

Eating Together: The Shared Supper and the Covenant Community

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Cultural anthropologists tell us that if they know the eating habits of any culture, they can deduce all the main features of that culture. Tell us, they say, what is eaten, when, where, how, and especially with whom, and we will know the essential things one wants to know about any community. Eating reveals our basic beliefs, attitudes, values and relationships as human beings. It is the ritual way in which we express our spirituality.

Eating, as a metaphor, refers to everything that we consume, and everything of value to which we have access or in which we participate. The way these goods are produced, distributed and shared exposes what we believe in our communities, in our cultures. We cannot hide our real beliefs because they stand revealed in our behaviors. So the questions I will ask are: What is valued? How is it distributed?

Direct and Comparative Values

Value is the desirable. I want to draw attention to two kinds of values: direct values and comparative values. Examples of direct values are the basic needs of life: air, water, food, sleep, and so on, in just the right quantities, neither too little nor too much. Also, among the higher values, there are family love and loyalty, friendship, experience of beauty and other types of goodness, creativity and virtue. These cannot be quantized at all. As long as the value is vested in the thing itself, it is a direct value.

But we also recognize comparative values. Then what is important is not merely that I obtain the desirable thing, but that I get *more* of it than other people. The value is no longer in the thing itself but in the *comparison*, the contrast, the inequality. If I'm the only one on my block to

own a Lexus, I feel that this is really a value, makes me important, is a desirable state of affairs. But if everybody on the street has an identical Lexus, then it doesn't count. The automobile hasn't changed. It's still the magnificent piece of design, technology and machinery that it was. But the *contrast* is gone – my pleasure in having something that others did not have.

Now notice another curious thing. It isn't sufficient that I have what others don't have. They must *wish* that they did have it. If it's an Edsel I've got rather than a Lexus, the comparative value may disappear! The rest of them don't want it. So the value comes from my having something that others *want* but don't *have*. My pleasure, satisfaction, sense of goodness, depends on their disappointment. The value lies in the inequality and the tension.

We can obtain the same sense of value satisfaction from things that we are able to do, such as compete in athletic contests or art contests. Just being able to run fast is not enough. The point is that you run faster than your competitors. The beautiful picture or beautiful song isn't enough in itself. It has to win first prize, be first in popularity.

We can even achieve this sense of value without referring to what we have or what we do. We can make it work on what we are. We can be more valuable by being of the favored sex, or ethnic type or social class. Or even by being better-looking or having a more attractive personality. As long as we can feel that we're superior to somebody in some respect, the comparative value is present. Inequality, contrast, the tension between possession and deprivation: that's the source of this kind of value.

And we've got a whole culture, a whole civilization, a whole world running on this sense of value. This is much of what we're 'feeding on'. In this respect we are not 'eating together'. We've got separate tables for the various kinds of haves and have-nots, segregated restaurants.

We talk about the First World and the Third World, about the nations of the North and the South. Our statistics show that the 20% of the world's people who live in the wealthiest countries receive over 80% of the world's income, while only about 11% goes to the 20% who live in the poorest. That's by national averages. If the global distribution is figured on individual incomes, the average income of the top 20% of people is 150 times that of the lowest 20%.

But the disparities are not just among consumables. They are also present in matters of social respectability. Honor and dignity are not equally distributed. Acknowledgment of competence, respect for another's opinion, are not extended without prejudice to all. Credit for accomplishment does not always go to those who have accomplished,

especially if they belong to a lower social class. And on the negative side, legal punishments have been known to be disproportionately imposed.

Even in small groups or one on one, the same dynamic can be present. Whose word is listened to and accepted? Who makes the decisions? Whose will prevails? Who feels triumphant? Who feels resentment? Why is it that to be treated with 'disrespect' has become an explicit social complaint?

Only rarely does a voice rise above the general melee to cry, 'But this is a ridiculous way to live! We are all human beings. We all need to live, we all want to feel valued and respected. We all want to participate in the community and to express ourselves creatively and to be appreciated. Why have we persuaded ourselves that the only way to live and feel valued is by depriving others? Why can't we realize and enjoy the value in itself rather than insisting on the value in contrast? Why can't we take pleasure in sharing our goods, in eating together?'

What kind of spirituality is revealed by this assumption that dominating the other is the only way to establish ourselves? I'm going to offer an analysis of this 'politics of domination' – organizing our social relations according to how we rank in 'respectability', where we stand in the pecking order – and then I will present an alternative way of seeing and valuing, which I will call, continuing to use the metaphor of eating, the 'shared supper', and I will describe the society that would order itself so as a covenant community. These will be two quite different kinds of spirituality, and I will indicate how we can pass from one to the other.

<i>Domination Paradigm</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Covenant Paradigm</i>
domination	social	friendship
fear	psychological	love of neighbor
alienation (outsiders)	metaphysical	indwelling (insiders)
mutual negation	logical	mutual affirmation

Figure 1. *The Analysis*

We are going to start from the social level and ask what kind of psychology makes that kind of behavior possible. Then we will inquire of a still deeper level, asking what view of how the world is structured enables that kind of psychology. And finally, what kind of logic, what principle of identity is underpinning the worldview. When we have done that, the analysis itself will suggest an alternative. Then, having started from a different logic, we will attain another worldview, which will make possible a new psychology, on which we can successfully build an alternative social structure. So we go down one side of Figure 1, from domination to mutual negation, then come up on the alternative

side, from mutual affirmation to the friendship that characterizes the covenant paradigm.

We can ask why our social ordering so often takes the form of what I've called here the domination paradigm. Pride is usually cited as the vice underlying our penchant for power, but I think it is really fear that drives us to seek our security in such a way. The sense of insecurity is a basic experience for us all, and we do most of what we do in an attempt to allay it. So I say that the social order of domination is based on a psychology of fear. That's the second layer down in the analysis, the paradigm of domination being the first.

What kind of insecurity is it? And what kind of fear? We feel, or fear, that we don't have *enough* of what it takes to stay alive and to keep or attain those values that we perceive as making life worth living. So we are always trying to get more and trying to hold tightly what we already have. Loss is always a possibility, and serious loss is disaster. Loss of reputation may be worse than loss of wealth.

But all the various kinds of loss really are reducible to our sense of an insecure hold on being itself. We are not the kind of being that can preserve itself in all contingencies. Thus we are afraid and we try to protect ourselves by manipulating whatever goods and values we can affect. This is the metaphysical layer implied by the psychology of fear.

Our basic metaphysical outlook in this paradigm of domination is of a collection of separated beings, all outside of one another, all 'other' to one another. It is a metaphysics of alienation, 'otherness'. And this metaphysics, the third layer down in our analysis, is in turn made possible by a logic of mutual negation. Each of us identifies our own being by saying how we are not any of the others. I am I insofar as I am not you. And you are you insofar as you are not I. We logically negate one another, we practice mutual negation, as our way of defining ourselves and claiming what being we can. This is the fourth and bottom layer of the analysis and the level at which we can propose an alternative.

The alternative is almost obvious. If mutual negation is the foundation to be shifted, let us try mutual affirmation. Let us say, I affirm you, and may you affirm me. Instead of seeing and saying all the ways in which I am different from others (and hopefully superior), let me focus on all the ways in which I can promote the well-being of others. Let me define myself as the one who enters into the other and receives the other into myself. Instead of mutual exclusion, let us practice mutual inclusion. Let us discover how to say, 'When I am most myself, I am in you and you are in me. This is the deeper truth beyond my being outside and not you'.

This puts an alternative dynamic into our lives. We are acquainted

with the way of acting in which I seek to gain goods for myself, whether material or social or intellectual. The energy of my action moves out from me, secures the value and returns to me, bringing what I desired. But suppose I send forth my energy of concern and of action with the intention of bringing good to my neighbor. Suppose we constitute a group in which each of us focuses on seeing that each other one has the goods of living and finding life worthwhile. We won't have to worry about ourselves. Everyone will be taken care of.

This, obviously, has to be done within a group, in a community, in which all the members agree to direct their behaviors in this way. That is why I've called it a 'covenant' community. We have to covenant with each other to live this way and not try to take advantage of others. But this is not so impossible as it may seem. When relations are expected to be of long standing, many more interactions with the same parties in the future, then cooperation will prevail over exploitation.

The logic of mutual affirmation enables us to see the world differently. If I say, I am I insofar as I affirm you, extend myself to you, experience your well-being as my well-being, then I am not outside you. I can say I am in you, and you are in me. Instead of a metaphysics of outsidership, alienation, we have a metaphysics of insidership, inclusion, neighborliness.

Mystical Realization and Deductions

But how do we attain such an attitude? Here we have to look more deeply into human nature than we usually do. Usually we see only the embedded selfishness. That comes, I believe, from a mistake in the way we identify ourselves. If you are asked who you are, you ordinarily reply by telling about your family connections and your work. Asked to describe yourself, you enumerate your physical characteristics, personality type, history, allegiances and affiliations such as nationality and religion, accomplishments and aspirations. In your own mind you may also feature disadvantages from which you have suffered. All these descriptions seem to constitute your selfhood. But do they really? If you take your consciousness deep inside yourself, to the very center of your sense of being 'I', you find that it doesn't have any physical, psychological or social connection characteristics. They could all be different, and your sense of existing as a point of consciousness would still be exactly the same. Your inner self *transcends* all those descriptions, you are *independent* of them.

This is a breakthrough discovery and has significant and powerful consequences. The first one is that, if you are not your descriptions, then you can't be compared with anyone else. Comparisons are made among

descriptions. So your value isn't coming from comparison because it isn't coming from description. This means that your value is immeasurable. It can't be rated or ranked. You are absolutely unique in your conscious personhood and infinitely precious.

The second consequence of this realization is that you now realize that you, the conscious person who transcends the descriptions are absolutely secure. Insecurities threaten only the descriptions. Free of insecurity, you are free of fear. Being free of fear, you do not need to put others down in order to augment yourself.

We come to realize that our true personhood transcends all our descriptions of body, history, personality, social connections, occupation, achievements, misfortunes. Each of us is a jewel, precious, irreplaceable, in our essence as an incomparable 'Child of God'. Thus, we are unconditionally secure in our personhood, which is absolutely unique, our true self. Therefore there is no need to protect, defend, augment, aggrandize this self, nor to find that it is superior/inferior to others.

Figure 2. *The Mystical Realization*

This insight into our true self beyond the descriptions brings us to a further realization and insight into human nature. What is true of you, of your deep nature, your metaphysical structure, must be true of all other human beings. They too transcend their descriptions and are incomparably precious conscious persons. In this respect we are all alike. And so we discover a marvelous power in ourselves. We can know what it is like to be any other human being on this deep level, beyond the variety of differences in the descriptions. As we feel the preciousness, the value, of our own personal existence, so we feel the preciousness, the value, of each other person's existence. And consequently, as we will the well-being of our own life, so we will the well-being of every other life. It is characteristic of human nature to do this. Selfishness is not the deepest level of our being.

Social ranking is characteristic of many species of animals, and challenging for a higher position in the pecking order is practiced daily. But this is not a justification for human beings' behaving this way. Human beings are more than animals. We can perceive the deep levels of reality, we can reach beyond the surface features of a merely finite existence. We can find that in ourselves which transcends all the values that have to be measured to be present. We can realize the immeasurable.

Take away descriptions: leave I AM. Security unblocks outflowing caring energy. No need to defend oneself, so the natural tendency of

person-energy moves out to others. To be is to communicate Being. This is natural. You don't have to push it.

The consequence of this realization is that the dynamic, the pattern of our energies of attitude and action, becomes spontaneously and naturally outgoing. If our deepest intent does not have to be secure and advantage our set of descriptions over those of the people around us, if instead our deepest intent is to appreciate and affirm and support other persons, then our energy goes out to them and rests in them instead of circling back to us with some preference for ourselves. And since, with the breakthrough of this realization at the community level, they feel the same way toward us, we will be well supported and valued. This, of course, requires a covenanted community, and I will come to that presently. For the moment, look at items 2 and 3 in Figure 3.

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| <p>1. We are all God's children,
with whom God is delighted.</p> <p>2. Therefore, we are all equal.</p> <p>3. Therefore, we must respect one another equally.</p> <p>4. Therefore, we must share our goods, material and spiritual.</p> <p><i>If we all do this, we will have a good life and promote the cosmic creation.</i></p> |
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Figure 3. *Deductions*

The outgoing energy takes the form first of deep appreciation of the value of every other person, and this appreciation expresses itself in behaviors of respect. We see that we are all equal as unique persons whose value cannot be measured or compared or ranked, so we treat one another with great respect. The deep insight is now beginning to affect what we do in the world of descriptions. Deference customs and language will be affected, social exclusions will have to be rethought, access to community activity and responsibility may have to shift, and so on. On the level of personal respect, we are beginning to share the table. We will know we are doing it when we literally eat together.

And the final consequence of the insight into deep self-being is that we want to share our descriptive goods. It becomes strongly important to us that everyone else have enough of the right food and water and protection against the weather, and access to various other material goods. We want all others to have access to healthcare and education and opportunity for creative expression and sharing. Now look at Figure 1 again (p. 19).

If we now retrace our steps through the four layers of the analysis, we find that the *logic* of mutual affirmation (rather than mutual negation) gives us a *metaphysics* of unity and security (rather than alienation),

which makes possible the *psychology* of friendship. It finally becomes possible to love one's neighbor as one's self. And thus at the *social* level we can come to the possibility of creating the covenant community.

The Covenant Community

The covenant community is based on the idea of the shared supper. Everyone brings something and everyone eats from any of the dishes brought. Giving, sharing and enjoying one another are the values celebrated in the supper. No one tries to extract advantage. No one undertakes to make comparisons. People don't put their names on the dishes they have brought or expect to win prizes for them. That's not the point of a shared supper. What we are practising, focusing on and celebrating is the sharing itself. By our acts of giving to all the others we have created a net, a fabric of the threads of our interactions, our inter-relationships, criss-crossing in all directions. I like to call it 'cross-feeding' -- as in the story of the long spoons.¹

Among the qualities that mark the supper is inclusiveness, welcoming as peers all sorts of people who might, in other settings, be classified and ranked. The supper is the alternative to societies based on classification and ranking.

In this community we trust one another. We feel safe. No one is trying to make use of us, to demean us, to ignore or neglect us. On the contrary, each of the others can be trusted to be seeking our well-being. Therefore, we all feel confident, relaxed and free from tension, and consequently creative and generous.

Special mention may be made of the community being characterized by forgiveness. This word is often, perhaps usually, confused with the word 'pardon'. We think of it as not holding against someone what they did to hurt us. That is the function of pardon, which means we will not hurt you in return. But forgiveness is something else. It is not an attitude toward the past but toward the future. The English word is derived from a German word, *vergeben*, from which we learn that the English prefix 'for' is to be understood as an intensive. It's as if we put 'super' in front of a word. For-giveness is super-giving. It's intense willing that all be well with the other person. The implication is that this willing takes place regardless of the past, but the focus is on the goodwill toward the future. You can imagine the productive, creative, and enjoyable energy generated by all the lines of interaction in a community practicing this kind of sharing. This is summarized in Figure 4, 'The Social Expression'.

1. See Appendix at the end of this text.

Basing ourselves on our mystical realization, we can now make together a just (rendering the respect and care due), egalitarian (all equally honorable, no classes), social (interpersonal, sharing, intercommunicating), unity (all-inclusive, undivided, belonging to each other) system (in which every member contributes, participates, benefits).

Figure 4. *Social Expression*

The covenant community is structured by the intention to enjoy *shared* values rather than *contrast* values. What makes life worth living is the productivity, creativity and happiness we share together. We don't believe that our sense of satisfaction in life is going to come from having or doing or being more or better than our neighbors. We have seen that that attitude is a trap; it doesn't produce happiness, no matter how far we pursue it, but only more tension and uneasiness. What brings vitality and energy for creativity and rejoicing is the security found in the covenant community built by good will. False tensions can be relaxed and attention turned to appreciating, caring for, enjoying one another and our wonderful world.

Conclusion

The thesis I am explaining and defending urges — as you see in Figure 3 — that *if we all do this*, we will have a good life and promote the cosmic creation. When we have done the analysis, we can explain it to others. We ourselves can live in this alternative way, thus modeling the life to those around us. We can encourage others who are trying to do the same. We can actually form small communities in which we do the sharing I've been talking about, taking care not to recognize any social divisions that would either exclude certain people or constitute ranks within the community. As we develop this life, we will discover that united people really have enough moral power to turn the world around.

Finally, what is important to see is that, idealistic as all this is, it is not impossible. Human beings are intelligent. We can analyse our situation and see what is true. We are sensitive and have the marvelous power of empathy. We can feel the higher values and dedicate ourselves to them. And human beings are creative. We can face tangled problems and solve them. We can bring into being structures that did not exist before. When we have the will to do something, we can usually, eventually, find a way to do it. We can believe in these powers of the human being and continue to strive for the values we care for, having faith that together we can make a world in which we can all sit down to a shared supper, happily eating together.

APPENDIX: The Long-Handled Spoons

A delegation from the local religious assembly asked to be granted some insight into Hell. They were shown a lovely park with many long tables loaded with luscious food. Good-looking people in fine clothes sat on either side of the tables facing one another. They were trying to eat the attractive food. But they were impeded by the fact that fastened to their arms were long-handled spoons—three feet long. It was impossible to bring the bowl of the spoon to one's mouth. So, in spite of the lavish provisions, they were completely frustrated.

The delegation members were impressed but puzzled. They asked if they might now see Heaven. They were shown the same identical situation—beautiful surroundings, gorgeous food, even the same long-handled spoons. But these people were eating and enjoying the food. How? They were feeding each other across the table.