

WINTER - SPRING
1998

Center Voice

the newsletter of the Center for Sacred Sciences

Special Focus: God

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In This Issue . . .

Throughout recorded history Humankind has intuited, and holy men and women have testified to experiencing, an Absolute Reality that is beyond anything we can know with the intellect. All cultures have designated some word to represent this Ultimate Mystery. In the West, it is generally called "God." At some point on our spiritual path, most of us will find ourselves confronted by questions about this "God."

Who or what is God? Is He or She really like the images presented to me as a child? What, if anything, does God have to do with my life or with the existence of the world? Is the concept of a God important to my spiritual practice? These questions and many others are bound to arise for us as we walk our spiritual path, no matter what our religious back-

ground. But for those of us whose traditional religious backgrounds have been unsatisfactory, the very word "God" can stand in our way as a stumbling block, bringing all kinds of negative associations with it.

In this issue of the Center Voice, we take a closer look at this concept of "God." In his article, "**Coming to Terms with God,**" Joel takes us on an exploration of the many ways of understanding this word, from the most exoteric to the deeply mystical. Perhaps more important, he demonstrates how even images of God that disturb us may serve as powerful windows to the Divine, often precisely because of our discomfort with them.

When we venture beyond prescribed belief systems and into the realm of personal spiritual experience, we may find that our ways of relating to God develop a unique character and richness that surprise even us. In the first installment of our new feature "**Center Voices,**" seven Center practitioners reflect on the question: "What does God mean in my life and practice?" Perhaps their thoughts and experiences might further inspire your own exploration of this question.

We round out this Winter issue with a special final installment of Mike Taylor's "**Postcards From The Path,**" some words from our library in "**The Library Corner,**" and a look at recent Center happenings in "**Center News.**" We hope that you might find something of value within these pages.

We've changed our twice-yearly publication dates to winter and summer.

CENTER NEWS:

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Sheila Craven

Contributing Editor:

Mike Taylor

Photography:

Mike Taylor

Proofreading:

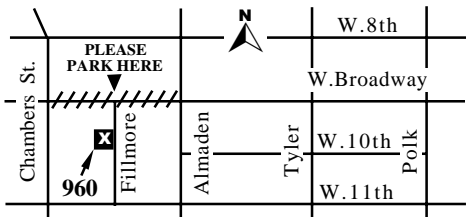
Merry Song

Dawn Kurzka

Wayne Leeds



The Center for Sacred Sciences is a non-profit, tax-exempt church dedicated to the creation and dissemination of a new Worldview based on the wisdom of humanity's great spiritual teachers, but presented in forms appropriate to our present scientific culture. Our programs draw on the teachings of the mystics of all traditions, as well as the evidence of modern physics. Among the Center's current offerings are Sunday Programs with meditation and talks by Joel, meditation classes, retreats, workshops, and study groups. Joel also leads a weekly Practitioners' Group for committed spiritual seekers, as well as being available for individual spiritual consultation. The Center maintains an extensive lending library of books and tapes covering a broad spectrum of spiritual, psychological, and scientific subjects. Other than a small stipend for our book-keeper, the Center has no paid staff. We rely entirely on volunteer labor to conduct our programs, and on donations and membership dues to meet operating expenses.



Meetings: 960 Fillmore St., Eugene

Phone: (541) 345-0102

<http://rain.org/~sophia/center.html>

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SPRING RETREAT

From April 18 - 23, 1997 we had our five-day **Spring Retreat** at Cloud Mountain Retreat Center in Castle Rock, WA. The theme of Joel's teachings was "**Servanthood.**" Along with a valuable opportunity to deepen our meditation practice, we were invited to taste for ourselves the bliss of realizing that God sees with "our" eyes, hears with "our" ears, chants with "our" voice, and thinks with "our" mind. In other words, that beyond this illusory self, we serve God perfectly by our very being and in giving the fullness of that being completely to God.



RETREATANTS: (Bottom row from left) Mike Taylor, Merry Song, Niraja, Joel, Vinnie Principe, Sue Orbeton, Fred Chambers, (top row) Barbara Dewey, Carla Wenzlaff, Tom McFarlane, Jim Zajac, Gene Gibbs, David Cunningham, Wayne Leeds, Todd Corbett, Mike Craven, Therese Engelmann, Clivonne Corbett. Also attending was Alicia Carter.

PALO ALTO TEACHINGS

Joel traveled once again to **Palo Alto, CA** during the last weekend of May 1997 to give a special teaching and meditation intensive with the theme of "**Living Beyond the Self.**" Approximately twenty-five people took advantage of what has become an annual tradition of Joel visiting our extended community in the Bay Area. Those wishing to attend his Palo Alto teachings next spring are invited to contact Sita DeLeeuw at (415) 857-1312 for more information.

NEW BOARD MEMBER

The CSS **Board of Directors** is pleased to welcome longtime practitioner **Fred Chambers** as our newest director, for a three-year term of service. He replaces **John Richardson** who completed his term in August. The Board wishes to sincerely thank John for his years of service to the Center, and to thank Fred for his willingness to serve our community in this manner.

CHANGING OF THE WATCH

Readers with sharp eyes may have noticed a name change on our masthead. As of this issue, **Mike Craven** takes over the sometimes challenging mission of **Managing Editor of the Center Voice**. He replaces **John Richardson** who has served as Managing Editor for the last three years.

John worked with selfless dedication in the often difficult role of Managing Editor, and prior to that as Editorial Assistant. Without him, the newsletter could not have continued and grown to what it is today. All of us who had the privilege of working with him will miss his very special presence at our editorial meetings. With sincere thanks, we wish him well wherever his calling to service in the larger community takes him.

At the same time we are grateful to Mike Craven for volunteering to serve in this capacity. We look forward to his unique skills and creativity leading the Center Voice into the future—our new feature “Center Voices” is but one example.

FALL RETREAT

“**Cultivating Bliss**” was the theme of our ten-day **Fall Retreat** (September 26 through October 6, 1997) at Cloud Mountain. Because of the allure of bliss and the danger of attachment to it, we find many warnings about bliss in the spiritual traditions. But the deeper teachings of these traditions suggest that, if approached with wisdom and guidance, bliss can function as a direct doorway to the Divine. Joel’s teachings about cultivating and working skillfully with the various levels of meditative bliss provided just this guidance, and each of us partook of his wisdom as we were able. Judging from experiences shared during our retreat wrap-up, this retreat was particularly profound for some, and of great value to each of us in whatever ways we needed.



RETREATANTS: (Bottom row from left) Gene Gibbs, Todd Corbett, Niraja, Jim Patterson, (middle row) Mike Taylor, Clivonne Corbett, Joel, Merry Song, Fred Chambers, (top row) Mike Craven, Therese Engelmann David Cunningham, Andrea Pucci, Jim Zajac.

FUN, FUN, FUN...

Center members know a good thing when we experience it, so this last summer we had *two* great parties! The first was our **Solstice Party** in June, followed by our traditional **Enlightenment Day Party** (celebrating the fourteenth anniversary of Joel’s Gnosis) in August. Both were hosted by Mike and Sheila Craven at their home in the South Hills of Eugene, and featured a huge variety of culinary delights brought by members. We enjoyed great socializing as well as group singing led by an ever expanding lineup of Center musicians, including a reprise of Gene’s incomparable “practitioner parodies,” traditional tunes led by Wayne, Vinnie and Lou, and, for a unique treat, Abdullah’s *a cappella* rendering of a pop song from Syria.



Enlightenment Day Party 1997

HELP!

The Center would very much like to continue sending the Center Voice free of charge to everyone on our mailing list. Although it is produced entirely by unpaid volunteers, production and mailing expenses come to **\$1.60** for each copy we send out, making this newsletter the second largest expense category in our budget.

If the Center Voice no longer interests you, won’t you please drop us a line and ask to be removed from our mailing list? This will aid both the ecosystem and our budget.

If, on the other hand, you find this publication of value, please consider sending a tax deductible donation to the Center to help support this work. Thank you!



COMING TO TERMS WITH “GOD”

by Joel

When I was a teenager, hanging out in the beatnik coffee houses of New York’s Greenwich village, I once ran across these words scrawled on a men’s room wall:

God is dead — Nietzsche.

But, just below, there was another line penned by a different hand. It read:

Nietzsche is dead — God.

Nietzsche, in case you don’t know, was a famous 19th century German philosopher, who proposed to “free” humanity from what he regarded as its ignoble subservience to religion. Although Nietzsche’s candor shocked even some of his materialist-minded contemporaries, he had nevertheless given voice to a secret hope, shared by most of Europe’s intelligentsia, that eventually scientific progress, founded on a materialist worldview, would indeed wean the ignorant masses from their superstitious belief in God.

A century later, however, this hope has proved vain. Despite materialism’s success in winning over the educated classes, the masses have steadfastly refused to relinquish their traditional religions. What’s more, in recent years even many intellectuals have begun to abandon the materialist worldview in search of a new spirituality—one which offers a vision of life based on something more than a mere struggle for physical survival and worldly goods. On the eve of the 21st century, then, religion—at least in its most general meaning of a *return to an Origin*¹—is far from dead. But what about God?

For traditional believers, of course, God is also very much alive. But this is not always the case for modern seekers, many of whom feel distinctly uncomfortable when they hear “God” used as a term for the Divine. Part of the reason no doubt has to do with certain social and political connotations the word has acquired. Today, much of the public discourse about religion is dominated by fundamentalists of various traditions, each claiming that the only “true” God is the one narrowly defined by their own particular sect or creed. Worse, the most fanatical of these militants have, “in the name of God,” increasingly resorted to violence and terror in their attempts to impose their views on others. Among more tolerant seekers, the employment of such odious tactics has understandably tended to give God a bad name—so much so that (as one of my students recently remarked) for some “God” has almost become a four-letter word.

In an attempt to dissociate themselves from this kind of rabid fundamentalism, some seekers have simply chosen to drop “God” from their vocabulary, and find, instead, some alternative which carries less doctrinal baggage, such as the “Divine Spirit” or the “Higher Self.” Those who adopt this strategy, however, are in danger of

throwing a lot of babies out with the bath-water.

For one thing, despite fundamentalist claims, “God” does not, as a matter of linguistic fact, belong to any one sect. Actually, “God” does not even belong to a particular religion. The word can and has been used quite legitimately to translate into English equivalent terms from many different languages and traditions. This means that Jews who pray to *Elohim*, Muslims who bow to *Allah*, Hindus who perform puja for *Krishna*, are all, quite properly speaking, worshipping “God.” Thus, while abandoning “God” certainly distances us from fundamentalists, it also poses a semantic impediment to spiritual dialogue and communion with the vast majority of human beings who are *not* militants or fanatics, and want nothing more than to practice their religions in peace. What we become in effect is a *de facto* sect of elitists, who feel themselves too sophisticated to speak the common spiritual language of ordinary people all over the world.

But there is more: In addition to cutting us off from dialogue with our neighbors, abandoning “God” also cuts us off from access to the Collective Spiritual Wisdom of our species, as it has been preserved in the Sacred Writings of the world’s Great Traditions.

“many... feel distinctly uncomfortable when they hear ‘God’ used as a term for the Divine.”

For unless we intended to learn a dozen or so indigenous languages, we must read these works in English, and (with the exception of Buddhist and Taoist texts) when we do, what we find is that they all revolve around this word “God.” Moreover, anyone who peruses these writings will find that centuries of insight and exposition have infused this little word with an incredible multitude of meanings, ranging from the gross to the subtle, the personal to the impersonal, the literal to the symbolic, the mythological to the theological, the metaphorical to the metaphysical, the relative to the absolute. To abandon the “God” of the Great Traditions, then, is to abandon all these meanings as well.

Finally and most seriously, in abandoning “God” we also abandon the Ultimate Meaning of this term, as it has been Realized by the mystics of all traditions. And even though God’s Ultimate Meaning cannot, according to the mystics, be definitively communicated in words, preserving what *can* be said about it is nevertheless of fundamental importance. For it is only through cross-cultural comparisons of expressions of this Ultimate Meaning that we can begin to see how all of humanity’s spiritual traditions—theistic as well as non-theistic—spring from, and point back to, the same Ineffable Source. In fact, it is precisely the *ineffability* of the Ultimate Meaning that, paradoxically, constitutes the first point of mystical unanimity. Here, for example, is how the contemporary Hindu mystic, Anandamayi Ma, puts it:

God’s true being cannot be described, for when speaking of “being” there is the opposite of “non-being”. When trying to express Him by language, He becomes imperfect.²

More specifically, God’s “true being” cannot be expressed in language because, as the Jewish Kabbalists insist:

The hidden God, the innermost Being of Divinity so to speak has neither qualities nor attributes...All that can be expressed are His symbols.³

This is why the Sufi, Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi, writes that even though we qualify the Divine with relative attributes such as “Wisdom,” “Mercy,” “Power,” “Will,” etc.:

The fact that we describe God as having all these attributes in no way bestows any attribute on Him: our description is merely our own attribution, an account we give of an attribute which exists through Him.⁴

“...God’s true being cannot be expressed in language...”

For, in reality, according to the Christian mystic Dionysius the Areopagite, God:

...is neither soul nor intellect; ...nor can He be expressed or conceived, since He is neither number nor order; nor greatness nor smallness; nor equality nor inequality; nor similarity nor dissimilarity; ...neither can the reason attain to Him, nor name Him, nor know Him; neither is He darkness nor light, nor the false nor the true; nor can any affirmation or negation be applied to Him, for although we may affirm or deny the things below Him, we can neither affirm nor deny Him, inasmuch as...[He] transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of His absolute nature is outside of every negation — free from every limitation and beyond them all.⁵

Now let us compare these statements by mystics belonging to the four great theistic traditions (Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) with the following description of Reality’s Ultimate Meaning given by Nagarjuna, one of the greatest philosophers of the non-theistic Buddhist tradition:

It cannot be seized either as existent or nonexistent, either as permanent or impermanent, either as unreal or as real...It is not anything composite or incomposite; not any dharma or adharma; it is neither seizing nor abandoning, neither arising nor perishing; it is beyond the four kotis of ‘is’ and ‘is not’; getting at it one does not find in it anything that can be clung to.⁶

We may also compare these statements to what Lao Tzu, the founder of the other major non-theistic religion, Taoism, said about the nature of Reality: “The Tao about which anything can be said is not the true Tao.”

Even from these few examples we can see that, in keeping with *Leibniz’s Law* of the identity of indiscernibles⁷, the Ultimate Meaning of “God” for mystics of the theistic traditions is identical to the Ultimate Meaning of “Reality” testified to by the mystics of the non-theistic Buddhist and Taoist traditions: for “THAT about which nothing can be said” is indistinguishable from “THAT about which nothing can be said”—or, as the Bard might have expressed it, *a no-thing by any other name is a no-thing just the same.*

Even so, the response of some seekers may be that this is all well and good, as long as we are, indeed, talking about God’s *Ultimate Meaning*. What they object to are those anthropomorphic *relative meanings*—such as “Father,” “Lord,” “Judge”—which are so much on the lips of the fundamentalists. From the mystic’s point of view, however, the fact that “God” has so many levels of meaning is not a liability but an asset. This is because in most traditions the relative meanings of “God” interlock in such a way that each relative meaning points to a higher meaning. Consequently, even the most exoteric images of God can serve us as valuable signposts and stepping stones on a path that leads to an eventual Gnosis of “God’s” Ultimate Meaning. Here, for example, is what Dionysius wrote about the various images used to portray God in the Christian Bible:

...the reason for attributing shapes to that which is above shape, and forms to that which is beyond form, is...the feebleness of our intellectual power which is unable to rise at once to spiritual contemplation, and which needs to be encouraged by the natural and suitable support and upliftment which offers forms perceptible to us of formless and supernatural contemplations...⁸

In a similar manner, the great Sufi shaykh, Ibn 'Arabi, explained the different levels of meaning contained in the Qur'an and other Islamic texts in terms of people's different levels of aptitude and preparedness:

...the prophets, apostles and their heirs...strive to express what they say openly, so as to combine what is outer and public with what is special and inward, so that the special person will understand what the generality understand and more...⁹

Not even the Buddha, who usually shunned references to a Personal Deity, was above employing such a concept when he deemed it beneficial to his listeners. Thus, when two young Brahmins, Bharadvaga and Vasettha, asked him if he knew how to attain union with the Hindu God, *Brahma*, far from denying the Deity's existence, he answered:

...with the Buddha, when asked about the path which leads to the world of Brahma, there can be neither doubt nor difficulty. For Brahma, the world of Brahma, I fully know. Yea, I know it even as one who was born there and lives there.¹⁰

Nor does he try to "correct" their theology during the rest of his discourse. Instead, he proceeds to give them detailed instructions on how to practice mental purity, concluding with these words: "Verily, Vasettha, this is the way to a state of union with Brahma."¹¹

From the mystics' perspective, then, the error made by fundamentalists is not that they make use of relative meanings of "God" in their teachings and

practices, but that they mistake these relative meanings for the Ultimate Meaning. Consequently, advancement on the spiritual path is blocked both for themselves and their followers. It was for this that Jesus criticized the Pharisees when he said:

Woe to you, experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to Gnosis. You, yourselves, haven't entered, and you have also barred the way of those who are trying to enter (Lk 11:52).

This was also the basis for the Buddha's critique of the Brahmin-Priests of his day. They taught that one could attain Nirvana simply by supplicating the Deities with formal rites and rituals, without having to undertake the arduous work of self-surrender. But it is precisely when it comes to this work of surrender that the relative meanings of "God" prove most valuable.

“... it is easier to begin by practicing devotion to some archetypal manifestation of the Divine...”

Perhaps, there are a few exceptional souls who can, indeed, give themselves wholeheartedly to a "God" conceived in such abstract terms as the "Truth," the "Emptiness," or "Consciousness, Itself."¹² For most of us, however, it is easier to begin by practicing devotion to some archetypal manifestation of the Divine—like the "Blessed Savior," "Merciful Lord," or the "Buddha of Compassion." These archetypes engage our emotions and purify our hearts at a much deeper level than purely mental concepts can ordinarily reach.

This brings us to a final reason why some seekers are uneasy with the term

"God," which has little or nothing to do with its social or political connotations. Many people harbor subconscious feelings of anger or fear towards the Divine which the word "God" arouses. This is especially true for those of us who had a traditional religious upbringing which we later rejected as being too restrictive and dogmatic. The problem is that even though we may have intellectually outgrown certain childhood images of God as, say, a "Heavenly Father," emotionally we have still not yet come to terms with the realities these images symbolize.

This is beautifully illustrated by an episode Alix Taylor recounts in her spiritual autobiography, *A Door Ajar*. As a child raised in France, she had been baptized and confirmed in the Catholic Church, but abandoned its dogmas early on. Still, she possessed a strong spiritual intuition and this, com-

bined with a series of extraordinary experiences, motivated her to undertake a lifelong quest for Truth. Before she could make any significant headway, however, she first had to come to terms with her past.

This happened when she was a young woman living in New York. She had joined an ad hoc group of fellow seekers who met regularly to read and discuss an eclectic selection of philosophical and spiritual books, one of which sparked in her a renewed interest in the practice of prayer. When she tried to say the Lord's Prayer (which she had learned by heart as a child), however, she found she couldn't bring

herself to do it. A friend suggested she recite one line per week until she pinpointed exactly where the obstacle lay. Following his advice, she discovered she had no difficulty with the first few lines—*Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy Name*—but that, for some reason, when it came to the line, *Thy Will be done*, she clammed up. This prompted her to examine her feelings about both her human parents and about God. She realized she was still in revolt against her domineering mother, and this made her distrust all forms of authority—including the authority of a “God,” whom she was no longer certain even existed!

Nevertheless, she determined to keep on with her experiment to see what else it might reveal. Again, she tried to recite the Lord’s prayer, but again when she got to the phrase, *Thy Will be done*, she found it impossible to say. Focusing her attention inward, she discovered an even deeper layer of resistance, having to do with the epilepsy that had plagued her since childhood. In her own words, here’s what happened:

Instead of surrender, I touched into anger in myself, as well as frustration and self-pity. It was due to this epilepsy that I felt I could not marry for fear of ruining a man’s career, even perhaps killing a child...I was only too glad to blame some big giant in the sky for my situation, for manipulating us all like puppets.¹³

As it would be for anyone, confronting such emotions was extremely painful. But, whereas other seekers might have turned back, in search of some easier practice, Alix knew instinctively that there can be no spiritual progress until all resistance to the Divine has been surrendered. Consequently, she persisted, night after night, trying not only to utter the magic words which would unlock her heart, but to actually *mean* them. At last, on a particularly hot summer night, she writes:

I slipped under the sheet, my whole body was perspiring but my mind

was finally still and ready to surrender, and I spoke the words with all myself. Then something happened that I could hardly believe. I felt as if a presence had engulfed the whole room. Extraordinary calm and peace entered as well as surrounded me. I did not dare pull the sheet from off my face to look at that presence. I was sure I could not bear whatever it was I might see. Even so the room’s atmosphere appeared to have increased in luminosity and the sheet itself seemed to glow with incandescence. I had found myself bathed in peace.¹⁴

What is especially important to note here is that Alix, herself, was unaware of these negative feelings towards God which lay dormant within her. It took a devotional practice, based on a relative meaning of the Divine as a “Heavenly Father,” to bring them to light. Moreover this was not a practice to which she was drawn because it was easy, but one which she actually found extremely difficult to do. But, of course, that is precisely the point. The more we feel resistance towards a particular practice, the more we are apt to be in need of it.

So if you feel personally uncomfortable with the word “God” because of something that happened in your past, you might want to follow Alix’s example. Instead of trying to avoid this term, you might want to undertake some practice which focuses directly on it. In this way you can bring whatever negative emotions you have towards “God” out into the open, where they can be examined and surrendered. For, it is only when we can engage in all forms of spiritual practices with perfect ease—surrendering ourselves to the Divine under whatever Name It presents Itself—that we are ready for the Revelation of THAT which accepts all these names, precisely because it has no proper Name of Its Own.

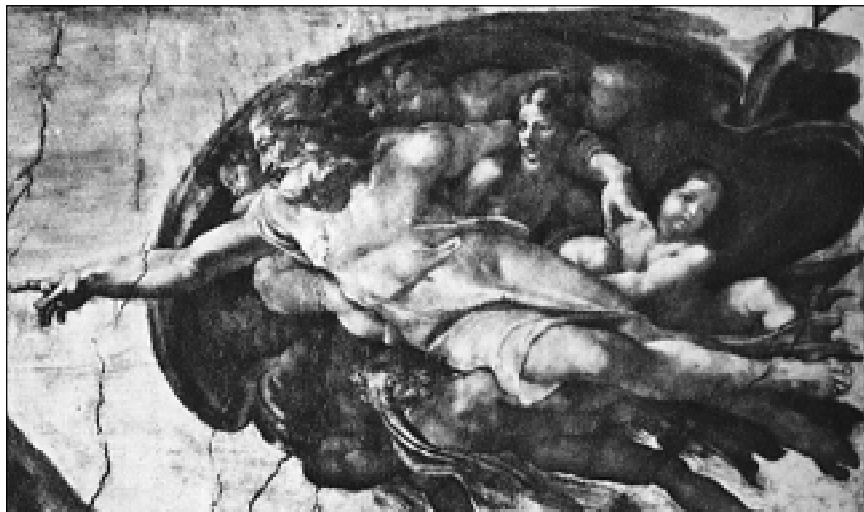
May all of you be blessed with such a Revelation!

❖ Joel, Fall 1997

NOTES

1. Etymological, *re* = return to point of origin; *lig* = bound (as in *ligament*.) Thus, *religion* is a binding back to one’s origin.
2. Sri Anandamayi Ma, *Matri Vani: Vol 2*, 2nd ed., trans Atmananda (Calcutta: Shree Shree Anandamayee Charitable Society, 1982) pp. 136-137.
3. Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941; reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 1961) p. 207, 215.
4. A.J. Arberry, *The Doctrine of The Sufis*—a translation of a work by the 10th century Sufi, Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi (reprinted, Lahore, Pakistan: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1983) p. 18.
5. Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies*, 2nd ed., trans. eds. of The Shrine of Wisdom (Nr. Godalming, Surrey: The Shrine of Wisdom, 1965) p. 16.
6. Venkata Ramana, *Nagarjuna’s Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal, 1978) p. 128.
7. *Leibniz’s Law* of the identity of indiscernibles states that, if there are no discernible differences between two things, they are identical.
8. *Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies*, p. 24.
9. Ibn Al’Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) p. 259.
10. “Tevigga Sutta” in *A Buddhist Bible*, ed. Dwight Goddard, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970) p. 68—I have replaced “Tathagata” with the more familiar “Buddha.”
11. *Ibid* p. 71.
12. My own teacher, Dr. Wolff, was just such a soul, but even so, hear what he has to say about this practice: “...the thinker must learn also to feel his thought, so that, in the highest degree, he thinks devotedly. It is not enough to think clearly, if the thinker stands aloof, not giving *himself* with his thought. The thinker arrives by surrendering himself to Truth, claiming for himself no rights save those that Truth herself bestows upon him....This the state of the mystic ignorance—of the emptied heart. He who has thus become as nothing in his own right then is prepared to become possessed by wisdom herself. The completeness of self-emptying is the precondition to the realization of unutterable Fullness. — *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*, p. 178.
13. Alix Taylor, *A Door Ajar* (Palo Alto, CA: White Wolff Press, 1994) pp. 52-53. (Note: *A Door Ajar* may be ordered directly from White Wolff Press, P.O. Box 52071, Palo Alto, CA 94303.)
14. *Ibid* pp. 53-54.

WHAT DOES GOD MEAN TO YOU ?



*We asked seven members of the Center for Sacred Sciences about the meaning of God in their lives. Their responses included their earliest recollections of God, how these images evolved, how God manifests in their lives, and their relationship with God. Here are their stories as told to the Center Voice. How do their experiences relate to the meaning of God in **your** life?*



***Barbara Dewey** is a personal development trainer residing in Springfield, Oregon. She is fifty-five years old and has been attending the Center for nine years.*

I was raised Episcopalian and attended church regularly because it was important to my parents. I don't remember much about an early concept of God other than there were lots of prayers. As a young adult, my image of God was somebody who rewarded good people, punished bad people, took care of people who did the right thing, and protected people when you asked Him to.

At thirty, I had a crisis of faith. It occurred to me that a lot of bad things happen to good people, and a lot of bad people didn't seem to have consequences. When nobody could explain this inconsistency to me, I drifted away from the church. I started going to the Unitarian Church, which was a more humanistic approach to religion and not so centered around God. Even after I had been attending the Center for some time, I didn't have a good feeling about God—the word, the whole idea of it.

The analogy that gave me a radically new way to think about God is one which Joel offered about two years ago—“Imagine that God is a rope and every conceivable manifes-

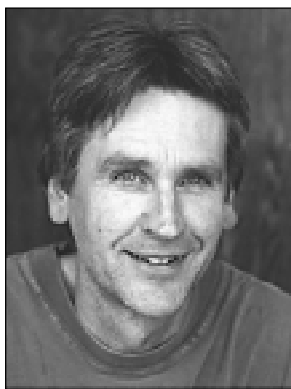
tation is a different kind of knot tied in the rope. They all look different, but are they really anything other than rope?” Using this analogy has gradually made the concept, “There is nothing but God,” real for me. Doing devotional practices and attending retreats has allowed the idea of the love of God, God in the heart, to evolve.

When I try to pray, it feels very artificial and mundane because words are so inadequate. What I do is just *be*. I just open up my heart, and there is some interaction, or communication, or joining.

Sometimes I feel that my personal relationship with God is so intense that I hold myself back. I've had experiences where I felt that everything was God, and it was so overwhelming that I had to back off from it. It's a pretty big thing, and so far removed from the reality that I've had all my life where I was me—here—and everything else was separate—out there. I feel very integrated. I have this concept of it all being God, not just in theory, but really, really God!

I don't think that God *cares* about me or anybody else. It's more the idea of life emanating from God. This outpouring is just what is, and part of what is, is me.

These days, practically everything I do, read, or think about has to do with God and my spiritual practice. This has made a big difference in my being able to accept people as they are, to connect with them, and to have compassion for them. I also have more acceptance of myself and am getting to know who I am instead of who I wish I was, or who I should be, or who other people might want me to be. All of this is intuitively a result of my relationship with God.



Fred Chambers lives in Cottage Grove, Oregon and has been attending the Center for five years. He is forty-five years old and a mental health counselor.



Carla Wenzlaff is an artist and Computer Science instructor at the University of Oregon. She has been attending the Center for eight years and resides in Eugene, Oregon.

When I was growing up, I attended the Methodist Church every week and developed an early concept of God as a *Big Daddy in the Sky*. As I grew older, I became disillusioned with Christianity by the apparent double standard of morality and backbiting taking place in my local church. I started to make a real break from my religious roots during college, and developed a lot of anger toward anything religious. For many years after that, I considered myself an agnostic.

Things have changed a lot since I started attending the Center five years ago. Joel's teachings put a different twist on things—they helped clarify Christian teachings that never made sense to me before.

My old negative reactions have become very positive and I am now comfortable with the concept of God. For me, this concept is *selflessness*. Although I don't know what God is, I have a faith that there is something operating in the universe. I realize that my concept of God is artificial, but I find it helpful in my life to use an image of the divine as something watching over me.

“Although I don't know what God is, I have a faith that there is something operating in the universe.”

In terms of prayer, I have occasionally cried out to God when I didn't know what to do in certain situations. I don't really direct my prayers to someone, but just put them out there, addressing some imaginary concept of God such as a higher power, some other reality, some truth. But then, I think of everything as a prayer, that every action is like a submission to God. Being in tune with the Tao is a kind of a prayer. I have no expectation that there will be a clear answer to my prayers, but I acknowledge the possibility that the answer might come in a way that I don't recognize, that the mysterious source will manifest in some way.

Although I went to the Lutheran Church a few times, I really didn't have much of a formal religious background. When my grandmother read Bible stories to me, she portrayed God as a *Big Daddy in the Sky*, one who could be both benevolent and vengeful depending on how good you were.

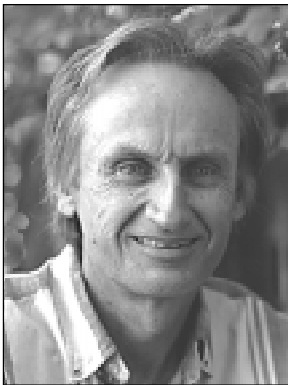
I never fully bought this masculine concept and still have a problem with the word “God.” Because of this aversion, I substitute the words “Divine” or “Sacred” for references to God.

My earlier concepts of the Divine had more of an Eastern flavor, influenced by my interest in Asian art. These beliefs had a greater appeal to me than Christianity in that they honored all beings and life forms, not just humans. The Sacred is an interconnectedness between all things, a thread running through all of life.

In my personal relationship with the Divine, I don't do a formal prayer with words—I meditate as a prayer of quiet in the heart. I pay attention and listen to what I am here for, then act on what I hear. This process is a mystery and one of constant discovery. I don't think that the Divine has a special personal interest in me, or that I am given more guidance than anyone else.

To live up to my full potential, I want to let God's will be done instead of thinking about what I want for myself. When I hear something in my dreams, Divine inspiration, I follow through on it—I can tell when something gets triggered that does not come from me. This process is very powerful and recently led me to take voice lessons, something that I never thought I would do. In the same inspirational way, my art is something that I *have* to do.

I can't imagine my life without my relationship with the Divine. By connecting through meditation and dream work, I have become increasingly open and conscious of what is going on around me. I am more aware of my own deficiencies and am listening to what I need to be doing for my soul and my heart. I am certainly more present in the moment. Joy seems to be bubbling all the time. Even when things appear not to be going well, I understand the impermanent nature of all things and can always tap into that joy.



Gene Gibbs, fifty, has an organic apple orchard near Cottage Grove, Oregon. He has been attending the Center for over four years.

My mom was a Catholic and my dad was an atheist. We did a little bit of church when I was eight, but my dad wasn't too supportive of that. I remember my mom saying the Lord's Prayer at bedtime, but I don't recall even thinking about God until I was around nineteen or twenty. My brother and other friends got into the Jesus movement in the 60's, but I was real resistant to it and wasn't about to knuckle under.

I developed a lot of anger around the word "God" because of others trying to use guilt and shame to get me to become a Christian. In different situations, people would come up and tell me that if I didn't accept Jesus, I would go to Hell and be damned for eternity. I remember being very scared of that. I also built up resentment against God because it was hard to think of Him as good when I saw all the trouble in the world.

I have had a tumultuous relationship with the concept of God. There've been times when I didn't even want to hear the word "God," and times when I got into using it in a mantra for a year. I am more comfortable with the word "Truth," but when I want to go to the root, to the greatest source, I move beyond my anger and resentment, and use "God." Maybe the word "God" has more power than just "Truth", "The Way", or "Consciousness, Itself." It's like a connection to another thing, having a connotation of being almost like another human. Everything has helped a little to accept that word "God," but I find I'm still trying to get around the God thing.

Sometimes I hear people throw the word "God" around so loosely and it pisses me off! It aggravates me when I hear comments like, "Isn't it funny how God dries up the soil so fast after a rainy season?" I can't relate to it. How do they know what God is doing, when no one really knows?

Somewhere, somehow, the image of God as the *Big Daddy in the Sky* with thunder and lightening bolts got deeply implanted in me. When I was exposed to the Buddhist philosophy that God is ultimately no different than your mind, it made me think and re-evaluate. I have no idea what my concept of God is. I'm pretty confused about it. Sometimes I think God is this force—power—that I can have a relationship with, that will grant me some kind of grace to go beyond

all the suffering, that there really is something else. Sometimes I think it is just my mind, that it's really foolish, and there's nothing behind it. It's really a big mystery.

Often there's real doubt and a resistance to really plunge in and pray to God. But, there have been times when I've done my practices, that I have sensed a connection with God and felt some peace. I always feel a yearning for that Truth—there is a flame in me that wants to know.



Thomas Reinhart is a salesman and massage student from Junction City, Oregon. He is forty-seven years old and has been attending the Center for seven years.

I was raised as a conservative Protestant. My family was fairly active in the Church of the Nazarene and I attended Sunday School regularly ever since I was in the second grade. A turning point that first year of church was when a Christian policeman was guest speaker and laid it all out. "If you accept Jesus, you're going to Heaven. If you don't, you're going to Hell!" So it was a bit of a no-brainer as to what I would choose. I got into it out of fear—his uniform made it official.

My earliest concept of God was that He definitely existed, was in Heaven, and had all the attributes of omniscience and omnipresence. There was a sense that He was a personal God and you could actually contact Him. When I prayed to God, it was like there was some person, but it wasn't the old white-haired fellow in the sky—there was some personality there, some entity beyond Jesus.

In my early twenties, a new dimension was added to my spirituality when I was stationed in the Army in Japan. We had been at war with Japan and I was raised on movies showing them as the enemy, but I found a major contradiction in that the people were so nice. Up to then, God had been more of a Christian God, but the Japanese didn't have the same God. There was a sense of serious spirituality with the people, that their connection with a higher being was a natural element. I put it together that if such good, normal, decent people believed in a higher power, there must be some logic to it. This began to diffuse my understanding of God—God became more universal.

My next major shift came at twenty-four, when I joined a Sufi community in England. There was an Eastern religious approach that was a complete negation of any Christianity, an absence of all western Protestant and Catholic religious influence. My five years there allowed me to get out from under the whole guilt element of religion, that Jesus is the only way. God became more of a mystery. In this mystical approach to reality, I had the idea that there was something there, but it was a mystery, not a personality.

My relationship with God changed. I had more turmoil in my life at that point because there wasn't this personal God out there that I could depend on. I was left to rely on my own resources and figure out what this Mystery was. It came down to having to face my own psychology, who I was as a person, and what I perceived to be my own inadequacies. It was a difficult situation in some ways. I was left to my own devices and kept seeming to fail.

This mystery continued until about a year ago when I came into contact with Sai Baba, a contemporary Indian guru from the Hindu tradition. I had spent the past ten years trying to find the right career, and it never worked out. I was trying to figure out what I was going to do next, and I carried on this imaginary conversation with Sai Baba. A couple of weeks later, an article on massage caught my interest. Although my wife Miriam is a massage therapist, I never had any interest in it. So, I feel that the way I found my massage career was a miracle.

I don't pray as a regular thing, only when things get tough. I don't pray to God, because if I'm going to talk to anybody, I'm going to talk to Sai Baba. For me, Sai Baba represents something greater than himself, this all-knowing element. In a way, I can relate to him because I know something about him and his miraculous powers. I see Sai Baba as an Enlightened being, an Avatar, an emissary of God power, with a knowing of what God is. I also consider Jesus an Avatar, but no longer the only way to God.

My conception of God is that there's something holding the world together, some element of beneficence, a sense that there's a personality. I think God is this force in the universe that is only meaningful if I can somehow relate to it personally. What God represents is sort of the opposite of all my unhappiness, and I hold out this belief that there is something beyond my suffering. There's this ongoing sense that there is something out there, peace out there, and that it's all okay, no matter what's happening. Maybe He's the animating principle that motivates me, the sense that there's a state of mind to get to that's not miserable. I'm not sure if this state is attainable in this lifetime, but I think that when one is moving toward it, that, in itself, is very fulfilling.



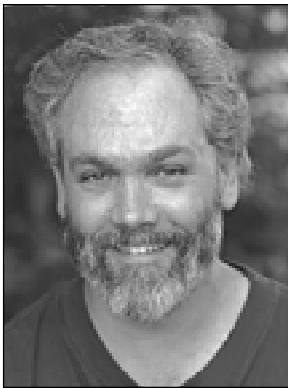
Merry Song, a teacher and writer in Eugene, has been attending the Center for nearly four years. She is drawn to photography, video making, and sitting in the presence of Enlightened teachers.

My early spiritual awareness was nurtured by a compassionate grandmother, challenged by a meditating older brother, and encouraged by my mother who taught Sunday School in the Methodist church.

When I was a little girl, I had a very definite concept of *The Big Daddy in the Sky*. Every night I would pray to God. Mainly I would say, "Thank you God for everything." Somehow I developed this mantra, even at five years old. As I would repeat this saying over and over in my mind, I would visualize a white light encircling my body. I felt that God was able to protect me, but I needed to *ask* for it. And sometimes I would ask for things in particular, often related to helping someone else. "Please, God, look over this lonely person on our block," or "Please, God, watch over my sick grandmother."

It wasn't until 1993 that I had a big falling out with God, this concept of *The Big Daddy in the Sky*, when I asked for something that I felt was justly due to me. When God didn't give it to me, it made me so angry, that the whole thing exploded. My concept of God as a being to pray to exploded. It was a very agonizing experience and it pretty much brought me to my knees. My sense of betrayal brought up such rage that I had to deal with what I considered to be the Dark Night of the Soul, which lasted for several months. I decided early on that I wasn't going to try to anesthetize myself but rather to ride it to the very end. It felt like a wild stallion of rage.

It eventually led me to something much more expansive. It's difficult to describe. Now I have a sense of God but there's no container to God. I can still say, "Thank you God for everything," although I hesitate over the "you" because it tends to put God into that container of *Big Daddy in the Sky*. But "Thank you God for everything" continues on and on in my daily Center practice and my Buddhist meditations. It seems that my childhood mantra will be with me always.



David Cunningham lives in Anacortes, Washington and has been associated with the Center for four years through correspondence with Joel and attendance at the biannual retreats. He is forty years old and is a computer systems analyst.

I was raised Catholic, but not in a very strict fashion. I had vague images of God based on Catholic symbols such as the crucifix, pictures of Jesus, the Bible, and Michelangelo's painting of the guy in the sky.

Around age 13, religion stopped working for me because all of the suffering and injustice in the world didn't equate with the idea of a loving God. Although our family was well off, I wasn't a very happy youngster. We had a lot of things you're supposed to have to make you happy, yet all I saw was a lot of misery around me.

My religious interest was revived at 16 when I hooked up with an Episcopal youth group which had a great minister. I started looking in alternative directions, which led me to read books by Yogananda and Carlos Casteneda. One of my high school teachers influenced me to become a student of Swami Muktananda and my evolutionary process continued from there.

There are really no words to describe my present concept of God. I often use the phrase "Consciousness, Itself," but the word "God" also has meaning and invokes a greater devotional aspect. Personal qualities like faith relate better to the idea of God as opposed to the phrase "Consciousness, Itself."

The concept of devotion is something I struggle a lot with these days. In its most basic form, it's this sense of love for *that* which I do not know, that which is not a thing I can grasp, but which has been a guiding principle of my adult life. Sometimes I wonder what a meaningful form of devotional expression would be. I still haven't come up with an answer except that I do try to pray. Beyond my formal sitting practice, during the course of the day, I try always to be attentive to that presence. Whether I'm paying attention to the breath, prayer, the word "God," or some form of inquiry, it's all devotional.

When I pray, I remember Joel's comment about prayer being very powerful because it is reaching beyond the imaginary boundary of self. I don't pray to someone or something else because, during prayer, awareness of the illusory dichotomy of subject/object immediately leaps to the fore. I feel that my prayers are answered in the little things that show up in my life—just sort of ticklers to say *I'm* here, *I'm* listening. As long as illusion persists, there is a sense of

self and other, and that which is beyond self and beyond what I know is somehow responding.

Whether the word is "God," "Consciousness, Itself," or "Buddha Nature," the concept plays one of the most important parts in my life.

❖ All interviews conducted fall 1997



LIBRARY CORNER

CSS Library Hours:

Sunday afternoons & **Tuesday evenings**
2:00 - 4:00 p.m. **5:30 - 8:30 p.m.**

Our library continues to grow at a steady pace. We now have well over 3,000 books, 550 audio tapes, and 150 videos. A large percentage of these acquisitions were purchased with proceeds from our annual book drive. The way the book drive works is this: Throughout the year people donate books they no longer want. These don't have to be spiritual books by any means. Textbooks, novels, self-help books, how-to books are all appreciated. Every six months or so Jennifer, our library director, hauls these tomes down to our local used book stores, where she sells them for cash. The money raised is then used to purchase new books for our library that have either been recommended by our patrons, or which Jennifer has learned about by combing through publishers' catalogs.

Last year our book drive funds were dedicated to acquiring books on the historical Jesus and early Christianity. Among the many books we purchased on this theme were *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* by Marcus J. Borg (Trinity Press International, 1994); *Trajectories Through Early Christianity*, by James M. Robinson (who headed the team of original *Nag Hammadi* translators) and Helmut Koester (Fortress Press, 1971); and *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: Effects of Early Christological Controversies on the Texts of the New Testament*, by Bart D. Ehrman (Oxford University Press, 1993). These and other modern scholars give us quite a different picture of the historical Jesus than the one presented in most traditional churches. If this is a subject that interests you, stop by our library and check them out. And don't forget to bring in any unwanted books you may have taking up space on your shelf, so we can keep the book drive going!



POSTCARDS FROM THE PATH

by Mike Taylor

Dear Friends,

Since my last dispatch, my sabbatical has continued as a rich time of personal and spiritual growth and discovery. To surrender so much of my sense of control over my life (deluded as that sense is), and to instead allow life to unfold with less ego interference and fear, has been a deep and illuminating experience. To whatever degree I have been successful at this surrender, it has shown me at an ever deeper level the omnipresent miracle of God's grace. Jesus' teaching about the lilies of the fields seems more true the more I trust it.

This world manifests as my teacher on this path with a perfection that is sometimes spooky. The Mystery behind it all seems intent on dissolving my barriers, deepening my understanding and compassion, and opening my heart ever more to God's love. I sometimes wish that I was a more able student, but I am slowly learning to have more patience and compassion for my own limitations.

It is a truism that each of us has different lessons to learn in this lifetime. The spiritual teachings that are found in all the mystical traditions are basically universal, but how they will impact each one of us will be as unique as our own personality. Our individual spiritual path and struggles cannot do other than reflect this variety. Each of us has different ways we are wounded—and different mechanisms and means we use to flee from God. But, being human and born into delusion, as the Eastern traditions put it, I see that we all do flee from this infinite freedom and love.

The lessons of my path have been getting subtler and subtler, and much more specific to my own personality and life experiences. Because of this, I have come to a place where I no longer feel that the details of my own path are likely to be of general interest or usefulness to others. At the same time, I have been feeling a strong calling to a deeper silence, a deeper letting go of the roles and personas that keep this flywheel of self spinning. The delicate balance that I have tried to maintain between keeping our ninth precept of charity (in part, giving unsparingly of our spiritual assets), and being responsible to the deeper call of the spirit within, has tipped

beyond doubt toward that deeper responsibility. It is time for me to step out of the spotlight. I expect that this is the last "Postcards from the Path" that I will be writing.

"The methods and techniques that comprise the Sacred Sciences are extremely powerful."

Before I fade into the shadows, I would like to share some final thoughts. The testimony of Joel and the mystics of all the ages is a challenge to us to *know* the Truth, in the deepest sense possible, not just to learn and believe in wonderful spiritual ideas or philosophies. My path has shown me that you *can* know for yourself. The methods and techniques that comprise the Sacred Sciences are extremely powerful. Meditation, precepts, self-inquiry, dreamwork, and reading the classical writings of the mystics have all been very potent practices on my own path. Most important of all for me has been the ongoing and selfless guidance of Joel, my teacher. His living example and personal testimony is, I feel, a priceless treasure and opportunity for anyone who is called to a spiritual path.

Having said that, it must also be said that this mystic's quest is not for everybody. I have met people, some deeply spiritual, who seem happy, fulfilled, and well served by their religion without ever delving into the deeper mysteries of ultimate Truth. More power to them—I have sometimes wished I was one of them! I have met other people who have an interest in mystical spirituality, but don't feel called at this time to pursue a deeper spiritual path. I used to think they should "get down to it," but now I just don't know. It seems that God leads each of us in different ways for purposes that others, indeed we ourselves, may not understand. I think that any growth in the direction of love and compassion is growth toward God, no matter what our individual calling in this life may be. And, from a strictly relative perspective, that seems worthy.

But for those of us who *are* called to the spiritual path, the witnessing of the mystics about their own path can be crucial. This spiritual life can appear very costly from a worldly perspective. Indeed, if we venture far enough down the path, the ego will see this quest as fatal. We may wonder if we have what it takes to pay the price. For me, the testimony of Joel and the other mystics about the Reality they found—the perfection of love, peace, and joy that was the fruition of their own spiritual path—has given me the inspiration and courage to look deeply into my own experience—to find the Truth that is hidden behind my beliefs, my prejudices, and my fears. God willing, maybe these five years of sharing my path in print may also have served you in some small way.

As I leave this stage, I have a sense that my life is in the process of changing in ways I can't predict. I am doing well, in case you were wondering, and know that my life is in good hands. My wish for all of us, whatever our path, is that we be blessed with faith, patience, and acceptance, that our hearts may come to overflow with the Love of God. There is truly nothing sweeter. Peace to you, my friends, and farewell for now.

❖ Mike, Spring 1997

THANK YOU ❖ THANK YOU ❖ THANK YOU

The Center for Sacred Sciences has always depended on the generosity of its members and friends to sustain it. For instance, other than a small stipend for our bookkeeper, we have no paid staff and all our programs and services are produced as a labor of love by those involved. We would like to take this opportunity to thank some of our friends for their special contributions above and beyond their membership pledges.

The Retreat Scholarship Fund has enjoyed broad support from the membership over this last year, as well as a generous special gift from **Mike and Sheila Craven**. This fund is an excellent way to express our gratitude for Joel's teachings while helping to provide our fellow seekers with something truly priceless — an in-depth opportunity to practice the teachings. Thanks to all of you who donated for your benevolent thoughtfulness! Others interested in helping their fellow seekers in this way should designate their check "CSS Retreat Scholarship Fund."

Other special gifts of note came from **David Capps**, for the general support of Center programs, and from **Mike and Sheila Craven**, for purchase of video tapes of the Bill Moyers interviews with noted scholar of world religions, Huston Smith, as well other library acquisitions. Many thanks for their generosity, which benefits all of us.

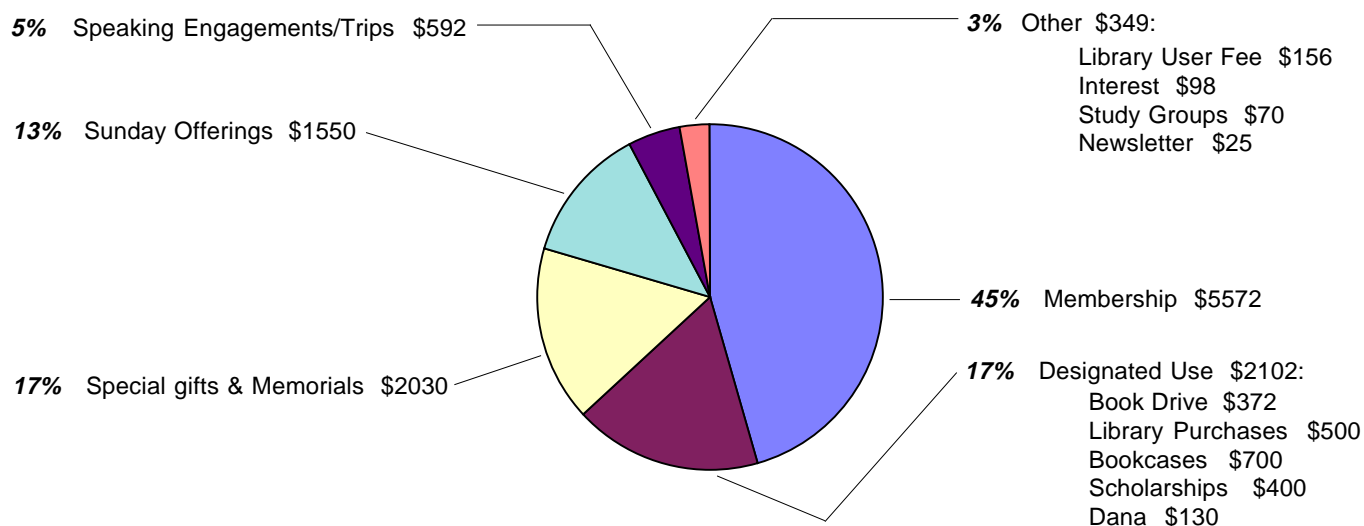
Of course, not all gifts are financial in nature. Many people give generously of their time and efforts to support the work of the Center. One of those people is **Ellen Singer** who, as Publicity Coordinator for the last four years, was responsible for program information about our monthly Video Sundays appearing in local papers. Ellen now passes this position to Sheila Craven. Many people's first introduction to the Center is through our Video Sundays, and we send a big "Thank You" to Ellen for the excellent job that she has done.

Last, but far from least, we would like to acknowledge a true unsung hero of the Center, from its early days on. We are referring, of course, to **Jennifer Knight**. Not only does she graciously open her home three times a week hosting Center programs, but it is Jennifer who had the vision for our Library, and whose efforts over many years brought it to fruition as the superb resource this community now enjoys. On top of that, a great many of the books, magazines, and other materials in the library were provided by her generous donations. Next time you attend the Center, or are moved, inspired, or edified by something from the library, you might take a moment to appreciate what is behind it. From all of your friends in the Center community, Jennifer, a very sincere "Thank You!"

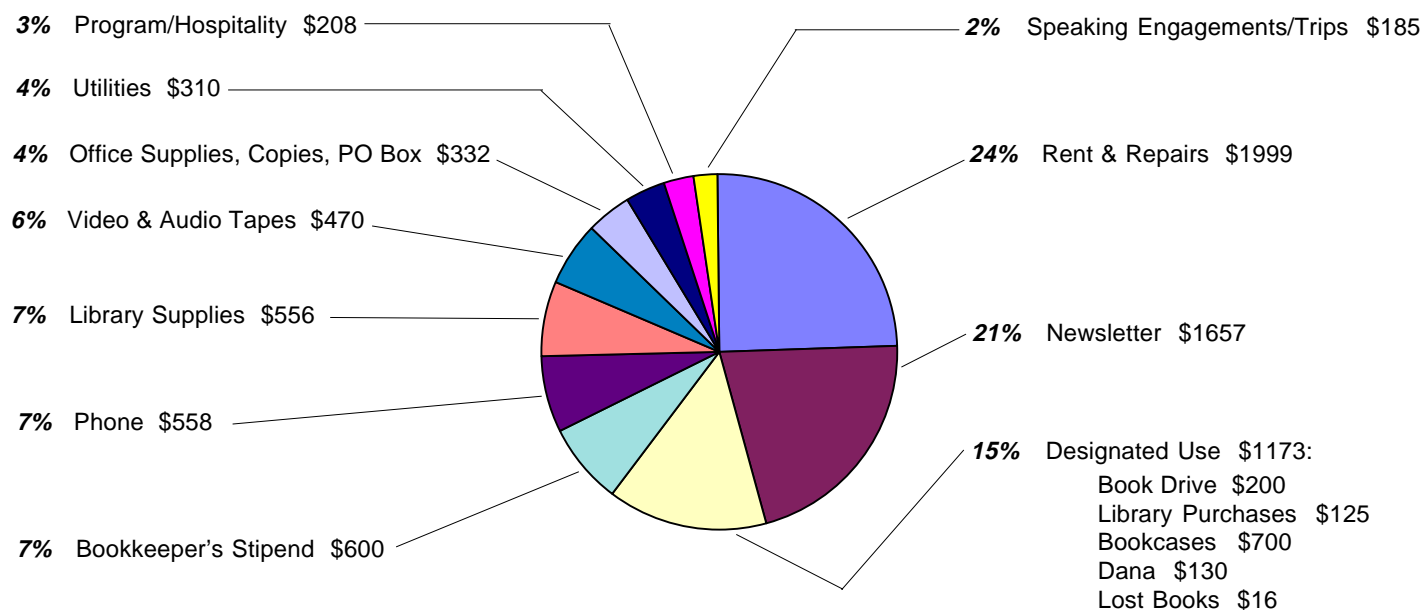
FINANCIAL REPORT: Fiscal Year ending 8/31/97

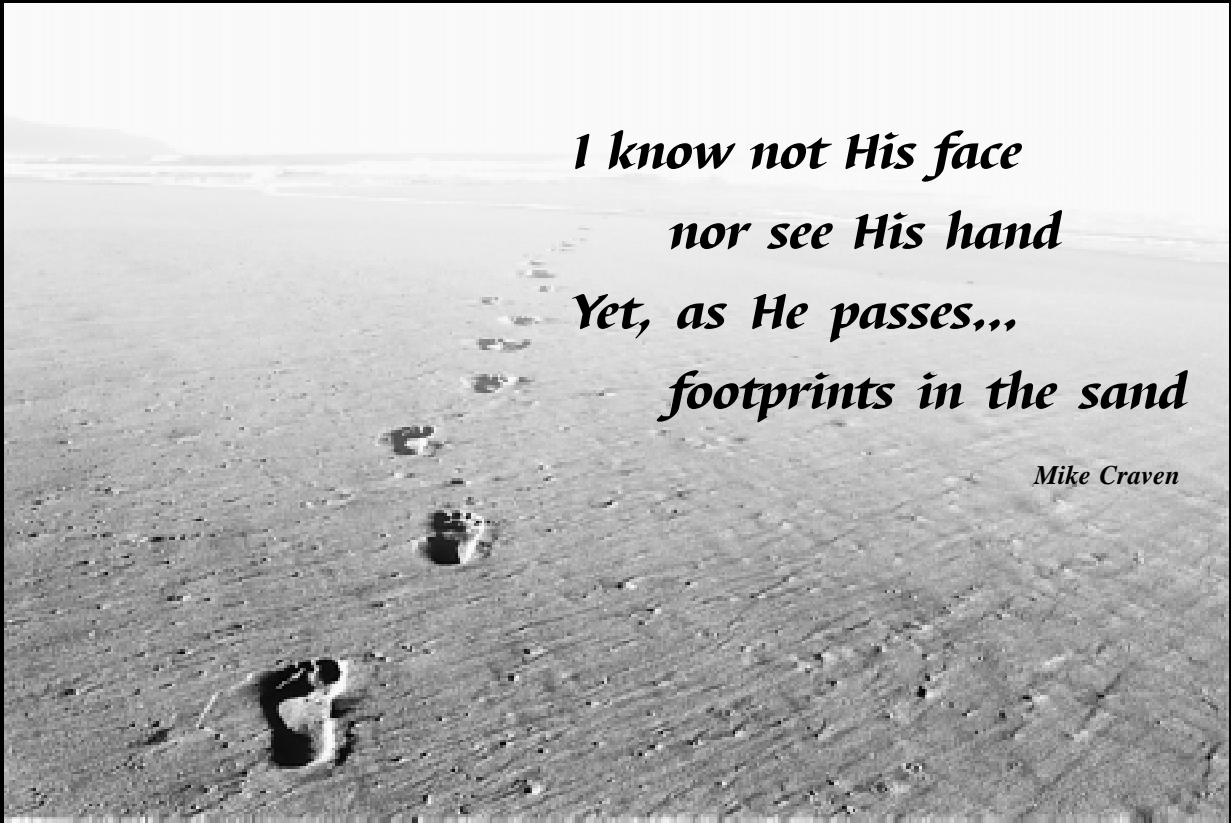
In this age of eroding worldly values, we feel it is especially important that a spiritual organization's finances be open and above board. From its inception the Center has been run as a labor of love by all those who work to bring you the teachings. Other than a small stipend for our bookkeeper, the Center has no paid staff. As you can see below, fiscal conservatism by the Board, as well as the generous support of our members and friends, have left us in good shape for the coming year. This is a welcome situation as we look towards publishing Joel's new book and accommodating the growth of our Center community. We hope that the charts below are self-explanatory, but if you have any questions, please feel free to ask Jennifer Knight, our Treasurer.

INCOME \$12,195



EXPENSES \$8,048





*I know not His face
nor see His hand
Yet, as He passes...
footprints in the sand*

Mike Craven

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