

How to Talk to Ourselves in Such a Time as This

Ken Wilson, 12/20/20

Here in the Northern Hemisphere, Advent is spiritual preparation for waiting-longing-hoping-working for a better world, and for enduring a long-cold winter. By Christmas Eve, we start to wonder, maybe the tide is turning, maybe we're not going to lose all contact with the sun. We begin to catch glimpses of the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel.

Because tomorrow, the Monday before Christmas, is Winter solstice, shortest day of year, 7 hours, 49 minutes and 42 seconds of daylight—which is 8 hours, 48 minutes and 38 seconds shorter than the longest day in June. That's an hour less than half the daylight. But there's a sacredness to the Winter Solstice recognized by all people. Because it's the last day of waning sunlight. And it marks an inflection point—every day thereafter has more sunlight each day. It's also Susan King's birthday. Anyone else have a birthday tomorrow? Any kid's b-days? Love to see it in chat. So tomorrow, less daylight than any day of the year. But after that, day after tomorrow, there's a little more daylight every day. Thank God. Praise Jesus. Halleluiah. Pass the Pop Tarts! Prepare thyself to see the first light at the end of the tunnel.

In 2008, I developed a case of claustrophobia. For a few months, it got worse and worse, and I remember driving to NYC and having to go through some pretty long tunnels on I-80. Gripping the wheel so tight, practicing all my coping mechanisms—and the relief of seeing, finally, the light at the end of the tunnel made me realize the phrase “light at the end of the tunnel” must have been coined by someone with claustrophobia. (Better now thank you. Not that I want to spend the afternoon in a closet or anything.) If ever there were a year, collectively, when we all felt a little claustrophobic, with eyes peeled for light at the end of the tunnel, it is this year. At our Christmas Eve service, bring a candle if you can, and during Silent Night, if you can, turn off the lights. So our candles can be so many lights at the end of this tunnel.

But...light at the end of the tunnel or no, we are in a tunnel now. So I want to offer a nugget from the Psalms, about our self-talk, which can get a little funky in a season of mental claustrophobia. I'm just guessing many of us have been noticed a certain negative turn in our self-talk lately. We experience worry-anxiety-depression as a certain kind of finger-wagging, Debbi Downer, Chicken Little self-talk. Have you ever caught yourself in a

worry patch and step back to say, *“Whoa what kind of story about myself have I been telling myself these past 5 minutes? How did I go from feeling a little dryness in my throat to being on a ventilator inside my head? Who’s running the projector in there?”*

Self-talk is our least examined form of talking. When we talk to others, we see how our words register—how they please, displease, surprise, bore, anger, sadden. We may hear our own spoken words and wonder, “Did I really mean that?” But our self-talk can run in the same ruts for years without ever being examined. We normalize to it, like living next to a Freeway. So noticing how we talk to ourselves is a key practice in shaping how we talk to ourselves.

The psalms are the closest thing we have to inner dialogue in Scripture, a window into the human psyche. And because it comes from a very different culture, this inner dialogue brought to light hasn’t passed through all the modern filters, so it’s more raw and, in a way, honest, like comedian says things out loud that we may think but know not to say. So in the Psalms we have these otherwise private thoughts and feeling expressed and we get to hear the sorts of things we say to ourselves in the middle of the night stumbling into the bathroom, under duress, or in times of exaltation, or other intense emotion. And they are painfully honest, vulnerable.

And it turns out, they introduce an alternative way of talking from ourselves to ourselves. It’s a way that opens up space in our heads when it’s getting a little funky and cramped in there.

This particular form of self-talk isn’t frequent but when it occurs it stands out, attention in various ways is drawn to it. The first example is in Ps 42, repeated two further times in the Psalm. and then as if to draw our attention the same words are used in Ps. 43 and they go like this: *Why so downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?* Not, I am downcast! But *Why so downcast, O my soul?* As if I were to say to myself, Ken why so downcast? As if I were truly curious to know and was waiting to see what I say in response.

In this form of self-address, the Psalmist is observing himself from within himself, speaking to himself as if he were speaking to any other person. Robert Alter translates this a little differently. His version goes like this: *How bent my being, how you moan for me!*

This same form of self-address occurs again in Psalm 103, where this time it is repeated 3 times, but with the added emphasis of being the first and last line of the Psalm. It goes, “Bless the Lord, O my soul!” Again, the speaker speaking to himself, like my daughter Oceana sometimes says to herself out loud, “You got this Oceana!”

And that term translated “my soul” is very important: Hebrew is *nephesh*. It doesn’t mean my religious self, even less, my self apart from my body. Robert Alter, the Hebrew scholar, translates it, “my being”—so the line in Ps. 42 is “How bent my being, how you moan for me!”

Like the Psalmist is noticing his being moaning for him. *Nephesh* is more like the way soul is used in soul music, where it means, not my incidental self, but my inner-essential self. When God breathed into adam [meaning human, not man) it says the human became a living being, a *nephesh*. The soul is the self, animated. When James Brown sang “I’m a soul man”—it was a declaration of his essential, his living-breathing-embodied-animated humanity. Think of that lyric in the context of white supremacy, where the founding document of your country, claimed that enslaved people from Africa were 2/3 of a person. Many of the enslavers claimed that these people didn’t have a soul, in the same way they might claim that non-human animals don’t have a soul. *I’m a soul, man*, was a declaration, I am a soul, man! Even that construction, *I am a soul man*, is closer to the biblical construction. Not I have a soul, but I am a soul—a living, embodied, God’ breathed being.

When a person addresses themselves in this way, “Why so downcast O my soul?” or “Bless the Lord, O my soul” it is speaking to one’s self with a sense of the dignity of the person addressed—that the person addressed is a God-breathed being, alive with divine life.

That’s the theology of it, now let’s get to the psychology of it. A research psychologist at UM, Ethan Kross, did a study on self-talk and demonstrated that when people say, “I am

thus and so [anxious, afraid, happy, etc.] a different part of the brain is lit up than when they use their name rather than the first person [third person address, in grammatical terms]. And that when a person uses their name to address themselves—in my case, “Ken is angry, sad, anxious...” they are better able to exercise influence-modulate their inner state. So I were to say to myself “Ken is angry” I would be better able to modulate my anger than a person who says, “I am angry.”

In other words, how we address ourselves matters. And addressing ourselves from within ourselves by ourselves as though we have dignity, the same dignity we would want to recognize in any person made in the image of God, the kind of person we would want to be a good neighbor to, the kind of person we would want to love even if they were our enemy, because they bear the divine image, well that’s important. We owe that to ourselves, under God.

And there’s something handy, or maybe a little magical, about using the third person form of address for certain kinds of self-talk.

To back up a moment: there’s an advantage to saying, when we are anxious, not simply I am anxious—which labels ourselves anxious in the same way we might say, “I am left-handed” an enduring trait. It’s better to say of ourselves, to ourselves, “I *feel* anxious.” So at least there’s a recognition that this is a feeling, an impermanent phenomenon—in motion, passing through us, hence an emotion. And when we shift to the third person address and say to ourselves, in my case, “Ken is feeling anxious” ... well that’s even better, because it tends to stimulate compassion toward ourselves, just as we would feel compassion toward a friend feeling anxious.

The psalmist is playing with the same set of tools with this phrase “O my soul” —which evokes the same feeling as “O my child” or “O my friend!” might. The O in O my soul is the equivalent of an exclamation point. And it represents kindness or compassion toward one’s self.

What’s the point in our current context? We’re all going through an extraordinary time. A global pandemic made worse by a dysfunctional politics with a rising tide of some of the ugliest things in our society—white supremacy, corruption, narcissism, lying—all in high

places, cockamamie conspiracy theories gaining a hearing, wrapped in religious and patriotic talk. To call it a witch's brew is to slander witches. What human being in such a setting wouldn't have an uptick of anger, fear, worry, moments of hopelessness, all mixed with our ordinary neurotic forms of guilt and shame.

In such a time as this we can do two things: One is urged on us by nature itself—that we keep our eyes peeled for light at the end of this tunnel, in the form of daylight waxing again, not waning. On any day the sun is shining, we pause a little to notice it shining, and if possible, step outside to savor it. Maybe when it's dark outside, we find a quiet place to sit, turn out the lights, and light a candle. And regard that candle as the light at the end of our present tunnel.

The other is urged on us by this form of address found in the Psalms, *O my soul*. This form of address that invites us to regard ourselves as God-breathed-into-being beings. Not just I have a soul, but I am a soul, man. I am a child of God and I am determined to regard myself with the dignity and worth and compassion that every child of God deserves.

Transition to a guided meditation. So if you are free to, settle in your chair, plant your feet firmly on the ground, feel your sense of connection to the ground, notice the weight of the body on the chair, sink into yourself, and take a couple of nice deep breaths ... and if you haven't already, go ahead and close your eyes if you like.

Take a little time to call to mind someone in your life, past or present, who has shown you some form of unconditional—I don't mean perfect unconditional love all the time, but someone who let's say channeled unconditional love to you. And it need not be a person, could be a beloved creature. I might think of my childhood dog Duchess. So just call that someone to mind, along with that feeling of full acceptance-as-you-are love.

Now let your mind shift to an imaginary scene, a dreamlike scene. It's the middle of the night, you can't sleep for whatever reason. So you get up, and in a dreamlike way, you get dressed and go outside in the dark, to find this person who shows you full acceptance love. Like maybe to have a cup of hot chocolate with them. All the houses are dark, but there's one house with a light on—that's where they are. You're glad to see they are up. You approach the house, knock on the door, and they let you in. It turns out, to your pleasant surprise they are waiting for you.

For the remainder of our time, focus on those moments after they've opened the door, you are bathed in the warm light inside, and they recognize you and say your name as though they are glad to see you. Let's just take 30 seconds now to sit with the feeling that scene evokes and the sound your name. Ok, you can open your eyes now, take a stretch...as we Diane leads us in the candle lighting time.