

## Right Sizing God

October 13, 2013

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(adapted from a sermon preached on November 16, 1997)

### Readings

At one point in the Hindu classic, the *Bhagavad Gita*; the figure Krishna, who is understood in the *Gita* to be an incarnation of God, speaks to the warrior Arjuna with these words:

I am the object of all knowledge,  
father of the world, its mother,  
source of all things, of impure and  
pure, of holiness and horror.

I am the goal, the root, the witness,  
home and refuge, dearest friend,  
creation and annihilation,  
everlasting seed and treasure.

I am the radiance of the sun, I  
open or withhold the rain clouds,  
I am immortality and  
death, am being and non-being.

I am the Self, Arjuna, seated  
in the heart of every creature.  
I am the origin, the middle,  
and the end that all must come to.

from “Auguries of Innocence” by William Blake

To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.

## Sermon

The God of the reading from the *Bhagavad Gita* sounds on the face of it like a very big God indeed, bigger than the human imagination can begin to grasp.

But then in the second reading we hear William Blake affirm that we can experience heaven in a wildflower, infinity in the palm of our hands – a very small God it would seem.

So, how big *is* God? To steal a term that was popular in the business world for awhile, is there a “right sized” way to understand God? Or is size entirely the wrong conceptual category?

Short answer: Yes, size is entirely the wrong conceptual category in any purely logical sense. Which doesn’t mean we can’t talk about God in terms of size or other qualities – we simply must remember that *any* language about God is metaphor.

What if someone, a humanist, maybe even an atheist, finds himself crying out at the moment of his mother’s death, “Dear God, welcome her with loving arms!”

Does it turn out that actually this person believes that there is a God somewhere other than here, a God who has arms, a God who welcomes each new arrival with a physical embrace?

No. But neither does it mean that these words were meaningless. They were a “cri de coeur” – a cry from the heart, a spontaneous prayer or yearning for ever-present love and care for one I so loved. Words fail – even words like “love” and “care” and “hope” – words fail in the end – of course. But words are one of the ways we reach *toward* the unreachable, unknowable mysteries of our lives.

In quite another context, who hasn’t gazed upon a beautiful sunrise or sunset, or a particularly splendid autumnal display of red, orange, yellow, and said without thinking, “Oh my God! How beautiful!”

It is a way of expressing awe that, again, enables us to point beyond words, beyond what is even sometimes a completely inadequate word like “beautiful.”

In Western religious literature, we certainly get a very dramatic portrayal of God in the biblical book of Job – on the face of it a very big God, but since at the end God is talking to a single human being, maybe not so big. Again, maybe size is beside the point.

You may recall that according to the folktale with which the book of Job begins, Job was given a raw deal based on a kind of wager between God and Satan (Satan here not the cosmic force of evil, but rather an angel whose role is to test the faith of human beings) – Satan suggesting that this good and upright and faithful man, Job, is only good and upright and faithful because everything has been going so well for him... but that if terrible things were to befall him he would curse God.

The long and short of it is that God does allow terrible things to befall Job (his children killed, loathsome sores all over his body...) and Job indeed does not curse God: “God gives and God takes away, blessed be the name of God.”

But he does get angry! And angrily demands an explanation. He wants, so to speak, his day in court... with God... the ultimate judge.

Well, finally, and after heated debate as well with his three so-called “friends” or “comforters” who, after sitting silently with Job for several days, tried to convince Job

that he *must* have done *something* to deserve all this suffering... finally God speaks – this time a very different-sounding, much bigger-sounding God as compared with the waging God of the opening scene:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?  
Gird up your loins like a man,  
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.  
Who determined its measurements – surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?  
On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone  
when the morning stars sang together?  
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

God goes on like this for dozens of verses. “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.”

Indeed, no more argument from Job, just a *quiet* response:

“See, I am of small account: what shall I answer you?  
I lay my hand on my mouth.

...I have uttered what I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...  
I heard of you by the hearing of the ear,  
but now my eye sees you...”

An unsatisfying reading of the book of Job is that God is just a kind of cosmic bully, never really giving Job a proper answer to the question of why he, Job, good, upright, and faithful, has suffered so; rather, just saying, in effect, “I’m bigger than you are, so be quiet!” Which paradoxically would make this God actually not so big at all, rather pretty small-minded and petty.

But if this were all that the book of Job were about, it would be easy to dismiss, and might not have lasted well over 2,000 years.

Yet what makes the book compelling is the juxtaposition of our inadequate human concepts of God with a divine reality not bigger than but beyond any of our concepts.

Job believed God to be just and good and all-powerful – pretty big ideas to begin with. Then Job’s experience throws him a cosmic curve ball. Because he knew he hadn’t done anything wrong *and* he also believed that God was in control of everything and that God was just... so Job was left unable to account for his suffering.

What then? Well, it is critical to understand that the answer “out of the whirlwind” is not meant to be a logical answer (remember, language about God is metaphor!) The only way it seems to me we can make sense of it is as Stephen Mitchell

makes sense of it in his commentary on Job – as an attempt to portray as well as can possibly be portrayed some kind of visionary, mystical experience – brought on by the depth of Job’s suffering coupled with his unrelenting questioning.

So it is the overwhelming nature of this visionary experience, “bigger than big” we might say, but more accurately “other than big”, which silences Job. So it may be that Job is not *cowed* (as it may seem) but rather, as Mitchell suggests, is *transformed* or *awakened*.

Well, this sort of visionary or mystical experience is shared across cultures, both ancient and contemporary; the passage we heard from the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* represents another attempt to speak about – or towards – such an experience.

And though these mystical portrayals of God often may seem to be about the infinitely big, they are just as often about the infinitely small. So we ought to begin to suspect that they are about some reality beyond or other than big or small. (Metaphor!)

The biblical book of Elijah plays upon these apparent paradoxes, perhaps to wake us up to our own experience which we might name the divine. The prophet Elijah, in the midst of his own trials, standing on the mountainside outside a cave, experienced God not in the great, rock-splitting wind or earthquake or fire as one might expect, but, after all that, in the “still small voice” or (as another translation puts it) within the “sound of sheer silence.”

And for Jesus, God was “abba” – father – a term suggesting yes, a kind of big ruler in the sky, but also suggesting an intimate relationship, a human-sized God.

Feminist theologians speak of God or Goddess not as a controller, but as a divine weaver of life, of community, a co-creator of life.

So I say that language fails, but not altogether. For language that suggests God is “big beyond big” or “smaller than small” at least begins to point us to a God that is outside of our ordinary human concepts, points us beyond words, maybe to an awakening, to an experience in any case.

Now, it is understandable enough that we may want to discard the word “God” altogether – given how often the word is abused, given how much violence has been and still is committed in the name of God... and given how small a word it may sometimes seem in relation to all that we now know about the universe not to mention all that we don’t know.

But we need not let the mis-users and abusers of the word “God” or the idea of God have the word and the idea to themselves. So, for example, if someone tells you they don’t believe in God, you might want to respond, as my late colleague Forrest Church used to respond, “In what God don’t you believe – I probably don’t believe in that one either.”

And in fact, it really isn’t about belief at all. I use words like “Tao” or “Brahman” or “God” not to affirm my *beliefs*, but rather to direct my *attention* – and sometimes your attention – to the awesome mystery of life beyond our ordinary knowing – not just the mystery of the things we don’t know *yet*, that science may someday learn, but the mystery that anything is at all, the wonder that we are here, living and breathing... and dying... the mystery and wonder beyond either science or theology....

And I use words like “God” to name the spirit of life, the “whatever it is” infusing and sustaining everything and everyone; I use such words to name the spirit of love, of attraction, from gravitational force to friends and lovers... and so, visible in exploding stars and galaxies, visible too in the falling leaves and in our neighbor’s eyes and in our own hearts, our own eyes, our own lives.

If we’re not careful of course, this might still be just words, words, words.

Yet now and then do we *awake* to all of this, as perhaps Job did, as perhaps Arjuna in the *Gita* did, awaken in the midst of grief or in the midst of wonder, awaken to an experience of our place in the cosmos, within the body of God – if we dare to use language at all for such an experience.

With this sort of thing in mind, return with me for a moment more to Job: Not *silenced* by a bully of a God. Rather, yes silenced, but silenced because suddenly *awakened* to the enormity and complexity of the reality of God and the cosmos *of which he was a part*. As Stephen Mitchell’s translation of Job translates Job’s words, “I will be silent, comforted that I am dust.”

Not “put in his place” but *awakened* to his place.

“Comforted” – which does not mean, I would add, complacent. For there are things to do, things we must do, from our place in the web, our corner of the cosmos, things to do, our human role (to return to traditional language) as God’s hands and God’s eyes and ears... and God’s conscience and God’s heart.

For if God is big enough to include all, if God *is* the all – then God/Goddess/Brahman/Allah/Tao can at the same time be intimate enough to speak within the sheer silence of our hearts and through the work of our hands.

Again Job – what he needed from his friends is actually what they had given him when they first arrived... when they simply sat with him in silence for days, keeping company in the midst of his suffering... the presence of a right sized God as we might put it.

Perhaps each of us needs a right sized God for whatever moment or situation in which we find ourselves – right sized manifestation of the divine whose other name is Love – so, a companion, yes, God’s hands and voice and eyes and ears and touch. Our kindness... God’s kindness.

And perhaps – no, not perhaps; rather, surely – each of us can be that manifestation, that companion, by whatever name, for others.

So may it be.