

Healing The Divide:
Consciously Participating in the Evolution of “Rightness.”

Mary Oliver, the poet who found such popularity, especially among the religious and spiritual community, died a few weeks ago. The New York Times described her “as far and away this country’s best selling poet.” She won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In an autobiographical writing she revealed that she had grown up in a very dysfunctional family. It was one in which she was sexually abused by her father. One of her poems, “The Summer Day,” contains lines that speakers, teachers and preachers love to use. It fits with the topic we are dealing with in Ordinary Life at the moment in our attempt to deal with the questions Jesus asked. Here is a part of that poem:

I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

I hope the door is still open in your head, heart and hands as to how you are answering that question. And, further, I hope this time today contributes to further clarity and resolve.

What I’m specifically focused on in this time is how we might individually and collectively contribute to healing the divisions that are tearing the human community apart today - globally, nationally, in families and communities.

This phrase “your one wild and precious life” is a reference, at least in my thinking, to the emerging consciousness of the cosmos. Gaining clarity about our role in the evolutionary process is a way we can contribute to the healing of the divisions in this world and among the various communities of which we are a part.

Let me open the door to this by offering a section I’m going to call “Jesus 101.”

A few weeks ago we looked at this question from Jesus:

Why do you notice the splinter in your brother or sister’s eye, yet do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? How can you say to your sister or brother, “Let me remove that splinter from your eye,” while the wooden beam is in your own eye?

Then, last week, this question:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask?

The first question gets to the heart and center of Jesus’ teaching. He wanted those who heard what he had to say to turn away from practices that he clearly labeled hypocritical and violent, even sinful, if you will. The second question is about as authentically Jesus as you can get.

How do biblical and religious scholars determine what Jesus actually said and, even more importantly, who Jesus was.

I want to do just a smidgen of theological archeology. I personally have a passion for this and wish I could infect each of you with that passion. I also know that as interesting to me as it is, it can end up being impotent. For example, I believe that in doing psychotherapy, psychological archeology is important. What are the family of origin dynamics or the early childhood wounds, lessons and experience that lie buried in our unconscious? Insight into these things can be helpful. But, after a while we have to get up, take up our bed and walk, as it were. With that in mind -

Let me deal first, and in as brief a way as possible with the “what Jesus said” issue.

After the what we call “the Bible” was put together, there was no question on the part of anyone about its authority or authenticity. Most people couldn’t read and until the invention of the printing press, precious few copies of Sacred Scripture were available in any religious tradition. The Christian movement, which over time had accumulated power and wealth and central authority in Rome, at least until the middle of the 11th century, told people what God thought and what God wanted. People learned the stories that were in the Bible by hearing them read and by seeing them in the stained glass windows of the cathedrals where they worshipped.

The split that occurred in the first centuries of the movement and in the eleventh century over the nature of Jesus’ identity in relationship to God was of concern to church leaders and theologians but to few others. People looked to the church to grant them access into heaven. Otherwise most people were kept busy just surviving.

The Protestant Reformation occurred not only providing another split in the church but also the Protestant part of this upset emphasized the importance of every person being able to interpret the Bible for

themselves - a disastrous notion if there ever was one. It is somewhat like saying I could watch an episode of Gray's Anatomy and that would equip me to do open heart surgery.

Even so the content and character of the writings in the Bible were not questioned or challenged until 1835 when a man by the name of David Strauss wrote a book titled, "The Life of Jesus Critically Examined." He is the first person to point out the reality and role of oral tradition and the fact that the early followers of Jesus both shaped and invented stories they told about Jesus. All of the narratives of Jesus life that we currently have were written between forty and seventy years after the death of Jesus. During this time the Jesus narratives were shaped and colored to fit the audience they were intended for - Jewish, Greek, and beyond.

There is nothing wrong with this way of story telling. The problems begin when these stories are taken as if they were video recordings of events that actually happened.

We are told in the Christian writings themselves that after his death his followers "searched the Scriptures," in order to understand what had happened. The Scriptures they searched were, of course, what we now refer to as the Old Testament. That is why there are such close parallels between the story of the crucifixion and Psalm 22, between the transfiguration of Jesus on the high mountain and the shining face of Moses on Mt. Sinai, between the ascension of Jesus into heaven and the ascension of Elijah, between the Sermon on the Mount and the giving of the Ten Commandments and on and on.

The work of Strauss was the first time in the history of the Christian movement when scholars sought to discover what could be known about the "Jesus of history."

The second time was with the work of Albert Schweitzer who wrote a book that actually gave a descriptive title to this undertaking. He called

it “The Quest for the Historical Jesus.” Schweitzer, who won the Nobel Peace Prize among many other awards, was a true polymath. He was a theologian, organist, writer, humanitarian, philosopher and physician. The word “polymath” means “having much learning.”

Schweitzer’s conclusion was that we couldn’t know the Jesus of history. When I was in both the university and the seminary this was pretty much the academic stance that was taken. All we could know about Jesus was what the preaching of the early church, which was the New Testament, proclaimed about him.

It was during this time that the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, though they were a long time seeing the light of day. And, of course, the discovery of the collection of writings called the Nag Hammadi Library.

All of this interesting academic work - from Strauss to Schweitzer through the discoveries that were being made - never made it into Christian Sunday School curriculum or became part of Christian preaching. What this disconnect between what was going on in the academic world of theology and biblical scholarship allowed, however, was that for almost two hundred years, that covers a long time, people settled into the belief that what we have in the Bible is history, much like what you have on “eye-witness news.”

Then, in the 1980’s all heaven broke loose when Robert Funk, renowned New Testament scholar, put together a group of scholars. This new group was called “The Jesus Seminar” and together they began a new quest for the historical Jesus.

What made this endeavor new was that these scholars now had available to them parables, aphorisms, dialogues, stories and deeds attributed to Jesus that had not previously been available. The goal of these scholars was to review each of the hundreds of items available to them and attempt, with the best tools of modern scholarship, to determine which

of them could be ascribed with a high degree of probability to Jesus. These scholars didn't do their work off in some ivory tower or behind closed doors but in a way that the public could see.

They were soundly criticized for their work, especially for their voting procedure. What the general public was not aware of was that ever since the first Bible published by Gutenberg, voting has been the procedure biblical scholars have used to decide which reading from which manuscript would be the one to be included in the Bible. Voting was used to determine how the King James Version of the Bible was put together. Voting does not, of course, determine what is true. It just indicates what is the best judgment of those who have studied the matter consider to be the case.

You can have all of this information, and more, in your own hands by purchasing a copy of "The Five Gospels" which has a thorough explanation of why a saying attributed to Jesus likely came from him or from one of his followers.

Also of interest to Jesus scholars has been the issue of "who Jesus was." For a long, long, long time there was no question in the mind of anyone who claimed to be Christian as to who Jesus was. Jesus was the son of God come down to earth to save people from their sins. Jesus' life was all about opening the heart of God to the lost human race and opening the doors of heaven to true believers.

Just as there have been discoveries and insights in the field of the documents that make up the Jesus narratives, so there have also been discoveries and developments in the fields of anthropology and archeology that scholars have used to construct a hypothesis of how a man born in the time and place where Jesus was born and grew up might have grown and developed. Where did he get his ideas? Why did he emphasize what he did in his teachings?

When information about what at one time was called “the Jesus of history” began to make it from the academic world into the non-academic world it played, as they say, to “mixed reviews.” Some people were absolutely aghast - “You can’t talk about the son of God like this!” - and some people were fascinated - “Wow! This is someone I can relate to!” - and some people were just puzzled.

Recently I mentioned in here Bruce Chilton’s book, “Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography.” There have been many, many other books and resources on or about Jesus that have appeared in the last twenty years or so, each one making an advance in our understanding.

One of the most impressive things I first read in this category was Stephen Mitchell’s “The Gospel According To Jesus.” This book was published in 1991. (For those of you not quick at math, that was nearly 30 years ago.) Mitchell talks about, and I was taught this in seminary, that very likely Jesus’ emphasis on God as father and the importance of forgiveness grew out of Jesus own experience of not having what was, at least in the Jewish tribal mentality into which he was born, acceptable Jewish paternity. Again, virtually none of this made it into the educational curriculum of Christian churches.

Controversy about whether God, some angel, Joseph, or some other man impregnated Mary has been intense and long-standing. To this day one of the litmus test questions about my teaching, or that of anyone who seems to stray outside the lines of orthodoxy is, “Does he believe in the virgin birth?”

Chilton admits that though we cannot recover the details about Jesus birth, that it is possible to construct a credible overall picture. And that is what he does in this book, “Rabbi Jesus.” Jesus as a young man of thirteen or fourteen, left home as many young men did who were in the socio-economic status of Jesus and he, just as you and I, had to answer the question of what he would do with his “one wild and precious life.”

I want to read to you just a paragraph from Chilton's book. Then, we'll get into how this applies to our wild, hopefully, and precious, certainly, lives.

“All his life, Jesus was both intense in his personal vision and gregarious in company. These habits of temperament develop early: personal intensity comes of loneliness, and those who love company most know what it is to live without it. A critical, independent child with an ironic turn of mind, Jesus must have spent much of his time alone, wandering through the hills of Galilee, talking to the shepherds and vagrant rabbis who were regarded as shady characters in small communities like Nazareth. All the while, without training or conscious articulation, he was developing a sense of Israelite society that was radically inclusive and a vision of God that was not limited to the strictures of local institutions.”

I have a, to me, wonderful cartoon from the New Yorker where Jesus is speaking to one of his followers and is saying, “Everyone wants to know what Jesus would do. No one ever asks how Jesus is feeling about his complicated relationship with his father.”

What do you see happening here in religion, at least in an understanding of some critical aspects of understandings in the Christian understanding of things?

It's evolving.

I would like to introduce to you what may be a new understanding of religion. Fasten your seat belts.

One of the first things I learned in my association with Richard Rohr, the Franciscan Friar who has so enriched my life, is that one of the main problems with and of religion is that it has taught us “what to see” and

not “how to see.” So religion, at least Western religions, has taught people what to believe and what rules to abide by. This has put the focus on focusing solely on the past and not “what is” and is “yet to be.”

A perfect example of this is ignorance about and resistance to and acceptance of a much wider understanding about human sexuality than we had just a few years ago. Science now informs us that there have always been people of homosexual, and other, orientation in the human population. Only in recent years has human consciousness evolved on the part of some to acknowledge the truth of this and to begin reshaping human-made rules and regulations to fit this new understanding. People who are open to this are called “progressives” on this matter. People who want to hang on to a mythic understanding of what was are called “traditionalists.”

Every year Rohr’s organization, the Center for Action and Contemplation, holds conferences, sometimes more than one a year, that are designed to help people learn how to see. I’ve been attending these for years. And, as many of you know, several years ago I went to one and was absolutely blown away by the presentations made by a Roman Catholic nun by the name of Ilia Delio.

The focus of her work, including astrophysics and evolution, has been the work of a French Jesuit priest by the name of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Interestingly he was banned from teaching and his works from being published by the Roman Catholic Church because what he was saying went against “the doctrine of the church.” The same thing happened to the teaching and work of Michael Morwood who is going to be speaking here next month.

Delio’s point, de Chardin’s point, Morwood’s point, and the list is getting bigger and bigger, is that is is not what is “back there” that should be getting our attention, except getting it right as I’ve been attempting to to today. What is important is what is up ahead. These

people, and that is a growing list of them, are trying to get us to see religion not as something separate from the evolutionary process but as an integral part of it.

We humans are just a tiny part of an ongoing evolutionary process.

Here is something I stole from Ilia. Imagine that you have in your library a shelf containing thirty large books. Each book is 450 pages long. Each page stands for one million years. The Big Bang takes place on page one of volume one. The first twenty books have to do only with lifeless physical, chemical, stellar and galactic processes. Life is in no hurry too makes its appearance.

Our solar system appears at the beginning of volume 21, about 4.5 billion years ago. Life remains single-celled until toward the end of volume 29, where the Cambrian explosion occurs. Though the complexity of life explodes, dinosaurs do not show up until around the middle of volume 30 and they go extinct on page 384. Only the last 66 pages or so feature what Brian Swimme calls a flaring forth of mammalian life.

Human-like creatures begin to show up a few pages from the end of volume 30, but anatomically modern humans make their appearance only about halfway down page 450.

Self-reflective subjectivity, ethical aspiration and the religious quest for rightness arrive in the universe only in the last paragraph of the last page of the last volume.

Now, here is what is new and exciting: Until things began to come together in the way that they now are because an understanding of Big History, or The Great Story, or the “new cosmology,” - call it what you will, the common understanding was that the origin of religion was as a

defense against anxiety. Especially the anxiety of death. That seems to be true.

But, something happened in the arena of religion. Now, because we have more data than we did and because we are learning different ways of “reading the evidence,” these scholars are saying that, at a point, and it happened all over the globe, there arose a religious consciousness about “rightness.” Karl Jaspers called this “the Axial Age,” meaning a time of great turning. It was at this time that the foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently in China, India, Persia, Judea and Greece. I’m calling this the “evolution of rightness.”

I believe, and this is relatively new stuff, that every aspect of religion gains new meaning and importance once we link it to the new scientific information about an unfinished universe. We, and religion is an organic part of who we are, along with every other aspect of the universe, are still evolving.

There arose all over the globe at one time in human consciousness an understanding that there are “right ways” to be in the evolving human community. You won’t find a religion devoid of this. The summary statement of this religious conviction would be “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Or, “don’t do to someone what you would not want done to you.”

I’m just introducing this topic today. This is just the tip of a huge amount of material.

But, it does give us a way to go forward in our journey from the no-longer toward the not-yet. In this light, let me go back to the questions of Jesus that are the foundation for this talk:

First -

Why do you notice the splinter in your brother or sister's eye, and do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? How can you say to your sister or brother, "Let me remove that splinter from your eye," while the wooden beam is in your own eye?

Then, this:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask?

In his life and teachings, Jesus, just like John his teacher and just like the prophets after whom they modeled their lives and message, was intensely angry at what he saw as injustice, evil and oppression. And, he called his followers to be just as indignant. He was giving expression to this "religion of rightness." It wasn't new with him. It wasn't new with John the Immerser. It was new with the Jewish prophets. It was new with Buddha. It was new with Confucius.

What is so admirable about Jesus teachings is that he preceded what we would call "Jungian shadow work" by two thousand years. His advice was spot on: "Take the log out of your own eye" - that is do your own personal work of cleaning up, growing up and waking up - then you can see clearly enough to make sure you are not giving stones when people ask for bread or snakes when they ask for fish.

If we don't do our own work, we project it onto someone else.

A projection is an aspect of our unconscious. That is, it is unknown to us. People project aspects of themselves onto all sorts of things.

All of the relationships we have with everyone and, I would dare say everything, is marked by two things: projection is one of them. A projection is when my psychological contents leave me and enter the outer world seeking something, usually a person, upon which to fasten. But, because this is unconscious - my definition of "the unconscious" is that we don't know what we don't know - we respond to the other as if we know him or her. We do this, of course, in our intimate relationships. But, we also do it with politicians, political parties, ideologies, media stars, our pets and on and on.

The other unconscious dynamic that affects our relationships with both people and ideas is transference. I transfer to someone else my personal history in regard to the kind of experience I am having. This is why we are so tempted and give in to the temptation, all of this is unconscious you understand, to infantilize and/or to idealize the relationship we have with our partner, our church, our government, our pets - and so forth. In this transferring process we relinquish our adult responsibility and approach the present moment with the beliefs and behaviors from our ancient history: we avoid, we comply, we control, and so forth.

We expect others to take care of us. We complain about our institutions being unable to meet our needs.

At some point, we have to realize that we alone are accountable for how things are playing out in our lives. When that realization comes we have to take the log out of our own eye and ask, "What am I asking of the other - whether a person, an ideology, whatever - that I am not taking responsibility for myself?"

What Jesus is doing in these two questions, among other things, is attacking ego arrogance and people misusing power. Power, position,

and passions are the defenses of the ego and these are clearly the moral concerns of Jesus - not phony moral purity such as much so-called Christian religion today focuses on with its emphasis on sexual rules and roles. This emphasis only increases the repression of shadow issues.

Immature religion creates people who are cognitively and morally rigid, people who are often - under the guise of being so loving and religious - are actually very hateful and crusading people, people who invariably have a single issue where they focus all their anger.

We have to clean up our own act - personally and corporately.

I don't want to make anyone feel bad or uncomfortable about being here today. But, I have to point out that we weren't in Jesus' demographic. He was concerned about the poor and those victimized by the system. In many, many ways there are countless people in this world who ask for bread and we give them rocks, they ask for a fish and we give them snakes.

Just limit it to this country alone. The American dream is a dream built on the back of a system of domination. We have a dark stain in our national unconscious about both Native Americans and slavery. In this sense and in terms of a system of domination for many people America is more of a nightmare than a dream. Achievement and advancement in the American dream are marked and marred by those left behind, those marginalized in their pursuit of happiness, and those devalued because of their lack of achievement in a system that is rigged against them.

A "religion of rightness" sees this and addresses it.

What I'm asking us to do is open our heads and hearts to this evolutionary right understanding of religion. It isn't about doctrines or beliefs. It's about trust. Which gives us the freedom not to know, to

question what has formerly been rigid doctrine. Rigid doctrine can't evolve.

Rather than simply protecting the past this "rightness" I'm speaking of hands us a sacred responsibility to protect the future for all people everywhere. That way we have something valuable and viable to give to the future.

It is what you can do with your one wild and precious life.

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