

Not Dying Is Not The Same As Living

We are on a journey. I have called it, borrowing a term from Robert Johnson, *The Journey into Wholeness*. (To know about and experience his journey, read his biography “Balancing Heaven and Earth.”)

This journey we are on is an odd one in the sense that unlike most journeys we take, this one has no distance to it. We are traveling from where we are right now to where we have always been.

What this journey requires is recognition of this fact. Our culture, the tribe into which we were born, often our religious upbringing, the price we pay in having to develop an ego, early childhood wounds - all of this, and more - create a film over our eyes that cause us not to see the truth. Our task is to learn to see for the first time what we have always been looking at.

Spirituality is a matter of becoming who we really are.

Everything else I have to say is merely an elaboration on this.

Now, here is something interesting about we human beings: Though what our heart longs for is “the truth” and though it is “the truth” in which we find our freedom and are given new life, our first reaction to “the truth” is one of hostility and fear.

I am coming, as late in my life as it is, to a deeper appreciation of just how difficult this journey is, and exhilarating. For me there is nothing more exciting than the discovery of new insights and truths. It is so empowering and energizing. And, yet it is also terrifying. In order to embrace the new we have to let go of what we have been holding on to, of what we have felt has been holding us up. This is difficult.

Years ago, quite by accident, I ran across the works of a Roman Catholic priest, Father Anthony DeMello. (You can read more about him here - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_de_Mello)

DeMello was an Indian Catholic priest and psychotherapist. Like everyone of necessity does, he started out quite conservative. But, he got exposed to Buddhism

and meditation, especially vipassana meditation, and that changed his life. He wrote numerous books that were and are highly valuable tools for the spiritual journey.

After his death Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict, led a crusade against DeMello's works and declared many of them unfit because DeMello had taken the position that Jesus was not the sole child or son of God but one who taught that all people are children of God, just like Jesus. (The best thing that Pope Benedict did for the church was to resign. First time a pope had resigned in 400 years.)

DeMello says that given the nature of the spiritual journey true seekers are rare and imposters are many. Like many master spiritual teachers Demello used stories to make his point. Such as:

A man came upon a tall tower and stepped inside to find it all dark. As he groped around, he came upon a circular staircase. Curious to know where it led to, he began to climb, and as he climbed, he sensed a growing uneasiness in his heart. So he looked behind him and was horrified to see that each time he climbed a step, the previous one fell off and disappeared. Before him the stairs wound upward and he had no idea where they led; behind him yawned an enormous black emptiness.

Well, who would sign up for a trip like that? Maybe not many.

When the King, this is another DeMello story, visited the monasteries of the great Zen master Lin Chi, he was astonished to learn that there were more than ten thousand monks living there with him.

Wanting to know the exact number of the monks, the King asked, "How many disciples do you have?"

Lin Chi replied, "Four or five at the most."

This journey is ongoing. We have to do the work of having our eyes opened and ears unplugged over and over and over and over.

This is why great spiritual teachers, like DeMello and Jesus and Buddha, sought to get around our natural defensiveness by telling stories.

Everybody loves a good story and there is likely nothing to stop us in our tracks any more than some version of “Once upon a time.”

People can oppose or resist the truth, deny it or sidestep it. But, almost no one can resist a story. If you listen carefully to a story, you will never be the same again. A good story will worm its way from your head into your heart, slipping through your defenses and exploding when you least expect.

One of the places I get good stories told to me is from the Spirituality and Practice website. I’ve recommended it to you before. I have known of and benefited from the work of Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat since before there was an internet. They started out offering resources to religious organizations and to individuals who wanted to explore all sorts of avenues for spiritual growth.

(Here is a link to some of their printed words as seen on Amazon - http://www.amazon.com/s/?ie=UTF8&keywords=brussat&tag=mh0b-20&index=stripbooks&hvadid=3481123732&hvqmt=e&hvbmt=be&hvdev=c&ref=pd_sl_6yeg38xp4u_e)

I encourage you to check out their website. (<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com>)

One of the ways I use this website is to check out their recommendations for movies. They have a wide variety of resources available for all sorts of interests. One of their listings is a constantly updated set of reviews about what they consider “spiritually literate” movies. They once put together a list of what they considered the most spiritual literate movies of all time. It’s difficult to find now but you can find it on the Ordinary Life website. (Here is a link to that list - http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/images/uploads/reviews/100_Best_Transformational_Movies-v2015.pdf)

They have their film reviews grouped by year. So I'll go back a year or so to see what they recommend. Those films are usually things I can download from Netflix or Amazon.

Recently when we were both tired and in need of something lighthearted, we watched a movie Spirituality and Practice recommended - The Croods.

The narrator of this wild and funny animated tale set in the Paleolithic era is a restless and rebellious teenager Eep (voiced by Emma Stone). She is upset with her overprotective father Grug (Nicolas Cage) who tells her and his two other kids — Thunk (Clark Duke) and Sandy (Randy Thom) — “New is always bad. Never not be afraid. Fear keeps us alive.” Each day seems to prove his view as various animals attack them or compete with them for food. He wants them to spend as much time as possible safe inside their dark cave.

“With every sun comes a new day, a new beginning, a new hope that things will be better. Except for me,” Eep laments at her own private pity party. One night, she disobeys her father and leaves the cave and runs into another human, Guy (Ryan Reynolds). He has learned how to make fire and warns Eep that an earthquake is coming which is “just the beginning of the end.” After her family’s cave is destroyed, they have no choice but to continue on to higher ground with Guy who has learned how to hunt with ease, to make shoes to protect his feet, and to handle most obstacles that come his way.

Filmmakers Kirk De Micco and Chris Sanders have crafted an incredibly entertaining movie filled with exotic land formations and a variety of creatures that run, jump, and fly. It’s fun to watch Eep’s family use their speed and prowess when pitted against predators who are bigger and more fierce than they are.

There are plenty of slapstick sequences and a batch of humorous one-liners contributed by co-writer John Cleese. The other women in this questing story are Uggia (Catherine Keener) as Grug’s patient wife and Gran (Cloris Leachman) as his feisty mother-in-law. But The Croods revolves around Eep’s yearning for a new life and the ways she responds to her father’s change of mind and Guy’s heroism. This attractive young man banishes her boredom by taking her on a trek towards the light.

In a dangerous world, curiosity, creativity, and collaboration are essential survival tools. It is a lark to watch Grug go through a series of personal changes as he leads his family on their adventuresome quest for a new home. With its captivating characters, rich and relevant themes, humor and imaginative visuals, *The Croods*, says the review from which I am quoting on the Spirituality and Practice website, is the most spectacular animated feature of 2013!

At one point when Grug gets especially frightened, he says to his family, “We have to find a cave and go into it and stay there.” Eep protests and Grug says, “It is my job as the father to keep our family together, to keep us alive.” Eep responds, “That wasn’t living. It was just not dying.”

In using the Gospel of Thomas as a guide on which to base these talks we have come to one of the most unique teachings in the entire collection. It is, perhaps, as close to a story or narrative as there is in the Gospel of Thomas. Keep in mind that this is not at all a literal account of anything, though it was likely based on something seen by and familiar to the follows of Jesus. Here is it:

They saw a Samaritan
On his way to Judea
Carrying a lamb.
Yeshua said, “Notice the Samaritan
With the lamb.”
His disciples said, “He must be carrying it
In order to kill and eat it.”
Yeshua responded, “As long as it is alive he
Cannot eat it. Only after he has killed it and it is
Dead will it be eaten.”
They replied, “What other way is there?”
Yeshua said, “You must be careful
To find a place for yourselves
In the realm of eternal rest,
Lest you too be killed and eaten.”

The scholars are fairly convinced that this is a parable created by the early Jesus community and attributed to Jesus. As you perhaps have heard me say before, “Jesus taught in parables. And, his followers taught in parables about Jesus.” Much of the narratives we have in the canonical scriptures are creations of the early community.

Jesus was a master story teller. In and with his stories he forced people, as I hope we are forced, to see the world, themselves and others from new angles, from new perspectives. His stories conveyed messages that could not easily be evaded.

I notice standing up here that many of you will tolerate these talks I offer in here at whatever level you do. But, the moment I can utilize a good story, as I have already today, I can tell your attention shifts. A good story can create a reality that is more real than real. As the native-American story teller would say at the beginning of a story, “I don’t know if this really happened or not, but I know it is true.

This story we are exposed to today is like that. It is an example of a pure parable. I have no idea how many books have been written about the parables of Jesus. Likely thousands. Are the parables of Jesus so complex that they require such attention? The answer is both a “yes” and a “no.” They are not jigsaw puzzles. They were first told to people who likely could not even read. If they were not clear and compelling, they would not have been remembered nor become as loved as much as they are. So, except for a few the scholars are still scratching their heads over, they are not complex. They are puzzling perhaps. But, not complex.

What is complex about them is the context in which they were told and the mind-set of both the person who told them and those who first heard them. We do not come at these stories out of anything remotely like that context. To understand the parables of Jesus well we have to keep in mind, or learn about, the ancient agricultural assumptions, wedding customs, relations of slaves and masters as well as Judaism and its history.

The men and women who were our spiritual ancestors were not wrapped up in the technological world in which we are. They were middle-eastern and did not think like we do nor acquire knowledge like we do. They had two ways of experiencing and expressing the Sacred.

These two ways of thinking and acquiring knowledge are called by scholars “mythos” and “logos.” Both were regarded as essential and each was used to get at the truth.

Each had its own area of competence.

“Myth” was regarded as primary. Myth was concerned with what was thought to be timeless and constant. Myth looked back to the origins of life, to the foundation of the culture, to the deepest levels of the human mind. Myth was not concerned with practical matters. Myth was concerned with meaning.

Isn't that why you are here? We seek to live meaningful lives. What is the point of life? What is my life about? Where am I headed?

If we don't have meaningful, wise and useful answers to these questions, we fall into despair or we remain at the surface, living superficial lives. Our culture is committed to superficiality.

The mythos of a society provided people with a context that made sense of their lives. It directed people's attention to the eternal and universal, as does the parable we are looking at today.

Mythos is also deeply rooted in the unconscious, in the collective unconscious. When people told stories about heroes who descended into the underworld and fought with monsters, they were bringing to light that which is unconscious in us all.

None of this is accessible to purely rational investigation but it nonetheless has a profound effect on our experience and behavior. All of us can be captured by those deep forces from the unconscious that cause us to live our lives either heroically or neurotically.

Mythos require rituals to keep them active and alive. I've done this with you in here before. Just wanted you know I know I'm repeating myself. Here is a picture of a Chopin Prelude? How do you like it? Does this alone provide a musical

experience? Does it satisfy? Unless you are a music savant just looking at the music would be abstract if not incredible. The music needs to be interpreted instrumentally before we can appreciate it.

Our spiritual ancestors had a very different view of history than we do. They were much less interested in what happened than in the meaning of what happened. For example, to tell someone in the first century that Jesus was born of a virgin would mean nothing to them. After all, their current savior and God, Augustus, had been born of a miraculous union between Apollo and his mother when Apollo turned into a snake and crawled into his mother when she slept at night. Interaction between gods and humans was common.

“Logos” was equally important. “Logos was the rational, pragmatic and scientific thought that allowed people to function well in the world.

We have virtually lost the mythic in our time and we have made logos, logic, the basis of our society. Of course, in order for logos to work, it must be accurate. It must relate to life as it is.

There was a time when myth and logic went hand in hand. Each was indispensable. They were distinct but only as distinct as the “head” and “tail” side of a coin. It was impossible to have one without the other. Each had a separate job to do. Each had its limitations. Logic, for example, can’t deal with human pain and sorrow. It can’t tell us about the ultimate value of life. That was the business of myth.

By the 18th century, however, we had achieved such astounding success in science and technology that we began to think that logic was the only way to truth. Myth began to be discounted as false and superstitious. What has happened in our time is that logic has been used to disprove myth or, for the fundamentalists, a distorted logic has been used to “prove” the myth to be literally true.

So, in this light, let’s go back and look at this parable again.

They saw a Samaritan
On his way to Judea
Carrying a lamb.

Yeshua said, "Notice the Samaritan
With the lamb."
His disciples said, "He must be carrying it
In order to kill and eat it."
Yeshua responded, "As long as it is alive he
Cannot eat it. Only after he has killed it and it is
Dead will it be eaten."
They replied, "What other way is there?"
Yeshua said, "You must be careful
To find a place for yourselves
In the realm of eternal rest,
Lest you too be killed and eaten."

The central concern of this parable is whether we will stay alive in the present world or whether we will be killed and eaten by it.

There is a poem by Carol Bieleck which seems, to me, to sum up the situation in which we find ourselves. It is titled "Breathing Under Water."

I built my house by the sea.
Not on the sands, mind you;
not on the shifting sand.
And I built it of rock.
A strong house
by a strong sea.
And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.
Good neighbors.
Not that we spoke much.
We met in silences.
Respectful, keeping our distance,
but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.
Always, the fence of sand our barrier,
always, the sand between.

And then one day,
- and I still don't know how it happened -

the sea came.
Without warning.

Without welcome, even
Not sudden and swift, but a shifting across the sand
like wine,
less like the flow of water than the
flow of blood.
Slow, but coming.
Slow, but flowing like an open wound.
And I thought of flight and I
thought of drowning
and I thought of death.
And while the sea crept higher, till it
reached my door.
And I knew then, there was neither
flight, nor death,
nor drowning.
That when the sea comes calling you stop being neighbors
Well acquainted, friendly-at-a distance, neighbors
And you give your house for a coral castle,
And you learn how to breath under water.

We need breathing underwater lessons. We are a culture and a church that often
appears to be drowning without knowing it.

We live in a culture that encourages us to think addictively, distortedly. That is to
say, a culture where beliefs and behaviors are largely hidden from the light of
consciousness.

What I was taught is that when the unconscious is largely in control, we
unconsciously use three defense mechanisms to survive: denial, rationalization and
projection. We project over there what we don't want to deal within ourselves.
That's why we've got to learn to learn our enemies - because invariably the people
who really annoy us are actually just like us. We tend to see our own faults in
others instead of in ourselves.

For example, we see how some jerk drives on the freeway ignoring and breaking the rules. We all want such freedom. We see how someone else is controlling the world situation. That upsets us because that is what we'd like to do - to control the whole situation.

This parable is about waking up and knowing one's self. When we don't want self-knowledge it is because we don't want to face our own dark side. We pay a heavy price when we keep a tight lid on the unconscious. What we sacrifice is all the mythos, the energy and enlightenment. Repressive religions, and that is what most religion has been throughout history, are dangerous and damaging.

We have to include all of who we are in the process of living life or we end up not living, just surviving. Not learning to breath under water but drowning.

We have to include all who are in the process of living life or we end up not living, just surviving.

Any notion of a pure, single and unadulterated source of divine revelation is pure nonsense. Yet many people who call themselves Christian still want to make their recent version of Christianity totally exclusionary and elitist in relationship to all other experiences and expressions of Sacred Mystery.

If there is one characteristic of holy people, I would say it's honesty. They just don't pretend anymore. That, by the way, is what Jesus meant when he called people "hypocrites." They were just acting. Not being real.

Surviving is not the same as living.

We are preparing for Ilia Delio to be here in November. I was looking back over some of the notes I've made in hearing her twice now and reading some of her books. We live in such a vast sea of energy. Our minds can't imagine it. This mass of energy has been in existence in its expanding, evolving, creative, entangled way for, again, longer than we can comprehend - 13 plus billion years.

It occurred to me: we're just here for the weekend.

Yet so many people, like the father in *The Croods*, think staying in their cave is the thing to do and they are experts on the matter. I think any of us are capable of strutting around asking our great questions: why does this happen? Why that? Where is God in times of crises? Why do the innocent suffer?

It is like someone visiting a country that is foreign to them for a few hours and griping about the things in that culture that are alien to him or her, because that person has not become learned in the ways of that land or its culture.

So it is with being in this life, in this world.

The choice is up to each one of us: are we going to stay in the cave or have the adventure of life? Are we going to learn to breathe under water or drown?

Whichever you choose, remember, you are just here for the weekend.

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