

## A Sky Full of Stars

by

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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 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 culture where 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 suggests that we each should decide things for ourselves, after reflecting with a clear mind.

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 Divine purpose, 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.

I love Zarathushtra's passion for the truth. He says:

["...As long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth." Y28.4.<sup>1</sup>](#)

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 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 way to the Divine, and the characteristics with which he defines the Divine (the means and the End) are one and the same – truth and what's right (asha), its comprehension (good thinking, vohu manah), its embodiment in thought, word and action (aramaiti), its good rule (vohu xshathra), its complete and undying attainment (haurvatat / ameretat), all of which comprise a benevolent, loving, spirit or way of being (spenta mainyu), all of which comprise Wisdom personified (Mazda).

These are what make for divinity. These are what we worship.

"Come hither to me, ye best 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).

These are also the way to God. These are how we worship.

"...I shall always worship all of you, Wise Lord, with truth and the very best thinking and with their rule..." (Y50.4).

"I shall try to glorify Him for us with prayers of [aramaiti]..." Y45.10 ["prayers of aramaiti" are prayers of thoughts, words and actions of truth].

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

When I first comprehended this teaching, it was like a super-nova. It blew my mind. I started experimenting with it in small ways. 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 the act that brings these values to life, is a touch of the divine. In the later texts, good thinking (vohu mano) and the other attributes of Mazda are described as angels. And both the Gathas and the later texts imply that so also are those who bring these values to life with their thoughts, words and actions. Presumably those who do it all the time are full time angels. I guess that makes those of us who do it some of the time, part time angels. I love looking for and recognizing these part time angels. 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 "grandmother" volunteers to read to and cuddle neglected children. She volunteers for the job – a part time angel.

The executive who (before the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted into law) 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 doubtless are a part of this brotherhood of part-time angels yourself. You just didn't know it. That's another thing I love about Zarathushtra – he helps us to see things in new, heartwarming, mind-delighting ways.

The Gathas suggest that something of 'God' lives in each one of us, that we all are part of the same Whole. If this idea is true (and I am inclined to think it is) then it requires some interesting conclusions. It means that although a given individual may perfect himself or herself, we cannot reach ultimate perfection, unless everyone does. It makes us see the concept of *haurvatat*, completeness, wholeness, 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 each other. When my neighbor is diminished, I am diminished. If I don't make it, you don't make it. It is an interesting paradox that in searching for God, Zarathushtra discovers the brotherhood of man (and all the living). The Gathas are full of neat paradoxes, which reconcile themselves beautifully. We all are part of the same Whole (one large community), yet the perfecting of that whole depends on individual choices (the individual), which individual choices include helping ourselves and each other (the individual and the community).

As with all of Zarathushtra's teachings, when I first became aware of this idea that we are all part of the same Whole, I tried to see how it applied to the reality of my life. Not easily. My profession (the law) contains some great human beings, and some real jerks. If some of my opposing counsel had something of 'God' in them, I sure couldn't see it. They hid it so well. But this teaching made me appreciate that while we can hate what a person does, if we are all part of the same whole, we cannot hate the person without, in effect hating 'God', and ourselves. 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).

I have often wondered how some Zoroastrians reconcile this belief in the in-dwelling God, with the view that religious ceremonies are rendered spiritually worthless by the presence of non-Zoroastrians. Zoroastrians account for less than 150,000 in the population of this entire planet. 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 and the Klingons) as a source of spiritual pollution, except for 150,000 Zoroastrians. If that were so, how could 'God' be a part of non-Zoroastrians? Would such a 'God' be worthy of worship?

Which brings us to a very significant contribution of Zarathushtra. He lived in an age when people worshipped and believed in a number of gods, many of whom were fierce and cruel.

Zarathushtra viewed this pantheon of fierce and cruel local gods and (using his individual good thinking) came to the conclusion that they were not worthy of worship – that only a being who is completely good, loving, truthful, intelligent, is worthy of worship – is worthy of being 'God'. (That is why these attributes are treated as divine in the Gathas, they are what confer divinity). Imagine the courage that took. 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. By God 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 believed otherwise, and once again, I am inclined to agree with him. He also believed that good would ultimately triumph over evil. How, you might ask, could he be so sure of that, 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 does not provide all the answers (or perhaps I just have not yet discovered them in the Gathas), but it makes more sense to me than anything else I have heard. It has to do with the nature of asha.

Asha means, literally, "what fits", hence, the truth, what's right. What fits includes benevolence and goodness. But what fits also includes that perfect justice which sets in motion the law of consequences – that we reap what we sow. It is interesting that when, under the law of asha, the evil we do comes back to us, it is not by way of punishment, but by way of enlightenment. So when we make wrong choices, between the law of consequences (which expands our understanding), and the goodness of others who help us (which breaks destructive patterns), we become aware or enlightened, and choose not to make such wrong choices again – not out of fear of "hell" or punishment, but because it's the right way to be (as the Ashem Vohu prayer tells us). If, as Zarathushtra suggests, evil is the product of wrongful choices, then, when we stop choosing it, we deprive it of substance. When, because of the law of consequences, and the help of other good souls, everyone becomes aware or enlightened enough to want to stop choosing evil, it is defeated.

I love Zarathushtra's understanding that 'heaven' is a state of being that is at one with the Divine -- not a physical location; that 'hell' is a state of wrongheadedness (and the unhappiness that generates) -- 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.

Let me close with one of my favorite aspects of the teachings of Zarathushtra. It is his idea of the relationship between man and God. To Zarathushtra, this relationship is not that of a master to a servant, or even a father to a child. It is that of a friend to a friend. Or a beloved to a beloved. I like the idea that God is my beloved friend.

And if He is my friend, and if He lives in you, can I be anything less than a friend to you?

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

With the help of asha, and each other (and a sky full of stars), atha jamyat yatha afrinami (as I have wished it, so may it be).

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Professor Insler of Yale University, as it appears in *The Gathas of Zarathushtra* (E.J. Brill, 1975).

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