



The Inexpressible Sanctity of Personhood

by Robert Perry

Personhood. I think we all innately sense there is something of ultimate importance, even sacredness, to a person. By person, I mean a sentient being, a thinking and feeling self who is aware, who makes choices, who has goals and hopes, and who feels pain and joy. I don't think you need a body to be that—we can all imagine being without a body yet feeling like we are still a center of awareness and choice, still somehow ourselves.

The recognition that there is some unfathomable significance in a person seems to be present to some degree in everyone. That's why it feels so tragic when we believe that someone has ceased to exist because of death. The idea that a person was there and now is gone forever, that the sacred flame of personhood has been snuffed out forever—the tragedy feels bottomless.

It's also why it's so exhilarating to feel truly close to another person. That the flame of your personhood can touch and comeingle with the flame of another's—the joy feels bottomless.

More generally, it's why the people in our lives matter so much to us. Given that they are persons, we know that *they* matter, and that the connection between us matters.

This knowledge is also reflected in our laws, which recognize the inherent rights of a person but not the rights of a car or a couch. Think of the abortion controversy, which centers on whether or not the unborn are *persons*. The incredible passion around this issue shows how strongly we feel about personhood.

Yet everywhere I look, I see worldviews that undermine the ultimate reality of personhood. The reigning philosophical framework of modern science is materialism, the belief that reality consists only of matter and energy, only of physical stuff. In this view, personhood is a kind of illusion, or at best some ephemeral byproduct of the unique hunk of matter we call a brain. In this view, what you really are underneath it all is just a collection of electrochemical signals coursing through that special cut of meat. Your free will is thus illusion. Your survival of death is a pitiable fantasy. And your worth is a purely subjective belief, a mere convention of culture with no anchor in reality itself. Behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner expressed this view in his book titled *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, a title that pretty much says it all.

Oddly enough, when I look at alternative spirituality—which seems the polar opposite of scientific materialism—I see an eerily similar picture. In spiritual circles, we seem strangely ambivalent about the personhood of others. We often talk as if other people are just our own projection, just illusions. In our obsession with our own inner peace, we find spiritual justifications for leaving others to fend for themselves. Yet despite this self-obsession, we seem ambivalent even about our own personhood. There are some traditions in which enlightenment entails realizing the emptiness of your own personhood, after which the phrase “there's nobody home” becomes not an insult thrown at you by others, but a blissful self-description of your own awakened state.

If none of us possesses ultimate personhood, this naturally implies that God doesn't either. And that, of course, is what we find in a great many spiritual teachings these days. We find a God who is just pure consciousness, or the Void, or the Force, or the universe—anything but a thinking and feeling Self who is aware, who has a will, and who actually cares. Such quaint religious notions were fine for an earlier time, but in a more advanced age, surely we have outgrown them.

I think it's no mistake that if you step back far enough, the materialist view and the spiritual view, despite their fundamental differences, begin to look oddly similar. We are, after all, children of culture. And I believe that one of the deepest and most foundational assumptions of our present culture is that, whatever reality is, it is ultimately nonpersonal. It is more like “stuff” than like a self. What we call a person is thus some kind of secondary emergence from that more basic stuff, whether it be seen as physical matter or pure consciousness. From stuff we came, and to stuff we shall return. That pervasive cultural assumption controls us more than we realize. Even when we reject one form of it, we tend to naturally gravitate to another.

I personally believe that this fundamental assumption is one of the most corrosive things about our contemporary culture. We live in a dehumanized world, in which we are willing to do unspeakable things to our fellow human beings,

in which we often place material objects above living beings. Such tendencies are part of human nature and have always been with us, but surely they are exacerbated by the pervasive assumption I'm talking about. If personhood is not ultimate, then surely an impersonal society is merely logical.

One of the things I love about *A Course in Miracles* is that it parts company completely with this deep cultural undercurrent. At the Course's foundation is an extreme affirmation of the eternal value, significance, and even sanctity of personhood. We tend to miss this in the Course. As children of culture, we have understandably projected onto it our culture's denigration of personhood. And so we talk about how nobody is out there, about how we ourselves are just illusory egos, and about how God Himself is impersonal. Yet if you take off our culture's tinted glasses and read the Course on its own terms, it actually heads boldly in the opposite direction, toward a soaring vision of personhood.

True, the Course does not exalt the word "person" as I am doing here, preferring instead to speak of us as "minds," "brothers," or "Sons." In the original dictation of the Course (right after what is now T-7.II.2), Jesus even expressed reservations about the term "personal" because of the separation it implies, saying, "'Personal' implies of *one* person and *not* of others." Yet we can adjust how we see the word "person," so that we no longer necessarily conceive a person as bounded by a body, nor as separate from others. If we do that, if we can hear "person" as someone who is ultimately nonbounded and nonseparate, then the notion of personhood becomes not only part of the Course but foundational to it.

If personhood really is foundational in the Course, then it must start with God, since everything starts with God. Is God, then, in some sense a Person? The Course clearly teaches that God does not have a body, being pure spirit. Yet it also describes Him as having a "Self" ("God shares His Self with Christ"—T-15.V.10:10). He also has a Mind, which has Thoughts. He has a Heart, which feels Love, peace, and joy. And He has a Will, which creates and even decides. All of these are attributes regularly attributed to God.

If God has a Self, a Mind, a Heart, and a Will, then what else can He but a Person? True, He is bodiless and without boundary. But this does not negate His Personhood. Quite the opposite; it means is that, in His case, personhood has been stretched to infinity.

As if to underscore God's Personhood, the Course gives Him an unimaginable warmth. Why did He create us? Because, quite simply, He "did not will to be alone." This sounds surprisingly human, but the Course tells us this five different times. For example: "Because He did not will to be alone, He created a Son like Himself" (T-11.I.5:7). In keeping with this, the feelings God has for us are described as intensely personal. At one point, we are even told that God's Love for us is "intense and burning": "For still deeper than the ego's foundation, and much stronger than it will ever be, is your intense and burning love of God, and His for you" (T-13.III.2:8). In one of the Workbook prayers, we describe His Love as the opposite of cool and distant, as a "Love whose tenderness I cannot comprehend" (W-pII.233.1:7). Finally, because He created us in order to not be alone, because He loves us intensely and with inconceivable tenderness, He actually *yearns* for our return to Him: "Would you deny His yearning to be known? You yearn for Him, as He for you" (T-14.V.1:4-5).

Does any of this sound like an impersonal God? Would anyone describe such a God as the Void or the Emptiness?

Given that God created us "like Himself," then we too are persons—nonbounded, nonseparate, but persons nonetheless. We, too, are a Self with a mind, a heart, and a will. We possess such attributes not in *spite* of God, but *because* of God. As persons, we are chips off the Old Block.

Given that our personhood is an extension of God's, we are not the tragically flawed persons we appear to be. Rather, in our true nature we share all of God's attributes (a Workbook prayer has us say to God, "And all Your attributes abide in me"—W-pI.326.1:5), including boundless love, limitless power, and pure holiness. Underneath our surface flaws, then, we are perfect.

Worth is an innate property of personhood. Just as we all recognize that persons matter, so we also recognize that they have intrinsic worth and value. And if there is value in any sort of person, what must be the value of a *perfect* person? The Course answers this by telling us that our worth is literally "inestimable" (T-7.VII.7:3, T-20.V.3:3). According to the Course, our value is too immense to actually be appraised (T-14.III.15:1) or evaluated (T-20.V.7:1). Moreover, it cannot be damaged. None of our careless mistakes, stupid comments, or unkind acts can ruin it, for it was not established by us:

Your worth is not established by teaching or learning. Your worth is established by God....Again,—nothing you do or think or wish or make is necessary to establish your worth. (T-4.I.7:1-2, 6)

This is the outcome of the Course's vision of our perfect personhood: a limitless worth that cannot be tarnished.

And if we possess such exalted personhood and worth, then surely other people must as well. The Course treats others as real persons, not as illusions, not as our projections, and not as mere fragments of the primordial ego. What Jesus

says about Judas applies to everyone: “Judas was my brother and a Son of God, as much a part of the Sonship as myself” (T-6.I.15:8).

This means that others, too, possess inestimable worth, as the Course constantly reminds us: “It is impossible to overestimate your brother’s value” (T-20.V.3:1). You could even say that honoring the infinite worth of others is our function while on earth, being the only response we should have to other people:

Give only honor to the Sons of the living God, and count yourself among them gladly.

Only honor is a fitting gift for those whom God Himself created worthy of honor, and whom He honors.
(T-7.VII.5:8-6:1)

Imagine greeting someone with the attitude that “Only honor is a fitting gift for you whom God created worthy of honor, and whom He honors.” What a far cry from “You’re just a projection of my ego”!

The Course’s vision of reality, then, is fundamentally different from that pervasive view in which personhood is a spindly illusion sprouting up from a more basic impersonal reality. In the Course’s vision, personhood *is* reality. Reality, you could say, is a transcendental community of nonseparate persons in perfect relationship with each other, perfectly giving love and perfectly worthy of receiving it. *And nothing else.* In the Course’s view, there is no actual physical matter or form. There is no impersonal ground of consciousness. There are only limitless persons in perfect relationship—so perfect that it is oneness.

I said earlier that we all recognize that a person matters. Actually, I think that understates things. Deep down, I believe, we all recognize that persons are *all* that really matters. We may spend our lives ignoring this truth, perhaps coming face-to-face with it only at the end. There is that saying: “Nobody on their deathbed says ‘I wish I had spent more time at the office.’” Yet even while we chase more shallow priorities, there sleeps below the surface the haunting knowledge that the worth within each of us and the love between us is what life is really about.

The beauty of the Course’s vision is that it takes what truly matters and enthrones it at the summit of reality—or more accurately, makes it *all* of reality. How can this not be a joyous vision? For in the end, doesn’t real happiness come down to experiencing that sense of worth within us and that sense of love between us? And how can this not be an ennobling vision? For in the end, doesn’t real goodness come down to honoring, with our feelings and with our lives, the worth that lies in every person?

Let us, then, celebrate the distinctiveness of the Course’s vision, rather than trying to meld it with the pervasive assumption of an impersonal reality. Let us be relieved that the Course is not a child of culture nor a product of the times. Rather than interpreting away the personhood within our brothers, ourselves, and God, let us see our path as one of learning how to fully honor that personhood. And let us realize that as we enter with increasing depth into what Martin Buber called “I-Thou relationships,” with our brothers and, yes, with our Creator, we are traveling away from illusions and approaching the hallowed temple of reality itself.



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