

## The Gift of The Luminous Pause

The last time we spoke together in here like this I began with the astounding news of the first ever photograph taken of a black hole.

This is a monumentally important achievement. It took 200 scientists on four continents using many radio telescopes synchronized so that they functioned like one giant radio dish the size of the earth. The person who put this together and coordinated the event is a 29 year old female by the name of Katie Bouman, a graduate of MIT.

There is, of course enormous scientific importance to this. The facts about this discovery are just too enormous for our puny brains to take in. For example, this black hole is fifty million light years away from us. A light year, I'm sure you know, is how long it takes a beam of light to travel from one point to another in a year. Light travels at 186,000 miles per second. There are almost 32 million seconds in a year. This thing is fifty million light years away from us. We can't take that in.

It takes a while for discoveries like this, at least the implications growing from such a discovery, to make their way into human consciousness. Even though Edward Hubble discovered that the universe was expanding and much bigger than we thought in the 1950s, it wasn't until much later that the general public began to realize or accept this.

I was taught in high school that the earth rotated around a minor star in a galaxy called the Milky Way. There might be another galaxy - or two. Now we know that there are at least two trillion galaxies in the universe, each containing billions of stars. It is likely that there are more than a few planets in what is called "The Goldilocks" zone. That is, where conditions are "just right," not too hot and not too cold, for life as we know it to exist. If that is the case, I wonder if the beings on those planets have abused and misused their planet as much as we have.

You are aware that it took Christianity, as least as represented by the Roman Catholic tradition, until 1984 to completely remove its condemnation of Copernicus. However, I think there are a lot of people who still emotionally hold it

that the earth is the center of things. Further, some Christian Fundamentalists hold it that Joshua really did stop the sun's movement in the sky in order to allow more daylight for the Israelites to kill their enemies.

William Falk in "The Week" (4/26/19) says that the value of the discoveries of things like this black hole is that "they remind us that human beings are not always petty, small and mean, and that at our collaborative best, Homo Sapiens is capable of magnificent things. Over the last century, science has shown that our universe is a far stranger place than our everyday experience would suggest. Space itself is curved and warped by mass. Time slows down on an object the faster it travels. Electrons act both as particles and waves. 'Entangled' particles seem to instantly know and react to what happens to their partner across vast distances. At the quantum level, there is no empty space. Particles constantly pop in and out of existence . . . The more we discover, the more it becomes clear that our certainties, whatever they may be, are built on illusions. We live in a great mystery."

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As a spiritual teacher, I have always wanted to be clear that what I teach is "how things seem to me" and not "how things are." I'm not smart enough to know "how things are." There do seem to be some "hard facts." We get them from science. But, even those are subject to new insights and discoveries. It has always puzzled me why the church, any organized religion actually, has been so resistant to new truths while at the same time claiming to have hold of the "absolute true word from God."

At the risk of sounding or getting inflated, I have from the very beginning of my ministry openly said that my commitment was to follow new light whenever it appeared and wherever it led. This, along with having been influenced by several significant Buddhist teachers and sources over the years, has lead me to aware of and teach about the danger of labels. Because, nothing lasts. And, I have also wanted to be as inclusive as possible, avoiding the notion that Christianity or the teachings of Jesus are the only way to experience and participate in Divine Presence.

Consequently, regardless of what has guided my teaching, I have taught mostly about peace, love and joy. Even my understanding of these things has changed dramatically over the years. Rather recently I added two more to this list of virtues - patience and humility. Patience has something to do with the teaching we talked about last time and will today. Humility has to do with the stance we take about what we think we know in light of things like the recent photograph of the “black hole.”

By the way, the black hole’s name is Powehi (pronounced poh-veh-hee) This is a word from a Hawaiian chant that means “the adorned fathomless dark creation.”

One of the major challenges facing religions today, and certainly the various forms of Christianity, is whether religion can adapt to the new realities that we are being confronted with. Can we honor the mysteries of the universe and develop the courage to let go of the requirement of maintaining allegiance to claims and beliefs from two thousand or more years ago?

I understand that there are people, some of them have Ph.D.s in various disciplines, who still do not believe in evolution and who hold to a creationist position about “how things came to be.” They believe that there is a “god in the sky” who, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “occasionally takes a stick and stirs it in the things that go on in the world.” Given what we know, given the science that we have, I don’t understand that. Don’t understand how it is possible.

I read about very academically informed people who believe that there was an actual person named Noah who literally built a wooden ark that housed people and animals and that a very loving and benevolent God destroyed every living thing and being left on the earth. I don’t understand how that is possible.

I also do not understand how given what we now know about biology, human development, genetics, how the documents in the Bible came to be written and collected, advances in biblical interpretation, anthropology and a host of other disciplines; how someone can embrace the notion that homosexuality is either chosen by someone or is incomparable with Christian teaching.

I am not going to spend an inordinate amount of time on this today except to say that since the Methodist General Conference I have had a multitude of conversations, phone calls and e-mails from people seeking some kind of clarification about the matter.

I will make just a few comments because this is not mainly what this talk is about. It does, however, fit with religious and spiritual literacy.

Why is homosexuality such an issue for the church?

A broad answer is that from the very beginning of its institutional life Christianity has never developed a healthy theology of human sexuality. Based on both distortions and misunderstandings of early church history, celibacy even became institutionalized and you can see what that has gotten us. Besides, even among those who most stridently advocated it, celibacy has never been consistently practiced. There have been married popes. Whether in or out of the church most teachings have led people to relate to sexuality with either shame or guilt which has simply fueled the pornography business. Pornography, easily available on any child's smart-phone, is how most children get introduced to sex in our culture.

Traditionalists refer to a 2,000 year long Christian tradition on the matter of homosexuality. There isn't one. The current language in the Methodist Book of Discipline did not find its way there until 1972. Ironically, that same year the American Medical Association begin its move to remove labeling homosexuality as any kind of disorder. New insights and information had come into existence.

There are some words from Paul Tillich that I keep close at hand. Here they are:

“The question is not that we have received any word from the Lord; the question is that it has been received and resisted and distorted. This is the predicament of all of us. Human existence is never without that which breaks vertically into it. We are never without a manifestation of that which is ultimately serious and infinitely meaningful. We are never without a word from the Lord, and we never cease resisting and distorting it, both when we have to hear it and when we have to say it.”

We are odd creatures, we humans. Inconsistent and incomplete in so many ways. And, so often unaware. None of us likes to hear, or perhaps is even open to, data that goes contrary to our already-latched-on-to convictions. There have been numerous research studies that show that people may even be born with a tendency to be what we either label as “liberal” or “conservative” and then go looking for evidence that backs up their point of view. My brother, for example, was a clone of Archie Bunker. He was a right-wing curmudgeon. Even his grandchildren called him “Grumps.” How did we come to be so different?

Many people who, for religious reasons, are opposed to abortion are enthusiastic supporters of both the death penalty and war. No consistent ethic there.

I said after the General Conference debacle that I was done arguing with people about what the Bible says about homosexuality, and I am. However, the comments, questions, e-mails I’ve gotten let me know that we need some religious education on this matter. So, let me deal with it like this.

A man whose work was first introduced to me by Jim Bankston was Marcus Borg. Many of you have read his works. He has spoken in this room several times. I think I have read everything he has written. Once I went up to him and said, “I want you to know that I plagiarize, I mean, borrow from your work.” He said, “Borrow, freely, my friend. Borrow freely.” He remains one of my theological heroes and I deeply appreciate his ability to clarify what he teaches.

Near the end of this life, he wrote a novel. It is called, “Putting Away Childish Things.” It is not, frankly, a very good novel but I am recommending to you anyway. The title comes from Paul’s writings where Paul says, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” This is what spiritual work is all about. Or, as Rohr puts it, “Clean up. Grow up. Wake up.”

The main character of the novel, the narrator of the story, is a professor of religion at a college and one of the subplots involves a female student who comes back to school after the Christmas holidays. While at home, she discovered that her brother had come out as gay and she is questioning this professor of religion about what the Bible has to say about that.

The professor patiently went over with her all of the biblical teachings that are used to say homosexuality is a sin or wrong. She showed these teachings set in their cultural setting, showed how inconsistent people are in choosing some laws from the Hebrew Scriptures to follow and ignore others. When they got to a particular passage in Paul's writing, the professor simply said, "Well, Paul, got it wrong."

It takes a certain kind of courage to assume that kind of posture. But, if we consistently follow Paul, women shouldn't be allowed to speak in church, should hold no positions of authority in any church and should be subservient to their husbands.

"Paul got it wrong." If someone takes the position that the Bible is a divinely inspired book, this is a jarring conclusion to reach. But, if one takes the position that everything we believe about our culture and what makes it up are matters that we have constructed, then it is something else. What we call "revelation" comes from the ground up and is not inserted into the human consciousness by a sky god off out there somewhere.

Some religious people take the stance that it is their job to "defend the faith" rather than question it. But, how can our religions be studied in any meaningful way if the assumption is that they are or the Bible is, in their present form, identified with unchanging reality.

By the way, the woman in this story was willing to give up a formerly held position because she loved her brother. Jesus ultimate criterion of faith was, "People will know that you are followers of mine by the way you love one another." Not by whether your beliefs are correct. And, the single and consistent way he taught this was by his practice of table fellowship.

The question of Jesus that this talk is built around is this one:

"Why do you see the sliver in your friend's eye, but don't see the timber in your own eye? How can you say to anyone, 'Let me remove that splinter from your eye,' while the wooden beam is in your eye?"

Just this week I finished reading one of the more challenging books about Jesus I've ever read. It is "Rabbi Jesus" by Bruce Chilton. The Jesus that Chilton writes about is not your Westernized Jesus. Chilton writes about the mystical side of Jesus. As you know, there are levels of human development and awareness. Most of us idle along at level three, occasionally getting to level four. We have a tendency to look at people who are on developmental levels lower than us as being "unenlightened" at best. And, should we encounter someone who is at level six, we would likely think them slightly crazy. Jesus was developmentally a six. He was Jewish. His passion was the reform of Judaism, especially temple sacrifice. His "in-your-face" teaching about how things ought to be was, as I've said, his practice of table fellowship. He got a huge amount of criticism for what he said and did. His response to that was to say to the religious leaders who he saw as so corrupt that they should repent of their hypocrisy, violence and injustice and take up his way of love and nonviolence. He did want to change the Jewish world but the way he saw to proceed with that was to do it through individual change of mind and heart. He wanted to help people see clearly. He wanted his followers to help others see clearly but he knew that we cannot do that if we don't clean up our own ability to see clearly.

Over and over again Jesus described the people around him, especially those who ran the show, as being blind. Many of his miracles are about helping people to see. What he is doing in this teaching is calling on people to move from self-righteousness to humility, from judging to accepting, from domination to service, from violence to non-violence, from resentment to reconciliation, from blindness to vision.

If each one of us individually dedicated ourselves to this, the world would change for the better.

This is one of the most significant questions Jesus ever asked. If we remove the wooden beam from our own eyes - personally, communally, nationally, globally, we will find healing. As you are aware, I hope, we live in a time of deep moral blindness. And, we are cured of this blindness over a long period of time. It takes willingness and work.

We have the capacity to see. We have the tendency not to. Moment by moment we can choose to go toward more clarity or stay in confusion. In order to do this seeing, however, we have to be willing to take up a practice that not only keeps us awake but also one that keeps us mindful of the wider context in which we make choices about how to live with each other on this very fragile planet.

Carl Jung said that “Life is a luminous pause between two mysteries that are yet one.” That’s why I’ve called this talk, “The Gift of The Luminous Pause.” It is not just life itself. The luminous pause is the way to life.

Some people think that a spiritual practice will lead them to peace of mind. Well, it’s great if you get some sense of calmness from your practice. I remind you, however, of something I once heard Richard Rohr says, “I never met anyone who was in their mind who had peace and never anyone who was at peace who was in their mind.” You and I have a much bigger responsibility in and to this world than “having peace of mind.” We have to pay attention to whether the way we are living is adding to the self-centeredness and anger of the world or whether we are adding some much-needed sanity. We are not going to bring such sanity to the world unless we start with the log that is in our own eye.

I’m convinced that most people are not even aware that they are contributing to the suffering of the world. Even if we do see it, most don’t have a clue how to stop and make a different contribution. This is where the luminous pause comes into play.

Right after 9/11 I heard a story. Perhaps you know it too. An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life: “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.” The grandson thought about this for a moment and said, “Which wolf will win?” The grandfather said, “The one that I feed.”

This is our challenge and opportunity. How can we train right now, not later, to feed the right wolf? How can we in our own individual lives see and then do what helps, what contributes to the world’s store of peace, love, and joy? Even the

slightest gesture toward feeding the right wolf will help. Perhaps it starts by seeing that we are all in this together and all deserve a place at the table together.

It can start right now with your making a commitment not to cling to fear, not to be close-minded, not to hold back. A radical, outspoken, evangelical I follow is John Pavlovitz. He sent out a tweet that said, "I just want you to remember that good people still inhabit this earth. You're here, aren't you?" We can let this goodness show. When we encounter people we don't like or agree with, we can, with such a slight shift, send healing energy to them. If we have a little perspective, we can see how the people in our closest relationships who drive us crazy, likely have similar feelings about us.

Most of us are so good in this culture of accessing our negativity and insisting on how right we are that the angry wolf just gets fatter and fatter while the other wolf just sits there with pleading eyes. We are not stuck with this. We have the gift of a luminous moment before we react, to choose another way to be.

We probably need some pointers on how to do this and some ideas about a place to start.

Let me suggest that a place to start is behind the wheel of your car.

Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun whose works I highly recommend, teaches that we have three qualities that are within each of us that we can use to feed the wolf that can better the world.

First is the quality of natural intelligence. When we are not hooked in the trap of either hope or fear, we know what the right thing to say and do is. If we are not blinded by anger or self-pity, we know what will help and what will make things worse. When we are mindless, when we are driven by emotion, we can say and do some crazy things. All of us. But, each of us has a basic intelligence that we can use to help solve problems rather than make them worse.

Second is the quality of our natural warmth. It's called love. Everyone of us wants to feel appreciated, to experience affection, to be paid attention to. But we have to take the log out of our own eyes in order to give these things.

The third quality is that of basic goodness. This is the condition of the mind and the heart before we jump to some conclusion. The stimulus comes - stop. That's the luminous pause. Our lives are made up of millions of these pauses. Often, however, we give in to immediate reactivity and let the wolf of aggression, anger and violence out of its cage. We have the gift of the luminous pause.

I came up with a phrase, which I think is original with me, years ago: bad habits of the mind. These are mental patterns we have cultivated over a long period of time that cause us when we see a certain person, hear a certain thing to fly off the handle and into a rage or fit of negativity. "Flying off the handle" refers to when someone is chopping wood and they bring the ax back to swing it down again and, in the process, the ax head goes flying off. That can cause a lot of damage.

Just pause. Take advantage of the gift of the luminous moment. At Plumb Village in France, where Thich Nhat Hanh lives, at intervals throughout the day someone rings a bell and at the sound of it everyone stops and takes a mindful breath. You can do this. Set your phone to remind you to pause and notice the internal dialogue. I'm convinced that one of the reasons many people resist having a meditation practice is that they don't want to encounter their own internal dialogue.

In any highly charged situation, we can shake up the usual pattern of reacting simply by pausing. That way we give ourselves a change to contact our natural warmth.

A serviceman returning from Iraq told this story:

He said it happened on a pretty typical day, when he had once again witnessed his fellow soldiers, people he loved, being blown up. And once again he and all the others in this division wanted revenge. When they located some Iraqi men who were possibly responsible for killing their friends, they went into the men's darkened house, and because of their anger and being in such a claustrophobic situation where violence was the atmosphere they breathed, the soldiers acted out their frustration by beating up the men.

When they put a flashlight on their captives' faces, that saw that one of them was only a young boy who had Down's syndrome.

This American serviceman had a son with Down's syndrome. When he saw the boy, it broke his heart, and suddenly he viewed the situation differently. He felt the boy's fear, and he saw that the Iraqis were human beings just like himself. His good heart was strong enough to cut through his pent-up rage, and he couldn't continue to brutalize them anymore. In a moment of natural compassion, his view of the war and what he'd been doing just shifted.

It seems to me that so many and so much of the world is full of pent up aggression and anger and speech. Yet, for every one of us the qualities of intelligence, warmth and love are always there, always accessible. All we have to do is train ourselves to accept the gift of the luminous moment.

To face the pain and problems in the world, let's first face our own. Let's become intimately acquainted with whatever it is in our own mind and hearts that wants to make someone else "the other," to make them "bad" or "wrong." Let us be willing to take the log out of our own eye and see our own inward hostile wolf. Then, over time we can stop feeding it. We can make other choices. Choices that involve experiencing and expressing peace, love and joy.

If it is okay with you, I'm going to stay with this issue for one more week. I teach what I want and need to learn and I see this business about what Pema Chodran calls "learning to stay" as my most persistent need. It is also a need for the world. It is certainly a need for the church.

Just this week I was found by these words of Wendell Berry:

"The Bible leaves no doubt at all about the sanctity of the act of world-making, or of the world that was made, or of creaturely or bodily life in this world. We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy. Some people know this, and some do not. Nobody, of course, knows it all the time. But what keeps it from being far better known than it is? Why is it apparently unknown to millions of professed students of the Bible? How can modern Christianity have

so solemnly folded its hands while so much of the world of God was and is being destroyed?”

It is because, I believe, we ignore the gift of the luminous moment.

What is in front of you is an absolutely blank page. There are probably lines on it. Some drawn by fate. Some drawn by destiny. You have a partner or not. You have a job. You have a skin color. You have a sexual orientation. Whatever the page looks like, it is for you to color in. Fill it with wonder and gratitude, paint it with love.

If you are in pain, as I know some of you are, draw healing and trust. If you are frightened, fill in the lines with colors of reaching out and asking for support. Make sure courage shows up.

The point is that it is your choice. You can use any color you chose. Each moment in front of you is the gift of the luminous moment. Seize it with love and compassion, with wisdom and understanding. For those are the things you are.

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