

From my book: *What is God?*

Chapter One

My Father's God

To think about God is to the human soul what breathing is to the human body.

I say to think about God, not necessarily to believe in God—that may or may not come later.

I say: to think about God.

I clearly remember the moment something deep inside me starting breathing for the first time. Something behind my thoughts and my desires and fears, something behind my self, something behind “Jerry,” which was and is my name, the name of *me*, from my earliest childhood.

I can say this now, more than sixty years after my first conscious experience of this second breathing, this first breathing of the soul.

Let me explain.

The year is 1943. I am nine years old.

It is dark night, full summer in Philadelphia, hot, humid. I am aware that my father is sitting outside on the front steps.

We have only just moved into these small rooms on this bare, newly constructed street pretentiously named Park Lane. The street is an island of low-rent apartments in a sea of wealth: leafy, large, gracious old houses-- and all embraced left and right by Philadelphia's incomparable Fairmount Park with its stretches of untamed forest and its rushing, mystical Wissahickon Creek.

I go down the thinly carpeted stairs and gingerly open the screen door, trying not to disturb my father's silence. I had thought to walk up the street into the sweet air of the park entrance. But this time, I don't know why, without a word, I sit down next to my father. I had never done that before. His solitudes were never inviting, often following bursts of anger or often simply mysterious and, to me, a child, inexplicable. Always more or less frightening.

I sit down, noticing that his head is tilted toward the sky.

In front of us stretches a vacant lot, part of which my father has cultivated as a "victory garden" (during World War II the government asked citizens to help the war effort in that way by reducing pressure on the nation's food supply). In that garden, now enveloped in darkness, there live corn, carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, radishes, lettuce, scallions, stringbeans and much else, planted and unplanted, some of it contained by the wooden fence and some of it rampantly flourishing in the wild lot behind the fence: lowly weeds with frost-green, sticky leaves, white-tufted milkweed, crowds of dandelions, and—to me most important of all—buzzing, brilliant insects, butterflies, some like fluttering snowflakes, others like flying wildflowers and others colored like jungle creatures, all heartbreakingly gentle and beautiful; snails, spiders, big, angry horseflies—and, lord of everything, the pale green praying mantis suddenly appearing out of nowhere in a moment of grace, as from another universe, so near on the leaf, so still, so complex, so seemingly conscious and wondrously deadly. And then, closest to my heart, grasshoppers --dancing, leaping, flying, singing grasshoppers some earnest, some clownish, some as thick my thumb, others almost as tiny as a crumb of bread in the

palm of my hand. It brought tears of wonder and love to my eyes to see the identical intricate structure of this improbable creature written in both the tiniest dot of being and the largest individual member of the species.

Out there, now, occupying the whole of the soft darkness: fireflies-- we called them "lightning bugs." Hundreds of them, intensifying the darkness by randomly glowing and vanishing in the same present moment; intensifying the silence with their noiseless rhythms of illumination. Like flickering stars they were, here, on earth.

But it was when I looked up into the sky that, at that moment, *I* appeared. It did not happen right away. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that my father was still looking up. And so I kept my gaze upward, noticing the stars, some of which formed into constellations whose names I knew. Imitating my father, I kept my gaze upward, just looking.

And suddenly, incomprehensibly, all at once, despite the heavy summer air that always absorbs most of the starlight—suddenly, as if by magic, the black sky was instantly strewn with millions of stars. Millions of points of light. Millions of worlds. Never, before or since, have I ever seen such a night sky, not even in remote mountains on clear nights. It was not simply that my eyes had become normally adjusted to the darkness; it was as though an entirely new instrument of seeing had all at once been switched on within me. Or, as it also seemed, as though the whole universe itself suddenly opened its arms to me, saying to me: 'Yes, I am here. See, this is what I really am! Do you like my beautiful garment?'

In an instant, less than an instant, a powerful, neutral current of electricity streaked down both sides of my spine—so quickly I had not a moment to have a thought about it or an emotional reaction to it. Many years had to pass before I was able to understand something about what it was that came down through me.

My eyes stayed riveted on the millions of stars, the millions of tiny stars with hardly a black space between them.

I wondered about my father, but I didn't dare turn my head to look at him, afraid that these millions of worlds might somehow not be there when I turned back to them.

I don't know how long we both continued to sit there, silently. But finally, speaking in a voice that I had never heard from him before, he said:

“That's God.”

Something, *someone* suddenly appeared in me, as new and different as the voice of my father was new and different. As though I were summoned into being by that new voice from outside and inside myself. I remember it as clearly now as though it has just happened: I saw my thoughts slowing down, and somehow becoming longer and thinner, like an attenuating gray cloud, gradually dissolving, leaving a nearly blank, dark space in my mind. And then, one thought, one question, appeared and filled my mind: What is God? What am I? It was the same question, it was one question., one experience.

And yet, at the same time, it was also one answer, the same answer. And only years and years later did I begin to understand that experience and that answer: *I am*.

But there, sitting on the steps next to my father, I did not have those words. I kept my head up and my eyes upturned, but already the millions of stars were fading away as

mysteriously as they had appeared. Why? Where did they go? And where is God? What is he? I tried to squint, thinking that maybe I could make all the stars come back.

A quiet yearning rose up in me—and it was just then that I noticed that other “breathing” taking place in me. Perhaps it had been there all the time, ever since the millions of stars had appeared, but only now did it catch my attention.

I said to my father: “Can I ask you something, Dad?”

“What? About what?” he said, without turning his head. His voice was unusually calm.

“When Aunt Bertha died . . . when I was little . . . and we came back from the cemetery . . . do you remember what I asked you? And what you said?”

He did not immediately reply. I was asking him about the death of his sister. There were six siblings in his family—five brothers and one sister, Bertha, the youngest of the children, beloved, and tenderly, protectively cherished by all the sons. When she was anywhere near the brothers they never shouted and almost never argued—even as a small child, I noticed that.

She was very beautiful; I have photographs of her that prove it to me, even now many decades later. I have photographs of her holding my hand when I was just beginning to walk. In those pictures I can see in myself that absolute love and trust I felt for her all the days that was she with me.

She was nineteen years old when she was killed. She was struck by a car as she was crossing the wide street in front of the family house where we lived with my grandmother and all of her grown children. I could not have been much more than three

years old. The words, “Aunt Bertha is dead,” had no meaning for me. I knew that bugs died, plants died, animals died. But I did not know what it meant that people died, especially people who were loved. When I heard those words coming from my father, with my mother weeping at his side, I became very still. Inside and outside. That is all.

My next intensely vivid memory is of the cemetery. I am standing next to my mother who is holding my hand. It’s a cold, sunny day. The coffin has just been lowered and is being covered with earth. The members of the family—many, many people—are standing listening to the rabbi as he chants in Hebrew while swaying back and forth, back and forth. My father and his four brothers, my uncles, are standing just behind the rabbi. In the middle, dressed—or I should say, covered—with black rags, supported at her elbows by the oldest son, Uncle Jack, and the next-to-oldest, my father, stands my grandmother.

It was startling to see her powerful, stout body trembling and weak, needing support, her face white with grief. Gray-black hair gushing as though electrified from under the loose black rags covering her head. I had already come to know her to be a kind of dragon, fierce eyes, fierce dark mole on her lip, her earthy Russian features with the high cheekbones that pressed upward into nearly Oriental eyes . . . served always by her angry sons who obeyed her every word, her every glance even as they shouted and roared at her. But now-- how was it possible? —she could not even stand by herself; and yet—and how was this possible?—her weakness seemed in some way stronger than strength. I remember that I could not bear to look at her for more than a moment. I lowered my eyes.

And then, while my eyes are down, I am startled by noise and tumult and sudden movement all around. My mother suddenly, painfully, squeezes my hand and utters a groan. I remember being afraid to look up. And then—a surging need to know, to understand what is happening inside this unknown thing everyone called death and which I really did understand very deeply inside my child's bones and heart.

And when I do look up I at first can not make out what I am seeing. I see swirling black clouds at the grave and hear someone—I instantly know it is my grandmother—shrieking, screaming in the household Yiddish and Russian that I cannot understand. She has broken free from her sons and has leaped into the grave and is clawing at the earth even as it is still being shoveled onto the coffin.

It took all five of the brothers to tear her away from the coffin and lift her out of the grave. And it took all of them to hold her back, screaming at the open grave as the ceremony ended.

Back home in the big darkened house, furniture covered with white sheets. Shoes all left on the front porch. Everyone, like me, without shoes on. Seeing all the old people in their stocking feet somehow makes me feel that they are like me, a child. Mirrors and paintings all turned to the wall. The rabbi and the relatives being served tea and cakes by my mother and some of the other women. One of the old women, one of my great aunts, offers me a small cake. The first time in my life anyone has “offered” me anything. People have *given* me things, but no one had ever *offered* me anything. It makes me now vaguely feel like a grown-up.

Soft, murmuring conversation. My grandmother, with two older women beside her, and holding a full glass of hot tea in her bare hand, sits staring and moaning on the couch. My father and the uncles are standing together, talking, in the enclosed, sunlit porch adjoining the darkened living room.

Independently, without asking anybody, I climb out of my slippery wooden chair and walk into the porch without anyone paying any attention to me.

I stand next to my father and feel absolutely no fear of him. I remember pulling at the sleeve of his coat. He looks down at me says something like, “What do you want, Jerry?”

I vividly remember what I said, in a strong voice, tears streaming down my face:

“Where is Aunt Bertha?”

At that, the four uncles abruptly stopped talking and looked down at me.

My father looks into my face. He suddenly seems young, young and powerful, his eyes glistening:

“She’s with God.”

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My words hang in the night air, “Do you remember?” But my father does not reply. He stays exactly as he was, his head tilted upward toward the sky.

But for me something important happened inside me. My mind started racing while at the same time my breathing became strangely quiet throughout my body. As a young child, from about the age of five onward, I had started precociously looking at books about astronomy, gradually becoming able actually to read and understand portions

of the text. I started piling up information, facts about the solar system, the planets and the sun and the stars, devouring photographs, begging to be taken to the planetarium and, finally, talking endlessly about the universe and God with a special childhood friend. So just now, sitting on the front steps with my father, my mind started racing with questions and thoughts about God and death. But there was something powerfully different about the present moment that made it unlike all my previous curiosity and questioning.

What made it different was that now, in the present moment, the memory of what I had felt at the death of my aunt and what I had felt tugging at the sleeve of my father—that memory was rising in my chest like the very power of darkest night itself. That memory wasn't really even a memory, it was a present experience, as present as the night sky, the lightning bugs, the sudden bursting sound of the loud crickets. What was present so powerfully at that moment was not a memory—that is too weak a word—it was my Self, it was what I was when I was three years old—what I was—no, *who* I was.

And *am*.

What I am saying is this: -- and it is of utmost importance if we, any of us, is ever to approach the question of what God is and what death is:

In that moment, sitting on the stone steps next to my silent father, I became two people: one thinking and questioning with all the information and logic at my disposal, and the other knowing and sensing and yearning within the depths of my embryonic and timeless Selfhood. And all the while there was no reconciling of these two human beings.

I tried as hard as I could to think. I formulated one question after another. Does God really exist? Why does He allow death and anguish? Why is He invisible? Why does He allow evil people to exist and make war and kill millions of innocent people? My mind raced through the books I was reading: astronomy, philosophy, biology, pre-history. The human mind—was God the Mind of the universe? And is the universe infinite? What could that mean? Is the human mind also infinite? . . . Or was it all—God and religion and ceremonies—all irrational? Something, beliefs, fairy-tales or something, for someone else, for other people—not for me, not for science, not for philosophy.

As I tried and tried to pursue the thoughts that were endlessly erupting inside my skull, and as I tried to concentrate on them, I was also deeply aware—wordlessly—of the yearning and the vibration inside my chest, and the sensation of *I am* that had accompanied the millions of stars and the remembering of the death of Aunt Bertha.

The more I tried to think, the more I became aware of the wordless vibration in my body, the more I felt like two people—and the more I felt something like a second breathing taking place inside me. And the more acute became the sensation of being two separate people.

What I wish to say in this introductory chapter, what I wish to propose, is that when a man or woman directs his attention to questions of ultimate reality—which are in their essence the question of the nature of God—something awakens within us and calls to us; when a man or woman directs his or her attention to questions of ultimate value and ultimate obligation—which also are in their essence the question of the nature of God and God's need of us—something within us awakens and calls to us. That awakening

something has no interest in material, worldly needs and attractions; no interest in pleasure or success or money or being first. I am calling it the soul (or the Self) for lack of a better word. It is not interested in what the me wants, not interested in what “Jerry” wants. It wishes only to live and grow and be and see.

What does it, what do I, need in order for it, the soul, the Self, to grow?

The point here is that in childhood this soul or Self sometimes calls to us in resounding tones; or in front of death it often calls to us in resounding tones. But as we grow older and begin to be drawn into our place in the world around us, and if there are few or no influences to help us remember this soul or Self, if every time ultimate questions arise in our hearts and minds—as they inevitably do in childhood and as we grow older—if every time such questions arise in us, we are immediately pushed into solving, explaining, utilizing, winning, worrying, selling, needing to score or get it right, fighting off foolish materialism or foolish fundamentalism, itching to make our mark, or solve some intractable problem of human society, or pass a test, or persuade someone, or persuade many someones, or persuade the entire world, or become famous, or become a star or a guru, or, finally, give our precious free attention to more “realistic” questions of “real life,” –if, I say, we are rendered heedless with our precious little free attention and compelled to allow that precious little to be swallowed by the conditioned impulses and reactions of our egoism, then we will never come to an understanding of what God is. To understand what God is, to begin to understand what God is, demands from the very

outset the presence in ourselves of what God is. I mean to say that God—or whatever we call essential reality—must already be active within our awareness when we turn to think about God.

Perhaps a better way to put this is to say that , if we look and observe ourselves, we will discover that the presence of a higher vibration within ourselves is already there activating the impulse to think about the question of God. But we are all too often insensitive to this inner vibration from within the heart of man, from within the embryonic soul in which there circulates what may be called the “blood of God.”

It does not matter whether we deny or affirm the existence of what the conventional world calls God. What matters is only that we are deeply and authentically concerned with questions of ultimate reality and ultimate value. It only matters that we are called to try to be honest and deep and good in our thought and life. We may come to the conclusion, as did Freud and as do many others of us, that the world is laboring under illusions about God, and that these illusions are poisonous and dangerous to the whole life of man. That does not matter. What matters is this dual existence, this simultaneous existence in oneself of two natures, two nearly equal and honorable impulses: the love of Truth and the Good, and at the same time, the impulse to think critically, logically, and/or the impulse to behave effectively and under the rule of conscience in the world we live in and facing the people we are obliged, by all that is real, to help and care for.

I am saying that if we lose all contact with this inner God-element in ourselves—or, if you wish, call it our inner, wordless yearning to serve the Good and know the Truth—if we lose contact with this inner vibration, our thought and our action

in the world will take us nowhere. Our thought will lead us either to cynicism or to an absurd overestimation of our mental powers. It will lead us to develop, in an onrushing torrent, inventions in the mind or in the physical world—ideologies or technologies—that, walled off from the being-impulse toward conscience and truth, can destroy us and our earth. On the other hand, if we lose all contact and respect for the powers and functions of our socially conditioned self, which is also given to us in order that we may become the instruments of love in the widening world of human beings and the world of nature—the world of nature which needs us to become fully human in order itself to serve the universal Good as a planet endowed with human consciousness—if we lose all contact with this “horizontal” near-half of our human nature; if we unconsciously retreat into self-centered mysticism or self-willed, blind “faith,” we may become like the “gods” of the Tibetan Buddhist teaching who, while possessed of higher energies, ultimately rot and suffer more than any other created being in the universe, and who create more evil and harm than any other force in the universe.

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It was fortunate for me that there on the stone steps, my father remained silent—whether he did so intentionally or not is not important. It enabled me to see more clearly this great division within myself between the eager, thinking, explaining mind and the vibration of the inner yearning of the inner being within myself. And it enabled me to see what I am calling the “breathing” of the soul. Years later, I came to see that there was obviously, and right in front of my eyes something else—namely, a third something that was actually seeing this division—a third attention too fragile and subtle even to discuss

at this point, but which later was to assume the proportions of an immense, unknown central question in my life and in my understanding.

But after having become aware of this strange, intimate twoness within myself, I later began to be acutely aware of its presence or absence whenever I began to think about ultimate questions—and I engaged in such attempts to think very, very frequently as I was growing up, as do many of us, sometimes especially in our adolescence. And as time went on, and I began to be intentionally aware, even if only slightly, of my state of being when I tried to think about God or ultimate questions, I observed—at first vaguely, but eventually quite clearly—that when I thought about God or ultimate reality without any sense of the inner vibration of my being, then my thought simply raced ahead into complications and “ingenuity” without end or without substance. I became “clever” or “brilliant” or “imaginative.” And I pushed hard to be “right,” or “original,” or “bold,” or “up-to-date,” etc. I received “recognition,” and chose my friends accordingly, honing my ability to argue and score intellectual points.”

But when that special yearning and vibration for a moment surfaced there in my heart and body, even faintly, I experienced a despair about all my clever ideas: my philosophical success tasted bitter and empty; my conscience brought me the pain of remorse, which for years I reacted to with fits of depression in order to cover it over with self-pity or ever more fantastic dreams about my intrinsic worth and mental ability. And when, without knowing exactly what I was seeing, I saw in many of my valued friends and teachers this same heartless brilliance and cleverness it served to increase my despair and cynicism about truth and the Good.

More and more, as I see it now, this heartless thought about God and ultimate reality dominates the mind of the contemporary world. For God or against God, “belief” or “atheism,” it makes no difference unless the inner yearning—or whatever we wish to call the cause and source of the “second breathing,”—is there. And it can so easily be there, just as it can so easily be covered over and ignored, perhaps for the rest of one’s life. God or not God, “belief” or “science”—it also makes no real difference for my personal life unless the call of the Self and its need to “breathe” is heard and, ultimately respected. Not only can thought about ultimate reality make no difference to the world or to my personal life without our hearing and respecting the call of the Self at least when we begin to think, but such empty thought can bring down our personal and collective world, even our earth itself. When thought races ahead of Being, a civilization is racing towards destruction.