

Seeing God

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The first – and only time – that I saw God it was not the anthropomorphic god of the Jews, Christians, or Muslims – the god of Authority, the giver of commands (though I believe it *was* the god of Jesus) – but more the inner god of Asia: the god of Presence and superluminal Being, the divine Witness to All That Is. The year was 1970 – I was a month away from being nineteen years old – and it occurred on the 14th or the 15th of August, just a day or so before my friend Erik Graff's birthday.

I'd gone to an evening party at his house, which sat on the east side of town. To get to his house, which was perhaps a mile away, I would have walked east on Belle Plaine Avenue, a well-traveled street in the midst of Park Ridge, one that intersected Fairview Avenue (which was my street) some three doors down from where our brownstone house stood behind a maple tree. It's a fond memory I have, of that maple and all the other maples, oaks, and elms of Park Ridge lining the curbs and overarching the streets wherever you'd go, lending a rural feel to the Chicago suburb. As a boy in my teens, I often walked the streets for hours, usually at night, to commune with the trees and the powerful winds that often swept in from the plains, driving leaves across the sidewalks, mixing the smell of earth with the sweet, heavy odor of the lilacs that were as female as the trees were male.

Somehow I wound up spending the first part of the party on Erik's front porch. Perhaps forty guests had already arrived, and being a bit shy, I found it easier to stay on the edge of things. I didn't know Erik's friends very well and it had only been a year since I'd met Erik himself. However, I'd taken an immediate liking to him. A thin, bespeckled guy, of Norwegian stock, with long and wavy blond hair, which he often tied back in a ponytail, Erik was a gentle, odd, pigeon-toed, melancholy person, intensely social, but also sometimes quite shy himself, yet easy to talk to, as he often played the role of therapist to all of his friends – a role, I suspect, that gave him comfort in that it made him feel useful, even indispensable, to our peculiar crowd – a crowd of hippies, rebels, and neurotics, of philosophers, misfits, and revolutionaries.

When you were with Erik, you had his undivided attention, and being an excessively serious and intense intellectual, his normal mode was to interrogate you – about your past, your upbringing, the background of your family, your girlfriend's family, the neighborhood where you lived, (though perhaps he might forget about analyzing your dog). He was always hungry for stories and always demanded a thorough accounting of everything little thing that had ever happened to you, to the point of making a fetish of personal history – but then he'd move on to the larger, philosophical issues, to how you felt about society at large (I had few ideas on the subject, at the time), which gave

him license to rage quietly about the evils of our government and about the genocide we were wreaking in North Vietnam.

This was the revolutionary side of Erik – his atheism, his socialism, his love of history, and his political activism – which would eventually influence me in ways I couldn't have expected back then. He'd been there on the Chicago streets during the riots of '68, demonstrating outside the Democratic National Convention, and like hundreds of others at the time, he'd nearly got his head bashed in when the cops went wild on the crowd, smashing billy clubs on the heads of provocative Yippies, or shooting teargas canisters among the broader group of angry demonstrators. So much for civil rights in a representative democracy. At the age of eighteen, he was a pacifist and he'd already filled out a conscientious objector form, which he didn't submit, becoming a draft resister instead. If worse came to worst, it would be jail for him, not escape to Canada, which I contemplated as an option. Then the lottery came and both of us had higher numbers, so we never had to confront the consequences of our decisions.

But that night, none of this was part of the conversation. While the party inside got going – his parents and his brother were away in Norway for about two weeks, and so, no doubt, there'd be folks tripping on LSD or smoking grass throughout the multi-day party – Erik and I sat together on his porch, locked in a conversation that would prove, for me, to be unlike any other.

I remember I sat with my back to the street, in an armchair, while Erik sat leaning forward on a small green upholstered couch. I remember the night as warm, with a light breeze coming into the porch from the window screens. I don't remember the prelude to our quiet confrontation, only that we talked intensely for about an hour in that probing, Socratic way that he had – question and answer, debate and reply – until the conversation got round to my religious beliefs. And then all my memories of that night are lit up as if by firelight.

The crux of the matter was my belief in God, that particular god I'd been taught to believe in by my Catholic upbringing – the God of Authority, to be sure, but he was also a god of incomprehensible severity and self-righteous anger – and yet also, a god I still clung to subconsciously, in a kind of abject wager. The wager was simple: if I believed in this God, I'd be spared the horrors of eternal damnation. Indeed, I was thoroughly terrorized by this God and had been continuously for three years as a child when I attended Catholic school, but I didn't yet understand how such terror can take root in your psyche and limit the very ground of your perceptions, the very self-sense of who you are.

It began when Erik asked: "Have you ever read any of the existentialists? Jean Paul Sartre? Friedrich Nietzsche? Or Albert Camus?"

"No, I haven't," I replied defensively.

"And why is that?" he asked, quite gently.

“I guess because I’m afraid of them. No doubt, they’re smarter than me. What if they convince me of something that’s not true?”

Erik paused for a moment and said, “Well, I think you simply have to have faith that the world will show itself to you as it really is.”

It was a very good answer, cutting to the core. In the flash of an eye, it forced me to confront a certain lack of faith that I had in things, born of a fearful clinging – the terrified allegiance I had to my angry God. It forced me to confront the question: what if the God of the Bible or the God of the Catholic Church had nothing to do with the way things really are?

At that moment, I let go of my idea of God, and my terror of God, and surrendered to a different, trusting kind of faith. “Ok. You’re right. I’ll read them. Why don’t you loan me some of their books?”

“I will,” Erik said, and our conversation ended. Erik took his leave of me and went inside to the party. I stayed back and sat quietly on the porch.

And it began. Something deep within me had shifted. I’d let go in a very profound way. Gradually, as in waves, a peace poured into me like a welling tide, filling the cup of my emotional being, as my emotions became more and more still, so that I drifted flat on my back, so to speak, of a welling tide of peace. I then had the sensation of floating effortlessly down a deep dark well, a long cool shaft, as the peace deepened in the pristine dark and the choppy sea of myself grew as still as pool of glass. In the clear black waters of that well, I felt I could see to the bottom of myself.

I had an intuition that something very unusual was happening to me, that there was no telling how far it would go, and that I needed to separate myself from the noisy crowd that was coming and going at the party. I knew that Erik often put candles in his bedroom upstairs, so that if people were so inclined, they could retire upstairs, away from the crowd and have a quiet, focused conversation with a friend or lover. So I opened the front door, walked quickly through the living room, taking care not to meet anyone’s eyes, and ascended the stairs to his room.

When I entered the room it was lit with candles, as I expected, and I remember now that Arthur, one of Erik’s friends, was lying in the bed on the left side of the room, listening to the Midnight Special, one of his favorite programs on WFMT radio. I nodded in his direction and sat down on the floor, but I turned my back to him. I didn’t want to enter into another conversation. Very soon after, when the program ended, he got up and left.

The act of sitting down seemed to break an invisible ice that lay at the bottom of that well and I fell through. And then the most astonishing thing happened. It’s hard to put into words, but it’s as if an angel came into the room and, leaning softly down, poured a pitcher of molten light over the crown of my head. Like a warm, luminous nectar or honey, this intelligent light had its own intent as it dripped into the center of my mind and broke it open like a pomegranate from within, shedding luminous seeds to the

furthest reaches of myself. In the Asian mystical texts you can read of the Third Eye that resides deeply in the center of the skull, usually identified with the pineal gland. Well this Eye opened now and I found myself staring into a fathomless Void. The Void was self-luminous and devoid of objects, while at the same time it permeated all of space and every object in that space. While I sat in the room beholding this Great Space, I was literally nowhere and everywhere. I now felt as if I looked out at the world from this Space, so that my looking came from everywhere at once and embraced all that it beheld. I was ecstatic. But there was more.

The divine honey dripped down into my heart and my heart burst open with joy. At this moment, my mind and heart became one, a single principle of perception that beheld what it was and was what it beheld. I saw now that the Void was not just an emptiness, devoid of objects. It was an infinite plenum, full of peace and love. *And I was this plenum.* There was no separation between it and me. As a consequence of this unity, I felt love for all things and was utterly fearless. Where before, I'd feared God, now I feared nothing because I was, precisely, God. I thought, "So *this* is the Christ!" – applying Christian terminology to the Void of Light – "and *this* is what it means to be anointed. No wonder Jesus was so fearless. Standing heart-deep in the Light, there was no room in him for anything but love." Like a Gnostic suddenly released from entrapment to the physical world, blinded by the delusion of boundedness and the heaviness of the body, I felt completely at home in the rapturous reaches of Cosmic Unity as my being was suffused with the deepest peace and joy I have ever known. Even as I looked around the room – at the floor, the walls, the bed, the burning candles – I saw that the whole physical realm, the world itself, was no longer external to my being, but *inside* of it. Since my being extended everywhere, in a superluminal space, all things were within me and part of my being. No longer a stranger in a hostile land, I'd truly come Home.

As I sat there, bathed in this internal radiance, marveling at my state of mind, (which was nearly devoid of thoughts, though it reads like thoughts now), Erik walked into the room. He'd been looking for me. He sat down and greeted me in his friendly, concerned way and immediately saw the joy on my face.

"What's happening? Michael! Are you ok – or what?"

I maintained my silence for a few moments. I thought: "If I speak, the action will pull me out of this state, so I should keep quiet." But then I thought, "How can I keep silent when it was Erik who helped me to come to this space in the first place? Out of love for him I should tell him what I'm seeing."

So I opened my mouth and did. With every word I spoke, I could feel myself being drawn more and more into my outer being. With every question that Erik asked – and he was his usual, persistent self – and with every answer that I gave, I felt myself descending more and more from the rarified heights within me, and that a delicate, gossamer veil was literally being drawn across the face of the Divinity. My inner eye

was closing. It took perhaps 45 minutes of talking with Erik, of trying to get him to understand what I was perceiving, before the veil was completely drawn and I could no longer perceive the Void of Light. Yet, the peace in my heart still glowed. I felt a deep resonant love, intermingled with sadness and regret that I could no longer truly see the ground of my being.

At some point, Erik tells me he switched the music playing in the house from Leonard Cohen's first album to the Moody Blues' *Days of Future Past*, perhaps in honor of what I'd just told him. I don't remember how I managed to stay at his house the rest of that night, amidst all the guests. I can't recall having joined the party, or danced, or even who was there. Since Erik had many parties at his house during those years, any number of them could have merged in my memory. But along about dawn, I do remember that a few of us decided to drive to Lake Michigan to see the sunrise. I remember Arthur, Erik, myself, and a woman – Erik tells me it was Nancy Sarima – piling into a car and driving to Tower Beach in Winnetka, which is a northern suburb of Chicago right on Lake Michigan, about an hour from Erik's house. Arthur told me some months later that he had no idea what was going on with me that night, since Erik didn't tell him, but that I seemed really happy in a way that he felt jealous of. And indeed, I was happy, beyond all words. I was bathed in peace and radiated joy.

And for three days afterwards, I moved into and out of the state of grace. I would get glimpses of the Void and the Light – and then the veil would be redrawn. I remember an afternoon during those days, sitting on a bench in Hodges Park – which is where our hippie crowd used to hang out, right in front of the Park Ridge Town Hall – and I remember marveling at the sunlight and basking in the summer breeze, watching birds fly from branch to branch, like trapeze artists, and the arc of their flight was so lovely that I would instantly be transported into their space and I would *become* that bird in flight. Or if I walked under the trees, the sunlight streaming through the leaves and branches would throw medallions of light on the sidewalk, and each medallion would become a doorway back into the Void. Or the same broken beams of light in the trees would create a shutter or strobe effect on the edge of my sight as I passed beneath them, and this too, would transport me. I'd merge with the physical light and find myself standing in a Void of Light, which is the most comforting, intimate light you could ever imagine. You are this light. The "me" in my head would disappear and I'd become the Cosmic Me.

It was this experience that launched a new kind of journey for me. I began to look for literature that could explain what I'd seen. But since this was 1970, it was still a bit early on for such things. Discussion of mystical states had only begun to circulate more widely in the 60s in the writings of Aldus Huxley and a few others and it took some time to find my bearings. I did find some literature on it later that summer, and afterwards, particularly in the writings of Alan Watts, where I got my first taste of Eastern wisdom, brought to hungry Westerners in such works as *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*.

As it turns out, though, I didn't read Nietzsche, Sartre, or Camus until nearly ten years later. I had to return to the suffering self, the deaf, dumb and blind self that we usually are, and to suppress the knowledge that I had actually seen God – had indeed *become God* – before I could bring myself to sit down and read them. In other words, I needed to live my life *as if I was an atheist* – a dangerous form of hide-and-go-seek – before Nietzsche and Sartre would make sense to me and become favorites of mine. How it's possible to blind oneself again to one's deeper Being, for years on end, after having seen what I'd seen – well, that's another story.

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