

Don't Screw It Up

Here are some of my assumptions about "what is."

My contention is that the central truth of and for spiritual practice is "paying attention" to "what is." Here is my major assumption about "what is."

There is, all around us, a Sacred Mystery, a Divine Reality, where we are not only safe but where we are all one. There is in each of us a longing, whether we recognize it or not, to live in this Mystery and Reality.

It is my belief that the primary goal of being truly and fully human is to grow in our awareness of, participation in and expression of this Mystery and Reality.

Though I use the teaching of Jesus as my central reference point in teaching about these matters, Sacred Mystery and Divine Reality - both around us and within us - is not dependent on any particular religious expression.

The teachings of Jesus are likely more than any of us can embody or fulfill in our efforts to live within our culture, to stand against our culture and to live in service to our culture. Whenever any religion claims exclusivity for itself, it inevitably becomes violent.

These, to me, are important assumptions and we need to be reminded of them from time to time.

Because - at least, this is true for me and I'm guessing it is true for you as well - most of the time we are not aware of living in this Sacred Mystery and Divine reality and it is more than easy for any of us

to buy into the religion of our culture in such a way that we end up serving the claims of the ego rather than expressing the compassion and kindness of the Self.

We live in such a culture of distraction that all of us, any of us, can be easily affected by "continuous partial attention." "Continuous partial attention" is when you are driving a car and on the cell phone at the same time. Or, are on the Internet, watching TV, responding to an e-mail and answering a question from your child at the same time.

Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic without a radio but now we won't go to the produce department without a cell phone.

We have come to that part in the story of "the last week" that provides us with the perfect opportunity to talk about why we have such difficulty and hesitancy to face into what the complete spiritual journey is all about - using the Jesus story as a reference point.

I'm going to read to you Robert Funk's selections that lead to the death of Jesus. Usually, at least has been true recently, I use Eugene Peterson's translation. Funk's is starker.

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Led by one of Jesus' disciples, the police show up at the place Jesus and the rest of his followers were gathered. Because Jesus had often gone to the place, Jesus' followers knew the place too. And the police seized Jesus and held him fast. And the disciples all deserted Jesus and ran away.

They brought Jesus before the high priest.

The ranking priests bound Jesus and turned him over to Pilate, the Roman governor.

Then Pilate had Jesus flogged and turned him over to be crucified.

And the Roman soldiers bring him to the place Golgotha (which means "Place of the skull"). And the soldiers crucify him.

Now some women were observing this from a distance, among whom were Mary of Magdala, and Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome. These women had regularly followed and assisted him when he was in Galilee, along with many other women who had come up to Jerusalem in his company.

Then Jesus breathed his last.

* * *

I want to show you a brief video.

Before you see it I want to remind you of some things that are so easily and quickly forgotten by us because we spend so much time not only in a state of constant partial attention and distraction but also we spend a lot of time living not simply out of our egos rather than the Self but also living at a dualistic level in the outer world. When we do this not only do we mistake such an existence for really living but also we overlook the world of unconscious archetypes and the role that projection and transference play in the worlds we construct.

Paul Tillich, that great theologian who coined the phrase "the courage to be," said that the phrase "God is

love" means that this love has as its goal the desire to "reunite the separated." That is to say, authentic love, one of the primary definitions of Sacred Mystery, seeks to bring forth the disowned and unrecognized aspects of ourselves into consciousness and, then, bring these together into completeness. Jungian psychology emphasizes the importance of including both male and female aspects of who we are in the reunion.

One of Jesus frequent metaphors for living in Sacred Mystery and Divine reality - he called it The Kingdom of God - was that of a wedding.

This video is something that took place at a wedding. I think it is highly unlikely the man speaking has a clue what a powerful metaphor what he says and the context in which he says it is about our spiritual and psychological work - to bring into awareness and to reunite the separated. You are going to see a father at his daughter's wedding. He is speaking to his future son-in-law in what is the part of a traditional wedding known as "giving the bride away." Don't leave it at that level. This is a powerful metaphor.

Here is the video - <http://safeshare.tv/w/kmODJCMfAH>

Don't screw it up.

The invitation Jesus issues to his followers during the story of "the last week" is an invitation to follow him to life though death. Not only did they not like that, they had a difficult time accepting it. The metaphorical meaning of the disciples failing to recognize Jesus on the walk to Emmaus is because they thought his mission had failed. Surely, the one who was going to bring the Kingdom of God, could not have been crucified. But he had been.

If they were unprepared for such a failure, how much more are we unwilling to take this one on.

Likely none of us will be called to physically give up our lives. Nonetheless, the journey into wholeness, if we choose to get on that path, involves moving to life through death.

Wholeness, if we decide to go for it, though, is not something we pull off. It is a gift. Though it is a gift, we have to do the work to be in a position to be open enough to receive it.

I said last week that one of the reasons I think we have difficulty with a spiritual practice, especially that of meditation or contemplative prayer, is that it is initially not rewarding at all. One of the first things most people experience when they meditate is what is called "monkey mind." The mind seems to have a mind of its own. If you are able to sit and simply "pay attention," you will - I promise - encounter a more direct and full experience than any of us wants to admit to of how controlling, blaming, judging and frightened we are.

Then, even worse, the experience of Sacred Mystery is not something we control. It is not something we make happen. We want to be in charge. We want to deserve this. We want to be special. True religion and spirituality undercuts the belief that the ego is who we really are. It is indeed like a crucifixion. To life through death.

This I think is the genius of the 12-step program - which is not only a good way to deal with any of our addictive beliefs or behaviors, it is also a good way to deal with life itself. Until we can admit that we

are powerless, real Power will not be either recognized or accepted.

What Richard Rohr teaches, and other spiritual masters teach this as well, is that real transformation cannot happen until people lose their foundation and ground. Then they realize that they are not holding on to, rather, they are being held. When, after one of my talks in here, someone says to me, "You give me nothing to hold on to," then I think I have succeeded.

Further, all wise and useful spiritual teaching shows us what to do with our pain. Again, as Rohr teaches, what we do not transform, we transmit. What could be more painful than crucifixion?

One of the things I learned from Robert Johnson, the great Jungian analyst, is that likely the only choice we have about being wounded in this world is how we live with our wounds. We can deny them, numb ourselves to them in the countless ways our society offers us, or export them to others.

If we cannot find a way to live with our wounds heroically, that is Johnson's term, we will inevitably become bitter, negative people. Unless we can find a meaning for human suffering, that Sacred Mystery and Divine Reality is somehow in the suffering that comes as part of being human, that Sacred Mystery can even use suffering for good, we have really screwed it up.

Spiritual and psychological growth does not come from gaining more knowledge, having stuff, gaining power, having control, winning, or any of the other things we are taught to value in our culture. The awful/good news is that spiritual and psychological growth come from the shattering of the ego, from crucifixion.

Please keep in mind: the kind of spiritual understanding and wisdom I am trying to communicate is a Mystery. The dualistic mind can't get it. The mystery is - and this is why in the Christian faith the cross is at the center of things for us to stand before and to contemplate - tragedy, suffering, pain, betrayal, and death itself can bring us into awareness of Sacred Mystery and can cause Divine Reality to come alive in us. There are no dead ends. Everything can be transmuted and everything can be used.

If we stay with this Paschal Mystery long enough, our dualistic minds break down and we become slow to call things totally bad or good. The best things I have experienced in my life have been on the other side of events which, at the time, I called the worst. Our culture doesn't support this but what Jesus teaches is that the virtues that really matter are humility, patience, compassion.

Sooner or later life is going to lead us, as it did Jesus, into a place where we can't fix it, can't control it, can't explain it, can't understand it. That is the place where transformation most stands a chance. When we let go and risk falling into the Mystery.

It is when we are led away from depending on our own resources that we learn to call on Sacred Mystery, Divine Reality, True Self, Christ Consciousness, Buddha Mind - whatever you want to call it, that we learn who we really are. We are who we are in God. No more. No less.

In September, over Labor Day weekend actually, Sherry and I, and my son, Douglas, are scheduled to attend another one of the annual experiences that Richard Rohr's organization, The Center for Action and

Contemplation, produces. These events usually last four days and feature someone they call "a master teacher." On two occasions this master teacher has been James Finley, the former student of Thomas Merton and Merton's biographer.

This year it will be Rob Bell.

I first heard of Rob Bell when my son-in-law handed me a book by Bell and said, "I think you might be interested in this." The book's title is "The Velvet Elvis" and it represented Bell's attempt to "repaint the Christian faith."

Bell grew up in an evangelical church. He had, it was discovered, a knack for speaking and connecting with people. In 1998 he founded the Mars Hill church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was in an abandoned shopping center. He decided there would be no dress code and no pulpit. If you see a video of him speaking he looks very like the late Steve Jobs rolling out a new Apple product. He had absolutely everything going for him. He was very popular and his church had become huge.

Then, at this point in his career, he did something dangerous. He started studying the Bible. Not reading it to confirm his prejudices. But, digging into biblical history, learning about the Jewish traditions that shaped Jesus' life and the competing agendas that shaped his message after his death. He saw that the Bible was not a hermeneutically sealed box.

He was no longer able to believe the doctrine of biblical inerrancy he had been taught as a child. One Sunday he even hid in a closet rather than go into the church to preach what he had discovered to be the real truth. At the last moment he decided it was better to be generous with what he was discovering.

Grand Rapids, Michigan is home to Zondervan Publishing House, the place where over ninety percent of all the Bibles in the world are printed. The demographic is highly evangelical, conservative - if not Fundamentalist - Christian.

Bell became tremendously popular among many and controversial among some. Every move he made both gained him followers and lost church members. His desire to include women in positions of leadership on the church staff is only one example of what some folks didn't care for. I, along with thousands of others, subscribed to the podcasts of the Mars Hill worship services and his sermons. They were thoughtful, scholarly and on the side of compassion, inclusivity and social justice. Bell moved his family from their comfortable suburban home to the inner city, sold one of their cars and tried to practice what he preached.

He wrote many books. I've read most of them. The second book of his I read was "Jesus Wants to Save Christians." It is a book about how to read the Bible. The subtitle of the book is "Learning to read a dangerous book."

He was provoking a lot of controversy. That was not his intention. He wanted the information he was providing to contribute to people's liberation. But, when people have beliefs that are precious to them, even though those beliefs are based on incorrect information - like, for example, a belief in the substitutionary atonement as a way to understand the death of Jesus - when people feel these beliefs are threatened in some way, they can be really nasty.

It was in that context that Bell decided to write a book, "Love Wins," in which he expressed his dream of a

world without arguments. He wanted to persuade Christians to stop firing verses at each other and start working to build the kind of world he heard Jesus teaching about

In "Love Wins" Bell also describes a future where at some point there is healing, reconciling and return for everyone. I personally have always been puzzled by what I call "the evangelical dilemma." Evangelicals want people to "accept Jesus" but "believe the Bible." As you know, a person can find proof for almost anything in the Bible. What Jesus did was embrace and include everyone. If a person accepts Jesus, and that doesn't mean believing doctrines about Jesus, then the Bible becomes something else.

Bell became an even bigger celebrity after the publication of "Love Wins." He made the cover of Time Magazine. Meanwhile members of Mars Hill were having their doubts. Was this guy their kind of Christian any more? Was he even a Christian? (Labels are so dangerous!) Under mounting pressure and unpleasantness, some Christians can be so mean, Bell and his wife and family left that church and moved to California. He now leads retreats based on the kind of inclusive and inter-faith position he has been led to because of his own studies.

I have brought up the issue of Rob Bell and his book for a variety of reasons.

One reason is because the big temptation of any religion is to confuse its True message with its institutional need for security and certainty. We can so easily screw it up.

Rob Bell went for teaching the message of Jesus and it cost him.

I am working out my relationship to Sacred Mystery within the context of the teachings of Jesus, as I currently understand them. These understandings change. The institutional version of Christianity is not given to easy change.

I could give you thousands of examples but while working on this talk this is the first one that popped into my head:

Thirty four years ago, in 1980, a man named Baily Smith, who was at the time the President of the Southern Baptist Convention, and I suppose I picked this because the Southern Baptist Church birthed and nurtured me, said, "It's interesting to me at great political battles how you have a Protestant to pray and a Catholic to pray and then you have a Jew to pray," Smith stated. "With all due respect to those dear people, my friend, God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew. For how in the world can God hear the prayer of a man who says that Jesus Christ is not the true Messiah? It is blasphemy. It may be politically expedient, but no one can pray unless he prays through the name of Jesus Christ."

Why is the church so frequently at the end of the line about so many matters? Why is the church that is to represent the teachings of Jesus who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened," unable to be first in line to get to places where there is greatest need? The church should be first in line where there are people who suffer, who are hungry, who are exploited or who are simply denied some simple human right. The insistence of some people who call themselves Christian that Christianity is an exclusive religion has shrunk the good news of Jesus who had a radical compassion that touched prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors,

adulterers, women and other third-class citizens of his time.

These people screw it up.

And when someone like Rob Bell comes to say, "Everybody is in, love wins," he is, by preaching a message of inclusion, excluded. When Rob Bell's book was released, a respected evangelical leader, John Piper, tweeted, "Farewell Rob Bell."

Another reason I bring up the truth that "love wins" is that before Jesus was even born there had developed in the Jewish tradition the notion that there would have to be some redress for the injustices that had been done to the Jewish people who had been executed in their efforts to oppose and resist Roman imperial domination.

Some thought that the injustices were so great that surely God would restore to them in the future the life that had been denied to them in the present. I'm not going into the development of this theology now. You can read about it in Borg and Crossan's book, "The Last Week." Suffice it here to say that when someone would hear of a Jew who had been put to death in the fight for justice they would say, "God will raise him from the dead." Then, "God has raised him from the dead." It was an expression of hope in the face of injustice, an affirmation of faith. This phrase was in the language of the Jewish religion before the time of Jesus.

So the tradition developed that when Jesus died, he went to these departed souls. You can find this in Christian Scriptures. It is in the Apostles' Creed: He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into hell.

This is, of course, not a literal truth. It is the metaphor for the affirmation that no one is outside Sacred Mystery. No one. This is hard for a lot of people. It was hard when Jesus taught it. It is hard now.

What I know is that the teacher I listen to says, "Don't judge." I'm not successful at it but that is the teaching. One of the meanings of the cross, and this is a liturgical metaphor please understand, is that Jesus holds the pain, he doesn't transmit it.

If I had written the Jesus is crucified, dead, buried and on the third day rose story; I would have him coming back with guns a-blazing, getting even and getting back. That's not how the story goes.

How does it go?

It is the nature of the biblical story to be contemporized. That's what I want to do now. I need your help. Or, you need your help. You can stand back and observe all this mentally. Or, you can crawl inside this story, feel it, experience it. Indeed, when we don't make it contemporary, we miss the very meaning we say we are looking for. Let's not screw it up.

I'm inviting you to step into cosmic time. Into one of those paradoxical moments that never was but always is. This is the power of myth.

Just for a few minutes if we can bear it, we can watch with him and, this time, not go to sleep. Okay? Ready?

The barriers of time and space are transcended. We are now living in cosmic time. Let's look at us. Let's see ourselves.

The story says that on the same night he was betrayed, he took bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples. If we are really to remember, we understand it to say, on the same night that we betrayed him he broke the bread (a symbol of intimacy and love) and gives it to us.

We begin with Judas. Why there? Because we know for sure that since Judas was there we are not excluded. What if he had not been there? Then the broken bread of love would not be for us. I, Judas, the betrayer, am at the table and I receive the bread and the cup. He asks me to eat with him.

But, you see, the rest of us sitting at the table don't know who Jesus is talking about when he says, "One of you will betray me." "Why, who here would do such a thing?" Then we wonder, "Is it I?" We were all there and we all wondered - "Could it be me?" We didn't know it was Judas. And to protect ourselves we start pointing to our credentials. "How could it be me with all this certification I've got? Look at how much I've sacrificed to be part of this. Look at how hard I've worked. Look what a gamble I've taken." We forget the word of judgment because we're busy reviewing our credentials. The picture of the church grows clearer.

Then he turns to Peter and says to us, "Simon, you will deny me tonight, you will deny that you ever knew me." We respond with our feeble vows of faithfulness: "Who sir? Me sir? No sir! Not I sir! I'll go to prison first; even to death."

Then, knowing the stuff we are made of, he tells us to bring along our money bags and our swords and accompany him to the garden. How he knows us better than we know ourselves. We must have our money and our swords, for these are our crutches; these protect us from

ourselves; these build our ego and we need them to keep us from having to face the awful truth of who we are.

We go with him into the garden and he asks us to watch and pray while he goes off alone himself to pray. He says, "Be with me right now. I need you." And he goes off into total loneliness to experience the agony of being human with his plea, "O God, I don't want to die." He is even lonelier when he returns and finds us asleep. He asks us to be with him and we fall asleep. The picture of the church becomes clearer.

And then it happened and it happened quickly. The soldiers and the priests and Judas come. Judas kisses him. Our ire is up about that, our indignation kindles. We rise to the occasion. "Lord, shall we strike with the sword?" One of us takes a swing and cuts off the ear of the slave of a high priest. O, we wake up from our lethargy all right. Indignant and self-righteous we gather our forces, we muster our strength and go forth to the fray. We set out on our crusade - and we nick a little piece of an ear. And we see ourselves a bit better because the fact is that we all flee, every one of us abandons him - with our purses and our swords.

Then Peter. With Peter we deny we ever knew him. All the vows we made back there are of no use now. We never really knew him. Right there in the court yard we confess it to the maid, so she will think better of us - "Look, I never really knew him." And when the rays of the dawn come he looks at us after the trial. The text says, "The Lord turned and looked at Peter." Each of you must decide for yourself what Peter saw in those eyes. What a comfort it would be if we could convince ourselves that in them we heard the reprimand: "Ah ha, Peter, I told you so." But, no, I fear we all know what it was we saw there. It was - "Peter, I still love you." And we go out into the night and we cry.

Yes, each of us knows by experience and personally the life-style of those who betrayed and then crucified him. You know the spiritual that asks, "Were you there when they crucified my lord?" Not only there. One of the main characters.

If you have ears of faith, at the foot of the cross you know that the word to you from this most personal expression of God, of Sacred Mystery, of Divine Reality, the word to you no matter what you've done is: I do love you still.

Don't screw it up.

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