

Attachment-Bond Spirituality

Ken Wilson 5.9.2021

I worked in Community Mental Health in 1970s—the things we didn't know. PTSD went undiagnosed. Vietnam vets had to organize to get it recognized in 1980. CBT, now an effective treatment for anxiety, just getting started. Brain science in its infancy.

Today one of the most fruitful approaches to therapy is informed by attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth—based on observations of early childhood. Young children with a secure bond to a caregiver who is reasonably available and responsive will become distressed when the caregiver leaves, and readily reassured when reunited with the caregiver. As the bond is strengthened over time, the child can be separated for longer periods and be just fine, with periodic check ins. Throughout life, having a secure home base to return to when stressed is what helps us to venture out into the world, take risks and so on. Like mount climbers—If you have a well provisioned base camp, you're able to climb higher up the mountain. Of course, we undergo attachment losses and injuries: we move away from a support system, lose important relationships, sometimes a previous place of refuge turns toxic.

We can trace all these attachment issues in the life of Jesus. Our reading from Luke 2 has Jesus at age 12, conversing with the elders in the temple courts. He's part of an extended family of travelers in for the high holy days, and the group has begun the trek back to Nazareth (his home village) without him—all the people looking out for him think he must be with someone else, when in fact he stayed behind. The fact that Jesus at age 12 was so at ease being away from his family in the Big City was indication of his secure attachment to them. When his parents notice he's not with them, rush back to Jerusalem to find him in the temple, they are beside themselves. "How could you do this to us?" He could have said, "I credit your good parenting, and my secure attachment."

Yet, as an adult, Jesus experienced painful disruptions from his secure attachments to parents, family, village, synagogue, and trusted elders. As early as Mark, chapter 3, we learn of a painful rupture in his family—his mother and brothers oppose what he's doing, try to stop it. He says to his followers, "Who are my mother and brothers and sisters? Anyone who does the will of God [gesturing to people around him]" This breach with his family came when the support of family was sorely needed—he was becoming

a prominent figure in Israel, and opposition from important power centers in Jerusalem were posing a growing threat. [By the way, this family breach is repaired later in life. Another story, and a hopeful one.]

But early in his public life, this turbulent period, his home base shifts—from Nazareth to Capernaum. Peter’s family lived there and that may have become a home away from home for him. But as opposition intensifies, Capernaum is no longer friendly territory.

He finds a new home away from home: Bethany, a village close to Jerusalem. One place in particular: the home of Martha and Mary, two sisters—mentioned in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John’s gospel adds their brother, Lazarus. All of them unmarried it seems, unusual in that cultural context: a family made up of three single adults.

There are some intriguing possibilities about who they might have been, thanks to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1940s, a trove of texts from a Jewish sect headquartered near the Dead Sea in Qumran, a group called Essenes. Like Jesus, the Essenes had a sharp dispute with the temple authorities. In addition to their Qumran base, the Essenes had homes in villages throughout Israel. And Bethany was one of those places. The Essenes elevated the value of foregoing marriage. Jesus was probably unmarried. As were Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany, where there was an Essene outpost. Jesus wasn’t an Essene, but Mary, Martha, and Lazarus might have been. Bethany means “House of Misery” and there is evidence in the Dead Sea Scrolls that Bethany was the site of a leper colony—a refuge for those with skin diseases needing special care. Jesus enjoyed the greatest support among marginalized people, though it’s worth remembering that in the Jerusalem church there were thousands of Pharisees. So it was complicated. Still, he was known as the friend of sinners [a designation that referred to social status more than morality, according to NT scholar Greg Carey] So Jerusalem during the festivals is crawling with Roman troops, nervous about messianic leaders—and Bethany is a nearby village with these two sisters and their brother, perhaps serving in the leper colony, a home away from home.

Wow. Jesus has a circumstantial need, and a capacity, to transition from one place of secure attachment to another. During this dicey period in the gospels, it’s like he’s crossing a raging stream with some dangerous critters, and he’s finding one rock then

another, each a place of secure attachment, helping him make his way. And at the same time, he's forming a community of people who can be a refuge for each other.

I admire this capacity in Jesus and so many people I know. I think of my stepdaughter Oceana. Oceana was born in Hunan Province in China to biological parents who couldn't, for unknown reasons, care for her. She was anonymously dropped off at hospital at 9 months and was cared for in an orphanage until nearly age of 3 when she was adopted by Julia and Richard. She gains a much older brother, Andrew, from Richard's first marriage. St. Clare's Episcopal Church becomes her village for many years. Then her father dies when she's a pre-adolescent—a really tough time to lose a parent. But she has 4 godparents (Episcopal priests go wild appointing godparents)—one of whom is a father figure to her. And then in 2014 I join the family as instant stepdad. Which of course takes a little while to negotiate—to find our way. None of these adjustments are easy, but Oceana has this capacity to form secure attachments with different people. She talks to her brother Andrew and his husband Franco every week—and wants to do grad school on the other side of the Atlantic where they live. And now she even tells me stuff she doesn't tell her mom.

How do people do this? Navigate these adjustments. They do. Jesus did.

I don't know whether this is the chicken or the egg, but in his adult years, those years of secure attachment injuries and finding new sources of secure attachment, Jesus leans into the Jewish mystical tradition, in which God is understood and experienced as the source of one's ultimate safety, as a refuge—in particular as a loving parent. Not an answer machine that solves all one's problems but a home base, a refuge. Jesus' word for G_d in this mode is the Aramaic term, Abba—dear Father. And he develops a strong identification with the Hebraic (and Near Eastern) feminine experience of the divine, named Wisdom, or Sophia. One like a mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings. He offers this attachment-bond spirituality to his followers. When you pray, say, "Our father in heaven..." It's language that hadn't yet been trivialized by the Christian marketing apparatus of recent years.

Psalm 131 is an example of this spirituality: ***"Lord my heart has not been haughty, nor have my eyes looked too high ... but I have calmed and contented myself like a weaned***

babe on its mother—like a weaned babe I am with myself. O Israel, trust in the Lord, now and forever more.” A weaned child is one who is just venturing out—moving away from the primary caregiver into the world and coming back to base camp as needed for reassurance and then back out again.

Jesus leans into this spirituality. It’s his secret superpower. The secure attachments he did experience with others, allows him to venture into the world, take risks, get roughed up, bounce back, develop resilience, and keep going. But all along, he’s also nurturing his secure attachment to God, which becomes for him a kind of internal baseline of security, that sees him through so many rough patches.

The thing about a secure attachment—whether to a parent, sibling, spouse, community, village, group, to God, or whatever it is we may cobble together through the vicissitudes of life (starting to sound like Moira Rose) these secure attachments, human-divine or both, form as a kind of nest that we carry with us, inside. As we venture out. Like a child with a secure attachment to a caregiver can wander off and carry that security with them. It’s like a super-power.

[BTW, I had that experience after getting vaccinated. It was like, wow, this is my superpower. Felt same relief as a kid in the 1950’s who grew up under the scary shadow of the Polio epidemic. Vaccination day was like a festival. We all knew people affected by polio. Time when public pools were shut down. Not to compare the two: at its height, the year I was born, there 3,000 deaths a year to Polio. Last year we had periods with that many COVID deaths a day.]

But I digress. Sometimes we need a super-power. We don’t outgrow the power of our secure attachments, even after we lose a parent or a spouse say, or an important figure in our lives. In the third surge of Covid I was running out of steam. *Are we ever gonna get out of this? I’m not a spring chicken.* I noticed myself finding, framing & displaying pictures of my mother. Which for me was a secure attachment—and I know it’s not for everyone. I stumbled across a watercolor that my sister did as a kid of our dog, Duchess, a golden retriever. That dog never had a cross word for me—she thought I was awesome. I was leaning into whatever secure attachments I had, drawing on them as a superpower.

And whatever that is, that's what God, in the Jesus vision of God, can be for us. Can be part of the nest we carry around with us inside. I use that as a kind of discernment guide to identify divine influence on me/in me: whatever that feeling of secure attachment is (however it has shown up in our lives, at whatever times in our lives)—that's the feeling that I associate with the divine within me and around me. For me, it's a handy-dandy discernment tool. A divine influence meter.

We can think of this time together on Sunday as a place to nurture attachments bonds. Rituals are an ancient way of doing this. Our candle lighting is a ritual that keeps our heart soft toward the suffering in our world, which over time, helps us to keep our hearts soft toward our own suffering. (Love your neighbor as yourself also works in reverse: love yourself as your neighbor.) The naming of loved ones in the prayer for loved ones, reminds us that we all have loved ones. And communion, blessing the wine, breaking the bread, or their equivalents, and eating them, signifies the possibility of friendship-kinship with God, a kinship that bonds us to each other.