

Gaining Traction in Slippery Times

I had a speech professor in the university who had a tremendous influence on my life. He is the one who said to me one day, “You don’t need to be at this school but at one where you can study psychology and theology. This school can’t take you as deep in those as you need to go.”

I got several great lessons and lines from him. One of them I’ve used before. He once said, “Never repeat yourself for emphasis. Understand? Never repeat yourself for emphasis.”

The other line of his I loved, and love, is that one day in class he began this way: “Before I say anything, I want to say something.” So, today before I say anything, I want to say something.

We are in the process of dealing with three of the most puzzling teachings from the Gospel of Thomas. Here is the one this talk is a meditation on:

When you see
your own projection
into time and space
it makes you happy.
But when the time comes
that you are able to look
upon the icon of your own being,
which came into existence
at the beginning,
and neither dies
nor has yet been fully revealed,
will you be able to stand it?

In summary what this teaching is saying is that when we get caught up by and confused over what various spiritual teachers refer to as our “false selves,” we can think we have accomplished something. When we confuse our ego with our True Selves, we can enjoy that. But, when we encounter our True Self and have to put down the False Self we have come to think is who we really are, it is something so awesome, we can wonder if we will be able to stand it. In Christian lingo this is

what Jesus meant when he said, “If you desire to have life, you must be willing to give it up.”

That’s today’s talk in a just over a hundred words.

Now, I want to say what I came here to say.

People who put themselves right of center politically and those who put themselves left of center feel that this country, even the world has lost its way.

Those who put Mr. Trump into office were appealed to by the promise to “make America great again.” They were fed up with the dysfunctional ways of our elected representatives. The America they thought was in their future has slipped away and they want it back.

It does seem to be true that for the first time in many generations the younger generation in this country does not have the hope or promise of being able to have a more economically prosperous or secure future than the previous generation. The gap between those called the “have’s” and the “have not’s” continues to grow, not just nationally but globally. Among many there is a sense of hopelessness and frustration.

Those who are appalled by the election of Mr. Trump have seen an element of brashness and a loss of decorum come into view that is just as terrifying to them. Behaviors and statements that, from someone running for the most powerful position in the world, would have been absolute deal-breakers a year or so ago are now “okay.”

That a sitting president is on record as mocking a disabled person in front of a crowd and getting applauded for this; that a man who, as a regular part of his campaign rhetoric spouted racism, who publicly equated a woman’s looks with her worth and had vulgar language dismissed as being in the category of something “all men do” (I’ve been in lots of locker-rooms and I have never heard such talk) is now our president is seen by an equal, if not larger, group of people also as evidence that something is slipping away.

Many on both sides of this great divide that has become our country wonder: how can we come together, how can we work together?

I'm not on Facebook but those who are tell me that anger and invective, blaming and name-calling can be expressed with equal vehemence by both the right and the left.

Even more, how has this happened? Why is it that people, all intending to be people of good will and who say they want what is best for the country, have gotten to a place where we as a country have actually regressed in emotional and relational intelligence, where the clearly unacceptable and common has become more acceptable and commonplace?

Peter Senge is one of the leading learning theory gurus in America. He is a professor at MIT and his insights into organizational development and how genuine change happens in an organization have placed him in the position of being the leading educator in his area.

He says that there are six ingredients needed for real and lasting change to occur in an organization. These things are: trust, vision, skills, resources, payoff and an action plan. If any one of them is missing the outcome may look, temporarily, like change but it isn't. We can argue among ourselves about what might be missing in our newly formed government as we go forward. Clearly, anxiety, anger and confusion abound.

Peter Senge is the one from whom, years ago, I first heard the parable of the boiled frog. He used this parable to illustrate maladaptation to gradually building threats. I'm sure you have heard it.

If you place a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will immediately try to scramble out to save itself.

But, if you place the frog in room temperature water, he will stay put. If you just gradually turn up the temperature, something very interesting happens. As the temperature rises slowly, the frog will do nothing. He may even show signs of enjoying himself. As the temperature gradually increases, the frog will become too

helpless to climb out. Though there is nothing restraining him, the frog will sit there, boil and die.

With that parable as a template, I want to read to you three paragraphs from a book that I have read to you from before. That was a couple of years ago. I think in light of our current situation the words from this book are even more relevant now.

The book is “Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.” It was written by Neil Postman and originally published in 1985. It is about the corrosive effects of television on our politics and public discourse. When it was first published it was hailed as a twenty-first-century book published in the twentieth century. Now, with television joined by more sophisticated electronic media, from the Internet to cell phones to DVDs, it has taken on even greater significance. “Amusing Ourselves to Death” is a prophetic look at what happens when politics, journalism, education, and even religion become subject to the demands of entertainment.

(As an aside: I recorded when it was first on and now for its three program new series, the National Geographic series starring Morgan Freeman titled “Search for God.” I haven’t watched any of the new series except by accident I happened as I was channel surfing my favorites the other night saw a bit of the most recent program. Morgan Freeman, in his “search for God,” had come to Houston and gone to Lakewood. I just saw a smidgen of his interview with Joel and Victoria Osteen before he went into the mega-church arena that seats 16,000 - and it was packed.

Let me be clear: I’m not being critical of Joel Osteen. I think Joel’s message does a ton of people a world of good. It just doesn’t have anything to do with the teachings of Jesus. At any rate, what I saw was an incredible theatrical performance with lasers and noise and stadium lights like some team had just made a touchdown and more. This is what for many people “Christianity” has become.)

Neil Postman’s book could have provided a blueprint for our gaining control of our media, so that they could serve our highest goals. But, at the time, in spite of his uncanny ability to peer into the future, Postman was dismissed, criticized and not taken seriously.

For forty years he was a professor at New York University. He wrote 18 books and was published widely. He is best known for this book. Though it was issued in a revised version a little over ten years ago by his son, this book was, as I said, published in 1985.

What was going on media-wise in 1985? Well, among other things not going on, there was no internet, no cell phones, no cable channels, no DVDs, no call-waiting or caller ID, no blogs, no flat-screed TVs, no hi-def TVs, no iPads or Tablets, none of it. Yet, prophetically, the book's point is that because of these things what is truly meaningful is being lost and that, like the frog, we no longer care what we've lost as long as we are being entertained.

I read years ago a brief prayer by Willard Sperry. Willard Sperry was the Dean of the Harvard Divinity School. Listen to it:

“Give to us, O Lord, a right discernment between that which comes first in our faith and that which follows after. And when we would make much of that which cannot matter much to thee, recall us to the heart of our Christian profession, Jesus our Lord. Amen.”

That is what we have done. We make much of what matters little. We have fallen for the cultural lie that the religion of consumerism puts forth so that it can prosper. We have done this to the point that even in what we call our religion, we emphasize that things that God could care less about. Does Sacred Mystery really give a hoot about which religion we use to connect to Her and by which to spread the values of loving-kindness and compassion, and to express distributive justice to those Jesus called “the least of these”?

These paragraphs come from the Forward of Postman's book:

We were keeping our eye in 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares. But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another - slightly older, slightly well less known,

equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World." Contrary to common belief, even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother was required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacity to think. What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was there would be no reason to ban a book for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in "Brave New World Revisited," the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." In "1984," Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In "Brave New World," they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will run us.

This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell was right

I think that one of the most insidious bill of goods our culture has sold us is that we don't have the time or the need to commit to growing into the people we truly are. Just sit back and relax and enjoy the show.

I don't want to offend anyone here. That's not in my best interest. But, we get the politicians we deserve. That's a quote. I couldn't remember who first said it. I was having lunch with a long-time psychiatrist friend of mine the other day and asked him if he could recall the origin of the words. He reminded me that it was Will Rogers who said, "We have the finest politicians money can buy." But, it was the French political philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, (1805-1859) who said, "In democracy we get the government we deserve."(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexis_de_Tocqueville)

What we see going on in this country, and we've seen it before and we've survived it before, in matters like the Civil Rights movement, Watergate, Vietnam, the reaction to 9/11 by invading Iraq, the economic meltdown that highlighted the role greed plays in this culture and on and on is this country working out its collective neurosis.

What has happened, and this is where Neil Postman's analysis or prophecy is so on target, is that - as you have heard from me many times - we have become isolated from one another and we have a culture that is committed to superficiality, glitz and entertainment. If you doubt this, just wait a couple of weeks when we host an even more watched than event the Inauguration: the Super Bowl. Someone told me that the cheapest seats are going for \$4,000. Blessed are the poor. It's our culture.

We are an emotionally immature country and we are, at the moment, in the tight grip of an regression when it comes to emotional and relational intelligence. As I said earlier, things that almost everyone would have agreed were deal-breakers just a year ago have become for many absolutely okay or rationalized into acceptance. We must not normalize what has no business becoming normal.

The radical Jewish mystic teacher and bringer of wholeness whose teachings these talks are meditations on, Jesus, said that one of the primary tasks of anyone who sought to follow him was to learn to live in their culture without either gaining or losing their identity from by in that culture.

The title I've given this talk today is "Gaining Traction in Slippery Times." One of the ways we do this, not the only one to be sure, is to be rooted in a tradition. There are other aspects of spiritual work that are of equal importance but I want to talk about this one for a few moments.

If you were to go today to a Mosque, a Buddhist Temple, a Jewish synagogue, an AA meeting; any other potentially life-transforming gathering there would be a connection to what that gathering calls their "tradition." In Judaism it is the Torah, in AA it is "the Big Book," in Islam it is the Koran and on it goes. It is not that one is better than another but there is something that is important about acknowledging that in our spiritual work we don't have to reinvent the wheel every time we gather.

So, to repeat, one of the most insidious bill of goods we've been sold is that which causes us to live on the surface, to be isolated from one another and to forget who we are.

The other is an absolute confusion on the part of many religious people as to what is Truth. This more often than not shows up as the mistaken notion that says, "My religion is the right one." This is one of the reasons I want my teachings to contribute to religious and spiritual literacy. The teacher you hear me quoting all the time, Richard Rohr, says that all too often religion, Christianity in particular, has focused on continually re-icing a collapsed cake rather than baking the bottom layers properly. Christianity has spent its time redoing the "fixings" - refining doctrines, moralities, beliefs, arguing over who is in and who is out. These things never work because an authentic religious tradition is not primarily a moral matter; it's a mystical matter that only works when the mind and heart operate with a clear understanding of what matters. Rohr calls it a "new operating system."

Here is a Zen teaching story:

A lion was taken into captivity and thrown into a concentration camp where, to his amazement, he found other lions who had been there for years, some of them all their lives, for they had been born there. He soon became acquainted with the social activities of the camp lions. They banded themselves into groups. One group consisted of the socializers; another was into show business; another was cultural, for its purpose was to carefully preserve the customs, the tradition, and the history of the times when lions were free; other groups were religious - they gathered mostly to sing moving songs about a future jungle where there would be no fences; some groups attracted those who were literary and artistic by nature; others still were revolutionary, and they met to plot against their captors or against other revolutionary groups. Every now and then a revolution would break out, one particular group would be wiped out by another, or the guards would all be killed and replaced by another set of guards.

As he looked around, the newcomer observed one lion who always seemed deep in thought, a loner who belonged to no group and mostly kept away from everyone. There was something strange about him that commanded everyone's admiration and everyone's hostility, for his presence aroused fear and self-doubt. He said to

the newcomer, “Join no group. These poor fools are busy with everything except what is essential.”

“And what is that?” asked the new-comer.

“Studying the nature of the fence.”

Only what Paul Tillich called our false illusions and vain strivings prevent us from seeing that we are - and always have been - free. The basic ingredient in the attainment of freedom is spiritual practice of some kind. Or, adversity.

To gain traction, we begin with who God is, the very shape of God, in whose image all is created.

Your image of God creates you. You become the God you worship. If your God is an eternal torturer, then torture is validated. If God is presented in the image of a king, then we'll all want to be kings. But, if God is seen as the descriptors Ilia Delio uses - creative, expanding, evolving, entangled, then you get an entirely different understanding of ourselves as part of this Sacred Energy.

With an understanding of Sacred Mystery as the source of all that is and all who are shaping our understanding of ourselves and of each other, we will participate with this energy in creating a more loving and just and caring and compassionate society.

If it is true, it is true everywhere and all the time. If we hold it that the particular religion we practice is the only true one, that, for example, God waited until there were Baptists in Tennessee to speak, then we have created a stingy, limited and withholding God.

In the Christian tradition there is a character who is call St. Bonaventure. He was born in 1217. He said, “God is an intelligible space whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. . . . God is within all things, but not enclosed, outside all things but not excluded, above all things but not aloof, below all things but not debased. . . . God is supremely one and all-inclusive, God is therefore ‘all in all.’”

Long before I ever heard Ilia Delio, though I admit that hearing her kicked me into a new level of understanding it, I was fond of quoting Paul as saying, “It is in God that we live, and more, and have our being.” (Acts 17:27.) It is the mystical teachings of Jesus that lead us to know that while our having our being in God is true it is also that Sacred Mystery within us seeks to find expression through us. If that were to happen, we could not demean each other. It is only with eyes wide shut that some people can do the harmful things they do in the name of God, or religion.

Cosmology is offering us a wonderful, and I do mean wonder-full, opportunity to reimagine our spiritual understandings. What Christians call “the Bible,” does occupy the role of being the foundational and identity documents of our tradition. But the first and real Bible is written in creation itself. All of creation, from the Big Bang until now, is saying that from the very beginning things live, things die and things live again in new forms.

The Buddhists put it this way: “Emptiness is form and form is emptiness.”

Christians put it this way: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

Both of these affirmations of faith say the same thing.

In our ongoing work to understand the nature of Sacred Mystery and ourselves the field keeps expanding. Never tightening. As the cosmos does itself we move toward an ever greater aliveness, a greater consciousness and a deeper union.

One of the things that can give us traction in these slipper times is knowing and living the knowledge that if it is true, it is true all the time and everywhere. We must, then, be sincere lovers of truth from wherever it comes and follow it wherever it takes us.

Our spiritual work must involve us in become more and more open, more undefended rather than being reactive.

Here is the teaching from the Gospel of Thomas this talk is a meditation on.

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into time and space
it makes you happy.
But when the time comes
that you are able to look
upon the icon of your own being,
which came into existence
at the beginning,
and neither dies
nor has yet been fully revealed,
will you be able to stand it?

What this is saying is that, and this is using our psychological concepts and lingo, we are entertained when we see our ego understandings played out in the world. But, when we are called upon to look upon the nature of our True Self, that which has always been true about us but which we have not - at least I have not - come fully to understand, can we take it? Because if and when we do, we have to give up allowing our tribal loyalties to tell us who we are and live the identity God has give us.

Two years ago on Christmas Eve we came home from our traditional Chinese meal and turned on the television. I was looking to see if there was a mass from St. Peter's or some other Christmas Eve kind of program on. What we encountered was a program on PBS called "A Christmas Carol: The Concert." We only got to see the last seventy percent or so of it. It was fantastic.

Who doesn't love Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol"? This one was done with a very fine orchestra, choir and leading characters who were so talented. And a very diverse cast.

I was so impressed that I went online to see if I could purchase DVDs of the show. You can. I bought several copies to give as Christmas gifts the past year.

(Here is a link to where you can buy it - [<http://www.shoppbs.org/product/index.jsp?productId=29150086&matchtype=e&creative=10174134612&device=c>])

You know the story. Scrooge, the quintessential "bah-humbug" kind of guy, has an encounter with three ghosts and because of that he is changed and his change changes his future Christmas.

Dickens got it right. Christmas has three tenses - past, present and future. Christmas is about a new world.

Through much of its history, Christianity has gotten it wrong and misunderstood the dream God has for the future of the world, or our future.

In one version the future is not about transformation but about devastation. There is going to be a fiery end end of the world where all of the faithful will be raptured up into heaven and all the rest of us will be left behind to read all the Left Behind books which will be hell for us.

There is another version and this one is one that many, many Christians are comfortable with. It is a Christianity that has little if any connection with this world. Religion and politics are separate. There is no connection between the teachings of Jesus and a transformed world. Christianity for these people is only about life beyond death.

Based on the teachings of Jesus, I reject both of these versions of Christianity and encourage you to do so also. God isn't going to intervene and bring about a perfect world. And to say that the primary emphasis or purpose or focus of the Gospel is about what happens to us after we die is such a betrayal of the teaching of Jesus and the biblical narrative.

I believe that there is a third option. It is not one we can exercise if we live life at the surface, if we are captured by either partisan labels or the distracting superficiality of our time. It is a vision that calls us to participate with God in bring about peace on earth.

There is a line by St. Augustine that I love: God without us will not. We without God cannot. God will not change either the world or us without our participation.

There is a place for us to stand in these slippery times. It is not in the arena of superficiality. It is in the realm of Truth that does not and will not normalize that which is contrary to peace, love, joy and justice.

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