

Living Beyond The Mythic World in a Culture that Doesn't

Being here in this space, either physically or virtually, can be hazardous to your current religious, spiritual, and cultural world-views. Being here may cause anxiety.

It is not my intention deliberately to upset anyone, that is clearly not in my best interest. But, given my belief that our primary purpose is ongoing growth - psychologically, spiritually, emotionally, relationally - I want to be very clear that moving from one level of development to another is not simple, easy or quick. The fact that many of you who have just heard these words think that you are an exception to them, proves my point. (You know, of course, that I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about the person sitting next to you.)

The archetype from the Christian religion - and all wisdom traditions have such teachings - is death, usually by crucifixion, three days of darkness, and, then, resurrection. As Richard Rohr says, "You can't get on a plane at level two and fly over to level six and do so in comfort."

The second thing I would say is that though it is my intention that all of the teachings I offer in here stand on their own, there really is a connection or flow in this current theme.

Fortunately all of the talks given in here are readily available through the Ordinary Life website. You can go back and read them, hear them, or watch them.

A teacher at a major university offered a class in creative writing. The class was early in the morning and, consequently, many students were late or missed it entirely. So much so that the question, “Did I miss anything?” eventually got under the professor’s skin. So he wrote this:

Did I miss anything?

Nothing. When we realized you weren’t here
we sat with our hands folded on our desks
in silence, for the full two hours

Did I miss anything?

Everything. I gave an exam worth
40 per cent of the grade for this term
and assigned some reading due today
on which I’m about to hand out a quiz
worth 50 per cent of your entire grade

Did I miss anything?

Nothing. None of the content of this course
has value or meaning

Take as many days off as you like:

any activities we undertake as a class

I assure you will not matter either to you or me

and are without purpose

Did I miss anything?

Everything. A few minutes after we began last time
a shaft of light descended and an angel
or other heavenly being appeared
and revealed to us what each woman or man must do
to attain divine wisdom in this life and
the hereafter

This is the last time the class will meet
before we disperse to bring this good news to all people
on earth

Did I miss anything?

Nothing. When you are not present
how could something significant occur?

Did I miss anything?

Everything. Contained in this classroom
is a microcosm of human existence
assembled for you to query and examine and ponder
This is not the only place such an opportunity has been
gathered
but it was one place
And you weren't here

Being here is the essence of our spiritual work. I don't
mean being present in this gathering. I mean "being here."

Therefore, our spiritual work is simple and hard. Our spiritual work is to learn to pay attention, to be here, to develop the resources to be with what is. It takes faith, hope, love and forgiveness. I hope these are the realities we move into and experience as we seek to live and move and have our being in “the sacred stream.”

By the way, that poem was written by Tom Wayman, a Canadian poet. I first heard Billy Collins read it years ago.

And being present, wherever and whenever we are able to do that can sometimes be disturbing. Our culture currently is very disturbing - which we will talk about today. Our current national and world condition gives us the perfect crucible to do our spiritual work. However, we can't stay at our current level of awareness to do and experience this work. We have to grow and growth is hard.

So sometimes I say things that are disturbing.

A few years ago I gave what someone took to be a particularly edgy talk in here and afterwards someone sent me an e-mail about the talk that said this:

“Just so you will know: what you said was not what you intended nor what we heard. What we heard, of course, was not what you said and certainly not what you intended. And, our understanding of what you meant was somewhat less than

complete not to mention inaccurate. We nevertheless are very appreciative of what we think we heard you so.”

That’s brilliant. I didn’t write it. I’m grateful to have it.

The theme I am giving to the talks I am offering in our times together this year is “Living in the Sacred Stream.” I got that image from my first reading of Stephen Mitchell’s “The Gospel According to Jesus.” This book was published in 1994 and I had placed an order for it before it was available for sale. I had read about it in some journal I took.

Just to put this in perspective, when I first acquired and started reading in this book, the iPhone had not yet been invented. That wouldn’t happen for another thirteen years. Even though the Jesus Seminar, an outgrowth of the Westar Institute of Religious Studies, existed, I didn’t know about it. It would be another ten years before I got involved with them.

(A lot went on in 1994: Nelson Mandela was sworn in as president of South Africa. The attack on figure skater Nancy Kerrigan by Tonya Harding’s body guard banned Harding from the sport for life. The movies that got our attention were Forrest Gump, The Shawshank Redemption and Schindler’s List.)

In this book Stephen Mitchell said that his experience with Middle Eastern languages and texts like those that made up the Christian collection called The New Testament, had led him to

believe that the very way the texts were passed on from one writing to another, they were all hand-copied at the time, led him to see - based on the evidence from various manuscripts - that there had been errors, additions and omissions from one scribe's hand to another over the long span of history.

The image Mitchell used in justifying his work was that at the source, if we could go back that far, we could come closer to the authentic teachings of Jesus. He likened it to a spring that has been polluted along the way from its originating source until now. This same image of the spring that over time has been polluted is found in Tolstoy's version of the God of Jesus.

This image of the spring is used by Kathleen Singh in her small but powerful book, *Unbinding*. It was from her work that I developed the image of our being like eddies caught at the edge of a stream and not only not moving into the flow of the stream but also coming to believe that the eddy of existence is who we really are.

Then, of course, there is the cosmic flow of energy that began at the Big Bang and is flowing into the future that we are privileged to participate in however briefly.

Being set free in all of these arenas or looking at being set free from all of these perspectives can be seen as exhilarating or terrifying.

Look at what is going on in our culture.

We are in a cultural war in this country. There are major ideological conflicts in the Middle East and reflected in the Russia/Ukraine war.

Most of you could give me examples, and some very painful ones, involving family members where division has occurred, of this cultural war.

I'll give you an example that slammed me to the wall. I subscribe to a newsletter put out by Dan Rather. He is the former CBS newscaster. He had his start, by the way, right here in Houston. He has a newsletter called Steady that I subscribe to. In it recently was this story:

At the opening of CPAC, the Conservative Political Action Conference, activist Jack Posobiec opened the conference with a fiery speech in which he said that it was the aim of their group to end democracy. To quote him, "We didn't get all the way there on January 6, but we will endeavor to get rid of it and replace it with this, right here," he said, gesturing to the crowd and holding up his fist. Then he said, to cheers from the audience, "All glory is not to government. All glory to God."

This may sound like I am over-simplifying but it is my belief that we are in the crisis we are in today because of ignorance about these three things that I am stressing about what

it means to live in the sacred stream. That may not be true for all cultures and countries but it is for the one in which we live.

Christianity, even the most “progressive” expressions of it, is in the midst of a crisis far more profound than that which led to the Protestant Reformation.

At the root of this crisis is how people see and experience what is meant when we use the word “God.” One of the reasons that the church is in decline today, and it is, is because a way of understanding God has died and a better or another understanding has not been firmly put in place.

I want to be clear: God is not dead. A particular understanding of the meaning of the word “God” has died.

The last time we talked in here I mentioned a book - seems like I'm always mentioning books! - “The Death of the Mythic God” by Jim Marion. Up until what is called “the age of reason,” that is until the rise of modern science with Copernicus and Galileo, the consciousness of most people, including Christians was at the level of mythic consciousness.

The mythic God lived in the heavens above the earth, separate and apart from humans. This God created the physical universe and would and could intervene in this world whenever summoned to do so by prayer. This is the God who sent his

divine son down from heaven to sacrifice himself for the sins of humans.

When I introduced these levels of cognitive development - that is, how we think, I said that likely most everyone here is at the “vision logic level of consciousness.” Our culture, indeed our current religious rituals, including hymns and creeds, ask us to go back to mythic level for a hour or so a week. This is so hard for many people at the vision logic level that they can’t or refuse to do it.

What I’m shooting for is that we can live at the “psychic consciousness” level - which will create an even greater divide between those at this level and those at the mythic level.

When I was in graduate school John A. T. Robinson in his book *Honest to God* suggested we stop using the word “god” for a generation. The book created a firestorm and most who read it agreed with it but no one followed his advice.

Jews will not utter the name of God. Muslims allow no image of God. Buddhists will not even speak of God. Christians talk about God all the time with certainty about what God is like, or not like; what God approves of or doesn’t; whose side God is on or not; and so forth. The result is that most Christians end up worshipping not God, about whom nothing can be said, but a product of their own imagination - or someone else’s -

which is doing the very thing Jesus himself taught people not to do that is, worship an idol or a false God.

So, what do we do without the mythic God.

The first answer I have is that we have a daily spiritual practice. But, I'll get to that in a moment.

We work to understand what Jesus really taught. If we were in some other religious tradition, we would work to get to the pure source of that teaching.

We seek to grow in our understanding of our own true selves.

We participate in the evolutionary process that seeks for the healthy growth of all that is and all who all.

It is that simple.

It is that complicated.

Jesus, for example, did not believe in a God who was external to the human experience.

Once we see that we are not separate from the divine dimension, language is so unhelpful here!, once we realize that no outside God is ever going to intervene to solve the problems

of this place, how can we, relying on guidance from our true identity, work to solve the problems that face us?

I do not know what spiritual practice is best for you. I do know that if you don't have one, there will be no change in any of these three levels.

Ken Wilber says that the only technique that has been scientifically proven to raise consciousness levels in adults is meditation. If you expect to raise your level of consciousness, you will not do it without doing this.

More important, however, than what you do in your daily spiritual practice is your intent. What do you want? Or, as Jesus asked, "What do you seek?"

Remember what I said at the beginning of today? About this work being hazardous? There is a fierceness about the teachings of Jesus that is very frightening. Living with clear-eyed, no BS psychic consciousness is something everyone of us, me too, is wary of. We know about. We know that there is a wholeness that transcends us. And, we also know that we live in fragmentation.

This is what I mean when I say that we suffer from depth deprivation. As Jim Finley puts it, "We are missing out on the gift of our own lives." We are all addicted to habits of the mind and heart that contribute to our unhappiness and to the

unhappiness of others. It is these habits of heart and mind that keep us from being who we are truly called to be.

And, now we have to work at being present to this and staying present to this in the midst of the current cultural war. This is part of what I mean when I say that we trust the Sacred Stream in all its ways, or God if you can use that word, to sustain us in everything and in every way and protect us from nothing. Our work is to become someone whose very presence makes this world, despite what is going on, a better place to be.

Now here is something: maybe this is just me and I'm projecting it onto you. If so, please forgive me. If not, hear this as a corporate confession of sin. You see, I think we can know about all this stuff I've talked about so far today. Even agree with it. But, still there is a part of us that wants to make a deal with the "mythic God." The deal goes something like this:

"God, this level of psychic consciousness is something I really want. I really do. It would mean the world to me. There is just one condition: when I get there, can I still be me? That way I'll get the respect I deserve. That way people will know what I've attained. Can we do that?"

We're all like that disciple who wanted to sit at the right hand of God.

So what about the cultural war “out there”? How do we live beyond the mythic level in a world that doesn't?

I have several observations, responses and suggestions about that.

Fragmentation in the outer world comes from fragmentation internally. We have all participated in creating a culture, for decades now and with accelerating speed, where the three main modalities of being are to be fragmented, withdrawn and numb. We have to do our own work at reversing these trends and practices, these addictions of mind and heart, within ourselves. Our current crisis didn't happen overnight. It took years. So, go back to the talk I gave at the beginning of this theme on the importance of patience and endurance. Patience and endurance are not personality traits; they are skills.

When I first got qualified to practice psychology, I had a job at Baylor College of Medicine. I was hired by a psychiatrist to work with alcoholics and their family members. I learned so much.

One of the things I learned is that when alcoholics quit drinking, they quit in an instant. It may take them years to get there but when they quit, they quit.

Also, quitting is a gift - that they work for. There's paradox to work with.

Those people taught me the deeper meaning of phrases like “one day at a time” and “take it easy.” I was also gifted with this piece that is called “Autobiography in Five Short Chapters.” It is by Portia Nelson. It goes like this.

Chapter I

I walk down the street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I fall in.

I am lost... I am hopeless.

It isn't my fault.

It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter II

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I pretend I don't see it.

I fall in again.

I can't believe I am in this same place.

But it isn't my fault.

It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter III

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I see it there.

I still fall in... it's a habit... but,

my eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter V

I walk down another street.

We have to walk down a different street. Doing the same thing over and over expecting a different result is indeed the definition of insanity. I'll say that in a different way: if our moving to the psychic consciousness level does not change the way we view the world, our economic beliefs, our politics, our ability to form and be part of new and inclusive communities of justice; there is no reason to believe we have made the move we think we have. So I'm not talking about some cosmetic religious change but an encounter of such immensity that everything shifts in position.

Another thing we might do is consider how we have contributed to this situation. Twenty-three years ago we had an opportunity that we squandered. It was called 9/11. Yes, that long ago. We had the world's sympathy and empathy. Our

political leadership lied to us about “weapons of mass destruction.” We went to war. Look at the results.

The attack on a party in Israel by Hamas was horrible. It was their 9/11. They have squandered their response and now anti-semitism is rising around the world.

People who live at the mythic level of consciousness believe everything can be settled by a war. We have wars and fights about everything. We fight cancer. We have wars on poverty, crime, and drugs.

At the mythic level people are seen primarily in terms of economic winners and losers. The world is divided and if you are on the losing side, the frustration turns to anger and bitterness. We are entering a time of battle for political offices, I have to fight traffic on the way home only to turn on the television to be frightened by the news because it isn't news but a form of entertainment really designed to get viewers to fight the competition. Then, I can watch one of the endless crime scene investigation shows, and on it goes.

The question that comes from the heart of compassion to any one we encounter is, “Where do you hurt?” And we all do.

How have we contributed, consciously or not, to an environment where, according to the most recent figures I could find, over sixty-five million of our citizens - we're talking about

people who actually vote - think that a thrice divorced, 91-times-indicted person who adores Putin should be our elected president? The people who think this aren't evil, bad people. They have what are to them, given their world view, valid reasons. What part have people on the other side of that issue played in that.

Further, we should not be surprised that hurt people hurt people. Or, another way of saying that is that people who live at the mythic level are like teenagers being given gas cans and matches. Resenting a fire for burning, that is for being itself, isn't helpful to anyone. People with mythic levels of religion rather like it that other people are going to burn in hell. Trying to get them to see otherwise is like trying to get a colorblind person to see green. They can't. We can stand by with bandages and ointments. I don't mean we shouldn't be politically and socially active. More to that in a moment.

Another suggestion: we should become mindful humans. I know, I know, you think you are. So do I.

I actually have a certificate to teach spiritual direction. That is, I teach, among other things, awareness. Yet, I can be so unaware.

You know how when a boat goes through water, it leaves a wake? Most of us, I know this is true for me, are or can be

totally unaware of the emotional wake we leave in the lives of other people.

I love coffee and love this particular coffee thermos to carry it in. It keeps my coffee piping hot all day long. Plus, when the top is closed, it doesn't leak. I can throw it into my brief case and not give it a thought. One Sunday I walked from the sanctuary building to here happy as a kid, carrying my coffee thermos - with the lid open spilling coffee every step of the way, inside and out both buildings and along the plaza; totally unaware. Everyone of us with our words, or lack of them, sometimes with just a look, have spilled on people.

We can walk down another path, we can live mindfully.

A huge thing we can do is be aware of the projections we make. In her wonderful book about "talking," "Fierce Conversations," Susan Scott says, "Being understood rather than being interpreted is so rare you could charge admission."

A projection is when my current psychological awareness, both conscious and unconscious, leave me and enter the outer world seeking something, usually another person upon which to fasten.

Simple example: Someone tells another person that they have lost a parent. If the person who hears this says, "I know

exactly what you are going through,” they have just lied. Not intentionally. But, without being mindful.

Another dynamic it is helpful to be aware of is transference. Transference is when I transfer to someone else my personal history in regard to the kind of experience I am having. We usually do that with our intimate partners. But, we can do it with our institutions - like a church. She isn't called “mother church” for nothing. The country isn't referred to as “land of our fathers” for nothing.

So this leads to another suggestion that would solve so many of our cultural problems: we can stop “othering” others.

And, of course, we can vote. By which I don't mean just casting a ballot but being informed.

The outcome of the upcoming presidential election is monumental. There is no doubt about that. And, there is a lot that can happen between now and then. But after that, whatever the outcome, we are still a very divided country. If you are listening to this, you are not at the mythic level. But, we live in a culture that is.

In every tradition that I know of there are great models for how to do this. The Jews lived in Exile. The early Jesus followers were persecuted beyond belief. After Constantine, many of the faithful either went into the desert or went

underground. Native Americans, in spite of the horrors this country put them through, held on to their identity and tradition. Africans brought here as slaves created a spirituality that has sustained them and enriched others in ways some are just beginning to understand. You know the Jane Elliot experience? I've shown the clip in here before. Jane Elliot in speaking to an all white audience asked, "How many of you would be willing to be black in American culture?" Not a hand went up. We know. Think of how the Dali Lama has managed to be an exile from his home in Tibet or how Thich Nhat Hanh lived as an exile from Viet Nam.

Another thing we could do, and there are so many more suggestions, is that we could become Schindlers. At the beginning of this talk I mentioned that when Stephen Mitchell's book on Jesus first was published, one of the movies that was just out was Schindler's List. I think it may be one of the greatest movies ever made. It is about how Oskar Schindler, a German industrialist saved more than a thousand Jewish lives by employing them in his factories during World War II.

Mythic consciousness is not kind, to say the least, to those it considers "other." We can be, individually and collectively, safe people and places for those who are hurt, excluded, judged, disenfranchised - whatever - by the system that wants to be in control in this country.

I think I can put the entirety of today's time in one sentence when it comes to what to do, to how to live beyond mythic consciousness in a world that isn't there.

When you go out from here today pretend, in the living of your life, that you are in training to be the next Dali Lama. That's one way to live beyond the mythic level in a world that isn't.

Amen. So be it.

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