

A Sky Full of Stars.¹

A good friend made a request: "Write an article on the Gathas" he said. "But not a scholarly article. Just tell us why you like the Gathas so much." When a good friend asks, one can but comply.

Why do I like the Gathas. The reasons are as numerous as the sky is full of stars. But the bottom line is: I like them because, as a woman of the 20th, and now the 21st century, living on this small planet, in this small galaxy, they are relevant to my life. They engage both my mind and my heart. Deciding which reasons to include here has been difficult. Here are a few. There are many others.

Having been raised in a time period and culture² in which girls were not valued for using their minds, I am enchanted by a prophet who not only allows women to think for themselves, but requires it of us.

I love the freedom from dogma. How often have I heard people wailing at Zoroastrian conferences: "We don't know what to think, we have no central authority to tell us what to do." Count your blessings! Central authorities often are wrong (but seldom in doubt, hence their aura of infallibility). Central authorities make mistakes, as Galileo discovered to his sorrow! In making our life choices, we are lucky indeed that Zarathushtra does not believe in 'central authority' but instead tells us that we should decide things for ourselves, after reflecting with a clear mind. -- each person for himself. (Y30.2).

One of the things that early attracted me to Zarathushtra's thinking was that it presents a view of reality that makes sense to me. I like the fact that he considers both the material and the spiritual aspects of life as necessary to the desired end, rejecting neither. He considers both as complementary, each capable of bringing about goodness, depending on how we choose to use them.

The material world is so large a part of our "reality." It does not make sense to me that the Divine, on the one hand, would create this beautiful world (whether through evolution or otherwise), and all the delightful and enjoyable things in it, and give us the capacity to enjoy it, but at the same time insist that we reject it. Zarathushtra's vision opens a different understanding of the Divine. I am touched by the generosity, (and the playful paradox) of a Deity who gives us material tools to achieve spiritual growth, and who crafts these material tools in such a way that the process of achieving spirituality includes moments of pleasure and joy ~ indicating that material things are not intrinsically evil.

This interplay between the spiritual and the material, this bringing the divine to life with our thoughts, words and actions, makes us grow spiritually, and makes our world a better place.

I love Zarathushtra's passion for the truth ~ that life (and religion!) is an on-going search for truth (*aṣa-*) ~ in the existences of matter and mind/heart/spirit ~ a search from which he does not exempt himself.

["...As long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth \[*aṣa-*\]." Y28.4, Insler 1975.](#)

We have only to consider the amazing discoveries in the sciences to be aware that beliefs about our physical existence, must of necessity change as we acquire increased knowledge. His teaching enables a growth of knowledge and understanding that is experience based, as we continue to search for and ascertain, the factual truths of our physical universe, as well as the abstract truths of mind/heart/spirit ~ all that is true, and good, and 'right' ~ an on-going process that enables a seamless relevance in personal and social growth.

I don't care much for the idea of gurus. I am not comfortable with people who claim to know it all. Zarathushtra endearingly admits that he does not have all the answers. He has something more valuable – an inquiring mind, and a kind, generous heart. He says:

"Truth, shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire both good thinking and the way to the Lord..." Y28.5.

Which brings us to an interesting question: What is "the way to the Lord"? Here again, Zarathushtra's answer is astonishing in its simplicity and depth (rather like a Sherlock Holmes puzzle – once he explains it, it sounds so simple).

To Zarathushtra, the qualities of the Divine, the path to the Divine, and the reward for taking that path, (the means and the End) are all the same:

- the true (correct) order of existence, which is the superlative of intrinsic goodness (*aša- vahišta-*),
- ~ its comprehension, good thinking, (*vohu- manah-*),
- ~ its beneficial embodiment in thought, word and action (*spənta- ārmaiti-*),
- ~ its good rule (*vohu- xšaθra-*), the rule of truth, its embodiment, its comprehension, (Y51.4),
- ~ its complete attainment (*haurvatāt-*), a state of being that is no longer bound by mortality, (*amərətāt-*),
- ~ all of which comprise a wholly beneficial-sacred way of being (*spənta- mainyu-*),
- ~ all of which comprise Wisdom personified (*mazdā-*).

These qualities are what make a being Divine. These are what we worship.

"... truth [*aša-*] is to have a gift of reverence." Y43.9;

"Come hither to me, ye best ones [*vahišta-* 'most good ones'] ...Thou, Wise One, together with truth and good thinking ... Let bright gifts and reverence (for all of you) be manifest amid us." Y33.7, Insler 1975.

These qualities are also the way to the Divine.³ They are how we worship.

"... I shall always worship ... you, Wise Lord, with truth [*aša-*] and the very best thinking and with their rule..." Y50.4;

"I shall try to glorify Him for us with prayers of [*ārmaiti-*]..." Y45.10, ~ prayers of thoughts, words and actions which embody the true (correct) order of existence.

"... Your enduring worshipful offering has been established to be immortality [*amərətāt-* 'non-deathness'] and completeness [*haurvatāt-*]." Y33.8, ~ our self-realization (our attainment of the qualities of the divine) is our enduring worship offering to the Divine.

The tools we use to worship in this way, are the everyday events of our lives. Whether you are building a house, designing a system, writing a contract, billing a client, teaching children, marketing a product, trying a lawsuit, structuring a business transaction, or visiting with a neighbor while gardening – if you act with good thinking, with truth, if you do what's right, you are performing an act of worship. You are on the path of the true order of existence, "the way to the Lord."

When I first comprehended this teaching, it was like a super-nova. It blew my mind. I love this form of worship. It gives interest and meaning to the way I live my life. Small, unimportant acts no longer are unimportant. Each represents a challenge. And each thought, word and act that brings these values to life, is a touch of the divine ~ the many small, unnoticed, loving, generous actions which, in that instance, bring

happiness ~ to a child, to an adult, to families, to communities, to nations, to our world. I love looking for and recognizing these part time angels among us. It makes my heart happy when I find them.

The farmers in Pennsylvania who heard on the news that cattle in the south were starving because of severe flooding. They piled into their trucks, with loads of their own hay, and drove down south to help those southern farmers save those starving cows – part time angels.

The grandmother who reads in her newspaper that a local school is looking for volunteers to read to and befriend neglected children. She volunteers for the job – a part time angel.

The executive who reviews the file of an alcoholic employee and opts for re-hab. and a leave of absence instead of dismissal – a part time angel.

You yourself are part of this brotherhood of part-time angels. You just didn't know it (no halo, no wings, how's a person to know!). That's another thing I love about Zarathushtra – he helps me to see things in new, heartwarming, mind-delighting ways.

I find it comforting that Zarathushtra does not despise or condemn 'asking prayers'. But I love even more his notion of 'giving prayers' ~ that the incense of worship is living in ways that promote all that is true, good, generous, 'right', with each thought, word and action ~ helping each other, helping other life forms, helping our environment, healing existence.

I love that he requires us to fight with ideas, with weapons of good thinking, with weapons of words and actions that bring to life the true order of existence ~ for the benefit of all the living.

Zarathushtra is what I call a practical mystic. The Gathas suggest that the Divine (in concept and in being) is immanent in existence ~ that we all are parts of the same whole.⁴ If this idea is true, then it requires some interesting conclusions. It means that although a given individual may perfect himself or herself, we cannot reach ultimate perfection, until everyone makes it. It makes us see the concept of *haurvatāt-*, wholeness, completeness, in a new light. It makes us appreciate that the purpose of life is not just to look out for ourselves, but also to help one another make it. When you are diminished, I am diminished. If I don't make it, you don't make it. We cannot reject any person without in effect rejecting 'God' and ourselves. A difficult lesson, and one which I have not yet mastered (But I'm working on it).

The Gathas are full of neat paradoxes, which reconcile themselves beautifully. We all are part of the same whole, yet the perfecting of that whole depends on individual choices, which individual choices include helping ourselves and each other.

I often have wondered how some Zoroastrians reconcile this belief in the in-dwelling Divine, with the view that religious ceremonies are rendered spiritually worthless by the presence of non-Zoroastrians, or that non-Zoroastrians cannot become Zoroastrians. Even if we don't believe that the Divine is imminent in all things, these exclusionary idea are not even intelligent (let alone an idea generated by Wisdom personified). Zoroastrians account for less than 150,000 in the population of this entire planet of several billions of people. It seems incredible to me that an intelligent (and loving) 'God' would regard the entire population of this planet, (setting aside for a moment, the Vulcans, the Klingons, and other extra-terrestrials) as unworthy of worshipping Him ~ except for 150,000 Zoroastrians. Would such a 'God' be worth worshipping? (Not by me!) Such silly ideas are not in the Gathas, nor even in any later (ancient) text. In the long history of Zoroastrianism, such ideas are of comparatively recent origin.⁵ The idea of not accepting converts into the religion started out as a survival mechanism, after Zoroastrians became a persecuted

minority, and welcoming anyone into the religion resulted in the deaths of all concerned (and their families). It was only later that this idea morphed into something (to put it politely) so contrary to Zarathushtra's environment.

Which brings us to a very significant contribution of Zarathushtra. He lived in an age when people worshipped and believed in a pantheon of fierce, violent and cruel gods. He was troubled by this view of the divine, and (using his own good thinking) came to the conclusion that such cruel, violent gods (if they existed) were not worthy of worship – that only a being who is completely, wholly, good, loving, truthful, intelligent, beneficial, generous, is worthy of worship – is worthy of being Divine.

Imagine the courage it took for Zarathushtra to openly reject the gods of his culture and instead proclaim his new envisionment of the Divine. Today, some of us are afraid to speak out against small cultural actions and practices that we know to be wrong. Zarathushtra not only spoke out against a whole pantheon of fierce and cruel deities, he demoted them from godhood! That took guts! And a real commitment to truth. (And you wonder why I love the Gathas!).

Zarathushtra's idea of 'God' is an intelligence of pure goodness. I really like that. We have come to believe that goodness is impotent, much less powerful than evil. Zarathushtra believes otherwise, and I agree with him. According to him, in the long run, it is impossible to prosper or succeed, or be happy, if we are out of sync with the true order of existence, an intrinsically good existence (*aṣa- vahišta*).

He also believes that good will ultimately triumph over evil. How, you might ask, could that be so, given the freedom to choose (to say nothing of the state of the world in his day and ours). And how do we reconcile the idea of a God of pure goodness with the idea that we reap what we sow – the good and the bad. Can a 'God' of pure goodness make bad things happen to people who act badly? Isn't that an oxymoron?

Well, Zarathushtra had a rather neat solution to these questions. I do not know if his solution is just the fruit of a brilliant mind, or if it is really true, but I like it. It seems to accord with reality. It does not provide all the answers (or perhaps I just have not yet discovered them), but it makes more sense to me than anything else I have heard. In essence, his solution for defeating evil is not punishment in hell (which in itself is an 'evil' to my mind). His solution is to change minds, change preferences through a long process of experiencing all there is to experience – the good, the bad and the indifferent, so that, incrementally, based on how such experiences affect us, we come to decide for ourselves that the ways of cruelty, lies, violence, hatred, prejudice and all other 'wrongs' (all of which in one way or another cause us grief) are not the way we want things to be. The acquisition of wisdom, in his view, is experience based.

So in his thought, eventually everyone will make it – an inevitable end, brought about by the freedom to choose (a paradox) – through good and adverse experiences, and mutual loving help between all the living, to help us through the refiner's fire.

I love Zarathushtra's understanding that 'heaven' is not a physical location, but a state of being in which we have attained the qualities of the Divine completely; that 'hell' is a state of wrongheadedness (and the unhappiness that generates) in *mortal* existence – a state of being that we will eventually grow out of. I love his teaching of the freedom to choose, and that mistakes do not generate 'punishment' from the Divine, but rather are opportunities to learn from our mistakes. I love the freedom from fear that his teachings entail.

So what happens next ~ after we have attained the true (correct) order of existence completely? Would it get a little boring, sitting around being completely good? Well, Zarathushtra does not say. I am inclined to think it will be the start of a new adventure ~ with what players, in what universe(s), and to what end, I do not know. But if our present existence is any indication, it should be interesting. And a challenge.

Let me close with one of my favorite aspects of the teachings of Zarathushtra. It is his idea of the relationship between still fallible mortals and the Divine is that of a friend to a friend. Or a beloved to a beloved.⁶ I like the idea that the Divine is my beloved friend.

If He is my friend, and exists in you, can I be anything less than a friend to you?

If He exists in me, and also in you, can you be anything other than a part of me?

And when we all understand this, will the world be renewed?

With the help of *aša-*, and each other (and a sky full of stars), we make it happen.

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¹ Many years ago, I wrote a little article for a Journal, with this title. Here, I have made some changes.

² India in 1940 through 1956, when I left to attend college in the US, and have stayed here ever since.

³ See *Part Two: A Question of Reward & the Path*.

⁴ See in *Part One: Completeness & Non-Deathness, Haurvatat, Ameretat*; and *The Identity of the Divine*.
See in *Part Two: A Question of Immanence; A Question of Reward and the Path; The Puzzle of the Most-Good, Vahishta; The Puzzle of Creation; and Did Wisdom Choose Too?*

⁵ See *Part One: A Teaching for All Mankind*.

⁶ See *Part One: The Nature of the Divine*.