



THE MARK

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The Church of Conscious Harmony
A Contemplative Christian Community

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All In the Family

by Tim Cook

“*The Family of Man* is the title of an exhibit of photos collected by Edward Steichen in the 1950s and first presented in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. According to Steichen, the exhibition represented the ‘culmination of his career’. The 503 photos were selected from almost 2 million pictures taken by 273 photographers, famous and unknown, in 68 countries, and offer a striking snapshot of the human experience which lingers on birth, love, and joy, but also touches war, privation, illness and death. His intention was to prove visually the universality of human experience....” (*Wikipedia*).

When I first saw this amazing documentation of the faces and lives of the vast human family, I was so deeply touched that I felt my own identity being immediately enlarged; clearly making me feel more fully human, myself.

The exhibit brings us face to face with the question of just who is included in our conception of the human family and who is not. Pausing for a moment of honest and sincere self-inquiry will let each of us determine exactly where we have set our personal boundaries

of who’s in and who’s out in our consciousness of the human world. It also gives us the opportunity to compare our view of humanity with that of its Creator so that we can pray for the help we’ll need to make any appropriate adjustments in our hearts.

A deeply unsettling article in the September 2006 issue of *Smithsonian* magazine helped me confront those boundaries in myself. It described a meeting between a western anthropologist and Lepeadon, a “fierce man” who leads his clan in fights against neighboring clans. Lepeadon is a member of the Korowai, a treehouse dwelling people who live in the jungles of Indonesian New Guinea. After an hour of sidelong glances sizing-up the white visitor, the first he had ever seen, Lepeadon spoke to him through a translator, saying, “I knew you were coming and expected to see a ghost, but now I see you’re just like us, a human.”

Later, as the visitor departed, Lepeadon followed him down the tall ladder to the ground, grabbed both his hands and began bouncing up and down and chanting

“nemayokh,” the Korowai word for friend. The doubtless sincerity of the gesture brought the westerner to tears.

The challenge comes, though, when we learn that the Korowai attribute death by disease not to germs and viruses, but to witches called “khakhua” who infiltrate clans by taking on human form. When a diseased person is dying they whisper the name of the person who is supposedly the khakhua who killed them. Relatives and friends then seize the accused clan member who is killed and eaten. The anthropologist asked his translator whether they eat people for any other reason or whether they eat the bodies of enemies killed in battle. The translator looked at him as though he was crazy and answered, “Of course not. We don’t eat humans, we only eat khakhua.” It is a part of their system of justice. As Bailom, another Korowai, tells the westerner: “Revenge is part of our culture, so when the khakhua eats a person, the people eat the khakhua. It’s normal. I don’t feel sad I killed Bunop, even though he was a friend.”

It’s normal? It sure doesn’t feel

normal to me. Yet to the Korowai who have never been exposed to the world I know as normal, it's just the way life works and it's absolutely normal and unremarkable to them. And for every one of the 503 people whose pictures appeared in the *Family of Man* exhibition; what they were doing when they were photographed was completely normal for them. And so it was for the other 2 million folks whose photographs were not selected for the exhibit and so it is for the billions and billions of people whose faces have never been nor will ever be caught by a photographer's lens. And so too for the incalculably vast expanse of human faces who have and who will people our planetary home. Could we, like Lepeadon, meet a strange and utterly different type of person and say, "I see you are just like us, a human"?

Lepeadon had his tribal consciousness enlarged when he met the white, western anthropologist. Tribal consciousness is a remnant of earlier, less expanded and less evolved human social organization. Now, there is nothing bad or wrong about tribalism but it is very limiting in its perspective and very clearly defines the lines between "my kind and not my kind," and thereby leaves us vulnerable to expressing violence

toward those defined as "other." But it's not just people like the Korowai who still gather in tribes who are subject to tribal consciousness. It continues to exist in all of us in the deep, common unconscious where all of humanity's prior experience resides in every person; unknown, unnoticed and usually unexpressed. But in times of cultural upheaval or social stress this ancient remnant of our common past can rise up into expression. Commenting on this all too human phenomenon, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once said, "Barbarity lies not behind us; it is beneath us." To realize just how horribly true his observation is we have only to recall the fact that in the 20th Century alone, human beings killed more than 100 million "other" beings that were human like themselves.

But if barbarity lies beneath us, so too does our true, divinized humanity wait deep within us, deeper than barbarity. Our true nature, our original human nature, is spiritual: the image of God, our common Creator, who is Spirit. Through the Mystery of Christ we come to personally experience our truly spiritual nature and we find that we are actually and factually united in our inmost parts to every human being who ever lived, is living now or ever will live. How this is so is a mystery. That it is so can be experienced directly by

anyone who really wants to know it. This great Truth that makes us free touches us in our own depths through Centering Prayer. It feeds us in the Eucharist. It gives us new eyes to see others, new ears to hear them and new hearts to love them; just as Christ does. It gives us x-ray eyes to see through the seemingly solid boundaries of tribe, race, nationality, gender, class and even species to the One Life living all beings.

St. Paul called us to know it and express it when he proclaimed the amazing Truth, "Christ within, your hope of glory." Christ is hidden away like the pearl of great price within each and every human person, no matter what their customs or culture.

A friend once told me that she thinks of the Christmas/Epiphany celebration as a remembrance of Christ's first public appearance. That wonderfully new way of looking at the mysterious birth of the Messiah also gives us a clue to remembering that even though his birth as a human child was his first visible showing, he was with us from the beginning. Always and forever present, even though invisible, Christ waits for us to open to him and bear him into the world as Mary did.

"Though Christ, a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, until he's born in thee thy heart remains forlorn."

A Family In Christ

by Barbara Cook

As I pondered our entry into the feast of Advent, the time of preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus, I was flooded with memories of the season from my personal ancient history and more the recent past. I recalled stories... of my mother's three older sisters going to Chicago to stay with an older brother and working during the depression. They came home, after a 300 mile train ride, heavy with presents, and there was Christmas for everyone. Going out with cousins to find the "best" cedar tree on the farm; cutting, dragging it home and happily decorating it. My parents creating Christmas at our home, opening presents after Midnight Mass. Christmas with the grandchildren at my parents' home, feasting in the carefully decorated house. Some years with homemade gifts of toys and costumes and perhaps just a bit too much alcohol for a family Christmas.

I see now that my family was moving farther and farther away from the reason for the season. But it wasn't until I began my spiritual journey and God began to heal the emotional wounds from those

days of childhood that I gained enough perspective to understand what had been missing. Then I began to see the opportunity that Advent offers us to take a deep look into the personal meaning of the most amazing time of the year; a look that can only come if we realize how important it is to slow down and remember.

For the past six years, I have been blessed to spend 10 days in an Advent Retreat at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass Colorado. Getting quiet is easy to do in that still, silent, snow-covered monastic valley, where all the retreatants sit together in silent prayer for three hours each day. But the most wondrous event comes on Saturday evening when Abbot Joseph lights the Advent candle, with a prayer for light to come into this weary, yet expectant, world. There is so much power and beauty in that chapel on those nights that no one needs an explanation to understand the enormity and universality of the event of Christ's coming into the world 2000 years ago and now, again, into each heart that consents.

Centering Prayer has opened me to the inner subtleties of Christmas and has helped me to see and understand that when that first holy family consented to bring the Christ child into the world, the whole world changed. My life certainly did. And it is clear that Christ's life and light have had a powerful healing effect on my whole family. Now I also see that none of us was ever actually separate from God's love. Even though we didn't notice God, God never forgot us.

Christ came in person so that we could know the Father's love for all his children and so that we could know that he holds nothing against us. Through Christ we know that when, like the prodigal son, we turn our wandering attention to God, He rushes to greet us, embraces us and gives us His own identity. Jesus shows us that we, like Him, are the sons and daughters of the Living God.

Our personal acceptance of the inner reality of Christmas begins a lifelong process of opening to the love of God and letting go of our self-centeredness. When I had my conversion

experience and began the journey home to God through the process of emptying the content of the unconscious part of myself, I was shocked. I had believed I was an alright person, having learned to keep myself in some degree of balance in the world. But when the inner clearing began, I started to see how dysfunctional I was and how poorly I had been parented. Now, I'm not blaming my parents. I know and God knows that they thought they were doing a good job and that they were doing the best they could. But, like most of the population, they just didn't have spiritual principles or maturity to do a better job. Fr. Thomas once said he thought that only Joseph, Mary and Jesus had it right. All our families need healing and need more space for God.

Once when I was serving on the staff of a 10 day Centering Prayer retreat I saw how a healthy family can work together. After lunch, without a word being spoken, the retreatants cleared their places, cleaned the tables, swept the floor, watered the plants, and did the dishes in a silent symphony of motion and grace. At our evening staff meeting I mentioned it to our retreat director, Fr. Carl Arico: "That was beautiful to see; it looked just like a family". He replied, "Yeah, a functional

family." I realized that what made it possible was that each person there was opening to Christ at the center of their being and in the community. It was wonderful to witness the formation of that family. Spiritual health can enter any family that opens to Christ within, through the transforming grace of silent prayer. As we deepen our practice we begin to see Christ already present within each member of the family. Through that recognition the whole family shares in the loving fruits of our spiritual journey. Through our prayer, Christ will gradually seep into all the lives around us, as we are empowered to practice love and utmost charity. Everyone benefits, even if it just means that we "get off their case." I pray that every one of us who has been given the gift of Centering Prayer will practice it with love and the sure faith that Christ is now and is always present within each of us. As we do, *kenosis*, the emptying of the wounded contents of self that accompanies the prayer, will make room for Christ to manifest in us, our families, and thus in the world. Our active relationship with God works through us, even though we still have imperfections, to bring evermore love, light, and life to share with our families and everyone around us. May it be so. Merry Christmas.

CCH Bookstore

Advent Reading

Faith: An Advent Companion
Father Thomas Keating

Begins Sunday, December 3

Gift Books

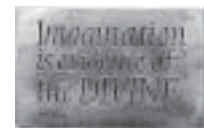
One Hundred Miracles
Christopher Calderhead

The Illumined Rumi
Coleman Barks

Gospels And Acts
The Saint John's Bible

Churches
Judith Dupre

Sacred Mirrors
The Visionary Art of Alex Grey



For your holiday shopping

Bookstore Hours
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Sunday 9:00-after service

Gift Certificates Available



Reflections on: Who Is My Family?"

by Cynthia L. Alexander

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially those of the family of faith. Galatians 6:10.

On December 26, 2004, the deadliest tsunami in history killed more than 230,000 people. As I sat in my living room viewing the destruction, I recalled the people I had met in Phuket, Thailand in July 2001. With the rest of the world, I mourned. I cried for the people I had met in Phuket as if they were family.

Three days later, December 29, 2004, my stepson, Adam, 37 years old, died. Many months later, I found out Adam died of a possible suicide or accidental drug overdose. With this news, I experienced deep guilt and a sense of failure because I had helped parent him from age 8 to 18. Despite this kind of parental relationship, I did not attend his funeral in Chicago. Instead, I stayed home the day of Adam's funeral, here in Austin, and pretended that Doug Sanders' memorial service was really a service for Adam. To this day, it is really hard to believe that Adam, the first child God put in my care as a married adult, is gone.

I had excellent justifications for

not attending Adam's funeral in Chicago. The divorce from Adam's father had been so traumatic that I did not feel free to be present. I did not feel I was part of my stepson's family. I did not believe that nineteen years after the divorce I could still be considered a parent. What I had forgotten was that, despite the passage of nineteen years, the relationship with Adam had never "ended." During the many years after the divorce, Adam had come to visit several times each year to participate in my new family's holiday celebrations. Not only did he visit regularly, but Adam was also a devoted (half) brother to my son, Aaron, who was born when Adam was 16 years old.

But because I justified myself with excuses to stay away from his funeral, I missed an opportunity to respond to the needs of family. I missed the chance to tend to the needs of my then 20 year old son, Aaron, suffering over Adam's sudden death and in need of all of his parents, step and biological. I did not understand that on this

occasion I was still "family" and belonged at the service. For me, during this life's journey, it has been hard to know who family is and who family is not. I am estranged from one of my two sisters and from my mother, unable to discern what that means and how to respond. Yet, unlike part of my "blood" family, my ex-mother-in-law has stayed in relationship with me over the years. Each of my sisters is married to their third husband, my parents to their second spouse, and I am single again after a second divorce. Who is my family?

In September 2005, nine months after Adam died, Aaron drove from Chicago to Austin, and knocked on my door. He had filled his car with all kinds of stuff to "store at Mom's" while he traveled to Israel. His appearance shocked me: he had lost more than thirty pounds since Adam had died. I interpreted the loss of weight as a symptom of his grief and depression over Adam's death. I

immediately tried to feed him. Despite my best culinary efforts, within days of his arrival, he was in the hospital. Three weeks later, a second hospital stay, and he was fighting for his life with a 20% chance of survival. His father came to Austin and together we rarely left Aaron's side during both hospital stays. Suddenly, the two of us, at odds for some twenty years, were facing the possible death of "our" second son. Suddenly, we were family again.

As a result of these ordeals, Aaron's three half sisters (one from me, two from his dad), became part of each other's lives in their mutual love for Aaron. Cheyenne and I spent three months nursing Aaron back to some semblance of health, though he is still struggling just over a year later. We opened our home not only to Aaron, but also to Aaron's dad and stepmom, his sisters, and his friends while he recovered. Our sense of "home" changed from these events. Our sense of "family" changed from these events. Cheyenne and I now realize how precious Aaron's other two half sisters are to us. We feel a new sense of family with them.

I also now realize that I have a family at Church of Conscious Harmony, a family I did not call upon to console me and help me through my troubles. I know now that if I had asked at the time, our minister would have held a small memorial for Adam so I could say

goodbye with proper respect and dignity. I did not need to pretend "alone" at Doug's service. I know that if I had called, people would have come to assist Cheyenne or even me during the months of care for Aaron. I know now that I am part of a community that visits the sick, clothes the poor, and stands by my side when I have to bury the dead. All I have to do is be willing to let my community into my sense of family — and call for help.

During this holiday season, it is my wish to remember all types of family. I wish to remember the small families, similar to the one Cheyenne and I live in which expands and contracts depending on who is "visiting." I wish to remember the extended complex families created by divorce. I wish to remember the traditional families that are able to stay together. I wish to remember and appreciate that I am part of the family-like community in our Church. I wish to remember the greater family of the world.

As I have experienced in the last couple years, it can be painful to have family. There are tragedies that take many of us at once as occurred during the 2004 Tsunami. We experience death, sickness, and estrangement in our families. The gift of being a member of a family and a community like ours, though, is the opportunity to love someone new that God places in front of us. These new people to love come to



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us in all kinds of roles: the “other” half sisters, our children (biological, step, foster), our brothers and sisters at Church, all the relations from our “exes”, and a sister’s third husband, to name a few.

I am grateful for our Church of Conscious Harmony family. This is where I have been able to begin learning the difference between reacting and responding. This is where I am learning about love of others and what they need so I can show up at my stepson’s funeral, regardless of who does or does not see me as “family”. This is where I am learning to choose to ask for help from a loving family rather than choosing to be separate and going it alone. I am now learning to bring Christ in so that my Family, in all its meanings and contexts, will be blessed with a Life in Christ.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Ephesians 3:14-17.)

For these lessons, I feel great gratitude and joy during this Holiday Season.



ADVENT

The Eastern Christian tradition sees the Advent season as a time of waiting for the light that will first shine forth at Christmas and reach its peak on Epiphany, the Feast of Lights.

This beautiful text of Isaiah is proclaimed during the Liturgy of the season:

*Rise up in splendor!
Your light has come,
the glory of the Lord shines upon you . . .
Upon you the Lord shines,
and over you appears His glory.
Isaiah 60:1-2*

On the feast of Christmas, the joyful expectancy exemplified by the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist and Isaiah – and shared by us in the Advent liturgy – comes to fulfillment. Christ is born anew in our hearts . . . and our incorporation in Him as members of His mystical body is the light that empowers us to follow Him and to be transformed into Him.

*Advent & The Octave of Christmas,
A Journey into Faith
with Father Thomas Keating*

DECEMBER Calendar

Visit consciousharmony.org for a complete listing of events

Special Events

One-Day Centering Prayer Retreat
Dec 9 8:30am-4pm

Youth Christmas Play
Dec 14 7pm

Christmas Eve Service
Dec 24 6pm

Office Closed
no regularly scheduled activities
Dec 25-29

Monthly

Community Workday
Dec 16 9am-12noon

Weekly

Centering Prayer Group
Mondays 7:30-9pm
Wednesday 7:30-9pm

Tuesday Enrichment 7:30-8:30pm
Sacred Chanting Dec 5
Gurdjieff Music Dec 19

Prayer Circle
Wednesdays 9:15am

Contemplative Lunch
Wednesdays 12noon-1pm

Mid-Week Communion Service
Wednesdays 6-7pm

Yoga
Thursdays 6-7pm

Intro to The Work Class
Thursdays 7:30-9pm

Daily

Daily Centering Prayer Service
M-F 7-7:35am