

Going Beyond Where We Are

There is something oddly interesting, or interestingly odd, about getting involve with wise and useful spiritual teachings.

On the one hand they stir up hope and excitement that we might experience the wholeness and healing that being led into new-to-us territory might offer.

On the other hand they stir up anxiety that we might actually be led into new territory.

Paradoxical.

These are the two fears we have when we gather for something like this.

We gather with anticipation of hearing something other than the “same old thing.” I want to strike fire with what I say, for you to think and experience that being here is worth your time. You do, too. You went to the trouble of being here, with all that entails. You don’t want this to be a waste of time. We want something to happen!

At the same time, what if something does happen?

I love the story of the Pentecostal man who wandered into a church like St. Paul’s one Sunday morning. You may not be

aware of it but St. Paul's is on the registry of historical buildings in America. Many people, like me, were first attracted to what hundreds of people have described as "a sacred space." And, we are what is sometimes referred to as "high church." That means we are a lectionary church that has an Anglican form of worship. It wasn't this church the man wandered into but one very like it.

The eleven o'clock service had just started. There was a sung introit, then the processional with choir, cross, banner, Bible and clergy. The first hymn concluded and the First Lesson was read, then the psalm was sung, there was the epistle reading and another hymn. This Sunday there was a gospel procession where with much solemnity and ritual the worship book from which the gospel is read is taken in a procession into the middle of the church and there read. The Pentecostal man had never seen or experienced anything like this in all of his church going experience.

The preacher for the day got up and began his sermon. Not five minutes into it the Pentecostal man said, "Amen!" People turned and looked - that is, stared disappointedly at him. We're not used to that sort of thing. The preacher continued and in a few more minutes the Pentecostal man exclaimed, "Hallelujah!" The ushers wondered if they should call security. The preacher persisted. Sure enough, another few minutes passed and the man shouted out, "Praise the Lord!"

By this time the head usher was down beside him and leaned over and said, “You’re going to have to keep quiet! The pastor is right in the middle of his sermon.” The Pentecostal man replied, “Keep quiet? How can I keep quiet? I’ve got the Holy Spirit!” To which the usher said, “Well, you didn’t get it in this church.”

We love the illusion that we are in control.

I have conducted two memorial services here in the past nine days. One was for a woman where death was a relief, a release. More often than not, death occurs like that for many in our culture. Even if the death is what we call “premature,” there is usually some warning - a diagnosis, a condition. But then, like the person we memorized yesterday, a sudden and very unexpected collapse and he was gone. You just never know.

If we are going to move beyond where we are, which is the title I’ve given to this time today, we are going to have to be in the process of continually having our eyes open to see.

I had a professor in seminary who love to quote a Jewish mystic by the name of Israel ben Eliezer, also known as the Baal Shem Tov. He was born in 1698 and is considered the founder of Hasidic Judaism. The title “Baal Shem Tov” means “one with a good reputation.” The line my professor loved was “The world is full of wonders and miracles but man takes his little hand and covers his eyes and sees nothing.” He was such a wise person

that I'm convinced had it live in our time, he would not have used such sexist language. We have eyes but frequently don't see.

Many of you likely know a story from Sunday School days. John is in prison, about to lose his head. He is discouraged and sends a message to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come? Or, should be look for another?"

Here is another instance where Jesus does not answer the question. Rather, he says to the messengers, "Go and tell John what you have heard and what you have seen."

Then Jesus quotes from Isaiah. It is a passage that is read regularly on Rosh Hashanah. What Isaiah says is that human wholeness will replace human brokenness. The words in Isaiah are quite specific: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame will leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute will sing."

In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus quotes this text, or the words are put into the mouth of Jesus. What the people sent by John to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one?," were told to say what they saw and heard was that "the blind see and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them."

In order for Jesus to be said to be the messiah the signs that he was the messiah would have been seen in him. This is why the various miracle stories were wrapped around his life. They were parables the early followers of Jesus told about him.

This is what I have come to believe about the miracles in the Christian Scriptures. This is why they were so late in showing up in the story. They were not ever events that actually happened. Any more than Moses could part the Red Sea or Joshua could stop the sun in the sky. Rather, they were to be taken as signs of the presence of God.

Some may take this interpretation to be a heresy. Just like some take the good news that there is no hell for people to burn in torment in forever as a heresy. I see it as indeed Good News. The burden of the miraculous is lifted off the back of Jesus in a time when that sort of supernatural thinking simply does not fit.

One of the signs mentioned by Isaiah and quoted by Jesus that a new era was arriving, which Jesus referred to as the “rule of God” in contrast to the rule of Caesar, was that of sight being restored or of people simply being able to see. Being able to see is both the heart and content of spiritual practice.

There is a story told in the Christian Scripture where a group of pompous religious leaders had caught a woman in the act of adultery. They brought her to Jesus in an effort to entrap

him, “Moses, said such a person should be stoned. What do you say?”

Jesus said, in essence, “Sounds like a good idea to me. Let the one who is without sin among you throw the first rock.”

This, of course, was not what they were expecting and it threw them for a loop. In this story and in the presence of Jesus the scales fell away from their eyes and one by one the religious leaders slunk away. I fear that if this story were set in our time the religious leaders would have quickly and easily been willing to throw the rock. At least there seems to be a lot of blame and accusation and fault-finding being flung about today - especially by religious people. People all over the place seem to be claiming moral superiority and self-righteousness. Whereas the leaders in this story are disarmed, literally, we are more and more turning to violence. We are a culture that amasses armaments.

One of the things claimed about Jesus is that he cured many people of blindness.

While working on this talk I ran across some words by Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher who lived in the mid 19th century and is considered to be the father of existential philosophy. The words of his I read this week were: “There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn’t true. The other is to refuse to accept what is true.” We live

in a time and culture where both forms of this foolishness are rampant.

Here is something that is true - evolution and the increasingly new knowledge about the nature of the cosmos. Yet, institutional Christianity embraces a picture of reality of an external deity who, though disconnected from the earth, manages to manipulate people and circumstances for his own purposes.

I have been asked to say a bit more about our “moral obligation to be happy” and why it is that if we know what we know about how to fulfill that “moral obligation,” we still have a society of so many people who are constantly seeking for ways to be happier.

I have a multitude of responses to this matter and can't deal with them all today.

Let me come at a partial answer to that in this way, keeping in mind that we are talking today about the healing we need to move beyond where we are.

First of all, life and we who live it are complicated beyond our ability to say. For example, let's say you came to see me for a counseling session or for spiritual direction. You come in and get seated and then take in the space in are in and I might ask, “What brings you here today?” Or, “If this meeting has a good

outcome for you, what will you leave with?" You respond. I ask some more questions. You respond. And this goes on for the fifty minutes or so we are together. At the end of that time both of us are aware: we're just getting started. But what I know and what you know is that likely why you have come has yet to be addressed. I remember offering a dream to my analyst when I was in training and he said something like, "We'll probably still be processing that six weeks from now." We want quick fixes. Life is not that way. Our culture lies to us that it is.

Here is another way to get at an answer:

I have this small painting by a Spanish artist that Sherry gave me over forty years ago now. It has been with me ever since she gave it to me. I have had it sitting by the chair in my office and it has moved with me from the time I first got it from office to office until now. It has occupied seven different offices now. I have placed it where I see it every time I am in my office and where it is impossible for anyone else who comes into the office not to see. I never call attention to it.

It never ceases to amaze me when in the process of our working together people notice it. Usually, the comment is something like this: "Hmmm, that's an interesting painting. You just get that?"

We all know what this cage is like. The title the artist gave the painting is "prison." The prison we are in consists of the fact

that we are dealing with some level of depression, we are all dealing with some level of anxiety. Jim Hollis says that when he does workshops he will ask people to write down something about where they are stuck. Everybody can do it!

Hold that reality or set of circumstances in one hand.

Now, put in the other hand the religion of our culture.

We may spend an hour or two - more if we have a dedicated daily spiritual practice - doing work like this. Most of the time, however, we are immersed in consumerism, competitiveness, and comparing. Carl Jung said, "If you don't tell the world who you are, it will tell you."

We can know at the rational level that happiness is the byproduct of living lives of loving compassion and service but the tug of our cultural religion is so powerful.

I took a course in meditation from Jack Kornfeld. People complained about not having time to have a practice. He said, "I can tell you how to find at least an extra hour in your day, maybe more." People were eager to hear, notebooks poised for the answer: "Unplug your television sets." That is when, using the language of my religious upbringing, he went from preaching to meddling.

A duck walks into a bar. He says to the bartender “Got any grapes?” The bartender says “No, I don’t have any grapes.” The duck walks out, sorely disappointed.

So the next day, he walks back into the bar, asks the same question “Got any grapes?” The bartender says, “No! This a bar. We don’t have any grapes.”

The next day, he walks back into the bar, and again, asks the bartender, “Do you have any grapes?” The bartender, who has lost his patience about this matter and not just being curious but now being irritated as to why this duck seems to think he may have some grapes, says to the duck, “No, I don’t have any grapes. Further, if you come back in here tomorrow and ask me if I have any grapes, I will nail your bill to the bar!”

The duck frowns, turns around, and walks out of the bar.

The next day, the duck walks back into the bar, and asks the bartender “Got any nails?”

The bartender says, “No.”

So the duck says, “Got any grapes?”

I fear that if I keep bringing up the levels of cognitive development, you may nail my feet to where I can’t come back.

Nonetheless, it is the mythic level where eighty percent of our culture lives.

It is at the rational level where much of the work of scholarship is done.

It is at the vision logic level where we begin to live by the values of love, truth, justice, and freedom.

It is only, however, at the higher levels of development, at least using this model, that we can “know God.” At earlier levels we can have “beliefs about.” This is why when Carl Jung was asked if he believed in God, he said, “No, I know.”

This has social practicality. As individuals change, so do groups. How we live, what we bring into the world, makes a difference in the world.

You might remember that a few weeks ago I asked you to think of the first word that comes to you mind when you hear the word, first, “religion,” and, then, “Christian.” The responses were not positive when it comes to “Christian.”

Peter Wehner, writing in “The Atlantic,” said this:

“One might reasonably expect that Christians, including white evangelicals, would be a unifying, healing force in American society. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be

called the children of God,' Jesus said. Yet in the main, the white evangelical movement has for decades exacerbated our divisions, fueled hatreds and grievances, and turned fellow citizens into enemies rather than friends. White evangelical Christians are the most consistently reliable supporters of the most polarizing and morally depraved president in American history. It has hurt America, and it has done tremendous damage to the witness of the Christian faith.”

Jesus made a difference in the world. I have the faith that following in the way he taught, we can as well.

But, first, we have to see - see ourselves, see each other, see a suffering world.

A very effective way of reflecting on the living of your life or when making some significant decision is to raise the question, “Does this choice, does this way of living enlarge me or diminish me.?” Usually we know the answer immediately.

Choosing the large is difficult until we realize the difficulty of choosing the small.

Many, many people bring into the living of their lives the messages from childhood that the world is too big and overwhelming and that they are too small, weak or inadequate to deal with it.

What you are looking at is a piece of art called “The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly.” It is in the Smithsonian Museum of American Art. It is the life work of a James Hampton who was a janitor for the federal government. By day he swept the floors and cleaned the toilets. My night he worked on this vision of his. Slowly with tinfoil from a thousand pieced of chewing gum and the fragments discarded by a bored public passing through the buildings in his custodial care, he assembled this grand vision. He did this work in his garage, on his own, with no patrons to help. This is what he brought to the world. For all of us there is a larger summons. (I got this story from James Hollis.)

As a counselor I can tell you that so far not a person I have sat with has not had the thought that “other people have the act together and I don’t.” My point is that every one of us is dealing with his or her own set of anxieties and losses. If other people have their act together then I need to pretend that I do as well and so we end up becoming strangers to ourselves.

To move from one cognitive level to another, to go beyond where we currently are means going through our fears and depression. I want to emphasize, go through these things. There is no magic or short cut.

Seeing is hard.

That is why I brought up the matter of death. Sometimes death can open our eyes to the preciousness of what we have right here and now. Richard Rohr says that there are two ways to move from one level of development to another.

One way is by way of a great personal tragedy - the loss of a loved one or awareness one's own impending death.

The other is by having a daily spiritual practice.

Take your pick.

But, for those of you who have tried it, having a daily spiritual practice is difficult because you encounter one humiliation after another.

One of the reasons we use incense and the sound of a bowl is because we can more easily enter into an altered state of consciousness through our senses. The smell of intense alters our senses as does the sound of the bell. Even this has its pitfalls.

We hear the sound of the bell and at first there is just the pure experience. Then come the evaluations and judgments. "That was such a beautiful sound." Or, "That was too loud." Then the cravings. "Wonder where I could get some chimes like that and would that improve my meditation?"

If we entered that deep meditation state that Jim Finley teaches about and, afterwards open our eyes and we see the world as Jesus saw it, what would we see? Finley says we would see God. Finley says Jesus saw God in everything. This is the level of Christ consciousness.

It is not easy to get to and I do a disservice if I create the illusion that it is.

What Jesus also saw was that people didn't see that they were just as much in the heart of Sacred Mysteries as was he but that we also did not see this about ourselves and we needed healing of every impediment that kept/keeps us from living out this wholeness. To enter into this is deep healing. Which means going beyond where we currently are and this is difficult.

I mentioned last week that each and every one of us is affected by anxiety and depression.

Years ago Dr. Bankston preached a sermon here in which he told the story of a traveling salesman, back in the days when there was such an animal, who came from the north to the south to sell his wares. His first morning in some Southern state, he goes to the diner to get breakfast and with his bacon, eggs, biscuits, gravy and coffee he sees this substance on his plate he doesn't recognize. He calls the waitress over and asks, "What is this?" She says, "Those are grits." He says, "I didn't order them." She replied, "Nobody does. Down here they just come."

Anxiety and depression just come. Sometimes so low grade that we pay them no attention. Besides, we have these wonderful, not!, ways of numbing ourselves and withdrawing from “what is.”

Jesus saw what all great spiritual teachers see about us - we suffer. To have a body is to suffer. To love is to suffer. Jesus' response to this was not to avoid or evade but compassionate relating and he calls us to be like him to each other and to ourselves.

One of the major requirements for growing in levels of consciousness is patience. We are not a patient people. Let's say that you have come to this place, or to see a counselor, or pastor and you are dealing with an unspeakable loss. You've lost a child, God forbid! You've lost in some horrible, unexpected way your partner. You've been given six months. The list of ways we can be traumatized is endless.

The first thing I would say to you is, “I am SO sorry this has happened to you.” Period. Full stop.

I have had three or four original theological, spiritual insights in my life. Here is one of them.

Genuine grief - honestly shared - not fixed - is grace. Or, such a process opens the door for grace to enter.

You might say when asked, “How are you doing?” “I am SO depressed.” And, you are. Indeed, you are depression.

After a while when asked, “How are you doing?” the answer will become, “I am not as depressed as I was.” It is that ability to witness that separates us from our suffering.

In the beginning we can't do that for ourselves. So, we need each other. And in that context our blindness is healed, we hear, we are able to move about, we know because we are known: amazing grace. 'Twas grace that brought be safe thus far and grace will see me home.”

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