

What Is True and How True Is It?
What Is Real and How Real Is It?

How many of you believe that you have a good imagination?

I want to begin our time together today by inviting you to join me in participating in an experiment. It is absolutely safe. Indeed, it might be fun. It does require that you have a good imagination. And, that you can follow instructions.

This might be easier if you close your eyes - just for a moment. I invite you to imagine that you have decided to go for a stroll on a beautiful beach. You are in a place where there are no other people, no sounds of traffic. You are casually and comfortably dressed. You can hear the sounds of the gentle waves as they come ashore. You are barefooted and can feel the sand beneath your feet and, perhaps, when you ever-so-slightly step into the warm water, feel the sand between your toes. The ocean air smells so clean. The sun, not too hot, gently warms you. Occasionally you hear the sound of sea gulls overhead. You take in another deep breath of the clean air. You continue to walk along enjoying the view of the ocean stretching off into the distance. You are feeling so relaxed and at peace.

Let's see how successful you were.

How many of you are now, at this moment at the ocean? Hold up your hand and leave them up.

Of course, we aren't at the ocean at all. But, this little exercise lets you know how susceptible we are to believing data that isn't actually factually true being true.

I have mentioned to you before how lucky I have been in the various teachers I've had along the way. One of them was Paul Watzlawick. (Please read more at (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Watzlawick) He died in 2007 at the age of 85 and was a pioneer in the field of human communication. He is the one from whom I first heard the words, "You cannot not communicate."

He did his work at a time when the entire field of physics was undergoing a change brought about by the discovery and understanding of general systems theory.

Involved in this was the discovery of ecology and applying that insight to all sorts of things. Everything and everyone is connected and if you perturb one aspect of a system there are reverberations throughout the system.

By the way, every time there is a shift in physics, everything that sits on top of that is affected. Starting with what we call the “harder sciences” like math all the way up to “softer ones” like philosophy and religion. This is one of the reasons most of organized religion is so often out of date and out of step. For example, when Copernicus and Galileo made their observations that the earth was not the center of our planetary system the church responded by arresting Galileo and condemning his work as heretical. The church did not officially reverse this opinion until 350 years later, in 1992.

Copernicus and Galileo introduced us to an awesome cosmos, not one where we are the center of things but, rather, one where we are immersed in a sea of uncontrollable mystery.

Most organized religion is a sort of pick and choose what fits you, a cafeteria or fast-food approach that does not make an actual experience of the Sacred necessary or even available to people. Just believe and belong. Transformation of self or of consciousness was not on the agenda. I can see how this may be good for social order but not for having any kind of deep experience with one’s Self or with the Sacred Mystery we are immersed in.

Religious conservatives have had a tendency to say, “We can do the old thing with the old mind.” Religious liberals have had a tendency to say, “We can do the new thing with the old mind.” The third way is to do “a new thing with a new mind.” People like Watzlawick helped usher in a new way by helping us understand how we use our minds and language to create the various worlds in which we live. By the way, the new way to do the new thing is love at ever and ever deeper levels. More about that before we are done here today.

I confess that I no longer remember the order in which I read the writings of Watzlawick. He wrote a book, “How Real Is Real: A Very Lively Demonstration of the Ways In Which Communication - Spoken, Written, Sign and Body Language -

Creates What We Call Reality.” It has on the cover an Escher drawing of a hand drawing itself. He wrote, or co- authored numerous publications.

His other books include “Pragmatics of Human Communication” and “Change.” They are among the most important and mind-changing books I have ever read. I’m not necessarily recommending them to you but they are important to know about.

These works help us understand how we form problems. Psychologists are interested in “problem formation and problem resolution.”

One of the vastly important lessons I got from my first spiritual teacher resided in his teaching me that almost all human and relational problems were the result of two epistemological errors we make. (Epistemology has to do with how we think and how we think about how we think.)

First, we cause ourselves and others difficulty by failing to accept that what is “is” and what ain’t “ain’t.”

Second, we cause ourselves and others difficulty by believing this falsehood: “I’m not happy now but I will be as soon as I can make you be different.” (Or, some variation of that.)

In the work we are doing in here we are seeking to have a new mind. One of the doors through which we can walk toward and into “new mind” is by paying attention to how our minds work. We do this by asking “how” questions and not “why” questions.

For example, the Buddha taught: “In the sky there is no distinction of east and west; people create distinctions out of their own minds and believe them to be true.” We think things and then, too often, make the mistake of believing the things we think.

Here is something you’ve heard before: The central truth of and for spiritual practice is “paying attention” and developing the resources to be present to “what

is.” Central to this spiritual practice is growing in the capacity to be non-judgmental.

So easy to say. So difficult to do.

At any rate, Paul Watzlawick has significantly shaped my thinking here. If you want a rather fun way to look at your own process, he wrote an amusing little book titled “The Situation is Hopeless But Not Serious: The Pursuit of Unhappiness.”

Events in and of themselves carry no meaning - until we give meaning to them.

Decades ago I was seeing a young man for therapy when he was involved in an automobile accident that caused him to lose a leg. He was in the process of completing his medical residency to be a surgeon and this accident derailed that. I tried to stay in touch with him and was not successful in that endeavor. He dissolved into a depression of pity and rage.

Some few months after this I read a story of a man who lost a leg to cancer and after a period of time for physical and, presumably, psychological adjustment, got involved in running marathons across Canada to raise money and awareness for cancer research. It occurred to me that the event of losing a leg has no meaning until we give it one.

Another seminal thinker who also influenced my own thinking was R. D. Laing. He was a Scottish born psychiatrist who also came into the field about the same time Watzlawick did. You can see his influence on my own thinking in these words that he wrote:

The range of what we think and do is
limited by what we fail to notice.
And, because we fail to notice
that we fail to notice,
There is little we can do
to change, until we notice
How failing to notice
shapes our thoughts and deeds.

What is required to move into this territory, to have this new mind, is what I mean when I use the word non-dual and it is from or with this mind-set that holy people are able to love their enemies, forgive offenses, and embrace paradoxes and apparent contradictions; as we seeing Jesus doing all the time. We'll see it in the teaching of his we are going to look at today.

Here is the teaching from Gospel of Thomas that has been the inspiration for this talk:

Yeshua says,

For what reason would you
only wash
the outside of a cup?
Do you not realize
that the creator of the outside
is the one who made the inside as well?

This phrase is used variously in the different Jesus narrative accounts. It is found in one version in Matthew and in another in Luke. There it is about cup and self: the outside of the cup concerns ritual purity, the inside of the self is full of greed and evil. In Thomas, however, the saying is recorded without context or moralizing. The outside and the inside are made equal because they are both made by the same creator.

Jesus was raised in a culture that had tons of rules about purity and cleanness and holiness. Indeed, in the various narratives there are frequent controversial encounters between Jesus and the keepers of these rules about what established ritual purity. The religious leaders who opposed Jesus did so because he broke those rules on a regular basis. They insisted that purity was achieved by, for example, what you take in and how one maintained cleanliness on the outside. In the narratives Jesus said, "No, it is what comes from the inside that matters."

The purpose of all the purity regulations was to make a difference between "us" and "them," between the good people who have access to the goodies of God -

matters like forgiveness and being included - and those who had no such admission to those goodies.

Every society has these access laws. The difference between folks may be determined by how you dress, where you work, where you went to school, your accent, who your parents were, how much money you have, etc. Purity laws are articulated by the managers of the goodies in order to guard access to the goodies, to give some preferential treatment and to deny it to others. It happened in that society, it happens in ours.

Then along comes Jesus and upends all of this by saying, “These distinctions you make are not wise, no useful.” Indeed, I think that this saying reflects the heart or core value of Jesus teaching - purity of heart.

The religious establishment of his day stressed purity on the outside - external behavior. The purity codes of his religious tradition put strict conformity to the exoteric practices at the center of religious and spiritual life. Jesus reverses it. It was not the outside that needed attention the most but the inside. One’s inner relationship to Sacred mystery was the key. Everything else was secondary. Who could dispute the simple culinary practice that it was the cleanness on the inside of the vessel that was most important in any kitchen.

This teaching is another invitation into non-duality. The inside and the outside are the same. This is an invitation to abandon duplicity and hypocrisy.

Here is the R. D. Laing quote again:

The range of what we think and do is
limited by what we fail to notice.

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For example, there are a lot of proverbs that govern our lives as well.

Opposites attract. But, birds of a feather flock together.

The early bird gets the worm. But, haste makes waste. So, hurry up and wait.

All good things comes to him who waits. But, A stitch in time saves nine.

Attack is the best form of defense. But, he who lives by the sword dies by the sword. So, be a hawk and a dove.

Clothes make the man. But, you cannot judge a book by its cover. So, be superficial or not.

Familiarity breeds contempt. But, home is where the heart is. So, we hate and love familiar experiences.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder. But, out of sight, out of mind. So, your absent lover will pine or play the field.

Which is it? It depends.

It depends on our ability to step away from the globalizations that dualistic thinking leads us into and hold the tension of opposites. Of course, if somebody doesn't know this or stays reflexively loyal to a philosophy or belief it can cause them and the people around them incredible pain.

This, in my opinion is exactly what has happened to, for the most part and though there are exceptions to this, to what it means to follow Jesus in our culture. Christianity for many people has become an overly personalized, private state of mind that involves believing certain things about Jesus, God or the Bible rather than a state of mind and being part of a community that is about being less fearful, more peaceful, more compassionate and committed to creating a most just social order.

Our culture thrives on fear and accusation. So-called “fake news” is designed to stir up fear and anger. This is why so many people own guns that are not designed for hunting and give their blessing to such an obscenely large defense budget.

This private and dogmatic stance - “I believe the right things about God and Jesus” - is a corruption of faith and not only renders religion impotent but results in the church being silent about matters that matter. A significant number of children in our public school system go to bed hungry at night and we are spending time and money debating a bathroom bill?

When I was in graduate school there was a really obscene comedian whose name was Lenny Bruce. One of his lines was, “Everyday more and more people are leaving church and returning to God.” That’s no longer true. Everyday more and more people are leaving church and turning to nothing. Consequently, these are the people who are open to believing anything.

Happily, there are some bright lights. You are one of them. Rohr’s organization is one. The new monastic movement as seen in people like Shane Claiborne is another. The Centering Prayer and Contemplative movement is another.

I am truly encouraged by the increasing number of people who are not seeking to be convinced by logical or rhetorical evidence in order to step deep into Sacred Mystery. They sense that faith isn’t something that one comes to through debate, data or arguments. Faith comes by noticing the lives of people who have faith and then living into it themselves. There is, I believe, a turning toward a more experiential, paradoxical, mystical and relational approach to faith and spirituality. This is an approach the early followers of Jesus experienced and understood.

What I’m teaching in here may sound new to some but it really isn’t. Rather, it is a reclaiming of the values of Jesus of inclusion, grace, acceptance and unconditional love. In that sense it is very conservative.

Though it may scare the bejabbers out of us, it does me, we seek to reclaim the heart of faith which is a direct mystical encounter with the Sacred, a felt connection with Source, a prayerful relationship to the Cosmic Christ and a deep trust in the Way, teachings and example of Jesus.

What blocks us from this kind of approach to religion or spirituality? To borrow, again, from Laing's quote, what keeps us from failing to notice and failing to notice that we fail to notice?

One thing is the tendency we have to globalize our thoughts. We use words like "always" and "never" and we clump people together in phrases like "all Republicans," "all Democrats," "all women," "gays are . . ." and the list goes on.

Another thing that can shut us down is not having tolerance for ambiguity. This makes us jump to conclusions rather than waiting to hear or get all sides of a story.

Another thing is having a personal value system that blocks us from considering alternatives.

Then there is rigidity - holding on to a perspective even when it self-limiting. Back when the AIDS crisis was so intense, I've worked with many men dying from complications from AIDS whose parents would have nothing to do with them.

If someone has a narrow, limited range of experience, that can shut their vision down too. I know people who have firmly held opinions, for example, about gays or Muslims who have never had a meal with such a person. Or, maybe more importantly, prayed with someone so seemingly different from them.

Just notice about yourself if this doesn't happen to be true for you: We have a tendency to ask questions of people we admire. We give advice to people we are worried about.

Some people get older and wiser. Some people just get older.

We don't want to be in that group.

The questions - What is true and how true is it? And, what is real and how real is it? - are vitally important for spiritual well being, and for our country's well being and for our planet's well-being.

Spiritually mature people, like Jesus, see that everything and everyone belongs.

Even the painful parts, the formerly rejected parts are all part of the whole. The spiritually mature person accepts him or herself, forgives him or herself, which allows for the ability to accept and forgive others.

Seeing what is truly true and what is really real is, I think, the very purpose of human life. We look at the container of life and though paying attention to the outside of it is an important life task, because the stronger and bigger it is, the more it can hold; moving to the inside which contains what we drink and seeing that it is not contaminated, is critically important.

Notice the people that you admire and respect. They are not interested in holding on to old hurts or feeling the need to punish other people. Their superiority complexes have dropped away. They have learned to withdraw their time, attention and energy away from negative things and people rather than fight them directly.

The container in Jesus' teaching enlarges to hold everything. Now you are just here and here is enough. In this space I don't have to prove that I or my group is the best, that my ethnicity is superior or that my religion is the only one or that I deserve superior treatment by my society.

Buddha said that religious beliefs and practices are like a raft that takes us across a wide river. While on it, perhaps we worshipped the raft. There comes a time to love the shore where it has taken us. Perhaps we once defended signposts. Now we have arrived where the signs pointed. We now enjoy the moon rather than debating about whose finger pointed most accurately to it. We are even able to take in the dark side of the moon, the darker sides of ourselves.

If we know anything, we know that we are all in this together. We know that we all do better when we all do better. Life is more participatory than assertive. We don't have to be better than anybody else on the dance floor. Though that, witness "Dancing With the Stars," is the ethos of our culture. God has taken care of the matter of identity. The brightness comes from within and our task is to bring that forth.

Erik Erikson, the psychologist - and another shaping influence in my life - called reaching this point “generativity.” A generative person is a person who is eager and able to generate life from his or her own abundance and for the benefit of following generations. On the inside of the cup in Jesus’ teaching we are able to contain more and more truth, more and more neighbors, more and broader vision, more and more of an experience of the Sacred.

The kind of person I’m trying to describe and to be, is one who does not have strong and final opinions about every thing, every event or most people. When we are in this space we no longer have to change and adjust other people to be happy ourselves. Ironically, in this position we are more than ever before in a position to change people but we do not need to. That makes all the difference. Human integrity probably moves people more than anything.

I don’t want to make this sound idyllic. Because the person who knows truth and reality also knows the pain of the world. But no other way of being makes sense or gives deep satisfaction to the True Self. You see this in Jesus and all the great spiritual giants. They did not so much have to have what they loved. They loved what they had. The inside of the cup still holds life sadness and joy.

I want to close this reflection by reading to you a poem a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke.

I believe in all that has never yet been spoken.

I want to free what waits within me
so that what no one has dared to wish for
may for once spring clear
without my contriving.

If this is arrogant, God, forgive me,
but this is what I need to say.
May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back,
the way it is with children.

Then in this swelling and ebbing currents,

these deepening tides moving out, returning,
I will sing you as no one ever has,
streaming through widening channels
into the open sea.

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