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# NEIGHBORLY BELIEFS

**T**he neighborly Covenant rests on beliefs in Abundance, Mystery, Fallibility, and the Common Good. It places faith in our communal capacity versus our consumer capacity.

## ABUNDANCE

To believe in abundance is to believe that we have enough . . . Even in the wilderness of an uncertain future. This thinking is a stretch of the imagination. It envisions social relationships in a different world, in a manna-based culture. It's a sharp contrast to a culture organized around commerce, a market ideology built on scarcity and the central premise that we cannot believe in sufficiency. It declares that we can never be satisfied with what we have, with the effect that customer satisfaction is truly an oxymoron.

A neighborly culture would declare that nature no longer needs to be productive. That raw land does not need to be developed. That we have enough without more development. It sees no need to extract from our lands and waters. It calls for an end to the belief that a community or an institution or even business has to grow or die to survive and have

a meaningful life. Believing in enough means we can stop identifying with progress as the path to the good life.

## MYSTERY

*It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings to search it out.*

—Prov. 25:2

The Neighborly Covenant promises an unknowable world. It is organized for surprise and believes that much of life is permanently unknowable. It values the vow, which is a commitment in the absence of specificity.

Mystery is not a problem to be solved. Mystery is an opening to the unknown. Liturgy and sacraments are a way of making mystery concrete—in Jewish tradition they are the path, the way of the Torah.

Acceptance of mystery opens the door to a set of communal disciplines such as time, food, silence, and re-performance. These disciplines lead us on a path that begins and ends in mystery. Believing in mystery is the initial act of departure, the doorway to an alternative future. It's an opening to creativity and imagination. It opens the door to a neighborhood or community organized by covenant.

What we are seeking is a gateway to the qualities that architect Christopher Alexander (1977) calls wholeness and aliveness. In trying to make sense of architecture in the 1970s, Alexander explored the reasons that when you walk into certain physical spaces your experience is different from what you sense in other spaces. He named this a “quality of aliveness.” The purpose of architecture, in his view, is to create a physical built environment that conveys a sense of wholeness and evokes a quality of aliveness. He also concludes that this quality of aliveness cannot be defined. It can be produced by a knowledge of a pattern language, but not defined. Mystery then is essential to aliveness. Covenant is the expression of this connection; it is an act that evokes aliveness and draws out those qualities.

Philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich (1973) also speaks to aliveness in his book *Tools for Conviviality*. This book was a guidepost to a culture that chooses life, a culture that prizes tools developed and maintained by a community of users—tools for life, not a system of death. Illich sought

a name for that portion of social life that had been, remained, or might become immune to the logic of economization (Cayley, 2015).

### MYSTERY AT WORK

Theologically speaking, mystery, then, is a combination of surprise and aliveness. The theological tradition would say that mystery is occupied by the bottomless combination of fidelity and freedom, qualities that evoke the presence of God. A combination of fidelity and freedom has popularly been translated into the message that love wins. Rob Bell had an Evangelical mega-church until he wrote a book called *Love Wins* (2011). He was run out for promoting that message. The issue was that if love wins there is no moral binding, and you can't threaten people to act right. There's no retributive capacity, no market discipline to confine or make demands on us.

We see an inherent longing and readiness for community all around us. It is the bottomless combination of fidelity and freedom that funds our yearning. In other words, our yearning for community is not something we invented; it is innate, a given. This means that mystery is more than just unknown space; it is also an active agency. Mystery has work to do. An example is that famous scene the night after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s house was bombed in Montgomery. MLK was sitting at the kitchen table when he heard a voice say, "Martin, don't be afraid." Dr. King said he was never afraid again. Was that an act of daring imagination on his part, or a mystery? We say it was an active mystery that came to him and he chose to receive it.

There is always something that cannot be explained. And the best of the scientists know that. They don't claim any sovereignty over knowledge. Especially near the end of their careers, they acknowledge the unknowability or limitless nature of what they spent their lives pursuing.

The child knows mystery also. All children at some moment ask the question of where something comes from, where they come from. You can answer in every way imaginable, but the only response that satisfies is, "From God." This ends the questioning in a comforting way, so that something is no longer missing for them. It is simply unknowable. There is no place beyond reason, or confusion, or understanding, only the place of mystery.

Mystery also has a relationship to justice. Justice begins with a vow, a vow constituted of freedom and fidelity. This vow enables the emergence of justice. The wedding vow, again, has to do with the practice of freedom and fidelity that, when rightly done, will eventuate as justice for your partner. If you knew what was coming, it wouldn't be a vow; it would be a contract. A vow requires mystery to be valid and trustworthy.

Mystery creates space for surprise, in contrast to the market that places such a premium on certainty. Holiday Inn was the first big motel system. The alternative was tourist homes and little places that might or might not be very good places to stay . . . you never knew. Holiday Inn made a promise to its guests; when you walked in to your room, there would be a sign on the chest of drawers that said, "Holiday Inn. No Surprises."

The free market consumer culture hates uncertainty. In the corporate world your stock price does not really suffer too much if profits are down. What is intolerable is not predicting the decline or not predicting it accurately. If you predicted a 20 percent reduction and profits fall 5 percent, you are faulted for that. If you predict a 20 percent increase in sales and you have a 60 percent increase in sales, you are faulted for that, too. The investment community, perhaps the greatest disciple of certainty, thinks that you are not in control because you missed your projections by so much. It's called risk management. The consumer culture transposes mystery into ignorance in the belief that what is ignorant can be known and then controlled.

On Christmas Day 1939 King George VI gives an address just months after the beginning of WWII, and it looks like pretty dark days ahead for Britain. He ends his speech with a quotation from a popular poem, which reaches the British public in ways that not even Churchill had achieved:

*And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:*

*"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."*

*And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.*

*That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."*

—Haskins, 1908

Like King George and the British in the early days of the Second World War, every community in its culture and its spiritual life has

historically understood there were mysteries and had a take on them other than “How can we overcome what we do not know?” They viewed mystery as a wondrous thing. It provided a cosmology, a relationship with nature, the planets, and the stars, and a connection to all living things. These are the ways that people have understood mystery held in community. Mystery is the embodiment of spiritual life. So whenever we declare that we will advance civilization when we know more, we are choosing a place for certainty that it does not deserve.

### A PLACE FOR GOD

*In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “God will not seek it out”; all their thoughts are, “There is no God.”*

—Psalm 10:4

Does God need to be part of the conversation about neighborliness and the common good? The sacred textual tradition calls for this. The claim of God stands as a limit against the reduction of reality to commodity, however one articulates that. That’s the barrier. And that’s the usefulness of God.

In the Hebrew Bible, God is a mystery who comes with a narrative. So He never characteristically says, “I am the Lord,” but says, “I am the Lord that brought you out of the land of Egypt,” out of the house of commodities. You don’t get this God without this narrative. And then the liturgy becomes the re-performance of the narrative in which God is an embedded character.

One of the things that has always been helpful in my life, because I do believe in God, is in response to when people will say, “Tell me about God.” And immediately I think, God is a mystery.

And so if I value mystery in life, then God becomes very important to me. It helps me in some ways toward a path of humility, peacefulness, rather than imperialness, and to understand that I do not and will not ever understand or command this place.

—Walter

In the world of religion, the mantra often heard is, “I’m spiritual, but not religious,” which means “I belong to no community of accountability and I’m not rooted in any tradition. It’s just me.” Of course the covenantal way of thinking and being welcomes this stance. But it is also a sign of the times, an earmark of the culture: Spirituality becomes just one more example of the individual as the key unit. The collectiveness has been taken out of the “spiritual” experience. Autonomy reigns.

When you talk of God in public or civic spaces, you do so at a risk. The risk is excluding those who don’t believe in a God or higher power. Take the woman who said, “You lost me when you mentioned the word *God*. I’m very spiritual, but not a believer.” This, too, was an expression of individualism. Allowing that statement to come into the conversation builds community and trust; it makes the discussion of covenant and vows and fallibility even more authentic. It is also a sign that so much God-talk in our culture carries unintended baggage, born of the experience of many that the church became an instrument of certainty and control rather than mystery and freedom. That the church is an ideology that is a given. In this way, God has been made subordinate to the market.

Still, there needs to be space for a God conversation to hold up the mystery and silence that departing the consumer culture requires. Dostoyevsky (1880) famously said that without God everything is possible, but if God be there, some things are not possible. Science says that everything is possible. Mystery says there are things we don’t know, and therefore things not possible.

The Tree of Knowledge in Genesis 3 is an attempt to penetrate the Holy Mystery of God. The story is about the idea of overreaching God’s space. So is the text in Deuteronomy 8 where Moses speaks to coming into the good land of houses that you did not build: *Do not say the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth*. This indicates the view that it is all God’s gift and to claim that what we have is from our effort alone is overreaching. The market world seeks immortality and perfection. An extreme example is the wealthy person who puts all his money into overcoming death. Who says, “I hate death.”

The Genesis, Deuteronomy, and death-defying wealthy man examples are all about overreaching God's space. Contract is the hope for limitless growth. Covenant is the act of not overreaching. Relating neighbor to neighbor is not overreaching in your neighbor's space. It recognizes limits. The Tenth Commandment is to not covet.

## HOLINESS

Holiness is the depth of mystery. What you can see in some of the parts of the texts like Leviticus is that they try to administer holiness. They made rules for the sake of control. But holiness is the Hebrew Bible's attempt to talk about mystery. If you try to define the word *holy*, you can't do it. It's a mystery. It's beyond that limit. It's like God.

The point is, we are associating community building with holiness. Community is the reconstruction of individual well-being through the well-being of the whole. This is very different from beginning with individual self-interest and believing that the invisible hand of the market will create communal well-being. How do you reduce suffering in the world? We say you do it by building community; and in trying to give form to the landscape of community, we are asking you to take a spiritual path.

We recognize that there is not much precision in any discussion of mystery. What we can say is that every neighbor is somehow a carrier or reflector of holiness and therefore must be honored in some way and not just utilized. The holiness of God in the biblical tradition is then transposed into the awesomeness of the neighbor.

*Community is people wrapped in a mystery. Community understands through their story, which gives shape and meaning to the mystery. Story honors our common experience.*

## WILDERNESS

The wilderness is the Old Testament metaphor for a covenantal social order. The Exodus narrative tells the story about Israel's leaving Pharaoh's Egypt. The Israelites went into the wilderness, a place where there were no viable life support systems. Its only virtue was that it was beyond the reach of Pharaoh. What they discovered, according to

the narrative, is that when they went into this desolate place, it turned out to have the life supports of bread as manna, water from rock, and meat from quail. It turned out that the wilderness was presided over by the gift-and-life-giving God. In our terms it would be a covenantal, unspecified place of neighborliness.

The neighborhood and neighborliness are the unexplored modern wilderness. When viewed through the lens of the market, our neighborhoods would be assumed to be not viable because they do not have enough resources. There are no managed structures for consumption. What has never disappeared, though, is the manna of the modern wilderness: the gifts and the capacities and the teachables of your neighbors. The story of an alternative social order is that we can discover in the local world that there are places where we can go that we once thought had nothing that we need.

The analog in our time for being beyond Pharaoh's reach is being beyond the reach of financial credit systems, payday loan operators, developers, the bureaucracy, all the imperial institutions. The communal path into a neighborly culture can be considered a step into the wilderness, with its uncertainty and lack of visible means of support. The consumer culture, however, is so embedded in our habits and brain wiring that when we move toward the wilderness of covenant and mystery, we are always drawn back to a world of control and contract.

The wilderness is an unattractive proposition for a culture fearful of strangers and immigrants, one that does not welcome the Other into it. Even a group that started as an authentic community can become like-minded after a while. The search for like-mindedness is a response to our isolation and a longing for the predictability of Egypt. We might appreciate the wilderness as a vacation spot, or when we view it from the comfort of an overlook at the park. The fact is, we must travel into it to make the shift from contract to covenant, market to neighborliness.

## FALLIBILITY

Neighborliness is based on the knowledge that fallibility is a permanent and natural condition. Fallibility is attentive to the limits of growth. It holds that the cost of development outweighs its attraction. It sees that

death is not a problem to be solved, but a state that animates life. It appreciates that the planet is wounded and needs care for its restoration.

We can see clearly how accepting fallibility works by looking at the movement to include people who are called developmentally disabled. Their fallibility is far more visible than for most of us. If we approach them as though there is something we can do to fix them, rather than say their condition is a mystery, we do them a disservice.

I was with someone in California a couple of weeks ago. He has a thirty-year-old son who, when he was four, got some kind of affliction and now, intellectually and emotionally, he's frozen at four. And the father says, "Thank God, it was four, and not two or thirteen." Then he says, "My son mediates to me God's grace every day."

—John

When we acknowledge their mystery, we can move ahead with who they are. And that's what the disability movement is about. There's a parents' movement that got past the idea of finding a cure for their children. Instead, they say, this person has been a gift to me; this person has gifts and we're moving ahead. Their stance is that something understood as fallibility isn't something they're going to waste their lives pursuing. The belief in fallibility allows you the possibility of seeing what is there.

In contrast to the world of developmental disabilities, the reason there is so little community progress with people who are mentally ill is that they still live in the world of improvement. In other words, the idea is that we can cure them. With people who are developmentally disabled, it's pretty clear now that that's who they are, so there's much more communalization and effort with them than there are with people who are mentally ill.

The word *affliction* is often associated with fallibility. Its root is the Latin *afflictus*, distressed, the past participle of *affligere*, meaning to cast down. It is also a biblical word. There is the Bread of Affliction, which

is the bread of Pharaoh, the bread the Israelites took with them into the wilderness. The apostle Paul says, “We are afflicted in every way, but not driven to despair.”

These are some of the parallels between mystery and fallibility. We are perplexed by both of them but not destroyed; we are persecuted but not struck down. We can identify all the problems associated with them, but we haven’t given in. We are comforted by the care of a trusted community.

*Fallibility and mystery give rise to poetry, whereas the market depends on memos. And memos are prosaic unambiguous linear communication. This yields servitude. Fallibility yields freedom, with poetry and art as the methodology.*

## FAILING TO BE GOD

A forerunner of the modern corporation was created in the seventeenth century with the formation of the British East India Company which, backed up by the British military, opened the floodgates of colonialism. Its character negated all the neighborly qualities we are speaking of, both at home and abroad. The modern corporation began as a financing institution for projects such as railroads and tunnels that were too large for family or royal wealth to take on. Over time, it has taken on a larger meaning. It now aspires to be immortal. It aspires to perfection. It expects to live forever. With the corporation, the market asks us to sustain our immortality, to strive for perfection, to maintain dominance, to be in denial of our human condition.

So says the title John conceived for an essay he once wanted to write: “On the Incredible Possibilities of Failing to Be God.” The cultural imperative of the market world is built on hubris, and it is in this way disabling. Its denial of the human condition is like something out of Greek myth; it is our Nemesis. The market culture has us aspire to be God, and the power that it has over us is called progress. It demands that we act as if we are not human. As if we are not in a finite place and in a limited universe. As if we are not going to die. William Paley was a founder of CBS and an iconic leader of the corporate market world. The author of his biography (Paper, 1987) reported Paley was the only person he knew whose last will and testament began, “If I die.”

*The practices of community, and neighborliness, with their common rituals of grief and celebration, are ways of dealing with the fact that we are not God.*

## GRIEF

Grief occurs to us because of the impossibility of perfection and immortality. The free market consumer ideology calls us to infinite possibility. It promises perfection (you can always improve your lot in life) and immortality (there is an answer to aging). This is its value proposition. Grow or die. Consume or be unhappy. The market is an engine for denial instead of grieving. In the market ideology, anything can be fixed. Denial is necessary to maintain the discipline of the market.

My first wife slowly descended into alcoholism and died of it. And so we did everything we could along the way to try to cure her, fix her, stop her. All those things. And nothing worked. And it finally really depresses you. Nothing works.

Ivan Illich came to visit and stayed with us. I was sitting with him one evening, telling him about everything that we had tried and how nothing had worked. “I just don’t know what to do,” I said. And he looked at me and said, “Then grieve.”

That had a really profound effect upon me. Beyond the world of fixing. Grief is the transforming experience.

—John

Scripture can be read in the same way. Institutionalized misreading of the text says, “Let us skip over what does not affirm the market ideology. Let the market define what will recruit well and build the congregation.” In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera (1984) called that kind of religion “kitsch.” Kitsch is religion that doesn’t tell the truth about anything, most of all the ethics of the market.

One answer to the market call, then, is the action step of grief. Grief is an element of aliveness and the answer to the denial the market demands of us. It is an index of our humanity. It is proof of the

presence of our relatedness to each other. It is a communal practice that recognizes that choosing the wilderness of vulnerability, mystery, and anxiety was a good and life-affirming choice.

## THE COMMON GOOD

Abundance, mystery, fallibility, and grief create conditions to reclaim the common good. The commons cannot be fully reclaimed by a movement, or on a science- and fact-based or engineered, legislated, or problem-solving path alone. The efforts underway to restore the environment, to put land, air, water, and resources back into the hand of the public trust are essential. These efforts will only be complete, however, when there is shift in our way of being together and naming with our own voices—aliveness. It is our humanness that also needs restoration, and there is no way to reason our way there. This is why the language of covenant and fidelity must create an opening to transcend the dominant narrative of market and even the narratives of change management, development, and the world is your oyster.