

The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World Part 5: Creation, Torah, and Your Soul

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Scripture: Genesis 1:1-26; Matthew 5:17-20

I. The Soul's Code

When our daughter, Maren, was young, she had a lot of frenetic energy and passion for creative expression. A bit too much. She would do three things that nearly drove my wife and I over the proverbial brink. (1) She would put on, and take off, a wide variety of costumes on nearly a daily basis, leaving the last costume on the floor wherever she got tired of it and wanted a costume change. (2) She would construct forts all over the house. Every room was considered a potential building site, and destruction site, but not a clean-up site. (3) She would find creatures in our yard and bring them inside to live in our house as “pets.” As an example of the depth of her project involvement, here is a snippet of some hand-written care instructions she left for us to take care of a wounded bird she brought home and named Kirby:

“Worms are in the fridge on top of the vegetable crisper, in blue containers. Feed her 3 times a day at least. Wipe most of the dirt off each worm! Early in the morning is best. She’ll be hungriest at this time so give her about 7-8 worms. She tends to open her mouth like a young chick for the mother to drop the food in, and I’m trying to get her out of that habit, so make her take it from your hand. She’s a good bird. Note: if you swat a fly or any bug in your house you can give that to her and she’ll eat that too (She’s kind of handy that way.)” This is just an excerpt from a two-page document written regarding the care of Kirby.

Maren is nothing if not “all in.”

Left to her own devices, Maren would leave our house looking like a tornado had swept through a costume shop, a zoo, and a small town. While we loved her ingenuity and zeal, we found ourselves continually trying to tamp it all down by several notches. This often took the form of stern words about making a mess, or bringing bugs inside, followed by “time outs” and tearful arguments and temper tantrums (mostly hers, sometimes ours) when she didn’t comply. Melanie and I worried that Maren was gradually becoming “a problem child.”

Feeling guilty and frightened by our changing impression of our dear daughter, we read a number of books written by recognized parenting gurus. Their advice was all over the map, the advice of one often contradicting another. We soon found each technique had one thing in common: it did little to diminish Maren’s behavior and much to heighten the level of aggravation between us.

Finally, we heard about a book on NPR that changed everything: *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*, by the American psychologist, Dr. James Hillman. Hillman is considered by many of his peers to be a maverick psychologist – though a maverick with credentials that

include directing the Jung Institute in Zurich, co-founding the Dallas Institute for Humanities and Culture, and a Pulitzer Prize nomination for his magnum opus, *Re-visioning Psychology*.

In *The Soul's Code*, Hillman enters the long-standing “nature v. nurture” debate concerning childhood development. What makes his book particularly controversial is that he sides with *both* sides of the debate while proposing a *third*, equally important factor that almost no one in the psychological establishment talks about. He said childhood development is influenced by nature, nurture, and *the calling of their soul*. He argued that children are born with an innate sense of their purpose in life within their soul much like an acorn contains the pattern of the tree it will develop into. He called this theory the “acorn theory of the soul.”

What Melanie and I found particularly intriguing was that, according to Hillman, while some children’s sense of calling is more suppressed, others are born with an unusually strong sense of calling. Yet, since their brains aren’t yet developed or mature enough to interpret their soul’s calling – or code – the disconnect often manifests itself in unusual behavior. Much of this behavior is negative, at least from society’s perspective.

Consider the case of 5-year-old Elias Canetti, for instance. Born in Bulgaria in 1905, little Elias was fascinated by written language before he even knew how to read or write. Whenever his father would read the newspaper, Elias would climb up in a chair to smell it, thinking that the smell of the newsprint was what was conveying information to his father.

When Elias’s cousin was learning to read and write, Elias would later write that “the sight of all the blue ink letters in her notebooks fascinated me more than anything I had ever laid eyes on.” But when he tried to touch them, his cousin wouldn’t allow him, no matter how hard he pleaded. Day after day he begged his cousin for the two notebooks in her hand, but she refused. Then, one day – a day no one in the family ever forgot – Elias stood at the front gate waiting for her as usual. “Let me see the writing,” he cried.

He tried to catch her, running after her while begging and pleading for the notebooks as she held them high over her head. Finally, she placed them on a shelf higher than he could reach. At once, Elias left her there, walked around the house to the kitchen yard where he picked up an ax.

Raising the ax he, he marched back with a murderous chant on his lips, repeating incessantly, “Now I’m going to kill Laurica! Now I’m going to kill Laurica!”

If little Elias had been born into today’s world, you can imagine what his fate might be. Likely, he would be placed on heavy medication and subjected to endless hours on a psychiatrist’s couch. Perhaps he would even be institutionalized. Yet this little boy grew up to become a great writer, winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1981, “for writings marked by a broad outlook, a wealth of ideas and artistic power.”¹

Citing Elias Canetti’s example and that of many others who achieved widespread renown after a childhood of abnormal or shocking behavior, Hillman recommends paying careful attention to the distinctive ways “problem children” act out. He says there is typically an underlying theme to the specific trouble they stir up which betrays their soul’s sense of purpose or calling.

¹ Nobelprize.com. Cited in Wikipedia entry for Elias Canetti.

Hillman advises that parents find this theme and then find ways their child's energies might be directed in a more positive direction.

Admittedly, Melanie and I were skeptical of Hillman's advice. But we were at wit's end. Perhaps Maren's multiple costume changes were a sign that her soul was calling her into acting or fashion design. So, instead of locking her costumes away, we allowed her to change costumes as many times a day as she wanted – and even wear them outside the house (something she always wanted but had never been allowed to do). We simply required her to put away each costume before adorning herself in a new one.

Under the new rules, Maren once showed up at church on Sunday morning dressed in a dog costume. Another Sunday she was a Native American princess, and so forth. It was a little awkward, but we were letting Maren be Maren. No one really batted an eye.

With respect to Maren's penchant for building and destroying forts all over the house, Hillman got us considering that perhaps Maren's soul was calling her into some sort of construction field, or into engineering or architecture. So, we told her she could build as many structures as she wanted so long as they were all built, and destroyed, in her room only.

Finally, we considered that Maren's penchant for bringing bugs into the house might be a sign that she was sensing a call to become an entomologist, zoologist or veterinarian. So, we let her bring as many bugs as she wanted into the house, provided they were placed in a tightly-sealed jar we provided with air holes and that they be returned to where she found them at the end of the day.

The tearful arguments and temper tantrums went away. Maren became happier and even more inventive.

How did this all turn out? Today, Maren has a degree in biology and a Masters of Architecture. She is interested in developing a specialty in biomimicry – a cutting edge field within architecture that looks closely to nature to learn how to create greater energy efficiency and environmental sustainability. And, Maren is one of the sharpest dressed people we know.

I don't know if all children's souls have a code like that of an acorn hidden within them. I suspect they do. What I'm certain of is that Maren's soul does!

II. Creation and Torah

One of the great gifts of Judaism is its Law or Torah. The Torah is the first five books of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, from Genesis to Deuteronomy. It includes the Ten Commandments said to have been given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, as well as 603 other rules that govern everyday life.

We don't think too much of rules in modern, American society. Or rather, we're fine with rules so long as they apply to *others*. We often think of rules as repressive. They are unnecessary restrictions on our freedom and liberty. We associate such rules with

tyranny and oppression. Didn't we just celebrate our independence from such rules on July 4th?

As Christians, we are even more skeptical than most about the imposition of rules that restrict human behavior. The apostle Paul proclaims that, "the letter [of the Law] kills, the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:6) We tend to categorize the difference between the Old and New Testaments as being Law versus Grace. Grace that set us free from the compulsion to follow the old, dead Law.

Yet our Jewish neighbors – and our Muslim ones – would advise us not to oversimplify. Their faiths not only include following a host of rules, but they insist that their rules are meant to free them from bondage, not place them there.

What if God's rules were more like the rules that James Hillman encourages parents to use in response to a child's problematic behavior? What if they are not meant to repress the impulse behind the behavior, but to actually enhance and extend it in a more positive direction?

I'm not about to claim that each and every rule in Judaism or Islam acts in this way. My own sensibility still gives me a visceral reaction to following too many rules. However, my engagement with Jews and Muslims has increasingly challenged my assumptions about rules and their purpose. One false assumption I see is that the dichotomy between Law and Grace is largely a false one. Law can be a powerful form of Grace. If following the Law as a spiritual discipline devolves into mere legalism, only then does it become the opposite of Grace.

In Jesus's day, the Grace behind the Law had become eclipsed by the legalistic structure meant to preserve it. Through telling parables like the Prodigal Son, in which an errant child breaks just about every law in the book and yet is welcomed back into his father's house with open arms, and through showing radical hospitality to "tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners," Jesus kicked up quite a lot of dust reminding people that, in any competition between Love and Law, Love wins. Love wins because God is a God of Grace.

Jesus insisted that he came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. (Matthew 5:17) In the context of James Hillman's book, *The Soul's Code*, one might say that while Jesus knew that certain rules can restrict the soul's need to fulfill its calling, other rules – flexible ones, formed in deep relationship with others – can actually enhance and increase the soul's ability to receive what it so urgently desires

How can Law be an outgrowth of Love and Grace?

The Torah literally revolutionized the world by establishing a kind of order to the world's chaos that protects the sanctity of all life. While religions that preceded Judaism understood there to be a connection between human beings and the divine, Judaism was the first religion that understood *all* human beings to share this connection, not just rulers or the wealthy. Thus, the Torah was the first body of law that put into concrete practice the idea that God loves all people, not just some.

The greatest example of how this life-bearing principle of Law works is found in the story of the six days of Creation in Genesis 1, at the very beginning of the Torah. When people tell this story, they tend to focus on God's amazing power as the Creator. After all, only God is able to create something where nothing existed before (*creatio ex nihilo*). God commands, "Let there be light!" Suddenly, there is light where before there was only darkness.

Yet if you read Genesis 1 carefully, you discover something quite curious. While God does create something from nothing when God creates light, mostly God "creates" by creating order out of disorder, creating rules that establish life-bearing relationships between things, and by empowering other parts of Creation to become co-creators with God.

"In the beginning," according to Genesis 1:1, "when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. *Then* God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

In other words, something actually existed before God created light: formless, watery chaos. You might call it a great sea of potentiality. Potential waiting to be given form and function.

Once God turns the Light on, from that time forward, God "creates" primarily by establishing rules that result in the pre-existing, watery chaos taking form and structure; like dry land, oceans, and sky. "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters [above] from the waters [below] ... Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." Gen 1:6, 9)

God also "creates" by empowering land and sea to become creators themselves: "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it ... Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky ... Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." (Gen 1:11, 20, 24)

Finally, God “creates” by empowering the creations of the creations to become creators themselves, telling them all, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:22). After creating human beings in God’s “image and likeness,” the same form of creative empowerment is given them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth ...” Only human beings are uniquely given the command to subdue and have dominion over the earth, its flora and fauna.

This command to “subdue and have dominion over” has been problematic in recent years, as the ecological crisis grows more severe by the day, largely caused by our efforts to subdue and exercise dominion over it. However, being created in God’s “image and likeness” means that we exercise dominion as God does. Namely, by ordering the world’s chaos to produce interdependent, sustainable relationships that promote life – relationships that enable Creation itself to fulfill its destiny to be fruitful and multiply.

By the time God’s arranging and empowering commands are finished on the seventh day, everything in all of Creation operates in fruitful, symbiotic relationship with each other – and operates so perfectly – that God takes a holiday, watching everything work to promote the life and vitality of everything else, and calls it “very good.”

In other words, processes that result in scarcity and starvation, pollution and even extinction, are explicitly against what we are commanded to do when exercising dominion. Dominion is *godly* dominion, not human dominion.

By placing this story of Creation at the beginning of the Torah, the message rings out loud and clear. The purpose of Law – God’s Law, anyway – is to promote life, not restrict it; to promote sustainable, interdependent relationships, not “lord over” others. Its purpose is to help all of Creation – including us – respond to our calling and fulfill our destiny.

In this respect, had Melanie and I been reading the Book of Genesis more carefully, we would not have needed James Hillman’s book – though we are grateful to him for helping us notice what we had overlooked. Chaos – at the beginning of the world, or at the beginning of a child’s life – is not negative. Chaos is unfulfilled potential that yearns to be actualized. It is power that yearns for a certain order to focus its energies in ways that fulfill its calling and destiny.

Now that our world seems to be devolving once again into chaos and confusion, I wonder if the Book of Genesis, and *The Soul’s Code*, might provide a much-needed shift in perspective. Could it be that chaos is not inherently negative, even now? Might our present chaos be a response to old rules established by human beings that did more to empower some than others; enrich the few rather than the many; and privilege human

life over non-human life at all costs? Could the chaos that is resulting be our invitation to create a new order, a new, more sustainable way of life – a more godly way of life?

Perhaps we who live in this time and place have a purpose and destiny that our present chaos invites us to fulfill. Namely, our destiny is to become co-creators with God of a new order, and new world, with a new Law written on people's hearts, not merely on a page.