

# Editorial: The Distance Between Us

By M. Ali Lakhani

I have fallen in love with the distance between us  
because it reminds me of You!

(M. Ali Lakhani, *Spiritual Aphorisms*, unpublished, 1990)

It takes a certain quality of absence in order to be present, of attentive stillness in order to more fully *be*. If nature abhors a vacuum, it is equally true, if not immediately obvious, that there is a sacred quality of space necessary in order to exist. Put differently, that which is existentially empty is metaphysically full. It is there, in that fragile and foundational emptiness, in the hollowed-out core of our self which the scripture refers to as “poverty of spirit”, that we can truly *be*. It is from the bedrock of our spiritual center that the disharmonies of our outward life can be ordered and set right. This is the space we must comprehend and inhabit in order to transcend the disjunctive fragmentation of our lives.

The space between us is, at one level, separative, but, at another, unitive. The separative dimension is horizontal and reductive. We know this space as separative because it alienates and atomizes; it is the basis of the perceived ‘otherness’ of things. This disjunctive reality is based on the Adamic “knowledge of good and evil” and of the quantitative duality of things. The unitive dimension, by contrast, is vertical and transcendent. We know this space as unitive because it sublimates relativity in the light of the Absolute. In this metaphysical dimension, space is the underlying harmony of the All-Compassionate Cosmic Womb (*‘Rabma’*), the very matrix of existence—it is its *being*. In this apprehension of space, the

universal informs the particular, the finite is seen as an aspect of the infinite, and the temporal of the eternal. This integral view of reality is based on the Adamic “knowledge of naming” where each creature is perceived qualitatively, as an aspect of the theophany that is One. This is not the space of unfathomable distance but of the unity of being—not of incomprehension but of knowledge, not of disconnection but of love. It is the distance that exists for love to be. For love cannot be without the existential space that distances the lover from the beloved. Viewed thus, space is sacred, it is the medium of the creative current of love. Thus in the Hadith of the Hidden Treasure (“I was a hidden treasure that was not known, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures and I made Myself known to them, and thus they came to know Me.”) we are reminded that love is the motive-force of creation, its ‘in-spiration’ through which creatures are brought into existence till their ‘ex-piration’ into the font of love. Existence—the passage of creation—is thus the ‘spiration’ of God and each of us reflects this passage in the very act of our breathing, re-enacting its transcendent Origin and End in the mystical moment of stillness that separates each breath.

If this metaphysical space is to be known, such knowledge can be attained only by faith and grace, not by ‘entering’ but by ‘being entered’—this is so because the greater must reveal itself to the lesser. Put differently, that which is immanently ‘Spirit’ can only be known receptively, through its own intellective vision, and not by any derivative faculty such as reason, feeling, or sensation. Reason can only discern conceptually, at best reducing reality to a dualism of subject and object (as in the case of Descartes) or categorical postulate (as in the case of Kant) or dialectic process (as in the case of Hegel)—its ‘telos’ will tend to be utopian (as in the case of Marx), fundamentalist (as in the cases of religious, political or secular dogmatism), progressivist (as in the case of Utilitarianism) or anthropocentrically consensual (as in the case of Rousseau’s social contract); while sensation or feeling, even where elevated to the level of empirical ‘science’, can only discern reality as matter or as psyche, quantitatively, thereby cutting it off from its transcendent and qualitative roots, leading to an emphasis on hypertrophic subjectivism (as in the case of Nietzsche), psychologism (as in the case of Freud), or reductive positivism (as in the cases of philosophical positivism and of scientism). That which transcends us cannot be known reductively but

only by that transcendent faculty which is immanent in us—which in Tradition is termed the ‘Intellect’ or the Self-knowing Spirit. To know is to discern *being*. We must empty ourselves of our ‘self’ in order to know who we *are*. We must return to the sacred emptiness of the space that is our ontological core in order to know that which truly *is*.

But if transcendent unity is an integral aspect of knowledge, existentially diversity is not irrelevant. All is One—but not in a way that ignores the ever-replenishing theophany. The transcendent One is also immanently all. Each creature expresses reality uniquely, through the particular gifts that make it individual. Each is a manifestation of the Hidden Treasure. Each participates to a differing degree in the Goodness and Beauty and Perfection of Reality that makes each unique—and, to that extent, it is incumbent on each creature to express those Qualities to the particular measure of its gifts, and to discern and embrace those Qualities expressed in other creatures in its relationships with them. Humanity is endowed with the Intellect through which to discern the treasures of the theophany (as is reflected in the Adamic gift of ‘naming’), to witness God behind His creation (as is reflected in the scriptural teaching of the pre-eternal witnessing where humanity affirmed its recognition of its Maker—see Koran, Surah 7:172), and also with the cardinal capacity to love God through His creatures (‘The Kingdom of Heaven is within you’—*Luke* 17:21; and the Hadith, ‘Heaven and earth cannot contain me but the Heart of my true believer contains Me’). These endowments are the foundation of its fiduciary role expressed in the Supreme Commandments of Love of God and Love of the Neighbor—the former emphasizing the obligation to affirm divine transcendence, and the latter to affirm divine immanence. Existential diversity, in other words, is metaphysical. It stems from the very ‘nature’ of revelation. It is an aspect of love—of love as divine Self-disclosure, and of its ‘natural’ resonance within the reflective Heart.

Because only ‘God is Perfect’, creation is (in this sense) imperfect. Therefore it is possible to perceive diversity as imperfection, and to fail to perceive it as theophany. But the scriptures teach that when God created the world, the Creator affirmed creation to be good, and endowed mankind with a primordial disposition which attested to its goodness as an aspect of its very ‘nature’. By contrast, the scriptures also teach that Satan refused to bow to Adam (who was created in the image of

God). Satan's sin of disobedience implicitly repudiated the theophanic nature of creation. While idolatry is error, the denial of theophanic Presence is equally error. God is not merely transcendent; He is also immanent. To affirm the Perfection of God is to affirm the Goodness of His creation. There is *no* distance between God and His creation from the divine perspective—and therefore from the perspective of that which is transcendent in man. Frithjof Schuon expresses this beautifully in this well-known passage from his writings: "What separates man from divine Reality is the slightest of barriers. God is infinitely close to man, but man is infinitely far from God."

The challenge for man is how to overcome this 'slightest of barriers'—the barrier of the distance between God and man, which is, at the same time, the distance between us as creatures. Continuing the quotation about the barrier between man and God, Schuon offers the image of a mountain that can be overcome only by prayer and grace: "The barrier is, for man, a mountain which he must remove with his own hands. He digs away the earth, but in vain; the mountain remains. Man however, goes on digging, in the name of God. The mountain vanishes. It was never there."

There are three critical points to grasp here. The first is that the barrier that separates man from God is existential, but it has no metaphysical reality. The veil of existence—of 'self' and the world—is relatively real, but it is transcended by spiritual reality which alone is Real. The second is that man cannot transcend his existential limitations except by the grace of God, by an affirmative and sustaining act of faith that demolishes the barrier as an act of love which "recognizes no barriers." And the third point is that to transcend existence is to affirm it as theophany, to embrace it 'bodhisattvically', as it were. The scriptures command us to love God and one another. But how to love? If God has created us out of love, opening existential space *out of* love and as a matrix *for* love through privation, then man must, through an act of privative self-emptying, open himself to receive God—to be present to God, as God is to us; to remember God, as we are remembered by God. As St. Athanasius has stated, "God became man so that man might become God." Man exists in order to transcend himself—to be empty himself of his 'self' in order to be filled with the divine Presence. To become, in another phrase from Schuon, the 'void made for the passage of God'.

Paradoxically, it is through our act of self-emptying that we can truly love. It is through our stepping out of our self that we can hope, by the grace of God, to be fully present—to perceive, despite the centrifugal influences of our lives and our times, in the words of St. Bonaventure, “the circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”