UNFOLDINGS

CONVERSATIONS

from the

Sunday morning seminars

of Bernie Loomer

First Unitarian Church
Berkeley, California

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JOURNEYS OF ENCOUNTER

There are times, I imagine, when those most gifted in the use of words find themselves mused by a charm of wordlessness, by a sunblind inadequacy to articulate those tenuous moments of transporting burnish, those transient hovings of near touching when the oneness in us is being enfolded as it unfolds in the oneness of another. Yet there are those rare and isolated occasions, illuminated by their very infrequency, when someone of extraordinary insight and fluency of word, can open us to new resonances of inquiring mind and expand us to new frontiers of spirit. It is at such times, that as our limitations are diminished, the boundaries of our human-ness are being extended. It is at such times that we are prompted to new ventures of liminar reaching and outreaching, to new stirrings of movement, to a becoming from where we are to a larger where-ness. It is at such times that we are disposed to untravelled distances, to destinies that draw us to nearness. And nearness to those Webings of connectedness that embrace the part in the mystery of the whole.

Those who have been privileged to attend Bernie Loomer’s Sunday morning seminars over the past few years can attest to the quiet but unfaltering genius of one who chooses to guide rather than to direct, to suggest rather than to proclaim. Void of all tracts of intellectual posturing or pedantry, he has opened up new territories of the mind for those inclined to venturing, and held out a candle to those who would contend with encircling dark. His stature as a scholar, as a teacher, as a man of eloquence and eloquence, as a wayfarer along the entourages of the spiritual and the sacramental, has been more than mere contemplation. But even more, if possible, Bernie is a poet, a mystic, a man of nuanced listening ... not only to the music of the spheres, but to the small faltering voices of our own individual inquirings. Detached from fixed positions of dogma and doctrinaire persuasion, Bernie has not been deterred from a sense of rooting. From a sense of where he has come from, or the directions in which he is going. He is not confused by vacillating winds of passing wisdom. Nor has vision been distracted or obscured by irrelevancies that are the trademark of small thinking. He has sought God as a reality beyond reality and a reality within reality; as a presence within and as a presence beyond the boundaries of our knowing. He has ranged from the ineffable & timeless to the tangible & the new. He has focused our attention upon ourselves and the entity, as a wayfarer along the entourages of the spiritual and the sacramental. He has presented the many faces of our yearnings and perplexities, our alienness and togetherness, our odysseys of self-discovery and quests of revelation and transcendency. He has helped to open us to ourselves and to our courting and courting with the unknown and the mystery of the Web. And along these journeys of restless, often trackless, seeking, he has given of himself unsparingly. And to each of us he has left a legacy of creative wonder, trimmed to the winds of discovery. For those gifts of untried, unexplored spirit, there are no measures of response beyond the fulness of our gratitude and the namelessness of our love.

And from the wilderness of our unrest
Comes a stillness taller than all reaching
A meaning larger than uncertainty
A verging of unfolding
A binding of nearness
A latitude of towarding beyond the dark.

... Lawrence Berger

INTRODUCTION

Bernard M. Loomer is a former deacon and professor of the University of Chicago Divinity School. More recently, he has been professor, and for a time, acting dean at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Many students have taken his courses at Chicago and at Berkeley.

Dr. Loomer is one of the people who helped develop a mode of thought within which to interpret a basic Judaic Christian faith. He describes this mode of thinking as essentially "process-relational" in nature, and distinguishes between "unilateral" and "relational" power. Perhaps his greatest gift as a teacher is that of encouraging and enabling others to forge their own theological impressions of life.

After the death of his first wife, Jeanne married Jeannie Wenerstrom. Jeanne had been working at Meadville/Lombard Theological School after the death of her first husband, Carl Wenerstrom, a Unitarian Universalist minister. The Loomers made their home in El Cerrito, about a mile north of the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley. Subsequently, Jeanne became a trustee, and then the president of the Church Board. After Bernie’s retirement from the GTU, Richard Boeke, minister of the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, invited Bernie to lead a Sunday morning seminar at the church. He agreed to try the idea and thus initiated the Personal Theology Seminar which soon established itself as a dynamic center for personal religious exploration.

In the seminars, Bernie generally opened with a twenty-minute talk on a selected subject . . . . . not always viewed along the lines of the discussion. These talks were not scholarly lectures formally presented. Rather they were general in content . . . . the thoughtful deliberations of a deeply contemplative mind . . . . addressed to lay people and informally delivered. A series of these talks was recorded on tape in the Spring of 1984 and is published here for the benefit of friends, students, and pilgrims who seek fresh insights into the process of living.

In “Loomer’s notes” which follow, you will meet Jesus as “the discoverer of the Web of Relationship” which Jesus called the “Kingdom of God.” In agreement with Howard Thurman (incidentally, a former Lawrence Lecturer as well as a distinguished American Theologian), Bernie believes that the Jesus of the first three gospels should be given priority over the apostle Paul.

To follow the Web is to become transformed. The pupils in turn become the teachers, “by your pupils you shall be taught.” In its profound sense the Web is a religious encounter within our reach, providing us with “the resources for the living of an abundantly meaningful life, (and) to be experienced within the concrete realities of this world,” as well as in a sense of that which is numinous.

Bernie talked to Dick Boeke recently concerning how deeply he had been moved by the seminar and church community. Dick told him of his experience in leaving the Baptist church and becoming a Unitarian Universalist. Bernie said he was ready to take the same step. Dick brought out the church membership book and Bernie signed it in the presence of his wife Jeanne. . . . The Web goes on . . .

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Jesus discovered the reality of the Web. He began his public ministry by announcing its presence and its fuller exemplification (the "coming kingdom"). He stressed the point that in relation to the kingdom what was required was a repentance of sin and the seeking of forgiveness. The two great commandments, of loving God with your whole heart and mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself, are, of course, applicable to life within the kingdom. But our sinfulness, which is a disposition of the soul, is an agent of alienation of ourselves from ourselves, from others, and from God. This predicament can be overcome only by repentance and forgiveness. And we are never at a stage where we are beyond the need for repentance and forgiveness.

When you come to the Gospel of John and the writings of Paul something has changed. In the Synoptics, Jesus is not the central reality. The Kingdom is the central reality. He describes this reality, but the Kingdom does not exist for his sake. He serves the Kingdom and draws his power from it. The Kingdom was not created because Jesus was of supernatural origin. The Kingdom was never created. The discovery was that the Kingdom is a given of life itself it was not created by Jesus. It was not created at all. It is simply inherent in life itself. Its actuality is simultaneous with existence.

When we move to the Pauline or Johannine traditions, Jesus then becomes the central figure. In the Pauline letters, Paul does not know the Kingdom of the Synoptics. He did not know Jesus in the flesh. The Church, over the centuries, by and large, has gone with the Pauline tradition, not the Synoptics. Whenever liberals have been dominant the Synoptics have been emphasized.

The main-line churches almost always begin with the Pauline passages, not the Synoptics. From Paul, you would not know these marvelous stories existed in the Synoptics. In Paul, you have the grim spectre of sin and the work of salvation wrought by Jesus. Paul thought that if left to our own devices, we will mess it up for sure - every time. Therefore, we need to have "it" done for us: an act of reconciliation on our behalf before God.

"The evil I do, I would not and the evil I would not do, I do"

Jesus' mind was more penetrating - more perceptive - than Paul's. This has been covered over because we have surrounded Jesus with religiosity. The person who wrote the letters of Paul did not have the mind to write the parables of the Synoptic Gospels.

John said: "No one comes to the Father, but by me." The covenantal understanding has been forgotten.

Sin is a distortion of our relations to God and to each other. Forgiveness is a restoration to those relationships. In sinful acts we act against the Web of Life. In seeking repentance we open ourselves to the forgiveness that is already there, as a fundamental condition of life. We make ourselves accessible to it, or it accessible to us. We are related to each other through the Web. Those others have free choice as to whether they will accept our forgiveness or not. In all cases we are trapped with an inescapable web of connectedness.

The belief that the Web is impersonal still does not deny forgiveness. We don't need a personal God in order to experience forgiveness and to be restored to connectedness. Connectedness can be to the whole and to the other person. We are related to each other through the Web and through the Web through each other.

In a real sense you cannot fully forgive yourself. You are a social individual. You are a singular self within a social web. Another has to be involved - at least one other. Your being restored requires an action on the part of that other. You cannot restore yourself simply by your own attitudes and actions. Yet an act of individual acceptance is always involved in forgiveness and repentance. If you cannot forgive yourself, you are denying your own worth and also that of others, and cannot accept the forgiveness of others or of the Web.
You can be estranged even though you are part of the Kingdom. You always have the free choice as to whether you will accept that forgiveness. You are never really out of the web whether or not you can recognize or accept the connectedness. In all cases, you are within the Web, the Kingdom.

**SURRENDER - PART I**

Bernie Loomer Seminar - February 19, 1984

In Unitarian circles I hear much more talk about responsibility than I do about gratitude. Not that I never hear the word gratitude. I am not speaking here of human relations, but of a religious stance - a religious attitude: responsibility, yes; gratitude, no.

Q: Is this gratitude to someone or something?
A: Yes. Gratitude is gratefulness to some one other, something other than yourself.

Q: Gratitude toward an organization?
A: No, speaking religiously, I don't think of an institution.

Q: Is gratitude an act?
A: Yes, but it is also, and more fundamentally, a disposition of the soul, an attitude of one's spirit that issues in acts. It is similar to the social and ethical acts of a responsible person. The acts may express that person's deep sense of responsibility. The acts may help to maintain or deepen that person's capacity for responsible responses to problematic situations. But the acts of responsibility do not exhaust the content of the full range and subtlety of that person's sense of responsibility. The acts reflect, but do not totally encompass, the character of the responsible person.

My own feeling is that if you emphasize responsibility too much, you are undervaluing others or the other. Also, you are over-valuing yourself. You are operating with an individualistic conception of the individual, not a social conception of the self. If you have a social sense of the self, you cannot maintain that you are wholly responsible for what you are. In the nature of the self, you draw your life blood from the society. You can be responsible within it, but there are limits to which your responsibility extends. I also think that within this attitude of responsibility there is the idea that gratitude beyond a certain point leads to dependence and this is a basic form of weakness. As much as we may not admit this intellectually, many of us feel emotionally that dependence is weakness.
The emotion of gratitude, when combined with the social conception of the soul and also the sense of the processive nature of things, leads to the notion of giving yourself to the flow. The activity of the flow produces something that contains a plus. It issues into qualities that are more than you can find by adding up the qualities of all the participants. There is a plus that emerges out of the relationship to the processive flow (if you do this in a proper way which we haven't discussed). This is surrender. But it is surrender not for the sake of reducing yourself. It has the consequence of enhancing the self. This is the interesting part. It is a surrender that does not diminish the self. It enlarges the self because you are free to absorb the energy, perspectives and insights of other selves. You open yourself to this processive interaction. The self has to expand in order to take this into its being. Then you are shaped, reshaped by this processive interaction. You are responsible for responding in a certain way. But you are also grateful for the good that you receive, and when experienced most deeply, it is a good that is always greater than you knew, than you asked for, than you dreamed of, because your own basis of appreciation has changed as a result of this.

COMMENT: Many people I know in the Unitarian - Universalist Church have erected barriers to this idea of surrender. It seems to come with the territory. Also, you can see some of the worst effects of surrender in your small right wing groups. There is a surrender but this does not result in an enlargement of the spirit.

COMMENT: But many people in Fundamentalist Churches do expand. There are those of enlarged spirits and significant stature.

COMMENT: But when you surrender to a belief system, you are not expanding yourself. You may be willing to go to war and make other people your enemy.

RESPONSE: There may be a difference here between surrender and abdication. If a fundamentalist goes beyond the belief system and develops personally, he may “open his life to Jesus” which may be the name he gives to the Web of Life. Most importantly, when a person is committed or surrenders to a belief system, this is idolatry. This is so whether the person and the belief system are fundamentalistic or liberal in character.

COMMENT: I think Bernt is talking about surrender to God rather than to a church, institution or person.

I would rather put the distinction in terms of whether the reality you are trying to relate to is static or dynamic. I would mean this in a very technical sense as well as a very general sense. The dynamic alternative involves the ultimate of becomingness. You give yourself to a reality which itself is in the process of creation. The Web itself is self-creating.

Creation means accepting diverse elements and creating something new. It is a synthesizing process.

COMMENT: Some of these religions - their beliefs and goals are hard but you may see surrender and growth and everything else.

There are all kinds of ways of being closed. There is a liberal way of being closed. There is a fundamentalist way. For the fundamentalist the window isn’t open. To many people, liberalism means that the window never closes. In both cases it no longer functions as a window. I always found it interesting that in Chicago at the Divinity School, the strongest intellectual members of the faculty were those of a conservative religious background - not those who had been born liberals. Those that had been born liberals usually lacked a passion, a drive. You can’t move from A to B without some passion.

Q: What is the difference between “surrender” and “acknowledgment” of just what is?
A: Surrender is not only more bodily, more emotional, but surrender involves at the same time as giving of oneself to something else that acknowledgment does not include.

Q: What is the flow you refer to?
A: It would depend upon the context. It could be immediate events, the dynamic movement, or whatever it is you are trying to attend to that would have the characteristics of a flow.

COMMENT: If you surrender to the universe, there is implicit in that act a belief in something good. You wouldn’t surrender to chaos. You would fight against it. You have to have some sense that you won’t be annihilated in surrender.

You can’t surrender until at least you have been led out of the wilderness,
until at least you have had some experience of some good. The contrast to this is the French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre who said religion is treason to the spirit. Sartre believes that in freedom you must give yourself to your own freedom. You can’t give yourself to something transcending yourself without losing your freedom. You are the only one who brings meaning into this universe. If I believed in that outlook, I would be militantly against surrender. I would feel that it would be dehumanizing to give yourself to something that transcends your freedom. I would tell the person who was surrendering that he or she lacks strength and courage.

The word “surrender” can carry the connotation that the one who is to surrender is nothing and that the other, God or whoever, is all. I don’t think that transformation occurs while one regards himself or herself as empty of worth, a nothingness, in the face of another. I think that one can be open to the other (particularly if the other is an important other), willing to be influenced even heavily by the other without thereby feeling that one has been demeaned, or that one has become a nothingness, or that one is being filled as an empty vessel.

This kind of emptiness is to be distinguished from the emptiness that results when a person lets go of old ideas, habits, perspectives, and responses that have been crippling that person’s spirit and blocking his or her development. This emptiness may be prolonged in its duration. Yet often this stage is the price that must be paid before the individual (or the community) is ready to gain a newer and deeper understanding.

I assume that every instance of worship does presuppose some willingness to be transformed by whomever or whatever one is worshipping. I think it would be psychologically and religiously impossible to worship something or someone without being willing (at least theoretically) to be open to influences from the object of worship.

The tradition always had great difficulty explaining what God got out of the worship experience since there isn’t anything that creatures can give to God anyway except their worship and obedience. So I think that in all worship situations there is an element of insufficiency, of relatedness. There is the urge to acknowledge and to relate to the presence of something calling forth more than we have been, or are, or may even become. One cannot worship that which is equal in stature to oneself. It would be a contradiction in terms to worship that which is lower in stature than oneself, that one dominates.
We could come close to worshipping another human being when we hold him or her up as an ideal or a model whom we aspire to emulate. This could come very close to worship although maybe that is too strong a word. But if you set up a model human being, then this human being tends to function as a God figure.

Q: Is that what they did to Jesus?
A: Yes, partly because they couldn't get a grasp of the reality of God in any other way. One of the reasons the conservatives emphasize Jesus so much is that in their view God is so absolute and transcendent that there is no way to have commerce with that God in any practical operational way. Jesus performs these functions, and very nicely.

You don't approach the one you worship as though you were nothing. You may be inadequate, or you may take the Pauline alternative that what you want to do you don't do or can't do. That is not the same thing as nothing. On the contrary, in one sense your grip on yourself is so strong that you won't let go and it takes the power of God to break this. So in worship one is open but the openness is not that of one who is nothing.

Hopefully it is the openness of one who is humble. In one sense sin is not the product of weakness, but of strength. As a sinner you are a person who has taken your energy and used it for your own alms and used everybody else for your own purposes. This is a kind of strength. You have to let go of that kind of power in order that another kind of power can have its way.

COMMENT: This is the Buddhist notion of emptiness. Maybe this is where Christian-ity and Buddhism can meet.

ANSWER: Well, you get the whole kenosis theory that Christ emptied himself of Godlike qualities and became fully human. The Buddhist has a relational dimension that he never lets go of. It is only recently that Christianity has had this relational concept and brought it to the fore.

In emptying, you are attempting to reduce your own self-centeredness, and if you succeed, it may seem as if you are moving toward emptiness in order to receive the kind of thing we are talking about. Actually, it isn't emptiness but a re-directing of our

energies. The issue is not the things you give yourself to as a matter of choice, but what you are gripped by.

Q: Don't you have to have trust and faith to surrender?
A: Yes, but there is a mutuality of dependence and creativeness. Trust leads to surrender and surrender may issue in trust. Also, resistance is a constant presence. You do trust and you don't trust. You do surrender and you don't. You do let go and don't let go. You can say, "on the basis of the experience I have had, from now on I will trust." But you don't - not fully or for all time. You have to go through this whole scene again. Once is not enough. Every advance presents you with new temptations, new opportunities for greater affirmations, greater trust, or deeper denials. The saint is aware that he can create more evil than he could before his arrival at saintthood. People now regard him in different ways than they did before. They take his word differently. When he really botches things up, he botches them up badly. (We are not judging saintliness by whether he or she acts more morally but by the maturity of the soul.)

Q: Is the saint primarily known for the quality of his relationship to people or to God?
Q: For myself, I don't know of any relationship to God that does not involve relationships to creatures. We don't have a relationship to God that stands by itself, isolated from all our other experiences and relationships. We are talking about something that is mixed to begin with. We are not talking about something totally demarcated on one or the other side. A person's relationship to God is not totally isolable, distinguishable from everything else that he or she thinks or feels, has or does.

You can point to the figure of Jesus and just speak about his unalloyed humanity. I don't think there is pure humanity in the figure called Jesus. You can talk about the purely human Jesus, Socrates, Lincoln or other religious figure, but it is a fiction. If those individuals hit notes that are rich and deep they also reveal something of God. The reality of God was moving within the depths of these people in ways not moving in many other people. The human and divine realities get interwoven. To think that we can separate all this out into nice categories is an illusion.

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THE BEATITUDES - PART I
Bernie Loomer Seminar

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (In French, "meek" is translated as debonaire) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the Prophets who were before you."

The Beatitudes constitute a strange, startling and puzzling chapter in the Biblical story. Several extreme human conditions, which most of us want to avoid like the plague, are called states of blessedness. Being poor in spirit, being meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, being merciful or pure in heart, or being a peace-maker or being persecuted - these conditions often take us to the edge of our humanity. They may become crisis situations which "make us or break us." These states require all the resources we can muster if they are to lead to creative rather than destructive consequences.

In one sense, all of these are focused on aspects of the first commandment. Being poor in spirit, mourning over the loss of someone or living through the deepest of disappointments may cause us to come to terms with the structure or things the way the Web is put together. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness certainly relates to the first commandment as do being merciful, having a pure heart, being a peacemaker and being persecuted. Which is to say that the Beatitudes are another way of stating that if you give the first commandment a fundamental priority, even though this apparently leads you into the most undesirable situations, the ultimate good cannot be denied you. You achieve this ultimate good not in spite of, but partly in and through, and because of, these fundamental attitudes and actions. Blessedness, I would assume, is not a state that can be a reality apart from the first commandment.

Q: How can your love of God lead you into undesirable conditions?
A: Your love of God can lead to undesirable conditions, not in your heart, but in the world. It can lead you, for instance, to being a peace-maker, and that is no picnic.

I am speaking of the two commandments of the New Testament, not the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament. I am not separating the two but emphasizing a priority - the first commandment. I am suggesting that in the first commandment, you have a kind of covert or implied promise of fulfillment even in the midst of extreme situations that seem to indicate a lack of adequate resources.

The Beatitudes are hard to understand because in certain respects, on their surface, they are false. Also, some of the Beatitudes seem to be downright foolish. In many cases, it is apparently not true that if you are merciful you will receive mercy from others. You may instead be walked on. They are not talking about being merciful to yourself, a mercy that is self-reflexive. It is a mercy to others.

That the pure in heart are the ones who will see God and that the seekers after righteousness will find it seems clear and true in an obvious sense. But the word "meek" is a troublesome word. In my own mind I have always linked the poor in spirit and the meek. They seem like two ways of saying the same thing. I would think that the meek are the humble. All the conditions of the Beatitudes are conditions of openness, vulnerability, humility. Poor in spirit, meek, mourning, thirsting; they are all states of vulnerability and that is a blessed state. If you are not open, you can't receive. If you are open, vulnerable, you will be able to receive. It was like the setting forth of a theme, a thesis.

It isn't that you are blessed in spite of these conditions. It is a "therefore" because of these conditions. The states of blessedness that can lead to great fulfillment are the same states that can lead to your destruction. You can get trampled on. A condition
that makes you more open to influence, that can recreate you and enlarge you, can also be a situation that can cause you to take in something you can't handle. The openness that can cause you to want to help another person can cause you to take on the disease of the other person.

The Beatitudes do not suppose that we are to reject the world and its rewards. "They shall see God" does not necessarily mean later, but they can see God now. It is not "other worldly". It is not in terms of the way this world defines power. It is this world, but lived in terms of values that people associate with another world, although they also belong to this world. The merciful are not strangers to this world nor are the pure in heart or those who hunger after righteousness. I don't see this as a picture of a transcendental life. It is not an easy degree of openness to have. The price one pays is enormous but then the gains are proportionate to the price you are willing to pay. You put your money down and you take your choice.

The Beatitudes begin abruptly at the beginning of a long discourse on the mountain. It is as if Jesus were setting forth a theme, a thesis. The Beatitudes then become one of the profoundest ways of spelling out the Kingdom of God or the Web of Life.

BEATITUDES - PART II
Bernie Loomer Seminar

I would like to spend some more time on the Beatitudes following last week's discussion. I had never thought previously of taking the Beatitudes as a discussion of the Web - of the Kingdom. I would state a thesis: "Great faith is correlated with great risks." We are speaking religiously now, primarily. And great risks do involve depths of relationships, depths of participation in relationships which often take us to the extremes of life. These extremes create threats to our own survival, as people living and trying to live meaningful lives. They also are ways by which we may tap into the deepest resources, and it is from this tapping into the deepest resources that the expression come "Blessed are you when . . . ."

We do not experience the deepest resources in the absence of depth of relationships, or in the absence of important risks. We do not experience the deepest resources in normal levels of normal relationship, not that there is anything wrong with them, but we deprive ourselves of the heights and depths available to us in terms of the deepest resources of the Web itself. Therefore, the Beatitudes state conditions of openness, of vulnerability and the rewards proportionate to the risks taken.

For example, the attempt to be a peace-maker is one of the ways whereby the "seeing of God" becomes possible. In the state of mourning, the spirit is opened to others so that they can enter into your life in ways that they could not before, and you can receive from them in ways that you couldn't or didn't before. Even though a price has been paid, the gain that accrues is commensurate with the price paid. What emerges in this state is commensurate with the risk involved, the depth of trust.

Suffering may harden you. You may even become more indifferent to life. There is no guarantee that the suffering will deepen your sensitivity, or enable you to reach out and touch others in a more effective and creative set of ways. But when this happens, if this happens, something is going on. It costs you one way or another, a price that has
to be paid either in terms of indifference, or hatred, or greater sensitivity. You are going to pay a price.

If you avoid suffering, you deprive everyone else of what you have to give because you were not able to see what you have gained, or might have gained, out of this experience. If you play by a certain set of "safe" rules or plans, then you will always be disappointed by the suffering, because the suffering is not according to your plans. You need to stay with the suffering. Let it have its way for a while. There is a point beyond which you have to say "That's it!", but if you do not live with it up to that point, you are saying, "I choose to be very selective about those aspects of life I live with." If you decide against risk and suffering, a price will be paid. You will pay it. The others of us in the Web will also pay it because we will be deprived of something we could have gained from you if you had lived fuller. We will be deprived of an outreach, a wisdom, a sensitivity, a way of seeing and saying things that only you can say and see. It is gone and never to be repeated.

If you don't come to a state of blessedness (through these experiences) you come to another state that is much less creative. In this sense, we don't get away with anything in life. A price will be paid.

Q: What about overwhelming, devastating suffering without hope of relief such as the Holocaust?
A: Suffering is not always redemptive. Perhaps it is not usually redemptive. A lot of it is senseless and destructive. There are no guarantees that if you suffer you (and others) will benefit. But the other side of the coin is that in many cases there is no redemption or advance without suffering.

THE AMBIGUITY OF GOOD
Bernie Loomer Seminar

The "ambiguity of good" is not just any ambiguity. One could speak of political ambiguity where one settles for something less than one should settle for, perhaps; or one knowingly settles for something less than what one might settle for. I want to contrast that with the ambiguity of good.

The ambiguous, traditionally speaking, is a situation that has been regarded as something finally to be overcome or transcended. If something was ambiguous, it obviously did not illustrate perfection. It bespoke of compromise - a settling for something that was ethically, if not spiritually, lower in the scale than one should settle for. Traditionally, ambiguity was a condition to be overcome for pretty much the same reasons that tragedy was to be overcome. Tragedy was not to be the last word. It could be turned into something that was non-tragic. Evil could be thoroughly defeated. Sin could be completely vanquished.

I would like to cite a few situations in which we can speak of the ways ambiguity arises in the human spirit. First, to put the matter most obviously and simplistically, the self is not divided into good parts and bad parts. If this is the case, if evil is not due to one part of the self and good to another part of the self, then goodness and evil arise from the same source within the self. If you try to exercise evil by symbolically cutting it out of yourself, you can also reduce your capacity for goodness.

Second, singlenessmindedness is a greatly cherished quality for human endeavor. It is usually associated with success in one way or another. There is singlenessmindedness of aim, attention, concern, of use of energy. But singlenessmindedness is never really complete, and usually our motives for doing whatever we are doing are split or varied. They are not derived from one single cause or purpose.

Third, I don't mean to sound mournful about ambiguity. Contrary to the tradition, I think ambiguity is a driving spirit. While it contributes to the mixture of good and
evil, it is also a means whereby goodness does not rest on whatever level of achievement it has attained. Therefore, it can be a spur, depending upon how we treat our virtues. There is that in the human spirit that moves us to adopt our virtues as though they were of indefinite value, or unlimited in their application. When we act as though our virtues were not limited, then our virtues become vices. The energy from which we have created our virtues is the same energy which encourages or drives us to turn those virtues into vices.

The virtues are limited. I suppose each one of us gets intrigued by various aspects of the human spirit. I sometimes want to entertain the generalization that regardless of the quality of a person’s voice, it tends to reflect, and it is best adapted to express, what that person fundamentally is.

Four, last week, someone brought up the topic of creating God in our own image. To me, this illustrates the kind of limitation it means to express. We use the kind of reason we possess as Western people to shape the world in the ways that we do. We do create God in our own image (as we create everything else in our own image), and then we worship our own creation. The shaping of things in our own image is probably unavoidable. What is avoidable is the worship of that which we create. It is difficult to give one’s self to something other than that which we understand or can give shape to with our minds. But if we do not give ourselves to something other than what we can shape with our minds, then we have turned a virtue into a vice. It is important for us to understand, to know, to use the best knowledge we have. But if we give ourselves to what we now know, then we give ourselves to ourselves, because we are giving ourselves to our own minds which are what we utilized to produce the best that we now know. But the best that we now know is not adequate to deal with the kinds of problems we now have.

The presence of ambiguity, therefore, arises rather naturally within the human spirit. It can urge us to move beyond where we are. There is an ambiguity about success. The difficulty with success is that too often it defines where we want to stop. We succeeded, so why push on? At least this is one half of the picture. The other half is: now that we have succeeded at that level, we do want to push on. This is the ambiguity, and depending upon the stance you adopt, the energy you have put into making your success is the same intense energy you will use to hold on to the success and the station you now occupy. We do not unambiguously move from one level to a higher level. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don’t.

Lastly, with every advance, particularly if you talk relationally of advancing within the web of life, the disciplines of relationships become ever more difficult, more subtle, more complex, requiring qualities that most of us don’t want to pay the price for. Every minority group that achieves a greater freedom, every understanding that causes us to see what is involved in the dignity of the other, creates in us the need for adopting disciplines that are more complex and requiring virtues beyond anything the human spirit has known - if we are to achieve and maintain a high level of civilized life. For example, we have to be more moral than any previous generation. It isn’t that we are more moral. But this need is forced upon us by the kind of relationships we are creating or that are emerging in our ongoing life. I, for one, do not know how to go about creating these kinds of disciplines on a wide scale. The most sustained experience I have had with this problem is in terms of educational institutions. The logic of relationships in the web means that every advance resulting in greater complexity requires disciplines of sensitivity and synthesis to match this emerging complexity. I doubt that this is what we are training ourselves and our children to accomplish.

It becomes therefore an open question for me whether the human spirit has given rise to a situation that it is unable or chooses not to respond to adequately. If the response is inadequate the human organism may turn out to be a dead end. Certain evolutionary species could not sustain themselves through the kinds of changes that occurred. They refused or were unable to adapt to situations that they helped to create - that emerged out of their surrounding roles. You either adapt or you perish.
Q: How does knowledge relate to this?

A: The products of our knowledge have helped to create the situation we are in. The desire for knowledge of certain kinds, which is a virtue, has become a vice in part and in various ways. One of the ways it becomes a vice is in terms of those who say, "I don't care what happens to my world. I am only interested in pursuing my line of inquiry. I have no responsibility for what people do with it." The sense of the holy, of the mysterious, of the other is missing from this perception of knowledge, this pursuit. The Oppenheimer story is an example of this. He was deeply disturbed by the results of his knowledge. "Pandora's box has been opened," he said. "We don't know what to do with it." In various ways, Pandora's box has been opened and we don't know what to do with it.

COMMENT: The rate of change is an important factor. Things are changing so fast that we don't have a chance to see if they (the changes) are adaptive or maladaptive.

A: There are a lot of people in the sciences whose primary loyalty is to their project. They don't care what happens to the University.

Q: Do we decide between good and evil through intellectual or emotional means?

A: It is a personal choice. It isn't intellectual, simply; it isn't emotional, simply. It is of the person.

THE WEB:
HOW IT ALL HANGS TOGETHER

Bernie Loomer Seminar

Let's begin with the notion of the Web - or the Kingdom, if you wish, and see how all the things we have been talking about are tied into this conception one way or another: the doctrines of forgiveness, repentance, responsibility, gratitude, sin, transformation, power and the rest. These conceptions all refer to dimensions of the Web.

We start with the notion of the Web as a world in which the entities in it, including the people, are bound together as inter-related. We are dependent upon each other, and yet each claims a kind of independence from all that goes on. The higher one goes in the evolutionary scale, the greater the concern for independence, but one never loses the sense of dependence upon the others within the context of an environment in which one lives and moves and has his or her being.

In this sense, there is no such thing as a self-made person or a self-made jelly fish or a self-made anything. Everything that exists has contributed to its own existence in part. Everything that exists has been contributed to by the context out of which it has emerged.

If all the creatures that exist were capable of worship, we would all begin each day by a sense of gratitude to the environment upon which we are so dependent, from which we draw resources and to which we make our own contributions, large or small. The Web, in this sense, is not only the gene-pool. It is the pool of all that we are, the carrier of all values. What happens in a community, large and small, is important for each one of us, whether or not we are aware of the degree to which we draw strength and sustenance from this environment. We are born or created, not as equal, but as members of a Web of interconnections - from which there is no escape and upon which we are dependent and in which we live out our days. This is a given, not a created condition. It is a given condition. I stress this. I cannot document this in the gospels and I could
sometimes have the impression that Jesus himself was somewhat taken aback at times by the simplicity and yet the immensity of his own discovery. This is a given condition. This is not something that has evolved. Our understanding of it has evolved, but the condition itself is a given. This is point one.

Point two, the implications for the self can be seen quite readily. On the one hand, the self is a social self, on the other a singularized, unique individual. The person is both of these, at one and the same time. The person is never one without also being the other, although we may tend to emphasize one dimension more than the other. There is that about the nature of human individuality which motivates us to deny or resist the very network of dependence and inter-relatedness from which we have emerged. It is a fascinating and endless story. The fact of becoming individuals, at least within the west, causes us to move almost inevitably against that very foundational condition of the world which is necessary for our being in this inter-related world. We are motivated to think that what we achieve is our own doing and we are rightfully proud of it. In all kinds of ways we tend to over-emphasize the notion of responsibility at the expense of gratitude. In our minds there is something admirable about the individual who wants to make his or her contribution. There is also something “brattish” about “by myself, by myself, let me do it by myself.”

The third point is that since we tend to prize our sense of individuality as an independent self, which often leads to egoism, we have one of the reasons why Jesus stressed the two fundamental requirements of repentance and the forgiveness of sins as important conditions of the kingdom. We also tend to move against the Web, with at least an implied denial of our dependence.

You cannot forgive yourself unless you forgive the other also. You cannot forgive the other unless you also forgive yourself. I think at points we may tend to make a sharp distinction between ourselves and the world. We may then feel that we can forgive ourselves and leave the world intact, without bothering about the question whether we should do anything about the world. I think that this is a mistaken notion, that we probably kid ourselves in thinking we can forgive ourselves without dealing with the communal roots in which our sinfulness is always embedded. It isn’t embedded simply within me nor is yours embedded simply within you. It is embedded within you but it is also embedded within your environment, community and society. This is why sin is not simply an act, or a series of acts. It is, on the one hand, a disposition of the soul. On the other hand, speaking as a rule, it is a structure within things, which is one of the reasons evil is so strong.

So just as we are not individuals and in isolation and apart from this community in which we live, so we cannot live a life of trust, repentance, or forgiveness by ourselves, singularly. A sense of responsibility that is not closely tied in with the sense of trust makes for pride. Responsibility that is not tied in with and does not live with its counterpart called gratitude or thankfulness makes for pride - pride in ones’ self. I use “trust” and “gratitude” in the sense of saying “thank you” to some other reality for what you have received. It is an acknowledgement that the other, who exists in his or her right, has taken the time and energy to enter your life, and has offered you a gift which you are free to accept or not. You acknowledge your thanks even if you decide not to make use of the gift. A sense of responsibility without being tied in with this sense of gratitude makes for pride. Pride, up to a point, is a very necessary element in self-worth. There is no self worth without some measure of pride. But pride, beyond a certain point, becomes an over-evaluation of the self. This becomes estrangement, wherein pride means you gain your status always at someone else’s expense. Your foot is in someone else’s face. You evaluate yourself “up” by putting someone else “down”.

Therefore, power that is most deeply consonant with the nature of the Web has to be mutual in its character, in contrast to the traditional notion of power as we discussed it previously. Unilateral power, which essentially is a masculine version of power, is wrong headed. Yet, we had no intellectual corrective (except the traditionally classical notion of love) to counteract the one-sidedness of power.
This means that love as mutuality was not regarded as a high kind of love. It was always thought that the highest form of love was a love that was completely self-forgetful, that involved a total commitment to the other, a concern for the other with no thought of one’s self. I think this is due in part to the equally one-sided conception of power, wherein power means that you are the only one who counts and others exist only as means to your chosen end.

Under the notion of the Web or the Kingdom, power in the deepest sense, is always mutual. It is a giving and a receiving. It is an influencing and being influenced. When you have one without the other there is an unbalanced, one-sided, incomplete kind of relationship going on. I happen to think that this is one of the ways that men particularly under the dominance of the traditional conception of power have been ill-trained to develop religiously. I think it is impossible to develop to great maturity religiously under the domination of this kind of power. This may be one of the reasons that wherever you have a great male religious leader, there are strong feminine elements manifested. There has to be in order to overcome the imbalance of the masculine conception of the nature of power.

The final point concerns the concept of transformation or surrender. The way this gets translated in the terms I am using now is to say that one does not surrender to other finite objects similar to yourself. That is idolatry. That is a loss of freedom. One can surrender to that dynamic process of mutuality making for greater internality between the two or more persons involved. That is to give yourself to the relationship, but not to the elements in the relationship. A person is to love the members of the relationship. But the person is to be committed to the relationship. An internal mutual relationship is one in which both are affected. The limits of being affected are without bounds. In the traditional notion of the relationship between people and God, the relationship was external as far as God was concerned since God could influence people without being influenced Himself. On the other hand, the relationship was internal as far as humans were concerned since they were influenced.
THE MEANING OF LIFE - PART I
Bernie Loomer Seminar

This is an impossibly awkward topic to discuss in any adequate fashion, and our treatment of it will constitute a very unpretentious introduction.

We may begin by making a distinction between the problem of the meaning of existence or creation in general, symbolized by the ancient question as to why there is something rather than nothing, and the problem of the meaning and destiny of life with respect to individuals.

With regard to the larger question of the meaning of existence in general - the fact that something exists, that we exist, that the world exists, that creation does go on, leads some thinkers to conclude that the point of all this is inherent within creation itself. The meaning, the significance, the value is inherent within creation itself. If you conclude that existence itself, or the world, is meaningless, I think that your conclusion is grounded on an analysis of the characteristics of existence itself.

Classically, there were attempts to get around this by making a radical distinction between God and the world. This distinction meant that the meaning of creation was not to be found within creation. The meaning of creation was referent to the God who created the world, but the world itself did not contain the answers to the questions you want to raise about it. This was one of the functions of the transcendent deity. The mystery of life was put beyond the reach of any creature by identifying the meaning of creation, not with creation itself but with the creator of the world.

So the classic theologians and philosophers could say that the world in itself could be regarded as meaningless - considered by itself. The world would be considered meaningless if you omitted consideration of God. This view persists until this day. You have God and you have the world. God is not dependent upon the world. The meaning of creation is to be found in God, not the world. The Greeks had this view. The Hebrews had this view. This view can hold even if you anthropomorphize God. You can have a

perfectly human God and hold this view.

Within this general framework, there then arises the question of the destiny of life, the fate of the individual. The beliefs range all the way from reincarnation to the view that any individual at any level on the evolutionary scale lives its life and that's it. It comes into being, lives its life and goes out of life to be superseded by another instance of the same species. Whatever significance is ascertainable is to be found within that time span in which the individual lives, moves and has its being - a few moments for some primitive forms of life or the three score and ten of human life.

I mention the bluntest modern illustration that I know, the Spanish philosopher, Unamuno, who just us and says that there had better be an immortal life or else he, Unamuno, won't play the game. He assumes that God has arranged things to take care of that little problem. Unless this is so, life is intrinsically meaningless to this modern Spaniard. How could anything as valuable as the life of a human being be snuffed out (and that's the end of it)? How could this possibly be the whole story (for Unamuno)?

There is throughout the Western tradition a basic pre-supposition that is gotten at in various ways. It is this: Things must come full circle if we are to have meaning in the deepest sense. In one way or another, qualify it as we will, things must return unto themselves. The sphere is the perfect figure. The incomplete must be completed. The partial must be filled. Contradictions are to be removed. The imperfect is to be made perfect. Evil must be finally overcome, completely, totally. Tragedy is finally transcendable. Otherwise, there would be a fundamental flaw in existence itself.

Therefore, the very meaning of the word meaning involves this sense of completion, of wholeness. You can even get at it ethically. From way back in ethical thought there has been this predisposition to believe that virtuous conduct eventuates into happiness. The strongest modern philosopher on this point would be Emmanuel Kant, who operated with this assumption. He recognized, however, that if one did one's duty, that is, if one did what one should do ethically, then one did not necessarily become happy.
And this is wrong. This is an inadequate and incoherent way of organizing life. Therefore, there had to be an immortal life for all of us to synthesize duty and happiness.

Happiness is usually thought of as a sense of total well being, in all respects apart from the details. The assumption is that right action, even when this involves suffering, does have a reward commensurate with the act. "God is not mocked." If you do what you should do, you will receive a value commensurate with the act, now or later. In the natural world Kant operated with a Newtonian set of principles. In the moral world, he tried to have an equivalent to this.

The whole notion of grace means, among other things, that the effect exceeds the cause. What you get is more than what you have earned. It is man, in the western tradition, who insists upon his own importance, and in one sense, I am inclined to think that a lot of Christian theology is constructed the way it is on the grounds that man is the peak of creation, the point of creation. At least to a speculative mind as well as an empirical mind, this is not the case. This is presupposition indeed.

Kant's position is that there is a cosmic memory, the value that we achieve moment to moment in our lifetimes is preserved, and thus makes a difference in the long run. Unless this is so, there is no way to maintain or justify any ethical attitude toward life. The world in the future will be the same as though our suffering were of no value. If it doesn't make any difference, why be ethical? This is one of the functions of God, namely, the preserver of a sense of our being remembered by another. Our being consciously remembered by a live person is of short duration.

THE MEANING OF LIFE - PART II
Bernie Loomer Seminar

Last week I started with a fundamental distinction between the meaning of existence in general - in contrast to the question of the significance of life for an individual. I did not devote much time to the larger question. This is the question that seems in principle unanswerable. It has taken various forms. Classically the philosophers have concerned themselves with a wonderment as to why there is something rather than nothing, which is one of the deepest ways of becoming involved in the question.

In some modern philosophic thought, a question that is not unanswerable in principle is not a real question. You are not speaking sense. To have yourself speak sense, there must be some evidence in principle at least. To speak meaningfully, evidence of a supporting kind need not actually exist. But there must be evidence whose existence is at least theoretically possible and could count for or against whatever was being asserted. From this perspective the question as to why there is something rather than nothing may be a meaningless proposition.

Again, one can take this position and still raise the question of the value of dealing with the topic of the meaning of existence. From my own experience, I would like to hazard a point that philosophy (and I wish theology would do it more) arises out of wonder and ends in wonder. You hope that wonder has deepened and become enriched. In one sense there is no transcendence of wonder; there is only transcendence within wonder. This in itself is an elevation of the human spirit.

Wonder, itself, even if you are dealing with an unanswerable question, seems to me to contain within its very being a tremendous amount of meaning and significance. Or it contains hints and clues of a meaning that goes beyond us. Maybe I have said more now than I did last week.
With respect to the topic of meaning for the individual, I enumerated some alternatives, including the notion of immortality. For the deep-dyed Christian, immortality takes the form of resurrection. The line of thought that emphasizes the immortality of one’s influence is a difficult one to follow through. There was also the point of view expressed in the perspective of reincarnation. That was about as far as we managed to get.

Personally, I do not see the basis of any notion of personal life before birth or after death. I tend to think that the meaning of life for any individual is whatever that individual is experiencing during the interval of his living immediacy - including the context of his world. This is one reason I emphasize stature, fulfillment, and tragedy so much, especially since tragedy is part of the deepest sense of a meaningful life. I think it is a mistake to look for a time when, and situation where, tragedy is transcended. The meaning for me is now.

This “now” is not just an instantaneous moment. This is a moment that retains the past and contains anticipations of the future. It contains the memories, the glories, the defeats, so that if someone makes a remark and I laugh or cry at it (or whatever I do in response to it), that laughter or that crying is the product of a long history. And of my history is brought to bear to produce that single note of laughter in that single moment of relationship.

What then remains? I do not know. I have to go back one step and say that I try to put no limitations on life as to what makes life meaningful. I try to set forth no specific conditions which must obtain if life is to have meaning, since the wonder that I mentioned contains the notion of transcendent meaning that I cannot grasp. I literally cannot fathom the question as to why there is something rather than nothing. By the same token, the fact that anything exists means that I am literally incapable of elemental doubt with regard to the meaningfulness of existence. The ultimate meaning of things may not conform to what I would like to regard as meaningful, but that is another question and another story.

That something of tremendous value, importance, or significance, is going on - of this I am literally incapable of doubting. Ideally, this would be true for me if no humans existed. The fact that we might destroy ourselves and the planet would not detract from the meaning of life for me. The book is never closed. Life in whatever form starts over again in whatever way it can.

I am always torn between the importance, and the insignificance of human kind. I glory in the human spirit, and yet, I object to the way we regard ourselves as the main act on the stage of life.

Holding the notion of the web that I do, I do believe that what I do makes a difference - how much of a difference, or in what form that difference will exist, I don’t know. Once I have done something, there is a sense in which that act becomes public property. It is no longer mine to claim. It is now available to others. What they will make of it, I cannot control. The influence may be good, bad, indifferent or ambiguous. Even if what I do is remembered, I am not sure what form that remembrance might take. You might remember it differently from me. This is one of the reasons why some idealistic philosophers hold rigorously to a notion of God as a way of preserving the dignity (which includes the worth) of the individual. The question becomes, “What was Bernard Loomer really like?”. From whose point of view? From his point of view? You can’t trust him to remember himself accurately. (I would agree with this.) You can’t trust anybody else. I’m sure the stumble bums won’t remember me as I know myself to have been. In whose perspective can I be known for what I really “am”? Thus for those philosophers the notion of God in whom and in whom alone there is perfect knowledge of the individual is important.

Q: Is it that the laws of God are unknowable and it is not for us to question?
A: I think it is up to us to question but we never get beyond the point of finally coming to recognize: “That appears to be the way things are.”

Q: Will you speak about faith?
A: You have two choices - maybe three. You either have faith - trust - that what is going on in the world does have some point, some character; however dimly we perceive it, and hold to that. Or you take the position of saying, "I cannot rest content with any given condition. I must be able to explain it in some way or other." That is to say, the first alternative is that you accept your own creaturehood in relationship to something that transcends it. The second alternative is that you rebel against your creaturehood. You rebel against that which has brought you into being, and you become a little bit angry with the fact that you are not God. It is possible to carry the question to the point where this becomes a disservice to you, a way of rebelling against God. You really do not accept any answer except one that you concoct, and you insist that life be lived on your terms. In such a case you finally decide to have faith in yourself. I think at this point you get broken on the wheel.

I don't know that there is such a thing as complete indifference to life. This is the third possibility. I don't know that there is such a thing as complete indifference to life, its meaning or possible meaning. Indifference would indicate an ability to literally not care one way or the other about anything or anybody.

Q: What about the position of the agnostic?
A: Apart from the openness of the stance, I see no great virtue in the position.

Q: Do we not create our own meaning?
A: Let us acknowledge that we construct meanings, plans and purposes. We give a shape, at least to a degree, to our world. This is part of what it means to have the kind of mind that we have. You could put a chair in front of certain human beings and it would not mean a "chair" to them. It might mean nothing. Let us agree that we are not purely passive creatures who receive what we have purely in a God-given form, to which we add nothing by way of interpretation. This does not mean, however, that because we do give a shape to the world in which we live (we give a shape emotionally, intellectually, whatever) that literally we create the value from beginning to end, as if we were the sole authors and creators of values, significance, and meaning and that the universe has nothing to do with it apart from us. This I don't believe.

When I visited the desert in bloom, the poet's lines came into my mind, "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness in the desert air." When I stepped out of the car in the midst of this beauty, I was told in the kindest possible way, but firmly, by the flowers, that the poet didn't really have it straight. There wasn't any wastage going on. They did not need us there to have value or beauty, and they were "doing very well, thank you," whether or not I showed up.

Humankind is important. We do create God in our own image and then proceed to worship the God we have created. I tend to give you a form, a shape, a meaning, a structure coming out of my experiences of you. If anyone asks me who you are, I tend to describe you in terms of the form I have. This becomes part of our difficulty. We use our minds to create our world, as I use my mind to create you, or at least an interpretation of you that I have, and then I proceed to deal with you as though my interpretation of you was adequate to you, or that my interpretation of God was adequate to God (or to the world or anything else). And obviously it isn't. We have the pigeon-holes of interpretation that no one fits in. We have the pigeon-holes of spiritual interpretation, but none of the Gods really fit them. I am not wholly an existentialist because I do not believe that we are the sole authors and creators of the meaning and value that we experience in the world in which we live. I don't believe that the universe is a passive entity and that we are the only active creative agents of value.

I think this is always a matter of interaction between the world and myself, as my understanding of you is a matter of my interaction with you and yours with me.

The second point. Sometimes I think the question of intelligence, in regard to the meaning of God, is important, and sometimes I think it is not. Sometimes I think that by the term "intelligence" we mean to attribute to God intelligence because this is our way of paying a compliment to ourselves as we take what is highest in ourselves and attribute this to God, forgetful of the fact that intelligence is itself a created quality. It is perfectly possible to have meaning without intelligence in our own form of life. I tend to think that there can be an unconscious non-human form of intelligence, a way of giving shape to life that is deeper than our form of intelligence. Some may say: "God may not be intelligent." This does not cause me a great problem. I can think of the universe as an organism whose forms of interaction transcend what we mean by intelligence, which is a highly limited way of giving form and shape.

Q: How can you say that the desert flower is beautiful in the absence of any human being, since beauty is a human judgment?
A: The properties that make up what we call beauty are there whether I am present or not. I don't think you can separate the properties and say: "This is physical and this is not, and therefore is not present." The judgment of beauty is a human capacity and contribution. But the elements that are the components of beauty do not owe their presence solely to the creation of the human judgment.
EVIL REVISITED
Berlie Loomer Seminar

I have divided the topic into four sections: Moral Evil, Evil as Sin, the Ambiguity of Good and Natural Evil.

Moral evil: By this I mean an attitude or disposition or an action which results in the destruction of one who is acted against, or also, possibly, the destruction of the one who is carrying out the actions, so that you get a mutual kind of destruction such as you see in war or possibly certain incidences of crime or other forms of violence where one aims at either destroying or doing harm to others.

Moral evil does not have to be a conscious act. It could be an unconscious act, the result of unconscious and destructive forces. It might be a consequence of the fact that we are relatively free individuals and that acting out of our freedom, invariably we clash, not because we intend to, but that's the way things work out. I, in my freedom, desire to cross the street one way. You, in your freedom, unbeknownst to me, desire to cross it another way. We happen to come to the cross roads more or less simultaneously, and there is a confrontation with some dire consequences. The alternative to doing away with moral evil that is the result of freedom would be to somehow deprive all of us of our freedom, and live, a completely ordered society governed down to the last jot and title, so as to avoid any clashes, any conflicts, any encounters that might lead to these kinds of confrontations. So there is this kind of evil that goes on. This kind of evil may give rise to certain gross insensitivity and unconcern, growing out of the perception of suffering we see in this kind of evil. This may happen or it may not happen.

In this sense, the suffering that evil may bring may or may not be finally vindicated by the actual course of history - the subsequent events. The idealist, the optimist, those of us whom I label the children of light believe that, hope that, want to believe that instances of suffering can lead to constructive, creative consequences. Some want to believe that a great good will emerge from the suffering of the holocaust. The belief in the creative historical consequences of suffering (that the cross symbolizes or implies). But for many Jews the truth of this notion is forever stamped out. That idea has been negated. In that sense, for these people, one is to live without hope. One is not to live in a meaningless world, but one is to live without hope in the respect that I have just been speaking about it. One may suffer, but suffering is not to be identified as the cost of advance. Suffering now becomes defined as simply the place of existence. If anything over and beyond existence ensues, that is icing on the cake.

The Understanding of Evil as a Result of the Ambiguity of Good: The evil results when our virtues become vices as they so easily do. Evil results from that kind of goodness that is involved when we commit ourselves to the best that we know. That is idolatry of one form. It is the idolatry of a sophisticated graven image. It is a commitment to our own minds as presently constituted. The best that we know is what we now understand and appreciate, and if we commit ourselves to this, we are committing ourselves to a goodness whose limitations are rather obvious. We are committing ourselves to a goodness that is a projection of our own virtues and vices, our own strengths and weaknesses. Rather, one is to commit oneself to that by which our understanding undergoes transformation, which is quite other than committing ourselves to the best that we now know. I think that to commit ourselves to the best that we know has a high priority in Unitarian history, and it sounds very idealistic and very rationalistic, and it is. This is both its strengths and weakness. The best that you know is a projection of your present level of appreciation which is your mind.

You need to commit yourself to that process by which your mind is transformed, which is other than the best that you now know. You can commit yourself to processive relationship by which, from which, out of which, a greater good emerges - a goodness which is beyond your present understanding. The process is a dynamic, creative process of flow that cannot be captured by concepts. This is the ultimate object of faith - an object that cannot be specified with any precision because it always runs ahead of
you. It is more than you can grasp or understand. It has this unknown aspect. Therefore faith in it does involve a risk.

I choose "Process" because this is, in my outlook, the unit of reality. There is nothing more ultimate by way of reality than the process of becoming.

Evil as Sin: It is that kind of notion wherein one makes oneself the center of existence. From the point of view of the tradition it was this situation which caused the main interpreters of the tradition to say, along with St. Paul, St. Augustine and Luther that a person was incapable of doing good by himself. He was free to do what he chose, but what he chose was in keeping with his own commitment to himself and thereby was unable to commit himself to something beyond himself. Thus, St. Paul's saying: "The good that I would do, I do not, and the evil that I would not do, I do." This syndrome can be broken, in the tradition, only by what was called the grace of God. It can be broken only by a kind of relationship which enables you, by means of faith born of gratitude, to give up your desperate hold on yourself, and thereby to enable you more freely to have genuine relationships with others and to be genuinely concerned about others.

All instances of sin result in evil, but it may be that there are instances of evil that are not necessarily sinful. I put moral evil and sin in distinctive categories.

Natural Evil: Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tornadoes and all of those things that have as consequences the destruction of human life or human property. We have been calling these things natural evil. I am unclear as to why we should call these evils.

I think that if one starts not with human beings but with the web and subsumes them under the web and if one encounters an earthquake which has to do with certain aspects of the web adjusting themselves, then this happens there is the sense in which the volcanic activity (or whatever) has a priority within the web. The web taken as a whole has a priority over any single species within the web. From this point of view, one should not speak of an earthquake or a volcanic eruption as evil.

Jung raised the question of experimentation: How do we know but what this is the latest in a long series of experimentations? We may have to go back to the drawing board after this one too. God's favorite creature, the human animal, does more evil and has brought more disasters than any other creature.

Earthquakes and volcanoes come from the lower levels, the inanimate. The inanimate levels are both the support and the enemy of higher levels. The inanimate is one way - not the only way - by which the person holds to himself. "If I am not for me, who am I?" I don't think a psychic form of existence is going to get us over this. There is a relation here to natural evil. The inanimate takes over. It can wipe out, destroy, or reduce the energies and capacities of the so-called higher forms to exist upon the face of the earth, or face of the web. What one sees at this inanimate level is also what one sees at the higher level although magnified at the higher level. But at the lower level the struggle between life and death, the better and the worse, goes on and on.
EVIL - PART II
Bernie Loomer Seminar

There is an allurement to evil that there may not be at times to what we call "the good." There is a fascination about evil. There is something about destruction that has its own attractiveness. When there is a fire in the neighborhood and a building is burning - a good building - people are drawn to this. They say "Isn't that terrible! Isn't that awful!" Yet there is another aspect to this. They are kind of delighted to see the place go up in smoke.

One does not have to make of evil an independent power or force, but for some people, some writers, some thinkers, it seems to occupy the place of a presence. It is kind of a given presence that leads the individual into situations where the individual would not otherwise venture. There is the sense in which one can speak of being trapped by evil in a way in which one doesn't often speak about being trapped by forces of goodness.

Fascination with tragedy as in literature is not the same as allurement with evil. Strangely enough, I would think that St. Paul is more symbollic of this. He was considerably occupied with this propensity for evil in his own life, and with his fascination with his own problems. Part of the fascination is that it isn't that we want to give up our evil ways, wholly and cleanly and adopt some opposite, contrary stand. It is, rather, that we do and we don't want to give up those evil impulses. We want to feel in some ways that we have some control of the evil in us, but we don't want to overcome the evil in us entirely.

Salvation, it seems, is a complicated, non-simple business. It always involves bringing our ambiguities along with us, perhaps raised to a higher level. All this and more is why many of the leaders and interpreters within the Western tradition felt that the grace of God was an absolute prerequisite to any process of transformation that made any real difference in the life of an individual or society.

To really be a great character you have to be strong enough to really sin. One way of reducing sin is to produce a bunch of "milk-toasts" who won't have the strength to sin largely. They won't have the strength to do anything else, either.

The point of natural evil arises out of the traditional effort to justify the ways of God to man where somehow man becomes the central focus of God's actions, and, therefore, one has to evaluate God's behavior in terms of how this affects human creatures, their plans, their welfare, etc. If you drop this notion and don't make man the focus but make the web the focus, then you do not get into the insoluble and vexatious situation of trying to justify the ways of the Web. The ways of the Web and the fundamental structures of the Web define the character of the Web. The character of the web is what it is. And beyond this "what of things" we cannot go.

In great catastrophes people get into religious perplexity, asking, "How could God allow this to happen?". When there is a holocaust, war, great crime, etc., they ask, "How could this be?" My response is: "What kind of a world would you have if you had a God who could prevent this kind of thing?" You would have a radically different world in which to live.

Beyond this, the question seems to assume that God deals with individuals as isolated individuals. A ship is lost at sea. The wives of the crew are waiting. Half the crew returns. Half are lost. The wives of those who return thank the Lord, leaving the other women to deal with life as best they can. Now, if one is to thank God for saving one member of the crew, is one to thank God for not saving the other? Or are these the wrong sets of categories to use, as though you could particularize these sorts of things and conceive of whatever you call God (or the basic energy of the world) as having an individual relationship with a particular person?

What is the image you create in your mind? Is God a huge computer and you have your own pipeline? In one sense evil has the capacity for bringing out the depths of concern in any individual that nothing else seems to do. It is the black sheep of the
family that may move one or both parents to a depth that no other member of the family does. Sometimes it is the very fact of destructiveness that calls forth a response from one's depth that otherwise lies either dormant or unprovoked.

We are never parents until we have children. The father of the Prodigal Son, in one sense had an inadequate relationship with his older son, and it took his relationship with his younger son to help him see this. But the elder brother couldn't get rid of his own pain and suffering sufficiently to see the contribution that was being made.

John Dewey claimed that you began to think only when your system breaks down, when you bump into a situation your system does not take care of. Then you have to think. Without evil (you have a similar situation) we would not know who we are. I remember a young woman, a student, who did not do too well, and she came to the conclusion that her difficulty arose from the fact that she had been "too well loved at home." She had not been exposed to adversity. Things had gone very well at home. She was loved and she loved. She was understood and she understood. When she came into a different situation, a university situation, she had difficulty.

Q: Are there not other important emotions and states other than those associated with evil that bring out the depths?

A: There is the sense of joy and celebration that, in one sense, is independent of evil. That is, it has its own avenue to life and its depths, although I suspect that even there, it is most meaningful when it incorporates evil and sin as part of its memory.

I assume that where you have two or more people, there will be some evil around.

THE NATURE OF LIBERAL COMMUNITY
Bernie Loomer Seminar

The dominant tradition in the West has taken the position that the community of the Church arises from the relationship that each individual has to God. Community does not arise primarily from horizontal relations that we have one with another. These horizontal relations between the creatures may come indirectly as a result of vertical relationships that the individuals have with the creator God.

I became more aware of this when I first encountered nuns at the Graduate Theological Union. I had assumed that nuns living in community really understood community, and I found out that they didn't. To rephrase it: They were not involved in each other's lives. Not really. Not in any deep sense of priority. The relationship to each other flowed from the relation of each to Christ. The relationship to Christ was the first basic relationship and other things followed. Following Vatican II, they began to develop a more horizontal conception of community. Then all the problems that are common to any other kind of community began to appear among these sororities of sisters. This is the tradition.

Unitarians and other liberals tend to take the other extreme and say that community arises primarily out of horizontal relationships. We are bound to each other. We are influenced by each other, we enter into the lives of each other, and out of this comes community. This is done as an act of freedom. Therefore, as I look at the liberal conception of community, I gather that the liberal thinks that community arises from freedom - that community is a voluntary grouping. The connectedness that is involved in community is a created connectedness; something that we establish ourselves. The classic tradition took the point of view that perhaps order was more important than freedom. The kind of freedom available to people up until recent centuries was not a strong or dominant freedom. Also there wasn't the tendency to think of community as being simply a voluntary association.
COMMENT From the political point of view, and, I think, from the point of view of Unitarians in the United States, I believe I am correct in saying, that they have made a distinction between community and society. Many of our Unitarian churches including those in San Francisco and Chicago, N. Y., denominate themselves "The First Unitarian Society." This is common throughout New England. I think it arose around the 1820s when they decided to separate themselves from the more orthodox brothers who remained Congregationalists. Most political scientists, and I think sociologists follow the definition of a German thinker that community is an organic growth. It arises from kinship groups. It arises from natural relationships. It has nothing to do with the voluntary choice of the individual. On the contrary, the sharp distinction of the society, whether business, political or ecclesiastical is drawn by the voluntary act and choice of individuals determined to come together. And this is the traditional view in American and European social thought; a sharp distinction between the organic and the voluntary, or the act of free will. Community does not exist in America, in the same sense that it exists in Asia or Africa or South America. We had to create it, certainly, but that is because we don't realize that community is something one is born into. Society is something one voluntarily joins. This is particularly true of the Baptists, where you have to make a voluntary choice to join the Church. You are not born into the Church, even if you have parents who are members. (end of Comment)

One can take the distinction just made and say that a Unitarian conception of community would be a voluntary grouping in which the many, the members, contract in one way or another to further interests that are common to each. One could simply say, "That is the end of it. That is a different conception of community, and we can take this alternative and let it stand in contrast to another conception of community."

What I mean by the conception of the Web is something that in the first instance is organic. It is something that we are born into, even though the Web does not have the clear lines of demarcations of smaller groupings that may also be considered to be organic. What I mean is that this organic aspect of the Web does give us some clue, possibly, of how our liberal version of community might on the one hand keep the virtues of that which is organic and at the same time preserve some of the virtues of what it means to be a free and voluntary society. In other words, I am trying to combine both conceptions into one: the organic and the voluntary, the traditional with a conception of freedom such that we have both the sense of oneness that is important to community and the sense of manyness that is also important to the sense of community.

If there is some hope along these lines (there may not be, but if there is) the oneness comes about in two ways: first are the interactions between the various members of the community of the Church, where the oneness does emerge out of the mutuality of relatedness. On the other hand, oneness which is something more than just a coactivity of the many, may also arise, as the Catholics insist, out of the liturgy - out of the worship itself. The tendency of these churches, when you ask them about the basis of any connection between various groupings within Christendom, is to indicate the privacy of worship. This is what is to be held in common - not belief, not work - but worship. There is where the oneness is to be found.

I would add a third one, although I think I would include this under worship. It is a sense of a dedication or a commitment to a dynamic reality in our midst, which each of us may relate to in various ways. But the commitment is common. The understanding may differ. To this extent the liturgy may differ in terms of its effect upon all of us. The oneness is both created from the many and it transcends the many. The oneness is created from the many and it is also creative of the many. This is a dynamic conception of the flow of the Web, which always involves relations, creatures of some order.

In order to be a community within the liberal tradition and avoid some of the pitfalls that pertain to other conceptions of community, it is possible to have our cake and eat it, too. It is possible to engage in an advance beyond both the Catholic tradition on the one hand, and the Unitarian and liberal tradition on the other hand - an advance that incorporates both, but is not identical with either.

I think that neither conception of community is adequate for the present time. The Catholic organic conception of community has now to give way to a conception of mutuality and freedom that it has never known before. The liberal conception now has
to provide some answers to the emptiness, the meaninglessness, the modern malaise that affects Unitarians as it affects everyone else. In response to this, freedom is not an adequate medicine. Freedom is the quality enabling us to move beyond where we are. It is not an end, nor should it be treated as an end in itself. In this respect, it seems to me that we can't advance by going back and starting over. We can't wipe out the liberal tradition that has come upon us even though mistakes have been made. We have to move beyond this. Here it seems that there are opportunities facing the liberal churches that need to be seized in some creative way.

I am trying to suggest that connectedness of deep community is also the creator of freedom. Freedom is not something that arises apart from the connectedness of life within the Web. On the contrary, this is where freedom is born. This is the context out of which freedom emerges. One doesn't have to add freedom to the connectedness. It is rather that the dynamic movement involved in the interconnections within the Web generate freedom, enabling the flow to move beyond where it now is. When freedom becomes sufficiently dissociated from interconnectedness, the many predominate in such a fashion that we lose the sense of the one. The many become dominant and the sense of the one is lost, and we have the emptiness of the many. We have the political situation where everyone votes the interests of his or her minority group.

When the sense of the one is lost politically and religiously, who is taking care of the store? This is the hard one, but this is one of the reasons why the sense of the one is important. I mentioned before that in terms of traditional Greek ethics, if it could be shown that something was for the common good, an individual assumed that it was also for his good. One did not have to prove that what was good for the common good was also for his good. Now you do. If you make the statement for the common good, one says, "So what?" Well, this is to me an indication of how far the one and the many have diverged. It is the conception that as one of the many, I am concerned about myself and my committee, my interest. I am not really concerned about the others.

Historians and social psychologists have shown with enough evidence that it takes a certain cosmopolitan situation to produce individuals rather than members of a group. I did not emphasize the need to recognize individuality because this is so rampant. If the situation were reversed, I would be hammering away at the other end of this duality. But because we have lost this deepest sense of community, our version of individuality is also truncated.

Q: Are we drawn to community through love or fear?
A: I would assume that here as elsewhere the motives are mixed, and that the motives may vary from individual to individual from time to time.

It is not just the fact of interconnectedness that is going to get us to a greater realization of community. It is the sense of commitment to some dynamic movement or flow within the connectedness, something that is not to be identified with our beliefs systems whether liberal or conservative. It is something that stretches us, wherein the sense of mystery is preserved, the sense of wonder is deepened, and the sense of the possible transformation or our minds and spirits is renewed.

Q: Can you have a relationship, such as some people have to diet, to the web?
A: Yes, I think we can and do.

Q: Is it something that you have found to have attained within your own reaching out? Is it something an individual can work on, or is it there and you can let it grow and develop?
A: The latter. It is a process of creating whose components are the individual units of reality. By devotion to this kind of "flow" these individuals may become transformed, and may experience a fuller sense of what the world is in terms of heights, depths, and all the qualities that increase or enhance our stature. This is experiential. It is not just an intellectual construct.

Q: How can we, in practical terms, restore a sense of oneness to the world? Is the oneness just an intellectual concept?
A: Sometimes it takes a change in theoretical understanding to produce a radical shift in behavior. The answer to the question involves the presence of some kind of community. But kinds of community, which are the grounds of unity, vary with conceptions of power.

The distinction between unilateral and relational power is important in order to understand community. We do not have in our educational system, either religious or secular, opportunities to develop this kind of understanding or ways of trying to inculcate this understanding into our children (or ourselves).
What can you do? If you believe in the distinction between unilateral and relational power, you might take a group within this church and explore the quite different patterns of behavior entailed by these alternative types of power.

Unilateral power means that you are trying to control your world, in one way or another, to arrange your world, to move things here and there to accomplish your purposes. It means that you are not concerned in any deep sense with anybody or anything else except as this relates to your purpose. The "other" has reactions with you, but you can’t sense what the other person is saying, doing, or communicating as long as you have senses attuned to unilateral power.

When you identify with an alternative perspective with respect to power and consequently acquire a different pair of ears, then the world will change, literally.

I know of no way to deal with the large question concerning the unity of the world unless one can break the problem down into more manageable units that we might try to carry out practically.

TRADITIONAL AND RELATIONAL
HOW RELATIONAL POWER APPLIES TO MAN-GOD RELATIONSHIP
Bernie Loomer Seminar

I want to talk about power, as this might give us a different slant on the whole business of transformation or surrender.

I define the traditional notion of power as your ability either as a person or a group to shape your environment (regardless of whether the environment consists of things or people) in such a fashion that you can realize your goals. This kind of power has to do with your ability to manipulate, control, utilize, recreate, transform the other - whatever the other is - in such a fashion that you can accomplish your aims. You can determine how much power you have by the size of the environment one can control or by the size of the other that it takes to cause you to change your course of action.

In this kind of power the other exists basically as an instrument for your ends. You are not concerned primarily with the influence of the other upon you. It is masculine whether it is utilized by a man or a woman. This is the traditional conception of power. I call it a military, economic, political, or masculine conception of power.

This is the conception of power that is presupposed normally in philosophy but also in the gospels themselves. Since this is the conception of power that is assumed, wherein you are primarily concerned about the realization of your ends regardless of what you have to do to the other to realize them, then love is defined as a counterfeit to this. The classical interpretation of love is that in love you are wholly concerned with the other, and are not concerned with yourself. In either instance, whether one talks about power or talks about love, the notion of God was taken as the basic model of what is involved. As the primary example of love God related Himself to his creatures without any thought of gain for Himself. As long as you are dealing with the Divine Reality, you as a creature are not influential with respect to that Divine Reality. It is all one-way in its trafficking. God was influential in respect to you, but you were not
influential with respect to God.

This viewpoint assumes that the reality of the individual is defined by the singularity of the self. This is a non-social, non-communal conception of the individual self. I am what I am and that is a matter between me and myself, and between myself and God. I have relations with others, but I am not constituted by them except that in some vague way I am shaped by my relationship with God. Fundamentally, what I am is derived from my dealings with myself and with a Divine Reality. Except for my relationship with God, my aim is to be increasingly strong, independent, and self-sufficient. This doesn’t mean that I don’t relate to others. I am to relate to others out of love, but I am not to relate to others out of my need. I think this has messed up the whole business of what we mean by “true self.” Supposedly I was to relate myself to my fellow beings in the way God was thought to relate to creatures—not strictly speaking, but never-the-less, I am to respond to them out of love, but this love is not part of my need. I am not to love them because I need them. I am to love them because I am concerned about them. This is the obligation in God. This is unilateral love.

Some of the classic Christian virtues seem compensatory in nature. The standards of goodness are so high because the understanding of evil is so deep.

I suggest that another conception of power is possible and desirable—relational power. It means, to begin with, that the ability to receive is in certain respects as important as the ability to give. “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Well, I think that at times it may be more blessed to receive than to give. Sometimes the best gift we can give another is to receive from the other—to provide these conditions whereby the other can give whatever gift the other has in mind. In one sense it takes as much energy to be the immovable object as it does to be the irresistible force, as many a New England farmer can tell you, when working a rocky field.

If it is important that someone receive when you give, then the receiving cannot simply be weakness and the giving be strength. Sometimes it takes even more strength to listen, to receive, than it does to give. So I would define relational power in the first instance as involving both the ability to give and to receive. Both giving and receiving can be signs of strength, and can be signs of weakness. One person may relate to another out of mutuality which is a giving and a receiving. Giving and receiving may encompass both love and need.

In any particular situation giving and receiving are seldom equally balanced in human affairs. There is sometimes more of one than the other depending on the makeup of the relationship. If relational power involves a giving and receiving, then relational power attempts to maintain a relationship of mutuality with the other—whenever the other may be. Where there is a mutual giving and receiving there is a mutuality of internal relatedness. By “internal relatedness” I mean that relations make a fundamental difference to you. In unilateral power, my relations to others are for the most part external. With relational power the aim is something other. The aim is to participate in a mutuality of relatedness in which all the members give and receive, and obviously this is an unevenly balanced set of circumstances.

This conception assumes a social conception of the self. It means that you not only have relationships, but that to a considerable degree you are your relations. You emerge from your relations. You are the personification of the web. If the web is a web of inter-relatedness then the conception of unilateral power as normative is a destructive notion. The conception of the web requires a conception of power as relational, and not unilateral.

In a relationship of mutuality, we give ourselves to the relationship and not to each other. Under the unilateral conception of power, the only real units of reality are you and me and the chairs and the clock, etc. Relationships are more general, vague, insubstantial than the particular substances that we can see. But in a viewpoint that recognizes that we are emergent from our relationships as our minds are emergent from our social behavior, then the relationships take on a more concrete character. Then the
term "relationship" does not convey just a vague abstraction. Rather it becomes a more concrete meaning that includes you and me and others. Apart from relationships, you and I are very abstract things in ourselves. Only as related do we take on substance or reality. So to give oneself to the relationship and not to the other, is the effort to give oneself to the process of becoming, to that flow of energy which is the source of all relationships. One gives oneself to the relationship and not to the other primarily because the relationship is the basic source. This is obedience to the First Commandment. But I am not to love the other or myself as I love the relationship. Therefore my basic underlying commitment to the relationship which includes myself and other creatures, both large and small.

What is it, who is it, that one can really trust? I certainly can't trust myself or you. What's left? The relationship is left. This is the source of the goodness of a creative life. This is the final object of my trust. I do not know what is for my own good. I certainly don't know what is for your own good. I may think I know what is for my own good, but I have been wrong, terribly wrong, about this before. If I try to impose my conceptions on you, I am presumptuous, I am partial, and I will end up giving you a beautiful example of self-righteousness.

Where are we to go to find and experience that which is for our own good? Apart from the relationships from which we emerge, I have no other answer. If the terms are properly understood, there is no way in which loyalty to the relationship can be against the best interests of the individuals involved.

TRANSCENDENCE
Bernice Loome Seminar

One of the less obvious but most real aspects of transcendence lies in the notion of mystery - that one doesn't have to be talking about things supernatural or things cast in a mode of thought that belongs to a somewhat different world - for example: the notion of a God who is entirely separate from the world - who created the world - that sense of transcendence - but rather the sense of mystery that confronts us every day, and first of all, the mystery of the others whom we meet, with whom we conduct the affairs of the world, with whom we often very deeply, sometimes very intimate relations. There is the mystery of the other - the other in his or her otherness - which remains distinct from, other than our own otherness.

In this sense we really cannot "understand" the other fully, if by that we mean we can attempt to account for fully the actions, thoughts, or feelings of the other - as though these were all subject to some scheme or structure, or plan, or whatever. The otherness of the other means that the other is the reason why he or she feels, thinks and does whatever he/she feels, thinks or does. These are not reducible to explanations - to causes, to factors, to conditions. These elements are present, to be sure, but nonetheless, the otherness of the other remains.

I think this is is something we don't stress in our daily relations with others - to recognize this as an enduring point - as an enduring characteristic of the other: that one treat the other with dignity, with humanity when this notion of dignity and humanity includes the freedom of the other. This means that we do not attempt to reduce the "otherness" of the other to a function of our own likes, prejudices, understandings and perspectives. I used to feel this way looking at the very deep brown eyes of our dog and wonder what was going through the mind or spirit of the dog. In certain respects I felt the depths of life present there as in any place.
The mystery takes on deeper dimensions when it moves from the finite others like unto ourselves to the otherwise of creation itself - to the world as a whole - to the mystery of being, itself. And transcendence becomes a part of our everyday life again when one practices the simple act of wonder. Wonder is a response to the mystery - the heights and depths of the other. Here, as elsewhere, one cannot reduce the otherwise of the world to our own prejudices, or likes, or hopes, or wishes, or even our ideas of meaning.

One characteristic of the human community is our tendency to find the meaning of life as a whole in terms of what makes sense to us. We regard ourselves as the measure of what is good, important, of value, meaningful, or whatever. What does not so conform is therefore meaningless, or destructive. Meaning is not an isolated something - it is not simply a special category experienced primarily or only in worship. It is a quality of every day life, of which worship is one very profound expression. But in this sense, worship roots in the everydayness of life. One can turn this around and say that what one does in terms of everydayness roots in the experience of worship. I would not be inclined to argue the point, but at this moment I want to say that worship itself is grounded in the very fiber of our common existence - that religion in this sense is not a special category. It is part and fiber of our very being. One has to work at not being religious. One has to work at ignoring the transcendence that is characteristic, or can be characteristic, of almost every aspect of our experience.

One has to learn to abstract oneself from the heights and depths of what is going on. There are two aspects of transcendence.

There is a third, and this assumes that the creative processes within the web of life, as it were, have their own sense of direction, have their own priorities which perhaps mostly do not agree with ours or we with them/it. That sounds abstract, but what I mean is: transcendence is to be experienced, if not most deeply, certainly very deeply during those moments or periods where one attempts to let go of himself or herself and to give oneself to the creative process of becoming - where one learns to trust the relationships whereby life is enhanced and deepened - where one comes to understand that God or the web (the two being synonymous) although creative in one respect, also constitutes the very process against which we struggle - which we resist.

I think the deepest characteristic that makes a person human is the ability to say a tremendous "yes" to life, and the capacity to say a tremendous and definitive "no." In a sense, the "no" is as deep as the "yes." The "no" cannot be explained any more than the "yes" can be explained. But the "no" means that even in the face of this overpowering, awesome wealth of meaning, this transcending goodness that surrounds us on all sides, also even in the midst of all the forms of injustice that afflict us, that despite all of this, all of this that confronts me, all of this that is possible to me, I say "no." This is transcendence.

The Jews and poets were not afraid to call God not only their God but also their enemy, because this is how He was experienced at the moment, and the great transformation was called for. There is the moment between Judas and Jesus, for example, where Judas looked at what he had inherited and contrasted this with what Jesus was offering: two versions of the covenant or two covenants - and Judas said "No." At that moment God was Judas' enemy in Judas' experience. God, the enemy, becomes God, the friend or companion, only when a transformation occurs or as the transformation process occurs. Until this happens, the demand seems to be too much, in the face of which I say "no."

Transcendence in this situation means that the transcendence is always out of us. It is something we can never capture, as it were. It is a quality of life found within the creative process of becoming as one attempts to move from a being of lesser stature to a being of larger stature - with all the resistances that we can muster against it.

Q: How would you relate the experience of the "inner presence" to transcendence?

A: In two ways: One, the presence is a transcendence in that it is a depth, a
mystery. Secondly, it is also a call, a demand to move beyond where we are and what we will say "yes" to and "no" to.

(In answer to a question regarding worship) Worship is a celebration of that which is worthy to be served, to give oneself to. If this is a meaningful notion, I would think that the Church service - the communal form of this - involves a tradition that no individual can accomplish worship by himself or herself. It takes an institution to form a tradition with structures, rites of passage, etc. If the heart of worship is meaningful to you, the Church is a practical matter. The worship is a celebration of that which is worthy to be worshiped. It is the acknowledgement of this. That is why one classic form of this is to begin with the celebration of the worthiness of God to be worshiped: Sometimes you may feel you are lying in your teeth: this is not how you feel. But this is how you may come to feel.

Certain forms of ritual make present the sense of the holy, without which worship does not take place. There are various things that can be meaningful - relations to other members, etc., but they need not add up to worship. They can be pleasant and you can find the service helpful, instructive, but it still need not be worship.

Every form of liturgy must have its supporting or accompanying theology. Without the theology that causes us to seek those forms that may enable us to become more sensitive to the holy, without the theology that urges us to look for this, we are not going to work at that aspect. We can do all kinds of good things, but they do not add up to worship. Protestantism has historically said, "We can present the Holy Spirit in Word, spoken word. If you hear the word, and act upon it, all these good things will follow." And we say this in an age when we are not accustomed to listening: It doesn't make any difference what the words are, we are not trained to hear. The Catholic tries to do it more organically. I laughingly spoke to a bunch of catholic theologians about the "pots and pans" approach - that the celebrant was just a chef. They said that is what Catholic theology is all about; trying to explain that meal. I had the sense that the catholic approach is more native to what we are, more so than the Protestant approach.

One has to distinguish between the two commandments. The fact that you love others as yourself does not fulfill the first ("to love the Lord thy God will all thy heart and all thy mind..."). All the good things happening in a Church do not necessarily add up to worship.
THE BOOK OF JOB
Bernie Loomer Seminar

The book of Job does relate to the general topic of the web in a manner of speaking. It also relates to tendencies in the human spirit that are not confined to the people of the Old Testament.

Briefly, the story has to do with God having a conversation with Satan. The Lord is bragging about some people, especially Job, who is in God's sight really an exemplary figure. Satan says, "Why shouldn't he be? In return for what he does, you have really bestowed the goods of this life on him. Why shouldn't he be good? Why don't you really test him and see how good he is - whether he is really good for goodness sake or for what he gets out of it. Why don't you let me do the testing."

So, the Lord agrees, but puts a qualification on it that he is not to take Job's life, but anything short of that will do. As you know, he has a few problems, from boils on up or on down, and then, through one kind of incident or another, he is parted from members of his family by death.

The scene so far is somewhat dramatic and artificial, constructed by the story teller, as it were, namely that God and Satan had had this little contretemps and they worked out this arrangement in order to test some things. From here on the story takes on a more naturalistic character.

Job begins to wonder why all of this has happened to him. What did he do to deserve all of this? And, like the rest of us when in deep trouble, he talked with his friends. His friends made short shrift of the situation by telling Job that he was in the trouble he was in because he had sinned. This Job denied, and the friends insisted that he had, and Job insisted that he had not. The friends were not to specify in what sense or in what respect Job had sinned, but that he had sinned was clear from what happened to him.

What emerges for me is the point that both Job and his friends and, in a sense, the conversation between God and Satan had one assumption running between them, namely, "If you obey my commandments, my statutes, fulfill all the laws, the ceremonial laws, then I will grant to you the goods of this life. That includes all the goods of this life, mental, physical with regard to health, material with regard to property - the various kinds of animals - and the well being of a good size family. If you do not obey and follow my statutes, commandments, and laws, then you will be punished accordingly."

Where is this presupposition or this assumption to be found? Then it occurred to me that there is nothing strange about where it is to be found. This is Deuteronomy. This is the first statement of the basic meaning of the covenant between God and the Hebrew people. This is the first basic covenantal statement: "I am to be your God and you are to be my people, and everything else follows." You are to obey my commandments, and if you do, all these rewards will come to you, including getting rid of those diseases you picked up while you were in Egypt - those especially.

Now, on this basis, Job argues that he is not a sinner, and therefore what had happened to him was unfair, unjust, and undeserved. His friends took the opposite tack that he had deserved it because he was a sinner; in some way or ways he had failed to fulfill the laws. So Job said in effect: "I can't get any place with you fellows. After all my quarrel is not with you. It is with God. I would like to talk with God directly - face him - man to God - and get some things straightened out."

So, the meeting occurred. The meeting was a little bit more than Job had counted on. God began the conversation to the effect, that while he agreed to the conversation, Job should be aware of the nature of the conversation to take place; namely, that this was not a discussion between two equals. There were to be no votes taken. There was no majority rule that was to be observed. One of the two figures was God, and Job was not it.
That “no” has to be said all the time. Job’s previous understanding, I think, tends to be native to all of us. I think for many of us, worship, religious devotion should pay off, and it should pay off in terms of the coin of the realm. In addition to the coin of the realm it should pay off with respect to the buttressing in our lives - in our individual lives - of those forces, structures, properties, values, and people who are important to the sustenance of our lives.

The contrast is to be found later on in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, and in the web as pictured in Jesus’ concept of the Kingdom. It is a little different from this: “Those who follow me will not even have a place to put their heads” - let alone have 4,000 sheep, 3,000 oxen and all this. Devotion, commitment to God is no assurance that what we call the usual goods of life will be granted to us. What is assured to us is access to dimensions of life involving great risks, great participation, great trust, but the ultimate in fulfillment as well as the ultimate in worship itself. This battle goes on all the time - even to this day.

(In answer to a question) At the moment in which you come to understand that a “no” has been given to your previous understanding, the system is “kaput.” It will not work. It does not work. At this moment you are dealing with the unknown. What the Hebrews did when they met a major religious defeat, they sat at the place of the “no” and poured the ashes of the “no” all over them. The answer is “no.” When I say “no,” I mean “no.” You must give this up if you are going to make it. You live through this “no” and slowly there emerges something else: a new vision - not all at once but the egg shell is cracked.

Q: Did not Job find God to be untrustworthy?
A: Job found his interpretation of the covenant to be untrustworthy. God said to him in a way, “Where did you get the impression that this was to be the proper, adequate understanding of the covenant? When did I ever tell you this? This is your version of our covenant. This is not my version.”

Job can stand for an individual or for the whole people. It isn’t easy to say “no” to that by which you and your people have always lived.
If you take Jung’s point [that God grew in consciousness as a result of Job’s experience] and interpret Job as a way of understanding God’s coming to self-consciousness, and then ask the question, “What does man gain from this?” The answer would be that the giving of the self in worship is the means by which man’s stature is most fully realized, and that as God grows in consciousness, so man grow in the consciousness of God. The act of worship, the act of relating, has its own qualities, its own heights and depths and all the rest.

The goodness of being good is for me a relational thing. Being good, being deeply relational brings with it the joys, sorrows, heights, depths, and all that is of the relational life. In the attempt to contribute to the web, one finds one’s own deepest fulfillment. Finally you come to the experience of certain qualities and relationships which constitute their own justification - your own reason for continuing in this way.

Job is a watershed, marking transcendence of a certain understanding of the covenant. While Job was put in the dramatic form of an individual, I think the writer is talking about a people. Something is terribly wrong with an understanding that has guided their lives - with an understanding that they have attributed to a God - namely a Deuteronomical version of the covenant. To come to that is a pretty heavy load. I take it, this is why he has three people insisting that Job was a sinner. He wanted the tradition said and re-said.

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1 The good you give that promotes the good of life is return for obedience to God’s Commandments, love, and will.

EASTER REVISITED
Berne Loomer Seminar

Easter is best discussed in the context of evil, since Easter is a kind of culmination, biblically speaking, of a long struggle between good and evil. Easter does not settle the matter, but there is a culminating point here, one strand of which is that the powers and forces that are constructive and creative in nature are strong enough to endure over the destructive forces of demonic and Satanic evil.

I thought I would take a few minutes to cite some of the possible ways of looking at Easter, then discuss one or two of these in detail.

I think for most people Easter is a celebration of the idea that a man, especially favored, lived, died, and now lives again in a somewhat altered form. He who was dead, is alive. Easter, in this sense, means fundamentally the Resurrection. Where there is no death, there is no resurrection. You can’t bring something to life that has not died.

As a result of this conquest of death, and by means of his love and his actions, Jesus paid the necessary price and purchased our eternal life, our salvation. This complex of ideas is the central core of meaning that is celebrated by many people.

Second, for many people there is an interpretation that is closely related to this first understanding of Easter. It is the belief that Easter is a celebration not only of the resurrection of Jesus. It is also a time for rejoicing in the expected resurrection of those who believe in Jesus. If you share in his death, you can share in his resurrection. The meaning of “salvation” in this context includes the idea of an everlasting life, a causal connection accomplished through the conquest of good over evil by the God-man Jesus.

In this complex set of notions, the Resurrection involves a rather radical miracle. In this whole Jewish outlook, we are born finite, mortal, destined to die. This is our natural state. We are born of the elements of the earth. There is nothing eternal about our being. We are finite, mortal in all respects. Biblically, we do not start with an
immortal soul. Thus, if an immortality is gained or achieved, this is indeed radical. How this happens is not talked about in detail in the Scriptures. It is simply assumed to have occurred. Paul recognized this and deals with the problem in his writings, but it doesn't really appear in the various Gospels.

There is a third meaning to Easter that for some people is tied in with the first two. For others there may be no connection. It is the notion that Easter is to be celebrated because it represents the possibility of transformation at least of individuals, and possibly of societies. This is the transformation from what we are to what we might become, and the Cross may be the price for this transformation. This idea may not necessarily occur in churches that celebrate the first two ideas.

The larger meaning involved is this: the larger the advance, the greater the price that has to be paid. This is the idea behind the notion of the "suffering servant." If you take a relational view of life, then the price that has to be paid is correlative with the kinds of relationships that you are able to sustain.

There is a fourth view: Easter is symbolic of spring. Life does come after death in some way or other. Winter is followed by spring. Spring is a kind of rebirth. If one thinks of the rebirth springing from a universe of energy, then there is a sense in which this view has some connection with an Easter viewpoint. I would call it the more tender side of Easter. It omits the sense of tragedy, the sense of possible deep meaninglessness as well as meaningfulness that are associated with the first views I talked about.

The first three views of Easter mean, one way or another, that life is tragic, and for many Westerners Easter also means that tragedy is finally transcended - that tragedy is not the final word. This claim is made in spite of the consideration that every situation, has its tragic possibilities. The deeper the relationships, the more complex the relationships we bear toward one another, the greater the possibilities for tragedy are. Usually these possibilities are realized one way or another.

By tragedy, I do not mean that life is meaningless. On the contrary, the fact of tragedy adds a meaning to life that life does not have if you omit tragedy from it. The tragic view of life is the more meaningful view of life than the non-tragic. By tragedy I mean to include all those situations where in spite of all your best intentions, you really did not know what you were doing to and with another, and the evil deepens. I see tragedy as almost inherent in the nature of things. It is intentional. It is also unintentional. It is there because of, it is there in spite of. We take the best of our human resources and kill them off. It is the human situation.

For example, we have had two World Wars. I have maintained that we had Nixon because (for one reason) we had buried so many young able people on the fields of France and Germany, and the far East and the near East on two separate, but related World Wars, as though as a species we had unlimited human resources. And then we wonder why we are governed by third and fourth rate people. We lost so many in the first place: poets, scientists, composers.

Into this a man came who was born of a certain covenantal tradition. Out of the interaction between Jesus and this tradition, there emerged the vision that we are all members one of another - that there is no special covenant that only one group of people can belong to by birth or election, or whatever. (One difficulty is that if you start taking this vision seriously, you threaten all those people whose dream is somewhat different. When you are threatened, you get rid of the threat. Which is to say, you kill off the threat.)

It appears to me, that the Gospel writers mean to state as a perceptual fact that there were literal post-resurrection experiences - that Jesus, after the crucifixion, was seen here and there by his people. The interesting fact is that when the disciples saw this figure, nothing is recorded as having happened to them by way of transformation at least at the moment of sight.
It is an interesting historic point that the greatest disciple of Jesus did not encounter him in his lifetime in the flesh. For Paul, Jesus was more alive dead than he was living. Paul is a peculiar testimony. He found the deepest resources in the context of the deepest struggle with the one whom he thought was his greatest enemy. Jesus, Paul thought, was the greatest threat to his and the other Jews' conception of the meaning of life. And when a threat gets large enough, we do not draw moral distinctions. Rather we feel that getting rid of the threat has a top priority. If that means a few killings here and there, so be it. I have mentioned that in Paul's letters very little of Paul's own killing of Christians comes out. He berates these people in the churches for being somewhat unruly, immoral and unfriendly toward one another, whereas his own record is not particularly good.

The advance, in the sense of historical advance, occurred both in Jewish as well as Greek contexts. This involved the experience of having received a new impetus. Out of this passion, out of this desire to know and be other than what we have been, we now have the atomic bomb. To advance means that there is always Pandora's box, and Pandora's box always has a tragic element. So if you don't want an Easter that is very important, you should cut out Good Friday, and have a nice quiet world where no one gets too badly hurt at any point. But if you are going to have Good Friday, if you think that the price of advance either for the individual or for society is suffering or tragedy, then you really need Easter or something that functions as Easter does, since you have to deal with this relationship between good and evil and tragedy and meaninglessness. If you do not have a Good Friday, then Easter becomes a different occasion. The problem would be that of overcoming death rather then evil. If you do away with Easter, I suppose you should try to do away with Good Friday and deny the heights and depths and realities and power of destructive, demonic, satanic evil that works in our midst as individuals or as societies.

Q: How do you view the resurrection as a physical event. What does life everlasting mean to you?
A: I make a distinction between "eternal life" and "life everlasting". Eternal life is language that speaks of quality of life. Life everlasting has to do with the endurance, the ongoingness of life. So I believe in eternal life. I don't believe in everlasting life. I believe that anything alive is finite, limited, mortal, comes into being, and ceases to be as existing in that form. As to how I view the resurrection: I make a distinction between how I think the Scripture means it, and how I conceive it for myself. Conceiving it for myself, I cannot operate in physical terms. I don't live in a world of the kind those people lived in where the dead (the disintegrating form of the body) comes to life again. But I do believe in a world of energy, and that there are all kinds of dimensions. Once a thing has happened historically it can happen again or because a thing has happened historically, it can now happen again. Until the four minute mile was run, it wasn't possible to run the four minute mile. It wasn't that Roger Bannister was a model, but once he ran the four minute mile, the context of the world changed for those interested in running - literally, psychologically, physically. It released all sorts of energy in a very short time, and these energies - psychological, physical and others - would not have been released until someone ran the four minute mile.
One thing that had to happen before the creative energy in the disciples could take place was to give up their hold on what the Messiah was to be. This they had to give up. As long as they held to this idea they could not understand what Jesus was about. They could not experience the empowerment, and Jesus represented all of this. They had to become empty in order that they could be filled with a different kind of energy, an energy with a different focus, a different direction, a different pattern. This is why Jesus said to them, or the ones who wrote the Gospels could say, "Unless I leave, the Spirit can not visit you." The holy Spirit is another name for the creative, redemptive energy.

To put Jesus's words in a different style: "I am going to have to leave you so that this energy can become a part of your lives. Unless I leave, you won't let it become a part of your lives. I will have to leave you and you will have to experience the abyss of meaninglessness. If you do not want to pay that price, you will never experience this other reality. It may not necessarily follow, but it will only follow if I leave you."

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