

Modern Mysticism

Chapter 1: Intimations of the Divine

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We have all had a magical experience at some time in our lives. It may have been a *déjà vu*, or a dream that came true, or an unusual coincidence—like thinking of somebody one hasn't heard from in years and then receiving a letter from that person on the next day. Usually such incidents are dismissed as bizarre or purely accidental because they do not fit into the logical “scheme of things.” Yet I think that many of us, when we have such an experience, secretly feel satisfaction and even a strange sense of familiarity, as if we have always known that such things are possible. These experiences are like “leaks” from another world, hinting to us the existence of a hidden order or truth beneath all that we take for granted as “reality.”

Perhaps the chords of familiarity these experiences strike go back to childhood, a time when our conception of reality was not yet so well-formed and emptied of all that is magical. In my instance, I remember an experience from my childhood which is one of the most unusual I have had. It occurred when I was around 5 years old, and is one of my earliest memories. This is what I remember:

One night, in the middle of what seemed like deep sleep, I suddenly realized I was wide-awake. I know I was sleeping, but the sensation I had was not the sensation of dreaming, for I was keenly alert. I recall dwelling in this awareness for a few moments, until I sensed a presence which I immediately knew was God. I don't remember any particular qualities about

this presence, other than that it was strong and seemed to be directly above and all around me.

Upon my recognizing his identity, God communicated to me. I remember this being on a nonverbal level—I just *knew* what he was “saying”. First he confirmed his well-meaning intentions toward me—that he cared for me, that he would protect me and be with me my whole life. He then asked me if I would like to see what my life will be like, if I would like to see my future. I said yes. My entire life was then unveiled to me. I cannot totally recall how this was conveyed, but I do recall the passage of an extended span of time. I vaguely recollect a series of visual images of my future—like a speeded-up movie—flashing before my eyes. The meanings of the images were implicitly understood. But above all I believe what was conveyed was an overview of the “checkpoint” through which my life would pass, the landmarks that would give it its significance or character. And the basic message communicated was, “It’s okay; it will be okay.” I sensed God’s guidance in the events of my life, that they would be occurring under his supervision or approval. I do recall the awareness of some anguish in the course of my life, but this too had God’s mark of approval: it too was “okay” and was seen as just part of my life.

And then God “spoke.” I believe he asked me if I was satisfied with what I saw. I said yes. And there was a shared sense of satisfaction, almost like a pact, an understanding between us. Then God said: “If you want to remember what you have seen, you must keep it a secret. You must tell no one.” I said I understood, and the encounter ended. I do not remember if I then awoke or went into a period of ordinary sleep, though in the morning, when I got out of bed, the entire incident was vivid in my memory. I felt that something special had happened. I had been privileged with a special gift and I felt happy.

In the weeks that followed, a subtle change began to color my day-to-day awareness of events. I realized that what was revealed in my nocturnal experience was “true.” Again, I do not remember exactly how I realized this. I believe that one or two events occurred which were forecast in the speeded-up movie, but because this movie was an overview of my entire life and only a few weeks had passed, and because I in fact do not remember the events, I imagine that they were not likely of major significance. In any case, I found myself having a curious sensation which I could not put into words until much later when, as an adult, I happened to read about the ancient Greek understanding of time. Very differently from ourselves, the Greeks, writes Robert Pirsig, “saw the future as something that came upon them

from behind their backs, with the past receding away before their eyes."¹ As Pirsig adds, this may be more accurate than our modern metaphor in which we see ourselves facing the future, for the past is visible, the future is not.

In those weeks of my childhood, it was as if I were watching the already-existing future that was revealed behind me unfold into the past before me. It was like a *déjà vu* that did not end. Contrary to what one might expect, this did not rob my life of its spontaneity, but allowed me to really enjoy it. I was like a child who enjoys a story more and more with each new telling because I knew that no matter what happens, everything will turn out okay. Knowledge of the unknown gave me a kind of magical power to see that life was unfolding according to God's plan. I am aware that all this may appear to be a rather lofty percept for a 5-year old mind. However, one should not underestimate how intelligent and sensitive—if inarticulate—children may be. When I treat children in my work as a psychotherapist I am often reminded of this. We have too quickly forgotten our childhoods, and with them the significance of Christ's adage that to little children "belongs the kingdom of God," and "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."²

Unfortunately, the kingdom of God did not last long for me. After a number of weeks, my cup had runneth over and I became cocky. It seemed to me that I had a firm grip on my discovery and could not lose it. With each day I became more convinced of the validity of my insight, and it became so integral to my awareness of things that it seemed inseparable from me. It was furthermore so "fantastic" that I could no longer keep it to myself. I had to tell somebody. My mother, who had taught me much of what I knew about God and religion and such matters, and who also happened to be one of my best friends, seemed like the choice candidate to whom I could entrust my secret. I thought that if ever I should need someone to recount its details—should I indeed be unable to remember them—she would be the ideal person to do so.

And so, the situation in which I chose to "test the Lord" and violate the condition upon which hinged my sacred knowledge was as follows. My mother was in the kitchen. It afternoon. She was ironing clothes or preparing dinner or doing some other domestic activity. My baby brother was asleep in the bedroom, and so we were alone. I sat down at the kitchen table and

¹ Robert M. Pirsig, "An Author and Father Looks Ahead at the Past," *The New York Times Book Review*, New York, 1984. Also published in the 10th anniversary edition of Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984).

² Mark 10: 14-15, Revised Standard Version.

announced to my mother that I had something to tell her. She acknowledged my request for her attention. I do not recall whether or not she stopped her activity; nevertheless, I remember being under the impression that she was listening with interest, as she had asked me some pertinent questions in the course of my relating my experience to her. I told her of everything that had happened and that had been revealed to me. This is all I remember of this occasion.



Now here emerges a critical time lapse in the reconstruction of my story. The following event occurred, but I cannot say how long after the above disclosure to my mother-it could have happened the next morning or it could have happened three weeks or three months later. All I know is that I woke up on a certain morning and I could not remember the details of my secret. I could remember everything except what God revealed to me about the future. At first I was terribly alarmed, but then took repose in the knowledge that my mother would surely be able to fill in the details. When I approached her, she could remember absolutely nothing about the discussion we had. She did not even recall having had it. I hounded her until I could finally accept that God's warning had in fact come true. To this day, all I remember is what I have written above. Of the revealed future, I remember nothing. As for my mother, when I periodically tell her this story, she listens with her usual, genuine interest, but only to conclude, "I'm sorry, I just don't remember."



This story, like so many of its kind, can be easily explained as the product of a vivid imagination. There is nothing in it that proves the existence or activity of God. The fact that my mind was so integrally involved could lead to a variety of ways of interpreting this experience. If we are to be objective in attempting to understand it, we cannot rule out the more mundane, naturalistic explanations. Let's touch upon just a few.

To begin with, the entire experience reflects the emerging concerns of a 5-year-old child. At this age, a child begins to see that the world is no longer as idyllic and safe as he formerly thought. People grow old, people suffer from horrible diseases, people die. As Ernest Becker showed in his erudite study, *The Denial of Death*, anxiety over the body's vulnerability and

mortality sets in at an early age.³ There is much that is unknown "out there," as symbolized in the monsterish nightmares and "fear of darkness" so typical in early childhood. The developmental psychologist Jean Piaget tells us that the 5-year-old is in the "preoperational period" of cognitive development. During this time, dreams, fantasies, and intuitive, prelogical reasoning play a large part in the child's view of the world. The child may have imaginary companions, and invent stories and make-believe games that empower him and compensate against the harsh realities mentioned above. The child at this age is also beginning to move toward abstract thought, wrestling with such ideas as death, heaven, and God. As he integrates the concept of time, he increasingly talks about what he will become when he grows up, and the future becomes a real concern. In short, the 5-year-old has both the needs and abilities to produce a compensatory dream of a superparent God who reveals a future that confirms that everything will turn out all right.

Of course, if we espouse this view, there are certain peculiarities which we must also rationally explain. Firstly, I claim I was not dreaming, but consciously awake during sleep. How does one explain this? Very simply: I could have been *dreaming* that I was awake. Occasionally people recount dreams in which they dream they are dreaming, i.e., they dream of themselves asleep and having a dream. Usually this dream within a dream points to content of a very unconscious, hidden nature, which is why the whole dream is presented like a multilayered onion. In my instance, it is not inconceivable that I dreamed the reverse, that I was awake—and we all know how real dreams can sometimes be. Or, also not inconceivable, I may have simply had an altered state of consciousness—a simulation of awakesness or a sort of visionary experience during sleep. Such possibilities also do not preclude the vivid imagination of the unconscious from participating.

Secondly, there is the question of a revealed future which later was experienced as "true" and then, in accord with the warning of the dream, mysteriously forgotten not only by me but an objective source, my mother. How does one explain all this? With regard to my mother, it is clear how she could forget. Perhaps she was more preoccupied with her domestic chore than I thought and was not really paying sufficient attention to remember. More likely, however, my story was, to her, one among many imaginative tales she regularly heard. I was, after all, a youngster living a large part of his life in the land of make-believe. How was she to know that this tale was

³ *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker, The Free Press (New York: Macmillan Publishing, Co., 1973).

no "ordinary" tale and not a fabrication? Probably she thought it was just another interesting story and forgot it with the others.

As for my own forgetting, it is difficult to fathom how this could occur with something that was previously so apparent to me. One possible explanation is that, somehow, there was implanted during the revelation state a posthypnotic suggestion or implication that if I spoke I would forget. If my unconscious imparted such a message to my ego, it may have done so for reasons which C.G. Jung would describe as "archetypal." Jung's concept of the collective unconscious proposes that underneath a person's individual or personal unconscious (what Freud referred to as the unconscious repressed) there is an unconscious of the human race, an unconscious which all people inherit and which is more or less the same in everybody.⁴ In this collective unconscious are stored many of the universal, religious ideas of history. Among these ideas or archetypes we would probably eventually find the motifs of initiation, the covenant, and betrayal. Initiation rites into the sacred mysteries of various traditions were usually shrouded in secrecy to safeguard the teachings from becoming commonplace or profane. A covenant or pact with the divine often had a heavy price, as observable in the ordeals of Abraham, Moses, and Christ, for example. And betrayal against the divine was always a possibility and, in the Old Testament at least, not without dire consequences. If we put these themes together, we may find ample material in the collective unconscious—yes, the collective unconscious of even a 5 year-old to see from where might arise the idea of a taboo of secrecy which, if not honored, would lead to a violation of the pact and its benefits.

Can this be the background for the delayed mechanism of forgetting? Possibly. However, I must admit that this hypothesis of archetypal post-hypnotic suggestion is truly absurd, and there is no way I can substantially prove or shed further light upon it. On the other hand, perhaps only such an absurd solution would be fitting for such an absurd problem. As the early Church father Tertullian commented in regard to Christian theology, it "is to be believed because it is absurd."⁵

Still, if we are seeking a rational understanding, we are probably looking in the wrong direction. The problem of forgetting—in fact, the entire experience including the unusual perception of time—can be explained by

⁴ More will be said about these conceptions of the unconscious later; for now I am raising them merely for the purpose of our explanation.

⁵ Cited in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, edited by Jacques Paul Migne, Latin Series, Paris, 1844-64, Vol. 2, column 751.

one quick psychoanalytic stroke of the hand. In his early writings, Freud set forth his incest theory, which claimed that the symptoms of hysteria in certain cases may be traced back to childhood traumas of incest or sexual abuse. Later, Freud revised this theory—to the chagrin of many contemporary professionals who work with sexually abused children. In his revision, he asserted that the incidents need not have been historical. Instead, Freud now believed he was tracing the memories of *fantasies* of incest, and the cause of the pathology was unconscious guilt over these secretly desired fantasies on the part of the patient. In the same vein, perhaps what I am remembering is not an historical incident, but the *fantasy* of an incident. And in the world of fantasy, anything is possible.

Rationalistic explanations are important, for they keep things in perspective and curtail possible excesses in our desire to believe. Yet their danger lies in their tendency toward scientific reductionism, of reducing phenomena that may be very "large" into logical formulas that do not adequately capture the scope of the phenomena. The answers provided may be correct; it is the questions and their built-in assumptions that may be too narrowly framed. For example, if it is indeed true that in the world of fantasy anything is possible, might it not also be true that this would be an ideal world through which God could manifest and orchestrate the perception of events, if not the events themselves? Do events have to be real in order to be true? Perhaps God, too, likes to operate by one quick psychoanalytic stroke of the hand.