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Within the past few months, a couple of friends have related similar stories to me about their preschool daughters. In moments of utter frustration, when these moms had their daughters' numbers, each little girl apparently blurted out something along the lines of, “You don't know everything about me, Mommy! You think you do, but you don't!”...My friends and I chuckled together about these incidents. How complicated--or mysterious--can the inner life of a 4-year old be? And, on a practical level, what even occurs off of these moms' radar screens? Even when they are not physically present, other sets of attentive eyes—dad's, a teacher's, or another mom's—faithfully report back on the girls' activities and interactions...

Yet, of course these little girls are *ultimately* right. There is no single person who is either physically or emotionally present to their **every** experience. And no one inside their heads, living out the ways in which their experiences are felt or interpreted. No, the reality is that there are natural boundaries between each of us, no matter how close our relationships. Things we cannot quite grasp about one another. And ultimately this is a **good thing**. For, without those boundaries of individuation, we would risk of merging into a single, undifferentiated blob of thoughts and emotions.

In the interest of full disclosure, I will tell you upfront that this is one of my favorite Psalms. I first encountered it in Vacation Bible School when I was a preteen, just starting to enter adolescent “misunderstood” territory. Like Alice in Wonderland, everything was awkward and uncomfortable, too big or too small, and I was sure no one--particularly my parents--“got” me.

While there can be a certain romance to feeling like a little “Rebel Without a Cause,” I would venture to say that **loneliness** was the bigger emotion. And so, to encounter scripture assuring me that God was interested enough to **search me** and **know me**, to carefully **knit** my body together in the womb, to be acquainted with **all my words and my ways** and that, even in this lop-sided preteen body, I was **fearfully and wonderfully made**, now that was a powerful antidote!

Perhaps what is most striking about this Psalm is how it places God not only right here **with us** in our day to day experience, but **within us: in our bodies, in our minds, in our hearts**. So many hymns celebrate the almighty God **above**, the God “**out there.**” But here we have a God of *intimacy*, who lovingly crafts our bodies like a mother or a grandmother knitting a baby blanket, a God who loves and cares for our **whole beings**, a God who is **present** to our **every** thought, emotion, and experience; a God who “**gets**” us in a way that *nobody* else can. This Psalm does a masterful job of demonstrating the *immanent, here and now*, quality of God’s presence, as opposed to the *transcendent, other-worldly* aspect that tends to be our default. Truly we are **never, ever** alone.

Of course, there are two sides to omnipresence, and we begin to approach the other, less comforting aspect within this passage and even more so in a piece the lectionary editors omitted from today’s reading. Says Verse 5 “You **hem** me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” Sound a little claustrophobic? It gets worse. In the omitted Verses 7 through 12 the Psalmist fairly well pleads, “**Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?** If I ascend to heaven, **you are there**; if I make my bed in Sheol, **you are there**. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, **even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast**. If I say, ‘Surely the **darkness shall**

cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

As opposed to the boundaries that exist between human beings, there is **no getting away from God**. And, like our well-crafted bodies, that is both a **wonderful** and a **fearful** thing. Something we may deeply long for and invite... until we fully realize the consequences.

To give you a little context, the basis of this Psalm is that the author has been accused and is defending himself against charges of idolatry. Here he appeals to God because God does know **everything** about him, because God does follow his **every move**. And, knowing this, he would be a **fool** to be anything but faithful, to worship **any one** or **any thing** else. But perhaps in the course of this monologue he is realizing, oops, there was that one little off-color thought I had the other day. And, oops, there was that other uncharitable opinion that popped into my head this morning. And, oh my gosh, there was that time last week when I took the liberty of speculating aloud about someone's motives and then condemning them on the basis of the scant, unverified information I possessed. Not exactly idolatry, perhaps, but nothing I'd care to have a bright light shone on either. Please, God, can't I have a little space? A little privacy maybe?... It is telling that, in some translations, God is not merely **searching** and knowing the Psalmist, but **examining** him, **probing** him like a doctor or a lawyer.

As I perused the media this past week, I encountered coverage and commentary on what seemed to me to be some pretty high profile examples of careless speculation... and perhaps even willful misinterpretation. First there was Jim Wallis's blog in which he pleaded with media pundit Glenn Beck to get his facts straight before equating social justice Christianity with communism or the President of the United States with racism... Then there was the New York Times poll,

which found that, even in a highly diverse, somewhat tolerant city like New York, a majority of people believe the mosque proposed by a group of moderate Muslims should find a home well away from the former site of the World Trade Center. This despite the facts that the proposed location is not exactly hallowed ground, but an abandoned discount clothing store...and that two strip clubs reside even closer to Ground Zero...

Then there were the news reports of teenagers harassing Ramadan observers in western New York state, of a mosque being burned by arsonists in Tennessee, and of a Koran burning planned by a Florida church to commemorate the anniversary of 9/11... Finally there was a Huffington Post piece in which the commentator reported having corrected the facts of a mass e-mail a friend had circulated. An e-mail which claimed \$17 million in tax stimulus money had gone to Oregon State University to preserve the President's brother-in-law's job there as a basketball coach. Snopes, Urban Legends, and other web sites offered substantial proof that every statement in that e-mail was false. The commentator was certain that, when provided with documented facts, his e-mail-circulating pal would issue an apologetic correction or at least an embarrassed "oops." Instead the response he received from his friend said this, "I'm going to keep sending it out. After all, Obama lies all the time, so we have the right to lie too."

We know where negative misinformation has led the world in the past. We know how risky this sort of rhetoric is. Words and thoughts are potent things. Depending upon how and by whom they are employed, they can be dangerous weapons of mass destruction...or powerful tools for healing and wholeness. When wielded by or against people already anxious and fearful in the midst of uncertain times--war, environmental disasters, high unemployment—their power grows exponentially. As does the need to proceed with caution.

Says that same Huffington Post columnist, Larry Gellman:

My friend, teacher and Rabbi Brad Hirschfield of CLAL has taught that anger and fear can be very useful as an alarm system--the flashing red lights and clanging bells that alert us that we are facing a serious challenge. But he goes on to point out that people should not make important decisions while they are angry or afraid, wisely pointing out that those actions never seem to work out well and are often disastrous.

Before a disease can be cured, it has to be accurately diagnosed. As long as a growing group of people continues to believe that our national sickness is all about dark-skinned people who are not like us and evil politicians, our problems will only get worse. This first step toward a cure has to be a return of honesty and rational, fact-based conversation regarding where we are and how to proceed.

It's going to be long and hard but, as Will Rogers once said, when you find yourself in a hole and need to get out, the first thing to do is stop digging. Because they are angry and afraid, too many... have used anger, outrage, and demonization as a shovel and as a result they are sinking deeper and deeper into the pit.

(From "Anger and Outrage: America's Fastest Growing Religion," www.huffingtonpost.com, August 26, 2010)

Some might label this portion of Psalm 139 a lovely, innocuous, experiential piece of personal piety and be done with it. I'm here to tell you that this *can be* where personal faith, the community, and the world **come together**. If we are **fully cognizant** of the fact that God lives within and deeply cherishes each one of us, how can we be anything but **nonanxious, healing presences**? How can we **allow** or, even worse, **cause** harmful disinformation and dissent to spread? How can we be anything but prophetic in our words, our thoughts, and our deeds?... **"Fully cognizant"** is the key here. When we are angry or fearful, anxious or just plain distracted, it's all too easy to lose track of our awareness of God's presence **within and around** us. And yet, that presence is as **natural**, as **organic** to us, as our breath.

You've probably heard that the Jewish name for God--in capital letters YHWH and commonly pronounced *yah-way*, is considered to be so sacred that it wasn't to be spoken aloud. This

particular name embodies the Jewish understanding of the nature of God as both **ultimate mystery** and **absolute presence**. Franciscan monk Richard Rohr teaches that the reason it wasn't spoken aloud was because, to pronounce it properly, it cannot be spoken at all – it can only be breathed. The Hebrew pronunciation of those letters – “Yah-veh” – is an attempt to imitate the sound of inhalation and exhalation. You breathe in “Yah” and you breathe out “veh”, but you don't make any sound other than breath sound. You do it very slowly and deliberately – breathing in deeply through your mouth making the shape of “Yah” as you do, and when you breathe out just letting the force of the air brush your bottom lip against your top teeth which creates the “v” sensation.

I'd like to invite you to close your eyes and give this a try a couple of minutes. Get comfortable in your seats and try to put aside whatever other thoughts may be running through your minds. Simply think “Yah” as you inhale and “veh” as you exhale.

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Amen.

You are now acquainted with the **YHWH Breath Prayer**. If we can do this several times a day, just taking a breath or two to consciously and intentionally breathe in and out the name of God, we'll find that we are more and more able to be **present to Presence** more and more of the time. It's a lot easier to stay in touch with **the nearness of the source of our faith and our being** when we know we're breathing God in and out all day, recognizing our breath as our first, our last and our truest prayer.

One thing I failed to mention about this Psalm earlier is that it has been called a “Psalm of Innocence.” As we head away from summer and back into our classrooms and committees this week, I would invite us to consider what it might be like to re-embrace our childhood naiveté. Before race or religion or so many other categories were even on our radar screens. And we were only just beginning to realize the separateness of our minds and our bodies from those of our parents. In that spirit, let us strive to fully embody that divine reality, which lives within, knows, and cherishes us in all ages and places.

Amen.