

## Free-Fall

11/22/2013

I am in my 70<sup>th</sup> year. I am peacefully married to a woman who has taught me over these nearly forty years how to open my heart. I love her more than I love anyone else—as best I can. We enjoy one another’s company. We have come to be silly in the same ways. Our peaceful boat begins to rock unsteadily when one or both of us turn inward and do not see from the other’s vantage point. Then, apologies, and the sadness sets in, and the overt kindness, until the waters calm again, and we can laugh.

Our children are 1200 miles away. I have forgiven Alex Bell for making distance disappear with his squawk box. They each continue to make their demands on us, and we cannot yet free ourselves from the too intimate details of their lives. The calls always end up suggesting a donation of some kind—financial, emotional, etc.— to their well-being. Nonetheless, the distance, and the beauty and commodiousness of the west central Florida coast are antidotes.

And, in my opinion, there is no better nutrient for the heart—indeed, for the whole, integrated person—than the Gulf of Mexico. I have grown in spirit here, I believe. I have begun, amid the Great Egrets and the Ospreys and the herons of five varieties and the lumbering Pelicans, I have begun to fly in my spirit. It may not look like flying to you. It often does not look like flying to me. Often, it looks like frustration, as my life careens out of control. Often it feels like unhappiness and irritation and “fuck ‘em all.” Often it feels like a loss of caring, a willingness to give up my place in the world—rather, in the community—to let it all spin tortuously away from me—so that I can sit dumbly with my friend, my wife, and watch inane but involving TV shows, or so that I can sit quietly in front of my computer screen and edit the hundreds of photos I take every week of the birds here, the clouds, the sunsets, the unnoticed things growing beneath larger things.

I wonder why I take so many photos.—My computer tells me that I have more than 25,000 of them stored there.—I think that each one is a simple statement. “This is what was there then. Look, how beautiful.” I know that if I see a beautiful cloud formation, I must snap it right then, because in half-a-minute, it will have changed into something else, lost its shape, or its compositional qualities, or its color. So every photo captures a fragment of existence that will never be again.

Well, not “captures” exactly. The fact is that the camera produces a two-dimensional rendering of a three-dimensional object or space. And my inexpensive camera never gets the color right. So I Photoshop all the interesting pictures, exaggerating color and contrast and proportion in order to highlight, as it were, features of the object which were very apparent and crucial in the real-

world setting in which they occurred, but which appear bland or obscure in the photographic rendering.

So I turn to each edited photo, looking at it as a thing of beauty in itself. Sometimes I remember the lived experience which the photo represents; sometimes I don't. It doesn't matter. The experience in real-life has passed. All that remains is the figment of it on the screen, which, if I've edited it well, tells its own beauty.

I almost never take photos of people, except at "moments": weddings, baptisms, visiting friends, and so on, and pictures of my wife, who doesn't like being photographed.

I expect that the pictures will die with me. Who cares about 10,000 photos of cloud formations? The few photos that might be artful and might sustain interest will be swept away in the torrent of the 10,000 banal representations.

So it is with each of us at death, at least from the viewpoint of the continuing-to-live. That heart-full of memories and stories and perhaps wisdom and faith and kindness—it's all swept away by the torrent of death. All that remains is a cold representation—a figment—of the living person who *was* for half-a-minute and then changed into something else.

There could be sadness about this, especially as death inches closer to me and to each one of us. Actually, of course, the pretty metaphors aside, what happens in fact as death sets in is that some crucial thing within us malfunctions fatally, or else rot and corruption set up shop within us and, like a python eating a live thing that comes out the other end as shit, turn us into latrine-fodder.

So much for the body that we cling to so dearly and that seems to drive so much of what we do. How many of our minutes we spend sleeping, eating, sexing, washing, brushing, perfuming, clothing and decorating our bodies! And how many more we spend making our environment comfortable for our bodies or pleasing to them.

I'm not condemning all this, or even devaluing it. This is the way things *have* to be because this is the way they *are*. This is the way they've been created in the Universal Consciousness of Divinity—if you will allow me to say that. I will explain briefly. When we become conscious of something—say, a siren on the street outside—what is the source of our consciousness of that event? Is our individual consciousness—yours and mine—projecting, or receiving? In other words, does your mind project awareness onto the world around you, like a spotlight, so that you become aware of objects when you turn your spotlight of consciousness on them?

If you believe that this is the case, then does the object or event exist somehow in those times when you're not aware of it? If the event or object exists only while you're aware of it ("It exists, as far as I'm concerned, only when I care about it."), then how does it come into existence when you become aware of it? Do you "create" it? Are you the creator of the world around you? If you are,

then go ahead and create a seventeen-legged cow right in front of you. Can't? Then you are not the source of your consciousness of your environment.

If you still say that things exist for you only when you're conscious of them, then explain to me what becomes of them when you cease to be conscious of them. Do they stop existing? Is this your answer: "As far as I'm concerned, I don't care whether they exist or not once they're out of my consciousness"? You don't? What about your beating heart? Does that matter to you, even when you're not paying attention to it?

If you answer yes, then consciousness does not emanate from you, because you've admitted that there are things that must exist for you even when you're not conscious of them—not "creating" them.

On the other hand, you might say, "No. I don't care about anything, including my beating heart, when I'm not conscious of it. Really, all I care about is (the beauty of) what's in my spotlight."

If you believe that, then I think you are in a spiritually healthy place—the place where you don't care about anything. You are unattached to everything and simply admire, or at least pay attention with dispassionate interest to, what is going on right now in your world—right before your eyes.

But let's take a moment to return to the other possible answer to the question of the source of your consciousness. We've already considered the option that your individual consciousness projects what you experience onto the "space" around you. Now let's think about the other option, that your consciousness is receptive rather than projective. In this case, your consciousness is like your eyes. The light comes from some source outside you and reflects off the objects around you, objects that exist on their own, without any action on your part. This reflected light from the objects passes into your eyes and registers in your interior workings, at which point you become aware of the object.

Likewise, in this approach to the answer to the question of the source of consciousness, every object in your environment exists, whether you are aware of it or not. Moreover, every object emanates or "shines with" consciousness of it. I'm not saying that everything is conscious in the same way that we humans say that we're conscious. Rather, I'm saying that consciousness of the existence of a thing and consciousness of the qualities and characteristics of a thing arise from the thing itself. Every existing thing proclaims itself—it "shines with" *what* it is and with the fact *that* it is.

All this is simply to say that according to this way of understanding, all things exist *objectively*, whether you're there to see them or not.

When you *are* there, you passively *perceive* the existence and qualities of the things in your environment from your vantage point. This means that your consciousness is *receptive*. Every object (including you yourself) manifests its own existence, and if someone is there and is “paying attention” (which means, being open to receiving these manifestations), that person will be aware of the objects in his or her environment.

When we say consciousness is receptive, we mean that we receive into our consciousness the proclamation of its existence and qualities that every object makes. – “Proclamations” is a metaphor, of course. Perhaps a more descriptive way to say it is this. Every object emits consciousness of itself. When you “receive” these “emissions,” you become conscious of the fact that the object exists and of its qualities and characteristics.

But if this is the answer to the question of the source of consciousness, then we have to ask, What is the source of these “emanations” or “emissions” of consciousness of the object which each object emits?

The answer I suggest is that every object “shines with” its own existence because there is a universe-wide Consciousness which is conscious of every object that exists. Individual objects—including you and me—“shine with” a consciousness that they exist and that they possess the qualities that they possess because there is a Universal Consciousness which is being aware of each one of them all the time.

When we perceive an individual object in our environment, we are participating in Universal Consciousness as it is aware of that object.

This answer seems to me to be the better explanation because it fits more closely with my lived experience of perception. Here it is in brief. There is a Universal Consciousness which is aware of everything that exists. This awareness by Universal Consciousness of the existence of each thing *is* what causes the thing to exist. The thing exists and possesses the qualities it possesses simply and only because Universal Consciousness is aware of it. This awareness of the object informs it with perceptibility—with existence in our perception.

Moreover, our perception or awareness of other things is due to us ourselves being perceived as existing with certain qualities, including the quality of awareness, by Universal Consciousness.

You and I and all of us, and everything of which we become aware—we all exist, and we all come to exist, within Universal Consciousness. We all “shine with” perceptibility, with the potential to be perceived—to be accepted into someone’s consciousness—because that “shine” is the awareness which Universal Consciousness has of us.

Universal Consciousness—which brings us into being, which maintains us in being, and which renders us able to be perceived by others—we call “Divinity” or “God.”

Let's go on. Divinity creates the world in every aspect. When we survey the human landscape, we have to ask, Is this the best that Divinity can do? Our world is utterly imperfect. There is war and slavery and dishonor. But, we might assert, when Divinity creates war, Divinity also creates in us the ideal of peace, and a yearning for it. When Divinity creates enslavement and cruelty and despotism, Divinity also creates in us the ideal of individual dignity and love and sharing in justice, and a yearning for these.

And when Divinity creates in us the recognition of a human world so imperfect, Divinity also creates in us—individually and societally—resolutions to do better: to make peace and justice come about. And Divinity creates in some of us (why just some?) the *primary resolution*: “I can do it, and I will.” I can be more honest, and I will. I can be more just toward others, and I will. I can be more caring and loving, even to those I don't like, and I will.

So, the world is created in a state of perfect imperfection. Universal Consciousness creates us to know the perfect amidst the imperfect. All imperfection leads ultimately, at least in some, to recognition of the perfect.

Pretty thoughts, but missing the bull's eye by far. If it were possible to bring about perfection in the world by people realizing the ideal of perfection in the midst of the actual imperfection, weakness, cruelty and greed in the world of lived human experience, then this realization, driven by the “primary resolution,” might result in an increasingly more perfect human world. – I've lived a lifetime now, and I've studied history from the Rift Valley hominids through Heraclitus to Pope Francis and Kim Jung-Un. I don't see any substantial change. The politicians have never been more corrupt. The poorest starve and die of survivable diseases, as always, while the rich buy pleasure-craft and, as the Chinese used to say, the rich build houses for their cars! (Now the Chinese rich also store their cars in garages.) The past one hundred and twenty years have seen unimaginable changes in the way we live and the tools we use, with no change at all in our moral excellence nor in our respect for goodness.

As for the primary resolution (“I can do it, and I will”), like every other thought or action in the created world, it is merely a stage of growth; it is a plateau in the developmental process, an identifiable state through which we pass. And like every other developmental stage from the gross self-interest of toddler-hood (“Mine!”) to the anticipation of death (accompanied by emotions I barely recognize—the sadness of finality with every “See you later,” the suffering brought by disease, the anticipatory fear . . .), like every other developmental stage, we pass through it, we are changed by it, and we move on to the next stage, and finally to the last stage. Then the torrent of death floods over us and carries us out to sea.

In my seventieth year, I have come to realize this: We—neither individually nor as a society nor as a species—can perfect what is imperfect in our individual selves, nor consequently, in the world. Each of us is created in a state of perfect imperfection. We each have our strengths and

talents, and often without thinking about them, we use them, and goodness comes to be. And in addition, we each have our weaknesses and imperfections. When we wake up to see the effects of our imperfections on other people or to recognize how we are offending the moral code we have been taught to obey, we can come to recognize the harm which we do, often without planning on it, or the trouble we put ourselves or others into.

When this recognition occurs, we often turn to the primary resolution: I can correct this weakness in myself and I will. Then, like an alcoholic in a Twelve-Step program, we set out to rid ourselves of our weakness, only to discover so quickly that the fight is constant, it's day-to-day, and often we are overwhelmed by our weakness. We try to be good, and we often fail.

The young people—those who still have energy—continue to hope and to try. After sixty years of trying and failing, praying and repenting again and again, I've come to see this: Divinity has created me exactly the way Divinity wants me to be right now, with both virtues and imperfections. The strengths often arise in situations that surprise me, in which I didn't think I was strong. And the weaknesses, well, they're still—after sixty years—inescapably there, making sorrow where there could be joy, and filling me with the guilt of breaking the moral code I was taught—a guilt which is in reality, grief which arises from not being perfect—grief over the loss of what I never had, or more precisely, grief over the repeated death of the illusion of perfectibility which I cherished in myself.

Divinity has made me perfectly imperfect. I cannot change that. When I get one spiritual seam sewed up, another splits. I've got so many split moral seams to fix that it would take me half-a-dozen lifetimes. And I keep discovering others.

So I've come to this: I'm done with the primary resolution. I'm done trying to fix the world. I'm done trying to fix myself. Here's the reason: Divinity has created the world exactly the way Divinity wants it to be right now. Divinity presumably has all the power Divinity needs to create the world in any way Divinity wishes it to be. If the world were not the way Divinity wanted it to be right now, why would Divinity have made it this way? So, the world is exactly the way it should be right now. I don't create it, so I can't fix it by my own efforts.

This means, for one thing, that the harm and injustice and cruelty that exist in the world right now, I must abide. Unless and until I feel called to do other, more proactive things (a 70-year-old Sandinista?), I will simply observe the error and cruelty and stupidity in the world, speaking when the opportunity arises, silent the rest of the time, passively awaiting goodness to arise, as Divinity moves creation.

Likewise, in my own life, Divinity makes me who I am at this moment, with strengths and with weaknesses. I can do nothing to change that situation either. Shall I contest with God over his making of me? No. I will carelessly be who I am—I will carelessly *do* who I am. The strengths will express themselves in the world as Divinity would have it—as they do now. And the

weaknesses I will endure, not standing in their way either, unless in the moment I am moved to do so and find the strength to do so.

I am as Divinity creates me right now. I accept that now. I accept my perfect imperfection. Divinity has all this in mind and will lead me through this stage of growth as well. But right now, while I am in it, I simply do myself, for better or worse, and I do not care who approves.

The distressing aspect of my situation now is that there are no hand-grips. I have jumped out of the nest. (I don't know why. It was comfortable in there with the others, all of us trying and all of us pretending we were succeeding.) I do who I am. God made me this way. I accept the way God made me, fully imperfect, fully virtuous.

And I'll let God determine whether the goodness that arises from what I do in strength out-values the harm that arises from the exercise of my weaknesses (presuming that that's important.)

I've jumped from the nest. And I'm experiencing the falling. I don't know whether I'm undergoing despair or surrender. I don't even know how to decide this question. They're only words, anyway—making a distinction without a difference, unless you add a whole *Summa Theologica* of qualifications to the terms of the question.

All that really matters is ***What Is***, and as a result of that, ***I will do who I am***. The rest of it all—I don't really care, call it whatever name you wish. This experience for me now, I prefer to call it ***Free-fall***. Perhaps at some point, I'll get used to it.