

**Speaking with God**  
by  
Andy Crosland

Back in biblical times, there were no questions about the existence of God or about what he demanded of us as humans. God was there and said what he wanted. Unlike the present, no faith was required; no interpretation was needed. As a child, I thought that that was a much better arrangement than the uncertainties of our times.

God started by visiting with Adam and Eve in the garden, walking with them in the cool of the evening. He told Cain and Able what he thought of their offerings, and He made Noah's assignment clear to him. God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, even walking between the parts of cut up carcasses to ratify the deal. He went on to give Moses his marching orders and then to march with him as a shining flame by night and a cloud by day. When he wanted the Hebrews to follow certain commandments, God literally wrote them in stone. Finally, Jesus came and explained the rest to the many humans who saw him raise the dead and perform other miracles to prove that he was God's son. No ambiguities. No uncertainties. No interpretations needed.

Yet, people were no more faithful or better than they are now. All of this certainty did not seem to have paid off as we might expect. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were evicted from the garden. Noah got drunk and naked after the flood. Abraham's descendants were prone to idolatry and couldn't ever keep their end of the covenant. Moses and his generation were too sinful to be allowed to enter the Promised Land. And even as Moses was getting the Ten commandments on the mountain, his people were making and worshipping a golden calf below. Jesus was betrayed by one of his twelve apostles and crucified by the people he came to save.

Viewed another way, there is something about humanity that is faithless and skeptical. About half of all Americans see what Trump has done and think he is evil and a threat to democracy. But the other half—seeing the same things—view him as a national savior, a strong man who will make America great again. We are not compelled by facts but enslaved by interpretations. We believe what we want to; we believe what suits us. It appears that I was wrong as a child about the advantages of a clearly present God.

So, God may have decided to try something else in our times. Most modern believers—whether progressive or traditional—pray. From childhood, most of us learn to say prayers of supplication—prayers that ask for something. We then wait for God's answer. Whether we realize it or not, supplicatory prayer moves us into potentially dangerous territory. With its emphasis on what **we** want, there is a temptation to cast God in the role of a servant genie charged with granting our wishes. We then judge God by how well She performs. We often feel there must be something wrong with a God who ignores our prayers.

The antidote to this kind of thinking was suggested by Ann and Barry Ulanov in their book *Primary Speech*. Arguing that prayer must be based on honesty about ourselves and with God, they argue that honesty about our motives and desires before God is a virtue no matter how contemptible our motives and desires in praying might be. Prayer—by drawing us closer to God—will improve those motives and desires over

time. Take a couple of lines from a Janis Joplin song: “Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz? My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.” First line selfish and probably is a bad prayer, but second line is honest about motive and plants the seeds of true spiritual growth.

The Ulanovs see prayer not as a series of episodic conversations with God but as a continuous process leading from purgation to insight to union with God. That is, prayers are not just isolated transactions but rather an ongoing spiritual practice leading to spiritual growth. And God considers our entire spiritual path in answering our prayers rather than responding to this or that specific request. Also, God may frame his answers in any form communication—not just the one we expect or asked for.

Meditation is closely akin to prayer. It involves quieting the mind and focusing on the moment in expectation of a whisper from God. That whisper sometimes does not come, but our meditation invites it and puts us in a listening posture.

Many believers turn to the Bible or other sacred texts to begin Divine discourse. Christians often refer to the Bible as the “Word of God.” Fundamentalists then read it in the context of a sin/redemption narrative about Jesus’ blood sacrifice redeeming a humanity that fell with Adam in the Garden of Eden. Add a creedal element and the Bible becomes a moral and historical text that can be read literally to hear God speak. But others read the Bible as a piece of literature and find metaphorical meaning in it. Still others view it as a mosaic of earlier human experiences with the divine. Mystics read it through the spiritual practice of *Lexio Divina* where a selected verse or story speaks personally to them with Divine insight.

Carl Jung has suggested other means of divine discourse viewed as a human dialogue with the unconscious. He wrote that the unconscious contains all that a person has forgotten as an individual plus certain collective insights, memories, values, and fears of humanity in general. A person’s consciousness is what that individual knows or is aware of. In Jung’s world, the unconscious is the unknown, the Other with a capital O. The unconscious is much larger than the conscious, and it enables us to grow. We grow by bringing insights out of the unconscious into consciousness. There are certain spiritual practices—including dream interpretation, active imagination, and synchronicity—that facilitate this process. All three resist easy explanation and must now be treated rather sketchily.

Priest and author Bob Haden called dreams “unopened letters from God.” They are a special wormhole through which we can access the unconscious. The tradition of interpreting dreams to understand God’s will is biblical. Joseph, Daniel, Jacob, and most of the prophets looked on dreams as “letters from God.” Modern dream interpretation approaches a dream much as a reader approaches a short story. What is the meaning of the characters, plots, settings, colors, numbers, and words we remember from the dream? Once an interpretation begins to form, the dreamer then looks for an application of this meaning in the events of her life. Most dream interpretation is at the level of daily guidance rather than apocalyptic revelation. It’s more what should I do about my quick temper rather than Jerusalem is about to fall to the Babylonians. When all is said and done, dreams yield spiritual insights such as might come from an intimate conversation with God about ourselves.

The Jungian practice of active imagination is interpretation of a waking dream. Active imagination begins with conscious design. The imaginer picks a setting and a

character to represent a problem, internal characteristic, an emotion, or almost anything else that is significant at the moment. She may even unroll a little plot to go with the character and setting. Then a dialogue begins between the imaginer and the characters in writing. It amounts to what an English teacher would call free writing where you put on paper whatever pops up, without any conscious filters. The purpose of this dialogue is to leave the imaginer with new insights into whatever is on his mind. Like the dream, it can be considered a message from God.

Finally, “synchronicity” is a term Jung used to describe those events or moments in our lives that occur without any identifiable chain of cause and effect yet seem to have deep spiritual meaning. A dove flies in at a burial and sits on the coffin. A rainbow appears after a person has just made an important decision. A person appears in your dream at the exact moment she dies thousands of miles away. If we watch for these synchronous life moments, they too may bring us messages from God.

The problems we have with understanding Divine discourse do not lie with God but with ourselves. God shows us, but we do not see. He speaks to us, but we do not hear. We are asleep and must awaken. God speaks with many voices—directly, indirectly, in fact, and in spirit; we must listen carefully to hear the Divine. We must shake off our stupor so we can hold up our end of the conversation. Let me end with a poem that makes this case.

### THE OPENING OF EYES

David Whyte

That day I saw beneath dark clouds,  
The passing light over the water  
And I heard the voice of the world speak out,  
I knew then, as I had before,  
Life is no passing memory of what has been  
Nor the remaining pages in a great book  
Waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.  
It is the vision of far-off things  
Seen for the silence they hold.  
It is the heart after years  
Of secret conversing,  
Speaking out loud in the clear air.

It is Moses in the desert  
Fallen to his knees before the lit bush.  
It is the man throwing away his shoes  
As if to enter heaven  
And finding himself astonished,

Opened at last,  
Fallen in love with solid ground.

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