

That Something More

Religion, it doesn't matter which religion you pick for this though we are focused on the religion of the Judeo-Christian tradition, has always served two very important functions.

First, it creates meaning for the ego.

All religions are created by humans in response to the human need to calm the anxiety we have had since the beginning of human consciousness, or of self-awareness, that we are going to die.

The religions that humans have created from the beginning until now have drawn on the culture and the symbol system of the culture in which they are created to create myths and stories and rituals that help the ego make sense of and endure the variety of experiences we have in being human. The first and biggest issue for the self-conscious being is the awareness that we are finite - a polite way of saying that we are going to die.

Because they are created using the symbol system of the culture in which they are created religions vary from culture to culture, from country to country.

Further, because the tribal values of a culture almost always trump the religious values of that culture, the religion of a culture has a difficult time transforming the culture.

This is one of the reasons, for example, that the religion of my childhood, the Southern Baptist version of Christianity, could put a great deal of energy and money into what it called "foreign missions," which was an effort to convert and save the souls of people in Africa for example, and yet be completely oblivious to the frequently violent racism that was a part of the culture in which the church existed.

So it is possible to have a religion that does not change the consciousness of the person who has that religion. Just a superficial look at the history of any religion

shows that a religion, even one that has many, many adherents, can fail to deliver radical transformation.

I'll give you two examples of this in our own culture.

First, is the sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church. It has gotten so big that they can't ignore it - though in the end they may end up making no significant changes. What one wonders is what is there about the Roman Catholic Church that permitted this thing to grow, go on and be protected?

Second, is what has been going on over the past number of years in Evangelical Protestant Churches. As someone who grew up in that tradition I have long known and been somewhat embarrassed about the anti-intellectualism of the Evangelical movement. That they allowed Christian Fundamentalism to take them over was, for me, a heart-breaking experience. And, in the past few years they have abandoned all of their principles in their support of our president. Of course, anyone is free to support the president. But, he spits on the values of Evangelical Christianity and yet they support him. What this tells me is that Evangelical Christianity, at least in this country, is not a religious movement. It is a security movement.

The ego seeks security and religion, even a perverted one, can deliver on this need.

Very often religion doesn't open the door of inclusion or communicate love but is used for division and judgment.

(See the overheads for the Pearls Before Swine cartoons that illustrate this.)

If your religion taught you, just for one example, that you are so bad that God had to kill his own son to save you from your sins, your religion damaged you. It taught you that rather than being truly created in the image of God, there was something terribly flawed with you. Martin Luther, referred to as "father of the Reformation," taught that humans were nothing more but excrement with a coating of sugar on top. This is a dysfunction of religion.

What religion does at this functional and dualistic level is that it consoles the ego, it fortifies the ego, it defends the ego and it promotes the ego.

This is not a bad thing. Indeed, ego strength is a necessary and good thing. I remember Robert Johnson teaching over and over about the importance of having a strong ego. A strong ego, of course, is very, very different from an inflated ego. Jesus is but one example of someone who had a strong ego.

Robert said that a strong ego was what Jesus meant when he said, “You must learn to be in the world but not of the world.” When people derive their identity from the various worlds they inhabit - their tribe, their marriage, their work, the political party, their denomination, etc. - not only do they live in a narrow world but they are at risk when the world in which they live comes to an end - as all things do.

But, ego strength is not an end thing. It is, certainly when it comes to embodying the values of peace, love, joy, patience and humility only the starting point.

Cultures, or groups of people, have their own kind of ego structure. I used Spiral Dynamics last week as a model to show how both individuals and groups of individuals move through certain developmental levels in the process of growth and maturity. Getting older, aging, is unavoidable as long as we stay alive. But, growing and maturing seems to be optional. This is why you can have people who have aged chronologically but have remained arrested at adolescent development otherwise.

I was in a group recently where someone complained about one of our political leaders saying that he behaved like a child. A woman in the group said, “I have children. They behave better than that.”

When the ego defends its religion by claiming it is the finished product of what the religion is aiming for, that always ends up in a disaster, a battle of some sort. The battle can be in the inner world or it can rage out of control in a country or between countries. An example that came to me while I was writing this is that of John Calvin.

I remember when I was in seminary reading about the wonderful John Calvin. He was a major leader of the Protestant Reformation. I was stunned to read about how Calvin, who so influenced Protestant Christianity, especially what we call the Presbyterian tradition, watched in delight while one of his theological opponents, Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician and theologian, burned at the stake!

These two men exchanged letters for a while each trying to convince the other of his opinion. It turned bitter. Years passed. One day Servetus showed up in Geneva and went to church where Calvin was preaching. Calvin had him arrested, Calvin ran the town, and had Servetus burned alive while Calvin watched!

Here is a psychological law as certain as the law of gravity: People whose self-definition is that they are “evil” or “sinful” almost invariably respond to that definition by victimizing others. This is why Fundamentalists can portray those who are not responsive to their message as bound for an eternity of suffering.

This has also led to an over-emphasis on the ego and its behavior as a definition of who we are. All of this, and more, comes - I believe - from a definition of humanity as so irreparably evil that Jesus had to die to rescue us from our hopeless state.

Just for the record, the substitutionary theory of the atonement did not enter Christian theology until the 11th century with the writings of Anselm of Canterbury.

In the inner world I have seen the turmoil and anguish that results when one can no longer subscribe to the ego's religion and desires to make the move to a more global or inclusive position.

Suppose, for example, your religion teaches that homosexuality and, therefore, homosexuality is and homosexuals are some form of evil. You see what you come to know is the falsity of that. Your spouse or family or good friends and neighbors do not. What do you do? I've seen, as have many of you, families torn asunder over an issue like this. And, even more tragically, churches.

Back in the early 60's I was pastor of a church where the issue was not homosexuality but the war in Viet Nam. I've buried more than one soldier's body

from that conflict and watched as families that had been friends and neighbors for years began to take opposing positions.

Some social psychologists argue that usually the tribal values win out.

As I see it the ego is hardwired for both religion and tribalism. The ego is always dividing, making judgments, deciding who is in and who is out. The ego is a master of selectively processing information that proves “my team is the best” - whatever team that is. Or, whatever the position is.

The religion introduced to us by people like, for example, Jesus, actually ends up serving a very, very small minority of people. The function of the teachings of Jesus is not the maintenance of the ego but is aimed at the radical transformation and liberation from the ego. It is a religion that does not fortify the ego, but utterly and unalterably shatters it. This is why I advise not to embrace any label too tightly. The risk is that the label will send you off looking for information that will justify hanging on to the label rather than for experiences that lead to deep levels of peace, love and joy. And, of course, patience and humility.

I’m shooting for the transformation and liberation of the ego for myself before I die. No religion is going to protect me from death. I’ve got to keep moving, to keep letting go. Over and over. And, I’m doing so with the faith and confidence that there is something more, that as I go forward in these dark times, there will be something solid to step onto. Or, as I step into the void, I will be taught to fly. At any rate, I’m calling this talk “That Something More.”

One of the ways I want to contribute to the higher function of religion is to free our inherited notions of the Bible and of Jesus from the cultural prisons in which they have been captured so that we can experience the refreshing and healing waters that are available for us there. In order to move toward the new we have to let go of the old. We can’t let go of something unless first of all we know that we are holding on to it. Or, in the case of culturally inherited religious teachings, that they have hold of us.

Because of movies and television and the movies shown on television around Easter and Christmas almost everybody is familiar at some level with the biblical

story. Everybody in here, more than likely, has seen The Ten Commandments - the movie I mentioned last week.

Last week I give a brief history or overview about how magic and, then, stories of miracles entered human consciousness and history. There are stories of magical events and people and powers in every culture and in every religion that I know about there are stories of what we know as miracles. Events in the world are said to have taken place by some sort of invasive power. The material that came to be included in the Christian Bible is no different.

As I indicated last week, there are not miracles on every page of the Bible. Rather miracles, as understood by interventions made into the human realm by an divine power that is outside the human realm, are really limited to two pairs of people.

In the evolving Hebrew story there came to be an emphasis on what was known as “the law” and “the prophets.” Moses represents “the law” and Elijah represents “the prophets.” Each of these men had an immediate successor and they too were said to have been the conveyors or conduits of miraculous power. In the case of Moses that person is Joshua and in the case of Elijah that person is Elisha.

I think it is important for you to know about this material for at least two reasons.

First, it contributes to your religious literacy.

Second, when we get to talking about the miracle stories that are embedded in the Jesus story, you will begin to see that almost without exception the stories told about Jesus are told to establish him as the new Moses and the new Elijah, the new law and the new prophetic emphasis.

So we have some miraculous events associated with Moses and Joshua and then, about four hundred years later, some stories associated with Elijah and Elisha. Then about 800 years later Jesus comes on the scene.

I want to look at the content of these miracle stories that are found in the Hebrew scripture and will attempt to do this as concisely yet thoroughly as possible. Today we are going to deal with Moses and Joshua.

You will remember from last week, I hope, that the miracles start with Moses hearing the voice of God from a bush that is burning but not consumed. This occurred while Moses was tending his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness. He was in the wilderness because he was "on the run" from the law. He had murdered an Egyptian and had fled into Midian.

Keep in mind that while the actual man, Moses, appears to have lived sometime in the 13th century B.C., the stories about him were not written down until around the tenth century. During this three hundred year period of time a lot of fantasy and folklore found their way into the story. For example, the story of Moses being found in a basket as a baby is very similar to another Middle Eastern leader named Sargon.

Last week I mentioned some of the amazing events that were told about Moses in his efforts to free the people from Egyptian bondage. For example, he could throw his staff to the ground and it would turn into a snake, or little dragon. Moses did a number of similar feats each of which could be duplicated by Pharaoh's magicians.

Since we covered all of the events leading up to the parting of the Red Sea, let me just point out a few things concerning this narrative.

Sometimes the text says that after a plague, Pharaoh hardened his heart. Sometimes the text says God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Why would God do that? And, why couldn't this all powerful God just send one super-duper plague from the very beginning? If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, why was God working against God's own purpose? If these plagues were really miracles, why could Pharaoh's magicians duplicate them, or most of them?

In spite of whatever questions logic might raise here, this is the way the miraculous gets introduced into the biblical story. John Shelby Spong writes, "Miracles were found in the ability to manipulate the forces of nature in order to create suffering for the enemies of the chosen people. It was not a particularly noble way for miracles to be born."

The most significant miracle in Hebrew history is the parting of the Red Sea. You've seen the movie so you know what happened.

Actually, the Red Sea was some two hundred miles away from the route taken by the Hebrews. The words in the Hebrew text that are translated "Red Sea" literally mean "Sea of Reeds" and that body of swampland was directly on their route.

What likely actually happened is that the Hebrews, who had a head start on the Egyptians, got to this swampy marshland well ahead of the Egyptians. Navigating the territory in front of them would have been difficult. But, they were traveling much lighter than the Egyptians. Though it was a struggle they made it.

The Egyptians did not fare so well. Bogged down with heavy equipment they were not able to continue going on and their only choice was eventually to give up. The Hebrew people had escaped and were able to resume their tribal and nomadic heritage and, as they saw it, God had delivered them from Egyptian bondage.

Just as happens with the stories you and I tell, this one grew. It had hundreds of years to do so. This event became a sign of God's power over water and it would be repeated in one form or another for generations.

The second miracle in the Moses story has to do with shortage of food.

The Hebrews had been traveling for a couple of months and their supply of food began to run low. At least in Egypt there had been food to eat. Their resentment toward Moses began to rise. They missed the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic they had eaten in Egypt.

So, whatever the origin of this story, God sends manna from heaven on six days of the week. Not on the seventh because that would violate the Sabbath.

This miracle of expanding the food supply would appear again and again in the biblical story. Remember the stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes with little food?

Moses dies. Joshua is his successor. But how will we know? Because as the people go forward they reach the Jordan River which is at flood tide. This blocked the people from going forward - until those bearing the Ark of the Covenant stepped into the river and it parted so that the people could cross over on dry land. The power that had been with Moses was clearly now passed to Joshua.

Perhaps the most amazing miracle story in all of the Christian Bible is the one about Joshua stopping the sun's orbit around the earth. Yes, I know the sun doesn't orbit the earth but they didn't. Some people still seem not to know this.

Joshua's army was fighting the Amorites, another tribal group and the sun was going down. They needed more daylight time to kill more people so Joshua held up his arms and created the first instance of Daylight Saving Time. The sun stopped. The Hebrews killed more people and won the battle. This is the sort of tribal mentality that people have been steeped in for centuries. It is what leads to the belief that "God is on our side."

Moses had done something similar to this. The Hebrews were in a battle with the Amalekites. They were losing. But Moses held his arms up and the Hebrews began to kill more of the Amalekites than were killing them. However, Moses arms got tired so he dropped them. The Hebrews began to lose. This went on for a while created the first instance of "the wave." Finally, Aaron and Hur brought a big rock for Moses to sit on and held his arms up until the Hebrews had killed all the Amalekites.

There are other miraculous things attributed to Moses. He is able to turn bitter water from a well into sweet or clean water. And, another time when there was no water for the people to drink, he struck a big rock and water gushed forth.

So far, all the miracle stories of Moses and Joshua were what are called "nature miracles." When we get to the miracle stories associated with Jesus, we'll see that they are divided into groups and one grouping is nature miracles and having to do with water - turning water into wine, calming a storm, even walking on water. Water is a big biblical image or metaphor. Jesus calls himself the "living water."

There are other miracles that are to come in the prophetic tradition but I want to stop here because I don't want a revolt because I'm doing too much "biblical" or "religious" stuff and not enough on what is actually relevant for your lives and living - though I think this sort of material is fascinating.

Egoic religion, which as I have tried to say is not only not all bad but which we are, I believe, hard wired for, is severely challenged by science. My personal experience of that has been absolutely liberating.

I am so grateful to have been introduced to and to have been able to introduce you to Ilia Delio. And, now I am so grateful and excited that next Sunday in this very spot will be evolutionary theologian Michael Dowd. And, for those of you who signed up next Saturday as well.

What these master teachers confirm for me is that the laws by which the world operates have not changed since the Big Bang. What has changed is the way human beings have understood these laws. That has changed dramatically. The ego does not like change. But the laws of physics are immutable.

In her book, "We Are All One," Joan Chittister writes, "God made both us and the stars out of the same material. There is, then, no difference between spirit and flesh. We are simply stardust on our way back to the source of life."

And the Dalai Lama has written, "If we really see each other as brothers and sisters, there would be no basis for division, cheating and exploiting among us. Therefore it is important to promote the idea of the oneness of humanity, that in being human, we are all the same."

Why is it that these notions of science, reliability and oneness are so resisted, repudiated? It is because the ego of each and every one of us, yes, including your teacher, has a box in which we live and in which we like to keep things. We all have ways of behaving and beliefs that make us feel "safe and secure."

In the church of my youth I grew up singing a hymn, "Leaning on Jesus."

The first verse went -

What a fellowship, what a joy divine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Then the chorus -

Leaning, leaning,
Safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

It goes on. A comforting notion that is absolutely false at the dualistic level - at which it is taught. Besides it fosters dependency and immaturity.

I had a box for much of my life that was built around this kind of thinking. I knew it didn't work. I knew it wasn't true. But that was because there was something wrong with me. Not because there was something wrong with the religion I had been taught.

The religion of my youth taught me not to question the religion but to doubt myself. This notion that there is something wrong with us, that there is some ideal state like the Garden of Eden that we have been expelled from because of our sinfulness is one of the most damaging things Western religion has done to its faithful adherents. Consequently I spent the first half of my life feeling insecure, not safe.

The work of spiritual and psychological growth which, I believe, is our primary purpose involves developing the willingness and skill set involved in seeing what our box is, what is in it, how it is constructed and what it takes to move out of it. This is not something one does once and for all. It is an ongoing task.

And it is hard. Just recently I was in a group where I heard a man talk about his agonizing struggle between what he knew to be true and what he wanted to be true. He wanted the comfort and familiarity of the religion of his youth but he had to

shut down too much of his “what he knew to be true” self to participate in it. He got to the point where he knew he could no longer do that.

Every spiritual teacher from every religious tradition teaches some part of the truth but what is taught is always only partial. No one is smart enough to be either wrong or right all the time. This is why from time to time I remind you of one of the core teachings of Buddhism:

“Investigate yourself. Question everything. Take nothing for granted. Don’t believe anything because it sounds wise and pious and some holy person said it. See for yourself.”

This does not mean that you should be cynical. It means you should be empirical. Subject all you hear to the actual test of your own experience.

The motivation of the intellectual part of our spiritual practice evolves out of an inner longing to wake up to what is real and to gain liberating insight into the true nature of “what is.” The entire spiritual journey hinges on the desire to be awake to the truth. If we don’t have this commitment, our religion will, in the end, be superficial.

I have come over the years to see my work as a teacher both here and individually to involve more unlearning than learning. It is complex and difficult work - which is why so few take it up. I congratulate you on being willing to do so. If you weren’t, you would be here. Though I do a lot of explaining about religious literacy, that is just the first course. The real meal is about containing and receiving everything and holding on to nothing.

This is why all great spiritual teachings emphasize the importance of not judging. Just notice. Just be aware. Be with “what is.” You can’t really understand anything or anyone if you have either approved or it or them or disapproved of it or them. There is simply too much ego invested once judgment has taken place.

As long as we hang on to being right, we are frozen. (I’m right about this - :)) If we have doubts in our religious or spiritual life, let it be about how right we think we are. That way we may have a shot at the transformation we claim we seek. Over

and over in our daily lives we have to choose love over fear, newness over getting even, the circle of reunion over the cycle of violence.

Every person in this room has a “god box.” What’s your’s? Even people who call themselves atheists have a “god box.” They have to have some notion of God in which not to believe in order to call themselves “a-theistic.”

This talk has two primary objectives:

First of all to convince you, to assure you, to seduce you into the faith that there is always something more. Don’t stop. Keep going. Keep meditating. Keep reading. Keep doing acts of mercy.

And second, and yes, I know this is dualistic language, to convince you, to assure you, to seduce you into knowing that something more is you.

I have been going back over the notes I made from reading “The Book of Joy.” Our world needs more people like the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and you. In this book “God Has a Dream” Desmond Tutu writes:

“If you were in heaven now you would notice the tears in God’s eyes. The tears streaming down God’s face as God looked on us and saw the awful things that we, God’s children, are doing to each other. God cries and cries. And then you might see the smile that was breaking over God’s face like sunshine through the rain, almost like a rainbow. You would see God smiling because God was looking on you and noting how deeply concerned you are. And the smile might break out into a laugh as God said, ‘You have vindicated Me. I had been asking Myself, ‘Whatever got into Me to create that lot?’ And when I see you, yes, you,’ God says, ‘you are beginning to wipe the tears from My eyes because you care. Because you care and you have come to learn that you are not your brother’s or sister’s keeper. You are your brother’s brother and your sister’s sister.’ And God says, ‘I have no one except you. Thank you for vindicating Me.’”

Go out there and keep making God smile.

We are called to be “that something more.”

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