Dynamics of Ritual and Relationship: Who We Make Real and How

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Dynamics of Ritual and Relationship:

Who We Make Real and How

Allison Bolles

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Author’s Note:

This paper is an exploration of attachment: how we learn to hold and be held, to know God and to know each other. In short vignettes, I share what I have learned about ritual, relationship, and mourning. Some pieces stem from my experience, others from academic theory and theology. I have tried to integrate them in a way that feels true.

I want to acknowledge the indispensable wisdom of my advisors Michelle Bentsman and Professor Cheryl Giles; my readers Shao Wei Chew Chia, Rebeccah Stromberg, Connie Chen, and Andrew Kim; and my mentor Ted Kaptchuk, who introduced me to this topic and inspired me to pursue it.
Just before Covid lockdowns begin, in the early days of spring, I walk to St. Paul’s Church on Bow Street. I pull open the big wooden doors and see I am the only person there. I choose a spot about halfway down the aisle near a pillar and rest my chin on the pew in front of me.

The room is dark except for the glow of the altar. I consider journaling or maybe meditating, but instead I just stare. The only sounds are the settling of the church and the occasional chatter from outside. After several minutes, I take off my boots and winter coat and lie on my back on the pew, placing my jacket over me as a kind of blanket. I gaze up at the ceiling, my heart sore and tender, my eyes moving in and out of focus.

I follow the soreness with my breath. With each exhale, I imagine a trickle of white smoke rising from my chest, like a candle I have just blown out. I compress my chest into my spine and ask God to take my spirit.

I hear someone enter the church and my body tightens. It sounds like a man’s footsteps. I don’t want him to see me like this, and I am worried he will ask me to leave, but he walks past without pause. The sound of his footsteps fades toward the opposite side of the church and the silence returns; I figure he is only passing through. My body relaxes, and I continue to look up at the ceiling.

The lights are quiet and soft, the dust drifting before them in waves. After a while, the sense of spirit begins to fade and I feel tender and alone.
I abruptly sit up, put on my shoes, and zip my coat. I turn to take one last look at the altar when I realize I am not alone: just across the aisle is a homeless man I recognize from Central Square. He must have been sitting in silence a long time, too.

We make eye contact. He has the most baffled expression on his face. I wonder what I must look like to him, mysteriously emerging from the pews. I want to be able to smile, but I can only stare. We hold eye contact for a moment before I pass him to leave, self-conscious of my footsteps as they echo behind me.

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The word ritual derives from *ritus*, the Latin term for a religious rite. Rituals require the body; they are external acts with both internal and external ends. How we engage with our bodies changes how we think, feel, and relate to others. Whether in the traditionally religious realm or not, rituals have the power to create a new world around us.

In his article “Ritual and Sincerity,” Adam Seligman draws an important distinction between the actions we perform (ritual) and the feelings we feel (sincerity). Seligman suggests that rituals do not rely on sincerity or earnestness, as is often assumed in the West. We neither perform rituals to conform with others nor to express our current internal state. On the contrary, rituals serve to

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shake up our preconceived notions and change our perception of reality by changing our behavior. Seligman argues that rituals are not a “husk of something else that is ‘more’ real . . . the medium is very much the message.”

For example, relationships rarely need “more love” to flourish. Instead, they need more acts of love. Many people love their families deeply, yet they still grow apart or fall into conflict. Given that sincerity (feeling love) is already present, restoring a peaceful bond does not require deeper feelings. Instead, it requires a recommitment to rituals, e.g., ending calls with a Love you, taking out the trash, or saying thank you for dinner.

These little actions ask “what if?” (i.e., what if we loved each other?) and then invite those in the relationship to play in that “as if” space. Through this behavior, what we play becomes real, and what was “as if” becomes what is.

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The morning is icy and bright, and I am sitting on a ledge beside Watertown Dam. The swans are still sleeping, their long necks tucked atop their torsos. In the foreground, I watch groups of ducks try to resist the dam’s current. One by one, they succumb to the waterfall and land with a kerplunk, slightly disoriented before they swim on their way.

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4 Seligman, “Ritual and Sincerity,” 11-12.
Several large rocks poke up through the water. I know them—some warm and motherly, others young and impertinent. I’ve asked them for advice many times. But today, I hear nothing and feel no one; I ask and no one answers. Their familiar faces become gray shapes as I look on, my body sinking, the icy water rushing past us both.

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Psychologists sometimes speak of attachment as “internalization,” or our ability to take in and create an internal representation of an external person. To internalize another, we must engage in rituals of connection. In the case of small children, for example, this might include breastfeeding, holding, and playing. The kinds of relationship rituals we experience determine the nature of our internalizations.

If the objects we internalize are harsh and rejecting (or absent entirely), we may experience a lonely, even terrorizing world, and our attachment is insecure or disorganized. If, on the other hand, our internalized objects are gentle, loving, and holding, our world becomes a place of relative safety, a place where we belong.

The figures we have internalized shape who we create in their absence, whether because we are in a new relationship or because we are alone. We may transfer our perceptions of a caretaker

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5 The ideas here are closely related to John Bowlby’s theory of attachment and internal working models.
onto our partners, for example, automatically seeing them as trustworthy or untrustworthy, depending on our pasts.

If we have had strong positive attachments in our lives, this perception of safety can translate into an experience of intuitively feeling held, even when we are alone. In the absence of human ‘content,’ the secure person’s internal system creates a loving other. In contrast, the insecure person’s system may generate loneliness or dread. In this way, our attachment patterns determine whether we have the capacity to make others real and, if so, the qualities of those we create.

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I drop into the death feeling that is brewing in my belly and land in a plot of purple flowers. They are young and full of life. At the center of the patch are several other flowers, these ones red, long dead, and gathered sparsely in a circle of dirt.

I walk across the sunshined purples to look closely at the reds, still beautiful but now tired and wilted. I carefully uproot each one and place it in a basket beside me. As I pick them from the ground, other dead flowers appear in their wake.

I carry the basket to a nearby stream and set it down on the bank. Holding the sides of the basket, I tell the flowers how grateful I feel; I thank them for what they’ve done. I tell them I don’t know who they are yet, but that I am sorry I waited so long to lay them to rest. The flowers seem to
snuggle into one another as I place the basket in the water. I watch them drift around the corner, and I emerge into the present.

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Tamar Gendler calls the development of embodied knowing *alief*. In contrast to belief, which develops through cognition, alief depends on habit: “An alief is, to a reasonable approximation, an innate or habitual propensity to respond to an apparent stimulus in a particular way.”⁶ Consider the act of walking over a glass bridge. We know, i.e., we believe, that the bridge is sturdy and will not drop us to our deaths. But the body has other ideas: we are terrified to cross because we *alieve* we will fall.⁷

Through rituals of attachment with our partners or parents, we develop aliefs that impact how we relate romantically, at work, and with friends. Changing these patterns requires not just cognitive decisions or updated ideas, but embodied shifts in how we interact with others. By engaging in rituals that disrupt our expectations, we retrain the nervous system and move past belief to adjust *alief*. For better or for worse, the behaviors we pursue affect who we become, how we experience others, and how they experience us.

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I am lying in bed, tears streaming down my face. I see an old pier gargling water in my chest; the sensation is bleak and abrasive.

A wave of panic rises within me and peaks, and suddenly all goes quiet. My tears stop and a man appears before me. He is cartoonish in appearance; brown rags hang from his frame and he stands hunched over a shovel. I cannot see his face, but I know he is suffering.

With a blink, the man disappears and I see the earth from space. It is dazzingly bright against the night sky and I stare in awe. The trees are cartoons, too; their kelly green leaves look like a children’s coloring book as they sway with the breeze. When I look closer, though, I notice there are not just trees but also people between them, all hunched, all in agony. The man I saw before is now one of many.

I hear in my mind that the universe had a beginning: this was no one’s fault. My body releases, my chest opens, and my arms become so light I think they are floating.

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According to attachment theory, babies are powerfully driven to act in a way that elicits care. The strategies we use to create and maintain these bonds fall into four primary categories: secure, ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized.
Research suggests that secure babies have attuned, responsive, and reliable caretakers. A baby with secure attachment experiences distress when left by her mother but is readily soothed when she returns. Trusting in her presence, she begins to play and to explore.\(^8\)

The parents of ambivalent babies show inconsistency—they are sometimes attuned, sometimes unresponsive or invasive. Anxious even at baseline, an ambivalent baby becomes distraught when left by her mother but is not soothed by her return. She clings to her and cries, struggling to calm down enough to play.\(^9\)

In contrast to both the secure and ambivalent babies, the avoidant baby does not show distress when left alone. She plays quietly by herself, paying the mother little attention when she returns.\(^10\) Despite her relaxed appearance, studies show that the avoidant baby experiences more physiological distress than her ambivalent counterparts.\(^11\) In response to her parents’ indifference, she has simply learned not to seek out soothing.\(^12\)

At the most distraught is the disorganized baby, who reacts with panic when left alone but rejects the mother when she returns. Siegel describes: “The infant may look terrified; he approaches the parent but then withdraws from her, freezes or falls down on the floor, or clings and cries while

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\(^8\) Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight: Transform Your Brain with the New Science of Kindness* (Great Britain: Oneworld Publications, 2010), 168. Direct quote: “But then he settled down quickly and returned to his childhood task of exploration and play.”


\(^12\) Siegel, *Mindsight*, 168.
simultaneously pulling away.”13 Raised in a frightening and unstable environment, the baby grasps and flees, leans in and leans out, searching for safety and unable to find it.

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Resting in Christ.

The words stir my mind and flow down to my abdomen. I see my pelvis like a cushioned bowl, waiting for the energy as it falls. I sink into the bowl and find myself resting, comforted by holding and softness. A feeling of awareness emanates from my spine and watches as this movement transpires, until my attention starts to flit away in little puffs. I try to stay with my body, but in only a moment I am back in my thoughts, commenting on the sensations, describing my experience to someone else.

Mary.

I say my centering word to bring me back.

Mary.

I cling to the feeling of presence.

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13 Siegel, Mindsight, 169.
Mary.

And I’m off, swept by a current of thought so strong I won’t return till Brother Nicholas rings the bell and the prayer session ends.

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It is undisputed in psychology that human beings have an innate need for the kind of close and reliable connection that makes secure attachment possible. In her book *Mothers and Others*, Sarah Hrdy describes the origins of human empathy and what attachment may have looked like for our ancestors.

In the Pleistocene period, the survival of offspring would have required attention from parents and other caretakers at nearly every moment of the day. Babies and young children needed “constant physical protection” to avoid injury, predation, or hunger. Hrdy theorizes that this holding and attention to children’s safety would have helped them to develop solid relational attachments and a sense of belonging in their communities. She writes: “any child who was fortunate enough to grow up acquired a sense of emotional security by default.”

This contrasts with the reality of modern parenting. While the children of the Pleistocene required devoted love and protection, modern children can often survive very serious emotional

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neglect, instability, and abuse given the benefits of healthcare, stable shelter, and access to food. Today, such conditions may lead to disorganized attachment. For our ancestors, they would have led to death.\textsuperscript{16}

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The first time I meet with Dr. H, I pop the lid off my cup of tea and spill it all over my lap. As I close the cup and apologize, he smiles and hands me a stack of tissues. I treat the stack like one large sponge, blotting at myself with the same flustered hands that caused the spill. I place the tissues, now damp with rooibos, in the trash can beside me.

I turn back to him, my hands now neatly in my lap and my chin blushing pink. When we meet the following week, he interprets the scene: a patient holding something she could no longer contain.

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Our internalizations either provide vitality or they strip it away. Though modern people may not die from disordered attachment, absent or abusive relationships leave their mark as inner deaths. All deaths, whether external and physical or internal and psychological, require feeling into grief and letting go.

\textsuperscript{16} Hrdy, \textit{Mothers and Others}, 290.
In his article “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud describes both the necessity of mourning and the damage of avoiding it. In cases of healthy mourning, he says, we undertake a journey towards acceptance. We relive the memories and hopes related to the lost object and bear the pain of withdrawing from each one. Over time, this work of recognition and release realigns us with reality, and we become capable of engaging with life.\(^\text{17}\)

In contrast, melancholia results from a kind of stuck-ness. It shares symptoms with mourning, such as isolation, sorrow, and fatigue, but we become melancholic when we cannot accept our loss. Too painful to face or entirely unconscious, the death remains trapped inside the body, enmeshing with our identity and eroding our self-image.\(^\text{18}\) Until we are able to mourn—to recognize, lean in, and let go—vitality will continue to elude us.

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I am on a meditation retreat when a familiar image crops up in my mind. I imagine I have these claws, long and curved, extending from paws larger than my face. The paws are disembodied, floating in the air before me as if on arms I can’t see. I cross them over my stomach and rip apart my abdomen.

I am making gashes from side to side when an image of Tara trickles in at the edge of my vision. Tara is the Buddhist goddess of compassion; she sits with one leg folded and one leg out, ready


\(^{18}\) Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 155 and 159.
to leap up at any moment and help someone. She lifts from her seat in a ballet motion and begins to fly, the breeze blowing my hair as she passes behind me and starts to travel the room.

As she moves, I see she is holding and unfurling a massive roll of gauze. She encircles the entire room then attends to me in large, sweeping motions, letting the gauze drape close to my skin and cover my wounds.

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In modern English, we use the word belief to describe a cognitive concept. Do you believe in God? What do you believe took place that day? But the word’s origins lie not in the mind but in the heart—to “belove” and to “believe” once held the same meaning.

In his work *Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggests that belief literally means “endearment, holding as beloved . . . a giving of oneself to, clinging to, committing oneself, placing—or staking—one’s confidence in.”19 It is an expression of trust and love, not intellectual submission.

With this definition, to believe in God has little to do with miracles or dogma. Historically, when God’s presence was taken for granted, to believe meant to orient oneself toward this goodness. “I

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believe in God,” then, might be understood to mean: given that God exists, I devote my life to him; though I could follow many different paths, I choose to pursue the Good.

The same applies for the term *credo*, so often defined erroneously as “I believe.”20 The word combines Latin *cor*, heart, and *do*, to put, place, set, or give.21 Smith suggests it translates best to “I place my heart.”22 To place one’s heart in God means to commit oneself to him, mind, body, and spirit.

The Christian baptismal vows demonstrate this distinction well. The question, “Do you reject Satan?” assumes a “belief” in, or understanding of, what we mean by ‘Satan.’23 In parallel, the later question, “Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth?” should not mean, “Do you think God is real and that he made heaven and earth?” Instead, the vows intend to ask: “Do you give your heart to God?”

Belief (as we use the term today) is not a virtue. But a promise to “belove”—identical in root and meaning to believe—is.24 Understood this way, religious ritual serves not to create new ideas but to forge a new relationship.

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21 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 76.
22 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 104.
23 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 77.
Place the bowl on the ground and fill it with water. Gather matches, a cup of tea, and a flower of your choosing. Once you have your supplies, sit silently for five minutes then journal about the following prompts:

What is dying in me is...

I weep for...

I wonder what my life will be like when...

What I need to be unbound from is...  

Name your intention. What do you seek to grieve? Perhaps you need to keep searching for what has died within you. If prayer comes naturally to you, pray for insight, courage, and compassion.

Drink your tea, remembering these three qualities.

The match represents what has died. Light it, give thanks, and celebrate its life as the fire burns.

Drop the match in the water and place the flower on its surface. What was dead has been remembered, and new life can now begin.

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25 Prompts are adapted from an exercise by Jean Stairs, Listening for the Soul: Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 106, Kindle.
It is often the case that the body understands what the mind cannot. Though we do influence our feelings, relationships, and religion with the use of rational thought, our bodies store the truth of our experiences.

In his work on the mysterious power of placebo medication, Oron Frenkel suggests that the body is “capable of responding to meanings,” no matter our mental understanding.\(^\text{26}\) He argues that patients do not need to believe they will get better to do so. Instead, the body makes “affordances” to the environment.\(^\text{27}\) For example, when the body sees a doorknob, it understands turning. When it receives medical treatment, it understands healing.\(^\text{28}\)

When considered through the lens of relationship, the implications of placebo move beyond the realm of medicine. We may not grasp how a sugar pill could help us, but the body alieves that care can heal; it alieves in the medical ritual.\(^\text{29}\) Our connection to caring others—parents, physicians, friends—asks the body a question: what if this love could relieve our pain? By engaging our whole selves in warm, trusting relationship, we evoke the possibility of healing.


\(^\text{27}\) An “affordance” is a kind of meaning response; it refers to the way we “do not separate the practical significance of objects from our perception of them: cups appear grabbable; doorknobs appear graspable. We need not reflect upon what we can do with or to an object in order to do it.” Frenkel, “A Phenomenology of the ‘Placebo Effect,’” 67.

\(^\text{28}\) Frenkel, “A Phenomenology of the ‘Placebo Effect,’” 68.

\(^\text{29}\) Frenkel, “A Phenomenology of the ‘Placebo Effect,’” 77. The term “alieve” in this instance is adapted from Tamar Gendler and not used by Frenkel.
A dream: Submerged in water several meters deep, a man walks to the Colosseum. He knows that this mission will end in his death. The goddess watches from above, her hair fanned out behind her, her glare piercing the water. Though he knows it can’t help him, the man rises to the surface for a breath. When he returns to the bottom of the pool, the goddess dives behind him, enraged, and forces him onward.

When we engage in religious ritual, we form a relationship with what would otherwise transcend our experience. In her study of an evangelical church called the Vineyard, Tanya Luhrmann shows how community members use rituals of attention, imagination, and behavior to engage with the divine.\textsuperscript{30} Like Seligman, she suggests that “acting as-if”\textsuperscript{31} moves beyond the realm of play: when members engage with God, God engages back.

The Vineyard’s “as-if” activities take a variety of forms. Knowing that God is not materially present, church members practice talking to God as if he were a friend or a partner. They might sing with him in the shower, ask him what to wear, or laugh at his jokes.\textsuperscript{32} Many women describe going on ‘date night’ with God, a practice one woman said “made that otherwise

\textsuperscript{31} Luhrmann, \textit{When God Talks Back}, 117.
\textsuperscript{32} Luhrmann, \textit{When God Talks Back}, 74-77.
ethereal relationship more visceral.” In another example, a pastor encouraged his congregation “to set out a second cup of coffee for God in the morning—to pour God an actual cup of steaming coffee, to place it on an actual table, and to sit down at that table with our own mug to talk to God about the things on our minds.”

These acts are symbolic. Congregants don’t expect God to drink the physical coffee. But the behavior causes transformation: an imagined and invisible conception of God becomes grounded in the body and tangible on earth. By directing their attention to what is “close and present,” their action becomes one with the sacred.

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Bumped by a foot gone astray, my cup of wine slides off the desk and begins its descent. It bounces down the set of (open) drawers beside me, splashing liquid inside each one. With nowhere left to go, it dances on the hardwood and lays itself to rest.

Clorox in hand, I begin to wipe my wall and electronics. I’m patting myself on the back for being so equanimous when I finally see it: wine, red wine, soaking through my books. Books I keep directly at my side, atop the set of drawers, because they mean so much to me. No no no no no.

33 Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 82.
Augustine—my high school companion and confidant—gets the worst of it. Tillich crinkles; Lewis scrapes by with a sturdy cover. I want to cry but cannot; I whine and furrow my brow and wish it hit the library books instead. I lay my copies on a towel and text a friend what’s happened. She responds with hearts, sad faces, and a simple message: *They are marked now by your own journey through life.*

I feel her words wash over me; my dread melts into affection. *Thank you,* I say. And in the empty space of a cleaned out drawer, I make a new home for my wine-soaked books.

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How we conceive of an inconceivable God can reveal the lens through which we see all of life. While Freud said we fashion God as an ideal father, Luhrmann suggests our “God-concept” is more likely to mirror our most formative relationships.36 Our internalized feelings of security or insecurity can shape how we connect not only with other people but also with the divine.

If we experience God as caring, we are bound to feel cared for; if we feel cared for by others, we are bound to find God caring. Belief in a God who is close, loving, and supportive—rather than harsh, judgmental, or punitive—makes it possible to trust in something beyond our current

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circumstance, and it has a measurable impact on anxiety and depression.\textsuperscript{37} In evangelical circles, one can readily find a therapist who specializes in altering one’s ‘God-concept.’\textsuperscript{38}

A positive God-concept transforms the mind and body—it turns us toward openness and trust rather than loneliness and fear. In \textit{Varieties of Religious Experience}, William James notes the benefits experienced by those who see God as good and nonthreatening.\textsuperscript{39} He summarizes with a useful quote from Edwin Starbuck:

\begin{quote}
A child who is early taught that he is God’s child, that he may live and move and have his being in God, and that he has, therefore, infinite strength at hand for the conquering of any difficulty, will take life more easily, and probably will make more of it, than one who is told that he is born the child of wrath and wholly incapable of good.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

If we can take the risk of trusting in God, we may start to trust the person beside us. And if we can trust the person beside us, we may find that God is good.

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A dream: I am standing at the edge of the ocean, my feet bare on wet sand. I feel the darkness of night on my shoulders as I peer down the beach. Several meters away, a friend likewise stands before the water. He turns to me and nods, saying, “You can do it.” As the waves recede, a gust

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\textsuperscript{37} Kevin Flannelly et al., “Beliefs about God, Psychiatric Symptoms, and Evolutionary Psychology,” \textit{Journal of Religion and Health} 49, no. 2 (2009): 246-261. \\
\textsuperscript{38} Luhrmann, \textit{When God Talks Back}, 123. \\
\textsuperscript{39} William James, \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience} (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 81. \\
\textsuperscript{40} James, \textit{Varieties}, 83. Quoted from Edwin Starbuck’s \textit{Psychology of Religion}, pages 305-306.
\end{flushleft}
of wind carries my body toward the rising tide. Taken in by the sea, I surface among a crowd of people, swimming with whales in the bright light of morning.

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Faith is a manner of saying yes to life. Of devoting ourselves to our destinies. Tillich describes it as a “state of being ultimately concerned,” a state that does not remain inside us but requires the perpetual surrender of self. While our desires and doubts may oscillate, faith asks us to trust in what is eternal and act in accordance with it.

This surrender is total. Thurman suggests that surrender means yielding from our very core; we chip away at our resistance until our “nerve center” relents. He emphasizes the importance of this commitment: “Whatever stands in the way of the complete and full surrender, we must search it out and remove it.”

Saying yes to God in this way does not diminish us; rather, by following God’s will we unite ourselves to him. In the act of surrender, our limits and our transcendence become one.

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42 Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 44.
Augustine famously writes in his *Confessions*: “Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.” In his longing for immediate connection, Augustine denies the surrender that could make real love possible. It is only after years of failure, of distraction and sin, that he finally submits his heart and mind to God. In his moment of conversion, a tremendous weight falls from his shoulders and light floods into his soul.

I am always struck by these lines: “Why do you mean so much to me? Help me to find words to explain. Why do I mean so much to you, that you should command me to love you? . . . *Whisper in my heart, I am here to save you.*” God’s command to love is not a command to fear, a manipulation to meet God’s needs. It is a command to become whole in ourselves and in relationship; to engage in a ritual that changes us.

The question *Why do you mean so much to me? Why do I mean so much to you?* suggests the relationship is one of mystery and growth—that there’s something inexplicable and intangible in it. If we can engage our whole selves in this mysterious relationship, we may find ourselves holding, and being held, in the process.

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47 Augustine, *Confessions*, 178: “the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.”
Bibliography


