

LIVING BETWEEN “NO MORE” AND “NOT YET”

We are beginning a new theme in Ordinary Life today which I intend to carry forward through this year. I’m calling it “Living Between The No-Longer and the Not-Yet.”

I know this title is true every second of our lives - that we stay alive. We are always living between the last second and the next, between the last breath we took and the next we hope to take, between this day which we hope to live well and survive and tomorrow which we hope to wake up to.

Most all religious systems that I know of speak of transitions, necessary endings, things passing away so that new life might come. Jewish Wisdom Literature is full of this sort of philosophy. It is a central foundation stone in Buddhism - things arise and they fall away. Nothing lasts.

For the most part we are able greet or accept this inevitability with equanimity. Of course, when it moves into or affects places and people where we have strong attachments, especially to people but even to ideas, that can become something else.

Most of us are broadminded enough to admit that there are two sides to every question - our own side, and the side that no intelligent, informed, sane and self-respecting person could possibly hold.

(Though I have seen several versions of this sentiment over the years, I believe I first saw it expressed by a columnist I used to read when I was in graduate school, Sydney Harris. He died in 1986 and I loved his column. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney_J._Harris]

Though things arise and they fall away, when it comes to our lives, the lives of those we love and cherish, our life-style, values we hold dear, institutions we believe that sustain us, when these things change or become threatened with extinction, that, my friend, is another matter.

I cannot remember a time in my life time, except for some episodes during the 1960s, when a stance of rightness and righteousness has so divided this country. This one nation which calls itself indivisible while pledging allegiance to the flag is in fact divided. Our culture has cracked open along fault lines of culture, class, religion and tribal identity. There are chasms of mutual incomprehension and disdain. One group truly cannot understand why or how another group of right-minded people could possibly hold the positions they do. Not only has politics devolved into a winner-take-all blood sport but everything seems to be politicized.

Regardless of whether you self-identify as leaning to the right or to the left, it is indisputable that we have just endured one of the strangest and most disorienting years in our country's history. The world seems to be twisted into some new form of insanity on an almost daily basis.

Perhaps it is because we are better electronically connected than ever that we are more aware of humanity's capacity for foolishness, self-destructiveness, selfishness and cruelty. But human capacity for foolishness, self-destructiveness, selfishness and cruelty seems more intense and more widespread than at any time since, perhaps, World War II.

I remain convinced that we are in the midst of a great turning. Whether we as a globe choose to turn into the light before plunging ourselves along with our neighbors into darkness remains to be seen. When you have two world leaders taunting each other about who is willing to push the nuclear button first, you've got a world most of us have either never lived in or not for a long time - since John Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Regardless of what is decided about that, the fact is that we do live in a time like no other.

One of the things I think about when I use the phrase "no longer," is the world that existed prior to the digital revolution and the globalization we have come to accept and take as common place. It once wasn't. Further, when revolutionary ideas or technology were introduced in the past, it took sometimes generations for them to become not only accepted but also known about. The insights of Copernicus and Galileo weren't widely known about for hundreds of years. When Gutenberg

invented the printing press that invoked a massive revolution. But, it took centuries before this revolution was fully unpacked. Our technological revolution has evolved with astonishing speed.

We are, at least some of us are, the last generation in the history of the world to know what the world was like before digital devices. No doubt it was a world that was not as advanced in many ways as is ours at the moment. Though our current world is seen by many as being more perilous. But, the pace was slower.

Think of this: During the time I was working on this talk, I had a Skype session with a colleague thousands of miles from where I was sitting. He told me of a book of theology he was reading and thought I would like. While we were talking, I searched for the book on Amazon on my iPad, bought it, downloaded and opened it and found the particular passage he was referring to. For many people this pace is virtually incomprehensible. For others, like for example my grandchildren, it is so ho-hum.

We are the last to know what it was like before the digital revolution and globalization. We once lived on the back side of the “no-longer.”

At the same time, we are the first generation in the history of the world to know what we know about the cosmos in which we live. The size of the cosmos is far greater than we thought just a few years ago. The age of the cosmos is far older than we thought. Indeed, the size of the field of energy we call the cosmos is so enormous that the human mind cannot grasp it. We are the first generation to know what we now know about the cosmos.

Further, what we are discovering about the brain is analogous to what we are discovering about the cosmos. The brain is far more complex and massive in its workings than we ever imagined. The brain can no more comprehend itself than the brain can comprehend the cosmos.

We are the first generation to know this sort of stuff. I am not saying that everybody knows about this “first-ness.” I’m just saying it is a possibility for anyone who is willing to expose him or herself to this newness. For some this increased knowledge and information has been a liberation. For some the fact that

one of the core operating principles of the entire cosmos and of the brain is evolution has been so terrifying that it has created deep wells of idiocy and denial and an increase of intensity and stupidity among Fundamentalists of all stripes in every religion. They make claims for their religion that do not and cannot stand scrutiny.

The cry among many is to return to the past.

Some shout that they want their jobs back. The fact is that, as futurist Ray Kurzweil has pointed out, we have eliminated all known jobs several times in human history. Even in this country. How many milkmen, lamplighters or buggy whip makers have you met lately? When I was a child almost 40 percent of all the jobs in America were on farms. Today that figure has dropped to under five percent.

Some shout that they want their religion back. One of the reasons I am so committed to dispel the falsehood of Fundamentalism, in whatever religion it shows up, is that not only is it misguided and ignorant, it will only result in even greater disillusionment and damage. And, it has caused and is causing so much human and global misery.

You've noticed, I am sure, that many people around the world make the claim that there is one true religion. It is amazing that their religion is the one.

We are the first. And, we are the last. We are the last generation in the history of the world to know what the world was like prior to the digital revolution - prior to smart-phones, the internet and all that this has brought us. There is no denying the enormous benefits this digital revolution and all that has accompanied it in numerous fields has brought us. There is also a growing awareness among some of the heavy price we are paying because of the constant attention our devices ask of us. Relationship skills are diminishing, rudeness is increasing and a general increase in a lack of civility seems to be on the increase. Digital devices can distract us from life itself.

I have been spouting the theory that what is wrong with this country is the issue of turn signals. It must be infuriating for people to have spent thousands, if not tens of

thousands of dollars, for a car only to be driving it and discover that their turn signals don't work - at least, they don't appear to on many cars. Not wanting to take personal responsibility for their stupid mistake, they take their anger out on either the Democrats or Republicans. And, the people who drive behind these people develop their own form of "road rage" which, rather than give expression to in their cars, finds expression in their anger toward either the left or the right. It's all about turn signals.

You can't imagine my delight when I found out, thanks to one of you, that the Pope's Christmas Eve homily at the Vatican was about how Jesus would drive.

Actually, according to David Brooks, what the Pope talked about was the fact that the people who have the most influence on society are not the "sleazoids" at the top but, rather, the normal folks who, through their normal, everyday gestures like, for example, being kind in public places and being attentive to the elderly. The Pope called such people "the artisans of the common good." Small deeds, he said, "express concretely love for the city . . . without giving speeches, without publicity, but with a style of practical civic education for daily life."

And, this is what pleased me so, what the Pope especially focused on was driving, praising those people who "move in traffic with good sense and prudence." Driving is precisely the sort of everyday activity by which we express our values and shape the culture around us.

If I speed up so you can't merge into my lane, I'm expressing a competitive rather than a cooperative value. If, on the other hand, I slow down so you can move in and you give me a friendly wave, you are expressing both that a kindness is recognized and gratitude. As Brooks points out: Kindness breeds kindness. Aggression breeds aggression.

Driving gives us countless opportunities to make moral decisions and opportunities to practice patience and to co-construct a shared culture of civility and to pay attention to the task at hand rather than the device in our hand.

I have noticed, as perhaps have you, that, thankfully, a number of people have gotten the message that it is not safe to text and drive. Though I can tell you that

when I walk my dog, I can see cars drive past where the driver is texting and driving. At any rate, now people stop their cars to text. I don't mean they pull over to the side of the road and stop. They just stop. At stop signs, stop lights or just in the middle of the street.

Being both in the generation that is the first and the last gives us an interesting vantage point in which and from which to look at what we have lost and what we have gained. Whereas we used to look to elders for wisdom and guidance we now look to our children not for wisdom and guidance so much as we do help in learning how to deal with the new technologies. Social anthropologists are saying that we are retaining less wisdom and knowledge because we don't need to. It's all instantly available, not the wisdom of course, at our finger tips. We remember less, know everything and we know nothing. One scholar has referred to this condition as feeling "smupid." Smart and stupid at once.

Many people are plagued with doubt, fear, and anger. What makes matters worse is that scared people do scary things. Angry people do angry things. This is, however, the context in which we live.

We could spend countless hours on all the various social, cultural and factual matters that are causing this to be such a time of reactivity. Because I am a spiritual teacher I will be focusing on matters religious and spiritual. Because my inherited religious tradition goes under the label "Christian," I will be focusing on changes that those of us who have and do use Jesus as a doorway into the Sacred must deal with as well as be enabled to talk clearly and intelligently about with people who are either interested in or who challenge positions like what you hear me take in here. Which are positions I hope to invite you to take as well if you already don't.

The biggest "no longer" that organized religious institutions have got to deal with or die, is the death of a theistic understanding of God. This began to happen with the insights of Nicolaus Copernicus, a mathematician who lived from 1473 until 1543 and Galileo who lived from 1564 until 1642. Though he was clearly a polymath, he is mostly known for his work in astronomy and his support for the insights of Copernicus regarding a sun-centered, versus an earth centered universe.

By the way, it was over four years ago when I first came back from a Conference where Ilia Delio spoke. There was no way I could have imagined then that she and I would be invited to appear on the same program together here in Houston at the Rothko Chapel next month. Our assigned topic is “The Concept of The Divine.”

I think that what was so transformational for me about that experience is that she articulated what I had intuited but simply hadn’t been able to put it together in the way that she had. She said that this energy field in which we live that we refer to as “the cosmos,” is marked by four principle traits.

It is expanding, creative, evolving and entangled.

If you go back and re-read the parables of Jesus through the lens of these four traits, you will see them clearly demonstrated and illustrated there. These four traits apply to what Jesus taught and how he lived. This is why he was so threatening to the establishment of his day. He was always crossing boundaries of all sorts. And, he invites us to follow him. We’ll be talking more and more specifically about these “boundary crossings” in the weeks and months ahead.

Though this is getting virtually no attention in most of organized religion today - Christian, Jewish, or Muslim - this is the direction in which informed spirituality is moving. Again, religious institutions ignore this at their peril. What you see going on in the culture, both religious and secular - I hate those divisive labels - is simply shouting louder. Constant attempts to deny the reality of “what is,” will not help.

In another “by the way,” I’ll mention to you two books that Ilia has suggested. Be forewarned: I have not finished either one of them and neither is a quick or easy read. They are “Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics” and “Incarnation: A New Evolutionary Threshold.” Both are by Diarmuid O’Murchu. Again, more about these works and the man who wrote them in the days ahead.

I repeat: The biggest “no longer” that organized religious institutions have got to deal with or die, is the death of a theistic understanding of God.

The implications of the death of theism are enormous. One of the things I want to do as we go forward to talk about how, since the beginning of the twentieth century, Christianity, especially in this country, has reacted to this death in the peculiar form that what is known as “evangelical Fundamentalism.” What are the “fundamentals” that Fundamentalists hold to and why are these beliefs so dangerous to our future?

A theistic understanding of God is this: God is a being, supernatural in power, who dwells outside of this world but who invades it periodically to do what is referred to as “God’s will.” I want to be as clear as possible in my teaching: God is NOT a being! God is Being itself.

The rational data to back this up are overwhelming and yet, in the face of this overwhelming evidence people still hang on to a theistic notion of God and the things that grow from this.

I remember as a child wondering why we do not have miracles any more like those described in the Christian writings. The answer I got was “the age of miracles is over.” What I now see is that the age when people saw events as miraculous is gone. The world of the new physics does not see God in terms of cause and effect. There was a time when sickness was seen as a reflection of God’s punishment. Health was a sign of God’s favor. Now we know about germs and viruses and the medical researchers have developed antibiotics, surgical procedures and chemotherapy. These things are just as effective on sinners as they are on saints. A man, the Reverend Dr. Timothy Dwight, a Congregational minister and the president of Yale University from 1795 until 1817, railed against vaccinations because if God had intended to punish people by sending sickness upon the wicked, then those vaccinations were standing between God and the divine ability to punish sinners. Many people still understand God and read the Bible in very similar ways.

God does not send hurricanes to some places and not others as a sign of some moral purpose. Yet, leading Christian spokespeople said that Katrina was a result of New Orleans’ sinfulness. Jerry Falwell, a Southern Baptist, said 9/11 was the result of, among other things, women getting legal abortions and the increasing

acceptance of gays and lesbians in what he called “mainstream America.” That kind of thinking is still with us and is growing rather than diminishing.

God doesn't love one country above another. Looked at from outer space you can clearly see that the boundary lines we draw on our maps don't literally exist.

The God of theism is so clearly dying that it is only by using denial and illusion, and that is a game many play, that one can continue to maintain that this God is still real.

The anger that so-called Christian people express when confronted with how non-sensible at best and how non-believable at worst their religious beliefs are is, I think, revelatory of its fragility.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in response to the growing insights among Christian scholars, and in response to the reality of evolution in particular, a group of Christians published a series of pamphlets under the title “The Fundamentals.” This is where we get the word “fundamentalism.” Fundamentalism is a description of the literal beliefs of some people. When we meet again I am going to return to each of what became known as the five basic fundamentals. These are still powerful for people and are still the litmus test of whether one is really a Christian in the minds of many. These five fundamentals are:

The inspiration of scripture as the literal, revealed word of God.

The virgin birth as the miraculous and literal means by which the divine nature of Christ has been guaranteed.

The substitutionary view of the atonement that was accomplished in the death of Jesus. The affirmation of the saving power of his blood and the gift of salvation that was accomplished by his death. I have said before: this is most successful piece of bad theology ever written.

The certainty of the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The accuracy of both the empty-tomb and the appearance stories in the gospel tradition.

The truth of the second coming of Jesus, the reality of the Day of Judgment, which would be based on the record of one's life, and the certainty of heaven and hell as eternal places of reward and punishment.

I want to talk about how and why these things came into being and the disastrous consequences they have had and still have for our culture. Especially beliefs about the Bible.

As you know, my life and my work has been significantly influenced by the writings of Carl Jung. In his writings he speaks of the "difficulties involved in clinging to our previous mythological tenets of belief." That had not been so when people operated out of a very limited knowledge of the world. In that world, Jung said, a person did not need to sacrifice the intellect to believe in miracles. All of this, said Jung, had racially changed under the compelling influence of scientific rationalism. Here is what he wrote: "We are tired of the excessive effort to believe because the object of belief is no longer inherently convincing."

If someone says that this approach to an understanding of the Sacred seems impersonal, I would counter that for me it makes it even more personal both when we think of Sacred Mystery and when we think of each other. Everything and everyone belongs which challenges and flies in the face of the divisiveness that seems to run our world today.

Where did theism come from and why? We'll look at that.

Let me say a word about Jesus. Or, several.

If Jesus didn't die for our sins, what is the relevance of Jesus? What does it mean to say with Paul, "God was in Christ"?

I see Jesus as one who was more fully and deeply alive than anyone else I've ever encountered anywhere - living or dead. The purpose or function of Jesus is not to rescue us but, rather, to call us into the realm of new possibilities, into fullness of living.

What Jesus through his teachings and life calls us to is to follow him across those security boundaries that we are constantly creating. We believe they keep us safe but, in fact, they block our fuller, deeper humanity. He invites us to walk past our tribal fears. Read the Jesus story for yourself. You can do it in one sitting if you take Mark. Over and over Jesus is going beyond the barriers of human prejudice. In his time, for example, the ultimate symbol of human prejudice was the Samaritan. He made a Samaritan the star of one of his stories. Prejudices bind human life in that they diminish our humanity. The more prejudiced we are, the less human we are. Jesus painted and paints a portrait of a new humanity and invites people to step into it. This is exciting and scary.

Well, this is some of the territory I hope to cover in the coming weeks and months.

I am just constantly amazed at how entanglement or synchronicity or my awareness of these matters just seems to keep growing.

Here are a couple of examples.

I have a long time friend who is also a clergy, a psychologist and for whom writing poetry is part of his spiritual practice. Just this week he sent me a new poem he had written called Idolatries. Listen

IDOLATRIES

I quit worshiping at thrones of gods
long before I realized my idolatry of goddesses

If I am able to quit the latter
as well as I did the former
I will be faced, I suspect,
with my deeper idolatry of self
which, should I succeed in dethroning also
will open the door to honoring the first,
loving the second, and being the third
--to Eden, that is

(My friend who wrote this is The Rev. Dr. Bruce Evans.)

Also, this:

I got introduced to Richard Rohr through some cassette tapes someone loaned me years ago. Before I had finished listening to them I had vowed that someday I would get connected with this man. On that set of tapes he told a story which I have now heard him tell several times publicly. He retold that same story in one of the daily meditation e-mails he sent out this week. Here it is:

When I was on retreat at Thomas Merton's hermitage at Gethsemani Abbey in 1985, I had a chance encounter that has stayed with me all these years. I was walking down a little trail when I recognized a recluse, what you might call a hermit's hermit, coming toward me. Not wanting to intrude on his deep silence, I bowed my head and moved to the side of the path, intending to walk past him. But as we neared each other, he said, "Richard!" That surprised me. He was supposed to be silent. How did he know who I was? "Richard, you get chances to preach and I don't. Tell the people one thing." Pointing to the sky, he said, "God is not 'out there'!" Then he said, "God bless you," and abruptly continued down the path.

The belief that God is "out there" is the basic dualism that is tearing us all apart. Our view of God as separate and distant has harmed our relationships with sexuality, food, possessions, money, animals, nature, politics, and our own incarnate selves. This loss explains why we live such distraught and divided lives. Jesus came to put it all together for us and in us. He was saying, in effect, "To be human is good! The material and the physical can be trusted and enjoyed. This physical world is the hiding place of God and the revelation place of God!"

Far too much of religion has been about defining where God is and where God isn't, picking and choosing who and what has God's image and who and what doesn't. In reality, it's not up to us. We have no choice in the matter. All are beloved. Everyone—Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Muslim, black and white, gay and straight, able-bodied and disabled, male and female, Republican and Democrat—all are children of God.

Folks, this kind of renewed understanding of the Sacred, of Jesus, of the foundational documents of the Jewish/Christian tradition is profoundly important. We do this work to do our part to keep the neighbor we have been given to love from suffering from the kind of beliefs that burned so-called heretics at the stake and fought brutal wars to impose a particular version of Christianity on to others, to protect the rights of those who have been so damaged by Christianity like homosexuals and people of color. It matters how people think about God.

Real religion isn't a private matter. Real religion is a communal matter where we act together to enhance life, to expand love and to encourage being.

It matters. God matters. The realm of reality into which Jesus invites us matters.

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