The Psychology of Nothingness V: Profound Engagement Between Nothingness and Something

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I began the fourth essay in this series (Bergquist, 2026b) by considering the BIG issue: How do we make sense of a universe that emerged from nothingness. Do we grapple at all with the distant prospects of Big Silence? I turn in this essay to consideration not so much the emergence of something from nothing in the first moments of the Big Bang, but instead the interplay between nothingness and something that is enacted at every moment and in every location of our universe.

I am specifically reminded of the Mesopotamian myth I introduced in the first essay in this series. This myth concerns the Void that is present prior to the formation of an orderly world. Ruled over by Tiamat, a primordial god, this state of nothingness or disorder was experienced in real life by those living in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East. Their land was chaotically flooded each year by the two rivers flowing through the Crescent. The flooding made this land fertile.

While we might not be living by a flooding river (though many of us do), there are other repeated incidents in our life in which nothingness or chaos reigns supreme. And in the very long term, we now know that Chaos and nothingness will ultimately conquer Order and somethingness. Following the Big Bang will comes the continuing expansion of the universe under the force of dark energy, leading eventually to the Big Silence.

Brugh Joy (1990) mentions some of these incidents of nothingness and chaos reigning supreme when identifying several recent calamities in recent times. I find Brugh Joy's insights to be relevant precisely because we are being "flooded" in many ways in the mid-21st Century by conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence and contradictions (VUCA-Plus) (Bergquist, 2026a). These six conditions swirl constantly around our reality.

We are also blessed with the opportunities to be free, to savor beauty and to act in a manner that benefits all of humankind. As Brugh Joy suggests, we need our full resources to enjoy and to appreciate Life--with its unknown destiny and its unknown purposes. We also can benefit from the creation or founding of a supportive community filled with people who can bravely imagine, anticipate, and create a "wonderful world" while living in VUCA-Plus saturated conditions that seem to yield neither destiny nor purpose.

Given the challenges I have just posed, I first consider the movement from nothing to something under VUCA-Plus conditions.

Moving From Nothing to Something Amidst VUCA-Plus Conditions

There is a significant challenge associated with the transition from nothing to something when we live with conditions of volatility (how do I know I have created something that will endure), uncertainty (how do I know that I have actually created something), ambiguity (what is it that I have created) and turbulence (how can I concentrate on creating one thing with everything swirling about me). However, I

propose that there are even greater challenges associated with the movement to something when faced with complex and contradictory conditions. I provide some evidence for this claim.

Complexity

Those who study the nature and dynamics of complex systems often point to the powerful influence of a specific dynamic that tends to operate when complex conditions are present. This dynamic is called a "strange attractor." When operating in a complex system, we are often pulled into a state or pattern (fractal) from which it is hard to extricate oneself. Furthermore, the creation of a strange attractor is hard to predict in terms of not only when it will occur but also the way in which it will operate. In many ways, strange attractors operate as if they are a vacuum that pulls in whatever exists in a specific space.

Given the dynamics of strange attractors, it is hard to be creative in a consistent, enduring manner. I know in the writing of dissertations by my doctoral students, there is often a period when they are stuck. A specific theme or observations keeps repeating in their head and in their writing. They find it hard to move beyond this "attractor." I am also reminded of the tragic story of Ellen West, who is preoccupied with the prospect of suicide. It is only at the point when she can take her own life that Ellen feels she has some control over her life (Binswanger, 1958).

Artists in all fields often describe being blocked by a recurring image or theme. They are caught up in a strange attractor, as are those trying to be creative in solving a problem or preparing an innovative project. Jungians would even suggest that these artists and problem-solvers are trapped by powerful archetypes that dwell in our unconscious. These archetypes (related to such images as mother, father, fate, and wisdom) pull us downward to a set of primitive images. An archetype of the uroboros or the Mandala pulls us into an unending search for unity, while an archetype related to Alchemy pulls us toward the search for making something precious out of something that is basic and unrefined.

More generally, there is a Jungian based proposal that the fractals appearing in strange attractors relate to the way in which we store memories. More generally, Harry Shirley (2025) suggests that fractals align with the *Unus Mundus*—a shared, archetypal realm of number and pattern. This perspective would lead us to view the challenge as particularly great when we try to be creative and produce something out of nothing during the mid-21st Century. For the complex field in which we are operating is filled with many strange attractors and fractals. We are pulled and yanked in many directions when things are complex (and volatile, uncertain, ambiguous and turbulent). Even our memories may be wrapped up in compulsive fractals.

All of this suggests that we should engage a group to solve the problem or prepare the innovation is often necessary when the sole creator is caught in an attractor. Under the conditions of complexity, strange attractors, and compelling fractals, we might find that collective intelligence is greater than the intelligence of any one member of a group (Arima, 2021). Something called "swarm" intelligence has taken hold, often complemented with Artificial Intelligence (Seebacher and Legat, 2024). While artists might be working alone, they are often more productive when affiliated with other artists—as we have witnessed in the explosion of accomplished creative work in such places as Florence of the 15th Century, Harlem of the 1920s, and Paris of the 1930s.

While the term is rarely used, I would suggest that there are also strange detractors. These are the defensive structures and processes that keep pulling us away from a direct confrontation with disturbing or socially inappropriate thoughts and feelings. Under conditions of great complexity, there is a pull not only into the "rut" of a strange attractor, but also a pull toward escaping the complexity in search of a state of simplicity—what I have identified as a distorted wonderland in which many people of the mid-21st Century live (Bergquist, 2026a).

Contradiction

It's hard to focus on creating something new out of nothing when people are calling for outcomes that are contradictory and polarizing. The problem that is facing a 21st Century task force team often resides not in identification of a solution. It resides in the differing outcomes desired regarding this problem. The noted behavioral economist, Daniel Kahneman joined with two colleagues in address this problem of differing outcomes (Kahneman, Sibony and Sunstein, 2021). They distinguished between Noice and Bias, suggesting that often a problem-solving team faces highly diverse and contradictory outcomes. The members of this team are confronted with substantial Noise.

At other times, the team members agree on the outcomes, but the outcomes are not directly related to the problem being faced. Under these circumstances, the team must address Bias rather than Noise. In the first case, a Noisy group is likely to become stuck in a polarizing situation. In the latter case, a Biased group might not be polarized, but it is likely to be filled with "true believers" and will form a bubble of belief that prevents members of the team from recognizing their bias (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024).

When an "outsider" comes into the Biased team and offers an alternative set of outcomes, the condition of contradiction is likely to be produced, leading this team, like the Noisy team, to confront the challenge of managing often-emotionally loaded polarizations. Fortunately, as I have already mentioned in this essay, there is a very effective process that can be engaged to address this polarization. It is the polarity management method first proposed by Barry Johnson (1996, 2020).

As I noted, Johnson has identified a way in which either/or becomes both/and. He breaks up a powerful swinging back-and-forth between two opposing outcomes that in many ways resembles the just mentioned dynamics of strange attractors and fractals. For Johnson, the key feature is the pausing to consider the positive and negative features of each outcome. This consideration of both positive and negatives contrasts with the usual focusing just on the negatives and then flipping to the other outcome. This pausing is fully aligned with Daniel Kahneman's (2011) slow thinking and Don Schön (1983) reflective practice.

As in the case of complexity, the presence of a group might help in meeting the challenge of contradiction and polarization. While a group that contains diverse perspectives can produce contradiction and polarization, it can also provide multiple outlooks that lead to a slowing down of the polarizing swing. Furthermore, somewhere amid the diversity is likely to be the "unifying" image or symbol that the Jungians suggest. This image or symbol can inspire and even guide a search for a shared perspective and outcome—or can serve at least as a bridge between the polarities. Collective intelligence in this setting shows up as a willingness of group members to listen to one another and to find safety in the collective, so that all members of the group can think and imagine "out of [their] box."

Nothingness Interacting with Being

As I have mentioned, some of the most creative and perhaps sustaining uses of nothingness occur when it continues to exist and interplays with somethingness (Being). I have witnessed it in Ortiz's violin concerto, and in the remarkable deconstruction of literary works and historical narratives.

Deconstruction

The text is broken down into small units (words, phrases) which are compared, correlated, and probed. Literary and historical biases are uncovered. And a new and often deeper meaning is revealed. Recently, for instance, Sharon Xiaoyn Ma, one of my doctoral students from China, "deconstructed" the naming of women and the representation of women in Chinese characters (Xiaoyn Ma, 2022):

> In the early feudal time, a woman can only have a family name as Shi, then after they got married, they put the husbands' name Xing before the Shi, and that would be the way to refer to a woman, no given name at all. Although Chinese family names have a rich history and cultural content, women are still not allowed to be recorded in the book of the family tree. . . .
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> Each Character carries a narrative and imagination itself. The word 'Nv' means Female. In its original form, the Oracle letter Nv (Image above: Upper is Oracle letter, bottom is simplified Chinese characters) looks like a person crossing hands in a kneeling/sitting position. Immediately, people would associate the image with the female's societal position at that time - bending over and obeying with no freedom nor rights. Then one may further imagine what it was like to be a woman in that period.
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> The word 'Nu' (First image below from left) has a left part of female (Nv) and right part as being caught by hand. It was said that during a war period, men were killed, and women were captured as trophies, 'Nu' means Slavery. To go further if we add a 'Xin'(heart) at the bottom of Nu, the meaning changed from Slavery to Anger (Second image below from left). It described an intense emotion which is aroused by being a slave.



> Furthermore, the word 'An' (Third image above from left) is a female (Nv) staying in a house. When women were in danger of been caught, it was better to stay in the house. This word means Safe. Other words like 'Fu' (Fourth image above from left) which has a female (Nv) on the left side and a tool on the right side, this character clearly shows that females are assigned housework. This word means Lady.
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> To go further, a spike of rice pressing on a female head was called ' Wei' (Fifth image above from

left), and there is no matching translation in English or Spanish for this word. It means obeying, feeling wronged but having to contain it. This is one who knows that they would be unfairly treated, but must remain silent, pleasing others and bending over. The idiom Wei Qu Qiu Quan means to bend over and repress the negative feeling, avoid conflict with others in order to keep the relationship harmonious. Again, the last word 'Hao' (Sixth image above from left) is a female with a boy child, which means a woman shall give birth to boy child, that means Good.

Sharon Ma goes on to point out that Carl Jung writes of the collective unconscious as populated by instincts as well as by archetypes. She suggests that the sequencing of words in a person's name and the Chinese character is a form of collective unconscious itself. The characters can be traced back to ancient rituals, and they conveyed social expectations.

Dr. Ma's deconstructing analysis suggests that deeply held assumptions about the role to be played by women in Chinese society are reinforced by the naming of women and characters assigned to female-related functions. There is "nothing" in these name-sequences and Chinese characters. They are just "arbitrary" or historical "accidents." At the same time, there is "something" very important in the potential unconscious influences of these frequently engaged sequences and characters in Chinese life.

Assumptions, Leadership and Hope

A noted British psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion, proposes that something is always seeking to emerge in groups, especially when anxiety pervades the group (Bion, 1961). Much as Chinese characters may influence the fundamental way in which those emerged in the Chinese culture view their world and their relationship with other people, Bion suggests that one of three basic unconscious assumptions (nothingness) dictates how members of a group view leadership and how they interact with the reality (being) they are facing.

These three assumptions concern the presence of wisdom in the group, the presence of courage in the group, and the presence of a vision of the future in the group. Members of a group tend to embrace one of these three assumptions and typically assign wisdom, courage or vision to the leader of the group. I wish to expand on what Bion has proposed turning to the psychology of anticipation and introducing hope, as a related psychological process. I wish to do not a deconstruction of Bion's model, but instead a bit of construction.

Anticipation: I begin by reviewing a bit of what I have written about anticipation (Bergquist, 2026a) and referenced in previous essays in this series on nothingness. I have proposed that we human beings live primarily in our immediate future. We anticipate what is about to happen a few seconds or few minutes from now and adjust our behavioral plans based on this anticipation—emulating the Test-Operate-Text-Exit (T.O.T.E.) model proposed many years ago by Miller, Galanter and Pribram (1960). Our affective state is also influenced by what we anticipate.

I know that when I am driving to a sporting event at a nearby sports bar that I am feeling high (adrenaline) and happy (dopamine). We know that the "high" which gamblers often get is produced not

by hitting the jackpot; rather, it occurs when they enter the casino or even when they are driving to the place (casino) where they anticipate a rewarding experience. Like me, their get their jolt of pleasure while enroute.

It should be noted that anticipation can be produced by a brief glimpse at something pleasurable (or something threatening). The anticipation comes in a flash. For instance, I get a jolt of pleasure when turning on the radio to find that I have turned to a piece of classical music that I enjoy. Conversely, if I tune on the radio and the piece of pleasurable music is about to conclude, then I get a bit depressed, knowing that I will not be able to enjoy this piece of music – unless like the noted cognitive theorist, Jerome Bruner (Sacks, 2008), I can replay the entire piece of music in my own mind.

In establishing this model of anticipation, I build on Peter Sterling's model of *Allostasis* (Sterling, 2020). He proposes that the human body does not return to a state of Homeostasis; rather it is constantly changing the desired physiological state based on anticipated neurological activities (Sterling, 2024). He puts it this way:

> Nearly all physiological and biochemical regulation is continuously and primarily managed by prediction, even the smallest changes when a thought flashes through the mind and predicts something that needs either raising or lowering various systems to adjust to the predicted demand. Corrective feedback is used secondarily when predictions fail. To me, this is the origin and purpose of the brain, to manage these predictions. When our body returns to "normal" from a deviation, normal is not due to a set point but to the brain's prediction that this is the most likely level of demand.

For instance, we signal to our body that more physical energy will be needed because we anticipate that our body must continue to be active (running on a treadmill); our baseline of stored energy is adjusted given that we will temporarily be depleted of some energy. In alignment with Sterling, I propose that we operate in the world via something I call *Polystasis.* I suggest that we constantly adjust our baseline of desired outcomes and prepare our body for engagement in specific behaviors in anticipation of what we think is about to occur in our environment. We appraise, anticipate, adjust, and act (Bergquist, 2026a). And this process of Polystasis and accompanying psychology of anticipation occurs in groups setting associated with wisdom, courage and vision.

Wisdom: Specifically, I propose that a group that embraces an assumption concerning the presence of wisdom is actually holding three related assumptions. First, members of the group assume that the major challenges they face concern knowledge. The group is operating in an environment in which much is unknown or elusive. In contemporary times, with the prevalence of VUCA-Plus, there is a particularly strong need for knowledge. The second assumption is that a leader must be found who is knowledgeable (wise) and can guide the group to a high overall level of knowledge (collective intelligence: Arima, 2021; Seebacher and Legat, 2024).

The third assumption comes with two pathways. The first pathway contains a shared belief that the wise leader is currently present in the group. This person is to be honored and followed, given their wise competency. The alternative pathway is based on the shared belief that the wise leader is not currently

present in the group. The group can only be Hopeful. The primary task of the group is to find (or invent) this wise leader. Until such time as this leader is discovered or created, members of the group are likely to be anxious and stripped of the knowledge that they do have.

The group will keep making the same mistakes and learn very little from the mistakes they make. The group is anxiously dumb and dysfunctional until such time as it finds or constructs its leader. There is a third pathway. Members of the group can recognize that they already collectively hold the necessary knowledge to meet the challenges of their environment (be it saturated with VUCA-Plus or be it stable, simple, quiet and consistent) (Bergquist, 2026a).

Courage: While the presence of VUCA-Plus conditions in many groups often leads members of these groups to the assumption of required knowledge and a wise leader, our world, unfortunately, is also highly polarized, with the presence in many groups of identified enemies. Under these polarized conditions, it is not unusual for a group to embrace the assumption that a courageous leader is required for the group to be successful. Once again, I would re-construct Bion's model by suggesting that three assumptions are actually present in this group.

First, there is the assumption that an eminent threat is challenging the group—and even its survival. This threat is often manifest in the presence of a competing entity – be it an organization offers the same product or service or a political party embracing a different set of priorities and policies. The threat might also come from a potential invasion of one's homeland, the presence of an "evil" force in the world (common in many fundamental churches), or the potential intrusion of another "body" (e.g a merger). While this threat might be "real," it is also often created whole-cloth by the group. As Robert Sapolsky (2004) has noted, we human beings are masterful at creating attacking lions that don't actually exist.

Second, as in the case of a group seeking a wise leader, the fearful group facing a threat (real or imagined) will seek out a leader who is courageous and ready to lead the group "into battle". The battle might consist of a new marketing plan or strategy for taking an "end-run" around the opposition. In many instances, it is up to the newly-appointed courageous leader to devise the battle plan—either alone or in collaboration with a "war counsel."

Third, we are once again identifying two pathways. First, the courageous fight-leader might already be present in the group. This person might have already led the group in battle. It is also not unusual for the courageous leader to have played a major role in signaling the presence of the threat. Unfortunately, this threat is often manufactured by courageous leaders as a means to bring them into power in the group.

There is the second pathway. Group members do not find a courageous leader. They must hope that this leader will emerge and will go on a collective quest to find this leader. There might be an ongoing "audition" of the courageous leader, with each potential leader failing in their efforts to successfully defeat the enemy. At times, when the group fails to find a courageous leader, members of the group will revert from a "fight" mentality to a "flight" mentality. They might look for and often find a flight leader

who will offer an escape strategy, be this humor, substance abuse, or a form of existential indifference ("Is that all there is. If that's all there, is then lets' break out the booze and have a ball!").

As in the case of an assumption regarding wisdom, there is also a third pathway regarding courage. Members of the group can acknowledge that courage is to be found in the heads and hearts of group members. Alternatively, the group comes to full recognition that threat doesn't really exist. There is only a "false lion" that may have been created to divert the group from its "real" task. The "enemy" is now identified as existing in the group itself. This "enemy" is the group's anxiety, the unwillingness of group members to take a risk, or perhaps the unwillingness of group members to acknowledge the real reason for the existence of their group.

Vison: This brings us to the third assumption. The group can look to a member of the group to provide a compelling vision of the future (Polak, 1973). As in the case of wisdom and courage, this assumption can be reconstructed in three parts. First, the group assumes that it is operating in a world that is filled with potential. The future is swirling about. Opportunities abound. It only requires a leader to emerge who can articulate this vision and guide the group in realizing that the envisioned future can be achieved.

It is critical for this visionary group to be realistic about the opportunities that are available. Just as groups can easily invent their own lions, it is also tempting to invent an opportunity that doesn't actually exist. When anxious, members of a group can revert to one of the most primitive of all defense against anxiety—this being Denial: "there is no problem here. We have only to wish upon a star . . . " JIminy Cricket might have had something important to say in Disney's *Pinocchio* about wish-granting stars, given the war-torn world in which he was singing during the early 1940s. Wishes may come true; however, mid-21st Century groups have to move beyond this wishful cricket.

The second assumption concerns the credibility of the visionary leader on whom a group invests their Hopes. This leader might be charismatic ("I have a dream") or someone with relevant data ("As a futurist, I have collected predictions from 600 technology experts suggesting that there is a 70% chance that XYZ will be created by 2035"). The selected visionary might instead be someone who is "in touch" with the current needs and fears of the group and is simply suggesting that these needs will be met and fears ameliorated in the near future. This is an opportunistic visionary who will usually provide little long-term guidance.

As with the search for a wise or courageous leader, there are two pathways toward identification of a visionary leader. The first pathway leads the group to identification of someone who already has a vision. The group has only to embrace this person and their vision. Sometimes, this person isn't the charismatic or fact-filled futurist; rather, they are the quiet one, who has been sitting back and absorbing information from other group members. When they finally are encouraged to articulate their vision, it "hits home" with the group because it contains elements of what other group members wish for. This is not the opportunistic leader, for it is responsive to the wishes and hope of group members rather than just their needs (or fears).

What then occurs when the group finds no visionary leader. When this occurs, then the group is likely to

wander around aimlessly. There is no Emerald City nor is there a compelling dream of equity and justice. As Fred Polak (1971) noted in his extensive analysis of compelling visions of the future, a society without a compelling vision will soon dry up. Similarly, a group will dry up. While the group might still operate, it will not only be aimless, the group will also lose its collective motivation. There is no glue holding the group together unless they revert to finding an enemy or listening passively "learning" from the wise leader.

As with wisdom and courage, there is the third pathway. Members of the group can search for their own internal vision and share it with other group members on the way to building a collective vision of the future. Quiet a few years ago, I was consulting with a medical team in California. The team had been energized for several years since its founding by the prospect of serving minority patients (especially farm workers). Revised government policies and shifting funding priorities (both governmental and private) have shattered this enthusiasm and commitment to serving the underserved. When I met with the doctors, I began by asking each of them to talk about the reasons they had chosen to become physicians and the reasons they joined this medical team.

This exercise was just supposed to be a warmup exercise; however, it ended up occupying the entire morning and extended into lunch and the early afternoon. Members of the team had either never heard these stories (especially about entering the medical profession) or forgotten them. The second half of the first afternoon and all the second day of this retreat was spent in recovering these dreams and reframing them to meet the challenges of shifting governmental regulation, priorities and public/private financial support. Within a month, this team mounted a very successful funding campaign based on the compelling vision they produced while at the retreat.

I have been fortunate to witness this same powerful reclaiming by group members of vision, as well as courage and wisdom. While most of the research has focused on the remarkable wisdom and knowledge to be found in collective intelligence (Arima, 2021; Seebacher and Legat, 2024), we are likely to find that the collective can also produce more courage and a more compelling vision than can be found in the head or heart of any one member of the group.

While nothingness is scary and can produce false lions and impractical visions, there is also the opportunity of the group to produce something of worth (independent of threat) and something to guide the group's collective future (independent of opportunistic "flim-flam"). As proposed by many social and organizational psychologists, the group can transform into a team when reclaiming its own wisdom, courage and vision (Hill and Lineback, 2011; Bergquist, Sandstrom and Mura, 2023).

God, the Numinous, and Psychological Barriers

An even more profound (and emotionally laden) experience of nothingness is encountered when we confront a divine presence—whether this be in a group setting or alone. I turn to John Lilly, the noted author of books about swimming with dolphins and immersing oneself in tanks that deprived one of all sensory experiences (producing a state of nothingness: solitude, isolation and confinement).

Many Godly Simulations: Lilly has used these experiences to map out the journey to some "simulation" of God (Lilly (1956/1975). Much like Don Howard (featured in previous essays in this series) writes about the profound challenge of creating God out of nothing while also requiring an existing God to account for the emerges of something (our universe) out of nothing, John Lilly identifies our existence in a "universe trying to describe itself" (Lilly, 1956/1975 p. 23) According to Lilly (1956/1975, p. 23):

> When one looks inside and sees himself, there is nothing. Feedback is complete in the void; however, there is a sense of being, consciousness, a state of being I am, I am that, I am it, which finally leads one to a [recognition of one's body and its many physical and mental functions.]

Amid this struggle to grapple with nothingness (as Lilly did in confronting the "cyclone" of thought and feeling in his tank) one finds the need to "simulate" a God who creates something out of nothingness. In this simulation, a set of connected concepts, ideas, and interacting models are produced that closely resemble what the simulator takes to be reality—leading to an acceptance of this "simulated" reality as the real thing.

For John Lilly, the simulated God can exist "out there." This God is the transcendent being that is envisioned in many religions (such as Judaism, and Christianity). God can instead exist inside oneself or one can exist inside God. I would note that this is the case with spiritual traditions purporting that there is nothing but God, or a solipsistic biocentrism that purports there is nothing but one's individual consciousness (Lanza, 2010).

God is also simulated in the personification of God as she/he/it, this simulation of God commonly found in the magnificent paintings of the Sistine Chapel or in the more mundane Sunday School portraits of a handsome (always Caucasian) male figure sitting on a throne in cloud-enhanced heaven. In addition, Lilly points to replacement of the traditional God with the God-like addiction to drugs, sex, and the perfection of the body. God is also created to prepare one for death, to exemplify one's feelings of righteous wrath or compassion.

According to Lilly, we may produce Gods that justify war, that guide science—and recently that is to be found in the computers we have invented (amplified today by the God of artificial intelligence). I would add to what Lilly has observed. Whether real or simulated, God is embedded in a human struggle to make sense of a constructed universe that impinging on our life. As transcendent beings, we can't avoid confronting the challenges of a God present in our life. It is the daily presence of a powerful simulated or real God that can bring us "to our knees." I would suggest that regardless of the God we have invented (simulated) or acknowledged, there is always a sense of over-whelm, mystery, and compelling attraction.

Gods and the Numinous: As I noted in the first and third essays in this series, Rudolph Otto (1923/1950) offered an early account regarding the psychology of religion. He identified the *numinous* is an experience of something that is unbounded, very large, very powerful, completely unexpected, or simply filled with awe ("awe-ful"). Building on Otto's account, Carl Jung (1938) suggested that we humans need to construct a barrier between ourselves and God—for a divine presence is among the

most powerful sources of a numinous experience. Jung specifically proposed that this barrier in the Catholic Church is often found in the structure of the church itself. The rituals of the church and the dominant role played by the Catholic priest provided the Catholic acolyte with a buffer from the numinous presence of God. Members of the Catholic Church do not directly confront God; they engaged God through the intermediary of the church and priesthood.

Conversely, according to Jung, the Protestant Church had eliminated the church and priesthood as an intermediary, enabling members of the Protestant Church to "speak to" God directly. For Jung, this meant that the Protestants confronted the numinous without any "protection." As a result, the Protestants had to find alternative entities to serve as an intermediary. For Jung, viewing the Protestant world of 1938, the authoritarian state might have served as the intermediary. Given that Protestantism was found primary in the Germanic countries of Europe, it is telling that Jung originally made this observation during the Terry Lectures that were given during imminent rise of the Third Reich in Germany.

God at Fault: It is also telling that other critical moments in human history have produced a profound interplay between a simulated God, the numinous and human psychology. For instance, James Gerry (2026) offers a powerful tale regarding the interplay between religious faith (including Lilly's God of War) and a major numinous-laden experience in American history—this being the American Civil War. Gerry begins his remarkable novel with the following observation made by Eli, the protagonist in Gerry's novel:

> On December 20th 1860, God was silent. But the newspapers were not. The late editions and the curbside hawkers who peddled them boldly shouted the news that we had most feared:
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> The Union is dissolved!
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> Our prayers that bitterness and wrath would be put aside had gone unanswered. Pleas that the land would be healed had been ignored.
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> Stunned, I wondered why God hadn't answered my invocation for divine help. But it wasn't just God. And it wouldn't be just South Carolina. In a matter of weeks, six other Southern States would also fail to answer my prayers, and they too would secede from the Union.
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> "I fear that war is coming," said my father, in a voice that was barely audible. "Our iniquities have separated us from the Lord, and he will not hear us. I despair that soon, just as the prophet foretold, our hands will be defiled with blood."

The protagonist, Eli, blames God for the impending disaster of a war that tears apart a nation. God is silent about the numinous-laden dissolution of the sacred American union. Why hadn't God answered Eli's invocation? If God is all-powerful and all-caring, then why was this display of bitterness and wrath allowed to be present. Why, in other words, was the absence of warfare (the "nothingness" of peace) replaced by the worst of all warfare, that between father and son, between brothers, and between two sectors of a once unified country? How do we make sense of the numinous of warfare which God has created? James Gerry has set the stage for a struggle between God and humankind, or at least between Humankind and religious faith.

Mankind at Fault: By contrast, Mary Baker Eddy (Eddy, 1994), the founder of Christian Science, an American church that was to emerge soon after the Civil War, found a way to resolve the issue. How can a cruel, numinous experience such as war be present in a universe created by an all-powerful, omniscient, and benevolent God. This issue was resolved by assigning the blame to human beings rather than God. This was Lilly's simulation of we humans existing inside God. It is the human "error" of believing that a world filled with illness and violence really exists.

The Christian Science "reality" is that God has created a perfect world. It is the human being who has imagined an imperfect world. Must as Eli's father is quick to blame human sin for the numinous experience of warfare. Mary Baker Eddy and her Church of Christ Science followers can blame human "erroneous" beliefs. For Eddy, "God has always met and will also meet every human need." It is up to we humans to accept God's grace. We are in error when we don't accept this grace and create a world of conflict, disease and death.

Carl Jung, James Gerry and Mary Baker Eddy seem to be saying that we build a tension when interacting with God regarding an "awe-full" numinous-laden experience such as warfare. We can assign blame to God. This allows us to avoid or escape from the "awe-ful" nature of a profound event such as warfare. However, we then must confront the presence of an even more awe-ful "reality" of a God who can at times being uncaring or perhaps not all powerful. Alternative, we can hold on to the assumption (belief) that God is all powerful and benevolent; it is we humans who are sinful or ignorant of God's perfect university.

Freedom

It is not just the power and awe-full-ness of God that seems to emerge from nothingness. The experience of Freedom often also emerges from nothingness – or at least from a state, as Kris Kristopher writes, when there is nothing left to lose. Much as we create barriers when confronted with the awe-fulness of God or create complex beliefs that enable us to live with a seemingly uncaring God, we construct barriers when we are confronted with the challenge of freedom.

The Choices and Responsibilities of Freedom: We are forced to move from the passivity inherent in a world of deterministic non-freedom, to the activism of a world filled with the difficult choices of freedom. We find it disconcerting to assume responsibility for the actions required in response to the opportunity of freedom.

The Russian existential theologian, Berdyaev (1965, pp. 183-4) puts it this way:

> That inward, profound and mysterious energy which creates life is revealed through spiritual causality. Here the opposition between freedom and causality disappears; in the determination of events and the production of life there is no longer anything external. . . . Freedom of the spirit which itself gives birth to consequences, which creates life, is revealed to us a bottomlessness, baselessness, as a force from out the boundless deep. We cannot feel a base, a foundation for freedom, no-where can we find some solid element which determines freedom from within. Freedom of the spirit is a bottomless well. . . . Freedom is rooted in 'nothingness'. The act of

> freedom is primordial and completely irrational. To understand an act of freedom rationally is to make it resemble the phenomena of nature.

There is irony here. When freedom produces something, then freedom itself is lost. As Berdyaev mentions, the process of freely creating something is "natural." It lacks the bottomlessness of Freedom. The process of creation can be described, even though in some ways it remains elusive. Those who produce out of freedom often find themselves suddenly constrained into the role of caretaker for that which was produced. Seymour Sarason (1972) observes this in the creation of new settings. The creator often becomes the manager of this new setting, or they hand the leadership of this setting over to a manager (who ironically was often a manager in the old setting). Thus, with freedom comes acceptance of a short-term experience of "non-being" (Berdyaev, 1965, p. 136)

Escape From Freedom: Often this experience is too frightening to endure for long. In many ways, freedom is aligned with the experience of Rudolph Otto's numinous. Both freedom and the numinous are bottomless and never quite comprehendible. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2024, p. 15) recently quoted the exceptionally articulate ex-slave and early abolitionist advocate, Frederick Douglass, regarding the elusive nature of freedom:

> . . . [F[ar away, back in the hazy distance where all forms seemed but shadows under the flickering light of the north star, behind some craggy hill or snow-capped mountain, stood a doubtful freedom, half frozen, and beckoning us to her icy domain.

For Douglass, freedom might have taken on a numinous quality. He had experienced it in his own exceptional journey to liberation; however, as Coates (2024, p. 16) observes, the pursuit of freedom for an enslaved man requires that they:

> . . . forsake the very real land of their birth for a dream and maybe a nightmare—an 'icy domain" that looms "in the hazy distance" under "flickering light . . . half frozen." Douglass's freedom is not banners or anthems, but terror that he nonetheless embraced.

While Douglass was primarily portraying the numinous experience of embarking on the journey to freedom for those enslaved in the American South as they followed the drinking gourd (North Star), his statement was also applicable to anyone pursuing freedom. It always required that one leave the land of one's birth (be this land a physical location or tradition-laden state of mind). Freedom and the numinous are both frightening.

In a very different setting and very different time, Erich Fromm (1941,1955) has something similar to say about the "awe-ful" nature of freedom as it emerges from an old and established societal order. When living under an authoritarian regime, we know what we should believe and do. With freedom comes the initial void of nothingness. We must leave home and create new beliefs and actions. We must find (or create) our own drinking gourd to serve as a guide for our creation of something out of nothing.

As Fromm persuasively documented, we are strongly inclined to escape from freedom. We stay home and align ourself with a comfortable, but constraining, authoritarian regime (Fromm, 1941). We are "rewarded" with the opportunity to consume goods (Fromm, 1955). Now, in the mid-21st Century, we chose to align easily and passionately with the alternative realities and conspiracies that populate our media—and particularly our digital media (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024).

Yet, with all the opportunity to escape from freedom, it is in freedom that we find the opportunity to no longer wait, nor continue to envision the states of imagination, anticipation, creativity and achievement that I explored in the previous essay (Bergquist, 2026b). We leave our seat where we have been waiting for Godot and begin freeing David from the non-perfect block of marble. We embark on the journey to some unknown site of initial nothingness, following our own drinking gourd. We require courage and a strong dose of maturity when engaging an interplay between nothingness and something. The outcome of this courageous, thoughtful, reflective and "out of the box" creativity is worth it all. For we have created something that from many perspectives and using many criteria is *Beautiful*.

Beauty as a Journey from Nothingness

It seems that the embrace of Freedom is not always subject to careful inspection. As Berdyaev (1965, p. 168) has suggested, Beauty is purposefulness without presentation of the purpose. It is a desired outcome of any creative process yet is not easily described prior to its presence. Neither are the criterion to identify what is *Beautiful*. This state and outcome can't be readily captured or quantified. Perhaps the most we can say is that Beauty is transcendent (Berdyaev, pp. 319-321)

> Beauty is a characteristic of a higher qualitative condition of being, of a higher attainment of existence, rather than a separate phase of existence. We may say that beauty is not only an aesthetic category, but a meta-physical category, as well. If man receives anything into himself integrally, it is beauty. We say what a beautiful spirit, a beautiful life, a beautiful action, etc. This is not only an aesthetic evaluation, it is integral evaluation. Everything harmonic in our life is beauty. Beauty is the final purpose of human life and the life of the world. Good is a means, a way, and it arose in opposition to evil (the knowledge of good and evil). Beauty lies beyond the knowledge of good and evil. But that good which lies beyond the distinction between good and evil, where evil is forgotten, is also beauty. . .

For Berdyaev, beauty is always the outcome of a journey from nothingness, through chaos, to some full appreciation of the "something" in which we are now living. This appreciation is not a simple act of acknowledgement. It is a creative, subjective act--a "going beyond the information given", as Dr. Bruner (1973) would put it. According to Berdyaev (1965, pp. 320-321):

> Our intuitive appreciation of the beauty of nature, of a person, of a work of art, is the creative conquest of chaos, disintegration or distortion. The appreciation of beauty is a break through the ugly bark of the world. . . .It is incorrect to say that beauty is objective. But saying that beauty is subjective is to say that it is real, since reality is in subjectivity, in the full flame of pristine existence, rather than in objectivized being where the fire has already cooled. . .

While freedom is often an experience from which we wish to escape, Beauty, according to Berdyaev, is something for which we hunger. Perhaps it is a strange attractor. It certainly, as Berdyaev (1965, p. 321) suggests, provides a form or pattern that is gratifying to the human spirit:

> The classic is an element just as eternal as the romantic. Human creativity can no more not strive for perfection of form than it can be satisfied with anything final or closed in the world. . . .There is no beauty without form. Form-lessness is not pretty: may even be hideous. Life's creative force must take form. We see this in the processes of nature, in the formation of the cosmos.

Yet, along with form and pattern (order), we must also find the disorder (chaos) and the void of nothingness. Beauty requires this interplay between order and chaos (Berdyaev, 1965, p. 321):

> . . . form may stiffen, petrify, quench the creative fire of life, may chill or limit it. And then the creative fire must flame up again, shatter the stiff forms, strive once more for infinite content. This is an eternal conflict, which cannot be ended within the bounds of this world. Beauty is connected with form, but it is also connected with the creative force of life, with the striving for infinity.... The form of great art is never half-dead in formalism; it is related to infinite meaning, the striving for the infinite. . . .

For Berdyaev, the interplay between order and chaos is evident in all aspects of nature. There is both form in nature and the formless vitality and unpredictability of life. Beauty is to be found in the swirling fractals manufactured by computers and the branching fractals of a river as it reaches the ocean and a pine tree branch as it reaches out for light. Beauty is to be found in the exquisite reasoning (form) and persuasive narratives (creative revelation) of a team proposal for a new social service initiative, and in the interweaving of classical form and improvisation in a contemporary musical composition. And Beauty is to be found in the appearance of human ethics--with human purpose and meaning (form) being evident amid a relativistic VUCA-Plus environment (chaos).

Ethics in the Midst of Nothingness

What then is the nature of human ethics as they are found during the challenging times of the VUCA-Plus saturated mid-21st Century? We turn, as we have in previous essays in this series, to insights offered by Don Howard. Much like the provocative ideas offered by Brugh Joy (1990) in the Epilogue to his book regarding the Avalanche that comes with the interplay of light and darkness, Don Howard (2025, pp. 127-128) offers the following insight about ethics and morality in the midst of nothingness, chaos and relativism in the Epilogue to his book on Nothingness:

> If there is a source--of being, of time, of consciousness-it has not announced itself£ It has not left instructions. It has given no clear sign that it wishes to be found. What we have is a world. Coherent. Incomplete. Capable of meaning, but unwilling to impose it.
>
> Which leaves the question not only unanswered, but entrusted to us.
>
> There may be other theories, other metaphysical sketches. But nearly all of them reduce, in the end, to some version of the same two paths: either being emerged on its own, or it was given. Either it arose from nothing without cause, or it was willed by something not subject to the conditions it created. All other answers tend to defer the question, rede-fine it, or dissolve it into formalisms. But the question remains. And when pressed to its foundation, it seems to leave us with just these two possibilities: that we are here because nothing could not hold. Or that we are here because something wanted us to be.

Howard (2025, 128) poses a challenge regarding the two possibilities:

> Of the two possibilities . . . one may begin to feel more coherent with the shape of the world we inhabit. Not by proof, but by resonance. A universe in which freedom exists, in which meaning

must be chosen, in which love is possible but never guaranteed—such a world feels less like an accident and more like a gift. . . .

The first possibility—emergence without intention—can account for complexity, consciousness, even ethical behavior. But it cannot explain why good and evil should matter beyond function or feeling. It leaves moral experience untethered: real to us, but contingent, evolving, ungrounded. In contrast, if the world was willed into being—not by force, but by a source that gives without commanding—then goodness is not a convention, and evil is not a failure of empathy. They become features of the structure itself. Not imposed, but made possible. In such a world, freedom is not an accident of evolution. It is a condition of the gift.

And if it was given, then the source of that gift cannot be part of the world it gave. It cannot arise from being, or from potential, or from any law it makes possible. It must stand not earlier, not elsewhere--but radically other. Beyond structure, beyond logic, beyond even the possibility of contrast. If intention exists, it must come not from within the system, but from what precedes the very conditions that make a system possible.

Does this mean that there must be a Divine entity that created the universe and provides us with guidance regarding how to live in her/his creation? Or does it mean that we must invent and live with our own sense of purpose and creation of meaning, whether or not we can fully find an answer to the question with which we began this essay: Why is there something rather than nothing?

Conclusions

While this set of essays offer a secular treatise on the ways we can deal with nothingness and the void, it often takes on a mythic or even spiritual tone. As I mentioned when introducing the fourth essay, matters associated with nothingness must often be treated as sacred rather than secular (profane) (Eliade, 1959). It is hard to comprehend either the Big Bang or the Big Silence without bringing in some Divine presence or some very long-range spiritual perspective.

The matter of nothingness, as it interplays with something, aligns with the battle between order and chaos on a Mideast fertile crescent. I have suggested in offering these sometimes mythic and often sacred comments, that our frequent journeys from nothingness to something be engaged with other people. There is room for our thoughtful and creative colleagues on the boat in Tuonela, at the concert where the concerto is played, and in the frequent battles in our mid-21st Century between order and chaos. We don't have to "go it alone."

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