

The Sun And The Umbrella

Once upon a time a crow found a piece of cheese. The crow flew up to a branch on a tree planning to eat the cheese. A fox down below, wanting the cheese for himself, began to flatter the crow. The fox told the crow how beautiful it was and wondered whether the crow's voice was as sweet as the crow's beauty. When the crow lets out a caw to show off its voice, the cheese falls to the ground and the fox eats it.

That is one of the first stories I can remember having read to me as a very young child. You likely recognize it as one of Aesop's fables.

Aesop was a Greek story teller who was born in 620 BCE and died around age 55 or 56. (The Wikipedia article about him is fascinating. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesop>)

I bring Aesop up today because a teaching attributed to Jesus found in the Gospel of Thomas is actually a saying from Aesop. Jesus' disciples, according to the scholarship I depend on, put this saying into the mouth of Jesus to sum up the attitude Jesus had toward the religious leaders of his time. It was also a truth they wanted all Jesus followers to be aware of. Here is the teaching from Thomas:

Yeshua says,

Cursed are your
religious leaders
for they are like dogs
sleeping in the feed bin.
They do not eat
nor do they allow
the cattle to eat.

Another translation of this saying is: Jesus said, "Damn the Pharisees! They are like a dog sleeping in the cattle manger: the dog neither eats nor (lets) the cattle eat."

This is coming from a man who also said, “Don’t judge.”

I mentioned last week that it is my belief that we are in the midst of a “Great Turning.” More and more people are interested in the kinds of things we talk about in here - in spiritual and psychological growth. As I have gotten further along in my own journey I have come to see that it is impossible to separate the spiritual from the psychological.

And, more and more people are interested in doing something to right the inherent social injustices that exist around the world.

I know that it is possible to look out at some of the things that manage to make the headlines in our various news media, and disbelieve that this turning is taking place. But it is.

Think about it this way:

We are the first generation in the history of the world to know what we know about the cosmos in which we live and about ourselves who are living in it.

It was Ilia Delio who opened the door on this for me. I knew something about the new discoveries that were being made about the nature of the cosmos but she put it in a way that absolutely captured it for me. And, captured me.

The size and age of the energy field we call the cosmos is so enormous that the human mind cannot grasp it. Plus, it is continuing to expand and evolve.

The same kinds of discoveries are being made at the quantum physics level.

Further, neuroscientists are saying that what we are discovering about the brain is analogous to what we are discovering about the cosmos. The brain is far more complex and massive in its workings than we ever imagined. The brain can no more comprehend itself than the brain can comprehend the cosmos. Perhaps the most incomprehensible thing is that we can comprehend any of this to the degree that we do.

We are the first generation to know this sort of stuff.

Of course, not everyone knows about this “first-ness.” But, for anyone who is interested, if they have access to the technology, the information is out there.

For some people, such as myself and I hope you, this increased knowledge and information has been liberating. For some it has been so terrifying that it has created deep wells of idiocy and denial and an increase of intensity and stupidity among Fundamentalists of all stripes in every religion. They make claims for their religion that do not and cannot stand scrutiny.

We are the first.

And, we are the last.

We are the last generation in the history of the world to know what the world was like prior to the digital revolution - prior to smart phones, the internet and all that this technology has brought us.

The digital revolution has brought us enormous benefits. We are also paying a heavy price because of the constant attention our devices are asking of us. For example: relationship skills are diminishing, rudeness is increasing and a general increase in a lack of civility seems to be on the increase. People are free and willing to hide behind the anonymity that some forms of digital communication affords them to say things they would never say publicly and personally.

I’m certainly not glorifying the “good old days.” The past that some people seem to want to return to were also days of limitations of all sorts of their own. But I would raise up the issue of what has been lost and the price we are paying for living in a world of constant connection. Constant connection causes us to pay only partial attention to some of the most important things in our lives.

When Gutenberg invented the printing press that invoked a massive revolution. It took centuries, however, before that revolution was fully unpacked. Our technological revolution has evolved with astonishing speed.

A friend of ours has a party at his home every Fourth of July. He lives on the edge of the park where Houston's Fourth of July fireworks display is based. Houston has the largest land-based Fourth of July fireworks display of any city in the country. It is impressive. Equally impressive, at least for me, this year were the two drones flying about the display taking and sending back for broadcast digital pictures of the fireworks display as it was taking place.

Being both in the generation that is the first and the last gives us an interesting vantage point in which and from which to look at what we have lost and what we have gained. Whereas we used to look to elders for wisdom and guidance, we now look to our children. Not for wisdom and guidance but for knowledge and information as we seek for help in dealing with the new technologies that keep coming at us.

Social anthropologists are saying that we are retaining less wisdom and knowledge because we don't need to. It's all instantly available, not the wisdom of course, but the knowledge and information. It is instantly available at our fingertips. If you want to know something just ask Siri or Alexa. I no longer remember phone numbers. No need. One scholar has referred to our condition where we can know everything but know nothing as feeling "smupid" - that is, smart and stupid at once.

We look at our daily lives through the lens of what is share-worthy while ignoring the surveillance of our lives by Facebook, Google, Twitter and others as they mine data for advertising revenue. We have learned not to see this as an invasion of our lives but, rather, as the small price we pay for being not only constantly connected but also having our every whim instantly gratified. What kind of logarithm does Amazon Prime use to know what I might be interested in next? But, it seems to.

We were having dinner out with friends of ours not too long ago. Both are among the most highly educated people I know in the fields of biology and the workings of the brain. At the table next to us sat a family that included a child who was perhaps two or three years old. The child was engrossed with an iPad mini and able to work it for his own amusement. Our friends noticed this and thus began among us a conversation about how our "wet brains" are actually being physically

modified by our interaction with our “dry brains.” The younger a person is, the more true this reality is for that person.

A person will not necessarily or automatically participate in the great turning I believe is coming.

I thought it was another example of entanglement when I was putting the finishing touches on this talk for today I got Richard Rohr’s daily e-mail. Let me read to you two brief paragraphs:

“I know the situation in the world can seem dark today. We are seeing theological regression into fundamentalist religions which believe all issues can be resolved by an appeal to authority (hierarchy or Scripture) and so there is no need for an inner life of prayer. In the United States we have seen the rolling back of a compassionate economic system and the abandonment of our biblical responsibility for the poor, the sick, and refugees. Fear and anger seem to rule our politics and our churches. We see these same things in many parts of the world.

“The negative forces are very strong, and the development of consciousness and love sometimes feels very weak. But a “Great Turning” is also happening, as believed and described in many ways by such people as Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Joanna Macy, and David Korten. There is a deep relationship between the inner revolution of prayer and the transformation of social structures and social consciousness.”

It takes a certain mind-set, a certain stance in the world. I believe, and you would expect me to say this, that we have to take up a deliberate and conscious practice of seeking the sacred - in ourselves, in each other and in the created order. This is, or ought to be, the function of authentic religion.

A problem is that religion, any religion, can go inauthentic in a heartbeat. Not only inauthentic, unwise, not useful; but also, dangerous and damaging.

Since I myself cannot always remember what happened yesterday, I want to take this opportunity just to summarize a few themes that have constituted the canvas

on which these “ordinary life talks” are painted on. These things make up the operating system that is constantly running in the background.

Years ago I knew, influenced by a multitude of factors, that the religious structure in which I had been born and raised, that of Southern Baptist, was too confining. I wanted both to experience and express something that was as open and inclusive as I saw God to be. I wanted to be open to new light and life from whatever source it came. So I came up with a phrase - we are to be involved in the process of becoming centers of freedom and love. Each word or phrase of this formula can be elaborated on at length. The main thing I wanted was to create something that assumed or required no particular religious orientation. The Christian language and myth is a part of my DNA but there are so many definitions of what it means to be Christian. I think this phrase is original with me. It didn't come to me out of a vacuum.

I mentioned to you a couple of weeks ago that my path in pursuing matters of mind and spirit was set for me by primarily by three important figures. I think they came to me in this order:

First, was Rudolph Bultmann who gave me the phrase “authentic existence.” Bultmann was a German New Testament scholar and theologian who said, in essence, if someone turns away from the call to follow Jesus let it not be because they are rejecting the notion of an outmoded three-storied universe, the literal nature of miracles and things like that. But, rather let it be because they have heard and come face-to-face with the call to and for authentic existence.

Then, there was my being found by Harry Emerson Fosdick and his similar sounding but very different call to be “a real person.” Though extremely bright and an outspoken opponent of fundamentalism, Fosdick was much more pastoral in his approach and open in making connections between spirituality and psychology. It seems hard for us to grasp this now but when Fosdick would preach at Riverside Church in NYC, the “New York Times” would send a reporter to cover his sermon and write about the next day. “Being a Real Person” meant an engagement in the world as it is in a way that speaks up for a certain set of values. So, Fosdick was second.

Third, I would have to put Carl Jung. This includes the teachers and trainers I have had. From one of them, Robert Johnson, I got the phrase “journey into wholeness.”

All Ordinary Life talks are, or ought to be, about these things.

I have also wanted, and this too is part of the background operating system, to contribute to spiritual as well as religious literacy. I really do believe that the salvation of the world lies in educating people as to their true nature, their true source, to the fact that we are all part of the same energy system. As the song of my youth affirms, “Brown or yellow, black or white, we are all precious in God’s sight.” It is just in each other’s sight this falls away. And, sadly religion misunderstood is easily religion misused.

It is beyond sad to me that the very teachings of Jesus to help people enter into the realm of Sacred Mystery in the here and now have been used as an excuse to denigrate other religions and to force people to convert to some version of Christianity.

I’ve said things like this before or in other places and almost invariably someone will say, “But didn’t Jesus say, “I am the way. No one comes to the Father except through me.”? First of all, I believe Jesus is the way to be, for those who choose to follow Jesus. But, please take that teaching from John in context. Jesus did not say, “Hey guys, I’m going to give you a set of secret instructions so that you will go to heaven when you die and people who don’t follow these secret instruction, aren’t going to make it.” What he is saying is, “Stay close to me and I’ll get you where you need to be, into the heart of God in the here and now. That’s where you belong. When you are there you can live out my message of love and forgiveness, healing and inclusion.” Real religion isn’t a matter of knowing about. It is a matter of knowing.

Jesus first disciples were clueless, over and over, about his message. They got caught up in wondering who is in and who is out. God! is that a theme for our global culture now. Even some who call themselves Jesus disciples and followers now show such a preoccupation with who is in and who is out and it gives rise to the uncomfortable suspicion that some folks won’t be happy being “in” unless there is a sufficient number who are “out.” That is what hell-fire and damnation

preaching, the “left-behind” books, and condemnation of those who don’t fit some culturally defined sexual norm and other exclusionary teachings are all about.

My religious sensibilities were also shaped by the intensely racist culture in which I was raised and in which we all still live.

The 1950s were also a time of fear and chaos in this country. It was the era of Senator Joe McCarthy and attempted racial integration. It was also the time when a Baptist theologian whose name was Nels Ferre taught in Tennessee at Vanderbilt. (<http://www.phil.uga.edu/faculty/ferre/vitafpf.htm>)

He wrote numerous books. Three that I am aware of - “The Christian Understanding of God,” “The Sun and the Umbrella” and “Christ and the Christian.” The first book, a scholarly work, was taken seriously only by scholars. The next book created such a fire-storm that Ferre had to leave the South and go North to Andover Newton to teach.

I encountered the book “The Sun and the Umbrella” in graduate school and it was, to me, such a breath of fresh air. In that book Ferre shows how the Bible, the church, and even teachings about Jesus can act as an umbrella to keep people out of the warming sun of God’s love and grace. Of course, no one likes to be told that they are hiding in the shade. Ferre was, however, difficult to deal with. He was too evangelical to be ignored. I can remember one of my theology teachers talking about how liberal Ferre was and then saying, “There is no person on the planet I would rather have pray for me than Nels Ferre.”

Ferre was also too smart to be easily defeated in argument. You can Google his name to see what a controversial figure he was. He was a pacifist. He thought insistence on things like the virgin birth were a distraction. He was called a communist at a time when that was the worst thing you could say about a person.

I bring him up because the way he talks about the dangers of literalism or Fundamentalism is by telling a story. To keep from being burned by the sun people built an umbrella. But they knew the light was important so they told a story about it - the Bible. Then they invented a light to resemble the sun by putting a candle in a lantern which was enclosed so the wind couldn’t blow it out. The lantern was the

church and the light was Jesus. His point was: Sometimes the very things we create to reveal God - doctrines and dogmas - end up concealing God.

Christianity is not about believing in Jesus but having a relationship with the God of Jesus and that relationship, ultimately, will not leave us unchanged. I think this is very simple. It is very orthodox - in the best, truest sense of that word.

This is what had happened in Judaism at the time of Jesus. And, though he was not the only prophetic voice to rail against what was going on, his was the most effective. Over and over he said to the religious establishment: "You've got it wrong. You have been entrusted with a great truth but you are not only not living it yourselves but also you are blocking other people from being nourished by it."

I'm ambivalent about organized religion - all of it. I'm going to limit myself to what has gone under the banner of Christianity.

Christian institutions and organizations have done a tremendous amount of good in the world.

I'm thinking about this what we are doing right now. A Christian church makes this possible. Most all of the hospitals and orphanages in the world have Christian origins. Humanitarian work done around the world - most of it started out of religious roots. Ordinary Life has been involved in funding and resourcing after school care and tutorial programs here and medical and AIDS work elsewhere for years. We are involved in micro-loan projects and clean water projects around the world. This is good.

But, on the negative side of the ledger are things like:

Almost five hundred years of Trans Atlantic Slave Trade that maimed, raped, killed, kidnapped, and enslaved 20 million African "heathens" to bring them to Christ.

Genocide of Native Americans done under the name of Christ as the "white man's" Manifest Destiny.

Not to mention the Salem Witch Trials, the Spanish Inquisition, the Crusades.

In Central Africa Republic Christian Militias have destroyed every single mosque and the UN reports that Muslims are facing ethnic cleansing with reports that Christians are cannibalizing Muslims, literally.

In America white supremacists are the single largest terror threat to American security, that's according to the FBI and 392 police agencies in a study published last year.

Just in the past ten days there has been a new revelation of further pedophile cover up in the Roman Catholic Church.

The fact that the KKK still exists, that Nazis still exist, that the Aryan nations still exist does not speak well for the message of Jesus being effective in the world.

You check for yourself and see who it was Jesus spent time being opposed by and being critical of. Check and see what was the group that most opposed him and called for his death.

I myself am comfortable allowing Jesus to be "the way." Not the way to get to heaven. The way to be.

I personally think it is a misreading of this teaching to take it to mean that we have open season on any institutional religious person or religious institution to blast them as we please. That's a straw-man exercise. The early followers of Jesus inserted this well known saying from Aesop into the teachings of Jesus as a warning not to block, or be blocked, in the experiencing or expression of what Jesus was about - the communication of the graciousness of God.

I don't know about you but I need to pay attention to that ego-stance of righteousness in me that blocks the experience and expression of kindness, generosity and justice.

There is another voice from the ancient world that I would like to raise up. It is that of Socrates. He was four centuries before Jesus. He is the one who said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

He said this at his trial. He was on trial for encouraging his students to challenge the accepted beliefs of the time and to think for themselves. Socrates did not have to die. He could have chosen life imprisonment or exile. But he believed those alternatives would have robbed him of the only thing that made life worth living: examining the world around him and discussing how to make the world a better place.

We are living in a culture, not for the first time in history, that seduces people not to live examined lives.

There is a saying: When the student is ready the teacher appears. (This is frequently misattributed to Buddhism. It actually comes from the Theosophical movement of the 19th century.) The teacher, whoever she or he is, is not in your life to judge. Unless, in some way you are blocking someone or some group from the experience of kindness, generosity and justice. If so, then Jesus wants to have a serious talk with you.

The teacher only wants to ask what umbrellas block your experience of the sun?

How is it going with you? How is it going with the immediate, concrete experience you have with yourself? What’s the internal chatter? Loving? Critical?

How is it going with the immediate, concrete relationships you have with other people in your life? My teacher said in talking to me about love of neighbor, “You don’t have to eat with everyone but don’t kick anyone out of your heart.

At the risk of quoting him too much today, I want to share another quote from Richard Rohr:

“We are either a people who love, embrace, and enter into a caring posture with our family, friends, neighbors, strangers, and even enemies (real or imagined) or we will spend our lives mercilessly trying to define who is lovable and who is not,

who deserves my attention and who does not. Inevitably, we will end up loving people who look like us, think like us, and pledge allegiance to the same flag - and we will exclude the rest. In this truly useless pursuit, we will separate ourselves from God (through tribal worship), from the world's good (by avoiding healing and restoration), and from our very souls (through self-preoccupation with ego.)”

Every one on this planet, just like you and every aspect of who you are, lives and moves and has her or his being inside the Sacred Heart or the Love Energy from which we came forth. Everyone belongs. Everything belongs. Our spiritual calling is to make this truth manifest in our lives and, then, in the world. Our spiritual calling is to remove whatever umbrellas block our awareness of this and any person's experience of this.

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