

ETERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS—INTRICATELY WOVEN

I awoke in the night under a “cloud of knowing”—facing what may be the truth about myself. It comes, in part, from my present process of collating bits of writing from my past and setting them in some kind of order to place on a website, so they may be preserved and available for others. It is introducing me to a lot of the selves I have put on paper over the years.

In the night darkness, I was struggling interiorly to face some of the bits I was unearthing that presented some uncomfortable perspectives. What was the truth? I tried to come to terms with a lifetime of covering and deceit on one hand, and also a lifetime of exposure and uncovering of the deep inner soul level, on the other hand.

Exhausted and disheartened. I returned to sleep. Awakening a few hours later, I sat in the Poustinia in my pool of quiet and pulled out my trusty copy of David Whyte’s *Consolations*—a series of essays evoking the hidden meaning of words where I often look for some “response” to my inner spirit. Earlier in the week, I had chosen his essay on *Honesty*. Today, I turned to the essay preceding it: *Hiding*. That was the word I sensed I needed.

Whyte interprets *hiding* as a necessary and positive step in allowing an important seed within us to gather enough time and sustenance to ripen before having the courage to come out into the light. So to be *hidden* took on new positive meaning. The line from Colossians 3 came to mind: “*Your life is hidden in Christ.*”

That precipitated a question: is there somehow I can link together a deeper truth about the way I both *hide* and *expose*? I did not want a superficial solution. It dawned on me that the answer might lie in the way my own personal heritage mingled within me the qualities of both my mother and my father in a way I had not previously identified. (How obvious! How mundane! Back to Family Systems again to explain everything.) Could I take a new look at the familiar dynamics?

My father’s presentation of self drew admiration and awe—both from me and from almost everyone his life touched. He did not expose his fearful unfinished side; he insisted on triumphing over any dark thoughts—usually attributing his bright spirit to his faith in God. I acknowledge my own tendency toward seeing the positive, the light overshadowing dark interpretations of life events.

My mother agonized incessantly over her faults, burying herself in self-recrimination, becoming perennially repentant and sorry. At the same time she came across as critical and judging of others’ faults, whereas my father’s interactions with others was consistently encouraging and appreciative. He saw the bright side; my mother the dark.

Was there a new way to carry these two strands within me? Can they come together uniquely in me? I had always held them apart— powerful streams of dual consciousness. My father: the light force, though impossible for me to reproduce since it required not exposing fears and anxieties. My mother: the dark thread I must either destroy or conceal.

A question arises with new clarity from my dark night: What do I hide and what do I expose?

My thoughts turned to Confession. I might seek out one of the monks at the monastery where we worship and ask for this rite. Yet, even in Confession, what is Truth? Can I simply lay my whole

body/self at Jesus' feet? Or perhaps fling myself into God's arms and simply beg for mercy? I instinctively turn to Psalm 139:

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is so high I cannot attain it*

How *uncovered* I am, to God.

*If I say, "surely darkness will cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
Even the darkness is not dark to you:
The night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

So what truth does this solitary confession uncover? I begin with my mother's darkness asking: "What *light* does it shed? Is it the part of me that uncovers what I need to see truthfully and confess to the God who searches me to know my heart—not in abject humiliation and self-loathing or judgment, but the persistent search for truth.

Is this the gift of my mother's legacy to me—uncovering truth? Is this behind my insistent introspective search for the gold mine of the inner life, my constant probing to uncover, to long for depth. . .the "hidden riches of secret places" and of God's love past knowing?

And what of my father's concealment of the dark—his insistence on the *light*? It is easiest to see this as only positive, yet the "birth" described in the psalm is taking place in the *dark*.

*My body was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.*

Underneath my father's *light*, he hid his fears and insecurities that existed in the core of him because of being a special child with a "handicap" of partial blindness from birth.

Oh, the hidden danger in being *blind*. . .on so many levels. So many things he could not (would not?) see. As Jesus pointed out about the Pharisees, their problem was not their blindness, it was because they said, "We see!" Can I receive my own blindness?

My father's gift was indeed his "choice" to remain blind. He genuinely did not *see* clearly, making him ignorant of others' failings and slights. His disability was uncovered out there for all to see. It is perhaps a shock for me to realize my own "nakedness" as well. I am not hidden to God—and as I write today, I uncover a piece of myself, as well.

"The darkness and the light are both alike to God" and perhaps I can see the two intertwined in an "eternal family system" within me. I know intimately both the hiding and the exposing, covering and uncovering. They are *intricately woven* together. Thereby I discover the "knowledge that is too wonderful for me."

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me;
You discern my thoughts from far away
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is so high I cannot attain it.*

This knowledge sends me to the prayer asking God to know my heart—to behold me as I am.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there be any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*



My husband Don came into the room as I pondered these things. He listened as I opened up about my thoughts. When he stood up to leave, he asked me to meditate on just two words that I had unknowingly repeated; "You know?" I recognized it as my way of seeking response. He pointed to the hanging on the wall beside me, etched by Thich Nhat Hanh. Four words: "Be still and know."



This sent me into a time of silent waiting. What was it I needed to "know"—not intellectually grasp, but experientially know. My life was on pause.



Three days later, a copy of *Presence* magazine arrived. I felt inexplicably drawn to an article on prayer. The author, Jim Neafsey, was describing prayer in all the ways that have become familiar to me in recent years—that it is more listening than talking, recognizing God praying within me with “*wordless sighs and aching groans*” —quoting Romans 8. This has changed the way I pray for my spiritual companions. I long to see God as God beholds me, and this has also become my prayer for others who need that same experience of God’s way of *beholding* them.

Then the author introduces a riveting concept:

A Zen koan has helped me understand what the prayer of beholding means. The Zen master sends her disciple off to meditate with this challenge: “Show me your original face before your parents were born!”

The intent of the koan is to push the disciple beyond rational answers to an experiential realization. She wants the disciple to return with a face that is radiant with the joy, freedom, and peace of his original face rather than an idea about what that might mean.

Disciples pass the test of the koan when they return to the master actually embodying their “original face,” *their spiritual identity beyond or deeper than the personal ego shaped by their DNA or parental and social conditioning.* {*Emphasis mine*}

This is the face we show when we know ourselves as unconditionally loved, deeply at peace, and full of joy and gratitude for just being alive. In Christian terms, it is the face of Christ in us, our identity as images and likenesses of God.

A giant “Aha!” arose in me. How have I experienced my original face? I am again amazed at the trenchant significance of the life verse I unknowingly chose in my teenage years, for it speaks of this “original face.”

*We all, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord,
are changed into God’s likeness from one degree of glory to another;
this is by the Lord the Spirit.*

I have turned to those words throughout the years since, letting it speak its truth into my life.

It also highlights a transforming moment during therapy at age 37, the day I lay quietly on my bed at home after a particularly momentous therapy session, taking in the reality of who I was as a woman for the first time—then leaping up to look in the mirror and suddenly *seeing* a face I almost did not recognize, but which today I can recognize was a glimpse of my “original face”—the one God sees and has seen from my formation in my mother’s womb, and perhaps before conception.

Fifty years have passed since that experience, but it still stands as something I *know*, experientially, and today symbolizes what God seems to be bringing to my attention powerfully—that “original face before my parents were born”—the face I want to uncover, expose, so that Christ may be seen.

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