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## Finding and Being Found

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The title I have given this talk is “The Joy of Not Finding What You Are Looking For.”

I’m sorry. That’s not correct.

The title I have given this talk is “The Joy of Finding What You Are Not Looking For.”

That;s not correct either. I think it is the other one.

No, actually, it’s . . .

Confusing? That could be a good thing. Let’s see.

There was a woman who came to church regularly. She sat about where you are sitting. Every Sunday she sat there. She participated in the service by singing along with the congregation, joining in with responsive readings and paying rapt attention to the sermon. She was faithful in her attendance rain or shine. The only thing that puzzled the minister was that she wasn't a member of the congregation.

As she left the building after every service she would stop and speak with the minister telling him how much she had benefited from the sermon and service. Finally, one Sunday he worked up his courage to ask her if she might not consider joining the church. She replied, “Oh no, I see no sense in that. I’m happy with things as they are.” He said, trying to think of some enticement that might not already be obvious to her, “But aren’t you concerned about the hereafter?” She said, “Oh yes, I think about it all the time. Every time I go from one room to the other I stop and wonder, ‘Now what am I here after?’”

What are you here after?

Someone sent me a fascinating journal article from The Journal of Evolutionary Psychology this week about the conclusions of a long-term research project that has been conducted on why people are attracted to religion.

For as long as there have been people to study human behavior, scholars and researchers have tried to identify the one key reason that people are attracted to religion. For as long as there have been humans on the planet, there has been some form of religious expression.

Some have said that people seek religion to cope with their fear of death. Others have called religion the basis of morality. Other theories have abounded. I have long held it that the human animal is hard-wired for religion just as we are hard-wired to speak a language and that tribal upbringing and cultural context thrust us into some sort of religious context whether we want it or like it or not. The conscious rejection of a religion is, in my opinion, in and of itself a religious stance.

This new longitudinal research study, conducted over a twenty year period has concluded that religion could not have achieved mass acceptance if it only fulfilled one or two basic desires. What this study has concluded is that religion attracts followers because it satisfies, in one way or degree or another, all of the sixteen basic desires that humans share.

The researchers identified sixteen basic desires that we all share: acceptance, curiosity, eating, family, honor, idealism, independence, order, physical activity, power, romance, saving, social contact, status, tranquility and vengeance.

We all share these things. What sets us apart is how much we value each one. According to the researchers, “How much an individual values each of those 16 desires corresponds closely to what he or she likes and dislikes about religion.”

Take the desire for social contact. A religion, of course, has to appeal to both introverts and extroverts. For extroverts, religion offers festivals and feasts and teaches that God blesses fellowship. For introverts, religion encourages meditation and private retreats and teaches that God blesses solitude.

Religion even finds ways to deal with the desire for vengeance. While some religions teach of a God of peace, there is also the other side: the wrath of God and holy wars. Religion attracts both peacemakers and zealots who delight in bombing and beheading people.

All religious beliefs and practices are designed, consciously or not, to meet one or more of these sixteen desires.

Religious rituals fulfill the desire for order. Teachings about salvation and forgiveness tap into the basic human need for acceptance. Promises of an afterlife are designed to help people achieve tranquility.

What, you might wonder, about atheism? By the way, atheism, the belief that there is no supernatural theistic being out there somewhere, is a relatively modern notion. Prior to the time of the so-called "enlightenment" and the "scientific method," atheism was not an option. The available religion in a culture begins to lose its appeal when it loses the competition to meet one of these basic needs to the secular society. One of the basic desires that may separate people attracted to religions from those who are not is that of independence. One of the basic desires satisfied by religion is that of inter-dependence with others. Those who have stronger desires for self-reliance and independence have less need of and for religion.

Steven Reiss, one of the principle investigators of this study has written a book, "The Sixteen Strivings For God: The New Psychology of Religious Experience," and claims that his instrument can actually test to see if there is a mystical personality type.

All of this, of course, says nothing about the truth of the claims of any religion but it may open the door to what you are here after.

Of course, I do sincerely hope that you do find what your heart desires here. There are many things on this list I would certainly value and hold close to my own heart.

I would not be here today, speaking with you like this unless almost every step of the way I have found and been found by things that matter to me: people, ideas,

experiences. And, out of my belief that I can help make the world a better place by passing some of this on, that in and of itself has become extremely valuable.

I hope you find what you came here after.

I would be willing to bet that even people who have virtually no experience or history in any version of what passes for Christianity are familiar with this teaching of Jesus:

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Ask - it will be given to you; seek - you will find; knock - it will be opened for you. Everyone who asks receives; everyone who seeks finds; and for the one who knocks its is opened.

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You've heard some version of this, right? Incidentally, the scholars in biblical studies say that Jesus said this.

Okay.

Well, he said some other stuff that we don't believe, trust or follow either. Like, love your enemy and sell all you have a give it to the poor.

Countless people, because of a misunderstanding of this teaching, have given up on the religious enterprise, especially a mono-theistic and, especially, a Christian one, altogether. Who can blame them? They asked, they sought, they knocked and, not having gotten what they asked for, not gotten what they were seeking or who felt the door remained closed to them, have turned and walked away from the entire thing. Who can blame them?

Every religion that I am acquainted with can be approached in one of two ways.

The first way is to make religion a transactional matter. You have and practice a religion in order to secure something, usually one or more of the sixteen items on

the list of human needs. If I behave according to the rules and regulations of that particular religious system, if I belong to the right group, if I hold to the right beliefs, if I do the right rituals; then, I'll get what I'm looking for, what I'm here after.

I think, at least this is what I was taught in seminary, that all religion starts at this level. All religion begins by making a distinction between what that religion holds to be Sacred and what it believes to be secular. Before long a order of special people emerge (clergy), as do moral distinctions, purity codes, and ritual systems that are designed to keep these two world apart. This makes the ego feel safe and superior.

It works if people stay at an early stage of development. Sadly, the business of this religion is keeping people at an early stage of development. You can take the word "business" here in several meanings: it keeps people busy, it works to satisfy customers so they will keep coming back (so you can't say or do anything to upset them) and it often becomes, as it had in the religion of Jesus day, a very subtle way of buying and selling God.

The story that Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector who go up to the temple to pray was his way of subverting "the system." The Pharisee was by definition, a fully orthodox and law-abiding person. The law was all about separation from the "unholy." He prided himself on being virtuous and, according to the way Jesus told the story, despised others. He prays to himself because he is trapped inside of himself. And because of that, there is no real contact with the mystery beyond himself.

Jesus says the "tax collector" who was by definition of the Jewish religion at that time an "unholy person" went home justified before God because he is honest and humble. This is a pattern you see in Jesus over and over and over. He refuses and rejects his own religion's distinction between holy and unholy things and moves morality to the interior level of motivation and intention.

In a transaction religion, you don't have a relationship with Sacred Mystery. You just have to behave and pay your dues one way or another. You don't have to fall in

love with God - by falling in love with the neighbor. Even worse - yes, even worse - you don't have to allow God to love you just the way you are.

Another way to experience or express a religion is relationally. As a relationship.

Now, what might be a way to do this?

If I wanted to nurture my relationship with my beautiful bride, how might I do that? Would having beliefs about her do it? Would even talking about her in a place like this do it? How about if I took her to a movie? What if I had good thoughts about her? What if I bought chocolate for her? None of that is going to work. She might make an exception on the movie part. I'd go for the chocolate.

The only way to nurture the relationship is to spend time with her talking to her and listening to her.

Mother Teresa was once being interviewed and was asked, "Is it true that you spend an hour a day in prayer?"

"Yes," she said.

"What do you say to God during all that time?"

"I don't say anything. I just listen."

"What does God say?"

"God doesn't say anything. God just listens."

I cannot imagine Jesus saying, "You know, I tried to have a spiritual practice. It just didn't work for me." Even though some of what he asked for, yearned for didn't come to him the way he asked for it.

Remember one of the major marks of what Jesus called "the rule of God" is that it is not under our control.

I learned this from seminary professor Alyce McKenzie in her book on the parables of Jesus and will remind you that the Kingdom of God, which is not heaven after you die, has four defining characteristics.

1. The kingdom of God is not under our control.
2. The kingdom of God shows up where we least expect it.
3. The kingdom of God disrupts business as usual.
4. The kingdom of God is a reign of justice and forgiveness.

Notice that each one of these requires something from us.

The first is that we deal with our compulsion to control our lives or the lives of others. Trying to control causes us suffering.

The second requires that we increase our ability to see what is the truth about ourselves, others and the world. Especially are we to see where God is in us, in others and in the events of our lives.

The third asks us to be willing to accept the disruption God would bring into our lives and world if only we would allow it. We must not lose the ability to wake up every day and be surprised by the gift of life that we have.

The fourth, of course, asks us to put our lives into working for love and justice so that love and justice might be extended to all people everywhere.

My hunch is that most people who call themselves Christian reflexively think of the Kingdom of God as in the future and the result of having the right belief, behavior or tribal affiliation.

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Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you.

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Please keep in mind that all the teachings we have from Jesus and his early followers were written down after his death. It was a horrible death. The teachings were remembered and recorded by people who said, "In this man we experienced the presence and love of God." They remember his words, teachings, parables, deeds in this light. They clearly heard him say, "Ask. Seek. Knock."

I have been studying the man Jesus and his teachings for decades. I'm not a scholar of the caliber of a Borg or Crossan or Robert Funk. I'm not a monastic or part of a religious order like Richard Rohr, Jim Finley, Ilia Delio, Joan Chisitter or Shane Claiborne. But, I know their work. Some of them I have studied with. And a score of others. Based on the best scholarship available to me, I have come to see Jesus as much more like a stand-up comic. This is one of the reasons I think Shane Claiborne may come as close to being Jesus in our time as anyone I know. Although, all of these people are incredibly happy.

At any rate, Jesus didn't stand behind a pulpit and preach. He went about doing good and as he did so he told stories and interacted with all sorts of people in all sorts of ways. He would say, "Being in the realm of reality I'm calling the rule of God is an incredibly complex and difficult task." It is. I look at some of the people I think most embody the teachings of Jesus and say to myself, "I'm not sure I could live like that." Jesus made it very clear that following him and his teachings would be costly. Over and over in one way or the other he would say, "Being in the realm of reality I'm calling the rule of God is an incredibly complex and difficult task." Then he would wink at us and add, "Any child can do it."

He taught and lived that no matter what you are safe.

Our spiritual work, it seems to me, is to develop the belief that no matter what, no matter how it appears we are always carried safely in God's loving heart.

Think about this: Jesus did not nor did any of his followers ever seek to get revenge about what happened to him.

This relational spirituality I am trying to teach begins in and with our ability to be still enough to get the ego out of the way and be patient enough and courageous



enough to know “what is.” Something is going on right here, right now. What’s happening? And, who is it who is experiencing what is happening?

It is possible to live your whole life and never meet and know the person who is living your life.

This is why I said to you a couple of weeks ago that what I have come to believe are the two essential faith questions, and these are as important as a correct understanding of what it means to have a spiritual practice, are:

Can we learn to love and bless our neighbors? Can we get it that everybody is just like us? That if we had the same life history and experiences others had that we would be and behave like them? This is related to Jesus’ major emphasis on forgiveness.

Second, can we construct lives that feed and nurture our souls? One of the things that blocks this, in my opinion - and all of this is only that, you know - is that we do not know how to practice a true Sabbath. The single most frequent response I get to my inquiry about having a spiritual practice is, “I’m too busy. I just can’t find the time. Maybe some day.”

Part of following the teaching of Jesus means that we have to change the direction in which we look for love and freedom and happiness when we ask, seek and knock. If we don’t we will easily become angry, frightened, embittered, cynical and isolated people.

I know some of you may believe this is being too simplistic but I truly believe that if we had a clear understanding of who we are and who Sacred Mystery is, it would solve many of the world’s problems - especially those caused by religion.

There is nothing wrong with you and God isn’t out there.

Do we want these things to be true?

Are we willing to allow them to be true?

Spiritual practice is having a relationship with someone. We can't have a good relationship if we feel we are unworthy or with someone who is distant. Of course, none of us is worthy but I don't mean it in the worthiness-system way of thinking of things. We just are. God just is.

God doesn't bring us magical answers. God brings us love.

Dag Hammarskjold, in his wonderful book, "Markings," put it this way: "God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder the source of which is beyond all reason."

It is in this context that we ask, seek, knock. We won't likely find what the ego is looking for. We will find what the Self needs. That's why I called this talk "The Joy of Finding What You Are Not Looking For."

But, I also called it, "The Joy of Not Finding What You Are Looking For."

Here is the teaching from the Gospel of Thomas that is behind this talk today.

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On many occasions  
you have longed  
to hear such words as  
the ones that I am speaking to you,  
but you had no one to go to.  
The day will come again  
when you will seek for me,  
but will not be able to find me.

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The "ask, seek, knock" teaching is authentic Jesus material.

So is this and it is just the opposite.

The teachings of Jesus, are contradictory and paradoxical. Just as the “ask, seek, knock” teaching is found many places in the Christian collection, so is this one. It is in Matthew, in Luke, it is in John four times - all said a bit differently.

Jesus seems full of contradiction and paradox. On the one hand he says, “The way is hard and narrow and few follow it.” On the other hand he says, “Come unto me all you are weary. My burden is light.”

Which is it? It is both.

It wasn't too long after his death that organized religion, not the first followers of the way, made Jesus into a answer-giver and problem-solver for the next world and not how to transform our pain in this one.

In trying to live into the teachings of this radical Jewish mystic we really do, if we are courageous enough, faithful enough have a mysterious sense of time. On the one hand we are told about patience and perseverance, about waiting quietly, about living totally in the moment.

Yet, at the same time we are told about the need, like Jesus first disciples, to leave everything and simply risk the journey.

It is not, in non-duality, one at one time and one at the other. It is both at the same time We have to risk and we have to wait.

It's hard to explain. I agree with Jim Finley, that it explains itself - if you stick with it. The way Jesus explained it was with stories, among other things.

So, I will tell you a story.

The story is in a book by Peter Mattheissen titled “The Snow Leopard.” The book was first published in 1978. That's a long time ago. What I remember about 1978 is that it was perhaps the worst year of my life. Perhaps that is why Mattheissen's story stands out for me so. I am so grateful I had a spiritual teacher directing me

during this time otherwise, when I came up for air, I might have gone down for the third time.

The book is about Mattheissen's own journey, undertaken just five years earlier, in 1973. He and a colleague travelled high into the remote mountains near Tibet to study the Himalayan blue sheep and possibly glimpse the rare and beautiful Himalayan snow leopard.

As the story unfolds it becomes clear that Matthiessen, a student of Zen Buddhism, is also on a spiritual quest. We find out that his wife had recently died of cancer and though it was a painful decision to make, he had left his small son behind in America. This is how important it was to him to be able to spot the rare snow leopard.

It is a difficult journey. Expensive in many ways. The book charts his inner path as well as the outer one and brings to the reader a deepening understanding of reality, suffering, impermanence and beauty.

All along Mattheissen's journey - one that required great discipline, suffering and hardship - he heard reports of sightings of the snow leopard here and there. Sometimes he missed the snow leopard only by a few hours. After many weeks, finally he returns home. When asked by others, "Did you see the snow leopard?" he replies, "No - isn't that wonderful?"

He didn't get what he wanted, it didn't turn out the way he planned, he was not successful nor was he in control of the outcome and, afterwards, he says, "Isn't that wonderful?"

How do we do this asking, seeking, knocking? By practicing, as did Jesus, the limitless qualities of love, compassion, non-violence, justice and inclusiveness. We work at trying to see the world as he did, by living lives as if God really ran the show.

Maybe in the process of this looking we will realize that all our efforts to hang on, to be in control, to succeed, to be right fail us utterly. What doesn't fail, if we are willing to trust it, is the dawning-in-the-dark realization that we are held on to by

the love of Sacred Mystery. That's finding what we weren't looking for but finding and being found by what we need.

Isn't that wonderful?

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