

“The Ghost in the Machine”

Several years ago there was a movie called "O God!" that featured George Burns in the title role of Our Heavenly Father. One of the actor's persistent problems is convincing the people he meets that he really is God Almighty, since few people seem to picture the Supreme Being as a balding, squinty-eyed, cigar chewing old man. Thinking about that makes me wonder, how do we (or would we) recognize God if we saw her? Or saw him? What does God look like? Would we know it if God were sitting beside us in the next pew, or if the Creator panhandled us on the street?

Some people think they know a god when they see one. The newspaper awhile back ran a story about hundreds of worshipers flocking to an oilfield somewhere in Texas or Oklahoma. Outlined in rust spots on one of the big petroleum tanks there appeared to be a super-sized image of Jesus. The woman who first discovered the apparition was reluctant to tell anyone what she had seen, but when she showed it to a friend who saw the same thing, she began telling others. Soon cars were clogging the roads around the refinery at sunset each day when the light was just right for the miracle to take place. The newspaper didn't say exactly how the woman knew the face she saw belonged to Jesus and not Willie Nelson or some wino from Houston or El Paso, but it's an interesting question. There must have been some way she could look at those rust spots and say, "Why, that's the second person of the Trinity over there!" There had to be some way she could recognize the divine when she saw it.

When most of us think about God, we're slightly more sophisticated than that. We're not likely to think of God as a crusty old man, or to imagine we see Jesus' portrait fried into a tortilla or the Virgin Mary in a bowl of Post Toasties. Unitarian Universalists have sometimes been defined as a people who believe in, at most, one God, and although a goodly number of us are atheists or agnostics, when we do think about the divine, it's seldom in naively anthropomorphic terms. "God is spirit," it says in John's gospel, and though some of us might prefer more modern language, we tend to agree with the sentiment. In a course on Building Your Own Theology, a class of newcomers to our congregation were invited to choose a word or phrase that came close to describing their own view of Ultimate Reality. Some indeed chose the word God, but other preferred "Ground of Being," while still others used phrases like "life force" or "creativity" or "universal consciousness."

This brings us back to the question we started with, however. How do we identify spirit, especially if we can't see it or hear it or taste it? Would we be able to identify life force or creativity if it bumped us on the nose? Gregory Bateson says that when he was a professor at the University of California, he was in the habit of showing his students the shell of a crab. He then asked the students to imagine they were scientists from another planet. One day a meteorite falls from the sky and, cemented to its surface, is the fossilized shell. He then challenged the students: what evidence would you give to prove the shell had once been part of a living organism? Some of the learners were doctors, others artists. All of them thought they knew what it meant to be alive, but most were at a loss to explain how they could tell the crab was a living thing and not some strange rock or crystal.

So what is life? What is spirit, or soul, or consciousness? These were questions that fascinated Alan Turing. Turing was born in England almost a century ago, in 1912. He was one of the inventors of the modern computer and a pioneer in the field of artificial intelligence. The puzzle Turing thought about most keenly was the question of whether a computer would some day be able to think. Could a machine have a mind? Turing ask these questions at a time when computer science was in its infancy, and even today there are lots of things people do easily that machines still can't master, like reading those squiggly letters you can find at the bottom of your computer screen on gmail or yahoo. They're called CAPTCHAs, an acronym which stands for "Completely Automated Turing Test to Tell Computers and Humans Apart." Presumably, though, it won't be long before chips can read those squiggly letters, just as they can already play chess better than most Grand Masters. So the question arises, could a machine one day write a sermon, or ponder the meaning of existence, or enjoy a joke, or worry about the fact that its circuits will one day be obsolete? Can the spiritual arise from a purely material basis? Could a machine have a soul, and how would we ever know if it didn't or if it did?

The question of whether a machine can think is similar in some way to the question of God. People are likely to have strong opinions on the subject. They can dogmatize endlessly. Instead of dogmatizing, however, Turing tried to take a more practical approach. He invented a procedure to test for the presence or absence of soul. This has come to be called the Turing Test or Imitation Game. The test requires two keyboard in separate rooms, linked to send messages back and forth. The test is to sit at one terminal and determine who (or what) is at the other end. Under the rules of the game, there's no limit to what you can ask. If you like, you can discuss literature or debate politics. You can ask riddles or sell life insurance or carry on a flirtation. If a machine can fool a human interviewer into believing that he is conversing with another person, then the machine has passed the test, said Turing. If it responds like a human being, with all the whimsy and wonderful weirdness of a person, then for all intents and purposes the machine has the equivalent of a human mind.

Turing wasn't a theologian, but his ideas have some relevance to the way we think about God or spirit. For it is possible to imagine our universe as a sort of grand Turing Test. If we envisioned our cosmos laid out on a gigantic video screen—a screen filled with galaxies and planets and turbulent change—our religious challenge would then be to determine who (or what) is working the hidden keyboard. What kind of world are we living in? Who is ultimately in charge? Is the universe merely a mechanism—an essentially heartless and mindless clockwork? Or is there, behind the vast panorama of space, the shifting kaleidoscope of time, an intelligence or spirit at work?

During World War II, Turing used his mathematical genius to crack the secret codes of the German high command. The Nazis had designed an encoding device they called the Enigma. Messages would be typed into the Enigma, and the turning gears would then print out a sequence of letters unintelligible except to those who knew the hidden code. Thanks to the work of Turing and a handful of other cryptographers, the British and Americans knew every troop movement and transport the Germans were planning in the last half of the war. But suppose we thought of our world as another kind of Enigma. We could think of oxygen and oak trees and stars and starfish as forming a

mysterious code awaiting interpretation and translation. We could hypothesize that the spiral of DNA and the spiraling of the Milky Way are part of a single, meaningful pattern, a cosmic hieroglyph in need of a Rosetta.

The difficulty, of course, is that no one knows the key. Some people imagine they've found a codebook in the Bible. Others feel God speaks to them in the great book of nature. Perhaps there is a divine Author behind this epic of creation. But then perhaps there's not. While there is harmony in our universe, there is also chaos. While there's beauty, there is also ugliness. There they seems to be order and meaning, there's also much that defies understanding.

Franz Kafka pointed to the dark inscrutability of things in his story, "In the Penal Colony." Like many of his tales, it is an allegory of the human condition. A man awakens to find himself strapped to a crude torture apparatus. He doesn't know how he got there, nor does he understand why he finds himself in the predicament. A set of needles are slowly being lowered onto his back, and as they penetrate his flesh, they move this way and that, tattooing a repeated pattern with their sharp points. Perhaps they're spelling out some message. Perhaps they're spelling out a verdict or condemnation for some crimes the man has unknowingly committed. Perhaps there's some reason for the punishment being meted out. If so, the man is unable to decipher the meaning hidden there. He knows only the pain of his present situation and the inevitability of his fate.

Alan Turing ended his life as an atheist. He was unable to believe in God or an intelligence at work in the world, partly because he experienced the world in terms that were almost Kafkaesque. He might have had a more nearly normal life, for although he was bright and inquisitive as a boy, he was never a child prodigy. He came from a relatively well-to-do family, and had more privileges than some. When he was thirteen, he was sent to a private boarding school in the west of England, where he was known as a shy and solitary boy, whom his classmates noticed would rather "watch thee daisies grow" than take part in team sports or athletics. His first venture into serious friendship came to a sudden and tragic end when Christopher Marcom, an older boy who had befriended Alan, died of tuberculosis.

Alan never forgot his first love, for indeed, while he never confessed his feelings to Chris, love was the proper word for it. Though he would care for other men in his life, the passion and intensity of that first romance would never be surpassed. Experiencing death at close hand, Alan began to wonder for the first time about the relationship between body and soul. While the physical remnants of his friend were gone, something intangible but vital remained. Alan plunged into studies in biology, physics and math trying to understand the connection between the living and the non-living. He distinguished himself at Cambridge University, until called into service as a code-breaker during the war. Then in 1950, he published his classic and controversial paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," where he proposed the now famous Turing Test.

Turing might have had a productive life pursuing his research. Yet to be a gay man at that time was to carry the weight of a terrible and shameful affliction. Homosexuals

were regarded as sick and dangerous threats to the larger society. So when Alan's sexual orientation accidentally came to light in 1952, it was a turning point in his life.

One theory in those days was that homosexuality was caused by an imbalance in the hormones. In the United States, the preferred medical treatment up until the 1950's was castration. In Britain, the treatment was less violent but no less inhumane. Turning was forced to undergo a course of regular injections of female sex hormones. He grew breasts and became impotent. After a year, the "therapy" ended. But something inside Alan Turning was changed. Somehow, the mysterious entity called "spirit" had been permanently and deeply wounded. One day in 1951, Turning prepared an apple dipped in cyanide. He bit it, and the next day was found dead.

It sometimes seems that human beings can be heartless and mindless, just like machines. They de-humanize those who are different than themselves. They treat living souls as things and objects, and in the process inevitably de-humanize themselves. Yet human beings are also capable of loving and caring for each other. Love is the recognition of spirit by spirit. Love means realizing that although we are homosexual and heterosexual and bisexual, light-skinned and dark-skinned and bronze toned, we are all beings of the same order. "No one has seen the Spirit at any time," it says in the Gospel of John, but "if we love on another, the spirit abides in us and is perfected in us." To look into each other's eyes and see there a kindred soul is to discover the divine in the universe and in ourselves.

Could a machine someday express love like a human being? No one knows the answer, but if it could, that love would be sacred, as all love is sacred, whether it be to the love of man for woman, woman for woman, or man for man.

"Love," writes the theologian Paul Tillich, "is life itself in its actual unity. The forms and structures in which love embodies itself are the forms and structures in which life is possible, in which life overcomes its self-destructive forces. And this is the meaning of ethics—to express the ways in which love embodies itself and life is maintained and saved."

How then do we recognize Spirit? We recognize Spirit whenever we see love, protecting, maintaining and enabling life. Love is the pattern that connects.