

● family lessons
by philip golabuk

If I had to name the most important event in my life, the one that most fulfilled my identity in a defining before-and-after, I would say it was the birth of my daughter, Samara. I remember as though reliving it, the nervous morning-into-afternoon hours of counting minutes between contractions, Christina's weariness as the spasms washed over her, the trip to the hospital, the doctor eventually administering the spinal anesthesia, my donning a green gown and mask and helping wheel the gurney into the delivery room, and finally, finally!—the crowning, the emergence of tiny shoulders, the miracle of watching one person exit another, that first cry soft as tearing paper, and the solitary walk I took on campus afterward, looking up through Loblolly pines at a full moon that seemed to me newly born.

Nothing, after this, was the same. It took Christina and me no time at all to fall utterly in love with Samara, and we are both just as much under the spell of this today, many years later, as we were then. From the moment she arrived, we made no decision that did not consider her. In restaurants, we corrected playful maitre d's who asked if we needed seating for "two and a half," and insisted that skeptical servers give Sam a menu, too (which she immediately put in her mouth). It was the early 70s in a college town, and I'm sure we were diligently protecting feelings she was busy not even having, as she sat innocently eating her menus, and so on. But that is not the point. The point is the oneness.

How quickly the years swept us from those pristine days of togetherness spent tickling and kissing Baby! Many of us have felt, looking around at our parents and siblings, that we were tossed into the wrong bin at birth. Certainly, I have felt this way about my tribe and its loopy ways that have nothing to do with me, oh no, uh uh. Yet, there is also the oneness. For all the differences, all the arguments we will make against the folks to whom we're related, for all the ways we will swear we are nothing like them, there is this ineffable but undeniable indivisibility called "family" that holds sway long after all our complaints have gone to bed. When we put down the weapons of critical judgment of our parents, when we see them as they were, perhaps, before they became parents, we find that, despite everything, the oneness is there—they are of us, and we, them. I do not claim that this is true or at least apparent in all families. But where it is absent, the absence itself becomes defining, and something has gone terribly awry in any family that has no feeling for its oneness in each other.

Lovers, too, report this experience of being "one soul in two bodies." Part of the power of this sense of oneness that we realize with our lovers and our children is that it draws us into a recollection of our expanded identity, one that is not defined or bounded by the physical body and its stance of separateness. This sense of expanded identity has a mystical undertow. Ultimately, it signals our oneness with spiritus mundi, with all Being, with God, however we may conceive (or not conceive) that ultimate reference. Family is the first call out of the ubiquitous self-centeredness of the child into the centeredness in Self that knows it is not the body, not even in the body; rather the body is in It, as are all things. Here is Consciousness Itself, at first involving Itself in

- the separate I-sense, then evolving into the greater self of family and friends, and ultimately finding Itself to be nothing less than the unconditioned I that is the whole of Creation, ringing with identity at last. “What I had taken to be myself, was not myself; what I had taken to be not myself, was myself all along. Finally, there is nothing that is not my Self.”

This mystical experience has at its base the love that calls us into expanded identity. But this is not love as we usually think of it, not a love based on special interests and favors and loyalties returned. Rather, it is love in the sense of oneness, from which vantage I see that I must “Love my neighbor as myself” because my neighbor is my Self, the same Self that I am. This love is impersonal, and there is a great deal to be said for the ability to love impersonally, since what we call personal love so often makes a mess of love in any sense. To truly love someone may well mean nothing more than entering into one’s expanded identity where that other is concerned. Where one can open to this, one becomes empathetic, kind, considerate, interested—all the things we try to contrive when love is still personal, and we make our accommodations, or so it feels, at our expense. Impersonal love, on the other hand, is simply resident in oneness. The other’s interests become one’s own; there is no conflict. There is no accommodation. There is only this wonderful, impersonal gesture to grant, to care for, to fulfill, as natural and effortless as snow falling.

The word “family” originally meant “a servant.” If we regard this strictly from within the consciousness of separateness, it will seem like a bad thing, demeaning, and implying a relinquishing of one’s rights and autonomy and such. But when we realize that we all serve something, we may consider that to be a servant of family is, mystically speaking, to be a servant of oneness, to open oneself in willingness to become the next more expansive version of oneself, to see, as the incomparable Goethe put it, “God’s presence in all things.” Ultimately, Being Itself is our family, and before long, we shall all go home. In the meantime, our earthly family members remind us that we are not here just for our little self, which is the barest seed of who we are. They challenge us to be more! The greater the differences that seem to separate us from parents, siblings, children, the greater the opportunity to see through them to the underlying greater reality. And if, despite the very real differences, we are living in the light of that oneness, do we not have the right to expect wonderful things?

The other day, I called Sam and said, “Hi, honey. How are you?” She replied, “Well, I’ve been feeling a little nauseated, but I understand this passes after the first trimester.” When I asked my son-in-law, Stephen, what he thought about the news, he said, while he was happy, he was going to need some time to get used to the idea that, as he put it, “We’re pregnant!” That boy may not need as much time as he thinks.