

## "Finding God in All Things"

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One of the ways this community talks about itself is to say that we're on a train. Some of us were born on it. Some hopped on in the middle of their lives, or even later. Some good friends have hopped off. But while we travel we have conversations. We exchange stories, compare notes. My thoughts this morning have roots in several of those conversations--and in one on a Catholic train. What connects them is a thread about "finding God in all things." That's an expression close to the heart of Jesuits (for those of you who don't know, I was a Jesuit seminarian many years ago). But "finding God in all things" also seems to be a family value here at Shalom. So here are my thoughts.

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They begin with something I wrote last month about the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. It's a short article posted now on the web site [bridgefolk.net](http://bridgefolk.net). Bridgefolk is a Catholic-Mennonite organization directed by Darrin Snyder Belousek, who was here at Shalom a few months ago. I called the article "Amen to it All: My First Holy Communion and Then What Happened."

### **Amen To It All**

My first Holy Communion was white. It was back in 1948 and the girls wore little bridal outfits and the boys white shirts and pants. The priest was vested in white and a white cloth covered the communion rail. The bread I received was itself white--a thin, almost transparent wafer. I let it dissolve on my tongue. "You don't chew Jesus," Sister Girard had told us. It was her way of saying "transubstantiation."

I didn't chew Jesus but I don't remember talking to him either. My face was buried in my hands, and I was imagining what a softening host looked like in my mouth, far from my teeth. Sister Girard said that communion poured sanctifying grace into our souls, and for years I pictured that grace as milk. After each communion I checked my milk-bottle soul and saw that the level of grace had risen. It must have gone down between communions because I was never able to top off the tank.

In my teens the milk bottle gave way to abstract thinking. Now I could absorb concepts like transubstantiation, and so I did during six years as a Jesuit seminarian. Aristotle had observed that a thing's appearance (its "accidents") was something different from its underlying essence (its "substance"). That became a way of looking at what Jesus did at the Last Supper. His words changed the substance of bread and wine but not their accidents; they still *looked* like bread and wine. The clarity of the explanation was appealing.

Over time, however, doubts began to creep in. If Jesus ever entered a church I knew I could tell the difference between him and the bread the priest had consecrated. I was distributing communion one Sunday, repeating the words "Body of Christ" and waiting for a recipient's "Amen," when I broke out in a sweat, overwhelmed by my lack of authenticity. I was making a statement I could not affirm while calling on another to affirm it. By the time the ordeal was over I was shaken inwardly. I never distributed communion again.

That's when the journey began. I still approached the altar and said "Amen" to someone else's "Body of Christ" but I didn't say it with conviction. What did that Amen mean? Amen to what?

I recognized at the outset that nothing I believed would change the reality before me. It was what it was, a darkness. So . . . I bowed. Just bowed. Just honored the darkness and what lay in it. All I did for years was say Amen to the unknown and the unknowable.

Finally a thread appeared, weaving its way back to the words of Jesus, "This is my body. This is my blood." I didn't know what he meant by them, but I picked up the thread and said Amen. I said it to his words alone, not to any written by Aristotle, not to any contained in later doctrine. Jesus didn't say, "*Explain* this in memory of me." He simply said, "Do this . . . ."

The doing led me out the door. A woman stood there one winter, bundled up in old clothes, selling a grass-roots newspaper that advocates for the homeless. Her name was Peggy, and she brought to mind other words of Jesus: "Whatever you did to the least of my brethren, you did it to me (Mt 25:40)." I wondered why Peggy and all those before her never became a sacrament of Christ's presence like the one inside the church. Maybe she already was and I just didn't see it.

I came upon a Lovefeast, a long-standing tradition in the Church

of the Brethren. (That was here at Shalom). Here was a conscious re-enactment of the entire Last Supper--a meal, conversation, footwashing, and of course communion. I saw Presence there as well: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20). I came upon the Quaker mantra "that there is of God in thee"--divinity in the midst of "accidents." I came upon Hindus who bowed to me in greeting. Not to me, actually, but to the divine spark within me. "Namaste." Just last week Gertrude said something in a similar vein: "We're all born with a little seed in us that wants to grow toward the light, and the light is God."

Now, come communion time at St. Mary's, I say Amen to all of it. Amen to the mystery. Amen to the words of Jesus. Amen to Peggy. Amen to God in Brethren, Quakers, Hindus, everyone. Amen to "substance" underlying "accidents" anywhere and everywhere. Amen to it all.

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But.

But what about that "all"? Did I really believe that God was present in all things? That everyone was a sacrament?

To explore that question I'll pick two places, one where I do find God and one which is, at best, problematic.

Where I do find God these days, and in a very sustaining way, is where things are rising up. Specifically, where virtue is rising up. I know that sounds vague, so here's a story.

Close to fifteen years ago an American colleague and I were invited to Kyoto, Japan, by an organization called the Future Generations Alliance Foundation. We met for three days at Daikaku-ji, a Buddhist temple that was once the summer home of the Emperor. About twenty scholars from Japan, China and Korea sat around a large table discussing the concept of generativity, often in complicated, abstract ways. A small contingent of students watched from the back.

Late on the second day the students were finally given a chance to speak. A wisp of a woman rose up and asked a simple question: "Dr. Kotre, Dr. McAdams, can you teach us to be more compassionate?"

My colleague and I looked at each other, drawing blanks. Here we were, two Americans fresh off the plane, sitting in a temple dedicated to the teacher of compassion, and we were to enlighten this gathering on the subject? There was a long silence, and then I said what I felt in the moment. Which was how much hope the student's question had given me.

I learned later that her name was Chie. What I saw in Chie, what moved me so much in that moment, was virtue struggling to emerge. I couldn't teach compassion. I couldn't pass it on. I could only witness it. And there it was, coming back in a new generation, giving it one more try, as the earth does every spring. That moment has become emblematic for me. In less dramatic ways it seems to keep repeating itself.

When virtue rises up, I see the hand of God. I see the Spirit. I'm getting old, I'm fading, so when I see that struggle in the young, when I see virtue coming down the pike, I'm reassured. I'm nourished. I'm given hope.

And not just by the young. Every morning I see something rise up in my wife, who has suffered physical pain for many years. I see it in her, "Good morning." To her, each day is a new day, no matter what has happened the day before.

Several weeks ago Paul concluded his sermon with a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "If you have something you fervently believe in, some commitment of your own, . . . let it be your 'secret discipline.' Study it and practice it in your own life as best you can, and leave the rest to the Holy Spirit." I hope to practice the secret discipline of seeing virtue rising up. Just the seeing can be enough, because seeing offers light, and light helps a seed grow. If you can actually work with people like Chie, if you can actually create something with them, great. But a discipline of witnessing, all by itself, does something too.

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Now for the problematic place. If God is actually there, well, he's awfully good at hiding.

When I was collecting pictures for the children's teaching ("Where is God Hiding?"), I kept some and got rid of others. I kept a picture of a field of beautiful flowers (surely God was in that beauty), but cut one of a weed. The

weed was what my kids used to call a "prickler"--probably a thistle of some kind. You didn't want to be in bare feet and step on one. Is God in a prickler? I kept a picture of smiling kids but not one of a kid going like this (angry face). Is God in that anger? I kept the little puppy but not the vicious dog baring its teeth. Was God in that dog?

Several weeks ago Paul began a conversation about polarization, about facing something like that vicious dog barking at you. It's hard to find God in polarization, but maybe there are spiritual practices--secret disciplines--that will help. Paul suggested a few. We can add to the collection.

A friend who was once a Jesuit but who has been practicing Buddhism for 30 years came up with one via email. It's to practice seeing the opposite pole, the person angry at you, the barking dog, as teachers in disguise. A novel idea to me, an intriguing one. I'll have to think about it.

Closer to home is the practiced suggested by Jesus: turn the other cheek. You get slapped here, let yourself get slapped there. It reminds me of something my wife and I once wrote about in an intergenerational context--the role of "buffer." Some of us, maybe all of us to some extent, have been damaged by previous generations. Some become determined not to pass the damage on. They absorbed a hit; now they contain it. They bear the scars but see their children free of them. They serve as buffers between the generations.

Take that role over to a situation where a polar opposite is seething with anger toward you. In some situations--certainly not all (I want to emphasize that)--it may help simply to absorb and contain. It may feel like a slap on the cheek. It may feel a lot worse, like getting hit in the head over and over. But you don't fight back and, as Paul said, you don't leave. Maybe you take time out but you return. You provide a safe presence and hang on. You listen to the Spirit saying, "I am with you." You absorb and contain.

Once again, this is not for every situation, but sometimes a person who is angry may actually welcome containment. He or she may feel out-of-control and actually welcome control. He or she may be grateful that damage won't spread. There's a lot to this business of turning the other cheek, as I'm sure the teachers of nonviolence can tell us. It can be another secret practice, one that enables dark clouds to pass and divinity to appear--in a place that is very surprising, a place that was once "problematic."

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I don't know how to wrap these thoughts up other than to say they are talk for the train. There's the idea of looking at everything as a sacrament of God's presence. There's the idea of finding of God in virtue rising up, especially in the young. And there's the idea of secret disciplines, one of bearing witness to what is rising up, one of turning the other cheek to anger, of absorbing and containing. Maybe, if you know how to look, God really is everywhere to be found. Amen.