

## **The Sound of Peace** **Welcoming the Strangers among Us**

By  
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I once heard an NPR story about a little girl who had no fear of strangers. After a drama class, for example, she approached an elderly woman she'd never seen before, struck up a conversation, and within just a few minutes asked, "Will you take me home? Can I go home with you?" I don't know what's more disturbing, the thought of a defenseless child naively asking to go home with a perfect stranger, or that the report went on to say the girl's love of strangers is due to a genetic disorder. Williams Syndrome is a disorder that causes those with it, children and adults, to love people. Think about how strange this sounds! Love and trust can be symptomatic of an abnormal condition.

There are serious life-threatening cardiovascular issues for the 20 to 30 thousand Americans estimated to have Williams Syndrome, and they also have difficulty grappling with numbers, abstract thinking, and spatial relations. Yet they have advanced verbal abilities, a natural affinity for music, and, as noted, extremely social personalities. In fact, according to the Williams Syndrome Association, "Parents often say the joy and perspective a child with WS brings into their lives had been unimaginable."<sup>1</sup>

The implications of Williams Syndrome, that healthy human beings don't normally love or trust strangers, reminds me of how bothered I was when I first read Sigmund Freud's suggestion that Jesus' most revered exhortation, "love your neighbor as yourself," is also indicative of a troubled mind. "...we find ourselves unable to suppress a feeling of astonishment, as at something unnatural." He writes, "Why should we do this? What good is it to us? Above all, how can we do such a thing? How could it possibly be done?"<sup>2</sup> The seeming impossibility of loving perfect strangers, let alone our enemies, was so incomprehensible to Freud that he considered it an inflation of one's own need to feel good. He felt it is normal, rather, for us to love only those that we actually know, and then only if they deserve our love. "My love seems to me a valuable thing that I have no right to throw away without reflection," he said, "It imposes obligations on me which I must be prepared to make sacrifices to fulfill. If I love someone, he must be worthy of it in some way or other."<sup>3</sup> Or, to be more clinical, he continues, "The command to love our neighbor as ourselves is the strongest defense there is against human aggressiveness and it is a superlative example of the unpsychological attitude of the cultural super-ego. The command is impossible to fulfill; such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value and not remedy the evil."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.williams-syndrome.org/what-is-williams-syndrome>

<sup>2</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, NY, 1930, 1994, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 68f.

I happen to be a great admirer of Freud, and though I don't agree with everything he had to say, I think he has often been discounted more because of the uncomfortable truths he has presented us with, than because of his errors. So, as a person of some intellectual integrity, I have struggled, and continue to struggle, with Freud's challenging thoughts about loving strangers. Was Jesus merely compensating for his own aggressive feelings, or, perhaps, suffering from Williams Syndrome when he told us to love our neighbors, strangers, and even our enemies as much as we love ourselves?

I'm not going to try to answer this here, in part because I'm still figuring it out for myself. But what I will point out is that Freud is committing, to some extent, what logic calls the *naturalistic fallacy*. This is the assumption that something is right or good simply because it occurs naturally, and wrong or bad because it happens to be unnatural. The rightness or wrongness of gay marriage for example, is often argued in light of whether or not being gay is a lifestyle choice or a genetic orientation. Such arguments, to me, seem unimportant, given that things like earthquakes, tsunamis, and tornados are natural events that are not good, and things like the Polio vaccine, fire trucks, and orchestras, though not naturally occurring, are. The morality of gay marriage should have nothing to do with nature, and everything to do with what it means to live in a free society. Freud seems to commit this same fallacy by calling Jesus' golden rule "unnatural."

Nevertheless, I too am going to commit the naturalistic fallacy now by suggesting that loving strangers is part of our natural human disposition. That is, our species is instinctively inclined to welcome others, even those we don't know, with open minds, open hearts, and open arms, as is indicative in our culture by the handshake, the open hand we readily extend to those we meet for the first time.

My first premise in this argument is that human beings are essentially made of light. I'll explain why this is important in a moment, but for now it's necessary to point out that physicists are telling us this is the case. David Bohm, for example, said that all matter is, in his words, "frozen light."<sup>5</sup> Even Einstein, who gave us his famous equation proving matter and energy are the same,  $E=mc^2$ , said, "There is no place in this new kind of physics both for the field and matter, for the field is the only reality."<sup>6</sup> This is why he went on to eventually say, "all I want to do is study light."<sup>7</sup> Even the energy we gain from the food we eat is stored light—photocalories. And our DNA, it turns out, continually emits a low frequency photonic signal. In other words, our bodies continually radiate light. And because all life shares the same DNA, all life broadcasts light.

So, my first premise, again, is that our bodies are made of light and continually broadcast light at a wavelength that is mostly imperceptible to our senses. My second

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<sup>5</sup> Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Capra, Fritjof, *The Tao of Physics*, Shambhala, Boston, 2000, p. 211.

<sup>7</sup> Fox. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

premise, however, is that we are, on an unconscious level, able to perceive life's photonic broadcast. This is why, I hypothesize, when we get away from the noise of our cities and technologies, we often say we are "communing" or "in harmony" with nature. Because, when we are in a natural setting, we more easily feel the vibration that is common to all life. We are in tune with nature. As theologian Matthew Fox puts it, "what a rare gift it is to be flesh or matter, that is, slow-moving light. This is not just true of human flesh, but of all flesh, the oranges we eat and the tea we drink, the grasses and the animals, the birds and the stars—are all slow moving light."<sup>8</sup> So, this feeling that we are in tune with nature, when we're "pickin up good vibrations," as the song says, might occur when we're more attune to the underlying frequency in all things, the quiet hum resonating through everything in the Universe.

Premise number three: You may have heard it said, "As within, so without. As above, so below." This ancient *law of correspondence* suggests that the invisible microcosmic world is mirrored by the visible macrocosmic world, that is, by the world as we perceive it through our senses. Meister Eckhart said, "In the innermost and deepest aspect of the soul God creates the whole cosmos."<sup>9</sup> For time's sake, I won't go any further into my reasons for accepting this is so, but ask that you open yourself to the possibility that it is. I suggest it is true, furthermore, to the extent that the words we use and the sounds we make often reflect those imperceptible underlying quantum frequencies that our bodies and all of life continually broadcast. If you look at caffeine under a molecular microscope, for example, it looks like a mesh of jagged wires. And when we drink too much coffee we actually say we are feeling "wired." Similarly, ATP, adenosine triphosphate, the molecule that actually transfers energy to our cells, looks like solar flares exploding upon the surface of the Sun. Selenium, atomic number 34, supposed to promote health and long life, is, likewise, shaped like pyramids.

Jesus is reported to have said, "Heaven is within you." On one level this seems but a metaphor, but on a quantum level, we now know that our individual bodies contain 125 billion miles of DNA, enough, according to anthropologist Jeremy Narby, "to make 70 round trips between Saturn and the Sun."<sup>10</sup> And all those endless miles of DNA in each of us, enough to string from here to the end of the Universe, is vibrating in harmony with all of life, if not with all that is.

I conclude from all of this, then, that even though we cannot directly detect this low frequency photonic signal, we might articulate it in some of sounds we can hear and utter. In its rawness, I believe, it is expressed best in Hinduism's two primordial sounds of creation, *ah* and *ohm*. These two fundamental sounds, furthermore, when combined, express the underlying harmony of the Universe, the ultimate oneness of all seeming

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<sup>8</sup> Fox, *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000, p.32.

<sup>10</sup> Narby, Jeremy, *The Cosmic Serpent*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1998, p.88.

opposites. This is why, perhaps, the very word, *harmony*, synonymous with words like balance and peace, also contains both sounds, *har-mon-y*—ah ohm.

What is even remarkable to me about this, if I am correct, is that these to primordial sounds are also reflected, almost universally, in the ways human initially greet each other. This is most apparent is the Hebrew greeting, *shalom*, and its Islamic relative, *salaam*, as in the Arabic, *as-salamu 'alykom* (peace be unto you). Less familiar greetings, however, sound similar. The Basque greeting is *kaixo* (pronounced kai-show). The Bulgarian is *Dobar den*. The Cantonese greeting is *ne ho*. The Czech is *ahoj* (ahoy). Fijian is *bula uro*. The French is *salut*. The German is *guten tag*. In the Congo it's *mambo*. Hindi, as you may know, is *namaste* (pronounced na-mus-thei). Hawaiian is *aloha*. Japanese is *ohayooy* (o-ha-yo). Maori is *kia ora* (kia o ra). Samoan is *malo*. Spanish is *hola*. Greek is *yeia sou* (yah soo). Swahili is *jambo*. German, Indonesian, Norwegian, and English all have some version of *hallo*. And even the made up Klingon greeting, meaning, “What do you want?” is pronounced, *nook-neck*.

So even if there is an instinctive part of us that is leery of those we don't know, there is also an instinctive part of us that expresses itself cross-culturally by greeting strangers with the two primordial sounds, *ah om*, *shalom*, words that ubiquitously mean peace, specifically the sort of peace and contentment that comes from balance and harmony. Indeed, the first interaction our species has with friends and strangers alike is to instinctively greet them with these two primordial sounds, an expression that, in any language, suggests that our natural inclination is to dwell with others in peace.

In Islamic law, whether it is always followed very well or not, an enemy who utters the word for peace, *alykum*, cannot be assaulted. And the Hebrew Scriptures are replete with admonitions to protect the strangers among us. “When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him,” says Leviticus, the Book of Laws, “The stranger living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”<sup>11</sup> And Jesus himself is reported to have said, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”<sup>12</sup> And Paul, the true founder of Christianity, wrote, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”<sup>13</sup>

I wonder if the converse is also true, that by rejecting, ignoring, and oppressing strangers, we are doing so to potential angels in our lives. Years ago, on December 17, 1988, to be exact, during my wedding reception, which happened to be the coldest day of that year, I saw a stranger standing in the center of the room. He was an older man, with long thick hair, an unkempt beard, and a weather-worn face. His suit, though neat, looked like a hodgepodge from the Goodwill. We caught each other's eyes from across the room. He had a sparkle in his, along with a polite smile on his face. I instinctively glanced away

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<sup>11</sup> Leviticus 19:33-34

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 25:35

<sup>13</sup> Hebrews 13:2

briefly to evaluate the situation. My first thought was that a bum had come in off the street to crash our party. But how could he have known about it? And why would he have been so uniquely dressed for the occasion if he were just happening by on the coldest day of the year? After only a moment, however, I decided to welcome him regardless. I turned with a smile on my face but he was nowhere in sight. And though many others had also seen him, no one knew who he was, or saw him come or go, or spoke with him. Nor does he show up in any of the video or photos taken during our wedding or reception. I've often wondered about him in terms of Paul's admonition. Could I have been entertaining an angel without knowing it? To this day I remember the divine sparkle in his eye and his knowing smile, and the way he vanished during that brief moment I was deciding whether or not to greet him. And even if he was just a stranger off the street, which the realist in me says must be the case, he was no less divine, and my hesitancy to welcome him into the warmth of our celebration still makes me feel ashamed. My hesitation caused me to miss an opportunity to know someone I've never seen again.

Today, however, I might not act any differently. My years of life, my journey away from hearth and home, have hardened me to a degree, and made me suspicious of strangers. I lost my childish naivety a long time ago, and do not suffer from some religious form of Williams Syndrome. On the contrary, I would do, very much, what I did 22 years ago; I would take a moment to think things through. But, afterward, I trust, I would also make the same decision to greet the stranger before me. The hesitancy, the precaution, is normal, but so is eventually letting go and venturing forth. This is the natural order of things.

The childish part of us wants to stay where we feel safest, by the warm hearth of home, near the glow of our family's love. Like Freud, we prefer to reserve our love and trust for those we know, for those who have proven they deserve it. Trusting our love to strangers, to those who haven't earned it, to potential enemies, puts us at risk. Trust exposes us to betrayal, but part of being mature means becoming less naïve. And we become less naïve, not by staying put, but by leaving home and experiencing a few let downs, a few betrayals, a few bumps and bruises along the way. Maturity comes by leaving the nest, the comfort of our family with its familiar ideas and ways, and opening ourselves to the ideas and ways of strangers—to strange ways and ideas. Maturity means having meaningful intimate relationships with people we aren't related to. It's about forming new relationships and making friends. It means welcoming the strangers among us.

Our initial instinct, as adults, is not to shy away, but to say *hello*—ah ohm—“peace unto you.” And though we cannot know if we are entertaining angels, we can easily detect the strangers among us for they will seem strange to us. They may wear strange clothes, or speak in a strange language, or have strange ideas and strange ways about them. They won't be like us, or like the people we're used to, because strangers are strange. And while we should continue to instruct our little ones not to talk to strangers, and to beware of the big bad wolf, those of us who have grown up and ventured out into the world, should recall what it was like when we felt strange, or those times when we have been estranged, when we were strangers in a strange land or a strange place, and the

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gratitude we've felt toward those who opened their hearths and homes to us. Trust your instinct to say shalom, alykom, hello. It may be a risk, but it's a risk worth taking.