

Healing for Life's Inevitable and Unavoidable Wounds

“Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult - once we truly understand and accept it - then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.”

Those sixty three words form the beginning of one of the most influential books written in our lifetime. This is how M. Scott Peck's book, “The Road Less Travelled,” opens. This book, published in 1978 was, in my opinion, one of the major things that began the shift away from religion and toward spirituality. This book is still the best selling book Simon and Schuster ever published. It remained on the best-seller list for six years.

A turning away from religion in this country, though it began in Europe years before - and caused mostly and ironically by the Reformation and the Enlightenment, began likely for many in this country in the 60's with the Vietnam War and the lies the government told the American people about it.

There were other things:

Around the time of the late 70's and early 80's there was an explosion of 12-Step Groups - AA, Al-Anon, etc. - that introduced an understanding of spirituality into people's lives that had nothing to do with so-called organized religion. (I say “so-called organized religion” because so far the history of religions reflect anything but stable organization.) Bill Wilson did talk about the importance of what he called “a vital religious experience,” but he would not put any sectarian fences around it.

A PBS series with Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell on “The Power of Myth” found many of us huddled around our televisions sets as perhaps our ancestors huddled around campfires learning about our origins and the myths that shaped us. They weren't Baptist, Methodist, Jewish, Catholic, Muslim or any other sectarian stories. They reflected the human journey, without labels. The time was ripe and people were hungry for such.

Another major thing that stepped in to fill the gap as the failures of organized religion became more and more apparent - in things, for example, like the cover-up of the sexual abuse scandal in the Roman church - was Buddhism. Buddhism is not a religion, though it is listed as one in some places. Buddhism is a philosophy, a way of life. And, it tackles head on the fact that life is difficult.

There is a wonderful story about the origins of Buddhism. It is, of course, a myth. So are the stories about the origin of Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Let me insert something here for those of you who are unfamiliar with or put off by the use of the word “myth.”

Recently someone said to me that it was a major adjustment for them to move from a more-or-less literal interpretation of the Bible to the notion, as they put it, that the story of Jonah being swallowed by the whale was “just a story.” My response to this is: “The story of Jonah and the whale is not ‘just a story.’ It is SO MUCH more than that.”

(Here is shown Michelangelo’s Jonah as it appears in the Sistine Chapel.)

Should anyone ask me if I believe the Bible is literally true, my answer would be, “No! I believe it is so much more than that. To literalize it trivializes it.”

The wonderful parable of Jonah is about the impossibility of escaping, ultimately, from Sacred Mystery. For some people that is good news and for some not. That’s another story.

Life is difficult.

If you don’t know anything about the stories told about the life of the Buddha or the origins of Buddhism, here is a link you can use to increase your knowledge - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gautama_Buddha (The statue is from Snarth, India dated around the 4th century.)

Buddhism is built on the acceptance of life’s inevitable difficulties and the reality of suffering.

Many legends exist about this man who is said to have been born into a family where he was a prince destined to rule a kingdom. Wise men at his birth had predicted that he would either be a great ruler or a great holy man. One day, out of one palace and on the way to another, he saw an aging man. He had, according to the legend, never seen an old person and his guardian explained to him that all living things grow old. On another trip out of his palace he saw a diseased person, a corpse and an ascetic. He was, as are we all, repelled by the suffering and, unlike all of us, attracted to the ascetic. Perhaps the ascetic knew something.

So Siddhartha at the age of 29 snuck away from his palace to begin his search for peace. It is said he had five companions. They tried everything to find peace but none of it worked.

He went to such lengths that he nearly starved himself to death. It is said he limited himself to one nut or leaf a day. He passed out in a river bathing one day and a young woman gave him some pudding to eat. After recovering some of his strength, he decided to try another approach.

He remembered watching his father ploughing in the garden one day and remembered the serene look on his father's face as he kept his plough in the middle of the furrow. So it was that Gautama decided to try what has been called "the middle way" to find enlightenment: not too much asceticism, not too much indulgence.

If you read the full story of Gautama's spiritual journey, you will see that it is filled with one disappointing experience after another. He grew in his meditative skills but each attainment left him unsatisfied. Following the incident where the young woman rescued him he sat under a pipal tree, now known as a Bodhi tree because of the town near which this occurred, vowing not to move until he had found the truth. The story has it that he sat there for 49 days at the end of which he had attained Enlightenment. So, he was called Buddha, the "enlightened one."

At first he was not going to teach. He was concerned that humans were so overpowered by ignorance, greed and hatred that they could never recognize the

path, which is subtle, deep and hard to grasp. However, a teacher convinced him that he should teach and that some people might understand his teachings.

In his first teaching he outlined what is known as the Noble Eight-fold Path one could follow toward enlightenment. This path consists of being conscious and correct in the following areas: how we view things, or right view; what our desires are or right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The foundation of the Noble Eight-fold path is what are known as the Four Noble Truths. These are: that suffering is an ingrained part of existence; that the origin of suffering is craving for sensuality, acquisition of identity, and fear of annihilation; that suffering can be ended; and that following the Noble Eight-fold path is the means of accomplishing this.

Buddhism is a very complex, complicated system and it has an incredibly diverse history. The movement started somewhere around 560 BC in the part of the world we now label Pakistan and India. I think the appeal of Buddhism when it came on the scene in the West is that it wasn't religious. It offered specific and concrete advice on how to live and if people accepted the Four Noble Truths and followed the Eight-fold path, everyone's life would be better. But, it would not cause life not to be difficult. It would not help anyone avoid the inevitable suffering that comes from being human.

One of the reasons many people give up on the spiritual adventure in a religious form is because they expected their religion, especially a particular set of beliefs, to protect them from suffering. It doesn't and it won't. That is one of the reasons the group of people who call themselves "spiritual but not religious" is growing so.

The other reason is a growing awareness on the part of an increasing number of people that what organized religion holds as nonnegotiable issues today are at major variance with what, in Christianity for example, Jesus actually taught and emphasized. Jesus's teachings are mainly about two things: forgiveness and inclusion. The church has frequently been about judging and saying who is out.

The church could change the world if it emphasized these things. But, sadly, the church has not been as concerned with changing this world as it has been concerned about getting into the next world. As Richard Rohr has said, “The church has been more interested in what goes on in bed than that people have a bed to sleep in.”

But, I digress.

Life is difficult.

You might wonder, “Where is the joy in that?” I hope to get there before we are done today. It is the avoidance of the fact that life is difficult, is full of inevitable difficulties, that makes it even more so.

No one teaches us, at least most of us - at least no one taught me, how to build a firm-enough foundation on which to build our lives. I was taught stuff to believe and how to belong. I was not taught how to relate to my own life experience. I was not taught how to know my own story in a way that led me to have compassion for myself and then, as a consequence, compassion for others.

It’s never too late.

How about now?

This is hard work.

The text from the Gospel of Thomas on which this talk is based is this:

“Blessed is the one who has toiled and has found life.”

The translation of Thomas you might be using may have this saying translated this way:

“Blessed are the troubled ones,
They have seized
Hold of life.”

The word “toiled” (or worked hard) and “troubled” are connected in meaning because once you get into the journey you begin to realize that there is a lot that happens in the world that we can take impersonally until it happens to us.

That make sense? It rains somewhere everyday. We don’t care. Unless it is on the day we have planned that special event for which we want no rain. People are dying all the time. It only becomes an issue for us if it is our death we are talking about.

I’ve been working on this theory. I’ve been working on it for over forty years or so. Every year I am blessed to get to tweak it a smidgen. I’ll read a book, I’ll hear a speaker, I’ll take spiritual direction, I’ll listen to my wife and I’ll take another step.

Here’s is an example: We went several years ago to hear Bill Plotkin speak at a Rohr conference about Self- or Soul-Development. In the process of his presentation he said, and I’ve quoted him before in here, that 80% of the adult population in this country is arrested at late adolescent development. Look at what is going on in politics today. Is it a reflection of mature clear-headed thinking? Or, is it more like a cafeteria food fight?

Or, decades ago I went through a divorce. I don’t recommend that to anyone. Except, of course, had I not, I wouldn’t be with Sherry. But, I wondered how it is that people stand before a minister, priest, rabbi, judge and vow to stay together until one of them dies, only to be in divorce court five to seven years later.

I’m pretty clear why people give up on religion. Most religion is limited and limiting.

But, why give up on the spiritual journey?

Here is my theory:

All of this happens because people want to avoid the trouble of going deeper, further, higher.

All of this happens because people want to avoid the pain of going deeper, further, higher.

Be clear: going deeper, further higher doesn't create the pain. Going deeper, further, higher reveals the pain.

It takes work. I know, I know, some people think that a good marriage, for example, shouldn't be work. But, think about it: nothing worth having comes without effort.

So here is something I would like to suggest you do in your spiritual practice.

Get a piece of paper and draw a line across the piece of paper. At one end will be your birth and at the other end will be where you are now.

If you can move your finger along this line from birth until now and you have never had any kind of physical struggle - you've never been seriously ill, never been in a major accident, never been hit or abused; then you get to draw a smiley face at where you are now.

But, if along the way, you have had major issues to deal with physically, write them down. When did they occur, how were they dealt with, what was the result of that?

Then go back and draw another line - date of birth until now. This line will be reflective of your psychological history.

If you have never had a serious psychological struggle, you get to put a smiley face at today's date. But if you have had to struggle with anxiety, an eating disorder, addiction, abuse, depression, abandonment, betrayal, death - any of those little hangnails; put a mark where they occurred. What happened? What did you try to do about it? What were the results? And, what is going on with you right now?

You are going to have two lines: a physical and a psychological line. Okay?

Then, on that piece of paper or another, go back and do the exact same thing for your mother.

Then, make one for your father.

Make one for any significant person in your life.

Again, this doesn't cause pain. It reveals where the pain is.

This is, I believe, the kind of work spoken of in this teaching.

By being more in touch with our own story line we can be more empathetic with others.

Here is the benefit to this: If we move too quickly into spiritual work, and being in an intimate relationship is spiritual work, we will not have the psychological maturity to sustain what we find and experience. We will give up on it or live on the surface.

In the Roman/Greek world into which the Jesus movement began and grew there were many gods. One of them was Hercules who, through his great strength, conquered the world. Scholars say this saying in Thomas seems to reflect this mentality.

This teaching in the Gospel of Thomas is not something Jesus said. He wouldn't say life is hard. He knew life was difficult. In that time in that part of the world most of the population was considered very expendable.

What Jesus knew and taught was that the way into the relationship to Sacred Mystery he knew and wanted others to know was hard. Read the narrative. "If you want to follow me, it is going to cost you everything you've got." And ever since, we have been trying to figure out a way to side-step, avoid or make that easier.

Life is difficult.

The way to life, maybe more so.

Though I completely understand why people say they are spiritual but not religious, religion serves a vital function. I am so grateful for what I learned and experienced in the religion of my youth. Ironically, I am using the very tools that religious upbringing gave me to critique religion. The myths, stories and rituals of religion help us to construct an ego, to learn the tasks we need to learn for the first stage of life. As Robert Johnson taught, you have to have an ego to move beyond the ego. You need, he taught, a strong ego to be in the world. You need a strong ego in order to make the world, and various worlds in which we live, work for us.

But, the ego is not who we are. In the Western world, that is in the world where most of us received whatever religion we did, a lot of people have suffered from horrible religious trauma: damage to self-esteem, guilt, fear, side-stepping of personal responsibility.

Bad religion is used to console the ego, fortify the ego, defend the ego, promote the ego. As long as the ego believes the myths, performs the rituals, mouths the prayers, or embraces the beliefs, then the ego, it is fervently believed, will be “saved” - either now or in an afterlife that ensures eternal wonderment. This makes the Sacred Mystery from whom Jesus got his identity an immense reward and punishment system. If you jump through the right hoops correctly, you’ll get rewarded. This is not about being healed or transformed. It is about playing the game correctly.

Jesus did not say, “I came to shore up the way you’ve been doing things.” What he said was, “I did not come to bring peace but to throw fire on the earth.” That is, transformation. “Follow me through the narrow gate. And, by the way, you can’t bring anything with you.”

Laugh at this or not, it is both funny and tragic: I believed until I was a young adult that if you were not baptized with complete immersion, you weren’t really saved.

(When I transferred my ordination into the UMC, a person in my family on finding out said, “William, do you believe in infant baptism?” I said, “Believe in it. I’ve actually seen it.”)

The identity we gain through following Jesus is what heals us. Who we are in Sacred Mystery is all about right relationship, not requirements. It is not about being correct, it is about being connected. Which, says Jesus, we have always been. We just forgot it. We fell for the lies of the ego.

What is the way out? How do we experience healing for the inevitable wounds we receive in life?

I would suggest to you two words that are having increasing importance to me.

First is “presence.”

Being present to Presence is healing. If it is true, as I believe it is, that we live and move and have our being in the Heart of Sacred Mystery, anything we can do that increases our awareness of this and our relationship to this will be healing. Won't protect us from illness and dying. But, will sustain us in that process.

We also need to be present to our own precious selves. And to the precious selves of others. Everybody has got his or her own story. We hear, as my teacher put it, we hear each other into being.

The second word that is critical to the on-going journey is “inquiry.” I don't believe there is going to be ongoing healing and transformation without a growing awareness of who we truly are and what is really going on with us.

By the way, the words “healing,” “whole,” and “holy” all come from the same root.

What Buddha taught and what Jesus lived is that we actually become more diseased when we turn away from the parts of life that caused us pain in the past or are causing us pain in the present. There is a saying in the Buddhist community, “The pain is inevitable. The suffering is optional.”

Everybody needs to be loved, right? Nurtured. Brought into a world where their needs are met and they are cared for in such a way that they come to believe that this world is a safe place.

I know a man who, three weeks after he was born, his father contracted polio and the father went into the hospital and the wife/mother went to tend to him and the newborn was put with what turned out to be a neglectful aunt who was married to an abusive alcoholic. It was not until he drew and explored one of the trauma maps we've talked about today that he could come to understanding what had happened to him and some of the ways in his adult life he had tried, unsuccessfully, to deal with his wound. It's ironic, isn't it, that turning away from our suffering causes us to suffer more?

Very early on we learn to deny resist and repress the painful aspects of our lives and we develop an identity based on this. We are constantly busy building this identity up, defending it, refining it. It is not who we truly are.

The first and most difficult step in the healing of our inevitable wounds is to expose our wounds, locate our disconnectedness from our larger being and the pain that separation causes. It is in this light that Paul Tillich's definition of love makes so much sense: "Love is that which desires to reunite the separated."

This is hard work. It is also, paradoxically, a gift of grace.

I pray you experience that gift here.

I believe working with the maps you can draw you'll find some grace, or be found by it.

Everyone of us is caught between two desires. We want to grow. We want to be comfortable. When I complained to my first spiritual teacher that the practices he suggested for me were hard, that is what he said. "Life is a constant struggle between the urge to grow and the urge to be comfortable."

So far I have not encountered a wise or useful spiritual teacher or teaching that doesn't clearly say that no serious work goes on in the comfort zone. As long as we are comfortably cruising along on the horizontal axis, completely caught up in our cravings and aversions, the attractions and diversions, we are not really open to the prospect of a different kind of life. The voice of the Sacred is so easily drowned out by all the surface noise.

So it often takes something that completely upsets our applecart to begin to awaken us to a different field of reality. Sometimes this takes the form of a personal life crisis -- a serious illness, loss of job or breakup of a marriage, hitting rock bottom with an addiction -- to call us to attention. Sometimes it happens quietly and more inwardly: simply a growing disillusionment as you look at your comfortable life and feel something precious slipping away through your fingers. Sometimes it comes as a result of an initially boring and seemingly fruitless spiritual practice. However it comes, something causes a crack to appear and though it scares the bejabbers out of us in the beginning we begin to yearn for and hear about a deeper order of reality, sense an invitation into the heart of what is.

Leonard Cohen, the songwriter, has a line in one of his songs: "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

Nobody welcomes any of life's inevitable difficulties. But, they come. They disrupt what we want and hope for and wish had been. Those who do the work recognize in retrospect that the light has indeed made it through these cracks, that these wounds have made us stronger, more compassionate and more enlightened human beings.

Jim Finley says that if someone gave us a script of our life right before we left the womb and said, "This is what's in store for you." most people would look at it and say, "You know what, I'm not going."

There is another metaphor I'd like to leave you with. Our work is like a chick pecking its way out of the egg. Our work is to hear and respond to, over and over and over until we die, the deep impulse to be born into larger life that in some way factors into these periodic disruptions of our comfort zone. If we can simply hang onto that image that though we don't know and can't see how, there is more to come. This brings us the healing for life's inevitable wounds. Doesn't make them go away. But does introduce us to the mystery, the Sacred Mystery, that gives us a way not to lose trust in life itself and the courage to be ourselves and the confidence to trust that no matter what we will always be where we are right now, in the heart of Sacred Mystery.

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