

I/THOU-I/SPIRIT: MARTIN BUBER AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE INFANT

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Abstract

Martin Buber's philosophical anthropology is presented as a framework for understanding the spiritual life of the infant. To Buber's I/Thou and I/It attitudes toward the world a third attitude is proposed, I/Spirit. I/Spirit is the manifestation of spirit in the mirroring of the infant as *Thou* in the mother's eyes. Not yet knowing there is a world outside of him/herself, the infant takes from the mother what s/he perceives is part of him/herself. The infant becomes *I* as the mother mirrors *Thou*. Once the infant distances the mother s/he can enter into a dialogical relationship with her in limited mutuality. Handling, holding and presenting the world to the infant through dialogical relations, the mother nurtures the infant's spiritual growth.

I/Thou - I/Spirit: Martin Buber and the Spiritual Life of the Infant

Into this world a child is born. This new life approaching us is a primal force, desiring to enter into relationship with "others" in the world to build, to tear down and to know him/herself and the world. As pastors, counselors, and religious educators we accept a shared responsibility with the infant's parents to nurture this real and actual child; body, mind, and spirit.

Recently authors have given us cultural, social and religious perspectives on the spiritual life of children (Ota & Erricker, Eds., 2005) as well as literary, empirical and pedagogical approaches to spiritual education (Erricker & Ota, Eds., 2001; Wright, 2000). Research has been done on the spiritual lives of children and developmental stages of faith have been proposed (Coles, 1990;

Estep, 2002 Fowler, 1981 Oser & Gmunder, 1991); but these works primarily deal with the spiritual lives of children older than three. Literature on infant spirituality has come from the psychoanalytic community from regressed adults in psychotherapy (Rizzuto, 1979) and the overlay of object relations theory on the spiritual formation of infants (Ulanov, 2001). In this article I am presenting the spiritual life of the pre-verbal infant through a Buberian lens.

Martin Buber, a 20th Century Jewish philosopher, contends the manifestation of human spirit happens “between” a very special relationship, an I-Thou relationship. “Spirit in its human manifestation is man’s response to his Thou . . . It is solely by virtue of his power to relate that man is able to live in the spirit” (Buber, 1970, p. 89). A contemporary of Buber, object relations theorist D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971) “. . . in his discovery of transitional space . . . witnesses to the location of the numinous in the space between self and other in the human realm, and between the human and divine, in the religious realm”(Ulanov, 2001, p.5). Transitional space, like the space created by distancing, is the space of moving out of *being* into *becoming*. Viewing Winnicott through a Buberian lens it could be said that spirit does not reside in the immanent or the transcendent but manifests itself through the narrative of self of the child created in the transitional space between *I* and *Thou*. But what can be said about the time before *I am I*?

An Ontological Point of View

Distance and Relation

In *The Knowledge of Man*, Buber, offers us a way to address the spiritual life of the human being by first offering us an explanation of the principle of human life (1988). Responding to the age old question “What is man?” Buber contended the principle of human life is two-fold consisting of a double movement where the first movement is considered to be the presupposition of the second. Buber called the first movement (the primal setting at a distance) and the second movement (entering into relation) (Buber, 1988). These are not movements in time sequence, but related movements where distance creates the space for relation to be entered into (Buber, 1988).

Through primal distancing the human being sets the world over and against him/herself, letting the world be as an independent opposite without reducing or subsuming or absorbing it. The process of distancing on the human being(s) part results in a recognition of the “otherness” of the object of human experience. Humans perceive not only what (is) but they can imagine a world that stretches beyond what is perceived through their senses and imagine an overall unity that extends in time and space. Buber called this perception of unity a (synthesizing) apperception (Buber, 1988, p.52). The process is primordial and pre-conscious, the “otherness” is not empirical but a part of the human(s) transcendental unity of apperception. This “otherness” does not exist in the world itself, nor does it exist in the one perceiving it. It exists in the transformation of the (between) if the perceiver enters into relation with that which has been set at a distance. Primal distancing provides the anthropological basis for polarity of relation. Distancing opens the space for existential becoming.

Existential Becoming

In the opening statement of *I-Thou*, Buber raises the question of the human being's existential relation to the world. “The world for man is twofold in accordance with his twofold attitude.” (Buber, 1970, p. 13) Once “man” has distanced himself from the realm and perceives the unity of the world as an independent opposite, “he” can choose to address the elements of the world as I-It or I-Thou. For Buber these are word pairs where the *I* cannot be separated from the *Thou* or the *It*. Since the *I* cannot be separated from the *It* or the *Thou*, the *I* must be twofold.

In speaking I-Thou, the “other” is met with one(s) whole being, (encountering) the other in his/her wholeness. This allows man to set the other at a distance and to let the other (be) without reducing, subsuming or absorbing him/her. One human being confirms the other in his/her right to exist and confirms the being of the other. The *other* may be the same, but the *I* of the I-Thou is not the same as the *I* of I-It. In the speaking of I-Thou the *I* must encounter the *other* without reserve, presenting the genuine self in dialogue. Spirit is met between *I* and *Thou* (Buber, 1970).

For Martin Buber the *I* addressing the world as *It* differs from the *I* addressing the world as *Thou*. “The basic relation of man to the It-world includes experience, which constitutes this world ever again, and use which leads it toward its multifarious purpose—the preservation, alleviation, and equipment of human life” (Buber, 1970, p. 88). I-It is the primary word of experiencing and using the world that takes place within the person and not in the world. In speaking I-It, the *I* shrinks back from the *other* which is regarded as a thing of possession or control. I-It is never entered into with the whole being. When objects in the world are addressed I-It, they are viewed in their objective state with the focus on their use for various ends. Humans can view other humans as *It*, a means to an end instead of an end in themselves. Genuine encounters can be stressful at times and the human is satisfied to be a means. According to Buber, continued living in the It-world increases the human’s capacity to experience and utilize. While objects in nature and sometimes people can be met I/It, God can never be addressed as *It*. Buber’s God is the Absolute Thou, the vortex where all I-Thou relations converge.

Before I am I

As I turn to consider the spiritual life of the infant, I am dealing with the infant’s *I* before *I am I*, towards a time when the infant distances the world and is able to say “I am” and “You are” and you are whole and separate yet connected to me. This is a time in infant development when the infant is relating first to a subject-object in the absolute stage of dependence and then with an independent opposite by the end of the stage of relative dependence. Winnicott uses the term subject-object to describe the first object, the “not-me” object. In Buberian terms, it is the developmental equivalent to the time prior to the distancing of the world when the infant is merged with the mother, through the time of distancing of the mother which creates a space for the infant to enter into relationship with her. In the “between” of the young human being revealing his/her narrative self and the “other” accepting responsibility for receiving it, human spirit is manifested. This is a space, a sacred space, of meeting and encounter. While I see Buber’s philosophy of the human being’s two fold attitude towards the world as a framework for addressing the spiritual life of the infant, I propose a third attitude towards the world that must be considered. This I have termed the I/Spirit relationship. I/Spirit happens in the early days after birth continuing for as long

as it takes the young human to loosely organize his/her inner life to meet reality. I designate the time in the infant's development before distancing as a time of *being*, a time of dialogical closure. I am claiming that distancing and the memory of *being* create a space for the infant to enter into dialogue with the mother and to become a person. I am calling what happens in the "between" of the mother/infant relationship a time of *going on being*.

A Developmental Point of View

I/Spirit in a time of being

According to Winnicott, the mother at the beginning of the infant's life adapts almost 100% to the infant, meeting the infant's need empathetically as the infant is not yet able to signal a need to be met. This maternal adaptation affords the infant the opportunity to live in the illusion that "the breast," a subjective phenomenon developing in the baby that symbolizes the mother, is under his/her magical control. "Omnipotence is nearly a fact of experience" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 11). The "breast" is created over and over again out of the infant's capacity to love or out of need. When the mother offers the breast to the infant just as the infant thinks s/he is creating it, the mother affords the infant the illusion that there is an external reality corresponding to the infant's capacity to create. "Psychologically the infant takes from a breast that is part of the infant . . ." (Winnicott, 1971, p. 12). Living in dialogical closure the infant lives in the fantasy of his/her own omnipotence thinking s/he has created that which responds to his/her needs. The infant does not know if s/he created the breast or was it there waiting to be found. This paradox is not to be questioned (Winnicott, 1971).

While lacking the mutuality of an I-Thou relationship, spirit happens as the mother offers the breast and gazes into the eyes of the infant. When the mother looks into the infant's eyes she encounters her infant as *Thou*, in actuality and possibility. The entire world pales in the light of her infant *Thou*. When the infant looks into the mother's eyes, the infant sees her/himself as *Thou*. The mirroring of the infant as *Thou* by the mother is a sacred act of communion, an affirmation of *being*. Before *I* becomes *I* there is *being*, the core around which the infant's inner life coheres and unfolds to relate to others in the world.

Before *I* becomes *I* the narrative begins. The mother's mirroring of the infant offers her/him a world view of connectedness and unity, a blueprint for love. What greater blueprint for love than to be *Thou* in your mother's eyes? Within this blueprint of subject-object unity the groundwork is laid for the infant's existential becoming in time and space. There is a growing emergence into the realization that there is a presence that transcends self and transcendence is an act of spirit. From a developmental point of view this way of relating to the world happens between the time the infant believes that the world is under his/her primary creative control and the time the infant can distance the world and objectively perceive it. The sacredness of the act of mirroring begins to create a space that enables the infant to achieve psychosomatic integration that witnesses to the integrative force of reality, Spirit.

Here the environmental mother plays a critical role in the manifestation of human spirit. As the mother addresses her infant as *Thou* without reducing, subsuming or absorbing her/him, she creates a space for the dyad to dwell together, I/Spirit, as the infant begins to become the *Thou* presented to him/her. The infant as *Thou* permeates the infant's being. Held "good enough" in the presence of the mother's address to him/her as *Thou*, the infant's *I* emerges and s/he can gradually begin to set his/her world, the mother, at a distance, a necessary process for a dialogical relationship.

The process of distancing on the mother's part is rooted in her acceptance of the infant's illusion of omnipotence and her ability to provide gradual disillusionment through maternal failure. The mother continues to meet the infant's needs, gradually frustrating the infant's sense of omnipotence as she adapts less and less perfectly according to the infant's ability to deal with her failure. The mother must gauge this process by the stress level observed in the infant and protect the infant from anything that might impede the infant's unique maturational process. In the midst of the gradual processes of the infant's loss of the illusion of omnipotence and maternal failure of the mother a relationship is being built between the infant and mother. The distancing process on the side of the infant also includes the infant's experience that frustration has a time limit, a growing sense of process, the beginnings of mental activity, employment of auto-erotic satisfaction and the integration of past, present and future.

Is not Time connected to Spirit? Before *I* becomes *I*, the human manifestation of the spirit can be witnessed in the young human being's presence, in the passing smile that manifests awareness of the loving presence of another, and in the intense focus of the living in the present moment. Bringing Presence into the present is a spiritual happening. The infant manifests the presence of human spirit in this I/Spirit relationship with joy of affirmation to become and to go on being. The human manifestation of spirit is present in the mother's encounter of the infant as *Thou* and the infant's acceptance of him/herself as *Thou* as mirrored in his/her mother's eyes. In the midst of I/Spirit, the eternal *Thou* is made present. "In every sphere, through everything that becomes present to us, we gaze toward the train of the eternal Thou, in each we perceive a breath of it; in every Thou we address the eternal Thou, in every sphere according to its manner" (Buber, 1970, p. 57).

I/Thou in a time of going on being

According to D.W. Winnicott, transitional space is the space that grows between the mother and the infant to facilitate the infant's transition from absolute dependence to relative dependence towards independence. By creating and enlarging a facilitating environment, the "good enough" mother encounters the infant in his/her actuality and possibility. In this space the mother confirms the infant in his/her right to exist and confirms the infant's personal individuation towards truth while holding on to her own truth towards becoming, a key concept in Buber's concept of dialogue. She supports the infant's process of distancing by first accepting the paradox of the infant's omnipotence and enters into relationship with him/her during the phase of relative dependence when the infant has placed her outside of him/herself. The mother addresses the infant as *Thou* by handling the infant body to body, by holding the infant's emotions to protect the infant's emerging soma/psychic integration, by presenting reality to him/her and by surviving the infant's aggression. While handling, holding and the presentation of reality takes place simultaneously, for clarity's sake let us look at them separately. Buber is silent about aggression in either the I-Thou or the I-It relation, but aggression and how it is handled by the mother or primary caregiver is important to the developmental process of distance and relation.

Handling the Body: Spirit and Love

“[Depth psychology] gives us valuable information about living in the body, literally and metaphorically” (Ulanov, 2001, p. 43). For the infant to know her/himself as human is to know her/his life in the body as the earliest relationship manifests itself in a dialogue of bodily care. From the earliest days of life outside the womb, and possibly in the womb, every touch, gaze, word and attitude directed to the infant is encoded in the body as well as the psyche (Helminiak, 1996). In the womb the intrauterine environment feeds the fetus body to body. Fetal development is formed and sustained by “. . . blood tides, breathing, rhythms, temperatures of heat and coolness, soothing [the fetus] with peace, alarming [the fetus] with panic” (Ulanov, 2001, p. 44). The mother’s memory of and the meaning she has placed upon her own earliest relationships influence her body rhythms and how she will relate to this yet unborn child. The mother will use these memories and the meaning placed upon them to respond to the infant. At birth and for many months after the young human being comes to know her/himself by the way the mother handles her own body. The mother’s body image, so crucial to infant and mother at this time, is an accumulation of familial and societal norms and the dominant culture at large. The mother’s attitude towards conception and birth can visit her like an angel or a ghost as the manifestation of these acts is present before her. The mother’s early object relations are also present to haunt and support her. The nursery can become as crowded as the conception bed. In the midst of this physical stream spirit happens. Person to person, body to body, in the dialogue between the mother’s touch and the infant’s response handling creates an environment for the mother to address the infant as *Thou* and for the infant to respond to her/his *Thou*. While Martin Buber was considering man’s response to his *Thou* as the manifestation of spirit, I am considering the process in the physical dialogue in the between of mother/infant dyad. The mother is physically responding to her *Thou*. The infant is physically responding to his/her *Thou*. They are participating in the cosmic stream of life, this is spiritual. They are co-participates in writing the child’s narrative of self whose organizing principle is spirit.

Body care offers the infant the opportunity to come to know him/herself as a unit with a limiting membrane connected to someone

outside of him/herself. In physical relationship the infant will soon experience a transcending of the self to meet something bigger than him/herself. Is not the act of transcendence a spiritual act? Handling gives us the developmental perspective and the physical manifestation of Buber's concept of distancing, making ready the new life to become a person in and through relationship. In the process of being handled the infant comes to know that s/he is a person in her/his own right and the mother is an independent opposite to whom the infant is connected. The infant internalizes these bodily relationships to be used in the creating of the self (Rizzuto, 1979; Summer, 1994; Winnicott, 1971).

When bathed, rocked, fed, kept warm, we acquire a skin that develops an inside distinct from an outside; we come to house our own psyche in our body and arrive at the definite form of the person we discover ourselves becoming (Ulanov, 2001, p.44).

This information has a lasting effect on how the infant and later the adult will view the world and the choices s/he will make to operate in the world and enter into relation with others. (Miller, 1997; Rizzuto, 1979). "Good enough" handling results in the movement of the infant from a loosely integrated self to a non-integrated state as s/he moves from awake to sleep and awake again. Handling results in a sense of *going on being* in a continuous way. As the infant moves from total dependence towards independence, handling creates an environment for the I-Thou relation to happen body to body. In the "between" of the relationship of body/body a space is created for spirit to happen. The infant who consistently meets the spirit and internalizes this relationship can later call the spirit into service for self-creation and transformation. This I-Thou relation allows the infant to move towards wholeness as the infant's *I* becomes *I* as the infant experiences *Thou*. Spirit is manifested in the infant's capacity of joy and the ability to live in the now and the emerging awareness of others. "Love presents itself in through body-care, body presence, and the body mingling of being" (Ulanov, 2001, p.69). And is not love born of the spirit?

Holding the Psychic Life: Spirit, Trust and Atonement

It is the task of the mother or primary caregiver to hold the emerging sense of continuous *going on being* in the psychic life of the infant. The infant must be allowed to move with ease from a state of integration to nonintegration and back to integration. Any interruption in this process causes annihilation anxiety for the infant. The mother or primary caregiver holds the psychic life of the infant by physically holding the infant gently assuring the infant that s/he will not be dropped. "Not to be reliably held when we are absolutely dependent makes us seem to disintegrate" (Ulanov, 2001, p. 44). The mother holds the psychic life of the infant by separating from the infant only as long as the infant can tolerate this separation to assure the infant that s/he has not been dropped from her attention. She further holds the infant's psychic life by living with the infant in the now, allowing the infant to direct his/her playing with her. Finally, the mother holds the psychic life of the infant by never retaliating to the infant's aggressive attacks against her. To arrive at the object permanence of the mother the infant in fantasy experiences an I eat you, I love you, I destroy you phase. If the mother survives these attacks she becomes an object outside of the infant. If the mother retaliates the infant will learn to conform to the demands of the mother, learning all too well that it is better to conform to a false sense of self than to be dropped from the mother's love.

Holding results in a ". . . sense of going on being in a continuous way, without the trauma of interruption against which we have organized the defense of dissociation" (Ulanov, 2001, p. 48). Dissociation is a gap created by the infant to house the impediments to continuous being experienced at the hands of others who refuse to touch her/him or who handle the infant invasively. At this stage of development the infant is working on integrating psyche and soma. Any impediment disrupts this process. Repeated impediments to this process of integration can result in the infant rejecting the injured part of the body or psyche placing it in the self created gap so that injury to one part cannot invade the other. Undue psychosomatic stress can result in a human being who cannot live in the body, who will live and function out of a false sense of self (Winnicott, 1971). A failure to affirm the human being in actuality and possibility is an act against the spirit, the basis of existential guilt (Buber, 1988).

Object relations theorists present us with a variety of theories that often contradict each other when considering the infant as object seeking from the start. They disagree about the infant's internalization of the object or the relation with the object and what actually happens to the relationship or object once internalized (Grotstein & Rinsley, 1994; Klein, 1952; Winnicott, 1971). These theorists and many others do agree however that the infant's being emerges in relationship with the object, the other (Miller, 1997; Siegel, & Hartzel, 2003; Stern, 1985). The relationship is a reciprocal reality. This relationship encompasses guilt feelings stemming from the aggressive feelings and acts that the infant has towards the mother during the phase of relative dependence as the infant places the mother outside of him/herself (Buber, 1971). From the infant's perspective the fantasy mother under the infant's omnipotent control changes as she frustrates the infant by delaying her response to his/her call. Since the infant still believes that s/he is creating this change s/he thinks that s/he is destroying the "fantasy mother." There is also a sense of loss coupled with erotic impulses connected to this process which results in destructiveness. The annihilation of the mother would produce annihilation of the infant so the infant seeks to relieve the stress and repair the damage. The good mother of the feed and the bad mother of frustration are gradually merged. The experience of destruction and reparation, atonement, become encoded in the newly forming body and psyche of the infant. This process is the experience of inner guilt, taking on the responsibility to repair perceived injury. "Man is the being who is capable of becoming guilty and is capable of illuminating his guilt" (Buber, 1988, p.138).

In the relational life of the human being, guilt must be encountered ". . . as something of an ontic character whose place is not the souls but being" (Buber, 1988, p.113). If the mother retaliates to the destructive impulse of the infant, an attack on the infant's being could result, an injury to the order of the human world. Existential guilt occurs when someone injures the order of the human world (Buber, 1988). Infant and mother share in the human order and the mother or primary caregiver assumes responsibility to maintain the order of this world. To retaliate to the infant's attacks would destroy the order of this small part of the world entrusted to her. If the mother continues to be present to the infant during these times of attack, she creates a safe space for the infant to learn to tolerate his/her ambivalent feelings towards her. For the infant these ambivalent feelings based in inner guilt feelings arise

out of the clash of loving the good mother of the feed and hating the bad mother frustrating his/her sense of omnipotence. For the infant there is a moving from ruthless love coupled with the desire to devour “the breast,” then to sadness attached to the illusion that this very breast that feeds him/her is being destroyed by the infant’s desire to devour it. This is followed by concern with a special kind of anxiety and the desire to mend the relationship. Without a person to both love and hate the infant cannot find a sense of guilt and a desire for reparation. To feel real the infant must eventually become responsible for both his/her love and hate feelings. Without a sense of guilt, that is a desire for reparation of injury caused to another, there would be no experience of atonement.

Presenting Reality: Spirit and Transcendence

Repeated experiences of matching the infant’s needs and object opens a space for the infant to realize there is someone/something beyond him/herself. The infant begins to leave the realm of dialogical closure and relinquish the illusion of omnipotence, the illusion that s/he can magically invent and control reality. “At first the relationship is with a subjective object and it is a long journey . . . to . . . a capacity to relate to an object that is objectively perceived and that is allowed a separate existence . . . outside the omnipotent control of the individual” (Winnicott, 1971, p.55). The important thing to remember is what is objectively perceived is to some extent subjectively colored. “Success in this field of development is closely linked with the person’s capacity to feel real in the world and feeling that the world is real” (Winnicott, 1965, p.224).

Feeling real is more than just existing. To feel real, the infant must go from *being*, to *going on being*, relating to the world from his/her own individuation to truth and retreating into *being* for relaxation. It is not instinctual satisfaction that makes an infant feel real. It is the infant’s emerging capacity to participate in the creation of his/her world through his/her unique way of being as s/he continues the narrative of self. Just as the species had to move beyond the realm of instinctual closure to be “a new being with a new way of being” (Buber 1988), the infant must journey beyond instinctual gratification to spontaneity and creative living. The infant must learn to live in the space between subjectivity and objectivity to allow his/

her sense of aliveness to carry over into his/her separate existence. The mother/primary caregiver must present the infant with objects from the world according to the way the true self of the infant requests. It is a matter of the call of the infant being responded to by the primary caregiver in a way that respects the infant's *being* and his/her *going on being*. In the mother's response to her *Thou*, in genuine dialogue, she must stand on the infant's side of the relationship and determine what the infant needs, not empathetically, but according to infant's own individuation and sense of time. As one further on the road of *becoming*, in dialogue with the infant, she holds on to her truth, imagines the real and responds in a good enough way with the least impingement possible. By allowing the infant his/her own sense of time to explore the world around him/her, not directing the playing but participating in it, the mother/primary caregiver lays the foundation for creative living that becomes a blueprint for life.

The mother/infant dyad learns to play in complimentary rhythms. In the infant's initial state of being the infant first plays with the mother or primary caregiver. Touching her face, pulling on her breasts, there is a to and fro between infant and mother. First with the mother and then with external objects, the playing infant is in a state of preoccupation. This play space cannot easily be left, nor can the infant tolerate intrusion (Winnicott, 1971). This play space is not inside the infant nor outside in reality. This play space lies in the "between" of transitional space. In the midst of this dialogical relationship spirit happens. As the infant is allowed to explore and manipulate objects from the world, the information gained about the self and the self in relation is organized by spirit to create the narrative self. The manifestation of this narrative is the human manifestation of spirit.

Concluding Thoughts

As pastors, counselors and educators a sacred trust is given to us, new life. First there is *being* and then there is *going on being*. First there is the encounter of spirit in I/Spirit and then the encounter of spirit in the "between" of the I-Thou relationship. What then is to be said about the I-It attitude towards the world? Having met spirit, the infant might, just might, bind the world of *Thou* to the world of *It* affirming actuality and opening a space for untold possibilities as a co-creator of a *We* community.

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