

Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth

Matthew 17:1-9

There is much to life that remains a mystery—more to life than what meets the eye.

Recently, I read about a British research study that explored the visual abilities of dogs, cats, and other mammals, with the discovery that many animals are able to see ultraviolet light, which humans under normal conditions cannot. Ultraviolet radiation has wave frequencies shorter and higher than visible light. So in a very real sense, animals can see what humans are unable to see.

Nocturnal vision is a good example of this, where dogs and cats can perceive in the dark what human eyes cannot, such as the bedpost and dresser I invariably bang into when I get up in the middle of the night to take the dogs out. This happens with such frequency that I'm inclined to believe this is a conspiracy among Bling, Biscuit, and Fusco as a form of late night comedy since, like the Muppets, they all seem to howl with delight when I whack myself! But I digress...

However, it's a belief among many that animals possess a sixth sense, evident, for example, in their uncanny premonitions about earthquakes, volcanoes, and other natural disasters hours, if not days, before they occur. The sheer volume of anecdotal observations suggests something extraordinary is going on. Some scientists have looked into it and attributed it to sensitivity to higher and lower frequencies of sound, or to electromagnetic fields, atmospheric changes, and the like.

However, I don't think it accounts for everything. For example, dogs have been known to warn their owners about impending doom

when there is no clue about that in advance; pet birds have become unusually agitated minutes and miles before a car accident occurs. How could they know? Do they have something akin to ESP? On the other hand, in my experience cats, even if they have a clue, tend to remain aloof to their owners' potential plight!

Pet owners like me have often observed something similar about animals. Pets seem to anticipate that someone will be leaving them, especially at a time near death. They behave in ways that are unusual to their nature and almost intuitively alert to something happening. I realize this sounds a bit anthropomorphic on my part, but it is uncanny how often this holds true. When you get animal lovers together, they will share untold stories of what they've witnessed firsthand or heard about the remarkable clairvoyance pets possess. They seem to know something is going to happen long before humans do.

So what's going on? Do animal premonitions have some logical basis in fact? Are there sights, sounds, smells, or something that they are attentive to that explains all this? Or, is there another dimension to reality they tune into that somehow lies beyond our natural human sensitivities and sensibilities? Do they sense something we cannot know?

Who knows? At this point, an argument for it would only be speculative at best, even though I've made my livelihood as a spiritual leader and, as people of faith, virtually everything you and I say in reference to the spirit comes with an assumption there is more to life than what meets the eye.

It does make you think. We assume God exists, but *where* does God exist? We also perceive there is actually a spirit within and around us—but in what form? We may presume another dimension to reality we tune into through meditation and prayer or we will go to when our mortal lives are over. So why should we be skeptical about the possibility of another dimension to life that exists beyond our normal perceptual framework?

Claiming this and proving it are two different things. The search for proof has been the great aspiration of metaphysics—an ancient philosophical discipline that seeks to prove the existence of what we cannot see and cannot claim deduce apart from mere speculation. Metaphysics as an academic discipline doesn't get much attention nowadays because of the presumptions of a material three-dimensional world that can be empirically studied and explained. Plus, with the advances of science and medicine, many of the mysteries once associated with human life have now been solved or put into proper perspective, unlike the era when metaphysics was an important contributor to human knowledge.

Yet, acknowledging of this, the question still stands: do we grasp everything that exists? The answer remains, no. Even traditional empirical methodologies run up against their own limits of explanation, especially when science is beginning to explore and theorize about new dimensions to what exists in the universe. Physicists Lisa Randall of Harvard and Raman Sundrum of Johns Hopkins are pioneering a theory that posits a five-dimensional dynamic, where the visible universe is but a membrane within a larger universe and hence, immeasurable dimensions conceived only

in terms of black holes and dark matter, actually are part of that original universe that exist beyond human vision. This has spawned additional conceptual models where, because of the limited range that humans can visually perceive electromagnetic energy waves, there may be more dimensions to reality that can yet be discovered or that will never be defined by mortal beings. It's an open ended quest for exploration for physicists and astronomers alike.

This may boggle our feeble minds, but theorists explain it in this way: if we were two-dimensional creatures, we would only be able to explain and interpret what we know about the world in two-dimensional terms. Everything would be viewed like a drawing on a piece of paper—flat with no depth. Since we are three-dimensional (with time being a fourth dimension), this is how we naturally develop and measure our concepts of what exists. We define things with three dimensions (height, width, & depth; geometrically, x-, y-, and z- planes), plus time.

To conceive of additional dimensions means we must go beyond the human senses and our mental paradigms for what exists. This might seem dubious to some, but to claim things don't exist only because we are limited by our current paradigm is not only mistaken—someday it could be viewed as foolish and arrogant as were the critics of Galileo or Copernicus! So one must remain open-minded, not just to the possibility of other dimensions, but to the *probability* that other dimensions to life exist!

I find this intriguing because, in many ways, this is what metaphysics does—it pushes us beyond what we already know and toward that of which we can only speculate. Mystics have always

believed that humans perceive another aspect to reality, commonly called the spiritual dimension or spiritual realm. It's revealed and expressed in many of the things that make humans distinct from other forms of life, e.g., imagination, creativity, conscience, consciousness, i.e., much of what constitutes the human psyche. The human ability to create, imagine, perceive, be aware, and so forth—all of this is a part of reality, to be sure, but we can't adequately measure them or quantify them in a reliable way. There's a great deal unknown about the human psyche, even though we don't question the fact that we exist!

So how do we account for this without a measure of speculation and uncertainty, or even subjectivity? What makes us uniquely human is not that we comprehended all reality; it's that we pursue we don't yet know about it. Our curiosity leads us to places we never knew existed. Much of spirituality engages us with a dimension to life we don't fully know or understand or easily explain, but it should pique our curiosity because it seems so essential to our nature and our wellbeing.

Now, I'm not sure if what I've said makes any sense, but the point of all this is to help us explore one of the toughest Bible stories to explain or understand, i.e., the Transfiguration of Christ. An experience described as it was in the Gospels doesn't make sense in a standard three-dimensional way. Something either happened to Jesus in this particular moment of time that defies the logic of human experience, or else it is pure fantasy, or at best, an imaginative metaphor meant to symbolize something else.

Honestly, liberal, rational types like me tend to take these stories as nothing more than metaphors, rather than try to explain them as actual descriptions of what occurred in real life. There's good reason to do so, since many of the Gospel stories seem to be shaped theologically more than journalistically.

But based on the mysteries associated with multi-dimensional existence, what if this episode actually occurred as it is described—that somehow, in some way, Jesus was perceived as a non-physical being and engaged, for a moment in time, the spiritual presences of Moses and Elijah—that somehow energy patterns crossed temporarily and what was normally invisible became visible? I know that sounds preposterous—something that doesn't seem likely. But could it happen if another dimension to reality was involved? Could a fourth or fifth dimension be at work—a part of the electromagnetic energy of the universe that breaks through every once in a while that is both within and outside of the material world? What do you think? Are we so three-dimensional that we can't conceive of anything outside of our perceptual box—so certain that there is no possibility or likelihood for a super-natural occurrence such as this? We might not be able to explain it, but should we close our minds to it?

I will say at this point in my life, I don't need to view reality only in concrete terms or with heavy firm lines circumscribing what is true from what is not true, what is real and what is fantasy. Why? Because there are times when absolute certainty doesn't ring true. There's more to life than what meets the eye. My soul yearns for some flexibility and for a porous view of existence—a perspective that has enough logical normal to it to provide some reason and routine

(something you can rely on), but then just enough holes in it to stir and inspire my imagination and curiosity.

I'm much more comfortable with a reality that is both known and unknown, intelligible and mysterious, comprehensible and enigmatic—substantive and tangible—yes, but elusive and fantastical as well, because Nature and all that we know is already that and more. When we can recognize there is a power and presence that lies beyond the human senses—that exists somewhere between heaven and earth—between the incomprehensible cosmos and the material, ordinary world—then I think it raises our awareness and curiosity of what goes on in the realm of greater life that extends to the farthest boundaries of our knowledge and understanding, and where we stand in relation to it.

So I take this story from the Gospel and instead of deconstructing it (like I normally do) to make it more intelligible to me in my rational three-dimensional paradigm, this morning I want to close my eyes and imagine myself on that mountaintop entertaining a sight I have never seen before, becoming overwhelmed with wonder for what is before and around me, and gasping at the memory burned into my heart and soul of an unexplainable and life-altering experience, asking myself and others around me, what does this possibly mean? What have I just seen? All the scientific measurements in the world don't make it any more real than what I honestly recall and know in my heart: there is more to life than I know and observe and if I never relive a moment like this, I will always be able to embrace it for what it is—an extraordinary

encounter of reality that lies somewhere beyond, somewhere between heaven and earth!

James Loder, the late Princeton professor, wrote about his own transforming moment in a book with that same title. He explored the psychological impact of discovering a reality beyond the normal patterns of human thinking and knowledge, framed by these questions:

How can we know the truth of these experiences when they challenge the realities presumed by ordinary thought and experience? How can we think about such exceptional experiences when they transcend the horizons within which ordinary ways of thinking are contained, and in that transcendence convince us of who we most truly are? ¹

That's what happens—people are changed by the experience, even if others remain skeptical. That's a subjectivity we cannot avoid or get around—glimpses of a reality beyond the material, measurable, three-dimensional world are not objective, undeniable truths. At most, they become personal convictions—but convictions that challenge the perceived limitations of human life.

Some people have near-death experiences that pull them into another sense of reality; others have extraordinary visions where they see something or someone that can't be reduced to being a delusion or fantasy. Many others experience on occasion an amazing turn of events that couldn't be mere coincidence or happenstance. Still others have hunches and intuition that foresees events before they occur. Even others witness healing in their bodies that lie far beyond the knowledge of medical science to explain.

How does one explain the unexplainable in life without recognizing the possibly, if not likelihood, all experiences don't have

¹ James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences*, 1981, pg. 10.

to fall within the boundaries of what we normally perceive? What if God simply wants to be experienced more fully without our having to figure out how it all happened?

I don't know, but if even the animals around us seem to have a sense there is something more to see than meets the eye, then maybe it's not such a foolish thing for us to ponder.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
2 March 2014