



RETURN TO WHO YOU ARE SERIES

I AM YOU AND YOU ARE ME

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It is true. The hoopoe and the bat never uttered the word, God, but we do, we humans who long for something to hold us in a chaotic world. I often think about the earliest human beings, the Homo sapiens who stood upright and walked away from the savannas of East Africa, looking up at the stars and saying, "God, help us." As they traversed the globe some 300,000 years ago, I wonder how they felt God guiding them, holding them in their vast loneliness. I wonder if they encountered another human being, they'd pause long enough to feel the miracle of existence. You are here and so am I.

Bill Bryson puts it brilliantly in *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, his book. He says, "Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years, every one of your forebears on both sides has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, lucky enough to survive long enough to do so. Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, or otherwise deflected from its life quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material at exactly the right moment, resulting eventually, astoundingly, and all too briefly in you." Now, I've preached on this idea before, but I remember it every day I wake up, lucky enough to live another day.

The odds are so slim that we exist at all that avoiding gratitude feels like a grave mistake, which brings me back to the word the hoopoe and the bat don't utter, the word Amy Leach describes as stones hard to swallow, the word that names something no one has ever seen, yet millions pray to for health, and safety, and material things. "God, give me what I don't have," they say. Over time, I've stopped praying for things. I've replaced that prayer with gratitude.

The Unitarian community in Northeast India, where I've just spent three weeks on pilgrimage with our group from the church taught me this. Before their feet touch the floor each morning, before thoughts of coffee, or tea, or breakfast arise, they offer a simple prayer. They say, "Thank you for another day

of life, God. I did nothing to deserve it, except to wake up." So for the past three weeks before my feet left the bed in Northeast India, my heart prayed something similar. "God, whom I may or may not believe in, whom I certainly don't imagine sitting on a cloud counting prayers or handing out favors, to you, I give thanks for one more day," I said each morning. I said that because it changes what I do next. It matters that thank you starts the day. Not because it changes God, whatever that word points to, but because it reminds me that I belong to the same family as the jackrabbits and the sandville cranes who offer their own strange gratitude just by being alive.

Maybe what we call God is simply this interdependence we can feel, but cannot fully name. When I was halfway around the world in India, our Unitarian partners spoke often about God. In fact, we had many conversations about what God is and isn't. I remember one person said, "God is consciousness beyond the human mind. We are not separate from God. We are part of God." Sounding very transcendental for a good reason, the Unitarians in Northeast India were reading Channing, and Theodore Parker, and Emerson. One of them explained God this way, God is like an ocean. We are like streams flowing toward it. If you live disconnected from the source, you dry up. Our goal is to live righteously and you intuitively know when you are doing so by staying connected, being helpful, walking the divine path.

Now, I know the word, God, catches some of us. It sends us straight to the Sistine Chapel, that bearded man reaching down to Adam. For many of us, that image misses the point entirely. A boxed or clothed God fails us the moment we define it too tightly. So why use the word at all, you might ask. Because, I say, it may be the best word we have for the pulse of existence that moves through us, the pulse that moved through our ancestors, through the hoopoes, and the bats, and the cranes, through those ancient human beings who looked up at the stars and said, "Thank you."

It may be the best word we have for what I would call interdependence, especially when that word feels clumsy or fragile in a world where humans can be cruel to one another. It's hard to feel interconnected often these days, especially with leaders who destroy for personal gain, hard to feel interconnected with armed agents violating basic rights, hard to feel interconnected with those who spread hatred and violence. I'm often tempted to abandon interdependence altogether to think in terms of us and them, to strip dignity away from those who frighten or anger me. My anger rises, my fear surfaces. I want to scream my independence from a world that feels unmoored from headlines that echo Orwell's 1984, from leaders who speak of peace while waging destruction.

And then I wake up. Before my feet touch the ground, I give thanks. To the God of my belief and disbelief, thanks for another day. And I remember the hoopoe, and the bat, and the crane, and the long line of wanderers stretching back 300,000 years, and I feel guided, not controlled, not nudged, but guided toward my best self. Maybe that's all that this is. Maybe life is sleeping, and waking, and praying, and thinking, and remembering that no matter how loudly we scream at the stars, we are still connected.

Bryson says another thing in that remarkable book. He says, "It's easy to overlook this thought that life just is. As humans, we are inclined to feel that life must have a point. We have plans, and

aspirations, and desires. We want to take constant advantage of all the intoxicating existence we've been endowed with, but what's life to a lichen? Yet its impulse to exist, to be, is every bit as strong as ours, arguably even stronger." He says, "If I were told that I had to spend decades being a furry growth on a rock in the woods, I believe I would lose the will to go on, but lichens don't. Like virtually all living things," he says, "they will suffer any hardship, endure any insult for a moment's additional existence. Life in short," he says, "Just wants to be."

And I hear that, and I read that, and I think, "Yes, life just wants to be and not just individually, but together in relationship and maybe more importantly in coexistence, in union with all that is in the world." Maybe this momentary existence with all its accidents and improbabilities, all its grief and beauty, is itself the miracle, that somehow through ancient wanderers and evolutionary chance, through star fire, and DNA, and consciousness, we have arrived at this moment whereby astonishing scientific discoveries and fragile human cooperation, you are watching this, and I am speaking to you, and we are trying not to lose hope in humanity together, trying to remember that we belong to something vast and alive.

And so I return over and over to the poem by E.E. Cummings that explains, "I thank you, God, for most this amazing day, for the leaping greenly spirits of trees, and the blue true dream of sky, and for everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes. Now the ears of my ears awake, now the eyes of my eyes are opened." Maybe what all this is finally asking us is a simple question, which is, what are you grateful for? I suspect if we follow that question far enough, it leads us back to all life itself and maybe, just maybe, that is what we mean when we say the word, God.