



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

By Thomas Keating

Session 7: Where Are You?

Introduction: Fr. Thomas suggests that the story of Adam and Eve is the story of how we each experience the pain of separation from God. God is the one asking, "Where are you?" because it's the circumstances of our human condition and cultural conditioning that cause the feeling of separation. The spiritual journey and the 12-Step programs offer us a process of examining where we are which is the first step towards healing the pain of separation.

I guess everybody has a feeling that something is wrong with them, though we prefer not to think about it normally unless we're forced to. All the great world religions are aware that something is seriously amiss with human nature and in the East, it's often referred to as illusion. In the West it's usually referred to as "the fall." Following the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis (Genesis 2-3) we understand that human nature is not quite what it was supposed to be. And that story in Genesis is really very symbolic and it's really more about us than about Adam and Eve. Because the intriguing thing is that they had this marvelous intimate and easy relationship with God. The text says that God came to visit them in the cool of the evening. Maybe they played croquet or something, I don't know. But then they disobeyed, or they did something to separate themselves from God, and they entered into I guess what we'd call in psychology, self-consciousness. Before this they didn't even reflect that they were naked. The text says they were completely at ease with God and all creation and with themselves. However, they got into serious trouble as soon as they felt the first moment of separation from God. What did they do? They headed for the woods. In other words, they tried to hide from God. How naïve you can get. They headed for the woods. We begin in the woods. And the woods stands for all the ways that we create in early childhood to avoid the pain of this feeling of separation which leads to other consequences, the frustration of the desire for happiness.

And so, in the Christian theology there are three consequences of this separation. Alienation is just a stronger word for it that is a result of repeated acts of personal sin and the trampling on the needs and rights of others to get what we want or to get away from what we don't want. And so, it's God who comes into that scene and calls to Adam and Eve saying, "Where are you?" One of the great questions of all time. Where are *you*? Depends

how you emphasize it. *Where* are you? or *Where are* you? All nuances of the most devastating question that no one wants to hear, because if we answer it correctly, we have to say, "I was hiding from you, God." Now if Adam and Eve had only come out of the woods at that request and said to God, as in the first step of AA, "I'm awfully sorry. I've made a terrible mistake. Won't you please forgive me?", none of the human misery we're aware of would exist. God would of course have forgiven them.

And so, God is still asking this same question of everybody else in the human family, who is brought up in the woods, who created the woods in order to hide the pain of separation. And the spiritual journey is a process of coming out of the woods. And the 12 steps are obviously a program for coming out of the woods, letting go of the means we use to hide from ourselves. And as this gets to be a bigger project, then we refuse to hear the call of God through events, through other people, through interior inspirations, to acknowledge where we are, then come the need for addictions and various means of hiding the pain or the issue.

And so, we find ourselves in full reflective self-consciousness in mid-adolescence or later, in full escape from ourselves. We're really hiding from ourselves in all the ways that we created in early childhood to avoid self-knowledge—the truth. But it's really so poignant. We desperately need happiness, we desperately want it, but we can't quite pay the full cost, which is to acknowledge who we are and turn that person over to God just as he or she is. Nothing more is required. And nothing seems to be more difficult.

So, let's take a look at why it's so difficult. What are the dynamics that lead to this pathetic and yet serious illness in which we don't know what true happiness is? It's called illusion, this problem. We seek happiness where it can't possibly be found in the wrong places. This is called concupiscence, or in Buddhist terms, craving. And if we ever get an inkling into where true happiness is to be found, we shrink from this because the will is too weak for us to accomplish it on our own. Hence the reversing of this practice begins with the hearing God's voice, hearing the call in some way, hearing the question, "Where are you?" That is, not geographically, but in your attitudes, perceptions, attitudes towards God, to other people, and towards yourself. Where are you? That is the big question in what I like to call, the first half of the spiritual journey. And AA starts right out with a response to that question.

How did it happen? There are various ideas and none of them are absolutely certain, but in our day science is the friend of religion though many scientists and members of the religious organizations haven't quite admitted this yet. But it's growing, and certainly evolution and anthropology are enormous contributions to the spiritual journey and our private spiritual journey. What we are discovering, and it's happening almost every year or two, as they discover new skulls and things like that is that the "Perennial Philosophy"ⁱ that seems to have existed in some degree in almost all the major religions, it corresponds right down the line at least with the opening levels of evolution up to the present time, so that if you accept evolution and that humans developed gradually from lower species, and that the brain as we discover is actually three-tiered—the reptilian, the mammalian, and the human brain—clearly developed in the course of evolution.

And the reptilian consciousness is characterized by no self-consciousness, by an immersion in nature, by a oneness with nature, such that the needs of life are the only concern of these dear ancestors of ours and contemporaries in some cases. The reptilian brain is also present in the infant when he comes into the world. Evolution, that was maybe three to five million years ago. Then we had the further step of the typhonic level of consciousness which is our early ancestors are half human and half mammalian still. And they're still trying to find the missing links that moved from one to the other. And this consciousness is characterized by hunting procedures, by a magic at times, and by an inability to distinguish clearly imagination from reality. And it involves an emotional response to external reality. A reptile can only respond to the environment through its senses. The mammal can respond with a certain degree of emotion including the higher mammals.

So, these two stages, interestingly enough, according to the developmental psychologists, are what everybody goes through in the process of becoming a human being in the womb and in the first year or two of life. The child originally is totally immersed in the environment, it doesn't distinguish itself, at least very little from the environment, and also as it continues to evolve it also experiences life as magic, and it identifies with the animal world even its dreams, Piaget tells us, are about animals more than people often. But we're dealing with an interesting fact that if the child's development is similar to the history of the human race's development and evolution, then the same characteristics we can identify in the evolution of the race will be verified, articulated again in each one's life along with the attitudes appropriate to that age.

Now, what is the attitude appropriate to the reptilian consciousness? Survival. That's the principal thing. So, the infant when it comes into the world manifests this level of organic development with a great need for survival and security. Hence the worst thing you can do with it, I suppose, is to put it in an incubator where it has no relationship with the human touch, the breath, and the love of a caring mother.

The typhonic period of childhood, maybe from one or two, is when the child begins to distinguish itself; it develops a body self from the other creatures crawling around on the floor. And it has its own identity. Now it begins to develop affection, manifest affection and approval needs. Perhaps esteem but it's a little early for that, and also a certain need for independence, its own way, in other words, for power and control.

And so, these are real instinctual needs born out of the very process of evolution towards higher states of consciousness, and ultimately some experts believe, or at least the transpersonal psychologists, that consciousness is itself the ultimate goal of evolution. But in any case, there's a gradual movement from one level of consciousness to the next.

Now, from four to eight, the child usually goes through a socialization period in which the attitudes of earlier life are now in confrontation with the likes and wants of other people its own age, or parents, adults. And this is called by some anthropologists, notably Ken Wilbur, who has developed the perennial philosophy to a significant degree. In any case, this is the need to belong to a group and to find one's identity in the acceptance, approval, and values

of the group. And so, at this level, we absorb unquestioningly the values of parents, ethnic group, national group, religious values, peer groups, and I suppose now the television, and soon it'll be the internet. So, there'll be a wider variety of socialization in children now as they get into a kind of global consciousness. God only knows what that will produce or lead to, but it's certainly going to happen.

Now suppose these instinctual needs are met with opposition. In actual fact, no parent is perfect, and usually parents are still recovering from their own childhood traumas, and the lack of expertise of their parents, on back to Adam and Eve. So, there's a certain transition from one generation to another in which the uncompleted redemption, so to speak, or the uncompleted healing of the emotional wounds of parents are handed on, the residue of them at least, to the children, and to their children, etc.

Now, modern psychology has added an enormous amount of detail to the old triple consequences of the fall (or original sin), that is, illusion, concupiscence, weakness of the will. And now you get in these all of the marvelous self-help programs of our time, all of which are helpful up to a point, but are not ultimately helpful enough because they don't necessarily connect with the same source of happiness that was originally at least hinted at in the story of Adam and Eve. Without God, the experience of God, everybody heads for the woods and stays there. The Gospel is an invitation to come out of the woods, and I imagine every other religious tradition basically has the same program.

The mythic membership level [of consciousness] is terribly important to grasp in our day because it's out of this limited consciousness that so much politics—nationalism, racism, sexism, bigotry of all kinds—emerges. It's the unquestioned assimilation of the negative, non-evangelical values that we've absorbed in our growing-up process that causes the mass problems, injustices, and violence on the level of society. And our spiritual journey requires freedom from that level of consciousness; not in the sense of rejecting our debt of gratitude to our nation, our patriotism up to a point; piety in the sense of love of parents and so on. But when any entity demands of us an allegiance that opposes true human values and the values of the Gospel if you're Christian, this is when you say no.

And rational consciousness, which begins maybe about the age of 14 or 15, is the time to re-evaluate both the programs we used for happiness in our childhood to survive and the overidentification with our cultural conditioning and environment. And to choose true values in the light of education and religious experience, et cetera. But what happens is that the enormous leap forward in consciousness that rational consciousness involves—Wilbur calls mental egoic consciousness—is, instead of evaluating our programs, they're so firmly in place, that the new power of rationalizing and planning and thinking and evaluating and creating is used to create bigger and better programs for the instinctual needs: survival, approval, and power. And adulthood, then, our move into adulthood is totally dominated by the values of the culture in which we live which has through the rational powers glorified, justified, and rationalized childish attitudes to life in such a way that from morning to night these values are beamed to us instead of true human values and the values of the Gospel.

That's why the early monks headed for the desert. They wanted to get out of this parochial mess. And so, they found there some further difficulties, and we'll discuss why that was discovered in just a minute. But just think for a moment of all advertising appeals to one of the three first energy centers. Security—how many cars you've got. Power and control—how to win friends and influence people. Approval—everybody'll think more of you if you have this or that. So, the symbols in the culture can be wealth, it can be power, it can be the number of wives you have, it can be sports, it can be entertainment world. In other words, it can be fame or fortune. And these are projected in our culture, day in and day out, and sometimes they appeal to one's prejudices, or what Wilbur calls the mythic membership level.

This causes immense harm in society and to institutions but suffice it to say for the moment here that beyond rational consciousness, which is a step beyond mythic membership level. What characterized the mythic membership level was the development of farming which gave people time because you could store things in barns, for religious or political things, and what pleased people more, apparently, wars. If you have a little leisure, you can go to war, and so every spring that was what kings did. But then developed the city-states where the king was the symbol of the people. Meanwhile, with each new level of consciousness—the differentiation, for instance of consciousness from the body-self—developed, as the anthropologists tell us into an ever-increasing fear of death, and hence the needs of victims—people to appease the gods or the higher powers as they understood them in those days. I hope your understanding of the higher power is a little bit further evolved.

In any case, the myth of the great Mother Earth appears at this time, but then in the movement to consciousness, and to higher consciousness of rationalization that took place maybe three [thousand] years ago is symbolized in Greek mythology with Zeus slaying the dragon. This is the symbol of reason dominating emotion. It also is the moment when men took over the universe and subjected women to all kinds of oppression and indignities and inequalities because they identified women with the lower forms of consciousness: nutrition, nourishment, providing service. And that patriarchal culture is an unfortunate consequence of the great leap into the level of reason which produced the great philosophers and so on. And then a thousand years or two years later, began to manifest itself in the great religions of the world. Almost all the great founders appear about a thousand years before Christ and their roots earlier in some of the very early Indic cultural religions. But it's that thousand years that you find the Upanishads, the Vedas, maybe even older, Taoism, Moses and the Jewish religion and the Prophets and finally Christ, and then a little later, Mohammed and Islam.

But the problem with all religions is that they're rooted in a patriarchal culture. Hence, they have an enormous job to do. With the further evolution that is taking place now, many anthropologists think we're at a new axial period which is when there's a transformation of average-level consciousness. And we may be moving into the intuitive level of consciousness where the experience of oneness and a certain trans-ease and transcending the more limited values of overidentification with a culture or a particular ethnic group and so on. But as you know from recent history, we're by no means over the problem of ethnic overidentification, and the next step up seems to be nationalism, which isn't much of an

improvement, and if anything, there's been a regression to tribal and hence, typhonic levels of consciousness.

ⁱ From Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations January 4, 2015

"The "perennial philosophy" or "perennial tradition" recognizes that there are some constant themes, truths, and recurrences in all of the world religions...

"Aldous Huxley calls the perennial tradition a metaphysic, a psychology, and an ethic at the same time: "1) the metaphysic which recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; 2) the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical to, divine Reality; 3) the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being. This is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the perennial philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions" (*The Perennial Philosophy*, vii).