

The Great I Am

May 13, 2012

Joe White (Albertson Memorial Spiritualist Church Board of Trustees President) and I had a telepathic connection this week. When he sent me today's program for my approval, I'd already begun to compose my talk. He selected Popeye's well-known phrase "I yam what I yam," for the affirmation, which is perfect because my talk this morning is centered on the "I Am."

The verb "to be" is one of those funny verbs that is vastly different in the infinitive form from the conjugation, because we don't say "I be, you be, we be," but "I am, you are, she is, we are." In some foreign languages there are two forms of the verb "to be." In Spanish, one form ("estar") describes the condition of a thing or person -- how I happen to be now: "I am at the market" or "I am hungry," for example. Another form ("ser") describes the essential nature of a thing -- "I am a woman."

In English, we use the same verb "to be" to tell *how* something is (the condition), as well as to tell *what* something is (the essence). I communicate my condition -- who I am at the moment, "I am happy to be here at the Church," the same way I declare who I am in a larger sense: "I am Irish and Polish."

We use this verb to define both condition and character, but what happens when we leave off the adjectives that generally follow? We're left with a pretty profound statement that defines something greater than the sum of condition and character: "I am."

That simple, three-letter phrase describes a miracle if you think about it. Truncated this way, it declares something concrete and unmistakable. *Who* I am may be open to interpretation, but *that* I am is not.

The brattiest thing I could say to my mother when I was a teenager was, "because I am." She'd say, "Why are you being so rebellious?" Or, "Why are you so unhappy." I'd answer, "Because I am," it would drive her nuts. But it was a small way that I could establish some rock-solid evidence of my personhood that she couldn't take away. When everything else in that crazy-making dynamic had me doubting my sanity and my sense of self and existence, just having that essential truth was a life-saver. I didn't realize that's what I was doing at the time -- I understood that only after I grew up. But I did realize as a kid that nobody could argue with the indisputable fact that "I am."

It isn't necessary to justify or defend when you say the words, "I am." It requires no supporting documentation or rationale. If you're alive and saying those words, it's absolutely true. For a teenager in a dysfunctional house, that *is* a miracle.

Years ago I had a new-age healing session, which was some form of reiki and cranio-sacral energy work. I was deep in an imaginative trance, quite relaxed, when the healer quietly said to

me, "Who are you?" Before I was consciously able to register that I had been spoken to, and that I needed to reply, an answer instantaneously formed itself in my subconscious mind. That answer was, "I am God's thought of Himself."

Not my own rational self-assessment, but an inspired idea.

That inspired idea was an enduring effect of an otherwise nondescript healing session. It led me down various rabbit-holes, one of which is this: If I'm God's thought of Himself, who is God?

Having been raised Catholic and attending a Jesuit College followed by a Gnostic seminary, I usually turn first to Christian texts when I have questions about God (though I certainly respect the holy texts of other religious traditions). For an answer to "Who is God," I turned first to the Old Testament and found this:

When God commissioned Moses to return to Egypt and free the Israelites, one of Moses' questions was, "Who shall I say sent me?" And God's response was, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:14, ESV)

The personal name of the God of the Old Testament (Exodus 3:13-14) is "I AM." The word Yaweh or Jehovah is the equivalent to the words, "I AM." The name that is above all earthly and heavenly names is Yahweh, the great "I AM THAT I AM."

(I'm using the masculine pronoun here for convenience, though I happen to believe that God is neither solely feminine nor masculine but represents and encompasses the nature of both genders).

In several places in the book of Isaiah, the I AM is used in connection with God's timelessness or His eternal existence, that He is the God who has been there from the very beginning, is here now, and shall continue to be there till the very end:

"Who has wrought and done these things? he has called it who called it from the generations of old; I, God, am first, and to all futurity, I am." (Isaiah 41)

Also we read in Isaiah:

"Hear me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of Israel, who are borne by me from the womb, and taught by me from infancy. Until your old age I am, and until you shall have grown old I am." Isaiah 46:3-4

It is difficult to put a meaning on the words I AM; they seem intended to point out the eternity and self-existence of God -- His un-createdness. It signifies the real being of God, His self-existence, and that He is the Being of beings. It also denotes his eternity and

immutability, and His constancy and faithfulness in fulfilling His promises, because it includes past, present, and future. Finally, I AM describes not only I am what I am at present, but I am what I have been, and I am what I shall be, and shall be what I am.

The New Testament carries over this idea of God's eternal existence as it refers to Him as eternal and complete, when we read in Revelation 1:8:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’”

In the Gospel of John 8:42, Jesus says to a crowd, ‘Truly, I say to you, before Abraham came into being, I am.’

God is the great I AM. Jesus is the I AM. If you believe in a timeless Creator God, you probably agree that part of our Being was Individualized from the Great “I AM.” We have these same words in our language, and we know in the Spiritualist tradition that we are also eternal and timeless. Our bodies were created through biological reproduction, and those bodies can decay, but who we are -- our I AM -- we believe continues after the change called death.

We are probably all familiar with the Genesis 1:26-28 account of our coming forth in the image and likeness of God. This “likeness” refers to God's Nature -- the essence of all that God Is. Our real self, our individualized God-presence, has a unique and immortal identity that is one with the mighty I AM presence, and one with each other.

Contemplating the simple fact of the I AM character is pretty mind-blowing. Concentrating on it for a while generates a unique feeling of truly being in the present.

One of the first metaphysical experiences I had as a child happened when I was riding in the back seat of the family car. We were passing by a house, and I could see in the window of the kitchen where a family was sitting down to dinner. In that moment I can still recall the difficulty I had wrapping my mind around the separateness -- but *sameness* -- of people who weren't me. There was a family, laughing together setting the table, just like I did with my brother and sisters. Maybe that girl in there had problems with her mother, too. To this day I can recall struggling to capture that sameness and separateness. I could observe that I had that feeling, but it was so difficult to digest.

I experienced a similar metaphysical moment a few years ago when flying out to California; I recall looking down from the plane and seeing a tiny car driving down a long, straight road. I was thinking, “Who is in that car? Has she had her heart broken, too?” Maybe she has to go have a difficult conversation, or maybe she's worried about money like I am. Again I had that other-worldly feeling of being the same, yet separated by our biology. She has a sense of I AM at the same time I am have a sense of it.

So I think about God, the great I AM, Who is and was and always will be. And I remember that I am made in His image. Me, and every other person who ever walked the earth. When we all say I AM, we are declaring our eternal nature. We are all using the first person singular, but we all ARE. There is nothing separate in I AM.

It is such a miracle simply to be. The monks and buddhists and yogis remove themselves for years to practice deep meditation, perhaps so they can fully experience their state of being -- their I AM-ness.

Maybe that's real enlightenment. Maybe that's what made Jesus a fully-realized human being. When we are fully cognizant of our *being*, time disappears, miracles are common, and healing happens. Because in the state of I AM, we were, we are, and we will always be. Nothing can decay I AM. Nothing can hurt I AM. No one can betray or disappoint or even fulfill I AM. It's just us -- you and me -- and God, together, united, in eternal communion.

Maybe enlightenment -- true comprehension of I AM -- doesn't take years of meditation on a mountaintop. I like to think it's more accessible than that. I want a short cut to I AM, and maybe -- just maybe -- it's a simple decision. Could that be possible? I don't know. If I repeat to myself I AM often enough, will I get it? I don't know that either.

I just want you to remember that you are a miracle, simply because you are. You are here, right now. That you were born is a miracle. That you have a voice, a talent, a heart, an opinion, a cause... that you *are* is miraculous.

Think about your I AM and it's miraculous perfection. Your I AM is your communion with God. Your I AM is not sick, or guilty, or bad. It is only, always, ever perfect, immutable and eternal. This may be hard to do. I'm trying it, and I think it may be that short cut to enlightenment or the full realization of the I AM:

Try to be conscious of how you define yourself, when you're defining a condition. Remember, in this language we have one verb that defines both condition and essential nature. Save the I AM for defining your essential nature, and define your condition in another way.

First, be conscious of the words you use to describe your less-than-perfect condition. If possible, don't use associative words when doing so.

In the hypnosis and NLP professions we use association and dissociation to help clients raise their self-esteem or distance themselves from painful memories or bad habits. I use these techniques quite a bit with my hypnosis clients and one of the first things I teach them is to use dissociative words when referring to their past failures or poor decisions. To put it outside of themselves so they don't feel personally like failures: "I didn't fail, that other guy failed at the time."

For example, say: "Today the body is not 100%." Don't say: "I AM sick." Or say: "The bank account is a little low". Don't say: "I AM broke."

Reserve the I AM for the holy, positive things about your nature. Use the associative I AM when you are defining your essential nature -- you'll find you're doing this mostly when you're describing a positive feeling: "I AM feeling so alive in this great weather. I AM in love. I AM happy to see you. I AM healthy."

If you meditate or pray, concentrate on the nature of I AM. You may never get your conscious mind around it because it transcends time and rational understanding. But it may be a way to identify and come to know God. to begin to feel as God feels. When we can do that -- feel as God feels, see as God sees, love as God loves -- we will be without judgment of self or others, we'll be accepting, trusting and faithful. We will live and let live. We'll just *be*.

Amen.