

Cultivating Oneness

Charles Burack

A few years ago, I felt an overwhelming need to transform my life so that the experience of mystical unity would occur more regularly and have a greater influence on the way I lived. I knew I could not create a sacred encounter—it is always a gift, an act of grace—but I also knew, having studied the writings of prophets, saints, and sages, that I could remove the barriers to spiritual awareness and create conditions conducive to divine connection.

Orthodox practice was no longer a viable path for me: I had rejected orthodoxy when I left rabbinical school twenty years ago. I could not accept the narrow beliefs, rigid rites, and discrimination against women, non-Jews and non-traditional Jews. I needed to develop a new set of spiritual practices that would facilitate my attunement to the Source of Life.

I was motivated as much by a deep hunger to experience the fulfillment and joy of spiritual union as by a real urgency to diminish bouts of loneliness and alienation. I wanted to feel more at home in the universe and in myself. I wanted to be more connected to all beings and to my own soul. And I wanted these connections to be based on deep love, understanding and acceptance.

Through a variety of practices—some modifications of traditional prayers, blessings and rituals, and some spontaneous creations—I have come to understand unity as a permanent reality which we only occasionally become aware of. *We are not separate from divinity but are of it.* The Supreme One pervades and encompasses all beings; nothing exists outside the Absolute All. The fundamental theological mistake is, I believe, to divide divinity from the world, to separate Creator from creation. Even the idea of “I and Thou”—an idea which I cherished in my youth—posits a gap, a split, a non-identity, between deity and cosmos. Whenever we assume or insist on separation, we create an enduring sense of spiritual alienation.

I would like to share a few of the practices—transformative techniques—which have helped to solidify my experience of essential unity. Since childhood, I have been attracted to the power and simplicity of the Shema. This central Jewish prayer proclaims the unity of God: *Hear, O Israel, YHVH is our God, YHVH is one.* Kabbalists understand YHVH as the primal unpronounceable name of God that signifies the



eternal beauty (*tipheret*) and compassion (*rachamim*) at the heart of existence. Traditionally, we pronounce YHVH as Adonai, our Lord. As I have come to experience the world as a manifestation of the Infinite, and not as separate from the Great Breath, the Shema has taken on a different meaning and feeling for me. I no longer pray that a transcendent deity is one but that all is one: heaven and earth and beyond are all of one essence, one source, one seed.

During my daily walks in the Oakland hills, I often sing or chant the first verse of the Shema. Initially, I started with a familiar melody, which I repeated silently, softly, or loudly depending on where I was. As I chanted the verse over and over again it began to act like a mantra and for moments I would feel completely absorbed in the chanting. In those moments, the chant became my fundamental reality: it seemed to express itself through me, rather than I through it; it had a life of its own, and my life was an expression of its life.

Soon I noticed an impulse to move beyond traditional melodies. New melodies would spontaneously arise and I would allow them to flow through me. These melodies were often quite rudimentary—I am not musically gifted—but felt wonderfully uplifting or profoundly grounding. They reflected as well as created powerful transformations in my consciousness. After a while, I came to understand them as the Great Song expressing itself in a new modulation, a new key.

The sounds of the Hebrew words increasingly developed a pull over me. I would chant the words very slowly, letting each syllable reverberate in my body, feeling each resonate in my belly, chest, throat, mouth and forehead. It was as if my upper chakras had become the openings of a flute or the strings of a wind harp.

At times, I would begin chanting “Om” or “Shalom” because the “Om” sound reverberates lower and more profoundly in my body than do the syllables of the Shema, and

ILLUSTRATION BY GENOVE TERRILL

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also because "om" is the sound that Hindus and Buddhists repeat to access the fundamental unity of reality. It was important for me to engage my whole being, to permit my individual oneness to merge or dissolve into the Supreme Oneness. And it was also important to let other religious expressions of unity enter into my experience.

A time came when I felt an inner pressure to change the words of the Shema. At first I resisted this impulse because it seemed sacrilegious or disrespectful to alter the biblical words. But I began to sense that the energy behind the words pressed for a larger audience and a broader meaning. I began to feel that the One was always expressing itself to all peoples and to all beings, and in all ways: not only the Jews needed to hear of Unity; and not only the sense of hearing needed to be involved in experiencing Oneness. So I allowed the words—sometimes Hebrew, sometimes English, sometimes other languages—to spontaneously transform: *Hear, O peoples, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one. See, O men and women, Yah is our God, Yah is one. Feel, O children, Yah is our Divinity, Yah is one. Taste, O animals, Allah is our Creator, Allah is one. Sense, O trees, Allah is our Source, Allah is one. Know, O earth, God is our Ruler, God is one. Experience, O beings, Brahman is our Maker, Brahman is one.*

Part of my inspiration for addressing the various creatures came from my understanding of the Hindu expression "Thou art that" (*tat tvam asi*). Because every being is a part

or expression of the One, each belongs to each, each is each. To deepen this awareness of identity, I began to address creatures that came to my attention with the silent statement "I am you." It could be a bird, a twig, a curb, a car, a crack in the sidewalk, a house, another person. Each time I allowed myself to meditate on, become one with, the being in my view. Then, I would ask myself how I was a bird or a car or the sidewalk. A bird manifested in me as the flight of my thoughts and feelings, the quickness of my responses, the soaring of my aspirations, the panoramic perspective of my highest moments, the temerity of my weak times, the feathery softness of the hair on my forearm. A car manifested in me as the metallic shell that sometimes hardens around me when I am afraid or angry. I discovered that I really did possess qualities of every being I met.

Sometimes, the creatures would seem to speak to me. It was always an inner voice—a voice in me inspired by the creature's presence. Many of the phrases formed epigrams or haikus. A few felt like short lyric poems. Unfortunately, I can no longer recall the exact words. All I can do is half-remember, half-create them: as I approached a brilliant yellow rose and said "I am you," I heard an inner voice say, "I greet the sun with flaming petals." And as I met a blade of grass, it seemed to say, "My tongue turns all to green glory." When I encountered a wooden fence, it said, "Boundaries are necessary too." And when I silently greeted passersby with "I am you," they usually offered a smile or a "hi" or a friendly look.

Most of these encounters were wondrously satisfying and joyous. But not all. Crossing the street on the way back to my apartment, I saw a man ahead of me crossing in the same direction and silently said to him, "I am you." Suddenly, he seemed to explode: he whirled around, took a wild swing at my head and cursed me profusely, his eyes barely focused. Shocked but alert, I instinctively stepped back, raised my fists, and shouted, "Stay back; don't touch me." In an instant, the intensity of his delirium seemed to diffuse and he immediately spun around and continued on across the street, mumbling to himself. I waited for a few seconds and then walked on. He proceeded north, while I turned westward.

My heart was still pounding when I heard an inner voice say, "This too is you; even the one who denies his connection is you." The voice seemed to break up my fear and I began to smile inwardly. I acknowledged to myself that my experience of oneness did not necessarily produce like experiences in others and that opposition and conflict too were part, a great part, of the unity. Perhaps the man had felt a streak of excessive cheerfulness or ease in my sense of oneness and was telling me so. Or perhaps my feeling of unity reminded him too much of his own sense of painful separation and alienation. Maybe I threatened to dissolve the psychic walls that he needed to survive. Or maybe I had simply gotten too close to him and had invaded his sphere of safety. Whatever the situation, I felt sure that the Unity, the Supreme Love, was vast enough to encompass every division, every difference, everything. □

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