

If I had to say what was the motivating factor that has led me to stand here doing this teaching, and the personal work and writing that goes on behind the scenes getting ready for these times together, it would be the very simple fact that when I was a small child I was afraid of the dark. Years later, while training to be a therapist, I would learn that the fear I experienced was something I absorbed from the family, mostly my mother, into which I had been born. Long story. I won't go into it here.

This fear was compounded by the fact that I was raised in an evangelical and benignly fundamentalist church - Southern Baptist. My grandmother, my father's mother - and it says something about our screwed up family dynamic that she was called "Great" and her husband was called "Chief" - was, I swear, one of the meanest people God ever made. She is the one who taught me - read, forced me to memorize and say - the terrifying childhood prayer:

Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

This added the overlay that death might occur while I was sleeping. It taught me I had something called a "soul" and that there was a distinct possibility that the Lord might not take it but that, rather, something else might happen to it.

It was the church that taught me what that destiny might be. If I didn't play my cards just right, and I never did seem to figure out what those cards were or how to play them because nothing I did put my nighttime fears to rest. Indeed, religion only intensified them.

I learned that Jesus was coming back and that his task was to separate the sheep from the goats. The more I heard of this teaching the more it came apparent, at least to me, that I was probably not in the sheep category. I was definitely goat material. Fear was a huge part of this religious teaching. Parables of Jesus and teachings of Paul were twisted to say that Jesus would be coming back like a thief in the night. You wouldn't know when but likely when you least expected it, he would break in and dish out the punishment.

I slept in a bedroom on the second floor of our house where outside the window there was a tree limb that, when the wind was blowing, would brush up against the window screen. Many a night I lay there in terror convinced "this is it. I'm done for."

Don't get me wrong. Nobody in that family or culture had a conscious agenda of "let's mess with little William's mind." (I didn't change my name to Bill until much later.) These were good people - given the level of awareness they had.

They wanted the best not only for me but for everybody. Though it caused no cognitive dissonance to them to hate people of color and exclude them from the political process of the community, the Southern Baptists were renown for raising millions of dollars to send missionaries overseas, unusually to what was referred to as "the heart of darkest Africa," to save the souls of people. By the way, in 2009, a few months after Obama was sworn into office, Wiley Drake, vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention, exhorted Christians to pray and ask God to kill the president.

I had a brother, six years older than me, who made fun of me about my fears. He was mean to me in other ways as well. He had his own issues being the result of an

unwanted and unexpected pregnancy of my parents' three month old marriage.

His teasing did let me know that there were people my age who weren't afraid of the dark. Why was that? What did they know that I didn't know?

As I grew older this fear of the dark served as an expanding metaphor for not only my curiosity about why some people were not so frightened but also why it was that some people seemed to be more successful at life and living than others. By "successful" I don't mean having lots of money and fame. You hear almost every day about people who have these things, who seem to have every reason to be happy, who blow their brains out or drift off into a ruinous addiction. By "success" here I mean those people who live their lives with peace and confidence, they have more friends, they have high levels of health, energy and happiness. Why is that?

I have spent my life seeking answers to these kinds of questions and I am so glad that I have.

But, I digress.

It has been the human animal's fear of the dark, that is of death and what comes afterward, that our work on what I'm calling, borrowing Brandon Scott's title, "The Trouble with Resurrection" has led us to today. Notice that both Scott and I are saying "the trouble with resurrection" and not "the trouble with THE resurrection."

One of my contentions today is this: I seriously believe that religion has screwed up a lot of people by using fear. A religion that says that unless you cross your t's or dot your i's just right, then an eternal

torture chamber awaits you is a bad religion and a seriously flawed understanding of Sacred Mystery. A religion that allows its adherents to kill others, and character assassination is a form of murder, because they believe "the wrong things" is a false religion.

From the beginning of time, at least as far as we can find any records for, humans have dealt with our awareness of and anxieties about death.

Those who specialize in cultural anthropology tell us that there have been, across the centuries and in various cultures, four main ways humans have had for dealing with these fears.

That horrible prayer - I pray the Lord my soul to take - gave me some notion about death. My first encounter with the death of a person happened when my grandfather, my mother's father died. He was very young, as we look at things now. Dropped dead of a heart attack. As was the custom then in the mountain villages in East Tennessee, his body lay in the bed he shared with my grandmother until the undertakers came and got the body and put it in a casket and took it off to the church. Open casket funerals were just the in thing at that time. I was at the peak of my being afraid of the dark period of my life when this happened. I knew that what happened to him could happen to me too.

This happens to all of us at some point, as it does to the human race. We come to the realization that the worst thing that can possibly happen one day will. And, that's frightening. It's terrifying. We begin to look for a way out. "Where is Daddy Stiles?" I would ask. "He's up in heaven looking down on us" was the answer I got. The idea of taking some sort of elevator up to

heaven to see my granddad really sounded a lot better than Jesus coming back to get my soul while I slept.

The social anthropologists tell us that we develop world views, our biases if you will, that promise us immortality in some form from the culture in which we live. Likely the most important work done on this matter is that done by Ernest Becker in his monumental book "Denial of Death."

We want to avoid death and the dream of doing that in this body in this world forever is the first and simplest kind of immortality story. It seems that every culture in human history has had some legend or myth of something that promises to keep us going forever. Ancient Egypt had such myths. There was Ponce de Leon and his quest for the Fountain of Youth. Even now people are putting their faith and hope in genetic engineering and nanotechnology. One thing that all of those who have sought some way of staying alive have in common is that they are all now dead.

The second kind of immortality story is that of resurrection. Yes, I have the body. Yes, it is going to die. But, I can rise up and live again. This belief started in Judaism and is shared by Christians and Muslims alike.

Though it has somewhat fallen into disrepute today, there has been in our time a belief in the idea of cryogenics. That is, when you die, you can have yourself frozen and when technology has advanced enough, you can be thawed out and repaired and revived. As Stephen Cave, who is the person I'm borrowing this from says, "Some people believe an omnipotent god will resurrect them to live again and other people believe an omnipotent scientist will do it."

The third immortality story, and this is the one likely held by the majority of people in the West, is not that of a body climbing out of a grave. Perhaps that reminds people more of a zombie movie than anything else. You do notice, that the idea of zombies has recently exploded in the entertainment field. This third way of dealing with our anxiety of death and dying is that we have a soul which, when the body expires, departs the body and moves on to another realm. We will deal with this more in a moment.

Of course, many people reject all of these and embrace yet another immortality story. It is that of leaving a legacy through which you live on in the world. Somehow you leave your echo behind. Ernest Becker makes much of this method. People try to become heroes in some way.

Fame has never been easier than it is now. Someone sent me a piece this week that posed this question: "If someone from the 1950s suddenly appeared today, what would be the most difficult thing to explain to them about life today?"

The answer was this: "I possess a device, in my pocket, that is capable of accessing the entirety of information known to the human race. I use it to look at pictures of cats and get in arguments with strangers."

You can become famous, leave a legacy, by creating a cute cat video.

People leave children as their legacy. Or, they leave huge amounts of money and later have buildings built in their honor like, for example, Jones Hall for Jesse Jones whose money, along with two others, built the cathedral across the plaza.

There are those, however, who even wonder about this. Woody Allen, for example, said, "I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen. I want to live on in my apartment."

Whatever a person believes, regardless of the period of history or the culture or the form the belief takes, no one believes what they believe on the strength of any "evidence" as we think of "evidence" with the dualistic mind. Whatever we believe we believe, say the social anthropologists and psychologists, because we are afraid of death.

I hope by the time we are done here today, we might open the door a smidgen to what it means to acknowledge that though the fear of death is natural, it is not rational. Further, it is fear and living fearfully that is the driving factor in the divisiveness in our world today.

I spent our time together last week talking with you about different levels of cognitive, moral, emotional and spiritual development. Our spiritual and psychological work is to do what is necessary for us to grow from dualistic to non-dual mind. As we do that, we will experience living life less fearfully and will have less need to be defensive. We can put more energy into our own growth and less into trying to either make other people wrong or trying to change them. I read a line from one of my favorite writers the other day, Marianne Moore. She said, "The passion for setting people right is in itself an afflictive disease." Indeed. As we do this kind of growth we can begin to look at how we are complicit in the very situations that we are upset about.

The tradition in which you and I live is call the Judeo-Christian tradition. It doesn't matter whether

you are Buddhist, atheist, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or "non-of-the-above," if you grew up in and live in the West you have been profoundly impacted by this orientation. Though I have said this before, it bears repeating: most people, even those who strongly defend their various religious opinions, think they know the Jesus story. The evidence, however, clearly shows that they do not.

Working to be open to non-duality is so important because at the dualistic level what is honored is being certain, being right, being comfortable and being in control. Spend much time talking with people like this and you begin to wonder: how is it that narrow minded people can be so thick headed? The authentic spiritual journey, or growing morally, offers us none of these things.

I got a wonderful line from one of Dave Barry's columns this week. He was writing about the increasing abdication of personal responsibility in this country. In his sarcastic, humorous way he was talking about how he use to think that some things, like not taking care of his health, was his fault. He writes, "Fortunately, I live in the United States of America, where we are gradually coming to understand that nothing we do is ever our fault, especially, if it is really stupid."

Our country is reeling from the consequences of people in high places of power and authority believing that the rules not only don't apply to them but also that the goal is to get as much as they can for themselves regardless of the consequences to and for others.

Becker and other social anthropologists say that all of this behavior is fear based. They go on to say that the big fear is that of death.

That gets us back to the topic of the day. What's going to happen?

I had an encounter in this very space years ago. For some reason something I said had upset a person who was attending Ordinary Life that day. After I was done, this young man was really hot. He was fuming. He came up after class to confirm that he had heard me correctly about what I didn't believe. Evidently my teaching that day had challenged some of his core beliefs.

With his Bible clutched to his chest, he ended his diatribe by saying, "Just let me ask you this. If you died tonight, what will happen to your eternal soul?"

As I said, the tradition each of us is in regardless of how we embrace it, is the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Jews, up until a few hundred years before the time of Jesus embraced as their mortality narrative the legacy story. Their belief was that God had chosen them as God's special people. Coming from a background of years of being slaves they experienced release from captivity. They were going to have land that would be theirs forever. They would have descendants that would populate the earth. Their task was to obey God's laws and grow in wisdom. You lived a good and wise life and you died and that was it.

Jack Kornfield, the man who helped bring Buddhism to America has written, "At the end of life what will matter is: Did I live fully? Did I love well?"

Then, something happened to and for the Jews. Caught between the political struggles of Syria, Egypt and Rome for control of land and people, the Jews once again experienced not just captivity and enslavement but also the destruction of their temple and being

forced to live on foreign soil. It looked as if God was not keeping God's end of the bargain. So they moved to another mortality narrative: that of resurrection.

The resurrection was not to some afterlife in a place called heaven. It was a resurrection to the lives they had been prevented from living here. It was an affirmation of faith and a profound hope in a future they had been denied.

Many people are surprised, perhaps even shocked, to learn that the notion of individual soul immortality is not Jewish and is no where to be found in the Bible - either Hebrew Scripture or Christian writings. Beliefs about having a soul come from the Greek culture and were thoroughly rejected by the Jewish people.

They did see, and here I'm specifically referring to Paul, daily images of the emperor "in the form of a god." They saw this on the coins used. They saw it in statues. They heard divine titles being given to the emperor. Rising to the top was a way of life much as it is idealized in our culture. So when Paul says that Jesus has been raised, that Jesus has been exalted; it is this kind of exaltation that he has in mind.

Paul talks to his sophisticated audience and says, "No, it is not Caesar who is exalted and raised to a place of divinity and worship, it is Jesus." That would have been appealing to Jesus followers. And, it would have been dangerous. For a Roman the assertions of Paul are unthinkable. The Jewish messiah - remember, there are no Christians yet - the Jewish messiah whom the Romans had crucified is now exalted as the lord and master of the universe. This would have been an obscenity beyond comprehension to the Romans.

One of the goals of my teaching is to break the literal mold into which the Bible, Jesus and his teachings have been forced.

I'm going to repeat something I've said before in this series and will likely say again. One of the problems with the notion of resurrection is that it has been made into "the resurrection." Then, this has been literalized, narrowed and constricted, turned into a creedal statement and, in the process, a great claim and hope has been lost.

The resurrection experience changed lives, reoriented people's understanding of the Sacred, and created a new holy day. That is sufficient data to indicate that something real happened in and to the community of people who followed Jesus' teachings.

The essence of spiritual work is to open us up to this kind of mystery. It is not to shut us down, which is what literalism and certitude do. Any of the mortality narratives looked at literally or dualistically make them ridiculous.

The danger of the eternal soul bit is that it helps create the division between sacred and secular. All that is and all who are is Sacred. We just desecrate some of it. All people are holy. We just objectify some of them.

So, what is your fate?

We are going to talk more about that next week when we talk about hell.

My teacher said, "We only have three things to worry about in life. Death is not one of them."

The difficulties we have are being born, growing old - if we are lucky, and being sick. Death is not a problem. When we are here, death is not. When death is here, we are not.

I want to quote an extended passage from Stephen Cave.

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I find it helps to see life as being like a book: Just as a book is bounded by its covers, by beginning and end, so our lives are bounded by birth and death, and even though a book is limited by beginning and end, it can encompass distant landscapes, exotic figures, fantastic adventures. And even though a book is limited by beginning and end, the characters within it know no bounds. They only know the moments that make up their story, even when the book is closed. And so the characters of a book are not afraid of reaching the last page. Long John Silver is not afraid of you finishing your copy of "Treasure Island." And so it should be with us. Imagine the book of your life, its covers, its beginning and end, as your birth and your death. You can only know the moments in between, the moments that make up your life. It makes no sense for you to fear what is outside of those covers, whether before your birth or after your death. And you needn't worry how long the book is, or whether it's a comic strip or an epic. The only thing that matters is that you made it a good story.

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So, if you die tonight, what will happen?

What is death? You know how we talked about levels of development last week? Anytime you go from one level to another, that's dying. We all know we are going to die

physically. Death is going fully beyond where I am now, it is giving up control. What we learn if we learn to pay attention is that grace is found at the depths. The longer I live the more clearly I see that the only "deadly sin" is to swim on the surface of things where we never see, find or experience Sacred Mystery. This includes especially the surface of religion.

So we must not be afraid of death, of falling, failing or going down. It is there we find grace.

You have to pick your own mortality narrative. None of the four I've mentioned today is really satisfactory to me.

One of the great non-dual minds of all time is the Persian Sufic mystic named Rumi. He was born in 1207 and you could get a book of his selected poems and use it in your daily practice. He wrote a poem that captures what I believe about death and dying:

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I spent millions of years in the world
of inorganic things
as a star, as a rock...
Then I died and became a plant--
Forgetting my former existence
because of its otherness
Then I died and became an animal--
Forgetting my life as a plant
except for inclinations in the season
of spring and sweet herbs--
like the inclination of babes
toward their mother's breast
Then I died and became a human
My intelligence ripened, awakening
from greed and self-seeking

to become wise and knowing
I behold a hundred thousand
intelligences most marvelous
and remember my former states
and inclinations
And when I die again
I will soar past the angels
to places I cannot imagine
Now, what have I ever lost by dying?

* * *

What Jesus taught and embodied is that our true
identity is who we are in Sacred Mystery.

We live in the heart of Sacred Mystery.

Our task is to move into this light, be enlightened, to
grow in awareness of this.

The way I hold it, and this is the sort of thing you
have to decide for yourself, is that if I die tonight,
I'll be where I am right this moment: in the sacred
heart of God. Where could I go?

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