

## Walking in Bigger Shoes - Part One

It was just a smidgen over five years ago, September 2, 2014, to be exact, when I first heard Ilia Delio at a Richard Rohr Conference. Though I had never heard of her, she was a very established, recognized and published person, she has authored fourteen books, and teaches at Georgetown University. If you had asked me to describe her after hearing her for the first time, I would have said that she is a tall and imposing person. Actually, she is physically small. That was her impact on me.

Those of you who were attending these times then will testify that I had a different kind of energy after that encounter.

As I think is true with all authentic spiritual teachers, she didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. But, she did put it in a language that was accessible and, at the same time, challenging. Some of you will remember my quoting her understanding of God. She said it is the same as what we currently know about the cosmos. The words she used were - expanding, creative, entangled and evolving.

She infected and affected me and my teaching. I am forever grateful for that and our eventually being able to bring her here to speak.

She grounded my conviction even more that, when it comes to religion and theology, we have to rethink everything from the ground up.

Because my teachings have reflected and amplified on the kinds of things coming at us from new learnings about the energy field in which we live, that lives in us and that we are a part of, I have had multiple comments from many of you about how these teachings have affected you. Particularly am I thinking about comments like -

“You have ruined ‘big church’ for me.”

“How can you teach what you teach and then go across the plaza and be involved in the worship service there?”

Over the years, I have gotten a multitude of responses regarding my being part of what Michael Morwood referred to as “middle management” of the church. I try to keep that part of my identity quiet as much as possible, especially when I am in a new group of people. People tend to avoid those they suspect of being clergy. Or, they expect some inside track to gain access to the Sacred.

The two responses I have gotten over the years use exactly the same words but reflect such different stances toward religion.

One comes from those who, for whatever reason, have had it with religion. They say, in one way or another, “You don’t believe that stuff do you?”

The other response comes from those who I call “defenders of the faith.” They say, “You believe that stuff, don’t you?”

So today I am going to try to say some things in response to these questions.

In doing so I am not trying to sell you anything. Except for a few but very important matters all I want to do in here is play my music for you. It is like when you go to a symphony performance or a rock concert, the musicians have nothing to sell you. Among the few things I do want to persuade you to embrace are having a daily spiritual practice and practicing justice and compassion.

This talk today is not a polemic.

I want to speak about four things briefly: tradition, ritual, myth and meaning. Graduate school seminars could be devoted to each topic. Indeed, volumes have been written about each.

Though I have made every effort to be concise, I simply couldn’t fit all of this into one talk. So, I’m breaking it into two parts. Today we’ll focus mostly on tradition and ritual and next week return to talk about myth and meaning.

And, of course, we can return to any of this after that. Let's see how it goes.

All of these topics are touchy for people. Some people can't stand religious tradition, can't wait to get away from it, don't want anything to do with it. Others are terrified that something may happen to change what they hold precious.

The word "tradition" simply means "to hand over." It is like handing the baton from one runner to another in a relay race.

Let me state what should be obvious but for many it is not. Namely, that all religions, no matter what the religious belief or where on the planet this religion shows up, is humanly constructed.

What I was taught in seminary is that all living religious traditions wherever they are found share some things in common:

They are human constructions  
in response to an experience of the Sacred  
using the language and symbols of the culture in which they  
were created.

They also embody and reflect what are called "the perennial tradition" and "aesthetic expressions."

And they create communities of both practice and transformation. This is true for all "living religious traditions."

We now look back at some of the religious things that were believed and practiced in former times through the filters of our culture that cause us to say, “How could they have believed or done such things?” Perhaps in hundreds of years people will look back on our beliefs and practices in the same way. We know enough now to know that no God in the sky told people to sacrifice virgins or animals to please this God. God didn’t wait until there were Southern Baptists in Tennessee to say something. To ask me if I am “washed in the blood of the lamb” in no way has the meaning that it would for a devout Jew during the time of Jesus.

There is growing evidence that ever since the evolution of beings who were able to be self-reflective, there has been some form of religious ritual. The earliest evidence has to do with burial customs. (We’ll come back to this later.)

By the way, when it comes to both tradition and ritual, Christians of whatever stripe are absolutely the new kids on the block.

Stonehenge was completed around 3100 BC and a language capable of being written appeared around 3000 BC. It is from this period that we have the earliest record of a creation story. The oldest surviving religious texts come from around 2500 BC. The epic of Gilgamesh, which likely means “the ancestor is a hero,” is from 2100 BC.

The oldest of the Hindu writings come from around 1700.

The earliest known monotheistic religion is Egyptian, not Jewish.

The scholars now say that the oldest of the Jewish writings go back to around the sixth century BC.

Christianity is based on a division that occurred in Judaism over the understanding of Jesus and his teachings and, as such, is a just barely, 2000 year old tradition.

I remember the first Seder meal I was a part of back in the 60's. I co-lead it with a radical rabbi as part of a Christian gathering. It was a huge success. I did the English and he did the Hebrew. After it was over I was exclaiming to him how much I loved what we had done. I said, "Let's do it again next year. This time we could do it differently." He looked at me and, though as I said he was as radical as they come, said, "No we couldn't. We've been doing it this way for 4,000 years."

Judaism is one tradition though there are several ways of "being Jewish." Several of my Jewish friends are clear with me that they are "secular Jews." They mean that they belong to no religious community. Among practicing Jews there are the Orthodox, Hasidic, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal and Humanistic groups or denominations. Rabbi Sam

Karff, a well-known and respected Houstonian, is in the Orthodox tradition.

Christianity is in the Jewish tradition and is more splintered than any religious group on the planet. There are two major divisions of Christianity: Eastern and Western. These are usually divided into Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Oriental Orthodox and Assyrian. These various groups are splintered into innumerable groups.

There are an estimated 2.5 billion people who call themselves Christian. At last count, there were about 30,000 different Protestant denominations. There are more than 200 different kinds of Baptist.

St. Paul's is in the Methodist tradition, which grew out of the Anglican tradition, which grew out of the Roman Catholic tradition, which grew out of a forced unification of various developing early Jesus follower groups, which grew out of the Jewish religion at the time of Jesus which was already divided into groups such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, The Zealots and the Essenes.

In many religious traditions a thing called "lineage" is very important. In Buddhism and Zen Buddhism this is very important. One of my Buddhist friends has a teacher who had a teacher who had a teacher who had a teacher - and on and on it goes - all the way back to the Buddha. You may raise an

eyebrow brow to that but ordained Methodist clergy in the United States can show that they were ordained by someone who was ordained by someone who was ordained by some who - and this goes all the way back to either Francis Asbury or Thomas Coke who were commissioned by John Wesley to ordain people in the newly found Methodist Church in the Colonies.

The word “Methodist” was originally a derisive term. Wesley, who had a method for doing everything, gave birth to a small group movement within the Church of England that soon came to be called “the people who are called Methodists.” This is far better than the term also derisively given to the prayer and Bible study gatherings John and his brother, Charles, developed within the Church of England - “the Holiness Club.”

Wikipedia informs me that are twenty-four different kinds of Methodists in the United States.

This sort of thing may bore you senseless but my commitment to contribute to religious literacy compels me to offer it. No matter how convoluted or much of a puzzle it may seem, every religious institution that calls itself a “church,” even those that split over whether to buy a new chandelier or not, can trace its roots back and back and back and back to some origin.

By the way, I am not unmindful that where we stand at the moment also has a huge psychological component. I’m not



dealing with that today. I will raise the question for your own reflection: how did you come to be here today? What were the circumstances, both external and internal, that led you to decide to be in the place you are right this moment?

Traditions give rise to communities and persons of meaning. They help people answer the question, “Why are you here?” Or, as my spiritual teacher from years ago who was a Roman Catholic/Buddhist asked, “What did you take birth for?”

The most important thing I want to say about tradition is that though it implies conservatism it is far more than simply holding on to the past. It is continuing the spirit of the past, its values and ideals, but just like the past, doing so in the language and symbols of the present. What links us to the past is the sense of identity that the tradition seeks to preserve.

Well, if that is the case, why are we still using some of the ancient language, symbols and practices of centuries ago?

This brings us to ritual. And, we will talk more in depth about this next week.

Since we know what we know about the cosmos, why are we - and I'm speaking specifically now about the liturgy at St. Paul's - still using a creed that was formulated in the early fourth century? “If it is true and if you truly believe that the Bible is a

humanly constructed document, why do we say, ‘The Word of the Lord’ and ‘Thanks be to God’ after the lectionary readings?”

“You don’t believe that stuff, do you?”

“You do believe that stuff, don’t you?”

I personally would change some of the language in our liturgy. After a reading from the Bible I would say something like, “A reading from our tradition.” I think that, for the most part, we avoid truly “cringe-worthy” hymns. Though there certainly are some in our hymnal. Regardless of the religious tradition one chooses to be part of, you will find plenty that doesn’t suit your fancy in it.

However, there is that most valuable theological word - “however,” - however, one of the values of both tradition and a tradition informed ritual is that it keeps us from cobbling together whatever we want to just so we will feel good. Though I am sure that has happened since the beginning of religions all over the globe, religious people in the United States have mastered the art. So some put together a spirituality that is a bit like a patchwork quilt - a bit of what the church has taught, a bit of what the culture teaches, a bit of what we only thought we heard, a bit of what we would like to hear, etc.

You can find many expressions of that in American culture. Perhaps the most wildly successful, though certainly not the only one, is right here in Houston with Joel Osteen at

Lakewood. The primary focus of Lakewood is making people feel good, happy and successful. So much so that there is not a cross in this “Christian church.” When asked about that, the answer was, “Well, we didn’t want to bring anyone down and make them feel bad.” I’m not being critical of Lakewood. People who go there do feel better. They do get some good advice about living. I’m just saying you can’t easily locate it in a tradition.

Without the challenge of both a tradition and a ritual, it is easy for faith to become a matter of making sure we feel good so that we can end up holding our discomfort, pain and misfortune at arm’s length. Prayer becomes a matter of getting God to set things right rather than the person simply nurturing their relationship with the Sacred, Creating Presence. One of the worst things we can do is base or live our lives on how we feel.

Religious institutions are slower to change than ocean liners. And, very dangerous undertakings. When I first started participating in the liturgy here, back in the 1980’s, there was a cartoon on the cork board in the sacristy that remained there until that space was remodeled. It showed a man being led to the gallows. He is clearly a clergy person, you can tell by his garb. The hangman asks, “What did you do!?!?” The doomed man said, “I changed the order of worship.”

The Methodists have a policy about every thing. A person being ordained a Methodist clergy has to stand in front of the Annual

Conference and is asked, “Are you going on to perfection?” And, the candidate had better say “yes” or he or she isn’t going to be admitted to the union.

I don’t agree with what is in the Methodist Book of Discipline about homosexual people at all. If I had let that keep me from being ordained a Methodist clergy, two things would have resulted.

Number one: I would not have had these years with you.

Number two: I would not have been able to lend my voice to all of those in the Methodist Church who are going for change over this issue.

I don’t know if you notice it or not but every Sunday in the announcement slides is one that says that Ordinary Life is part of the Reconciling Ministries Network. Thank God for Jim Bankston who paved the way for this with courageous stands that costs him mightily. And, won him immense respect for his integrity.

Back to ritual.

Years ago I asked a buddy of mine if he would come to St. Paul’s. He said, “I’ve been there for a wedding or funeral. But, no, I don’t think I’ll come to worship services.” “Why not?”

“Well, all that standing up and sitting down and standing up and sitting down - it’s just too much for me.”

There was a graduate student at Rice University who did a study, and this was years ago, about why people attended St. Paul’s. He came up with up twenty-seven discretely different reasons. There are likely just as many reasons as to why people stay away.

I think most people probably couldn’t tell you why worship services are structured the way they are. At least in churches that clearly have a lineage with the Catholic tradition.

The very first worship liturgy recorded is from the second century, from the middle of the second century! Our current pattern of worship is pretty much the same.

That liturgy, which was conducted in a house church, a small gathering of people, was taken from the synagogue service. Those people were Jews who decided to follow Jesus.

The Jews are the ones who came up with the liturgical year, not Christians. Christians just embellished it and reinterpreted it.

I doubt you that one person in a thousand, if that many, could tell you that the Christian Gospels, I call them the “Jesus narratives,” are structured after the Jewish liturgical year. After the death of Jesus, his followers went back to their Jewish roots,

their synagogue worship, and it was the Jewish thing to interpret their life experiences in light of Jewish Scriptures. It took decades to do but they crafted stories in that context.

Further, the Jews were and are liturgical geniuses. They knew and know the importance of ritual.

The Jewish people over the centuries experienced times and places where they experienced the Sacred. They captured these in word and ritual. The early followers of Jesus continued that. They captured these moments in life and living and said, “We will hang on to and reenact these sacred moments.” And, whether a person is “religious” or not, we all know what these moments are: they are when a baby is born, when two people marry, when someone dies.

Our lives are full of rituals both physical and verbal.

If you go to a high mass somewhere in Italy, Spain, France - someplace where you don't know the language, the whole thing is going to look like mumbo-jumbo. As a matter of fact, the phrase that magicians use, “Hocus-Pokus,” comes from a mis-hearing of words from the mass. But, I assure you that relatively speaking - compared with the Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Zen practitioners, some aboriginal peoples - it is not very old and, just as in the Japanese tea ceremony, every movement has a reason.

I'm grateful that Richard Rohr has stayed in the tradition, and Jim Finley, and Ilia Delio. And, Jacqui Lewis whom you will hear. As well as countless others. Joan Chittister. Sister Simone Campbell of "nuns on the bus."

In Buddhism if you want to become a Buddhist and be recognized as such, you have to take three vows. They are referred to as "taking refuge in." You take refuge in the Buddha, you take refuge in the teachings of Buddha, you take refuge in the community of Buddhists.

This was true certainly in the Jewish religion. You had an identity as a Jew, followed the laws and participated in the community. Belonging was hugely important for Jews. Still is.

In the early Jesus movement the followers of Jesus, who for good and ill became institutionalized Christianity, took refuge in Jesus, shaped their lives in light of his teachings and banded together in groups of love and support.

Though it is far more complicated than what I am about to say, Christianity in the United states took on a different flavor. The biggest aspect of this is that the Christian movement became individualized. In the United States this has been the combination of an emphasis on "saving souls." - that is, focusing on the individual's going to heaven at death and the corrosive influence of the secular doctrine of "rugged individualism."

In so doing the church has subtly communicated the message: you don't really have to do anything to be a Christian. It is really simple and easy. Just say, "yes." And, of course, give us your money. There is virtually no emphasis on the importance of spiritual growth both in "head space" or "heart space."

Of course, each of us takes "refuge" in something throughout the day - in our devices, in a person, or another person when that one doesn't suit us, in social media, etc.

My point is that there are resources of and for transformation in religious tradition and rituals. Knowing that they are human constructs, I encourage you to pick one. When you get on the path, stick with it. A professor of mine at Harvard said, "It is better to dig one well sixty feet deep than six wells ten feet deep." Which, of course, is exactly what our culture encourages.

I know there are exceptions to what I am about to say - I think if I walked into St. Paul's cathedral some Sunday and they had installed two huge TV screens in the front as is the case in many churches, that would be it for me - but, as far as I can see, I'm here to stay until, as my father would say, they carry me out.

Being religious and taking on the community of people along the way, is kind of like being married. It is well after the vows are taken that a person realizes, "Oh, good lord! What have I gotten myself in for?" But, the vows have been taken. We learn to live with the things we consider the faults and failings of our



partner. And, something we forget easily, they learn to live with ours. So we make a commitment to follow a particular path.

Next week I am going to talk about language, myth and meaning.

Again, I have not been trying to sell you anything today. As your spiritual teacher, at least for this time we are together, I want to do what I am able so that when it is time for us to die, we will not discover that we have not lived.

The title I gave this talk today is “Walking in Bigger Shoes.”

I don't think this is original with me, but many years ago I realized that the religion that was being rejected by many people I encountered was one that they had gotten in childhood and stopped growing in at about the 8th grade. It would be ridiculous to still be wearing the clothes you did then.

Then, in graduate school, 1959 to be exact, I encountered Carl Jung, one of the life altering encounters of my life.

Jung said that we all walk in shoes that are too small. We limit ourselves and our passions to fit some expected role or some inherited teachings. Walking in shoes too small creates a disconnect with ourselves, our lives, others and the world in general.

I find in the work that I do with others and in the life I lead for myself that we all often experience that we are either not enough to deal with the world, we are insufficient, or that the world is too big for us, it is overwhelming.

I know that all religion, certainly the Christian religion, is flawed and has a profoundly unimpressive historical record in many times and places. I also know that the church that changed its heart on issues such as slavery is not two churches. The church that freed itself from slavery had received a faith that had enough depth and resource to put its own history into question and to demand a new form of truthfulness. That is what is happening now with the issue of homosexuality. And, my faith is that it will have the courage of its convictions, whether it can acknowledge them now or not, in the future.

Hang on: it gets even more paradoxical. It is not we who manage the truth that our institutions hold. It is the truth that seeks to transform us. We don't manage as much as we respond to the Sacred. When you take off the clothes you wore in the 8th grade, you have to put something on. What will it be for you?

There is a line I got from Marion Woodman, a Jungian analyst and poet and mystic that I think fits here for us, both individually and collectively.

If you travel far enough,  
one day you will recognize yourself

coming down the road to meet you.

And you will say

Yes!

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