

LETTER XVI

The Tower, Arcanum of Construction

Spiritual Exercise: The Marriage of Opposites



The marriage of opposites is a principle of universal significance. This is not a compromise that one contrives, but rather the cross and the magic of the cross. It is thus that the “true Self” is united to the “lower self” in the human being, where the “lower self” is the cross of the “true Self” and the “true Self” is the cross of the “lower self”. The two poles of the human being then live in the presence of one another, the result of which is an alchemical process of gradual approach to one another. (page 454)

The magic of the cross, alchemy operating in the “marriage of opposites”, is therefore the sole hope for the world, for mankind and for its history. And it is precisely this principle of the “marriage of opposites” which underlies Hermeticism. This is why it rejects the principle of divorce and war—the surgical principle—in practice as well as in theory, spiritually, morally and intellectually. The soul of Hermeticism is that “nothing should be lost...all should have eternal life” (John vi, 39-40). (page 455)

They say that opposites attract. Sure, that’s proverbial, but like so many nuggets of folk wisdom, it’s rooted in peoples’ real experience. I see it at work in my own marriage. I am nerdy, bookish, and easily get stuck in my head; my wife, by contrast is artistic, streetwise, thoughtful and caring, and simply couldn’t care a fig about such things as the history of religious dogma or the finer points of mystical theology. I have long said, “I write about the contemplative life, and Fran lives it.” Of course, I *try* to live it, and she cares about having a thoughtful approach to her beliefs and values. Still, we very much complement one another (and I suppose part of the reason why are marriage is happy is that we see our relationship as complementary. I could see how for some couples, their deep-seated differences could be an occasion for conflict, competition, or at worst, jealousy).

In God’s grace and wisdom, God has created us as different creatures indeed. Spend some time exploring personality assessment tools like the Enneagram or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator; it quickly becomes obvious just how so many people really do see the world in radically different ways. Add to that our physical or cultural differences, from sexuality to gender identity to ethnicity and skin color; our social distinctions, from creed to political philosophy to level of education... the list could go on and on. It’s clear that for so many of us, “opposites” really do exist, and they

just might be the people whom we meet in our house, or neighborhood, or faith community.

A spiritual buzzword these days, at least among contemplative Christians, is “non-duality.” It’s a loan word from the east. In Sanskrit it is *advaita*, and indeed an entire branch of Vedantic philosophy is called *Advaita Vedanta*, or the philosophy of non-dualism. What, then, is non-dualism? *Advaita* literally means “non-secondness” but it can also be interpreted as “not-two.” It’s not exactly the same thing as monism, for monism is the idea that everything ultimately consists of a single substance, while non-dualism accepts that there are real distinctions in existence, but that those seeming distinctions are held together by a deeper unity. So a monist would likely say “evil does not exist,” whereas a non-dualist would accept the reality of evil, but still affirm that there is a unity that transcends even the differences between good and evil.

Jesus taught the importance of loving one’s enemies. A monist would not understand this teaching, for to monists the very concept of “enemy” would be seen as simply an illusion. On the other hand, a dualist would see the idea of loving one’s enemies as absurd, for a much better approach would be to seek to defeat them. A non-dualist however, would accept the reality of the conflict (and the differences that lead to conflict), but would always approach the conflict not from a win/lose perspective but with the trusting commitment to erase the conflict through an appeal to the deeper unity that ultimately makes us all one.

When I am asked to explain non-duality from a mystical Christian perspective, I ask people to imagine they are one with God. God, of course, is Love. So I am asking them to imagine being one with Love. In that place, everything that exists — no matter how good or bad, how meritorious or undeserving — is something to be loved. Not because of its own lovability, but because of God’s nature, which is to love. In every direction God turns, God loves. That, for a Christian, is non-duality. We love God. We love our neighbors. We love ourselves. And yes, we even love our enemies.

None of us have this mastered, of course. But God, the source of non-dual love, loves us even in our imperfection. And we, in turn, are made capable of love, because God first loved us.

With this in mind, the spiritual exercise for this arcanum is based on a Buddhist practice known as *metta*, or loving-kindness meditation. We could get abstract as we think about how to “marry” all the opposites in our loves. But a more direct, Christian approach, is simply to love all, to love with a love that melts opposition away.

Spiritual Exercise: The Marriage of Opposites (Lovingkindness Meditation)

This is an imaginative exercise, which may be paired with any other prayer practice, such as Centering Prayer or Christian Meditation. It may be helpful to invest some time into silence, either before or after this exercise.

Begin this exercise by imagining how God is the source of all love, all kindness, all compassion, all care. I like to imagine that God is like a vast ocean, an ocean of love. A different image or metaphor may work better for you, and that's okay. Just use whatever image or concept or metaphor helps you to sense God as the limitless source of limitless love. Take time to savor and rest in God's vast treasury of love, knowing that this love is always available to you. Ask God to pour God's love into your heart now, in such a way as to empower you to share love with others (and yourself).

Now, imagine the one you love more than anyone else in the world. Perhaps it's yourself! But it could also be a parent, a child, a spouse, a dear friend, even a pet. Just reflect on who it is that fills your heart with love. Now, imagine that you are bathing this person with the love that God has shared with you. The love just flows from God, to you/through you, to the person you love. Imagine how good it feels to share that divine love with the one you love so much. Take all the time you need, and just savor the love, and savor how God gives you the love for you to "pay forward."

When it feels like you've shared enough love with the one you love, now take time to imagine someone else who matters to you. If you chose another person previously, now imagine yourself. But if you were thinking of yourself before, now imagine another person for whom it is (relatively) easy for you to love. Once again, imagine how God's love is an undepletable reservoir or ocean of compassion and care. Visualize the limitlessness of divine love flowing from the heart of God, into your heart, and then from you to whomever it is you are thinking of now. Take the time to let the love flow.

Sometimes people find it is difficult to love themselves. They may not feel very lovable. But we know that God loves everyone unconditionally. So do the best you can to let the love flow, from God and to you, and/or to the other person you love.

Eventually it will be time to shift your imagination again, and this time, imagine someone whom you know but you don't have a strong feeling about, either positive or negative. It could be a neighbor or a coworker, maybe the clerk at your local grocery store or post office. Basically you have neutral feelings for this person. But now it is

time to share divine love with this person, as fully and lavishly as you have shared it with yourself and with someone you love. Try not to judge or evaluate the exercise, just imagine the love flowing. Imagine the person bathing in the light of this love. Let it flow. Try to feel its beauty and kindness. Try to enjoy the flow of the love.

When you are ready, now it is time to imagine a person you have difficulty loving. It could be an annoying neighbor, a workplace rival, an obnoxious relative. It might be a politician or media figure whose values are very different from your own. It could even be an out-and-out enemy, if you have such a person in your life. Whomever it is, you acknowledge that (at least for you), it's not easy to love this individual. So you may need to really lean on Christ to do the heavy lifting for you. Let Christ love this difficult person *through you*. Allow the love to flow, from God, to you, and through you, even to this difficult person. Let go of any analyzing thoughts, especially any thought of judgment, criticism or condemnation for the person. Now is not the time for a debate or evaluation. Now you are simply invited to love. So love, as best you can. It won't be perfect, but keep trying, as best you can.

Finally, expand your field of vision for the entire world. *Love everyone*. Remember, this is not "your" love, at least no more than love given to you on a temporary basis. Just let the love flow through you. Allow God to love the entire world, through you. What's good or bad, what's healthy or sick, the rich communities and the poor communities — God loves them all, and so you are called to love them all as well. Let that love flow, even though it may not flow perfectly through you. Forgive yourself for any ways you may thwart the love. Just keep breathing, and relax into the infinite and caring nature of God's presence in your heart and in your love. Be the agent of God's love. Be the love. Let it flow.

You may find that this is an exercise you have to return to from time to time. So be it. We are all "learners" in the school of love. That's okay. But if we seek the marriage of opposites that the spirituality of non-duality represents, what better way to cultivate that, than by loving all as best we can? So continue to pray this way, and let the deep and unconditional love grow in your heart. You will not regret this!