

Creative Deconstruction

I would like us to begin this time today with a moment of silence in memory of those people who went to their church last Sunday in Sutherland Springs, Texas only to lose their lives. We remember them and their families. And, we also remember the family of the shooter. So much grief. So much loss.

Our country will continue down this self-destructive path until we, or our children, have had enough.

If you want to have some insight into why these shootings happen, please stream the documentary, “The Mask You Live In.” When you watch it, be sure to stay with it all the way through the ending credits.

The over arching psycho-spiritual goal of these talks - indeed, of all of my work as a teacher, director or counselor - is that we each grow in our ability to experience and express peace, love and joy. Knowing about these - peace, love and joy - and growing in them is the authentic spiritual path regardless of what religion one chooses to practice.

The path to get from where we are to the place where we are aware of our growing in these things - peace, love and joy - may not be peaceful or comfortable at all. In order to live in a more spacious home and a bigger world, likely some walls have to come down and some containers that have been holding things seen as valuable, even necessary, for our well-being have to come down, to be replaced. But, this is, I hope to show, an exciting, enlivening adventure. That’s why I’m calling this talk “Creative Deconstruction.”

If these words sound familiar, it is because I used them to open last week’s talk.

The teaching from the Gospel of Thomas this talk is based on is this:

Yeshua says,

Wretched is the flesh

that is dependent
upon the soul,
and the soul that is
dependent on the flesh.

I know, I know: it sounds like gibberish but it is not.

This teaching is almost like a lament. If you are familiar with the teachings of Jesus, you know that often he did lament the fact that so often people, especially those who apparently were closest to him, simply didn't get what his message was. The scholars I depend on say that what we have in this teaching is something from students or followers of Jesus who did get it. They "got" the respect and autonomy that needs to exist in the relationship between what we would call the "ego" and what we would call the "Self." If we confuse the "ego" with the "Self," that confusion will prevent each from functioning on its own level and in a manner that is appropriate to its own wholeness.

This is very difficult to put into language. So, let me try to say it in another way.

The first step in spiritual growth is an "enlightened ego."

This "enlightenment" leads to an understanding of Self that KNOWS that if the Self is dependent on the ego for being it is doomed.

Your brain sore yet?

This is the way the analyst I worked with when I went back for training and insight into Jungian analysis put it: Unconsciousness responds to consciousness in the same way that consciousness regards unconsciousness.

This all clear? I hope so because from here on it gets deep. (I stole that line from Jim Finley.)

So let's try to unpack this and see why I would call this talk "Creative Deconstruction."

By the way, I don't mean to give the impression that either Jesus or his early students had read the works of Carl Jung, knew the developmental theories of Piaget or got Richard Rohr's daily meditations on their e-mail. They didn't. They were much wiser than that. We easily confuse smart with wise. They are not the same. Knowing something is not the same as comprehending something. The ego is all about knowledge, information, data and the like. The Self is all about wisdom, understanding, love, inclusion, peace and the like.

The over arching psycho-spiritual goal of these talks - indeed, of all of my work as a teacher, director or counselor - is that we each grow in our ability to experience and express peace, love and joy. Knowing about these - peace, love and joy - and growing in them is the authentic spiritual path regardless of what religion one chooses to practice.

The ego can know about these states but the ego cannot comprehend them. As my teacher put it to me decades ago, "There is all the difference in the world between reading a book about swimming and getting into the water. There is all the difference in the world between watching someone ride a bicycle and riding one yourself."

As long as people, any people any where, experience themselves as separate from what I call Sacred Mystery, we are subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering. And, paradoxically, though disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life, spiritual attainment is not the result of our efforts. Spiritual attainment is an ongoing experience of oneness with "what is."

"Oneness with 'what is'" is the way most mystics from all traditions have talked about the goal of what I'm referring to as psycho-spiritual work. In the Christian and Islamic traditions it is referred to as "union with Divine Love." You see this in the Christian mystics like John of the Cross and in the Sufi writings. Rumi is an excellent example of this. Buddhism refers to it as "enlightenment."

All of you have heard of "enlightenment." Most people think they are enlightened. No offense intended but clearly we aren't enlightened. If we were, we wouldn't be doing to our planet what we are and we wouldn't be creating the future for our children that we are. Women wouldn't be treated, especially by religions, as

second-class citizens. An enlightened culture would make sure every child in it received a superior education. Enlightened people don't text or talk and drive, they use their turn signals and floss their teeth. And, an enlightened person certainly never rushes to the head of a line of cars patiently waiting to merge onto another freeway and force her or his way in. An enlightened religious ego is literate about whatever religious tradition it uses to find meaning. Etc.

Thomas Merton said that religion would not survive if based on tribal consciousness and each of us, unless you live under a rock or in a monastery are immersed in tribalism from the moment our feet hit the floor in the morning until we go to bed at night. The ego resists leaving the tribe.

I don't think there is hardly a week that passes where in one of the journals I take - psychological, spiritual, religious, cultural, news oriented - that there is not at least one article waving the red flag about what peril "smart-phone" technology is exposing us to. The most recent such article says that the average smart-phone user checks in about 80 times a day.

I quote from the article: "Americans now 'eat, sleep, and breathe media.' . . . Not surprisingly, scientific research has linked smartphone use to decreased concentration, lower problem-solving skills, and depression. For youngsters, smartphone addiction is truly disastrous, with the incidence of depressive episodes soaring by 60 percent. Why give kids under 12 what for them is 'a very expensive portable internet porn finder/social-media stalking system/mean girls text center'? Adults should limit their kids' smartphone minutes - and their own. Our collective mental health may depend on it." (Source: National Review as quoted in The Week, 10/27/17, p. 12)

When we look out at what is going on in the world, in our country, in our city, in the various groups to which we belong and hope for things to be different, we need to first look at ourselves. What have we been willing to accept out of fear, out of a sense of helplessness, out of a sense that things cannot change?

Mother Theresa said about her work, "As one person I cannot change the world, but I can change the world of one person." That "one person" begins with no one other than yourself.

There is a story about a man to whom God appeared in a dream. God asked the man to save the world and he promised the Lord that he would.

When he woke up, he resolved to get to work immediately. But, being a practical man, he began to reflect, asking himself some pragmatic questions: “Where should I start? Clearly, it must be in my own country. But where in my own country can I most effectively begin? Surely in my hometown, which I am not even sure I know that well. So, what part of town should I begin working in. Obviously in my own home. But, who in my family can I most effectively begin to save? Myself.”

More often than not, at least this is true for me, I reflexively think that things would be better if the other person would simply wake up and see the truth that is so obvious to me. There is likely not a one of us who has not in some way or another, and thank God usually silently, said, “You know, if it weren’t for you, I could be an enlightened person.”

Most people who practice a sitting meditation tradition have what is called in the Buddhist tradition a “Puja Table.” It is simply a table or an altar which the practitioner adorns with various icons or symbols or aids to meditation. We use these things, including chimes, bells and incense because they by-pass our normal rational, dualistic minds and quickly induce an altered state of consciousness. Prayer beads are used variously for counting and simply keeping the mind focused on something other than what you have to do as soon as your meditation time is finished.

One of my Buddhist friends, back during the Viet Nam war, had someone in the administration who upset him greatly. If you have only one such person in your life, you’re doing pretty good. At any rate, he put a picture of this person on his Puja Table placed between him and his icon of Buddha. The intent of that is that he does not want anything or anyone to block his heart from the flow of kindness, generosity and justice.

I remember asking my teacher, “What do I say to people when they tell me they want nothing to do with God or organized religion because of all the hypocrites

they have encountered.” His response was succinct: “If some hypocrite is standing between you and God, that person is closer to God than you are.”

The overarching goal of our work is that we grow in our ability to experience and express peace, love and joy. To live unafraid, trusting, open to Truth and to loving and being loved. The goal is that we have that kind of comfort, that kind of peace, that kind of freedom.

One of the values of having a meditation practice where mindfulness is the goal, is that time spent in mindful meditation can make us more mindful in every day life. Meaning, that our lives will be less governed by misleading or unproductive thoughts and feelings. Just like you, I spend time every day driving behind people who have no idea how important it is that I get to where I’m going. There are other people who cross my path who seem intentionally to inflict indignities upon me. Mindfulness meditation makes us less reactive.

It also makes us more appreciative of the beauty and goodness and kindness around us.

Though, as I’ve said, we all know about enlightenment and likely think we are, we’re not. The first step toward enlightenment is working to develop an enlightened ego. An enlightened ego knows what enlightenment is. The ego has knowledge. It does not have understanding. When Buddhists use the term “enlightenment,” they mean ridding oneself of the two illusions people suffer from: the illusion about what’s inside our minds and the illusion about what “out there” in the rest of the world. I’m calling this work the work of deconstruction.

The word for enlightenment in the Abrahamic religions is “freedom.” Or, “liberation.” As I came up with it for myself years ago, and this is only my way of expressing what I think all wise and useful religion is about: we are to be involved in the process of becoming centers of freedom and love. Right now we are talking about freedom.

My own process has involved finding people who seem to embody these qualities and going to them and asking, “How did you do it? How do you do it?” Sometimes these are living people like my teacher George, or Thich Nhat Hanh, Jim Finley,

Iliia Delio, etc. Sometimes they are people who are alive to us only through their writings or writings about them like Jesus, or St. Teresa of Avila, or Julian of Norwich.

The goal of deciding to undertake a consciously chosen spiritual journey and religious practice is to gain insight. Indeed, the biggest meditation movement in the world is called “Insight Meditation” and it embraces all religions.

The goal of liberation, freedom - to experience and express in on-going ways peace, love and joy - is made up of a path that may not be a peaceful or comfortable one at all. In order for new containers to be built to house our growing understandings of peace, love and joy; likely a lot of deconstruction has to take place first.

Let me see if I can illustrate.

The ego hears that there is a path to enlightenment and says, “Yes, I’ll have some of that.” The ego is always interested in acquiring what it thinks it needs to feel good, be secure, exceptional, etc. So, the ego goes off to attend a class like this or buys a book on “enlightenment made easy,” or whatever.

The first thing the ego learns is about impermanence. No one could argue with that. Even the ego knows that nothing lasts forever. “I don’t like it,” says the ego. “But, there you go. We all have to go sometime.”

Then, the next thing the ego learns about is suffering. And, who hasn’t suffered? A rabbi friend of mine said to me years ago that his grandmother had said to him, “If everyone were to hang up their suffering on a clothesline to air out, at the end of the day, after seeing everyone else’s suffering, you would go and take your own. Because, no matter how you suffer from it, at least you are familiar with it.” The ego is more than willing to get on board with this business about suffering.

The ego is even willing to undertake a fairly intensive meditation practice to get to the deeper meanings and appreciations of impermanence and suffering. But, then comes the kicker. The ego has to die. In Buddhism it is referred to as “not-self.” Jesus referred to it this way: “If you want to live, you must be willing to die.” At

this point the ego says, “You know what? I think I may sit this one out.” The ego cannot comprehend this. Yet, embracing the reality that you don’t exist frees you up, liberates you, to have life in its fullness.

The ego is not who we are. No idea of who we think we are is who we are. Nor, is any idea we have of someone else who that person is. That’s what prejudice is. Prejudice is falling for the lie that the idea we have about someone else is who that person is, or that group. That’s why what happened here last Sunday was so important. We need to hear each other’s stories because we all struggle with the same stuff.

Although I have put this into my own words, I got an image from Jim Finley that has been enormously helpful to me in understanding this “not-self” notion. It uses Christian images and metaphors.

We do our religious and spiritual work to become more peaceful, loving and joyful. We’ve embraced impermanence - as if we had a choice. We’ve known suffering. We are ready to be enlightened. We’ve found the cave where God lives and are sitting outside of it performing our rituals and praying our prayers. We are so sure that if we believe the right things, perform the correct rituals, are part of the right group and so forth, that eventually God will come out of the cave and give us a reassuring hug, pat us on the head and say, “Now, run along and have a good life. Call me if you need me.”

So, we wait.

One day Jesus comes up and sits by us while we are waiting and asks what we are doing. We tell him. We tell him about what we’ve been up to, how hard we’ve worked, how we’ve struggled to get to this point. He listens patiently to us and after a while, sometimes a long time he says, “You know what? I’ve got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that you’ve found the cave. You’ve made it this far. Good for you. The bad news is that God’s isn’t coming out. You have got to go in.”

Now this is the point in the Jesus narrative where the so-called rich young ruler in one of the parables about Jesus said, “What do I have to do to have the life you talk

about?” And Jesus says, “You have to give up all you have and come follow me.” And the young man chose not to follow.

So we continue to sit there. We say to Jesus, as we look from afar into the opening of the cave, “It’s dark in there.” He says, “Yes. One of my best interpreters referred to it as “the dark night of the Soul.” We ask, “How long does the dark last.” He replies, “Only as long as you resist it.”

Jesus stays with us. Loving us. And, as we get up to head off into the cave, Jesus says, “By the way, you can’t take anything with you. Not even the clothes you are wearing.”

We say to him, “You know, I really don’t want to do this.”

“Neither did I but it was that or lose my life.”

Then, he adds, “I promise you: it is as awful as you fear and it is perfectly safe.”

One of the things that has intrigued me in these past decades when I have been privileged to do the study and the teaching I have done is this question: - and it is a question that could be raised about Buddha or Mohammed or any founder of a religious movement - What attracted people to them, to their movement? The message of all of them is tough. “You want to follow me?” Which, by the way, was Jesus message. “Then, be willing to give it all up.”

But, people were attracted to those who were attracted to him. Why? It wasn’t because they believed certain things. It was because they behaved in certain ways. Peace, love and joy were things they embodied. The true Self gained dominance over the ego in such a way that people saw in them things that made them say, “I want that.” That’s what transforms this world. And, remember, a lot of them died doing this. Be forewarned.

How do we embody peace, love and joy? By being non-reactive. How do we learn to be non-reactive? By having a practice that we take into our daily life and living. How do peace, love and joy show up in the concrete, specific relationships you

have in your life? With yourself? How do you talk to yourself? With your intimate partner? With your children? Your parents? Your colleagues?

You never know how one little gesture or comment can have reverberations that will affect the destiny of millions. I'm not exaggerating.

One morning in the 1960, Father Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest, was walking through the streets of Soweto in South Africa. He passed by a woman walking in the street with a little boy by her side. Huddleston was a tall man striding with his cassock flowing and his hat perched on his head. As he noticed the woman and boy, he reflexively nodded to them, tipping his hat in respectful greeting as he passed. Huddleston was a white man and in that context and time few white people would notice black folk, let alone greet them with such graciousness and respect.

That small act by a white man of the church so impressed the little boy that it affected his life deeply. That boy is now known as Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The tip of the hat was simply the tip of the iceberg for Huddleston. It was the outflowing of who he truly was, an embodiment of peace, love and joy.

I think the most genius question Jesus ever asked was, "Who do you say that I am?"

Fortunately, one of the people in the crowd that day had already not only become a Christian but also gone to seminary and answered, "Sure, I know. You are the eschatological manifestation of the ultimate ground of our interpersonal relationships." And Jesus said, "What!?"

The ego wants certitude. God wants us to participate in the uncertain but exciting evolution of peace, love and joy.

Who do you say that I am? The emphasis in that question is not on Jesus but on you. Who do you say that I am and who is the you who says that?

This teaching from Thomas today is clear, following Jesus won't allow us to stay in our prisons of prejudice or jails of judgementalism.

Who are you? And, who is the you who answers that question

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: You carry precious cargo, so watch your step.