

# **The Universality of Unknowing**

Luther Askeland and the Wordless Way

Rhoda R. Gilman



**Quaker Universalist Fellowship**



**Quaker Universalist Fellowship**

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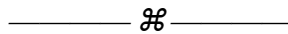
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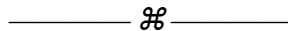
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focus upon it. In this way turning consciousness may touch the uncontained and the unbroken for only a moment, so that its “time” *in* God is infinitesimal, but as we have seen, just in that instant of being a single bare nerve fired by the touch of the signless element, it receives turned life’s essential nourishment. For just one such moment, a time too quick for awareness to catch, suffices for turning consciousness to be suffused or charged with — or just transmuted into — energies which will remain to inform and shape the future moments of turned life.

to, or bound, or impose an edge on the signless, indeterminate, and consequently infinite, element. Further, since it is pure singularity to which no “second” thing might even be compared — for it does not share any category with any other thing — it is omnipresent and oceanic, is infinite, in an unprecedented, peculiarly “incomparable” way.



The absolute infinity of the signless element is the infinity of edgeless sky. Its space, everywhere, is the space of openings, of commencement, is the shining and crystalline virginal space of spacious doorways and vast thresholds. It is infinite portal without lintel or frame, is a movement or gesture, *before* all “time,” signaling an unending and infinite disembarkation, is a great blossoming flower out into whose ever expanding circle of efflorescence awareness now is carried, and in whose infinite petals awareness now opens up.



It is not God’s sayable name, but God’s intimate, immediately known, and unsayable *reality*, that counts. This is so, even if contact with that reality is imperfect and intermittent. . . . For reality’s touch, even if rare, fleeting, and incomplete, is more powerful in its immediate and its long-term effects than the recollection or utterance of any word; and indeed its greatest influence on turned life may well be subconscious rather than conscious. . . .

That singular event — the touch — may seem bereft of all measurable duration. In this most subtle and volatile of experience-realms, it is as if that instant of uncontained free flight out of all horizons into an infinite and crystalline lucidity has been consummated — has already begun fading into “the past” — before unwieldy consciousness even begins turning to

## Editor’s Introduction

As author of the current pamphlet I mainly want to thank those who have helped me in producing it. From John Cowan of the Twin Cities Friends Meeting I received support and encouragement in writing it. John met Luther Askeland during the closing days of Luther’s life and, like me, was deeply impressed with his thought and his spirit.

I have received helpful suggestions and editorial review from the Reverend Clement W. Welsh of Annapolis, Maryland, and from Patricia Williams, editor of *Universalist Friends*. Finally, Kari Askeland shared some details of her father’s life and gave permission to reproduce passages from his unpublished work.

To all of them I give my heartfelt thanks.

Rhoda R. Gilman

## The Universality of Unknowing

### Luther Askeland and the Wordless Way

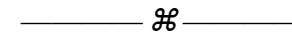
LUTHER ASKELAND died in February, 2006. I had not heard from him for several years, so it was a surprise when he called during the week after Christmas. His voice on the phone was husky and not much above a whisper, although I could still recognize the slight Norwegian-American accent. The cancer, he said, had affected his larynx. In fact, it had taken a turn for the worse, and he was now staying with his daughter in Minneapolis to be closer to help and care. Could I get there for a visit? He would like to see me.

I had first met Luther back in the mid-1980s. We were both loosely connected then with the *North Country Anvil*, an alternative magazine that preached peace, radicalism, and the environmental gospel from a small town in southern Minnesota. To me he had been little more than a name and a thin, bespectacled face lost in the crowd of aging hippies and threadbare back-to-the-land advocates who gathered once a year to reaffirm their fading hope for a better world and their support for the *Anvil*. {1}

It was in the early 90s that someone from my Quaker meeting who knew I had practiced Buddhist meditation for years, gave me a photocopy of an article that had appeared in the small theological journal *Cross Currents*. It was called “The God in the Moment,” and as Quakers say, it spoke to my condition. Or, to put the case in less Quakerly terms, it blew me away!

I am a historian, not by academic training, but by nature and by a lifetime of working in the field. The mystery of time has haunted me since childhood. I can recall at age twelve standing on the site of a tragic massacre that had occurred a hundred years earlier on a quiet, sunny morning much like the

consciousness *identifies* itself, is precisely and absolutely decisively just what “I” am. For the “I” is one pole of the two original opposites which establish “the world’s” primary perceptual contents and structure, and upon which the entire verbal world depends; and of the two ultimate opposites which first divide and map the world within which it finds itself, the “I” is the one with which consciousness identifies itself affectively as well as perceptually, while it perceives the other — “the world out there” — precisely as what “I” am not.



All the sign-based things and events normal consciousness perceives jostle against others comparable with them within the vast, teeming categories of ‘is’ and ‘is not’, of ‘persons’ and ‘things’, etc., yet language, bringing to bear sign-perception’s universal principle of binary opposition, naturally opposes ‘the one’ to ‘the many’, ‘singularity’ to ‘plurality’, ‘the incomparable’ to ‘the comparable’. In this way the ancient biology of sensory and verbal perception has engendered a category — ‘the unique’, ‘the incomparable’, ‘the one of a kind’ — which no *object* of animal perception, nothing, that is, encountered in any biological world, can possibly fill; consequently, we have come to use those signs merely as vague terms of exaggerated praise or even of dismissal. But now that all opposites and so all worlds have been dissolved, consciousness is at last exposed to something — the signless element — which alone qualifies for that most “unworldly” category: the incomparable and incommensurable, the absolutely unique, Latin’s *sui generis*, Sanskrit’s *advitiya*, that is, “that which has no second.” . . .

Spinoza and the medievals have already equated determination with negation and with finitude, and clearly in the present case, all else — that is, “the world” — having vanished, there remains nothing which possibly *could* set limits

Normal consciousness comes to identify itself exclusively, and most significantly and fatefully, with the particular verbal sign 'I'; in consequence, almost everything in "the world" — that is, almost everything which "is" — presents itself to consciousness first of all as something which "I" am not. This critically important element — the simultaneous emergence of an "identification with" and an "alienation from" — is unique to the process of "I" enchantment, yet the general *manner* in which this verbal sign enchants normal consciousness mirrors the way in which all verbal signs enchant. Bewitched by it as by any other sign, consciousness does not relate to it simply as a phenomenon in itself, but rather as identifying a separate entity — "I" — which together with all other entities and events constitutes "the world." It is as if I immediately passed through the sound itself into that perfectly corresponding being which — as if by magic — had materialized from it. In this way "I" come to picture "myself" as "a person," "a man," "alive," etc., and so — in addition to that primary "otherness" — also as resembling the others, that is, as one identifiable, particular, clearly delimited being in a world of myriad such beings. I see myself as amenable, like all things, to processing by means of verbal signs, as a "someone" who, like all other persons, can be verbally identified, described, and explained. I now am one who at any moment can be gloriously or ignominiously laid bare by that life story which I or you or even "they" can tell.

We have seen that the diphthong "I" is the audible or the ghostly interior sound I incessantly make, is the perennial, constantly trafficked hub of my sentences. It is the sound with which awareness in me delimits and first defines itself, is the way in which consciousness is present to itself. The particular "person" which has materialized from it, and which awareness passes into as it lets itself be enclosed in the sign, is, like all other persons, someone in "the world." But also and above all that "person" — now much more ambiguous, intimate, "subjective," and even close to "nothing" — is that with which

one around me. History hung in the air like a living presence. Where had the past gone, I wondered. The cries, the terror, the sudden anguish of those people were, if anything, more real than I — yet vanished. How? Where?

In the many years since then, the present moment had become an important focus for me through hours of meditation, as I strove repeatedly to clear my mind of words, pictures, and discursive thought. Yet what was left appeared only to be what I once described as "the crack between the *was* and *will*." Sometimes I pictured myself with my nose pressed against that crack, hoping to get a slight whiff of the eternity beyond.

Looking at the article, my attention fixed first on the deliberate, crystalline way in which the writer distinguished between merely thinking about the present and the effort it takes "to bring awareness to rest in the transparent presence of the moment itself." As I read further, he dismissed the ever-changing mental content of each moment to expose the featureless remainder as identical with every other moment in time, whether in ages past or ages future. "The present moment I can dwell in right now, and someone else's present moment five thousand years ago, are moments veiled and filled by different events and experiences, but in themselves those moments cannot be distinguished — each is just a pure presence, a mysterious 'now.'" Pondering the words, I felt the crack widening, and a new depth of reality opened to me. In a shadowy way, that reality was intensely familiar, yet I could not say when or if I had experienced it before.

"We can simply go on and say that there is one single moment, a moment that abides and is eternal, a moment outside time, through which, however, the motley, swiftly changing flow of individuals and events streams." The essay went on to explore the implications of this fact for one's sense of self and the world. It described how we struggle to give shape and boundaries and definition to it all, and how we map it with

language, screening from ourselves the fact that we actually know nothing of what we are or where.

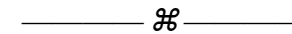
I had not noticed the identity of the author, but when I looked back to find what sort of person had produced these insights, I saw Luther's name, and I felt an unbelieving shock of recognition. By then the *Anvil* was no longer in existence, but I knew Luther had lived near the town of Red Wing, and an old acquaintance there gave me his phone number. I called, and he invited me to visit him at his woodworking shop in the Cannon Valley. It was only some forty miles from my home in St. Paul.

AS I TURNED OFF the country road that led away from the Cannon River, a narrow driveway took me to a clearing in the woods at the foot of a hill. From the steps of what looked to be a much-remodeled mobile home, an old gray cat, whose name I learned was Gunnar, greeted me warily. Luther reassured him and invited me in.

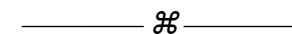
Over a lunch of herbal tea and veggie sandwiches, I heard that my host was the son of a Lutheran minister. He had grown up in rural South Dakota and after attending various church schools, he had earned a degree in philosophy from Harvard. Then he had taught Scandinavian studies at the University of Minnesota. At some point in the 1970s he had turned his back on the academic world and opted to make his living with his hands. Later we toured the shop he had built from used lumber, where he did some cabinet-making and furniture work.

His principal income, it turned out, was from a line of lovingly constructed replicas of the 19th-century stereoscopes that provided entertainment in Victorian parlors along with the spread of photography during the 1850s and 1860s. Invented in 1849, the stereoscope is a simple mechanical device that allows two pictures taken from a slightly different angle to

particularized awareness “like void and cloudless sky,” is “naked, spotless intellect . . . without circumference or centre.” For the woman or man who “recognizes” the Clear Light and becomes one with it, the bonds of illusion and samsara are broken, and any future birth will be her voluntary birth as an awakened one — a buddha — determined to liberate all the world.



The Latin syllables *coincidentia oppositorum* call to mind Nicholas of Cusa, who sometimes writes that all opposites coincide “in” God, at other times that God is above, prior to, or beyond their coincidence. God is beyond distinctions such as that between motion and rest, activity and passivity, time and eternity, oneness and plurality, being and nonbeing; since that most perfect being is in this way beyond all distinction and classification, we cannot even begin to form a concept of Him, and “the more an intellect understands the degree to which the concept of God is unformable, the greater this intellect is.” But in spite of this renowned European connection, one can generalize that the particular preoccupations and perspectives most hospitable to the Latin phrase are more fully developed in other — above all, in India's — traditions. Indian thought's historically most prominent “seeing” or “school” is known specifically as the Non-dual (*advaita*) Vedanta. One striking example of Buddhism's preoccupation with this theme is the *Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra's* climactic ninth chapter on “The Dharma-Door of Nonduality.” By way of showing how one may enter that door, each of thirty-one bodhisattvas in turn identifies a particular pair of opposed conceptions — for example matter and voidness, happiness and misery, transcendental and mundane — which one who seeks “nonduality” must leave behind.



In life as we know it there is just one instant — the last — in which instinct-habit is no longer required, for now there remain no future life-instants to will, ensure, or prepare. In that extreme moment, instinct-habit — that is, all the operations, including the sensory and verbal perceptions, of normal life — has become useless and can therefore give way. Further, that final instant is the instant of the I's final breakup, finitude's dissolution. In it all determination, limitation, and negation, all division, and all perception by means of sensory and verbal signs also therefore “give way.” Now that animal life and finitude itself are both breaking up, nothing remains which might oppose or limit that process of *infinite* dilation and simplification which is the innermost essence of the turn. And this means: just in that final moment the way is cleared for intuition to take full possession, flooding dying, disintegrating consciousness, which now is “dead to the world,” with an infinite and seamless content.

Reporting that they have reached that final moment and then miraculously returned, some recount how they have hovered — with awareness wholly transformed — over their own body and over “life.” In terms of the foregoing, they have flown up out of their now inert golem project into an edgeless, cloudless, peaceful sky. They have experienced the unthinkable consummation of the dilation-simplification process, have known what it is to be uncontained and one.

The Tibetans have beautifully thought that in the dying person's last moment, normal consciousness vanishes and one sees instead reality's “Clear Light.” Unlike “the world's” light, which discloses multiplicity in constant change, this supreme Clear Light is the pure oneness of light before it is fractured into prismatic color. As “the Clear Light of Pure Reality,” it knows no bounds. The “dazzlement” it produces in dying consciousness is like “an infinitely vibrant landscape” in the spring. The Clear Light is also pure “unmodified” or non-

be seen separately by each eye. Thus it produces the illusion of three-dimensional depth, demonstrating how perception is shaped by the angle of vision and the habits of the neural system. Luther sold them to collectors throughout the country.

After that visit, our meetings were mainly in Minneapolis. When Luther came to the city on business, which usually included visiting the university's library, he would give me a call, and we would meet at a small Vietnamese restaurant near the west bank campus. Our conversations were wide-ranging: philosophy, religion, books, history, current events. We seldom ventured onto the ground of spiritual experiences, but there was always the unspoken understanding that they were present in both our lives.

I was also reading more of Luther's work. Another of his essays, entitled “Nobody Knows My Name,” provides a striking image that has become a part of my own mental furniture. That image is from an old Jewish tale of creating an artificial human or “golem.” Luther suggests somewhat playfully that each one of us is doing this from the time of our birth. “We are all laboring to turn that dispersed and amorphous question that we are into a human being, to create something living, formed, and real that will correspond with our name, something that can be the proud referent of that spellbinding sound ‘I.’” Our relentless hunger for a clearly defined, solid reality, both for ourselves and our world (Buddhists might call it “permanence”), drives us to the lifelong task of shaping “a completed human being dancing its millennium.”

Luther had published a number of articles, and he was working on putting them together in a book, united by introductory and closing essays. Knowing my background as an editor, he asked me to critique the final one, entitled “Avignon.” It is a reflection on manifestations of what the Spanish saint, John of the Cross, called “the dark night of the soul,” and it considers three examples. From the sufferings and ultimate spiritual victory of Juan de la Cruz, Luther leaps ahead

to the desolation of soul endured by the 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his years of poverty, obscurity, and approaching insanity. The essay concludes with the fall from grace of the medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart, who near the close of an honored life was condemned by the Church as a heretic and purveyor of evil. Nothing is known of Eckhart's final days at the Papal headquarters then located in Avignon, so Luther is free to speculate. In doing so, he ends on a somewhat wistful note of hope.

Beyond seeing in it a statement of Buddhism's first Noble Truth — that life is suffering — I still struggle with the essay's full meaning. "Avignon" is without doubt a personal cry of anguish and a grasping for hope, but it has an urgency which goes beyond that. In Luther's own valley of despair I see ominous shadows of the dark night that looms over all humanity. Sages have dealt before with personal tragedy and even with social disaster. Just a few years after Eckhart, the Black Death swept across the world and decimated most of Europe. But ours is the first generation poised to destroy itself along with the ancient patterns of species and perhaps even life on earth.

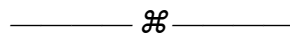
I encountered Luther's thinking as separate articles until 1997, when he gave me a copy of his finished collection, *Ways in Mystery*.<sup>{2}</sup> There they are introduced with a step-by-step consideration of the *Via Negativa*, or "Way of Unknowing," which takes up more than a third of the book. It is an uncompromisingly clear statement of the nature and limitations of mysticism.

The ongoing theme is the tension between human intellect and mystical "knowing." Intellect demands dualism; when confronted with singularity, it is silenced. All language is built on distinction between what is one thing or another, and all thinking proceeds along that path. The ultimate example is computer language, where a billion microchips, repeatedly switching between two positions — yes and no — can

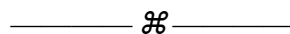
Suppose that after an hour concentrating all thought on forming the paragraph just before this one, I stand up. For just one extraordinary instant or atom of time during that minute ascent . . . consciousness in me is nothing but awareness of something nonspatial and unlimited, something no word has encompassed, no name has named. It is as if in one instant I had collapsed out into and now everywhere touch that edgeless, strangely luminous reality or presence which right now and most vividly is "where I am," is *This*. But minutes later as I walk down the gravel road toward Irvin's, the driver of a delivery vehicle stops to ask for directions to Houston. Without hesitation or the slightest inner sense of confusion, I identify "where we are" and explain how to get "there" from "here." Only as the car disappears down the road do I ask myself if I was right ten minutes ago or now; and perhaps I further ask: what is to be said or thought if there is no such thing as being "oriented" or "disoriented"? What if the very notion of a "where I am" is merely one more superstitious, magical, mythical fabrication, like the Cartesian "I," like "America," like "Thor."

Off the road now and walking by the bur oaks on the path to and past Irvin's long-empty shack, I try to channel whatever lucidity I can mobilize into the one great question where am I, what is *This*? For a moment I seem to brush against my meager question's infinite answer, seem to be *in* nothing but boundless, unbroken, unsayable reality. And during the next moment I seem to see most clearly: boundless, unbroken, unsayable reality is always "where I am," is always what I move into when I move, what I breathe in when I inhale. But then with the very first response of mine with which I seek to think, feel, or say this "reality" — or to enact it in a gesture, or echo it in an act — I have already missed it and slipped past it, and am being carried down a particular path which like all particular paths leads away from *This*.

instinctive, habitual, *normal* practice is to dream the wrong dream and choose the wrong path should be hidden away as an innocuous aside in a Dutch philosopher's letter of 1674 to a Mennonite merchant residing in Amsterdam. While discussing a question in geometry raised by his correspondent, Spinoza makes brief allusion to the general principle that "determinatio negatio est," that is, "determination is negation." Applying the principle . . . to visible forms, Spinoza regards geometrical figures as created by cutting away "the whole of matter considered indefinitely." To conceive a figure is to conceive a determinate, that is, a delimited thing. "This determination, therefore, does not appertain to the thing according to its being, but, on the contrary, is its nonbeing." And so, since a figure is "nothing else than determination, and determination is negation, figures, as has been said, can be nothing but negation."



Determination — that is to say, definition, identity, form, measure, particularized being as this or that, particularized knowing of this or that — is negation, not only because it requires the exclusion of all other particularity, but also and primarily because it is an infinite negation, for it comes into being only by abolishing the indeterminate, by *excluding* — by *not being* — the undivided and boundless. Spinoza's declaration therefore posits the infinite as pre-existent, as "given." For the philosopher the infinite is conceptually and existentially prior to its infinite negation and impoverished substitute, particularity; and we can now see that myth, grafted as it is onto time, projects this priority as temporal. And so myths of a fall . . . let loom in their background a perfection, an unbroken plenitude of being and knowing, which once, at least, was ours.



encompass vast stores of information and potentially all human knowledge. In contrast, mysticism is mute. It does not deal in distinctions or representations. The mystic remains forever a novice, glimpsing momentarily the blissful freedom of emptiness and uncomprehending awareness.

By the time Luther's book appeared, the everyday world was fast encroaching on his solitude. A construction company had bought the adjacent farm, just over the hill. Heavy equipment was parked there, and the roar of trucks combined with the growl of earthmovers to destroy the quiet of his secluded hollow. The industrial use defied local zoning rules and was blatantly illegal, but county authorities looked the other way.

The scholar and reclusive mystic was only one side of Luther. His contentious golem fought back, and the county courthouse crew endured a blistering attack at several open hearings. Business ties were strong, however, and the commissioners were unmoved. At last Luther put his own property up for sale, firing a final shot in the form of an article on "Why Citizens Are Cynical About Government," published in a local libertarian paper.

His new refuge was more remote. Long-standing family ties drew him to the Root River valley in far southeastern Minnesota, where he took up residence in a rented farmhouse not many miles from the Iowa border. I seldom saw him after that. We corresponded occasionally, and I learned that he was working on another book. When my own golem danced its way into a Green Party campaign for state office, Luther let me know that he had voted for me. That had been his first visit to the polls, he said, since he had cast a vote for Barry Commoner for president in 1980. It was only later that I learned of his cancer and the respite of a year or two that allowed him an extended trip to Europe. His purpose in going, he told me, had been to revisit and contemplate at leisure the great Gothic cathedrals.

The book he had been writing was completed, and the manuscript made a slow round of theological publishers and university presses. It received high praise for its scholarship, but no offers to publish. There was simply no market for such stuff, he was told. As he drew closer to death, his daughter Kari created a Web site and Luther placed the book there in downloadable form, a final gift to the world. {3}

He entitled the work *When the Word-Animal Discovers Signlessness: Reflections on the Possibility of the Mystical*. It considers from a different angle the themes put forward by *Ways in Mystery*, and unlike the latter it is addressed to an academic audience. With heavily labored precision that often becomes repetitious, he struggles to lay out in sequence the steps from habitual language-driven acceptance of “the world,” to a questioning, a seeking, and at last (perhaps) a finding of the hidden reality that we exist and move in, unperceived because it is edgeless and permeates all.

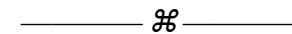
Luther himself was indeed a word-animal, and among his other skills was an impressive command of languages. In addition to those of modern Europe, he was familiar with old German, and his self-taught knowledge of Sanskrit resulted in several published translations. The influence of Eastern philosophy is more evident here than in his first book. Although his real inspiration came from late medieval Europe, and especially from Eckhart, he quotes repeatedly from the Upanishads, the Buddhist Sutras, the second-century poet Nagarjuna, the Zen masters, and Sankara, who founded modern Vedanta.

At the depths he was exploring, the universality of mysticism and its similarity behind the masks of differing cultures and belief systems were too obvious to waste time discussing. He adopts the term “Yoga of Coincidentia Oppositorum” for the rigorous intellectual discipline which he recommends that the word-animal follow to get beyond intellect. In its effect on

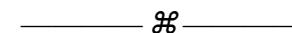
## APPENDIX

### SELECTED PASSAGES FROM “THE WORD-ANIMAL DISCOVERS SIGNLESSNESS”

Perhaps the final paradox, and the hidden spring which drives philosophy’s unending reflection, is the fact that reality — that essence, that *This* — is what enfolds us most intimately and what we most intimately are, yet nothing we can utter or imagine addresses or even relates to it. Regarded from this perspective, philosophy and theology, or what India simply called a *darshana*, “a seeing,” is simply the first curious, bemused sniff consciousness takes when it becomes alert enough to be startled by *This*. It is the word-animal’s attempt to process that which cannot be processed in any way, is the endeavor to bring into one’s particular sign-world that intimately ubiquitous presence which exceeds and ultimately dissolves *all* worlds.



In the past, as now, human beings inhabited a human world, divided into smaller private and greater public realms, and consisting of the various persons, human actions, and fabricated objects — cultural artifacts and tools — of the kind so familiar to us. But unlike its modern counterpart, traditional consciousness was further stimulated, enriched, and transformed by its constant intimate involvement with the non-human natural world, and so it came to see the human world as integrated within a greater natural world teeming with forms of life, forms of perception, and rhythms other than ours.



It is fitting that the West’s classic formulation . . . of this very soft, very disturbing whisper which implies that our

New York, 2000), p. 12; Coleman Barks et al, Tr., *The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition* (Harper Collins, San Francisco, 2004) p. 105; William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (Sessions, York, UK, 2nd ed., 1979), p. 336.

- {6} Rufus M. Jones (1863-1948) was the best-known student of the mystical tradition among Friends. In his many books and other writings he often compared it with Eastern and Medieval forms of mysticism. For an overview, see Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Friend of Life: A Biography of Rufus M. Jones* (Reprint edition, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1981) p. 249-262 .
- {7} This is eloquently argued in a pamphlet published by the Quaker Universalist Group in England. See Clive Sutton, *Human Beings Yearning for a Faith* (Torquay, Devon, 2006). Striking new stories offered in recent years have included Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story* (Harper, San Francisco, 1994) and Edward Goldsmith, *The Way: An Ecological World-View* (University of Georgia Press, Athens, revised edition, 1998).

the mind, the method suggests working with a Zen koan. He recognizes that word signs like YHWH, Allah, Shiva, Brahman, Vishnu, and Tao all point to “*This*, the utterly nonverbal and unthinkable ‘where we are’.” In English, he maintains, the syllable “God” is the only one that “comes to us already carrying within itself the scent, taste, and feel of that uncontained, indivisible, unsayable, unthinkable signless element — pure reality.”

IN A BROAD SENSE Luther Askeland was only restating in his own terms what many others have said before. Mysticism has been a persistent undercurrent through three thousand years of the growing human ascendancy over nature that we call civilization. It has taken some strange forms in different times and places, and it has been regarded with uneasy suspicion by authorities of all kinds — civil, religious, and intellectual. Historically mystics and doubters have walked hand in hand, and they have emerged together in cosmopolitan cultures where diverse traditions have met and mingled. In today’s global world, this is happening again.{4}

We are forever haunted by the fact that all we know or ever can know of ourselves or the world is mediated through our own sense organs and the mental figures created by that undefined essence called consciousness. Those of a frog or a bee may reveal an entirely different reality. Even the certainties of science are not certainties at all, whether in the minute world of whirling atoms and electrons or the vast cosmos of galaxies and light years. Built from myriad minds linked by language, they are as much the product of human sense organs and consciousness as is the daily world around us.

My own experience at this tells me that the sense of self — the golem we all build — is a tissue of memory binding events together into what we call a lifetime. We look with

suppressed horror at senile elders who have lost the memory of their life or even their name. And we honor the tales of our ancestors, whether sung by poets of the oral tradition or recorded in volumes of history. They give our fragile identity a niche within the flow of time and are powerful elements in pushing back the encroaching shadows of unknowing vacancy.

But there is a paradox here. Beyond the desolation of never knowing our origin, destiny, or true nature, there is also a strange consolation. When we lay down our golem and become empty of any certainty or clear relationship to what we perceive, there is nothing left to divide or set us apart, either from each other or from all that exists. This is more often recognized in Eastern than in Western philosophy. “Emptiness” in Buddhism leads directly to “nirvana.” According to Lao Tsu, the Tao is “. . . an empty vessel that may be drawn from without ever needing to be filled.” And the medieval Sufi mystic Rumi repeatedly celebrates in his poetry “This emptiness, more beautiful than existence. . . .” Even in 17th-century Scotland, a spirit-inspired Quaker once rose in a silent meeting for worship to declare that “In stillness is fullness; in fullness is nothingness; in nothingness are all things.” {5}

Quakerism has rested from its beginnings on mystical awareness, which it defined as direct personal experience of the “Christ within” or “Inward Light.” The Quaker form of worship has been mainly silent, and Friends have generally followed their founder, George Fox, in his distrust of words and “notions.” At first their “openings” were described in Christian imagery, but in the 20th century, as cross-cultural contacts increased and the universality of mysticism became apparent, their vision was framed in broader terms. By the 1930s and 1940s many Friends were reading the works of Kahlil Gibran in private and following the inspiration of Mohandas Gandhi in public action.

Quaker thinkers like Rufus Jones have struggled to draw distinctions between Quaker mysticism and the Way of

to define for each other and ourselves what this odd but ordinary man had meant to us.

Family and friends who had known him from youth recalled schoolboy pranks that were memorable for startling ingenuity — like somehow suspending a bed from the ceiling of a gymnasium during the night before an important game. Others mentioned summers among the wooded hills and valleys of southeastern Minnesota and his unlikely friendship with Irvin, a semi-hermit who lived by odd jobs and gathering ginseng there. Two or three had, like me, sought Luther out after reading his words and had developed an acquaintance that touched the core of our being. One college administrator had never met him but had acquired a deep respect and attachment for him solely through correspondence. At last our recollections trailed off into baffled silence. Overhanging the group was a sense that a remarkable soul had moved quietly among us and now was gone, almost unnoticed by the world.

#### NOTES

- {1} For an anthology and history of the magazine, see Rhoda R. Gilman, ed., *Ring in the Wilderness: Selections from the North Country Anvil* (Holy Cow! Press, Duluth, MN, 1996).
- {2} Luther Askeland, *Ways in Mystery: Explorations in Mystical Awareness and Life* (White Cloud Press, Ashland, OR, 1997).
- {3} [www.lutheraskeland.com](http://www.lutheraskeland.com)
- {4} The connection appears repeatedly in Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt, A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson* (Harper Collins, San Francisco, 2003).
- {5} Lao Tzu is quoted in Stephen Batchelor, *Verses from the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime* (Riverhead Books,

than a sense of mystery. That mystery need not be distant. Once touched or felt in wordless moments, it hovers on the fringe of consciousness. We feel faint intimations of its presence at odd times when our fixed attention on the past and future wavers.

It is there in a sudden bird call, a chord of music, or the shadow of a cloud passing across the land. The brush of an artist may capture it in light spilling into a scene from an unknown source, in a window opening on a hint of worlds beyond, or in the arrested motion of a bird in flight. We can recognize the power of mystery in places where our forebears have left brooding stone sentinels pointing to the sky or raised soaring arches that define empty space beyond the reach of words. But it cannot be seized and held. It is present only in that instant when consciousness fixes existence in space and time.

If we do not brush it aside, if we court it in hours of stillness, it can become a sustained presence within. Our feeble efforts to express it may describe it differently, but countless generations have known it. It has survived the relentless enclosing of our lives in the words and works of human minds, and it haunts us with reminders that all of life is one.

THERE WAS no public funeral or memorial service for Luther, but on a Sunday afternoon in March family members and a few close friends gathered in his daughter's home to mourn and remember. Some mementoes were laid out on a table — copies of his publications, pieces of fine woodwork, several complex three-dimensional puzzles that he had devised and marketed, and, of course, a stereoscope of polished oak. There were also a few snapshots, including one of Gunnar, his four-footed companion in solitude. We groped for words as we tried

Unknowing. The Quaker experience is communal, they say; it is affirmative, not negative; it points to acceptance of life and to action within “the world.”{6} Yet the differences are elusive. The *Via Negativa* is negative only in rejecting intellectual content. Whether followed in a silent meeting, a Christian monastery, a Buddhist meditation hall, or a Sufi dance, it is most often shared communally. While a few mystics in all traditions have sought solitude, others has been social activists. The negation of word-based thought and of a separate self leads directly to dissolving of boundaries and to a sense of union with other beings. We feel that this is our true nature, and there is a fresh intimacy with reality and renewed compassion for all life around us when we return inevitably to the joys, sorrows and conflicts of the everyday world.

By identifying “the word” as a central barrier to full awareness, Luther indirectly — perhaps intuitively — touched on what may be a key factor in human destiny. Thought as we know it is rooted in the structure of language. It has steadily gained in power and reach as language has moved from the spoken word to the written word, to the printed word, and to the electronic word.

Spoken words defined what it means to be human; over a period of eons language allowed our gregarious ancestors to create relationships, poetry, and dense webs of culture. Then some three thousand years ago words painted on papyrus rolls or sheets of parchment for the first time enabled the single human mind to capture its own thoughts in precise form for review, analysis, and reshaping. The same written words communicated those thoughts to other minds across both space and time and the result bloomed in philosophy and mathematics.

Five hundred years ago printing multiplied and distributed words a thousandfold. Countless solitary readers could find new companionship in distant minds and thoughts. This fostered in the individual a sense of private self quite apart from the roles

and status assigned by society and daily life. The sanctity of class and clergy faded. We do not yet know what changes the electronic word will bring, but at each step, time and space — or our consciousness of both — have expanded as more minds became engaged, not only across cultures but across generations. Meanwhile our control over nature has increased, our sense of helplessness before the ultimate mystery of existence has retreated, and a “theory of everything” has become the human goal.

Today we stand face to face with the devastating results of the power created by our collective minds and our ignorance of how and why to use it. Yet mysticism still strikes at the heart of the conflicting certainties and fanatical beliefs that threaten to tear our world apart. Its message is universal. It also cuts away the ground from scientific materialism and from reliance on technology as the only hope for human betterment. The Way of Unknowing offers an encompassing humility that goes beyond the recitation of religious or moral “truths” that are common to different traditions. It rejects a world of dualism where the ignorant armies of good and evil — them and us — embrace each other in endless rounds of mayhem and murder. And it rejects the arrogance of modern technology with its tinkering and tweaking at the foundations of life while blind to the edifice it may threaten.

Luther’s words may sound remote and frigid —like Nietzsche on a peak in the Alps “six thousand feet above humanity and time.” Yet the “intuition” that he calls on to counter our instinctive reliance on language and logic could just as well be described as the perennial yearning for meaning and faith. In either case it is there, an undeniable part of conscious existence.

To touch people in their hearts and lives, the wordless Way must come down from those windswept heights to the fragrant, wooded lowlands of emotion. Emptiness must merge with empathy. This came home to me recently when I attended

a large funeral held in a rural Midwestern church. The entire community, it seemed, was there.

As a hundred voices were raised in the old hymns of affirmation, of sorrow, and of hope, I melted within. At some deep level these were the voices of my ancestors, confronting and lamenting inevitable death and despair. They echoed generations of love and of loss — the passing of those more dear than life itself, and the passing of a world of human struggle that gave life its dignity and meaning. They and I were one. Yet part of me resisted being engulfed again by the web of human longing. The beauty was there with the sorrow, but somewhere in the years of meditation I had glimpsed freedom from that sense of being a solid self standing with others like me against the tide of time.

I still belong with those other yearning, passionate humans; indeed, separation from them is no more possible for myself than separation of a cell from the breathing body of which it is a part. Yet for me the Rock of Ages has become the Wave of Change. That Wave is fluid and constant. It knows no dichotomy of life and death, good and evil. And as one turns to ride it and releases one’s compulsive grip upon the Rock of existence, the Wave itself becomes colored and suffused with love.

It may be that to ride the Wave we need new stories of how we came to be. For most of us the old ones of omnipotent, transcendent gods no longer serve, and new ones are appearing. Some tell us of an exploding universe in which destruction constantly leads to new creation; others depict a hierarchical system of life transforming its environment and forever growing more complex.<sup>{7}</sup> But stories have a way of subtly mutating into received truths. And knowledge of The Truth embodied in words leads inevitably, it seems, to conflict.

An older and surer way lies in denying all humanly constructed truth and facing humbly our inability to know more