

# Goodness Will Prevail, Even Among the Ruins

It is now more than two months since Russia invaded Ukraine, and the scenes and screams of war have now become familiar news. We in the comfortable West sit in our comfortable living rooms and lament the horror of war, while nursing a glass of wine or munching on after-dinner snacks.

This is not to demean our activities. I think the tragedy of war weighs upon our minds and hearts, but we feel helpless and have no clear direction as to what we should do to alleviate the misery of others. One thing is clear, however: all is not right with the world.

I have been watching the British Netflix series, *Call the Midwife*, a story based on the memoirs of Jennifer Worth. The plot follows the work of midwives and the nuns of Nonnatus House, a nursing convent and part of an Anglican religious order, coping with the medical problems in the deprived Poplar district of London's desperately poor East End in the 1950s.

The Sisters and midwives carry out many nursing duties across the community, with about 80 and 100 babies being born each month in Poplar alone. The primary work is to help bring safe childbirth to women in the area and to look after their countless newborns. Having now sat through all ten episodes, I can say that childbirth is simply miraculous.

One of the most significant aspects of this mystery is the emergence of a tiny human infant with an attached umbilical cord. With each birth, the cord is clamped and cut and

must be done so quickly and efficiently, so as to avoid complications.

I have been pondering the significance of the umbilical cord because it seems to symbolize a significant dimension of human personhood. We are born tethered to the womb of our mothers, but once the cord is cut, we must discover for ourselves the tethering of our own true identity.

We are an umbilical species with an innate need to be tethered to a personal source of love. One of the most beautiful moments of birth is when the newborn is placed in the arms of its mother; the gaze between mother and child is ecstatic and ineffable. It is a gaze of unity and wholeness. We are a people who longs to be tethered, seekers of wholeness and unity. But this must be done in a healthy and integrated way, lest we become "naval gazers."

There are many different types of mammals with umbilical cords; however, the human is born with a more complex brain that bears a capacity for complex symbols and language. In this respect, the human person is unique.

A person not only knows but knows that one knows. I would suggest that the umbilical cord represents the knowing process that corresponds to the religious dimension of human personhood. We grow to realize that, in our root reality, we are tethered to an ultimate source of life, and we long to be one with it. Primal spiritualities express this tethered oneness in community and ritual;



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axial persons express it in solitary pursuit religiously, as individuals of prayer and worship, culturally, as consumers and competitors.

One of the great meltdowns of modernity was the loss of a tethered center and, accordingly, the loss of a metanarrative. Life was more harmonious among smaller, tribal, agrarian communities because the cosmic umbilical cord was the basis of shared communal life. Story, myth and ritual strengthened this cord of life, and one's personal identity drew its strength from this bonded life. Axial consciousness and, with it, the rise of the individual, initiated the severing of the cosmic umbilical cord.

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The maxim of Plotinus, a significant forerunner of Christian spirituality, aptly described the human journey as “the flight of the alone to the Alone.” The separation of human and cosmos, following Descartes’ philosophy, disconnected the human from the whole. The scientific pursuit of the new Adam, perfected by knowledge, became symbolized by the astronaut, while the conquerer of the frontier was symbolized by the Marlboro man.

The severing of the cosmic umbilical cord is a Western phenomenon, and the prime culprit of this loss is western religion, in a particular way, Christianity. The one religion which claimed that God was born human, a religion of God-birth, should have been the religion that celebrates the umbilical cord of all cosmic life. Instead, Christianity boarded the train of Greek metaphysics which carried the weight of otherworldliness and the supernatural, a train which crashed into the walls of twentieth century modern science. Eastern religions, especially the Asian religions, have found a deep resonance with modern science, especially quantum physics, and have embraced the complementarity between science and religion, enhanced by process philosophy.

But the West has not paid much attention to the East. As a result, we have no cosmic umbilical cord or center of connection. The rapid rise of computer technology and the deluge of information that now comes across our screens is fracturing us further at a very rapid rate. Our rather primitive brains cannot handle all the information filtering through our neural circuits. Consequently, it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to think clearly or discern a global ethics or create new corporate and political structures that foster sustainability and community. Instead, we are technologically-tribalized and increasingly polarized. Technology has splintered time into millions of bits of information moving through circuits at rapid speeds, causing our planet to become, like a speeding train, out of control.

I am writing out of a deep concern for own imminent future. The symbol of the umbilical cord expresses the reality of our deepest existence, a reality that begins with the humble birth of the human person and is intended to grow into a conscious, spiritual tethering to an absolute center of existence, in which we truly know ourselves in love. That is, the umbilical cord symbolizes the existential nature of religion. As Teilhard de Chardin noted, religion is first a biological phenomenon before it is a spiritual one. He wrote: “To my mind, the religious phenomenon, taken as a whole, is simply the reaction of the universe as such, of collective consciousness and human action in process of development.”[i] Ursula King states: “Teilhard is one of the few modern thinkers on religion for whom evolution provided the dominant note of his entire work.”[ii]

The relationship between cosmos and religion is so fundamental to the earth that in 1916 Teilhard wrote: “Religion and evolution should neither be confused nor divorced. They are destined to form one single continuous organism, in which their respective lives prolong, are dependent on, and complete one another, without being identified or lost. . . . Since it is in our age that the duality has become so markedly apparent, it is for us to effect this synthesis.”[iii] Teilhard said that the true function of religion is “to sustain and spur on the progress of life.”[iv]

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The emergence and growth of religion corresponds to the growth of humankind; the emergence of the human in nature brings with him/her the emergence of a divine pole to give one balance, as one is drawn up ahead. Religion corresponds to our transcendent nature, and without a viable religious dimension, humans will orient their transcendent dimension toward unhealthy ideals, such as consumerism, greed and violence.

For Teilhard, religion is primarily “on the level of consciousness and human action, rather than on the level of institutions or belief systems, except insofar as these systems manifest and give direction to the former.”[v] In his view, no one religion can satisfy the religious spirit of the earth because no religion is directly concerned with the universe and its evolution towards Omega, that is, a cosmic center of universal love.

I often wonder what kind of world would have emerged in the 21st century if we followed the intuitions and insights of relational thinkers such as Teilhard, Alfred North Whitehead and Sri Aurobindo. Would our cosmic umbilical cord have been realigned with a new cosmic center?

Alas, evolution and religion did not grow together and now we have a world spiraling downward. Anything spinning this fast is bound to fall hard.

We are simply not prepared for what awaits us up ahead; the future is chaotic and unpredictable. The earth is delicately fragile. The other day I was walking around the beautiful park of the Holy Child Sisters’ motherhouse. Birds were chirping amidst the branches of the trees and the beauty of the moment was, indeed, a religious experience. I wondered briefly if the birds are chirping in the Ukraine, amidst the bombed-out homes of so many innocent people.

Does nature continue to live in hope while we humans destroy the earth, or are both humans and birds destroyed by those who seek absolute power? One thing is clear, suffering and death are woven into the overall process of life in evolution.

We here in the West are not exempt from what befalls our global community; neither are we prepared for a life of bare means. But we can begin each day to prepare ourselves by embracing the simple moments of life’s goodness, breathing in gratitude and breathing out compassion. A simple prayer of thanks and a simple yes to what life sends our way can help us each day to contribute to this creative process of life. It is important that we ask ourselves each day, “to whom or to what am I tethered?” What source of unity gives me life and sustains my life? The more truthfully we answer these questions, the freer we are to love and to forgive, to let go and participate in the great unfolding of life, even in its cruciform nature.



As I conclude these thoughts, I am reminded of the profound wisdom of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jewess, whose life was cut short by the brutalities of the Holocaust. Etty developed a deep friendship with God in the midst of the horrors of Auschwitz, where starvation and death occupied daily life. She was deeply influenced by the Austrian poet Maria Rainer Rilke and his emphasis on the *Weltinnenraum* or “inner universe.”

She wrote in her diary: “Through every being single space extends: outer space within.”[vi] The inner universe and the outer universe are a continuous flow of life so that, even in the midst of war and destruction, one may see goodness and find peace, if one’s inner universe is tethered in love.

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In one of her diary entries, she wrote: “The rottenness of others is in us, too... I really see no other solution than to turn inward and to root out all the rottenness there. I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we have first changed ourselves. And that seems to me the only lesson to be learned from this war. That we must look into ourselves and nowhere else.”[vii] She goes on to say:

*Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears his grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate. But if you do not clear a decent shelter for your sorrow, and instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge—from which new sorrows will be born for others—then sorrow will never cease in this world and will multiply. And if you have given sorrow the space its gentle origins demand, then you may truly say: life is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and so rich that it makes you want to believe in God.*[viii]

Etty’s inner spirit of light, shining amidst the darkness of human destruction, bears witness to the hope that lies within us, a hope born from the spiritual cord of infinite light and love. Now is the time for us to become aware of our most important connections, our ultimate tethering, for what grounds us in this moment can sustain us in the future. The world is weak and fragile, but God is eternal newness in love, and love is what makes life beautiful. This is what Etty Hillesum realized:

I shall wait patiently until the words have grown inside me, the words that proclaim how good and beautiful it is to live in Your world, oh God, despite everything we human beings do to one another.

It still all comes down to the same thing: life is beautiful. And I believe in God. And I want to be there right in the thick of what people call ‘horror’ and still be able to say: life is beautiful.[ix]

## Notes:

[i] Teilhard de Chardin, “How I Believe,” in *Christianity and Evolution*, 118-19.

[ii] Ursula King, *Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions: Spirituality and Mysticism in an Evolutionary World* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2011), 179

[iii] King, *Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions*: 179-80.

[iv] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy*, trans. J. M. Cohen (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 44.

[v] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Activation of Energy,” trans. Rene Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 240 – 42.

[vi] G. Meins and S. Cotier, *Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 33.

[vii] Etty Hillesum, “An Interrupted Life.” <https://blog.magis-center.com/blog/etty-hillesums-interrupted-life>.

[viii] Etty Hillesum, “An Interrupted Life.” <https://blog.magis-center.com/blog/etty-hillesums-interrupted-life>.

[ix] Etty Hillesum, “An Interrupted Life.” <https://blog.magis-center.com/blog/etty-hillesums-interrupted-life>.



