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Martin Buber's Sweet Sacrament of Dialogue

A person can try with all his or her strength to resist the presence of "God", and yet one tastes God in the strict sacrament of dialogue. -Martin Buber

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ABSTRACT

Martin Buber (1878-1965) stands among the most significant philosophers of the 20th century. While many studies have attempted to summarize the scope of Buber's writings, here I will highlight some key implications of Buber's basic insight that there exists a deeply reciprocal bond between genuine interhuman dialogue and the divine-human relationship. Buber characterized authentic dialogue as sacramental, and he suggested that it included four elemental aspects: turning, addressing, listening, and responding. Every genuine dialogue opens out toward transcendence insofar as God's presence can be glimpsed as "absolute Person," can be tasted as the spirit of elemental togetherness. The fundamental result of engaging in sacramental dialogue, both with others and with God, both in public discourse and private prayer, is the renewal of the entire person. As Buber repeatedly described it, to become who we are created to be—dialogical partners with God—it is the responsibility of every person to participate in God's creative, revealing, and redemptive presence in that part of the world where we stand.**

(Note: For Part I refer to Bulletin No. 1 of the Association of the Friends and Sponsors of the Martin Buber House - January 2016;
For Part II refer to Bulletin No. 2 - June 2016)

Part III

BECOMING WHO WE ARE CREATED TO BE

That prayer and interhuman dialogue are inter-dependently sacramental is not just an idea, it is a living expression of being dialogically created (“in the beginning, God said: let us create... human beings”), dialogically constructed (evolved, raised, educated, developed), and dialogically called into personal existence (“as I say Thou I become I.”). For Buber, the fundamental result of engaging in sacramental dialogue, both with others and with God, both in public discourse and in private prayer, is the renewal of the entire person. As Buber repeatedly described it, to become who we are created to be, it is the responsibility of every person to participate dialogically with God’s creative, revelatory, and redemptive voice in that part of the world where we stand. “The environment which I feel to be the natural one,” Buber wrote, “the situation which has been assigned to me as by fate, the things that happen to me day after day, the things that claim me day after day—these contain my essential task and such fulfillment of existence as is open to me.”ⁱⁱ

Buber’s basic insight into the deep reciprocity between our interactions with each other on the one hand and with God on the other engenders trust that God is forever present in all genuine relationships. Because God addresses us through relationships of dialogue, calling us to again and again transform the world, such trust, for Buber, is not simply an affirmation of belief in an abstract truth but rather an existential posture based on our direct experience of God as one always ready to enter into conversation with us. Turning to God, for Buber, is like turning to your best friend, the perfect listener: someone who not only hears every word, but also hears our thoughts, even those we are not yet aware of; one who completely understands what we mean by everything that we say and don’t say; and one who always responds honestly, compassionately, and justly.

This basic theme is presented clearly in Buber’s addresses on Judaism delivered in New York in November and December of 1951. At the end of his first address, “Judaism and Civilization,” Buber encouraged his audience to recognize themselves amidst the political facts of life. He then asked a provocative question: “How can we become what we are?” In other words, how is it possible for human

beings to really become genuinely *human*? What do we need to learn, practice and cultivate in order to become the relational persons we have been created to be?

Buber began to suggest an answer to this question in his second address, “The Silent Question,” by asking another, more profound question: “Who, indeed, can help me if [you can] not?”ⁱⁱⁱ In this question, Buber was capturing a deep longing within the human spirit to fully trust existence. He was also suggesting an answer to his first question—“How can we become who or what we are?” Rejecting the “I” of self-enclosed pride and isolated egoism, Buber identified humankind working in concert with God to help each other fulfill our humanity. Faith, Buber noted, forms a bridge between “two firm pillars, man’s ‘I’ and the ‘I’ of the eternal partner.”^{iv} In other words, two seemingly contradictory insights are true at the same time: we cannot satisfactorily answer the question of who we are meant to be without divine assistance; and yet, we are the only ones who can answer that question with and for each other. For this reason, Buber concluded his second address by saying,

you yourself must begin. Existence will remain meaningless for you if you yourself do not penetrate into it with active love and if you do not in this way discover its meaning for yourself. Everything is waiting to be hallowed [made holy] by you... Meet the world with the fullness of your being and you shall meet God.^v

The fulfillment of our humanness, Buber told his audience, is waiting to be realized and disclosed through our active participation in the fullness of creation. The “active mysticism” of which Bergson spoke is found precisely here, in Buber’s affirmation of the communal nature of our relationship with God.

According to Friedman, Buber’s third address in his series of lectures on Judaism, “The Dialogue Between Heaven and Earth,” “reveals the coming together of Buber’s interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and his philosophy of dialogue with an explicitness that cannot be found in any of his other writings.”^{vi} Buber opened his third and final talk with a comparison between Hebrew scripture

and the sacred texts of other living religious traditions. Unlike all other scripture, he claimed, the Hebrew Bible is full of a dialogue between heaven and earth. Again and again, God addresses humans directly, thus inviting us to stand in “the dialogic situation.” For Buber, God’s plan for humanity was to bring us more fully into dialogue with God. God invites us into a partnership with both the present One who creates everything, including the dialogic situation, and with creation itself, through which the eternal partner addresses us. Buber affirmed, in this third address, that the God of scripture continues to speak “within the limits and under the conditions of a particular biographical or historical situation.” For Buber,

In the infinite language of events and situations, eternally changing, but plain to the truly attentive, transcendence speaks to our hearts at the essential moments of personal life. And there is a language in which we can answer it; it is the language of our actions and attitudes, our reactions and our abstentions; the totality of these answers is what we may call our answering-for-ourselves in the most proper sense of the expression.^{vii}

And we? How does it fare with us? How do we relate to the ever-new presence of the divine dialogian? When we turn wholly toward one another, the substance of what we speak assumes the cadence of an inwardness that stirs one’s heart of hearts. The encounter itself becomes transparent into the absolute.^{viii} Drawing on this culminating insight, Buber maintained that if we are to affirm that it is “God” who speaks at the innermost core of our being when we are addressed then it is necessary to forget everything we imagined we knew of God ... [to] keep nothing handed down or learned or self-contrived, no shred of knowledge, and [be] plunged into the night...If we named the speaker of this speech God, then it is always the God of a moment, a moment’s God...In such a way, out of the givers of the signs, the speakers of the words in lived life, out of the moment’s God there arises for us with a single identity, the Lord of the voice, the One.^{ix}

This implies, for Buber, that God is always becoming new and that God's presence can never be tied to dogma or ritual. God continuously enters into renewed, unique relationships with us. Buber certainly had this insight in mind in 1957 when he wrote in his Postscript to *I and Thou* that God's voice addresses us by penetrating through every genuine interhuman relationship, especially when the words of others stand out as an "instruction, message, [or] demand" that we take a responsible stand.^x

The transformative power of sacramental dialogue can finally be exemplified by a personal anecdote from Buber's life. On Easter of 1914, Buber met at Potsdam with men from various European countries in order to discuss possible ways of responding to the conditions that would produce World War I. Buber noted that conversations among them were "marked by that unreserve, whose substance and fruitfulness I have scarcely ever experienced so strongly." In the midst of the discussion, a former pastor, Florens Christian Rang, objected that too many Jews had been nominated to serve on several committees, which he believed would create an unbalanced representation. Obstinate, Buber raised a counter-protest during which, speaking of Jesus, he came to say, "We Jews knew him from within, in the impulses and stirrings of his Jewish being, in a way that remains inaccessible . . . to you [Christians]." At this, first Rang, then Buber stood up in confrontation. For an intense moment of silence, each looked into the other's eyes, standing face to face in a profoundly wordless communion. Suddenly, from the silence, Rang spoke the words, "It is gone." Before everyone, they gave each other the kiss of brotherhood. Looking back on this encounter, Buber remarked that "the situation between Jews and Christians had been transformed into a bond between the Christian and the Jew. In this transformation, dialogue was fulfilled. Opinions were gone, in a bodily way the factual took place."^{xi} In the words of Grete Schaeder, "Buber's lonely stand on the 'narrow ridge' at the outposts of human knowledge" in "the mute crepuscular spot where the mind relinquishes the irritable pursuit of facts, is too perilous for many...who cannot share the exhilarating experience" of sacramental dialogue.^{xii}

ⁱ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 17. My translation. This article originally appeared in “Tasting God: Martin Buber’s Sweet Sacrament of Dialogue,” *Horizons Journal*, 37/2 (2010): 224-245.

ⁱⁱ Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*, p. 38.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Buber, *At the Turning*, p. 29.

^{iv} Martin Buber, *At the Turning*, p. 41.

^v Martin Buber, *At the Turning*, p. 44.

^{vi} Maurice Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), p. 338.

^{vii} Martin Buber, *At the Turning*, pp. 49-50.

^{viii} Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 17.

^{ix} Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, pp. 14-15. My translation.

^x Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 136.

^{xi} Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 6. Speaking of Rang, Buber recalled what Rang once said about the most difficult time in his life: “I should not have survived if I had not had Christ’. Christ, not God!” Buber’s response indicates remarkable open-mindedness: “I see in all this an important testimony to the salvation which has come to the Gentiles through faith in Christ: they have found a God Who did not fail in times when their world collapsed” (Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, p. 132).

^{xii} Grete Schaeder, *Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, p. 365.

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