

Thank you, oh Creator, for the gift of today with everything it entails.

Welcome back to the Church of Inquiry, which is a place of compassion, love, caring, contemplation, and inquiry devoted to the pursuit of the Divine. We believe the universe has a creator, that we exist for a purpose and that the Creator can be known using the methods and practice of science.

For thousands of years, humans have asked difficult questions such as: *Why are we here?* *What is our purpose?* and *What awaits after our brief existence?* In the search for those answers, spiritual seekers have been led to believe that science is oppositional to faith, instead of the ally it truly is. Adding to that schism is a notion that science, in illuminating the vastness and complexity of the universe, has diminished humanity's significance and, thus, our place as special to the Creator. I see the opposite.

We'll unfold this more, but to contemplate humanity as special to the Creator — which, in the Abrahamic frame, is to consider whether the ostensible Heavenly Father would be proud — is to be mindful of two interlocking parts of the creation: one being us as individuals and the other the species as a functional organism. These aspects interrelate, yet are not interchangeable since they function at different levels. We can, however, start by asking: does one person have significance with respect to the divine?

The Church of Inquiry believes that we can have a direct, verifiable, repeatable experience of the divine, so the reply is yes. That “yes,” however contains an acknowledgment that it is incumbent on each of us to create significance individually, separate from what is satisfied through cooperation and collaboration. There is a dance between how we serve as individuals versus how we serve as a collective with regard to the spiritual realm, which we will explore. None of us exist independent of the whole, yet our divine dance, with its endless variation, starts with the self. The metaphor of dance offers a useful lens for contemplation since it simultaneously expresses individual and collective intention.

So, let's begin with a wonderful quote from choreographer Martha Graham, who said:

“There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is, nor how valuable, nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours, clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open.”

Martha Graham uses her artist's lens to see a distinctiveness of expression in each of us, as if the soul's fingerprint was whorls of movement. She weaves in an admonishment to remain introspective and be "aware to the urges that motivate you" — this is key. Graham's understanding of distinctiveness is echoed in both science and spiritually, with one practice turning the lens outward, the other turning inward. So, how can we make this useful in our individual practice? We could start by being curious about Graham's "open channel" and wonder about our place or role and whether something is lost, individually and to the whole, when we do *not* develop the self, when we do not participate, when we do not keep the channel open.

The experience of the divine comes from within. It is not "out there," just waiting. The experience is personal; no one can tell you how to do or have it, myself included. The Church of Inquiry has no formalized practice, since each person's practice will be a reflection of current individual growth and need going forward. There is no doctrine to memorize because knowledge is not a static thing. We have an intention. We have an alignment. We have an understanding of our finite nature which exists within infinite possibility. We have tools and we cooperate. The new tools of science allow us to focus our spiritual search while eliminating — with reason — places we needn't consider.

Despite all the claims of all the religions, there is no proof of a Creator, so there can be no one true path towards It. We are now at the point where scientific tools used in service to our inquiry can bring us to clearer understanding, to deeper truth. While pursuing big questions that have historically eluded answers, it's important to remember that each of us is a unique part of the creation and needed for an undertaking of such magnitude. Since no two people experience the world exactly the same, we each can make a unique observation and contribution to the collective body of human knowledge and experience. Each of us can ask a vital question that opens a path of inquiry for ourselves or for another that can take us closer to the divine.

When we accept our place as seekers, employing our distinctiveness in this pursuit, it becomes part of our practice as well as a gift of thanks to the divine. We honor and give thanks that we have been given, along with our tools, the capability to observe, question, and fundamentally modify the fabric of our reality based on what has been collectively learned. Each of us gets to engage in a unique way. All it takes is saying yes and setting an intention — to make the choice to open the channel.

Michelangelo said, "Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it." Discovering the thing within is an apt metaphor for spiritual pursuit since religious people tend to agree that the divine is within, ready to be discovered. Likewise, we sculpt our minds by learning, we sculpt our psyche through introspection and questioning, we sculpt our bodies with exercise and diet; we create the

future version of self by acts of will and choice, even when the choice is to do nothing or to withdraw. Yet once we choose to walk the spiritual path, we are compelled to reject choices that interfere with or cause harm to our spiritual unfoldment.

To sculpt is to accept that there are techniques to learn and skills to develop. An unschooled individual wouldn't expect to be given an expensive block of marble. A skilled sculptor wouldn't purposely select an improper tool that could damage or destroy a work in progress. Are you ready to further sculpt the being within, to reveal the hidden work of beauty that already exists? (And, yes, beauty: as we discussed in an earlier sermon, the intention of the Creator may have been to create something beautiful.) Since we believe that one can have a direct, verifiable, repeatable experience of the divine, it is worth considering which version of self we will present to the divine, should that time come.

As you continue on this path and work towards your spiritual unfoldment, as you walk your path towards the Creator, remember that you have significance, that you matter, as do your choices. The universe may be nearly infinite, but there will only ever be one you in all of time and space. In chaos theory there is a phenomenon called the butterfly effect, which looks at how tiny changes in the initial conditions of a system can result in large differences in later outcomes. It is illustrated with the curious recognition that the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil could set off a tornado in Texas days later. This observation came from weather modeling, where rerunning computer data with a seemingly inconsequential rounding error produced a strikingly different set of outcomes. We're left with a clear illustration that very small causes are tied to large effects over time because of how everything is interconnected. Your participation matters, as does your choice to pursue a spiritual path. There is a butterfly effect we each exert, and that effect is mediated by imbuing our actions with intention and attention. Even in listening now, you are actively crafting the future version of self.

Let's consider that self. We know the thoughts that filled our youthful heads aren't the same as those today. Who will we be 10 years from now? We're forever a work in progress, changing, growing, and unfolding. We're all shaped by teachers, mentors, and guides yet our initial *filter*, if you will, through which we then view life, is formed very early as our cognitive structures develop. Personality type is a filter: it changes how we move through the world and restricts or limits our experience of it, including our perception the divine. You've undoubtedly seen examples of cautious versus reckless behavior, "look before your leap" versus "*Charge!*" Those different individuals experience identical circumstances differently. Is the world you perceive welcoming or hostile?

I've previously used the scientific terms genotype versus phenotype – what something is versus the specifics of its individual expression. When that concept is applied in the subtle realm of our spiritual quest, it asks that we consider: what is our true expression, our *true self*, and any factors that prevent it from being experienced and expressed. Is exhibiting

cautiousness or recklessness a true expression of being, or is it actually a product of psychological defenses? The more we let go of routine and fear as we turn inward, the more we will find our way to the true self, versus the false one frozen in the shape of the ego. That ego, which appears to define, actually restricts our sense of personal identity — and in the defense of identity, things often go awry.

Peeling back the layers of the self to arrive at a deeper understanding is part of our path, part of our preparation in moving closer to the divine. There are many ways to do this, and each person will create a distinct process over time. We have multiple psychological systems for assessing our urges, choices, and motivations and you've probably heard of personality archetypes like Freudian, Jungian, or Reichian assessments. We have personality tests like Myers-Briggs, the Big Five, or the HEXACO model, each offering different perspectives. There are many systems that offer insights and explanations for understanding human behavior, each hopefully helping us to release our fears, to return us to a more original, whole state of self — to unclench a metaphorical fist.

There's a system I quite like called the Enneagram, which originated in Sufi mysticism from thousands of years ago and was codified into a psychological system in the 1950s. Its deep wisdom can be applied at a number of levels. The system identifies nine distinct personality types that form from three initial causes. Personality is seen as a measure of deflection from initial wholeness, and the ego as a psychic structure based on crystallized beliefs about ourselves and the world. Because those nine personality types experience the world differently, it becomes obvious that common sense is only common within, and not between types. That creates differing realities.

For a wonderful introduction to the system, Helen Palmer's book, *The Enneagram: Understanding Yourself and the Others in Your Life*, is a great place to start. Separate from what the system offers for psychological and/or spiritual work is a simple and exciting realization: we actually have access to all nine types. That creates a necessity to find a pathway for fluid transition between them. As you learn what informs each type, as you learn how to walk a mile in another's shoes — which, it turns out, are still yours — as you decode the basis of those nine understandings and the common sense that flows from them, you reduce the distance between yourself and others and triangulate on the true essence of the self. It sits in an accessible place of wholeness, of love, of support, of effortlessness, of tranquility, and of fearlessness. This is the place of the divine that we carry within.

Now might be a time to pause. Next time I'd like to play with some practical tools that align intention with practice as it pertains to the subtle realm. They'll help us to triangulate on the place of wholeness and calm at our center.

One last thought about that inner being brings us again to Michelangelo, and a beautiful quote that can help to us understand what it means to walk our path with intention. “In every block of marble, I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and in action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it.” Become curious about the being within that is “shaped and perfect in attitude,” that has kept the channel open, that exists in a place of peace and without fear. What will it take to hew away your rough walls? Remember that the perfect you within, who is the effortless embodiment of our divine gifts, has much to contribute. As an act of faith, I’ll ask you to trust that there is beauty at your core and that, if you reveal what is locked behind the ego’s presentation, you will reveal divine glory.

Let me close, in gratitude, with our invocation:

Thank you, Creator, for all that is possible and your abundant gifts.

Thank you, Nature, for the forces that formed us and shape our reality.

Thank you, Science, for the path and the tools we use to explore and understand both nature and the divine.

Thank you, friends and fellow humans, for choosing to walk this path.

Honor the Creator. Honor the Creation.