

Out of the Vicious and Into the Virtuous Cycle

I love stories. Nearly everybody does.

“Once upon a time . . .”

Just that phrase causes people to shift awareness, to pause and pay attention.

Jesus was a master story teller. What the scholarship of the past hundred years or so has let us know is that he was not the only story teller in Eastern culture. His Jewish tradition was full of stories. Good ones, at that - as I hope my retelling of the story of Jonah and the great fish illustrated last week.

First Nations religions, the Hindu religion, Buddhism are full of stories. Zen, a form of Buddhism is famous for teaching stories.

Here is one:

It seems that when the guru sat down to lead the community of seekers in meditation each evening, the guru's cat would get in the way and distract those gathered to meditate. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening meditation time.

After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening meditation.

When the cat expired, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening meditation.

Centuries later learned lectures were given and important spiritual books were written by the guru's scholarly disciples on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while evening meditation is performed.

When religion becomes unwise it devolves into something like that.

In my teaching I do not dismiss tradition. It can be a safeguard against the peril of purchasing a cheap kind of credibility that sacrifices authentic substance for the truth of “what is.” There is, however, a difference between tradition and traditionalism. Just as there is a difference between patriotism and nationalism. As seekers we are looking for what is credible and trustworthy. That’s the past. And though it is the past it has not stopped happening to us yet.

In spiritual work we must also make sense of now. What is really going on? We are not only as a culture in a consensual trance but also at the mercy of a superficial and entertainment mentality. How can we avoid being captured by the very dysfunctional archetypes that seem to run, and ruin, our world - those of patriarchy, insufficiency, separation and violence? This, I would suggest to you, constitutes the most important question of our time. How can we embrace the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible? I want my teachings, what you hear in here, to constitute expressions of hope.

I want to repeat something I said last week: I want these times together to challenge us to move - whether we have to crawl, limp, walk or run - out of our comfort zone into a space where loyalty to tribe does not blind us to what is or bind us to beliefs and behaviors that contribute to separation.

We must learn how to be present to Intelligent Heart with intelligent hearts. I don’t want to contribute in our living to our simply continue tying up the guru’s cat.

To take us into the territory that today’s talk is about, I’ll tell you another story. This one was told by Jesus.

I’m telling it for several reasons.

For one thing this is one of those stories that Christian Fundamentalists take as literal. The story you are about to hear, like the story of Jonah, is a parable.

Another reason I am telling it is that this story continues to lay the foundation for future talks I want to do on the “acts of Jesus,” most often referred to “miracles.”

Also, this story speaks directly to the conditions in our world and country. And, suggests a path toward healing. I'm calling this talk "Getting Out of the Vicious and Getting Into the Virtuous Cycle."

Here is the story:

There once was a rich man, expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption. A poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, had been dumped on his doorstep. All he lived for was to get a meal from scraps off the rich man's table. His best friends were the dogs who came and licked his sores.

Then he died, this poor man, and was taken up by the angels to the lap of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell and in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham in the distance and Lazarus in his lap. He called out, "Father Abraham, mercy! Have mercy! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool my tongue. I'm in agony in this fire."

But Abraham said, "Child, remember that in your lifetime you got the good things and Lazarus the bad things. It's not like that here. Here he's consoled and you're tormented. Besides, in all these matters there is a huge chasm set between us so that no one can go from us to you even if he wanted to, nor can anyone cross over from you to us."

I have loved the decades of work I have put into and the material I've been exposed to studying the teachings of Jesus. This parable, which depicts the extraordinary indifference of the rich man to a poor man, is so similar to other stories Jesus told. Notice that the rich man is not condemned for being rich. He is condemned for being indifferent.

Jesus loved to tell O'Henry-like stories where there was an unexpected ending. I'm thinking of the more well known parable of the Good Samaritan where no one at the time would have even thought a Samaritan could be the hero of a story.

Then there is that story about the laborers in the vineyard who worked just a short time but were paid as much as those who worked all day.

This parable is also important because the character of Lazarus will show up again in the Gospel of John for one of the most amazing miracle stories told about Jesus, the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

This parable addresses themes close to the heart of all of Jesus' teaching - the lost, the last, the least and the little.

This parable is somewhat like the parable of the two men who went up to the temple to pray. One was a member of the successful elite class and one was a lowly street person. The high and mighty one prayed, "Thank you God that I am not like that street person over there in any way." The street person prayed, "God, have mercy on me." Jesus said that the one who was seen as worthy was the street person. The problem is, when we identify with the street person, we put ourselves in the category of the one who thought highly of himself. The parable is a clever linguistic trap.

Something like that is true with this parable. There is not a person in this room, hearing this, viewing this or reading this later who isn't wealthy beyond the wildest dreams and hopes of ninety percent of the other people on this planet. And, on the other hand, I would advise you not to go trying to qualify as the Lazarus character in this story. Life will give us all we need to knock us down. All of us are of the nature to grow old, get sick and die. That is, if we are lucky.

In the narratives that are told about Jesus he is presented as always pushing those who heard him, especially the wealthy and those who were leaders, to come beyond where they were. He doesn't so much accuse them of being "bad" people as he points out how either blind they are or how they are asleep.

Waking up is what I hope for myself and what I hope as an outcome for these teachings that I offer. God knows it is not my goal to cause anyone to feel bad. But I do want to facilitate our getting out of the vicious cycle we can so easily get

caught in and into the virtuous cycle. Again, the rich man in this delicious little story of Jesus isn't evil. He simply didn't see. He wasn't aware.

It is this not seeing, not being aware that has caused the rich and powerful people of this world to be so ready and willing to stuff those they label as losers into the garbage cans of history.

The rich and powerful who are in positions to make the decisions about how things are to be run have a view of success. Somehow, however, these plans to make sure things are better than they were have consistently seemed to shun the sick, lock the poor into ghettos, disenfranchise those with the wrong skin color, or exterminate those whose religion is inconvenient. It is not that, for the most part, people intend these consequences. They just, as the saying goes, "happen." These things simply fall into the category of "just the way things are."

I want to play you a very brief video clip by Jane Elliott. Jane Elliott is an educator. She is an anti-racism activist who came to national attention for an exercise she conducted in her public class room, she was a teacher in Iowa at the time, the day after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. It is called the "Blue eyes-Brown eyes" exercise and has become very famous.

I don't know if when you get the texts of these talks whether you follow up on any of the links that are sometimes included. I'm putting one to a Wikipedia article about not only Jane Elliott but also the exercise. It is really worth your time. She has concluded and shown time and time again that simply talking about racism would not and does not allow her all-white classes to fully comprehend racism's meaning and effects. She had been about to teach a section about native Americans and the truism, "don't criticism someone until you walk a mile in their moccasins."

That is not what this class today is about. It is about waking up, becoming aware, especially about our own not seeing. I wanted to show you a very brief clip of Jane Elliott now speaking at one of her presentations and needed to give some background before doing that.

(Here is the link to the article - [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane\Elliott>]

Here is the brief, very brief, video. You may have seen it because it is quite well-known. It is called “Being Black.”

Ruth Elliott is four years older than I am and has had an amazing journey. On the evening of April 4, 1968 she turned on her television to learn of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. She says that she vividly remembers a scene in which a white reporter pointed his microphone toward a local black leader and asked, “When our leader, John Kennedy, was killed, his widow held us together. Who’s going to control your people?” That reporter simply reflected the conventional wisdom of the time.

Jesus is constantly saying to people that they are blind to what is really going on. Yes, it is an indictment. But, it is also an invitation. Jesus invites people to see themselves, their neighbor and the world in a new and different way. Jesus’ teachings were designed to bring about a radical perceptual shift. To be given one’s sight, to see, is a miracle.

Jesus came to restore sight to the blind. (You understand that I just spoke metaphorically, right? And, within a particular tradition.) Jesus came to restore sight to the blind. I’d go further. Jesus came not to reward the rewardable but to raise the dead.

I am in the process of de-constructing the Christian Fundamentalist tenet that the miracles in the Bible are to be taken literally - as things that literally happened. I’m dealing with this particular story today, as I said, because many people have been taught that this is not a parable but a factual event and because it lays the foundation, when we get to it, of the story of Jesus raising the brother of Mary and Martha, Lazarus, from the dead.

I want to stress that there are not that many miracle stories in the Jewish-Christian scriptures. Certainly compared with the miracle stories in other religions this is true.

I could also say the same thing about the teachings of Jesus in general. He really didn’t teach that much. Just about a few things.

Jesus taught primarily about the character of God. The God of Jesus was a God of compassion and a God of justice. What Jesus meant by justice, and this is consistent with the Jewish prophetic tradition, was not retributive justice but distributive justice. There is a place at the table for everyone. As someone has put it: if you are not welcome at the table, you are likely on the menu.

Then, Jesus taught about “the way” to experience this God and to express this God’s character or “will” in the world.

Jesus taught that there were two ways to do this. One way he referred to as “the broad way.” The other way was “the narrow way.”

Whether you grew up with a religious background or not, most people think that the “broad way” is the way of doing bad and “sinful things.” “Sinful things” is largely determined by the tribe you grew up in. In my youth this list of “sinful things” included drinking, dancing, gambling, sex outside of marriage and the like.

Jesus didn’t see it that way. For him the “broad way” was simply the way most people lived.

I remember not too long after 9/11 we were in Turkey. We were with a tour group and the motor coach we were on stopped at a place Sherry and I had been before. After everyone got off the bus I hung back to visit with our guide. She had gone behind the bus to smoke a cigarette. I wanted to know more about who she was and what she did and we struck up a conversation. She was curious about me, too.

At some point she said something like this: “You know, we all want the same thing. We want to be safe and for our families to be safe. We want our children to have a good education and a chance to make their way in the world. We want to come home at the end of the day and enjoy our families. It’s the politicians who screw things up.”

I think I could say that of all my neighbors, of all of you. We pay our taxes, obey the laws, want the best for our children and our loved ones. Indeed, for most of us most of the time our lives are structured around the conventions of our culture. These are the things that we simply take for granted about what life is about. It is

the kind of thing that “everybody knows.” We come to believe that this is how life should be lived.

Indulge me one more personal travel story. We were in Paris. Before we had arrived Sherry had arranged for us to have an English speaking guide for a walking tour of a section of Paris near the Sacre Coeur Cathedral.

Our guide was an African American man who was a jazz musician from London who was trying to make it in Paris. He supplemented his income by giving these guided walking tours.

I love walking the streets of sections of Paris - you walk by pastry shops, cheese shops, wine shops and “butchers” - meat shops. At one of the meat shops I pointed to the incredibly bright red fresh looking meat in the shop window. Our guide said, “Yes, this is horse meat. It is very popular here.”

Our culture doesn't eat horse meat. That we know of! Some cultures eat cats and dogs and guinea pigs. We don't. It is just not something you do. Unless, of course, you happened to be raised in that culture.

Here is my point: We don't so much live in the world of our conventions. Our conventions live within us. We learn to value what our culture values. We learn to go for, to pursue what our culture tells us is important. We see the world as our culture teaches us to see the world. Our culture tells us that what we see is “the truth.”

Jesus' stories were mostly focused on getting people to see. In this story the rich man didn't see. Not a bad guy. Just blind. Like most of us much of the time.

It is not hard to walk the broad and easy way.

Jesus taught about two ways to live. The broad and easy way and the way he referred to as “the straight and narrow.”

It is so hard for most of us to hear this without thinking that it has something to do with morality. And, of course, it does. But, we can't earn or prove our way to virtue. This is about seeing.

That is what this parable is about. Seeing. Seeing with the heart. The rich man didn't see.

This parable isn't about what happens after we die. It isn't about reward and punishment. It is about the fact that there was at this rich man's door step every day an opportunity to experience and express the heart of compassion and he didn't see that.

Jesus spoke of the blind leading the blind. That's dumb and foolish. Everybody knows that. But our churches are full of it. And our politics.

When we think we do see, according to Jesus, our preoccupation can easily become trying to correct other people's ways of seeing. We not only have impaired vision but blindness to impaired vision. Go back to the Jane Elliott video. We see but we don't see.

How we see makes all the difference on the spiritual journey.

This is so complex to talk about. On the one hand it is so mysterious, so mystical, so mind-blowing that it can't be put into words. What it is is that each and every one of us, rich man and Lazarus alike, are all part of an incomprehensibly vastness where there is no separation among any of the infinite number of all who make it us. Our spiritual journey is a process of waking up and returning to the consciousness from which we have arisen. We haven't really left it. Just gone unconscious, gone blind.

What did Jesus teach about? One thing was the character of God. Which is - love and justice. We can't, I think, comprehend this love and justice. But it mothers us, encourages us, challenges us, consoles us. It is personal and intimate and gives itself to us in complete freedom. It seeks to make us whole and to heal us from the scars and wounds of human existence. It is not a head trip and it is incomplete

unless and until we become like God in being compassionate and loving and living out this love in our relationships to all of God's children.

This is not the religious or spiritual conventional wisdom that most of us grew up with or of our culture. What I grew up with was that if I was good enough or believed the right thing or was part of the right group, then I would be safe. And it really wasn't so much for right now as it was for something off and out in the future.

The place of seeing, of being awake, that Jesus taught about is not a place we can get to. There is no there to get to. You can't "get" there. You can only "be" there.

How do you do that?

How do we learn to see? How can we be healed of our blindness? I know, I know. You are not blind. You see perfectly. Right? We're talking about all those other people out there - especially those who don't see things like we do.

Here is what I have been taught by the teachers I most respect. We cannot make the healing happen. But we can put ourselves in the position that provides the least resistance possible for healing and wholeness to take place. A poet cannot make the poem happen. The poet can get in the position that provides the least resistance possible for the poem to come forth. Lovers cannot make the oceanic experience of intimacy happen. But, they can create the context that provides the least resistance possible for that love to be experienced and expressed between them.

The True Self that Jesus manifested and calls us into seeks for reasons to do good. The ego seems to look for opportunities to do something stupid. And, the more unconscious we are, the more this seems to be the case. The writer Annie Dillard wrote, "The mind wants to know all the world, and all eternity, even God. The mind's sidekick, however, will settle for two eggs over easy."

Spiritual practice is about getting the ego and its insistent cries "to obtain and/or get rid of" out of the way so that we can allow things to fall together. We don't accomplish this. We allow it to happen.

So, it seems to me that in order to experience the miracle of healing, to get out of the vicious cycle and into the virtuous cycle there are two things required.

First, is that we have to have a practice. Your practice can be any one of a number of things. It probably should include a number of things - practices that engage your head and your heart. Spiritual practice is whatever you do and what you enter into with your whole heart that you use as a way of awakening, of seeing, of experiencing and sustaining your awareness of your inherent wholeness and holiness and the wholeness and holiness of very one else. Next week I'm going to talk more about this. The critical factor is not so much what the practice is in its externals as the extent to which the practice incarnates an utterly sincere stance of awakening and surrendering to the Godly nature of the present moment.

So, one essential is practice. Without it I can pretty much guarantee that you will spend more time in the dark than in the light. But, you are likely not to be aware of it. Just like the rich man in this parable or the people in Jane Elliott's audience.

The second thing that is required is faith. Faith is not about believing something, some list of things like the five fundamentals of Christian Fundamentalism. I know people who believe all the right things who are absolute jerks. Not compassionate, not joyful, not loving, not peace makers.

In preparing for this talk today I was led into an arena where I encountered more on "entanglement." This was about Bell's Theorem. (You can read about that here - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bell%27s_theorem)

Oversimplified, Bell's Theorem is that which deals with how quantum entanglement occurs over long distances. Split a particle and separate the halves by huge distances. Punch one with a stick at this location and the one way over there yells "ouch."

Our faith is that everything is connected, everyone is connected. We are part of the whole. The faith is -

There is no chance that we will fall apart.

There is no chance.

There are no parts.

There is a warning in this parable. Not about hell but about being blind and contributing to the story of separation.

There is an invitation in this parable. Not about some special, exclusive afterlife in a gated community. But, about seeing.

This rich man in this story knew but he didn't know. He had but he didn't have. This kind of knowing and having, which is stressed in our culture, is a dead end. Fundamentalism of any kind is a dead end because it encourages darkness but calls it light.

In Judaism Sabbath observance is very important. Jesus got into all sorts of trouble because of not following Sabbath rules. That is another story for another time.

At any rate, for the observant Jew it is important to know when the Sabbath begins so observances can be done. And, it is also important to know when the Sabbath is over so that people may return to their weekly routines and stop Sabbath observances.

A rabbi asked his students, "When is it at dawn so that one can tell the light from the darkness?"

One student replied, "When I can see well enough to be able to distinguish a goat from a donkey." "No," answered the rabbi.

Another said, "When I can see well enough to be able to distinguish a palm tree from a fig." "No," answered the rabbi again.

"Well, then, what is the answer?" his students pressed him.

"Only when you are able look into the face of every man and every woman and see your brother and your sister," said the rabbi. "Only then have you seen the light. Until then you are still in the darkness."

The teachings of Jesus are designed to enable us to see “what is.” He asks us to follow in his way.

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