

The Feeling Which Remains Where the Concept Fails

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You might wonder why one would reach back to an obscure phrase taken from a rather heavy theological writing nearly one hundred years old to entitle a lecture today. I must admit I've shaken my head at myself many times in these past weeks of preparation for this lecture – shaken my head for agreeing to speak in the first place and, beyond that, for choosing this subject.

A couple of years ago I gave what I declared to be my last lecture. The idea of a “Last Lecture” comes from a “Last Lecture” delivered at Carnegie Mellon University by Dr. Randy Pausch on September 19, 2007. He had terminal pancreatic cancer – a fact known at the time that he spoke. His lecture was entitled “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.” He died on July 25, 2008. I really did think this kind of engagement was probably behind me. But with the invitation to give this lecture I couldn't refuse, in spite of the wise counsel of Nancy, my wife. She probably didn't want me to embarrass her in this fine congregation where she was baptized, confirmed and where she faithfully worshiped. When word got out that we were to be married, the pastor at the time said to me, “You will do anything to get my members, won't you!”

But, back to the question – why would I choose such an obscure subject? The answer I know stems from my obsession with the question of God – the question not whether God exists, but *how to image God, how to speak of divine action, how to experience God.*

You might wonder how one could spend his whole life as a pastor/preacher/teacher and not have that figured out at age 80. I might respond that the problem of some pastors is that they figure it out too soon and avoid the anguish of the wrestle for the truth of God. For me God is and has been a moving target. From a wonderful home and family steeped in Reformed Christian faith blanketed with deep Dutch pietism, I have been on a journey trying to understand intellectually what I have always known experientially and that is the clue to my title selection – *The Feeling Which Remains Where the Concept Fails.*

The title comes from a book, written by a German scholar, Rudolf Otto, a university professor of theology. He was born in 1869 and died in 1937. The book, *Das Heilige*, published in 1917, was translated into English by John W. Harvey in

1923 as *The Idea of the Holy*. A second edition was published in 1949 in which was included a Foreword to the first English edition by Rudolf Otto. In that Foreword Otto wrote:

This book, recognizing the profound import of the non-rational for metaphysic, makes a serious attempt to analyze all the more exactly the feeling which remains where the concept fails....”

Otto defined the Holy as that which is *numinous* – in Otto’s definition, a “non-rational, non-sensory experience of feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self.” Numinous derives from the Latin *numin* (divine power). The numinous is a mystery marked by fascination and terror at the same time.

It must be noted that the terror and fascination is not simply an experience within the being or mind of the human, but that which exists outside the one experiencing the numinous as mystery. In his Preface to the second edition of his translation of Otto’s work, Harvey writes:

The word ‘numinous’ has been widely received as a happy contribution to the theological vocabulary, as standing for that aspect of deity which transcends or eludes comprehension in rational or ethical terms. But it is Otto’s purpose to emphasize that this is an objective reality, not merely a subjective feeling in the mind; and he uses the word *feeling* in this connexion not as equivalent to emotion but as a form of awareness that is neither that of ordinary perceiving nor of ordinary conceiving. Certainly he is very much concerned to describe as precisely and identify as unmistakably as possible, by hint, illustration, and analogy, the nature of the subjective feelings which characterize this awareness; but that is because it is only through them that we can come to an apprehension of their object.

The ambiguity attaching both to the English *feeling* and the German *Gefühl* should not therefore mislead us. We do after all speak of feeling the beauty of a landscape or feeling the presence of a friend, and our ‘feeling’ in these cases is not merely an emotion engendered or stimulated in the mind but also recognition of something in the objective situation awaiting discovery and acknowledgement. It is analogously to such uses that Otto speaks of the ‘feeling of the numinous’ or (less aptly) the ‘numinous feeling’. As one of his compatriots, the philosopher Rickert, put it: ‘by the “numinous” is indicated not the psychological process but its object, the Holy’.

So far then, from stressing the place of the subjective state of mind in the religious experience, Otto’s emphasis is always upon the objective reference, and upon subjective feelings only as the indispensable clues to this. (p. xvi F)

Thus the Holy Mystery is not something simply in our mind but it is the experience in mind and heart that points beyond itself to the Mystery – to God. I use heart and mind – perhaps better to speak of our being. Otto was saying clearly the experience of God transcends the mind – reason cannot discover the Holy Mystery – the concept fails! But reason hitting the ceiling, as it were, feeling remains – we “know” what cannot be known but only experienced.

In answer to my opening question, why one would reach back to theological writing nearly one hundred years old for a title to a lecture today – it identifies my spiritual journey – an ongoing journey stimulated anew by this occasion – the heart/mind wrestle for understanding the deep mystery of our human being before the face of Mystery. As I said above, God has been for me a moving target. I am probably only 180 degrees from the God of my childhood which I carried into my early ministry. God was in heaven, having created the universe and the human being along with all life on earth. In the fullness of time that same God visited the planet Earth in the Word made flesh, Jesus: life, death, resurrection, ascension and we await the grand finale – the great judgment morning, the issue of which will be salvation or damnation – Heaven or Hell.

As I relate that vision of God and creation and its issue, it seems so far away and long ago.

I was a theist. The term derives from the Greek *theos*, meaning “god.” I suspect most of us at least began there and perhaps many of you are still there, you not having wrestled with the God question. My early preaching and teaching were from that perspective. But eventually that conventional conception of God was called in question as I engaged in pastoral ministry. Questions arose. I won’t bother you with the stories, the issues, the questions, but eventually I needed to go back to school to get the education I never had, largely because I was not open to learn.

I was most fortunate to be able to return to study, to engage in graduate work in The Netherlands, the University of Leiden, with Professor Hendrikus Berkhof. My choice of him was sealed when I first met him in his study in his home. A widely recognized scholar, he was as well gracious and cordial. As I arose to leave I noticed a mimeographed paper pinned to the drape that separated his study from the rest of his house. I went to read what was written; what was written changed my life. The lines were those of Alfred Lord Tennyson:

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.

I remember the moment vividly. I had found my professor!

For those who have been with me for some time, this is a familiar account but I must, in this retrospection, underline it here because I was at a critical point in my life and ministry. My “little system” had hit a wall. My whole ‘system’ was based on the absolute authority of the Bible as the God-breathed, inerrant, infallible truth. I was devoid of any sense of how the critical studies of Scripture had revealed it as a very human product that was a witness to revelation – that is, the report of an experience of unveiling, not the unveiling itself. I came to view Scripture as a human, fallible witness whose purpose was not to teach history or provide a scientific account of creation but in stories, myths and parables to witness to the Creator, Redeemer God. I really had to start over, to begin again to find a understanding of God, of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection – in a word, a fresh understanding of Christian faith. My mind had been challenged to think critically even though I never lost the sense of the grace of God that embraced me.

Mind inquiring;
Heart resting.

That was my situation as I returned from four years of serious study and began again to lead a congregation. The wrestle for the truth of God engaged my mind as I experienced very great grace indeed from the people who invited me to continue my quest as their pastor.

Along the way on one’s journey there are landmarks that one recognizes as turning points in one’s journey. One such critical moment for me was reading a book on Christology by the British New Testament scholar John Knox. In his discussion of the pre-existence of Jesus, which he took as symbolic story, not literal fact, he related how such a symbolic story functions for those who have moved beyond a literal view of Scripture.

For a story like this can speak to us of matters beyond our understanding only if it has also spoken *to* our understanding – and, within the limits of our powers, been understood. There are two conditions under which a significant symbol loses (or, perhaps better, is shown to have lost) its vitality and power. One of these is when our hearts no longer need it, when all we want to say or need to say (or to have said to us) can be said without it. The other is when our minds, failing to discern in it the coherency of truth, are forced to reject it. *For our hearts cannot finally find true what our minds find false.* If they could, we should be hopelessly divided and any firm grasp of reality would be impossible. What we mean by ‘the heart’ in this connection is not something alien or counter to the mind, but is the mind itself quickened and extended. The wisdom the heart has found, if it be wisdom and not fantasy, is the same wisdom the mind all the while has been feeling after, if haply it might find it. It is a wisdom which, far from by-passing the understanding, enters through the doors of it, fills and stretches the space of it, and only then breaks through and soars above it.

(The Humanity and Divinity of Christ, p. 106f)

For our hearts cannot finally find true what our minds find false.

I wrote it this way:

The heart cannot rest where the mind cannot follow.

If I were to have one statement to summarize my spiritual journey, that would be it. That journey from far right orthodox conservative to the liberal left end I can explain simply due to the fact that my mind, exercising critical rationality, creates the only possibility for my heart to be at rest. I suspect someone might ask then why I so value the claim of Rudolf Otto that the experience of God lies not within reason's grasp but only in the feeling that remains when the concept fails. To the extent I understand myself, I desire to be fully aware of the amazing world of exploding knowledge of which we are a part. An honest spiritual quest for the experience of God must be open to the whole spectrum of human knowledge. Otto's claim is not that "the concept" not be preserved to the end but rather when reason's quest is exhausted, one will not have experienced God because, as he insisted, God is not apprehended at the end of the human exercise of our critical faculties but only in the feeling that remains when reason's probe has come up empty.

Yet, if faithfully persevered to its end, failing to come to the experience of God, there is a feeling that remains. As we have noted earlier, Otto was saying the experience of God transcends the mind – the concept fails, but beyond the mind there is a feeling – not a subjective feeling, but a sense of the "numinous" – that aspect of deity which transcends or eludes comprehension in rational terms. Otto uses feeling not as an equivalent to emotion but as a form of awareness that is neither that of ordinary perceiving or of ordinary conceiving. As noted above, one of his contemporaries, the philosopher Rickert, explained "by the 'numinous' is indicated not the psychological process but its object, The Holy. Otto's emphasis is always upon the objective reference, and upon subjective feelings only as the indispensable clues to this." (p. xvi f).

In her monumental study *The Case for God*, Karen Armstrong confirms Otto's thesis. She puts the God question, the whole human spiritual endeavor, in the context of the whole human story. The persons, schools, movements to which she points and which she discusses have long been familiar to me through long years of theological work. But the picture she paints, the story she tells casts a fresh light on the whole human effort of "groping after God."

The book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with "The Unknown God," covering the centuries from 30,000 B.C.E. to 1500 C. E. Part II explains "The Modern God" (1500 C.E. to the present). There is a richness and fullness in the story she tells and I will in no way give a full analysis of the work. What I do hope to do is lift up what is so striking in her work as it relates to our present theme _

the relation of the heart to the mind, faith to reason, religion as a way of life and practice and religion as a rational dogmatic system to be assented to by our reason.

With voluminous documentation, Armstrong established her major thesis that historically, from the earliest evidence of religious activity until the advent of the modern period, religious practice as ritual found transcendence in myth. She notes that many date the beginning of the modern period with Columbus' voyage in 1492. While still a solidly Christian nation with Catholic monarchs, Spain was in an age of transition. Armstrong writes,

The people of Europe had started their journey to modernity, but the traditional myths of religion still gave meaning to their rational and scientific explorations. (p. 162)

But that would change in the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Counter-Reformation and the early breakthroughs in the investigations of the natural sciences, for example the work of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo. Armstrong gives a rich picture of the interplay of reforming religion – Catholic and Protestant and the unlocking of the secrets of the universe. With the advent of the modern period, religious practice changed and, Armstrong claims, has brought us to the present unhappy place of aggressive, dogmatic fundamentalism and equally aggressive, militant atheism. In the pre-modern period religion was not primarily something people believed but something they did – its truth acquired by practical action. For example, she explains it is no use imagining you will be able to drive a car if you only read the manual or study the rules of the road.

It is this perspective Karen Armstrong brings to the whole purview of religious history. The insight, wisdom and comfort of good religion are not the result of believing certain “truths” or creedal propositions but disciplined practice. She points to the musician lost in her music or the dancer inseparable from the dance – a satisfaction, she contends, that goes deeper than merely “feeling good.” It can lead to “ekstasis” – a “stepping outside” the norm.

Religion is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of mind and heart. This will be one of the major themes of this book. It is no use magisterially weighing up the teachings of religion to judge their truth or falsehood before embarking on a religious way of life. You will discover their truth – or lack of it – only if you translate these doctrines into ritual or ethical action. Like any skill, religion requires perseverance, hard work, and discipline. Some people will be better at it than others, some appallingly inept, and some will miss the point entirely. But those who do not apply themselves will get nowhere at all. Religious people find it hard to explain how their rituals and practices work, just as a skater may not be fully conscious of the physical laws that enable her to glide over the ice on a thin blade. (p. xiii)

For those who engage in religious practice – meditating, participation in liturgy and ritual – witness to the discovery of a transcendent dimension of life. That has been a fact of human life, but it was impossible to explain what that transcendent dimension was in terms of reason. Armstrong writes,

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a time that historians call the early modern period, Western people began to develop an entirely new kind of civilization, governed by scientific rationality and based economically on technology and capital investment. *Logos* achieved such spectacular results that myth was discredited and the scientific method was thought to be the only reliable means of attaining truth. This would make religion difficult, if not impossible. As theologians began to adopt the criteria of science, the *mythoi* of Christianity were interpreted as empirically, rationally, and historically verifiable and forced into a style of thinking that was alien to them. Philosophers and scientists could no longer see the point of ritual, and religious knowledge became theoretical rather than practical. We lost the art of interpreting the old tales of gods walking the earth, dead men striding out of tombs, or seas parting miraculously. We began to understand concepts such as faith, revelation, myth, mystery, and dogma in a way that would have been very surprising to our ancestors. In particular, the meaning of the word “belief” changed, so that a credulous acceptance of creedal doctrines became the prerequisite of faith, so much so that today we often speak of religious people as “believers,” as though accepting orthodox dogma “on faith” were their most important activity. (p. xv)

That paragraph really expresses the heart of Armstrong’s contention as she addresses our contemporary situation with *The Case for God*. She does a marvelous job of describing the rise of modernity as it emerged from the late medieval period – the early development of the scientific method, the inductive method of empirical research and experimentation. She chronicles with clarity the triumph of *logos* in the mastering of the natural world, the growing consensus that *logos* was the sole means of acquiring true knowledge and how, in turn, the theologians sought by means of rational thought to express religious truth.

Such a move by the religious scholars to abandon mythical thinking and seek to establish God-talk and spiritual reality by means of the canons of human reason – while understandable given the climate of opinion of modernity, especially the Enlightenment – was a disaster for it is an impossibility. And, further, it has led to the rejection of the spiritual dimension of our human experience and the abandonment of religious practice wherein the human family had found hope, comfort and healing. She describes the consequences of the move in the modern age of religious discourse from myth to reason.

This rationalized interpretation of religion has resulted in two distinctively modern phenomena: fundamentalism and atheism. The two are related. The defensive piety popularly known as fundamentalism erupted in almost every major faith during the twentieth century. In their desire to produce a wholly rational, scientific faith that abolished *mythos* in favor of *logos*, Christian fundamentalists have interpreted scripture with a literalism that is unparalleled in the history of religion. In the United States, protestant fundamentalists have evolved an ideology known as “creation science” that regards the *mythoi* of the Bible as scientifically accurate. They have, therefore, campaigned against the teaching of evolution in the public schools, because it contradicts the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. (p. xv)

Armstrong points out that atheism is rarely “a blanket denial of the sacred per se” but most often a rejection of some particular conception of the Divine. This can be demonstrated in the rise of classical Western atheism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as its present expression.

Atheism is therefore parasitically dependent on the form of theism it seeks to eliminate and becomes its reverse mirror image. Classical Western atheism was developed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, whose ideology was essentially a response to and dictated by the theological perception of God that had developed in Europe and the United States during the modern period.

The more recent atheism of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris is rather different, because it has focused exclusively on the God developed by the fundamentalisms, and all three insist that fundamentalism constitutes the essence and core of all religion. This has weakened their critique, because fundamentalism is in fact a defiantly unorthodox form of faith that frequently misrepresents the tradition it is trying to defend. But the “new atheists” command a wide readership, not only in secular Europe but even in the more conventionally religious United States. The popularity of their books suggests that many people are bewildered and even angered by the God concept they have inherited. (p. xvi)

But the whole broad picture of human knowing has undergone and is undergoing a major shift in understanding. Our era has no name except “post-modernity.” Obviously the label points to the contention that we as a human family in the pursuit of truth, knowledge of our world, have moved beyond the assumptions of the modern age with its certainty of *logos* as the only and final arbiter of truth. Postmodernity, the American philosopher John D. Caputo contends, should be “a more enlightened Enlightenment, that is no longer taken in by the dream of pure objectivity.”

Armstrong concludes her chapter on “Death of God?” quoting Caputo:

If modern atheism is the rejection of a modern God, then the delimitation of modernity opens up another possibility, less the resuscitation of premodern theism than the chance of something beyond both the theism and the atheism of modernity. (p. 317)

Armstrong concludes the section, “...how best can we move beyond premodern theism into a perception of ‘God’ that truly speaks to all the complex realities and needs of our time?”

That is really the question in my mind which called out these deliberations – the need to move beyond the traditional theism which still prevails in much of the Church and Christian practice and yet be alive to an experience of the Mystery beneath, above and beyond our cosmic journey. Armstrong summed up our contemporary human religious situation as “the present unhappy place of aggressive dogmatic fundamentalism and equally aggressive, militant atheism.”

That being the case, how can we move beyond such an impasse in which situation recent religious surveys indicate a growing percentage of people registering as “nones” – simply dropping out of religious engagement. Armstrong suggests “the only viable ‘natural theology’ lies in religious experience” and she counsels rather than looking for God “outside ourselves”...in the cosmos, we should, like St. Augustine, turn within and become aware of the way quite ordinary responses segue into “otherness.”

Otherness – experience that creates the feeling that remains beyond all intellectual pursuit, the sense of something that can only be trusted, never proved, yet because of the experience no proof is required.

In the New Testament the Johannine writings have been most helpful to me in wrestling with the God quest. John’s Gospel begins,

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God, and
the Word was God.*

Someone has translated that – In the beginning was the Intention. I find that helpful because it removes the term with so much baggage; everyone “knows” what God means. And then in verse 14, the Intention became flesh or human, and in verse 18 we read, “*No one has ever seen God but the Intention that became human made God known.*”

That Intention in flesh, of course, is Jesus. To be fair to the text, the writer intends Jesus in flesh to reveal the God of Creation. Nonetheless imagine with me. Could it be that the Intention behind creation is revealed in the Way of Jesus?

Cosmologists tell us that our cosmos reaches back 13.7 billion years and who knows the future eons of time. And they speak of multiverses. Further, the more they know, the greater the mysteries of the unknown grow. But that is not our quest nor our problem. Here we are, the human race on planet Earth in all its richness of plant and animal life.

What if the Intention for planet Earth, for humankind, was the Way of Jesus as reflected in the Sermon on the Mount? For example,

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.

And again,

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous...Be perfect (mature), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (mature).

In Luke's account of the Sermon on the Mount, we read,

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

In the First Letter of John we read,

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.... Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

The writer repeats the statement of the Gospel,

No one has ever seen God.

But then he greatly expands where God may be found – not just in Jesus but,

If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

He writes further,

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.

Am I arranging John's writings to say what I sense is a possible description of the Creative Source of reality? Is reality the fruit of Love? Of course I am. But, what if the biblical writer was trying to say more than he knew? What if the Intention of the whole creative process is Love? We are not doing very well, one might respond, and that is sadly true unless one takes the really long-range view from human origins, the rise from savagery, to the present, once again beset by

religious violence, yet with hope for a more humane world if only love's way, the Way of Jesus, were enfleshed.

Let me review: we are seeking beyond traditional theism and atheism some ultimate that creates a feeling beyond reason, a feeling that remains and assures us there is ultimate meaning to our human existence. I turned to the Johannine writings suggesting the Divine Intention is Love embodied in the human.

Let me set before you a current situation facing our nation – the negotiation with Iran and give some background on the whole nuclear threat. The big issue today is trust. The President and Secretary of State insist it is not just trust but trust and verify. Nonetheless trust is key.

In his book *House of War*, James Carroll gives the history of an early nuclear critical decision. I addressed this history a few years ago, from which I quote.

Let me refer to just two critical moments in the history through which we have lived. The first moment was what to do with the newly discovered nuclear power. Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote a memorandum to President Truman. Carroll writes:

It was another of those events dated September 11, each one the center of a world in collision with other worlds. The impact of such collisions is our subject. On September 11, 1945, four years to the day after the groundbreaking of the Pentagon, fifty-six years to the day before the Al Qaeda attack on the Pentagon, less than a month after Japan's surrender, and just over a month after the detonation of the Nagasaki bomb, Stimson composed an urgent "Memorandum for the President," which began, "Subject: Proposed Action for Control of Atomic Bombs."

First Stimson told the President what the dawning of the nuclear age meant:

If the atomic bomb were merely another though more devastating military weapon to be assimilated into our pattern of international relations, it would be one thing. We could then follow the old custom of secrecy and nationalistic military superiority relying on international caution to prescribe [sic] future use of the weapon as we did with gas. But I think the bomb instead constitutes merely a first step in a new control by man over the forces of nature too revolutionary and dangerous to fit into the old concepts. I think it really caps the climax of the race between man's growing technical power for destructiveness and his psychological power of self-control and group-control – his moral power. If so, our method of approach to the Russians

is a question of the most vital importance in the evolution of human progress... The crux of the problem is Russia.

Carroll comments further:

“To put the matter concisely,” Stimson wrote, he proposed that the United States take immediate steps to “enter into an arrangement with the Russians, the general purpose of which would be to control and limit the use of the atomic bomb.” He suggested that by bringing the Soviets into our confidence, they would have reason to believe it when Americans said that “we would stop work on any further improvement in, or manufacture of, the bomb as a military weapon, provided the Russians and the British would do likewise.” This meant, and Stimson proposed it, that Washington would “impound what bombs we now have in the United States provided the Russians and the British would agree with us that in no event will they or we use a bomb as an instrument of war unless all three governments agree to that use.” Give up the secret. Give up the monopoly. Give up sovereignty over use. Give up control of existing bombs. Stimson, in the cover letter that accompanied this memo, summed up his proposal by using the word “share” twice. (p. 113f)

Carroll relates how Stimson’s grasp of the situation with Russia in light of the atomic bomb was countered by Secretary of State James Byrnes. Carroll’s account is so fascinating because he gives us a glimpse behind the scenes from the perspective of history as to the tensions and arguments that raged at the time. Writing of Stimson, Carroll relates,

So now he warned that relations with Moscow “May be perhaps irretrievably embittered by the way in which we approach the solution of the bomb with Russia. For if we fail to approach them now and merely continue to negotiate with them, having this weapon rather ostentatiously on our hip, their suspicion and their distrust of our purposes and motives will increase.” This reference to the atomic bomb “ostentatiously on our hip” is a tip off that this memo was essentially an argument against fiercely anti-Soviet positions then being taken by Secretary of State Byrnes, who had already proven to be something of a nemesis. Stimson had, the week before, criticized the way Byrnes was preparing for an upcoming meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers in London: “Byrnes [is] very much against any attempt to

cooperate with Stalin. His mind is full of the problems with the coming meeting of the foreign ministers and he looks to having the presence of the bomb in his pocket, so to speak, as a great weapon to get through the thing he has.”

Very much against Byrnes, in one of the most remarkable statements ever made by an American statesman, Stimson presumed to assert in his September 11 letter to Truman, “The chief lesson I have learned in a long life is that the only way you can make a man trustworthy is to trust him; and the surest way to make him untrustworthy is to distrust him and show him your distrust.”

I conclude the first critical moment by underscoring these last lines – the matter of trust. Trust or fear leading to mistrust; fear that often blooms into paranoia and a world community marked by paranoia is a dangerous place.

Do you sense that the whole disastrous tragedy of the Cold War could have been avoided? Do you sense that at that critical moment in the history of the twentieth century trust could have changed the impasse of terror through which we lived on the brink of disaster?

One more critical moment – the breaking down of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. We remember it well – the euphoria, the relief, the high hopes for a world at peace. From James Carroll filling in the background of the Reagan/Gorbachev encounters, I was struck by the stature of the Russian leader. It was he, not Mr. Reagan that created the possibility and effected the reality of the end of the Cold War. But this I point to because for the United States it was another missed opportunity – a missed opportunity to disarm the nuclear weapons that both sides stockpiled because of that earlier missed opportunity when we could have averted that arms race before it began. Russia wanted to disarm; we did not.

I find it fascinating – even amazing that we repeat the score over and over. I am quite aware that much is at stake and I am far removed from centers of power and the inner workings of international affairs. Nonetheless, I will live and die in the Way of Jesus, the way of love, of grace calling for trust.

Speaking thus, please understand I claim no divine insight or infallible truth. This role for me is one of bearing witness to my best wisdom and understanding. I am well aware the Way of Jesus is a costly way that goes against all worldly wisdom.

Jesus was crucified.

Following in his steps, Gandhi was assassinated.
Following in his steps, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

Love as embodied in Jesus calls for loving the enemy, for trusting, for risking all for peace. Costly to be sure, but it must be abundantly clear

Violence begets violence;
Hate begets hate;
Distrust begets distrust.

What if the Eternal Intention was really enfleshed in Jesus? Then living in radical love is the only way to realize peace on Earth, in the cosmos.

God is not to be found in our rational inquiry. The quest hits a wall. If God is Love, then to love is to come to an awareness of God in the feeling that remains where our rational search has failed.

Sometimes our human experience itself would give us a clue to *Love at the core*.

Let me close with two illustrations – one from history, one from the arts.

Here is a report from Flanders, Belgium, December 24, 1914, as related by Jeremy Rifkin in his book *The Empathic Civilization*.

The evening of December 24, 1914, Flanders. The first world war in history was entering into its fifth month. Millions of soldiers were bedded down in makeshift trenches latticed across the European countryside. In many places the opposing armies were dug in within thirty to fifty yards of each other and within shouting distance. The conditions were hellish. The bitter cold winter air chilled to the bone. The trenches were waterlogged. Soldiers shared their quarters with rats and vermin. Lacking adequate latrines, the stench of human excrement was everywhere. The men slept upright to avoid the mud and sludge of their makeshift arrangements. Dead soldiers littered the no-man's-land between opposing forces, the bodies left to rot and decompose within yards of their still-living comrades who were unable to collect them for burial.

As dusk fell over the battlefields, something extraordinary happened. The Germans began lighting candles on the thousands of small Christmas trees that had been sent to the front to lend some comfort to the men. The German soldiers then began to sing Christmas carols – first “Silent Night,” then a stream of other songs followed. The English soldiers were stunned. One soldier, gazing in disbelief at the enemy lines, said the blazed trenches looked “like the footlights of a theater.” The English soldiers responded with applause, at first tentatively, then with exuberance. They began to sing Christmas carols back to their German foes to equally robust applause.

A few men from both sides crawled out of their trenches and began to walk across the no-man's-land toward each other. Soon hundreds followed. As word spread across the front, thousands of men poured out of their trenches. They shook hands, exchanged cigarettes and cakes and showed photos of their families. They talked about where they hailed from, reminisced about Christmases past, and joked about the absurdity of war.

The next morning, as the Christmas sun rose over the battlefield of Europe, tens of thousands of men – some estimates put the number as high as 100,000 soldiers – talked quietly with one another. Enemies just twenty-four hours earlier, they found themselves helping each other bury their dead comrades. More than a few pickup soccer matches were reported. Even officers at the front participated, although when the news filtered back to the high command in the rear, the generals took a less enthusiastic view of the affair. Worried that the truce might undermine military morale, the generals quickly took measures to rein in their troops.

The surreal “Christmas truce” ended as abruptly as it began – all in all, a small blip in a war that would end in November 1918 with 8.5 million military deaths in the greatest episode of human carnage in the annals of history until that time. For a few short hours, no more than a day, tens of thousands of human beings broke ranks, not only from their commands but from their allegiances to country, to show their common humanity. Thrown together to maim and kill, they courageously stepped outside of their institutional duties to commiserate with one another and to celebrate one another's lives.

An accident or reflective of the deepest core of our human nature – the enfleshment of the Eternal Intention?

One more story from the drama *Les Misérables*. Jean Valjean finally free from twenty years' imprisonment for stealing bread to feed his sister's family. He finds hospitality at the house of the Bishop but in the night he steals the Bishop's silver. The police approach him, bring him to the Bishop, as he had claimed the Bishop gave him the silver. The Bishop confirms his story claiming he did give the silver to Jean Valjean. And then after this act of pure grace, the Bishop tells Jean Valjean he has claimed his soul for God.

By grace transformed, Valjean goes on to live an extraordinary life marked by grace upon grace. The drama ends with Valjean, an old man, sung to by the young woman he rescued as a child. She sings,

To love another person is to see the face of God.

In the film version Valjean is greeted at the Gates of Paradise by the Bishop whose act of grace transformed his life. Angels and those whose lives he touched

guide him into Eternal Light – one of the most powerful dramatic moments one can imagine.

Indeed, to love is to experience beyond reason's deepest probe, a feeling beyond reason's search or word to convey.

Two stories of love in human experience, one historical, one a drama. Do they not move us at the core of our being? And might that feeling stem from an awareness of something ultimate, of the Love that is at the core of Being?

Of course, there is no proof for that because reasoned proof has no place in the quest for the Ultimate Reality, call it God or call it Love.

But I have a Feeling...!