

WORKING TOGETHER IN CONVERSATIONAL MOTION—OR WHY WE ARE MORE LIKE A WING THAN A CONVENTIONAL CHURCH COMMUNITY

Posted on June 24, 2019 by Andrew Brown

READINGS:



WORKING TOGETHER by David Whyte

from *The House of Belonging*

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We shape our self
to fit this world

and by the world
are shaped again.

The visible
and the invisible
working together
in common cause,
to produce
the miraculous.

I am thinking of the way
the intangible air
passed at speed
round a shaped wing
easily
holds our weight.

So may we, in this life
trust

to those elements
we have yet to see

or imagine,
and look for the true

shape of our own self,
by forming it well

to the great
intangibles about us.

Written for the presentation of The Collier Trophy to The Boeing Company marking the introduction of the new 777 passenger jet.

EVERYTHING IS WAITING FOR YOU by David Whyte

from *Everything is Waiting for You*

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Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden

transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you freedom.
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.
The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into
the conversation. The kettle is singing
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots
have left their arrogant aloofness and
seen the good in you at last. All the birds
and creatures of the world are unutterably
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

—o0o—

ADDRESS

Working Together in Conversational Motion—or why we are more like a wing than a conventional church community

As most of you here know, every week, following the address, there is an opportunity to begin a new, or to continue an old, conversation. It can be the time to agree with the thoughts I have brought before you or it can be a time to disagree with them and to suggest other lines of thought we might consider. It is a time to raise questions and to see what kind of responses to them we might individually or collectively make. It's not usually the time to argue combatively, as if it were necessary to come up with a definitive "winning" argument about this or that matter because the general aim is — if we are lucky and as the prayer which marks the end of this part of the service says — simply to create an environment in which we might "receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity and brief moments of insight, to gather them up for the precious gifts that they are and, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown."

This kind of endeavour is, of course, far, far from being the standard practice in churches because it's perceived as being something way too risky. In conservative settings the primary risk is that it would be the opportunity for heresies to appear which might represent unwelcome challenges to the authoritative, official, fixed beliefs of the church and to the authority of the preacher as the mouthpiece of the same church. In the liberal setting the risks are different, but what are they? Well, I think there are many, but here's one expression of them as described in a soon to be published guidebook about Cambridge in which [Grahame Davies, the Welsh poet, author, editor, literary critic, journalist and assistant private secretary to the Prince of Wales](#), visits various places in and around the city in the conversational company of local people:

[After giving the address, Andrew] offered his microphone to the congregation so they can comment, rebut or question. A risky manoeuvre. I've seen this kind of thing go badly wrong, and I braced myself for ramblings about UFOs, conspiracy theories, ex-partners. But I needn't have worried. The questions were concise, thoughtful, insightful, and Andrew responded to each with honesty and imagination. There was so little belief in the supernatural that I could hardly say it strengthened my belief in God. But it certainly strengthened my belief in human beings.

[Following this visit to the church in January 2018, on two later memorable and enjoyable occasions Grahame and I visited the *Gog Magog Hills* and *Fleam Dyke* and it is those visits/conversations which form the major part of my (very) small contribution to the book. I'll let you know when it is published.]

Anyway, I hope that like me, you appreciate Grahame's words. However, some of you — and certainly many outside this local church — may be disturbed by Grahame's comment that, although his visit strengthened his belief in human beings, it didn't strengthen his belief in God. Doesn't this seem to cut against the very purpose of a church?

It's a good question to which I have one, important immediate response. It is that, for a long time now, and under both my own ministry and our minister emeritus Frank Walker, we've been a community which has consistently shared the desire of the Cambridge theologian/philosopher [Don Cupitt](#) and the associated [Sea of Faith](#) movement to explore and promote religious faith not as something supernatural but as a **human** creation.

Given this I was, personally, very pleased to read Grahame's words because they suggest to me that we're succeeding in this task and are actually offering people an appropriately sceptical, enquiring and thoughtful approach to religion understood as a human — and not a supernatural — phenomenon.

But, having said this, something further needs to be said lest it be thought that the thing which keeps us aloft as a religious body — and which strengthened Davies' faith in humanity rather

than a supernatural “God” — is, somehow, believed to be a wholly and completely human-centred and dependent phenomenon. It is this “something” which brings me back to where I began this morning, namely, with conversation. As far as I am concerned the something that keeps us aloft, and which in traditional religious language is often called “God”, is not a supernatural being at all but natural conversation.

In the Gospel of John we read the author’s famous conjecture that: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

I want to agree with the author of the gospel but with a massive caveat attached, one which I have noted many times before, namely that the “word” of which I speak about here is not to be understood as the final (capital W) “Word” of God but something much more modest, namely, the (lowercase w) word uttered in this or that moment in this or that poem, story or address. This, in turn, means there is always-already the need for the next word, and the next, and the next . . . In the beginning there may be the (lowercase) “word” but never forget, as [J. L. Austin](#) memorably noted, there exists no such thing as the “Last Word” on any matter — “in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded.” ([Philosophical Papers, OUP, 1979, p. 185](#)),

To help you to begin to see what I mean, here, for a moment, imagine yourself on a plane — something which, for ecological reasons, I fervently hope none of us here will actually ever do again unless required by some genuine, unavoidable emergency reason.

For me, one of the oddest things about the whole experience of flying was always the apparent unwillingness of most of the passengers onboard openly to acknowledge the reality of what they were doing. On every flight I’ve been on I have looked around the cabin only to see people with their heads doggedly buried in books, magazines or films steadfastly refusing to take the opportunity to look out the window at the astonishing natural vistas unfolding around, above and below them.

Having said that, as someone who suffers from a pretty extreme fear of heights and flying, at a visceral, emotional level I quite understand this behaviour because whenever I have managed to pluck up enough courage to look out the window, after the gasp of initial amazement at seeing, for example, the magnificent snowy peaks of French Alps thousands of feet below me, I all too quickly become acutely (and panically) aware that, whoooooah, I’m up here with absolutely no visible means of support.

But even someone like me who is pathologically fearful of flying like is, occasionally, gifted with a brief and comforting moment of insight as they look out the window.

Although it is much more complicated than we learnt at school ([see here for a NASA website](#)

[exploring the nuances](#)) as I'm sure most of you know, as air flows over the wing of a swiftly moving aircraft a region of low-pressure forms above it whilst, below it, there is a region of higher pressure. This phenomenon is, of course, what lifts the plane into the air. As the pressure above the wing reduces there simultaneously occurs a sudden fall in temperature of the air above the wing and, if there is any water vapour present in the atmosphere, it condenses above the wings and there before you your means of support is suddenly, we might say almost "miraculously", made visible.

When one is lucky enough to see this tell-tale sign over the graceful curve of the wing you are suddenly made aware of the fact that the natural forces holding the plane up are, as we are inclined to say, "as solid as a rock".

But, as the contemporary poet [David Whyte](#) observes, this support is not some static, inert thing suddenly made visible but a highly dynamic phenomenon only made possible thanks to "a [constant] conversation between the velocity of the plane and the shape of the wing" and that were we ever to "lose either end of the conversation" we would be arriving back on the ground a lot earlier than we'd like.

[Whyte uses this image](#) to help us glimpse another truth, namely, that, although we can and should always be concerned about how we shape **ourselves** into this or that kind of person, like a wing we "don't get to choose between the shape of [ourselves] and what's passing around [us]". We need to remember that we are only ever one side of a conversation that's always going on, not only with other people, but with the whole world of things around us including those small, oft-missed, quotidian things of which Whyte speaks in his poem "Everything is waiting for you": soap-dishes, window latches, stairs, doors, telephone speakers, kettles, cooking pots and all birds and creatures of the world.

Consequently, it's not right to say that in this church it is **only** we humans who are doing the heavy lifting which keeps our church aloft because, in truth, it's **the conversational motion** that does the heavy lifting just as the conversational motion between the shape and velocity of the wing and the air does the heavy lifting for an aircraft.

In this image, "God", if that is the right word to use — and I often doubt that it is — "God" is not to be found in either the flows of the wind over the wing or in the wing itself, but rather **in the event that is their meeting in motion**. When they do so meet there is lift and so we fly.

What is true of the plane is, I think, also true of our community. [As the Dutch protestant pastor and Christian atheist Klaas Hendrikse insists](#), "God" is word that should be reserved for certain types of "experience, or human experience" (see the postscript below for a clearer indication of what kind of experience I have in mind) and that when this "experience happens", it's a down-to-

earth thing “between you and me, between people, that’s where it can happen. God is not a being at all.” For Hendrikse — and for me — “God” is a word we sometimes apply **retroactively** to the experiences which **happen between people in conversation**. Our meetings together in **conversational motion** is what holds our church community aloft and, as a religious force, it feels, as we might colloquially say, “solid as a rock” — but only in so far as **both sides** of the conversation are continued. If either “side” of the conversation stops we, like a stalled plane, will fall like a stone.

I realise that, for the most part, and for most people, we must appear to be a community that is flying without any visible means of support and, for some, this can be a very frightening and disturbing thing, even as our apparent bravery in doing this occasionally strengthens their belief in human beings.

But, as I hope you can now see, this is really only ever half the story. We, here, know this because every so often when the conditions are just right, our conversations together gift us with the graceful, tell-tale sight of “condensation” over the shape of our community — over our “wing” if you like — and, in those moments, we sometimes compelled to point at the “condensation” and say, “There, that’s what **we** mean by God”.

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POSTSCRIPT

All of the above put me in mind of the definition of God preferred by [John Dewey in his “A Common Faith” \(2nd ed., Yale University Press, 2013, p. 47\)](#): *“We are in the presence neither of ideals completely embodied in existence nor yet of ideals that are merely rootless ideals, fantasies or utopias. For there are forces in nature and society that generate and support the ideals. They are further unified by the action that gives them coherence and solidarity. It is this active relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name ‘God’. I would not insist that the name must be given.”*