

## Being Open to Listening and Seeing At A Deeper Level

“The trouble with some of us is that we have been inoculated with small doses of Christianity which keep us from catching the real thing.”

Though attributed in various forms to many, I first read this in the writings of Leslie Weatherhead when I was in graduate school. There are many ways this inoculation takes place. I want to show you one.

(Here a video is shown of Dave Allen, an Irish comedian, that you can find on YouTube. Search for “Dave Allen - religion.”)

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My hunch is that more often than not when we think of “change,” we think of something “new.” For example, “I need a change of scenery, a change of pace, a change of clothes, a change in my diet,” and similar phrases seem to imply that we are looking forward to something new. And, perhaps we are. The ego thrives on thinking that there is something missing from our lives that if we had, we could finally be happy.

My experience in doing psycho/spiritual work is that real transformation, which is what we are shooting for in here, comes not when something new begins but when things fall apart. It is when we step into the disruption and chaos of an old order passing away, however, that we are given an opportunity to listen and see at a new and different level. That is what this talk today is about: learning or being open to seeing and listening at ever deeper and deeper levels. The cardinal sin of our time is that of superficiality, skimming along on the surface thinking we are really living.

When things fall apart is when we can, if we don't turn bitter, be open to hearing and seeing a new and other way. When things fall apart.

By the way, whenever I encounter someone who is asking for direction or counseling, more often than not, I will recommend what has, in my opinion, become one of the modern spiritual classics, “When Things Fall Apart” by Buddhist nun, Pema Chodren. It is a masterpiece.

In my current teachings, which I’ve given the theme the title of “living in the gap between the ‘no-longer’ and the ‘not-yet,’” one of the things I’m stressing is that the old is not working any more. Further, the efforts used to avoid or deny this are also not only not working but actually causing further damage.

Transformation inevitably involves disconcerting reorientation. We stand in a space where we can either find new meaning or we can choose to close down and become bitter. I am convinced that what makes the difference is the quality of our inner life. Altering this inner life is difficult. Just notice your own difficulties in establishing a daily spiritual practice.

The change of the evolving cosmos is going to happen with or without us. Spiritual transformation is the process of letting go, being willing to live in the dark space for a while and then being willing to allow ourselves to be spit up, as it were, on a new and unexpected shore. When Jesus was asked to give a sign about what the future would be like, he said that the only sign that would be given is the sign of Jonah.

The religion that most of us got inoculated with has led us to wait for God’s intervention. In Christianity this shows up as some notion of Jesus coming back to earth at some time in the future and/or our going off into heaven after we are done here. We wait for intervention. Over and over Jesus taught that God is waiting for our collaboration.

One of the major points I have tried to make so far in these talks in this theme is that the response of fear and anger to this inevitable and impending change only makes matters worse. I do believe that we do need clearly to see what is being left behind. At the same time, since I do not believe that fear, guilt and shame motivate people to be more loving and gracious, compassionate and peaceful; we do need some hint, some blueprint of what the “not-yet” toward which we are moving looks like.

Without going into this in detail at all, let me give you a very brief preview of “coming attractions.”

Evolutionary theologian Michael Dowd has written: “I am an unabashed evidential mystic - a sacred realist, a Christian naturalist. Reality is my God and evidence is my scripture. Big History is my creation story and ecology is my theology. Integrity is my salvation and doing whatever I can to foster a just and healthy future for the full community of life is my mission.”

I want to repeat that: I am an unabashed evidential mystic - a sacred realist, a Christian naturalist. Reality is my God and evidence is my scripture. Big history is my creation story and ecology is my theology. Integrity is my salvation and doing whatever I can to foster a just and healthy future for the full community of life is my mission.”

I am pleased to announce that the author of those words, Michael Dowd, will be the next endowment speaker here on November 17.

This is the future. Whether people like it or want it or not, it is coming. The goal of Fundamentalism is to keep this future from happening. They will tell you it is something else. They will tell you it is their effort to be faithful and true to the Bible. I think some of them sincerely believe that but it simply isn't the case. I believe that we have to know as much as we can about the “no-longer” so that we can be free, and assist others also to be free, to this new and exciting future that is yet-to-be.

So far we have talked about how the notion of a theistic god in the sky is neither true nor useful. Again, the Fundamentalists did not create this understanding of God. They simply stepped in to defend it. And, they did this after the works of people like Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, Newton, Einstein, Freud and others began to reveal their view of the world as woefully incorrect. Theism is a fearful reaction to the reality of our finitude. The word Fundamentalism didn't get applied to a movement within American Christianity until around 1910 or so. However, again, the fundamentalists didn't invent or cause to be what we now know as the five aspects of Fundamentalism.

These are:

The Bible is the literal, inerrant word of God.

Jesus was literally born of a virgin.

Substitutionary atonement is the meaning of Jesus death on the cross.

The miracles in the New Testament literally happened.

Jesus rose physically from the grave, literally ascended into heaven and will return someday in the “second coming.”

Though we will get to and through all of these, we are going to camp out on various aspects of biblical literalism because we live in such a biblically illiterate world. Ironically, those who spout the most invectives in defense of the Bible seem to be those who know the least about it.

Last week we looked at the origin of the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Torah, and how the “holiness code” came to be and its misapplication to the current controversy among evangelical Christians about the issue of homosexuality. Today I want to take another step along this path.

I’m calling this talk today “Being Open To Listening And Seeing At A Deeper Level.” The most exciting thing going on in what I call the “psycho/spiritual” world today is a call consciously to participate in the evolutionary process, to respond to the future that is calling us forward, not backward.

I want to say here and will amplify on this at a later time: all the gospel narratives are parables. They are not literally true or eye witness reports. As such, notice how prominent, early and frequent in each of the four narratives we have, do we find Jesus causing the blind to see and the deaf to hear. Or, imploring people with phrases like, “If you have eyes, use them. If you have ears, use them.” Or, “You have eyes but you do not see. You have ears but you do not hear.”

Let’s be open to seeing and hearing at deeper levels.

Although I bemoan the fact that there is so much religious and biblical illiteracy, in one sense it is not surprising. Nor is it surprising, given the history, that people, at

least in some parts of the world and of this country, invest the Bible with rather magical qualities even to the point of taking it literally.

I have said that the theistic understanding of God grew out of human anxiety about death. The various religions that grew up in response to this have focused on calming this anxiety and keeping people in control. Those in charge of these religions - the shamans, witch doctors, priests of various sorts - were thought to be representatives of this sky god and, of course, they did not want to share either their “special knowledge” or their power. This is one of the reasons that so much religion has focused, not on love, peace, joy and the transformation in and among the human community that comes from practicing these graces but it has, rather, focused on shaming people, making them feel guilty and frightened.

The fact that all writings that are considered “holy scripture” in whatever tradition have human authors who lived in a specific time and space is a disturbing insight to someone who holds to a divinely inspired source for these writings. But, as I said, it is easy to see, in a way, how this divinely inspired and literal understanding of the Bible in particular is still alive and doing well.

I want to give you a very brief historical overview.

As I mentioned last week, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, were not composed until around 8 to 6 BC and they were not written by Moses but rather were composed over a long period of time using five different sources.

Most of what we know as the Old Testament, and remember it was not called that until there was a collection of writings that could be referred to as the New Testament, was in place during the time of Jesus.

After the life and death of Jesus and the Easter event experienced by his followers, a collection of the teachings of Jesus and of his disciples began to be collected. This took place sometime between 30 and 40 AD. Scholars are divided about whether the Gospel of Thomas is to be counted as one of these. I believe it is. Most New Testament scholars subscribe to the theory that there is a lost collection of Jesus saying that would also date from around this time.

Most people are surprised to learn that the Jesus narratives that we do have - Matthew, Mark and Luke - were not the first books written. The books in the New Testament are not in order of their composition. The earliest writings are seven of the letters attributed to Paul. They were likely written sometime in the 50s. The earliest narrative we have is what is called "The Gospel of Mark" and it was written around the year 70. This is at least forty years after the death of Jesus. By the way, none of the narratives we have are "eye witness" accounts. I don't know about you but I have difficulty remembering what I had for breakfast yesterday much less something that happened forty years ago. The Gospel of John was not written until at least the year 90. The book of Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, was not the last to be written. That distinction belongs to Second Peter which was written near the middle of the second century.

The New Testament itself was not put together in its current form until the year 397.

Because of general religious and biblical illiteracy most people likely think that Jesus was crucified, three days later he rose from the dead and within a short time founded the church. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote down their memories of what Jesus said and did. Somebody collected some letters from Paul and then stuck the book of Revelation on the end so that people would know when the world was going to end and that was the end of it.

During this early and formative period there were likely hundreds of different versions of what I refer to as the "Jesus narrative." Now thanks to the work of scholars like Bart Ehrman, Robert Funk, John Dominic Crossan and others we have access to many of these manuscripts. Not all by any means but some.

So how did it come to be that we have in the New Testament the 27 books that we do? Well, in the year 325 Constantine called a meeting of all the leaders of the various churches and ordered them to come up with one version of what Christians believed and what would be their authority for believing it. By this time the Jews had their Scriptures. Christians needed theirs. This meeting was held in Nicaea and so is called the Council of Nicaea and it was there that a creed was agreed upon that is used still by some Christian churches in their worship, the Nicene Creed. If

these church leaders couldn't come up with an agreement, Constantine might withdraw his support for the movement.

Not every one present agreed with this creed. Many didn't understand it. Many still don't. For example, what does it mean to affirm about Jesus that he was "begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father"? The church leaders agreed to this more to please the emperor and secure their safety than out of religious conviction.

There was great pressure on the leaders of the early church to conform to what the state wanted and in that process compromises were made.

For example, since the sun god was very popular in Roman culture, the council decided that the Roman "sun" day would be the Christian sabbath. In a similar manner they set the date of the birth of the sun, around the time of the winter solstice, for the celebration of Jesus' birthday. Jesus was likely born in the Spring of the year. Most surprisingly, the traditional symbol of the sun, the cross of light, would be the official symbol of Christianity. Up until then the symbol Christians used was the fish. Early Christianity has no art depicting the cross, no images of Jesus and certainly no images of Jesus on the cross. That would have been a violation of the Jewish notion of idolatry.

The most important thing that happened at this meeting however is the decision about what writings would be considered authoritative for Christian faith and practice. Since there were hundreds of writings available at the time, how did we end up with the twenty-seven that we have? How in particular did we get the four gospels that we have?

Here is how that happened: During the council meeting all of the available versions of the Jesus story were put under a table. Everyone left the room and the door was locked. Overnight the participants were to pray that the true gospels would miraculously appear on the top of the table the next morning. The next day only the writings that we have come to know as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were on the table top.

Believe that? Literalists believe stranger things. As we shall see.

Here is what actually happened. Well prior to this council, because he died 202, there was an intense deal-making session bullied by a man named Irenaeus. He didn't like the Gospel of Thomas because he felt it left too much up to the individual believer. So, he not only pushed for the Gospel of John to be included but actually influenced that version of the Jesus story to be edited in such a way as to make Thomas, the disciple, to appear to be slow-witted and full of doubts. The story of doubting Thomas is only in John and not the other three gospels.

Irenaeus, who was Bishop of what is, now Lyons, France, faced the challenge of selecting four gospels out of the hundreds that circulated throughout Europe, Greece, Egypt, and Asia Minor. At a time when the earth was considered flat, and therefore had four corners, he chose four gospels: the ones we have now. Here is his impeccable logic: I'm quoting here, "There are four winds, four directions on the compass, four elements, and four pillars of the church, therefore there must be four gospels." He mentions many of the discarded gospels by name, in particular those of Thomas, Philip, Judas and Mary Magdalene.

From that time on no other version of Jesus' life and words were made available. These were either "hidden" or destroyed. We know about these writings because of archeological work done and the fact that the Jews did not believe in destroying writings. Scholars knew these other writings existed because they were referred to in other writings of the early church that we do have and because, as a result of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other archeological discoveries, we have copies of them. If you are interested, you can read about them in, among other places, Bart Erhman's books.

I knew about the Gospel of Thomas when I was in seminary and got a copy as perhaps many of you did and read it and thought, "What in heaven's name is this gibberish about?" Then, I began hanging out with people like Richard Rohr and Jim Finley and Joan Chittister and Cynthia Bourgeault, I began to study and study and in the process felt closer to Jesus' teaching than at any time before in my life.

If there is a take-away from our time together today, I would like for it to be this: Up until this time in the Jesus movement, there was incredible diversity. It was not a big movement as we think of big today. But, it was diverse. And, outsiders would



look at this diversity and say, “Look, how they love each other.” The tragedy of the Christian movement today is not its diversity but its divisiveness. It was after the Council of Nicaea that so-called Christians began to kill each other and others whom they began to refer to as infidels. Beloved diversity has become bitter divisiveness.

We will be coming back to deal with how the belief that the Bible is literally true has affected, or infected, each of the other strongly held tenets of Fundamentalism.

For now, however, what I would like to attempt to do is to put the history of all of this into some sort of perspective.

I grew up in a part of the country called the “Bible Belt.” That phrase was used by H.L. Mencken, an American writer and satirist, when he was reporting on what became known as the “Scope’s Monkey Trial” that we talked about last week. That trial took place in Dayton Tennessee. Mencken was writing for the Baltimore Sun and referred to the region as the Bible Belt. Mencken used the term in a derogatory way, referring to the region in subsequent pieces with such quotes as “the Bible and Hookworm Belt” and “Jackson, Mississippi in the heart of the Bible and Lynching Belt.” The term “Bible Belt” was first used in 1925.

Remember when we talked about the origin of the Fundamentalist movement in the United States, I said there was a battle between the “Fundamentalists” and the “Modernists.” One favored defending the literal belief in the Bible and the other was open to the scholarship that had arisen in the previous one hundred years. The “modernists” won the large urban area and seats of higher education while the “Fundamentalists” won the rural, southern and, at the time, less educated areas.

So, how did we get here?

During the time period we are trying to cover - from Jesus through Constantine to America and now - most people could not read. The subject of literacy is massive. People have been able to read for thousands of years and do amazing mathematical calculations. During the time of Jesus most people couldn’t read. The Jewish people had a special class of people set aside to read and interpret the Torah for them - rabbis and scribes.

Clearly some people could read and write when Paul wrote his letters. But only a minority. Most people were busy trying to figure out where their next meal was coming from. Seriously.

What people were taught by religious authorities was very much what I was taught as a child. Namely, “What is in the Bible is the Word of God.”

This belief is ancient. After the council of Nicaea and the newly organized Christian church had put together what they embraced from the Hebrew Scriptures, which they called “The Old Testament” in contrast to their “New Testament,” it and this collection of writings, now called the Bible, was regarded as sacred. The printing press hadn’t been invented yet so there were precious few copies of this “Bible” available.

I thought it might be interesting to establish just a bit of a time line:

We have this council that is convened in 325 and then after that some bloody history.

The Bible is retained by “the Church.” People didn’t have it. People couldn’t read for the most part. They learned of the stories of the Bible by hearing stories, seeing paintings, seeing stained glass, seeing mosaics, etc. Rembrandt has a painting of Matthew being dictated to by an angel what to write in his Gospel. More about theories of inspiration in a later talk.

As time passed, and I’m greatly abbreviating this, the collection of writings we know as the Bible was translated into Latin. This version of the Bible was called the Vulgate. That’s the word we get our word “vulgar” from and it simply means in Latin, “the language of the people.” But the people didn’t have access to it. They didn’t read and if they could, they didn’t read Latin. This translation was done by Jerome sometime around 400 A.D.

In 1382 a man named John Wycliffe, an English vicar, translated the Latin Vulgate into English. I am not making what I am about to say up: Wycliffe’s reward for this was that he was pronounced to be a heretic. He died but the church could not let

by-gone's be by-gone's. So, they dug his body up and had him burned at the stake. The church hierarchy wanted the biblical text to be kept hidden from ever being challenged by anyone outside the "powers that be."

In 1524 William Tyndall translated the Bible into English. He is eventually charged with heresy, strangled to death in a public execution and burned at the stake. It was against the law, the laws being set by the church, for anyone to have a copy of the Bible in English.

Wycliffe and Tyndall were considered heretics because it was argued that if people could read for themselves what Jesus said and did and compared that with the behavior of the bishops and priests who preached to an ignorant population, there would be trouble, perhaps even a social revolution - as indeed there was.

Gutenberg revolutionized the world by inventing the moveable type printing press and the first book printed by the Bible. It was, however, printed in Latin.

In 1492 Columbus comes to what will be called America.

Luther's translation of the Bible into German in 1534 will lead to the Protestant Reformation

Yet to come, however, is the revolutionary insight of Copernicus. That was in 1543. That was not well known until, around a hundred years later, Galileo supported his work around 1615.

In 1630 John Winthrop led a group who became known as the second group of settlers after the Mayflower to America and in a sermon he wrote he shaped the destiny of what was to become the United States from this time on by referring to America as a city set on a hill.

In 1776, following a revolutionary war, the declaration of independence from England was signed.

In 1861 a bitter five year war was fought over the issue of slavery.

In 1834 a new wave of Biblical scholarship arises in Germany. We'll talk more about this in a future talk

Just around forty short years later the battle between the Fundamentalists and the Modernists.

In 1985 the Jesus Seminar is created in the United States.

It wasn't until 2013 that the Supreme Court struck down "The Defense of Marriage Act" that led to the Marriage Equality Act in just 2015.

Given the distractions of our population and our world, given the emotional and intellectual level where most people in our country are, it is somewhat understandable that there exists so much biblical and religious illiteracy.

Most faithful Roman Catholics still believe that the Pope is infallible and, over the years, I have heard numerous Catholics decry the day when the mass was put into English. They liked the older, and not understandable, Latin version.

Protestant Fundamentalists I've had personal encounters with will, in response to some insight or learning I have had and seek to offer, and these are people who have college educations, will say things like: "Are you disputing what is in the Bible?" Or, "I'm not sure that person is a Christian." Or, "That goes against everything I've ever been taught." Or, "You better be careful. Those are dangerous teachings." Etc.

Most people do not care to read the kind of books I refer to in here. They have other, more important things to do. The majority of our population do not embrace psycho/spiritual growth as being the primary purpose of human life and living, embracing kindness as a way of life.

The religious, psychological and social journals I take are having a debate about whether what is going on in American politics is something new. Or, rather, whether it is the true character of the country just coming to light.

Whether it is something becoming true or coming to light, the fact is that Fundamentalism is a growing phenomenon in our world and in our country. We can see the danger and damage of Fundamentalism in another religion, like Islam. But, Christian Fundamentalism is dangerous as well. Because, it refuses to listen deeply, to see deeply. It is unwilling to move to the deep levels of mythic, metaphorical and mystical meaning. It is obsessed with literalism and exclusion. Fundamentalism's need for clarity and certitude leads to using sacred writings in mechanical, close-ended and quite authoritarian ways. If something challenges the values or ethics of that particular group, no reason can work its way in.

Fundamentalism rarely asks real questions. It mostly gives quick answers. This invariably leaves ego-driven, fundamentalist minds and groups utterly trapped in their own cultural moment in history. Thus they miss the Gospel's liberating message along with the deepest challenges and consolations of Scripture. Consequently, they miss what the very word "gospel" means: "Good news." They miss experiencing and expressing in boundary-crossing ways the peace, love and joy taught by Jesus. My goal is that not be true for us.

I hope you do not think in any way I am being disparaging or dismissive of the collection of writings we call the Bible. These writings are the photo album of the Jewish-Christian faith. They constitute both our foundation document and our identity document. They contain some of the loftiest and most sublime writings and they contain some of the most vengeful and small-minded tribalistic writings imaginable. It is important to be able to discern which is which. We rely on scholarship to help us with this.

We need words to point to the Sacred. But, the words themselves are not sacred.

One of the first things I learned from my first spiritual teacher was this very fact. A finger is needed to point to the moon. But do not mistake the finger for the moon.

Just so with the Bible. We need words to point to the Sacred. But, do not mistake the words for the Sacred. Let's commit to being open to see and hear deeper than that.

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