

The art of drawing closer to Persons and Things.
Revisiting Van den Berg's contribution to human science.

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The starting point of Van den Berg's reflection on the human condition finds perhaps its most condensed and striking form in a sentence we read in his masterpiece, *The Changing Nature of Man*. It reads:

*“All thinking and longing seeks to bring the other person or the other thing nearer.”*¹

This longing to draw nearer to persons and things should be understood as a desire to live in closer and more intimate contact with a surrounding world. This longing therefore propels us in a direction different from that of science and technology, both of which urge us to distance ourselves from our habitual everyday world by means of objectification and abstraction. The rewards of this alienation come in the form of a greater mastery and control over our natural and physical environment.

Van den Berg follows another path that begins not with a rational and methodic estrangement from our everyday life, but with the experience of astonishment before the vivid presence of a particular thing or person. The fundamental question posed by this encounter with the real is not a practical one that asks how we might master and use what we see, but rather the more fundamental, ontological question about what it is that appears before us. The practical question, the question concerning the “what” and the “how”, places what we perceive within the context of a workaday natural universe. The question about the meaning of a phenomenon places it within the festive realm of encounter and in the context of a very differently constituted inhabited cosmos.

The question about what to do with persons and things keeps us within the realm of natural science and technology, where we are motivated by the desire for mastery and control. Here is where we ask what it is that makes a watch tick, or what causes someone to become a hypochondriac or a criminal. But the type of

¹ Van den Berg, J. H. (1975) *The Changing Nature of Man*. New York Delta Publications P. 202.

questioning proposed by van den Berg seeks to bring us into a more intimate, lived contact with what surrounds, undergirds and overarches our human world. It is this latter type of questioning that finds expression in art and literature, as well as in thought and religious practice. It animates architecture and sculpture and thereby sets the stage for human life. To be deprived of the means to contemplate and draw nearer to a common, inhabited, human world condemns us to live an alienated and barren life. The fundamental task of a psychotherapeutic practice in this regard would be that of drawing nearer to the various ways in which we become alienated from our surrounding world, together with the artful ways in which we find our way back.

In reflecting on this vision we cannot avoid the central question it raises, namely, how do we find our way into a fuller presence of things and persons? How does it come about that a meadow can suddenly light up before us and awaken in us all our senses? How is it that a mere gesture or the particular timbre of someone's voice can completely transform our world, or that a painting that we might have seen many times before can suddenly surprise us and open up new worlds to us? How is it that at times we become alienated from our world and at other moments we can be overwhelmed and gratified by its presence?

Van den Berg provides us here with a few interesting descriptions taken from the world of literature that have served him as sources for his own reflections on these matters. The first of these is drawn from André Gide's autobiographical novel "*Si le grain ne meurt*" and tells how as a very young boy the author discovered the strange beauty of landscapes during a walk in the woods with his favorite nurse.

*"When Gide was a child, he went out with his nurse one day to pick flowers; noticing he was alone he called out to her. She stepped out of the shadow of a tree into the full sunlight. He had never seen her so light and so like the summer, and it seemed to him that she was smiling at him. He asked her why she was so happy. She said: "for no reason at all; but isn't the weather gorgeous?" At that moment, writes Gide, the whole valley became filled with love and happiness."*²

Van den Berg refers to that instance as a "miraculous moment" that shifted the child's perception from a world of threat and absence to one of plenitude and presence and from one filled with anxiety and darkness to one of brightness and happiness.

We note that the description does not limit itself to the action of a single person, or even to what takes place within the relationship of two persons; it describes

² Gide, André (1975) "*Si le grain ne meurt*" Paris, Gallimard, p. 58

instead the fundamental transformation of *an entire world*. At the very moment when the nurse steps out of the shadows into the light, the child's entire world moves from being one of threat and indifference to one that welcomes him and offers the prospect of countless adventures. The entire valley lights up; it shows off its flowers and lush vegetation at the very moment when the nurse's bright smile reassures the boy of her continued, benevolent presence.

The story reaffirms our fundamental intuition that the child access to a wider world is made possible on the basis of his intimate bond with the nurse. It confirms our experience that we gain access to a human world not solely because we possess certain generic or individual biological qualities or traits, but on the strength of maternal, paternal, fraternal and civic relationships that draw us outward from the womb, the hearth and the home into a wider world of civic and cosmic adventures.

It is always possible to distance ourselves emotionally and intellectually from the cosmic world in which we live and thereby programmatically transform our lived world into a natural scientific landscape; we then adopt an universal perspective in which our lived bodies show up as natural, biological bodies. From that perspective the child's access to the blooming valley is understood to be the natural result of the child's neurological, sensory and muscular equipment. But if we move away from natural scientific abstractions and from our preoccupation with a natural and physical universe we rediscover the lived cosmic world that forms the ultimate context of the boy's experience. We will then also rediscover the particular lived world that gives birth to the arts and the humanities and come to understand that we are able to think, to write, to paint, to sing, not as an automatic response to our natural, biological development, but rather by the grace of all those who have smiled upon us and who have invited us into the lived, cosmic world explored by the arts and the humanities.

We cannot ever feel at home in a world that has not welcomed us. We may try to outwit such a world, or even conquer it by force and reason, but in doing so we will have transformed an enchanted world into an indifferent and inhospitable domain that cannot recognize our humanity and that cannot serve us as a home. We might think of the modern scientific and technological universe as representing just such a partially conquered, vaguely alien, but essentially indifferent world in which there is no distinct place reserved for either human or divine habitation.

Van den Berg's second example concerns an anecdote Freud told by about his three-year-old nephew.³ The anecdote found its way as a footnote into Freud's

³ Van den Berg op.cit. p. 195

“Three contributions to a theory of sex.” It seems the child stayed overnight with his aunt and uncle and became frightened when he found himself alone in the dark of an unfamiliar room:

*“Aunt,” cried out the child in the bedroom, “aunt, please say something. I am scared in the dark.” His aunt answers: “What good does it do for me to talk since you cannot see me?” The child answered: “No matter, when someone speaks it becomes light.” (“Wenn jemand spricht wird es hell.”)*⁴

It is interesting to compare van den Berg’s interpretation of the anecdote to that of the founder of psychoanalysis, who understood the boy’s anxiety in terms of what he called “a transformation of the libido”. In that instance Freud compared the transformation of libido into anxiety to the chemical process whereby milk or wine turns stale and sour. What we see on display in this instance is Freud’s strenuous effort to imagine a natural and material psychic substructure that could “explain” psychological life in the same way that a natural universe “explains” the natural, physical phenomena of our workaday life.

But where Freud and academic psychology were mainly inspired by the progress of the natural sciences, Van den Berg sought guidance from the arts and the humanities. Where Freud dreamt of understanding the human psyche as it formed part of a material and natural universe, Van den Berg understood psychic and spiritual life as first and foremost a phenomenon of the lived world and as a foundational aspect of an inhabited cosmos.

Where Freud hoped that psychoanalysis might one day acquire the status of a natural science, Van den Berg insisted that a viable human psychology would have to draw its ultimate inspiration from the lived world formed by artistic, literary and religious creations.

Seen from the latter perspective, we cannot be satisfied with the explanations provided by a psychical apparatus that itself must be explained in terms of the forces of nature that control a natural universe. We want to take serious what the child says about the human voice and about the light it sheds on the surrounding darkness. But to do so we must leave aside for the moment our modern preoccupation with the objects and the forces of a natural and universal world and turn our attention instead to our lived world and to the intrinsic relationship between light and darkness as we find it described in art, myth and literature. That relationship, which remains entirely opaque to modern science, has formed part of our western cultural heritage for over two thousand years and we find fully spelled out in the creation story of Genesis. It is indeed remarkably how

⁴ Freud, S (1961) *Gesammelte Werke V*, London, S.Fischer Verlag p.126

closely the child's sensibilities correspond to what is described in that sacred text.

The child seems to have pre-reflectively understood that the light by which we see our world does not come in the first place from the incandescent bulb or even from the sun or the moon, but from the luminescent presence of a loving person. The opening paragraph of Genesis tells us that the creation of a human world began at the moment when a personal Creator spoke his first words and thereby transformed a dark chaos into a luminous cosmos. In the beginning cosmos there was as yet no separation of light and darkness, and the sun and the moon had not yet been formed. It was a living breath and a *voice* that created order out of chaos and that brought light into the world. We read:

“God said: “Let there be light.”

The text does not encourage us to think of the Creator's voice as a natural phenomenon that produced sound waves and echoes in the way we have come to think of it under the influence of the modern natural sciences. This voice is first and foremost an inspiring breath and a mysterious loving impulse that orders the chaos in preparation for human habitation.

We find this understanding of voice and breath, of light and love, repeated in the Gospel of St. John that opens with the words

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.”*⁵

Van den Berg understands this mysterious “Word” as that which creates “nearness” or intimacy between God and man, and by extension, between one person and another. It is this *relationship* that serves as the primordial source of light that illuminates the world. And it is again this *relationship* that makes the world a place of human and divine habitation.

The dark and unfamiliar bedroom that evoked such anxiety in the child resembles in many ways the chaos that in the Genesis myth preceded the creation of the world. In the beginning, when the first Word had as yet not been spoken:

*“the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.”*⁶

⁵ Gospel of St. John, first verse.

⁶ Genesis 1:2

Against this background we come to understand the child's anxiety as aroused by the threat of a return to primordial chaos and the loss of an inhabited cosmos. In following the biblical narrative we come to appreciate how the aunt's voice was able to disperse the threatened chaos and make the child's bedroom room once again part of a created and inhabited world. Once the child has been reassured that that his bed and his room form part of a created cosmos he is able to find his way back to the world of sleep and dreams.

It is in the same way that the bright smile of the nurse dispels the anxiety of the young Gide by transforming chaos into cosmos and an uninhabitable natural wilderness into a created, welcoming, human world.

The child's anxiety speaks about the loss of a welcoming world in which it is possible to draw nearer to persons and things. Such a world is a gift and cannot be secured by individual initiative and resourcefulness. It can be restored only by the miracle of a voice that lifts the darkness and by a smile that opens a world.

When Van den Berg speaks about "miracles", he does not refer to events that contravene the natural order or suspend the laws of the natural universe. He speaks of miracles precisely because they do not make their appearance within the space and time explored by the natural sciences and therefore do not form part of a natural universe; they make their appearance only within a humanly inhabited cosmos.

Miracles remind us of the creation of a human world out of the darkness and confusion of a primordial chaos; they speak about the gratuitous appearance of a loving voice or a smiling face that brings light and order to a chaotic world.

Our word "miracle" is related to the Latin "*miraculum*", understood originally as: "a wonderful thing, a marvel", which in turn can be traced back to the Old Indian "*smerah*" for "smiling" and for "being astonished".⁷

We should understand that Van den Berg does not consult sacred and literary texts or study architecture and painting so as to discover natural scientific facts and thereby secure a firmer grasp on a natural universe. The object of his study remains always the inhabited, human world as it is revealed in the arts and the humanities. In following his example we read literary and sacred texts and contemplate works of art, not to improve our skills in dealing with a workaday natural world, but rather to find our bearing within a human and divine cosmos. Works of art and sacred or literary texts never were meant to increase our power over an abstract, material and universal world; they rather provided us with the

⁷ E. Klein (1971) A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language, Amsterdam, Elsevier Publishing Co. See under "miracle".

means to build a festive and a workaday world in which human beings can prosper and be at home.

It is for this reason that, unlike natural scientific descriptions of a physical universe, works of art and literature touch us directly both in the personal and the public sphere of our life. It is in this way that we become personally involved in the trials of Job, the conquest and destruction of Troy, the peregrinations of Ulysses and the blind wandering of Oedipus. We recognize ourselves in the furtive gestures of Adam and Eve as they eat the forbidden fruit, we commiserate with Job and feel the destitution of Ulysses on his long way home. We share a common fate with these moving characters. Such is not the case with the objects we discover in the course of biological, chemical or physical studies. Naturalistic objects become available for study only after we have withdrawn from them.

Van den Berg writes from within the context of a psychotherapeutic practice where the chief concern is not the scientific and technological management of a natural universe but that of finding one's way within a complex web of human and divine relationships. He knows from experience that this process cannot be effectively guided by an abstract, technological reason and that it requires instead constant recourse to a cultural framework of art and myth.

Van den Berg's own writing bears eloquent witness to that necessity by its frequent recourse to cultural traditions, to the arts, to myth and to literary and sacred texts.

It is in this way that his understanding of the anxiety of Freud's young nephew is guided and supported, not by inferences about a natural scientific universe or a psychic apparatus, but by a religious, artistic and literary heritage that is designed to help us find our way in a human world.

By contrast we have seen how Freud's modernist attempt to distance himself from that heritage led him to adopt a materialist vocabulary of natural drives and forces. That fateful turn led him to formulate highly abstract and ultimately sterile explanations of his nephew's anxiety.

Where Van den Berg's psychology always leads us back to a cosmic relationship that symbolically unites heaven and earth, man and woman, child and adult, neighbor and neighbor, self and other, Freud's psychology poses as its ultimate horizon a natural and universal conflict between material drives or forces.

Van den Berg psychology finds all that is human and divine within an encounter between two persons, while Freud sees such an encounter as merely forming the surface of a much larger and pervasive conflict between natural forces inherent in a material universe.

It is as if modern scientific psychology in general and Freud's psychoanalysis in particular sought to repeat within the realm of psychology and psychotherapy the modern success story of biology and medicine. That success story was achieved by putting in the place of culturally circumscribed personal relationships a new ethos of scientific abstraction and objective exploration that gave birth to medical anatomy and eventually to modern medicine. A psychology seeking to repeat that historic achievement would have to trace all aspects of human personal and collective life back to a natural and universal world in the same way that medicine taught us to trace all human phenomena back to a natural and biological body.

One can see that such a psychology would have to exclude reliance on insights wrought by older cultural traditions and forego reference to wisdom revealed by poetic, mythic and literary texts, in the same way that traditional medical concepts and practices had to be discarded to make place for modern scientific medicine.

It is interesting to see how Van den Berg's position contrasts with that of modern academic and scientific psychology when he writes that:

*"The real facts of psychology are outside the official empiricism; they belong to an empiricism of another order, that of every day life, unchanged, unreduced by reflection, unchilled by the distance of abstract observing and reasoning."*⁸

We find this different empiricism reflected and contemplated in the seminal works of the Western tradition. To come to understand these psychological facts that are outside the official empiricism we ponder myths, read poems and novels, meditate on sacred texts, visit the theater and the concert hall and let ourselves be moved by painting, sculpture and architecture. This other, non scientific empiricism does not seek to master aspects of a natural universe; it only seeks to draw closer to persons and things so as to create thereby a more human and a more inhabitable cosmos.

Psychoanalysis was born out of the perplexity of a neurologist who in his medical practice came upon cases of paralysis that could not be explained on the basis of neurological impairment or disease. Freud then took an unusual first step in the direction of a non-neurological and non-medical understanding of human suffering by inventing, with Breuer, a psychoanalytic practice.

But rather than cultivating the already existing cultural resources for understanding human pain and misfortune, he sought a middle ground and set

⁸ Van den Berg, op. cit. p.154

out to construct, as we have seen, a “psychical or mental apparatus” (*“psychischer Apparat”*). He hoped that this psychical apparatus would play in the field of psychology the same scientific and explanatory role that the anatomical and physiological body had played in the development of biology and medicine.

Freud’s thinking remained thereby entirely within the sphere of naturalistic problem solving of everyday, workaday life. By contrast, Van den Berg’s thinking moved away from the workaday sphere of instrumentality and functionality as he began to explore the festive sphere of human encounter.

In placing the two psychologies of Freud and Van den Berg side by side we are confronted with two very different conceptions of what constitutes the ultimate basis of a human world. For Freud that world ultimately rests upon a natural scientific universe in the same way that his conception of a psychological world is made rest on a psychical apparatus. He saw that apparatus not only as homologous with a natural universe, but as forming part of it and as functioning in all respects in accordance with its laws.

Freud’s meta-psychology makes it clear that the psychical apparatus of his devising is merely a makeshift construction, in the same way as he thought of the natural sciences of our day as offering only glimpses of a more perfect future science.

Van den Berg sees this materialist aspect of psychoanalysis as an artifact of Freud’s medical training that began with anatomy, progressed to physiology and ended with endocrinology. That training at no time paid attention to the human body other than as a natural artifact and as an object of scientific curiosity and technological manipulation. Van den Berg describes that program of medical education in the following terms:

*“first they learn about the bones, then about the muscles, then the glands, and finally about the gland that secretes thought.”*⁹

The author does not only plead here for a more liberal medical education, but also for a psychology less bound to the world of the natural sciences and more attuned to the inhabited, human world as it is explored by the arts and the humanities. He does so in the conviction that the ultimate object of our longing and thinking is not merely that of gaining absolute control over a natural and material world. As we have seen, he has defined that ultimate object as one of “drawing closer to things and persons.”

⁹ Van den Berg op.cit. p.155

This basic longing cannot find ultimate satisfaction in scientific discoveries and technological advancements; it finds its true fulfillment only in mutually revealing relationships that shed their light on our world and awaken in us the desire to more fully inhabit it.

More about miracles.

At times we experience our world as a comfortable and supportive place while at other times we experience it as indifferent to our wants and needs and hostile to our projects. But we are almost never entirely at the merci of a particular attunement and mostly enjoy a margin of freedom that permits us to change the physiognomy of our world. Such ability to alter our view of the world, and at the same time change the way others see us, is closely associated with health and happiness; we find it always severely limited in neurotic and psychotic patients. To alter our view of the world we need to find access to an “*alter*”, understood here in the Latin sense of “the other of us two”, “the other with whom I form a pair and inhabit a cosmos”.

When our world grows stale and stagnant it speaks in an allusive manner of the absence of this *alter* who enables me to change positions and see things in a different light. The role of the therapist in the treatment of neurosis is precisely that of standing in for the missing other and to constitute a true *alter* to the alienated patient.

The author reminds us that after they were banished from Paradise and arrived on earth, Adam and Eve faced for the first time an inhospitable and as yet uncultivated landscape. They not only had lost the ease and plenitude of paradise, but had forfeited their earlier access to the divine Other. The first human couple thus had every reason to become despondent over their fate. Yet, they did not give in to despair but created a religious ritual that would serve to bring earth and heaven together and create the new symbolic unity of a divine and human cosmos.

*“ But barely has the first couple been expelled from Eden, then they light the first fire in sacrifice. Faith presumes a breach with God.”*¹⁰

It is especially the last sentence that attracts our attention here. If faith presumes a breach with God we may presume that there was no need for it in Adam and Eve’s previous life. Religion appears as superfluous in Paradise as would be conversation between a mother and the child in her womb. Moreover, if faith and

¹⁰ Van den Berg, Op.cit. p. 193

religious practice presume a previous breach with God we should accept that the love of a child for his parents points back to a similar breach in his relationship to them. Our love for others emerges against the background of an absolute prior unity that was broken and that can be healed only by a reciprocal exchange of gifts and words.

We become adults only after we have been born and are weaned, that is, after we have been banished twice from a simpler and closer union.

Only a child whose umbilical cord has been cut and who has learned to breath on his own can begin to lead a human life, and only a mouth that has lost its grip on the mother's breast becomes a fully human mouth capable, not only of sucking and chewing, but of speaking and singing.

Only a human creature that has been born and that has been banned from the womb can learn to differentiate an inside from an outside and a beginning from an end. And only such a creature will be able to develop the cultural means to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, mother and child, man and woman and between neighbor and neighbor.

We come to understand that Adam and Eve brought heaven and earth back together again after they were separated by the Fall. They did this by creating a ritual in the form of prayer and sacrifice, in just the same way that the newborn child overcomes the distance between his mouth and the mother's breast by exchanging smiles and expressive sounds followed by words.

If we follow the path of this thought we come to think of the fated distance and difference between heaven and earth as repeated in that between mother and child, man and woman, neighbor and neighbor. We then come to understand Adam and Eve's first sacrifice as laying the foundation of a world in which distance is overcome by a symbolic action. We come to see gift exchanges and economic and political activity as elaborating and transmuting this same fateful distance that made its first appearance with the Fall of Adam and Eve and that thereafter repeated itself in the breach between heaven and earth, mother and child and between man and woman. We come to understand human civilization as a unique repertoire of symbolic forms that overcomes the paralyzing distance of banishment, birth and death and thereby lays the groundwork for a distinctly human way of life. These symbolic forms transform the lost, literal unity of Paradise into the symbolic unity of a human and divine cosmos. It is the power of human language that transforms the paralyzing chasms created by the Fall into thresholds that both separate and hold together, an inside and an outside, a heaven and earth, a mother and her child, a lover and his beloved, a neighbor and his neighbor.

Within this light we come to see Adam and Eve's sacrifice, or the infant's smile, or the greetings exchanged between neighbors, as signs of reconciliation that prevail over what would otherwise have been a fateful, unforgiving and unrelenting distance and silence.

It is by the grace of these exchanges that our world holds together and it is made inhabitable so that we can "*draw nearer to another person or another thing*". What marks us therefore as truly human is the miraculous transformation of a paralyzing absence into a life-giving presence, and of an absolute and deadly silence into one that awaits and receives the word of self and other.

Returning to the incident in which Freud's wife calmed the fears of her little nephew, van den Berg writes:

*"The child is afraid in the dark, it wants light. He is given light. He is given light –light without fire, light by a word. But this is a miracle!"*¹¹

We find this same "miraculous" relationship repeated in Gide's autobiography where it is the light of the smile rather than the light of the voice that draws the child out of the dark forest and into the sunny valley.

In both instances it is the gift of the symbol and the miracle of a loving, inviting relationship that brings light into the world of the children.

This miracle operates in the adult world too. We all know how a friendly smile can light up our day and how recalling a kind face, a moving musical phrase or a line of poetry can miraculously transform our outlook on the world.

Victor Frankl describes how during his wartime internment in a death camp he was able to overcome moments of unmitigated despair by vividly recalling the image of his beloved wife. The very memory of her love appeared strong enough to shield him from the onslaught of nihilism all around him.

It is in a similar way that great art, like great love, has the miraculous virtue of restoring our vitality and humanity at moments when we are most in danger of giving in to defeat and despair.

These reflections bring us to a closer understanding of Van den Berg's insistence that miracles belong intrinsically to everyday life. When we speak of everyday life we refer to human life as it is lived and as it forms part of a cosmos and not as it might appear seen through the special prism of the natural sciences.

Approached from a cosmic perspective, everyday life can be seen to alternate between two very different modes of time and of ways of being in the world. We

¹¹ op.cit p.195

make a principled distinction here between a workaday mode, in which we struggle with a resisting natural world, and a celebrative or festive mode, in which we encounter and seek to grow nearer to persons and things. The workaday mode permits us to set the stage for meaningful encounters while the festive mode permits us to come more fully into the presence of self, world and others. The border between these two ways of being in the world is announced by the appearance of the festive other.

It would appear therefore that the end of work is not ultimately determined by clock time, or even by the fatigue and weariness of our body, but by the advent of that other who is able to draw us away from the workaday world by engaging us in conversation and in the exchange of gifts.

Our work ends the moment we cross the threshold that separates and binds us to the other and makes us enter into a mutually revealing, personal relationship. It is this relationship that draws us out of the shadows and into the luminous world of human and divine encounters.

If we follow this cosmic logic of a human world we come to see that a miracle makes its appearance each time there occurs a fruitful and truthful exchange between two persons and every time an authentic revelation passes the threshold dividing and joining two adjacent realms.

To illustrate this proposition we might think of someone undertaking a long and arduous voyage to visit an old friend. In our imagination we might follow this modern Ulysses as he makes his way over difficult terrain where he is beset by the most varied and imposing obstacles. All along the way he is obliged to draw upon his personal resourcefulness and perseverance and we therefore come to think of the progress he makes in his journey as an accomplishment wrought by hard and skillful labor.

But all this changes the moment when the traveler appears on the doorsteps of his friend. It is here that the journey, understood as an individual achievement, comes to a halt. Any further progress on his part is now placed in the hands of another person who must open the door and invite him into the house.

When that door opens and his friend extends him his welcome, our Ulysses receives the wages of his efforts and at the same time becomes witness to a miracle that no amount of individual will or effort could have brought about.

Our Ulysses has risked dangers, he has tested his strength in a perilous journey, and yet he is deeply moved and grateful now that a new world opens itself up to him. It is at this point that we come to see his long journey as itself a long and urgent plea for a door to open up to him and for another world to extend to him its welcome. If that plea is not answered and that door remains closed his labor appears to have been in vain.

It would seem that the fruits of our labor do not materialize in the absence of a miracle that opens a door, that leads us across a threshold and that grants us access to *another* world. Science, technology and labor can only bring us to the threshold of accomplishment. But only the miracle of encounter can crown our disciplined efforts and grant us access to a fully human world.

It is for this reason that we do not think of the child's discovery of the sunlit landscape as a purely personal accomplishment, achieved by industry and clever strategy. The young Gide did not find his way into the blooming valley by studying botany or forest management, but by an act of grace and a miracle born out of a loving, trusting relationship.

Miracles form part of a festive, moral and religious world of hospitality and gift-exchange, while the marvels wrought by science, labor and technology belong to a workaday world where initiative, strategy and personal perseverance reign supreme.

Van den Berg's insight is here of crucial importance for psychologists. The surprising feats of the modern world of technology and science take place in a workaday world from which all miracles have been banned. Yet effective psychotherapy takes place in the festive and hospitable world of human and divine encounters. Within that latter world we do not seek to move mountains or to build impregnable fortresses but await the miracle of encounter, the opening of a door, and the invitation to enter the world of another.

How do we overcome di-stance

If it is true that "*all thinking and longing seeks to bring the other person or the other thing nearer*" we must think of the various ways in which we overcome distance. We think here first of all of intelligent labor that sets itself a distant goal and then works patiently and persistently to achieve its realization. It is in this way that we learn to interconnect the banks of a river by ever more efficient and durable bridges, or learn to traverse oceans in shorter time and greater comfort by developing faster and more luxurious ocean liners. Yet this industrious, self-sufficient and workaday mode of overcoming distance is of little use to the anxious child who seeks to cross over the abyss dividing a dark and threatening world into one that extends its welcome and promises to make place for him. To reach across that divide the child needs the guiding presence of a loving other.

The myth of Genesis contains brilliant insights about the birth of difference and the subsequent emergence of an impassible divide between heaven and earth and between divinity and humanity.

The human desire to draw closer to self, other and world cannot be understood apart from the original separation between heaven and earth that served as a prelude to the creation of a human world.

We learn from the creation story that in the beginning Adam and Eve lived in undivided closeness and intimacy with their creator and with each other. Nothing needed to be done to support or maintain that intimacy; no sacrifices were required, no prayers or other rituals needed to be performed, no learned theological propositions needed to be formulated to restore a lost closeness between the creator and his creation.

We know of only one cultural obligation and one threshold that originally marked the difference between mankind and God: Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that stood in the middle of the garden. Distance between self and other, self and nature and self and God was thus almost entirely absent from the intimate and blessed world of paradise.

Di-stance means a “standing” (*stance*) “apart” (*di*) that can take the form of a “standing with”, of a “standing besides” or a “standing behind” someone or something. It refers to a post-paradisiacal way of being-with persons and things. *Di-stance* could come into being only after the original and almost imperceptible threshold between Adam and Eve and the forbidden tree had been transgressed. By eating the fruit of that tree, that is, by fusing with its substance and destroying the sacred distance, Adam and Eve almost succeeded in completely erasing the difference and the distance between themselves and their creator. It was clearly with this prospect that the serpent enticed them to transgress:

*“Your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good from evil”*¹²

Adam and Eve’s transgression made paradise uninhabitable. By removing from paradise the merest trace of a threshold they had transformed it into a totalitarian utopia from which all difference and distance had been removed.

Within this brave new world a transgressive will would have destroyed all thresholds and thereby would have made everything and everybody into an object of prey and a victim of domination.

The *di-stance* evoked by a threshold holds persons and things apart so that they are protected from violence and can be joined only symbolically and by mutual consent. Such “standing apart”, such *di-stance* incarnate in the threshold forms the ultimate foundation upon which a hospitable human and divine cosmos can

¹² Genesis 3:5

be built and maintained. There can be no question of either love or understanding in the absence of duly respected and well-guarded thresholds.

We may think of the Fall from paradise as the radical widening of an earlier, almost imperceptible distance that separated Adam and Eve from the tree in the midst of the Garden. This widened distance would henceforth separate heaven from earth and mortal human being from eternal and divine being.

It would make its appearance in all manner of human frailties such as moral and intellectual failings, human sickness and death, madness and illusion and even in the dangers and the pain surrounding childbirth. It also would announce itself in the indifference to human life and well being that we face in the material and objective world of everyday labor, of technology and science. It would make itself manifest in the enmity of untamed beasts and in the burdens caused by weeds and pests.

In paradise the landscapes had always shown mankind a bright and inviting face, but on earth there would also appear the violent and hostile faces of storms, earthquakes, floods and forest fires.

In response to their banishment Adam and Eve sought above all to diminish the distance that separated them from their former home and to meliorate the differences that set the earth apart from the heavens. But they equally felt alienated from their immediate earthly environment.

To bring the heavens nearer to the earth they developed religious practices and to draw nearer to the surrounding earth they set about to modify and ameliorate it by means of persistent and intelligent labor. To avoid repetition of the sacrilege that had banished them from paradise they set about to establish and honor thresholds and in this way they learned to inhabit the earth.

To conclude, we should point out the danger of confusing the distance and nearness experienced in human and divine relationships with the measurable and conquerable distance encountered in everyday workaday life and in the worlds of technology and science. Within the latter regions we struggle with an indifferent, alien and material universe that we seek to master so as to diminish our suffering and to assure our survival. Within that realm *distance* is understood as the index of our success or failure in the total subjugation of the natural world.

But in the realm of human encounter we do not seek the *dissolution* of distance between self and the other but rather its miraculous transformation from an abyss that cannot be bridged into a place of encounter and of mutual revelation.

Workaday, scientific and technological life seeks *to level* all differences insofar as these form an obstacle to progress. But in the world of festive encounters the differences between one person and another, one domain or house and another,

or one world and another, form the starting point of human civilization. Such differences are the source of love and friendship and form the foundation of prosperous cities. The leveling of differences, such as are recommended by so-called progressive ideologies and implemented by totalitarian regimes undermine viable art, thought and religion and thereby destroy human community.

The reasons for this are not far to seek. If we take the concepts of distance and difference such as these apply to the workaday world, and then use these to guide our understanding and our actions in the festive world of encounter we distort and destroy creative differences and poison the well of love and friendship. We then come to think of the nearly complete absence of difference and distance between the slave and his master as a worthwhile ideal to strive for. Within the realm of labor, science and technology we make the natural world conform to our needs by perfecting our strategies and by increasing our understanding of the enemy's strongest and weakest defenses. Success in this realm depends on persistence, skill and effort. It requires neither sacrifices nor entreaties and it does not rely on, or even believe in, miracles. Moreover, it lives of transgression and has no desire to cultivate thresholds.

Quite to the contrary, within the realm of personal relations we cannot shorten the distance or erase the difference between self and other by violence or by personal fiat. This does not mean that the personal realm demands no effort, but only that that such effort cannot come to fruition without the help of a miracle.