

## Traveling In The Belly of a Paradox

### Journey Into Wholeness

Our goal is to Become Involved in the Process of Becoming Centers of Freedom and Love.

These are the ways I described the teachings I offered and the work I did when I began it in 1966. That's a long time ago. Fifty years to be exact.

“Journey Into Wholeness” is a phrase I got from a teacher, Robert Johnson, Jungian analyst.

Robert is still alive. His books have sold over two and a half million copies. He is a introvert, an almost painfully shy man.

(Here is a link to learn more about him - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_A.\\_Johnson\\_\(psychotherapist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_A._Johnson_(psychotherapist)) )

A series of life experiences, traumas actually, that he had as a child sent him searching for something deeper. He studied Hinduism for a while. Indeed, for as long as he was physically able, he spent three months a year in India. Eventually, Robert found his way into Jungian analysis. After the best possible education in that discipline, he came back from Switzerland and he set up a private practice in Los Angeles. After ten years of this he closed his practice and became a member of Saint Gregory's Abbey, a Benedictine Monastery.

After four years there he returned to California and resumed his practice. He wrote a book: “He: Understanding Masculine Psychology.” It became a best-seller. He continued to write and publish books that in very accessible language interpreted the myths and stories that have helped shape the human race. You will find that most Jungian psychologists are also deeply involved in the spiritual world and many carry religious credentials.

He wrote his autobiography a few years ago, “Balancing Heaven and Earth: A Memoir of Visions, Dreams and Realizations,” and I HIGHLY recommend it.

## Journey into Wholeness

That descriptive phrase belongs to Robert Johnson.

The other descriptor I've used over the years is, as far as I know, original with me. We could "camp out" on each word for a long time.

We are to become - that is a choice, involved in the process of becoming - there is growth and not a steady state, centers - rather than being in any way fragmented, of freedom - the highest goal of the human is to be truly free, and love - that is the definition of the Sacred Mystery from which we emerged and to which we return.

This too is a journey.

The most frequently used metaphor for the way we spend our time on this planet is that of "journey" Whether one claims to be religious, spiritual, secular, atheist or none of the above; this is the case. We journey, aimlessly or with meaning, "from the cradle to the grave."

It has struck me as odd, and this has been true from the very beginning of my conscious decision to journey toward what Carl Jung calls "integration" or wholeness in freedom and love, that I live in a culture that values "progress" in absolutely every area of existence except when it comes to religion. Religion has become a love affair with the past and the "status quo" and embraces a deep fear of the future.

Whereas physics is revealing that the very nature of reality is evolving and creative, religion seems to fight change every step of the way.

However, I can make a case, as anyone could who can read, that every wise and useful spiritual undertaking begins with a decision to get up and leave the place one has become comfortable with, the place where one has received the initial nurture and guidance necessary for navigating the first part of life, the place we call "home," and head out for a destination we know not of.

The Jewish faith begins with Abraham receiving a call from God to get up and leave home and set out for a destination yet to be shown to him.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham> )

Buddha had a series of events that called him to leave the comfort of the palace in which he grew and head out for a life that sought peace from the inevitable suffering that comes as part of being human.

In my own life and work, and you will have to speak for yourself here, I want to head away from those things, both in the inner world and in the outer world, that keep me from Life, and experience a deeper union with Sacred Mystery - also both in the inner world and outer.

I'll tell you something I've learned about this journey: we do it in the belly of a paradox. I got that phrase from Thomas Merton's writings. You are going to hear more from and about him today.

So, here at the beginning let me put the paradox on the table. We'll spend the rest of our time today trying to unpack it - using dualistic language to try to understand non-duality.

We are on a journey. We are always traveling. Those of us who are on a consciously chosen spiritual journey are always attempting to move from those things, beliefs and behaviors, in both the inner and outer world, that block us from experiencing our true Selves and having union with Sacred Mystery. These are, of course, goals we never fully realize.

But we keep traveling. Not knowing where we are going. And, yet, at the same tie, knowing we have already arrived.

As Merton has put it, we are privileged to be on a long and difficult journey.

One Jesus saying that seems fairly authentic is, and this is Eugene Peterson's translation, "Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with sure fire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time.

Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life - to God!  
- is vigorous and requires total attention."

This is why I have said that the teachings of Jesus have everything I want, they attract me. At the same time they scare me. How narrow is the gate I have to go through? What can I take with me? How dark is "the dark night of the soul"?

Here is the teaching from the Gospel of Thomas we are going to look at today:

\* \* \*

Yeshua says,

Whoever does not  
Refuse father and mother  
Cannot become my student.  
Whoever does not reject  
Brother and sister,  
Accepting the cross as I do,  
Is not ready for me.

\* \* \*

Now, this is the same guy who said, "Love your neighbor. Love your enemies. People will know you are a follower of mine by how you love one another." Here, however, and he says it several places - he will say it again in Thomas - he seems to be saying something just the opposite.

Here is how I currently understand this teaching: in order to be here, which is where Sacred Mystery is, we can't be anyplace else. We can't be back there in time or out there in the future. If that is where we are, we have to leave those places in order to be here. In psychological and spiritual lingo this is called "leaving home."

In the Hebrew Scriptures, at the beginning of the Jewish religion, God called Abraham to leave home. The actual text says, "The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your kin folk, and your parents' house, and go to a country that I will

show you. And so Abram set out.” The history of the Jewish race hinges on this single event.

In one part of the Jesus narrative he calls a man to follow him. He begins his ministry by calling men and women to drop what they were doing and come follow him. In this particular instance the person said, “Let me first go say goodby to those at my home.” That sounds reasonable enough. What Jesus said in response was, “No one who puts hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom.” As long as we have a home back there we are tied to in any way, to that same extend, we are excluded from the Kingdom because we are incapable of being here.

A good psychological and spiritual goal is to become homeless so that we can be at home wherever we are.

For most of us the word “home” probably conjures up some image of our parents’ house of the place where we grew up. Very often I will hear people who have lived in Houston for decades say that they are taking a trip this weekend. “Where are you going?” “Home.”

When I use the word “home,” I am talking about some symbolic, not literal, reality. The event of leaving home is far more profound than simply leaving a house or a town. This is a spiritual event. You may be a thousand miles away from where you were born and call home but still very tied there emotionally.

An important question for spiritual work is: what and where is home? We have to know in order to leave it.

Home is where the heart is. Home is a place to which one is tied. Home is a locale where part of one’s spirit is left behind. Home is any place that still contains one’s heart, one’s feeling of well-being, of belonging, of being “at home.”

Home is where you can be yourself. Where you can do, say, think, whatever you please. Home is where you can relax, kick off your shoes (emotionally as well as physically,) and feel accepted as you are. Pretense and competition can be laid aside at home. At home you don’t have to measure up or try to please everyone.

Home is an island of unqualified acceptance and personal liberty in a sea of rejection and playing by other people's rules.

You didn't have such a home? At least not in the place where as a child you slept at night? Then, where did such images come from? When I was a child, like countless other children, I ran away from home one day. What was it I was looking for?

My point is that home stands for any such place - either actual or imaginary. We are to sever ties with either; to give up emotional dependence on the house of our youth or the dreamed of home in our mind. To leave home means no longer having a haven of rest back there in our past or out there in our dreams. It is to have no external place, physical or mental, that is home. It is to be homeless - unattached emotionally to any place. As long as we are tied someplace else, we can't be here, much less be at home here. You can't be bound and free at the same time.

To be on the spiritual journey of becoming centers of freedom and love is to get unbound from distant homes so that we can be fully present with all our hearts wherever we find ourselves.

The task is to not let the wish to be someplace else distract us from full life now. This is it. Things aren't going to get any better than this. Or, worse. Of course, this doesn't last either.

I call this the most difficult of all spiritual or psychological tasks: to fully arrive at being here where we can see that the Kingdom of God is right here, right now, within us, among us.

One sign of progress along this journey is seen in our willingness to accept that we belong here. Even if the place is strange and unfamiliar, even unpleasant, that this is where we need to be in the process of becoming who we are. Right now this is home. This class, this city, this country, this globe.

So, since this is home, and we are not visitors here or merely passing through, we will involve ourselves in whatever is involved in taking responsibility for us to make this our home. The problems of the place where we live are our problems.

The people where we live are our people. Differences in geographical or ethnic background do not deprive us of family. At home in the world, we join the family of all persons. All people are our people.

It takes a great deal of faith to live this way. You see plainly here, I hope, that faith is not something you believe in mostly or even primarily. Faith is something we do.

And, further, let me be as clear as I can possibly be here: Taking this contradictory, paradoxical journey is not something that you add to your list to do. Committing to become involved in the process of becoming centers of freedom and love is the way we do our list. One of the ego's biggest tricks is to seduce us into saying, especially when it comes to tending to the Soul or Self, to anything that takes us away from the ego, "I'm going to get to that first thing in the morning."

I want to say a smidgen more about this saying before trying to elaborate on my current understanding of it a bit more. I say "current understanding" because I've come to understand that another big danger in doing this work is to think, "I've got it." How many times have I said that about something only to discover that "I don't got it at all!" Every step on the journey is always fresh, always new.

In the time of Jesus, as we talked about last week, the glue that held the society together was the "belonging system." Jesus was saying, "NO!" to that. Knowing that one belonged to God, that that was one's true identity, took precedence over everything else. Jesus was a social radical

By the way, this is the only place in the Gospel of Thomas where the cross is mentioned which causes some scholars to say maybe only a part of this teaching is authentic Jesus. Perhaps. The way I see it is that the cross was prevalent in the time of Jesus. Rome used it to intimidate anyone who was seen as a threat to their setup. The cross was not only an instrument of intimidation but also of extreme suffering. Anyone who left the system was going to suffer.

I also remind you that Jesus was in the tradition of the Jewish prophets. He was steeped in the stories and traditions of his faith. He had seen how they had gone

wrong and wanted to reform them. His basic, unassailable confidence was in an understanding of God who leaves the future open.

This does not solve problems. Life is confusing. The most faithful person finds it so. Things do not always make sense. Neither do people.

The journey starts in leaving home, as we have defined home.

So Abraham, and Jesus, leave home. Turns away. Departs. Security is behind. No road map. No pre-announced destination. No flight plan. No GPS. Rather Abraham, and Jesus, commits everything. He cannot go back, only forward.

And Jesus says to those who listen to him, "Follow me."

How does it work out? For Abraham? For Jesus?

Well, as for Abraham, at the start Abraham just goes from place to place. It is as if he had already heard the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said, "Don't worry about tomorrow. There will be enough tomorrow to worry about. Just deal with today. Right here. Right now."

There have been times in my life, and I'm sure there have been in yours as well, when it was not a matter of dealing with today but getting through the next hour. Our spiritual work is to get through whatever space we are in in such a way that we can come to the next step with an open road still in front of us. How? By having the faith that the Sacred Mystery that brought us to this point in our journey will be at least one step, maybe more, in front of us and will meet us when we get there.

All though the Jesus narratives, written as mystical documents and not news reports, Jesus is always calling people forward, sending them out, saying things like, "Tell the disciples I'll meet them in Jerusalem."

Of course, if we are tied to someplace else, either back there or out there, we can never get there. So, every time Abraham stopped to camp for the night, and I'm not sure how familiar you are with this story, he set up an altar to God. That is a

metaphor about affirming one's faith that God is around - even in what seem like strange places.

So he went on. Blazing a trail behind him - which is the only direction in which a trail can be blazed. This trail blazing is done with the faith that what hasn't even existed for us yet is going to be familiar, to be home, because God in it.

I've thought this for years: the problem with the story of Abraham, or the Exodus, or Jesus is that we hear them all from such a comfortable distance. We know how it ends. They didn't. And from their lives and journeys we are to learn something about faith, about being uprooted to travel through life as persons instead of staying in place as things.

Here is the teaching again, just so we can be clear about it. Don't take it literally. That's way too superficial. Take it seriously.

\* \* \*

Whoever does not  
Refuse father and mother  
Cannot become my student.  
Whoever does not reject  
Brother and sister,  
Accepting the cross as I do,  
Is not ready for me.

\* \* \*

Living this way is to live your life at risk. It's a gamble. Which means, we don't know the shape of the end of the journey. Things aren't sure or simple.

I got my introduction into useful mysticism through the writings of Carl Jung. Later, when I was introduced to the notion that Jesus was a Jewish mystic and in my attempt to understand his teachings, I went to some of my Jewish colleagues and asked about Jewish mysticism. That was like stepping off the high board at the deep end of the pool and not knowing how to swim.

There is a HUGE body of literature about Jewish mysticism. Overwhelmingly huge. Mystical Judaism is all gathered under an umbrella term “Kabbalah.”

(To learn more see - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbalah> )

The word “Kabbalah” is a Hebrew word that means “receiving/tradition.” Much of the Jesus story was shaped using Kabbalah ways of thought.

There is a writing, the Zohar, which is considered the foundational text for Kabbalah thinking. Reading this stuff will make your brain sore. In the Kabbalah tradition those who want to do the kind of growing we are talking about in here are encouraged not only to be on a pilgrimage but also to walk four paths simultaneously, to strive for four dimensions of consciousness. They are: literal experience (be here!), allusion to something beyond the literal, (see the Sacred in everything), the search for meaning, (the faith that there is more) and be open to the Mystical. This, according to the Jews, is the way to “paradise.” Jesus called it the Kingdom of God.

Most all of what Jesus taught can be found in the Jewish tradition or in teachings about the Jewish tradition, especially in the mystical writings. What made his teachings different was that he made them political and he emphasized that one's identity is to be found in who we are in God. Whereas the Judaism of his day had become legalistic he made it about forgiveness and inclusivity. It was, however, for his decidedly political emphasis that he was executed.

(These four paths are not only in the Zohar but can also be found in a document called The Babylonian Talmud which contains teachings dating from before the Common Era to around 200. This was the tradition of Jesus.)

(See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud> )

The journey these people made was not by themselves but as a communally, as a people. They travelled literally and metaphorically as a people. When Jesus said, “Leave your father and mother,” he wasn’t saying to run off and hide in a corner somewhere. His teaching was “follow me.”

What a tragedy that Christianity, especially since the Reformation, has made this corporate mystical journey into “having a personal relationship with Jesus” and made church into a service station that people attend once a week to get their faith fixed and their prejudices confirmed. None of you, of course! Church is meant to be a place that nurtures and supports individuals in a community of like-minded people along their journey toward where they truly already are.

I’m not idealizing anything about organized religion. I hope you understanding that. People project unrealistic expectations on various things all the time only to find out that no group or person or relationship can meet all our needs. It’s like being in a committed relationship with someone. You cannot meet all your partner’s needs nor your partner yours. The path to wholeness is to stay present to see the mystery, the profound mystery, that you are to each other. Imperfect communities and imperfect relationships - actually the notion of “perfection” is a deadly one - are good schools for us.

We are searching for a truth that will set us free, something that will help make us more loving people. When we find it, it will be a truth that we do not already know. How can something we already know set us free? And, when we find it, we ingest it and keep moving.

I’ve changed my mind about something this week. It came as a result of working on this talk.

I have believed, most of my professional life, that we human beings, if we are lucky enough not to have to worry about where our next meal is coming from are made up of about fifty percent nurture and fifty percent nature. The kind of care you received and observed for the first dozen or so years of your life make up half of who you are. The other half is the result of your personality. This is why work on the Enneagram is so important. By the way, your Enneagram number is not who you are. Your Enneagram number is what shows up when you don’t.

Fifty percent nurture. Fifty percent nature.

But, I’ve changed my mind.

Now, I have come to believe it is one third nurture, one third nature and one third pure choice.

No one has to undertake this spiritual journey. You can choose not to do so.

A man I have mentioned to you before, Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, has had enormous influence in my life. Several of his sayings I have where I can read them every day. One of this is this:

\* \* \*

Waking up this morning, I smile.  
Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.  
I vow to live each moment fully  
And to look at all beings  
With eyes of compassion.

\* \* \*

Yes, it has some scary and painful aspects to it. Growing in awareness, however, doesn't create pain - it merely reveals what is already there.

I think about the teaching of Jesus as what I call psychologically and spiritually "leaving home." We are on a journey. It is paradoxical. We travel as if we did not know where we are going. We live as if we have already arrived. We live in the belly of a paradox.

That "living in the belly of a paradox" comes, of course, from the story of Jonah and the big fish, which we'll talk about sometime. But I was sure I had read it in the writings of Thomas Merton. I went looking for it. I want to read you what I found. It is a kind of long quote, but I think worth it.

I preface it by saying that in the beginning of the Christian movement, Christianity and mysticism were one and the same. Mysticism is not a flight from this world. It

is the salvation of the world. Further, I want you to know - and I want to know for myself - that we have the capacity and the courage for journey.

About a decade before his death, Merton had one of the most transformative experiences of his life that led directly to his greater involvement with societal issues of peace and justice and that deepened his compassion while increasing his acceptance of the sacred being found in the midst of the world at it is. He wrote:

\* \* \*

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. . .

. . . Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts . . . the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed . . .

(This is from his book "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, p. 157ff.)

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Sacred Mystery wants to clear the road ahead of us for that kind of living and loving. Our task, our opportunity is, to whatever degree we are able, make it our business to make where we are right now a humanizing place for ourselves and all who live with us.

In the choice to be at home where we are as people responsible to receive or create and communicate meaningful possibility, in that kind of journeying, we are carried along in spite of ourself.

Again, in the belly of a paradox. The question is not so much what are we to do but who God is. Who God is and will be is the God of the present moment. It is not a question of which religion is right, what doctrinal stance matters, what morality boundaries we draw but that every moment and every place is full of the reality of Sacred Mystery reaching out to touch us where we are and thereby change where we are going.

How positively or negatively are you attached to someplace else - either back there or out there? If it makes sense to you that only by leaving that, you can be at home wherever you are, then you might need to start saying goodbye to some things. My suggestion with reference to the past is to dredge it up and reminisce, walk around and say "so long" rather than "see you later."

This is it. This is home.

Don't let the possibility of later moves distract you from the fact that for all we know tomorrow might not be ours.

Can you imagine a transplanted flower saying, "Well, I'm not going to be here long, so I won't put any roots down." Nor does the plant wait to be invited before putting down roots.

The issue is not abandoning other homes back there or out there. The issue is being here. See the paradox? Being homeless opens the door to being home.

Psychology and spiritually, this is a metaphor. Some people don't want to do this. My complaint about immature religion is that it leads some people to want to stay in the third grade forever.

Be busy in leaving where you have been and arriving fully where you presently are.

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