

Keeping the Faith Without a Religion

ROGER HOUSDEN



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

Contents

INTRODUCTION	The Spirit of Now . . . vii
CHAPTER 1	Trust the Knowing . . . 1
CHAPTER 2	Trust the Mystery . . . 21
CHAPTER 3	Trust the Dark . . . 35
CHAPTER 4	Trust the Joy . . . 49
CHAPTER 5	Trust the Changes . . . 55
CHAPTER 6	Trust the Imperfection . . . 65
CHAPTER 7	Trust the Letting Go . . . 79
CHAPTER 8	Keep Faith with Beauty . . . 91
CHAPTER 9	Keep Faith with Kindness and Love . . . 105
CHAPTER 10	Keep Faith with the Human Spirit . . . 121
	Bibliography . . . 133
	Acknowledgments . . . 137
	About the Author . . . 139

Trust the Knowing



One day you finally knew what
you had to do, and began.

MARY OLIVER, FROM "THE JOURNEY"

Who and what is it that we human beings are? I ask not with an answer ready on my tongue, but out of wonder. The same wonder that must have prompted Nietzsche to proclaim that a human being is "a dark and veiled thing; whereas the hare has seven skins, the human being can shed seven times seventy skins and still not be able to say, "This is really you, this is no longer outer shell."

What is Being? This question was the primary preoccupation of the ancient Greeks. Heidegger, "the great master of astonishment," as he was called, thought that Western philosophy was one long detour from that fundamental question. And now here we are, you and I, a book between us, about to stir the fire that so many generations have tended already. We shall raise the question not in the hope or hubris of some final answer, but

that we may light that same fire inside ourselves, that we may fall ever more in love with this wild and mysterious business of living. I will use a variety of terms to point toward this ineffable reality: *the Knowing, the Person, the Heart, the Presence*. While each term overlaps with the others, each will also add a dimension to the exploration.

If you take the word *knowing* and roll it around on your tongue, you will register that it sounds like *knowledge*, but that it has a different, subtler taste. In my mouth, the difference brings to mind the distinction between the words *person* and *personality*, and I can't help thinking that these two pairs are intimately related. They may even reach into the heart of our question.

Does the personality not gather information from the world that it lives in and accumulate it into a body of knowledge? Knowledge that it can draw upon as needed with the powers of its reasoning faculty? Knowledge about Shakespeare, perhaps, or the mechanics of an AK-47? Knowledge about celebrities, the subtleties of algebra or algorithms, or the ancient Hindu Vedas or the Bible? Knowledge about anything, exalted or debased, fine or coarse? The personality—our familiar identity—feeds on knowledge. Knowledge enables us to function successfully in a chosen field. It gives us a degree of command in an uncertain world, and in doing so, it adds substance and solidity to our identity. And yet that substance is only ever provisional and will never bear careful scrutiny, however much knowledge we have acquired.

Knowing is different. To begin with, the word *knowing* is a verb and not a noun. It is a dynamic process, not a static something. It is a direct perception unmediated by the thinking mind, and it may express itself as wisdom. Knowing and its fruit, wisdom, signal the presence of who and what you are. Parker J. Palmer, in his book *Let Your Life Speak*, writes, “Everyone has a

life that is different from the ‘I’ of daily consciousness, a life that is trying to live through the ‘I’ who is its vessel.”

You may say that intuition is also a direct perception unmediated by the thinking mind, and that would be true. But intuition emerges from the subconscious mind; the Knowing that we may also call wisdom doesn’t come from the mind at all, even though it may make use of the mind.

The psychologist Daniel Kahneman has written an excellent book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, to describe our two main ways of knowing the world: intuition and thinking. To explain his case, he makes use of two “fictions” (his term, to remind us not to take his theories literally, something we should remember for our own inquiry) that he calls System One and System Two.

System One works in the background of our awareness all the time. It makes decisions for us that are immediate, intuitive, and usually emotionally based. It makes snap judgments about people when we first meet them. It just *knows* the right turn to take. System One has its reasons, which System Two cannot know, Pascal might have said.

Malcolm Gladwell opens his book *Blink* with a story of some art experts gathered round a classical Greek sculpture of a striding boy. Several of them had a gut intuition that it was a fake, though they were not able to say why. They just knew. And they were right. They knew without knowing how they knew. This is System One thinking. It is a definition of intuition, which is a form of knowledge. But it is not the Knowing. It is not wisdom.

Kahneman quotes Herbert Simon to give some explanation of why and when System One thinking works—which it does much of the time, but by no means always. Simon says that “the situation has provided a cue which gives the expert access to information stored in memory, and the information provides the answer. Intuition is nothing more or less than

recognition.” Kahneman’s conclusion is that if you have had ten thousand hours of training in a predictable, rapid-feedback environment—for example, tournament chess, firefighting, or anesthesiology—then you will blink in recognition and instantly know what to do. In all other cases, you will think—which is to say that in all other cases, you will use System Two, our faculty of logical reasoning. System Two is invaluable. It is one of the gifts that distinguishes us from other animals. It is in charge of our capacity to doubt, to question, to need verifiable and reproducible evidence.

Kahneman’s System One and Two thinking concern knowledge, both logical and intuitive. They may even include the kind of foreknowledge that can arrive in dreams. But the source of the Knowing is neither logical nor intuitive knowledge, though it may make use of either. It reaches into the heart of what it means to be human—to be a *person*, rather than a personality.

When I use the word *person*, I am borrowing from the Christian tradition. The Hindus too have used the same term for millennia. But here’s where language can fool us. By *person*, I do not mean a *thing*, a fixed entity that can be located as the “real you,” hidden somewhere like a mini you, a little Christ or Buddha or Shiva, glowing inside your heart or mind. The word’s origins stretch all the way back to the Sanskrit word *purusha*. They point to a *process*, a dimension of being that connects the individual to the universal.

The same is true of the terms *witness* and *higher self*: to our Western minds, especially, these terms can imply something fixed—some substance or concrete object that is our *real* self, standing behind our daily personality, a self that doesn’t die and was never born.

But that’s not it, not quite. That’s the only way the conceptual mind can make sense of terms like this and bring the

concept into language—to make it an entity or a *something*. But terms like *person*, *real self*, *witness*, even the word *heart*, as we shall see later, can only ever be symbols pointing to a dimension that language can never get its vowels around. That’s why the wisdom of what, for convenience’s sake, we are calling the Person is communicated more by a felt experience, a presence rather than words.

The Person isn’t a truer identity, because it’s not an identity or a *something* in the way we normally understand those terms. It’s a knowing presence, a dimension of being, a quality of awareness and direct perception. Like a prism, it reveals the colors of the moment while retaining its essential purity. This is why the Buddha kept silent when asked if there was an Atman, a *Self*; the term used in India at the time and still used there today to refer to our essential nature. It’s not that the *Self* doesn’t exist; it’s that it transcends language and the conceptual thinking that always concretizes things. It points to a dimension of being in us—a silent, aware presence—that knows what my familiar self does not know, that sees what I do not always see, and that is undisturbed by the flux of events that happens with the passing of time.

If there is one form of language more than any other that can communicate the ineffable—and this is the ineffable we are pointing to here—it is poetry. Poetry does not communicate facts; it communicates what cannot otherwise be said through image, metaphor, and symbol. These forms of speech come from the imaginal realm, itself the gateway to what cannot be said at all. You *feel* poetry rather than understand it. It conveys a visceral experience, rather than information. We feel the echo of a good poem in our bones, and we “know” what the poem is saying even if we cannot fully explain it.

Poets throughout the ages have given voice to our deeper nature. They may sound as if they are talking about concrete

entities and things—the soul as a bird, the first person *I* as the *real Self*. But we must remember that poetry’s territory is the imaginal world that speaks in pictures. The pictures point to the moon. Here are some word pictures from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” that evoke the distinction between the Person, the Knowing, and the personality, with its knowledge:

The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies,
authors old and new,

. . .

The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman

I love,

The sickness of one of my folks or of myself,
or ill-doing . . . or loss or lack of money, or depressions
or exaltations,

. . .

These come to me days and nights and go from me again,
But they are not the Me myself,

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,

. . .

. . . curious what will come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and
wondering at it. ♪

The great Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez frames it this way:

I am not I.

I am this one

walking beside me whom I do not see,
whom at times I manage to visit,
And whom at other times I forget; ♪

We get it, we sense it, we feel it—this one they are pointing to, the one who, Whitman writes, “is not the Me myself . . . who is curious what will come next”—who is “both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.” The one whom, Jiménez writes, “at times I manage to visit, / And whom at other times I forget.”

This is the Person as distinct from the personality. What you know *about* is of the personality. The Knowing in us is the radiance, the *presence* of the Person that we are—a knowing field rather than a store of knowledge, the curious witness, ungraspable and unfindable. It doesn’t know anything in particular. It responds spontaneously to the environment, inner or outer, with a silent, present awareness that may use the knowledge of the personality as a craftsman uses an instrument. But in this case, the instrument of knowledge is used with wisdom. That wisdom *comes through us*, radiates from us, rather than being anything we decide upon or logically work out.

It’s significant, then, that the word *person* comes down to us not only from its origins in the Sanskrit, but also via the Latin *per-suona*, meaning “to sound through.” Wisdom seems to come from beyond us and sound through us, in the form of words or actions, or simply as a clear and impartial presence. It’s not ours, so to speak; there’s no sense of ownership. It can’t be stored for future use, as knowledge can. It serves the moment at hand and varies according to the need of the moment. It’s a moment-by-moment response, authentic to the moment itself. It cannot be self-serving (in the service of the personality’s needs and desires) because it comes from beyond the personality and leaves no trace as it passes through us.

You have probably known the passage of wisdom yourself in any number of ways. When we act nobly, with dignity, with grace and generosity; when we make a spontaneous act of

self-sacrifice in some way that will benefit the greater whole; when we act to bring about goodness, truth, and beauty in any form; when we convey an atmosphere of effortless peace, clarity, equanimity, and compassion for others—when these qualities arise, we know they do not *belong* to us as such, even as they pass through us. We forget ourselves and our narrow concerns for the moment, even as we seem to speak from some larger self other than the one we normally inhabit and are so familiar with.

Not that we are uninvolved, like some unconscious channel; no, the field of being that I am calling the Person is “both in and out of the game,” as Whitman writes. The Person is intrinsically human and not a visitation from some other world. It serves as a conscious bridge between the personal and the transcendent dimensions of our own humanity, a threshold where the individual and the universal become one.

When that dimension awakens in us, in the form of any of the qualities I have mentioned above, we recognize it somehow. We remember it, and we remember that its passage raises us up to the best we can be—not in some outwardly moral sense, but as a natural and spontaneous expression of those qualities that are intrinsic to the Knowing, the Person that we are. Even if we do not always experience ourselves as that, even though most of us need to remember because we so often forget, we can trust the Knowing Presence that we are because all of us at some time or another have known the true taste of it. And in reality, it never comes and never goes.

We remember that it straightens us, gathers us up, makes us whole (re-memembers us). To re-member ourselves is the purpose of philosophy, Plato says. Re-membering is a theme in the Psalms. Yoga is literally a way of re-membering ourselves. Hindu and Buddhist chants are designed to attune us to the frequency of the purusha, the Knowing that we are. Remembrance—not

of something past, but of that in us which is always and ever present—is integral to all spiritual traditions.

THE HEART'S KNOWING

This knowing field, our true identity, is the heart of our existence. The heart has been the symbol for our deepest humanity the world over. The Heart Sutra is the most revered of all Buddhist texts, and these are its most beloved lines:

Gone, gone, gone beyond,
Gone far beyond, the Wisdom is. ☞

Gone beyond—beyond the dualistic version of the world that we ordinarily live in. *Who* we are stands free and silent in the center of the circle, in the heart of hearts.

William Penn, the Quaker who founded Pennsylvania, wrote that “there is something nearer to us than scriptures, to wit, the word in the heart from which all scriptures come.” In yogic traditions, the heart is the seat of individual consciousness. In the Japanese language, there are two distinct words to describe the heart: *shinzu* denotes the physical organ, while *kokoro* refers to “the mind in the heart.” All these traditions have a common view of the heart as harboring an intelligence that operates independent of the brain yet in communication with it. In Sufism, this intelligence of the heart is known as the *Qalb*, “the speaking selfhood” or “the eye of the spirit.” *The speaking selfhood*: this is who we are at heart.

As always, we are speaking in metaphor, in poetic language, of something that is *real*—more real than anything—but that is not a *something*. *The heart* is perhaps a less loaded term than *Person* or *Self*, less liable to form an image of something solid

sitting inside us, since we know we are not talking about the physical organ. Even so, it has gathered confusions around its meaning. *Heart* can mean different things to different people.

What we normally mean by it is the emotional heart—the one that feels personal joy and sorrow, romantic love, and empathy for others. The yogic traditions have practices to allow these affects fully into our experience—to open what they call the heart chakra, the wheel or matrix of emotional energies located in the center of the chest, so that the more personal emotions become refined with an influx of transpersonal energy. Visualizations, devotional music, and ecstatic dance can open the heart chakra in this way. They can fill the heart with boundless love and compassion.

Such experiences of heart opening are profound and even transformational. Yet the wisdom of the heart is subtly different than emotions such as sorrow, love, and compassion, and these emotions do not necessarily lead to it. Jonathan Edwards, the late-eighteenth-century American theologian, was wary of both emotionalism and intellectualism. True religion, he said, was of the heart: “a unitary faculty of love and will, leading to a tenderness of spirit, and symmetry and proportion of character.”

Archbishop Anthony of Sourozh, head of the Russian Orthodox Church in England until his death in 2003, was a true mystic. A seminal figure for me in my thirties, when I lived in London, he was a living embodiment of wisdom rather than knowledge. In his book *Lost Christianity*, writer and philosopher Jacob Needleman mentions to the archbishop how the chanting of the choir in the cathedral affected him. Needleman felt acted upon by the music—made good by it, he said. At the same time, though, said Needleman (I am paraphrasing him here), he was struck by the lack of emotion in the singing. Archbishop Anthony looked at him and smiled. “I am glad you noticed that,” he said. “We have worked very hard to eliminate any trace of