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A Place to Come To

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The metaphor of entering a river or body of water plays a powerful role in every religious tradition. We have many hymns that reference rivers and water. We have many rituals that do so as well. Keep this in mind as we go forward today because our goal will be to end up entering the river. Or, more correctly, with an awareness that we are already there.

Who are you? Where are you going?

Who are we? Where are we going?

Those questions, questions of identity and destination, are at the heart of every authentic, wise and useful spiritual journey.

These questions are not easy to answer under the best of circumstances. Immersed in the various worlds in which each of us lives, sometimes feel “forced” to live, these questions can easily be forgotten, put on the back burner or answered for us.

If we do not answer these questions for ourselves, and answer them in ways that give meaning, purpose and direction, our culture will answer them for us.

This is just one of the reasons to have a vital daily spiritual practice; to answer the questions of identity and purpose. And, to keep the answers we come up with in front of us.

Our culture convinces us that things are important that turn out not to be important at all.

One example is the upcoming Super Bowl. Last year the Super Bowl had the largest viewing audience of any television program in history with an audience of 114 million viewers. That’s a little over a third of all the people living in this country. This will be Super Bowl 50 and will be between the Panthers and Broncos. Have a favorite team?

Professional football and what surrounds it is almost a religion in this culture.

Let me ask you some questions about these much-anticipated events?

What professional football team won the very first Super Bowl?

It was the Green Bay Packers and the game was played in 1967.

Super Bowl VIII was played right here in Houston at Rice Stadium in 1974. Who played and who won? The Miami Dolphins beat the Minnesota Vikings, 24 - 7. By the way, the Super Bowl will be played here again next year.

Who won the Super Bowl five years ago? The Green Bay Packers beat the Pittsburgh Steelers 31-25.

I won't ask you about last year because who could forget the Seattle Seahawks disastrous interception with just seconds to go giving the game to the New England Patriots.

We are also coming up on The Academy Awards. That will be February 28th. Eight films have been nominated for best picture: The Big Short, Bridge of Spies, Brooklyn, Mad Max, The Martian, The Revenant, Room and Spotlight. Have you seen these films? Have a favorite?

The Academy Awards has quite a history since its inception in 1927. It has gone through name changes and award changes. What is now called "The Best Picture" award has gone from Outstanding Picture, Outstanding Production, Outstanding Motion Picture, Best Motion Picture to, beginning in 1962, Best Picture.

In 1927 what motion picture was awarded "best picture"? A film called "Wings."

That's too long ago.

What film won in 1960? "The Apartment."

Still too long ago?

How about five years ago, in 2011? “The Artist.”

2013? “Twelve Years a Slave.”

How about films for 2014? That’s for last year. “Birdman.”

Though these events are highly touted by our culture and people gather around their television sets in order to watch them, we don’t recall them.

How many of you remember the name of your first grade teacher?

The name of your first pet? (Cartoon about father telling son to remember dog's name.)

Your best childhood friend?

The most recent statistics I have been able to capture reveal that the average person, and no one is this gathering is average, spends 8 hour and 41 minutes a day looking at a flat screen of some sort. I’m sure I’m in that group. I don’t use a typewrite, few people use land lines, I read on a Kindle, etc. I’m not sure that staring at flat screens is the issue. The issue is our falling for the cultural lie, even or especially in our religion, that causes us to make much of that which surely cannot matter much to God. Does Sacred Mystery really give a hoot about which religion people use to connect to Her and by which to spread values of loving kindness and compassion, and to express distributive justice for “the least of these”?

About ten years ago, and frankly I don’t remember where I was in my relationship with Richard Rohr, he convinced me to read a book that was even then twenty five years old. Ten years ago and certainly thirty years ago now, we did not have any of the electronic gizmos we have today. We didn’t have cable television, movies on demand, any of that. The book Rohr wanted me to read was “Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business” by Neil Postman.

Postman had an uncanny ability to peer into future and, because of that, was dismissed, criticized and not taken seriously.

For forty years he was a professor at New York University. He wrote 18 books and was published widely. He is best known for this book which, though published in 1985 is still very relevant.

The book has been issued in a revised version about ten years ago by his son.

Again, just a reminder to put this book into perspective: When it was published there was no internet, no cell phones, no cable channels, no DVDs, no call-waiting or caller ID, no blogs, no flat-screen TVs, no hi-def TVs, no iPads or Tablets, none of it. Yet, prophetically, the book's point is that because of these things what is truly meaningful is being lost and that we no longer care what we've lost as long as we are being entertained.

And so we end up making much in every arena you can imagine of that which matters little.

And, it happens to us so slowly that we don't even notice.

Peter Senge, one of the leading learning theory gurus I have listened to, is a MIT scientist and educator, is the one from whom, years ago, I first heard the parable of the boiled frog. He used this parable to illustrate maladaptation to gradually building threats.

If you place a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will immediately try to scramble out to save itself.

But, if you place the frog in room temperature water, he'll stay put. If you just gradually turn up the temperature, something very interesting happens. As the temperature rises slowly, the frog will do nothing and may even show every sign of enjoying himself. As the temperature gradually increases, the frog will become too helpless to climb out. Though there is nothing restraining him, the frog will sit there, boil and die.

I want to read you three paragraphs from the Foreword of Postman's book:

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We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn't come true, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another - slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World." Contrary to common belief, even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacity to think.

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was there would be no reason to ban a book for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in "Brave New World Revisited," the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite of distractions." In "1984," Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In "Brave New World," they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will run us.

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I think that the most insidious bill of goods our culture has sold us is that we don't have the time or the need for a contemplative practice.

We come into the world, come into this culture and are given, without our asking for it, an operating system. Just like a computer has an operating system, so do we. It is called "the egoic operating system." Until we become aware of it, and we do this by coming to understand our true identity, this operating system determines how we see everything. Because consumerism is the civil religion of our culture, we are taught to see everything in terms of personal advantage. Operating without our even being aware of them are questions like, "What's in it for me?" And, "How do I protect my stuff?"

Nothing could be further from the teaching of Jesus. We are immersed in a culture of right and wrong, who is in and who is out, and as long as we are locked into this, we will never see the rule of God that Jesus talked about - either in our own hearts or in the world out there.

All the great religions have talked about a different way of seeing. That different way of seeing comes from assuming a different perspective, a different vantage point, a different starting point.

Though we are always immersed in the grace of God, in Sacred Mystery, we do not always see this. Sometimes when I wake up, that is to say, become conscious, I will notice that I'm not within a country mile of the things I say I value. The biggest addiction problem we have in this country is an addiction to the way we think. We can convince ourselves of almost any nonsense in the world and be in such denial of what is really going on.

One of my teachers when I was at Harvard was Harvey Cox. Indeed, he is the one who was responsible for my getting to go to the post-doctoral program in psychology and religion there. In one of his lectures he told the story of Jesus being called to resuscitate the daughter of a wealthy Roman. As Jesus is going to the Roman's house, a woman who has been hemorrhaging for years reaches out from the crowd and touches His robe. He feels her touch and turns around and asks, "Who touched me?" The woman comes forward and begs Jesus to cure her

and He does, then He goes on to the house of the Roman whose daughter had died. Most people are familiar with this story or some aspects of it.

After telling the story, Cox asked us who in the story we most identified with. When he asked who identified with the bleeding woman, about half held up their hands. When he asked who identified with the anxious Roman father, more of the rest raised their hands. When he asked who identified with the curious crowd, most raised their hands. But, when he asked who identified with Jesus, not a single person raised their hand.

Something is wrong here. If we don't learn to identify with Jesus and let him live through us, what is to become of us? Something is wrong with our concept of Christianity if it seems arrogant to identify with Jesus. That is exactly what we are supposed to do. We are supposed to identify with Jesus, to act like Jesus, to be like Jesus.

Who are you? Where are you going?

Who are we? Where are we going?

Those questions are answered by where we start from, who our teachers are, how conscious we stay about our identity and destination.

I want to give you the teaching from the Gospel of Thomas this talk is based on and then unpack just a little of it.

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Among those born on earth
beginning from Adam to
John the Baptist,
no one has reached a higher state
than John - and you should
bow in honor before him.

Yet, I tell you this,

whoever of you becomes “a little child”
will not only know the kingdom,
but will be raised to a state
higher than John’s.

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Keep in mind: these teachings in the Gospel of Thomas are to be read and interpreted at the mystical level.

Though it is not immediately apparent, this teaching begins with the Sacred Feminine. I’m not going to elaborate on that today because other teachings from Thomas will give us more than ample opportunity to do so.

“Among those born on earth . . .” Where do we come from? What is the source of our nurture?

Because we have been so acculturated to see Jesus and what is called “Christianity” through such Western, even North American and United States glasses, it is virtually impossible to hear the teachings that grew up in the time after the life and death of Jesus in ways that give us the meaning they originally had.

At the time of Jesus there were many people who were protesting the evils of the government and the religion that had been coopted by the government. One stood out. A wild character we know as John the Baptist. John called people to come out from the system, to take hope that a different kind of life was possible and gave strict guidelines for a more just system. Of all the people who were hoping for an end of Roman domination and a renewal of Jewish justice, which has nothing to do with our understanding of justice - our understanding of justice is about getting even, Jewish justice was about fairness to everyone - the one that Jesus went to was John. Jesus legitimizes the teachings of John by being baptized by him. How long Jesus was a disciple or follower of John we don’t know. Both of these men, John and Jesus, were executed for their teachings.

John Dominic Crossan says that the difference between John and Jesus was that John had a monopoly and Jesus started a franchise. John had followers. Jesus had

disciples. Nevertheless, Jesus said that there had not been a greater prophetic voice than John the Baptist.

If we decide to get on a spiritual path that will take you in the direction of your true identity and give guidance to your behavior, we need teachers. We need teachers who can hold us accountable and John was a no nonsense sort of fellow. He called people to separate themselves from their culture and to come out into the desert and to go into the river and be undergo baptism as a sign of their commitment to their true identity and purpose.

All of this is a metaphor, a symbolic action undertaken, to remind them of their once having been slaves in Egyptian bondage, trekking across the desert, crossing the Red Sea and entering the promised land.

Everybody wants to be out of bondage. Everybody wants to enter the Promised Land. Not as many want to take the step into the water. Jim Finley, whom I'm going to reference again before we are done today says that the Red Sea doesn't part until we step into it and are often in over our heads before it does. This is why one of Richard Rohr's teachings is that we need to learn to breathe under water. Our culture is so addictive that it is engulfing.

We must, and this is what John symbolizes, build a sturdy container in which to put the truth that frees us. The truth that frees us is found simply by waking up to our true identity. It is the child stance, which every great religion talks about in one way or another, that allows us to experience what already is, namely, that we are right this moment immersed in the river. My spiritual director has a name for God: the river under the river.

So here is what I want to do. I want to encourage you to step out of the culture. Step out of the normal bounds of your life. Learn and keep learning to see yourself differently. Allow yourself to be born into a new life every moment. One source I read about entering the mystery puts it this way: allow your life experience to be lightly dusted with form.

I've called this talk today "A Place to Come To." That is the title of an old Robert Penn Warren novel. I read this book when it first came out in 1977. The place we come to is - death. Cheery thought.

We do this coming to death now so that we can die before we do die. We die before we die. If we can put ourselves on that path, we realize that there is nothing to fear. We have to hear John call us and we have to leave our cultural constraints and we have to enter the river. That's a symbol that is in all religions in one form or another.

I want to share some images about river entering with you. I'm influenced here by Jim Finley.

You know what immediately occurs when you enter the river? You get wet.

It doesn't matter whether you've entered the river hundreds of times or whether this is your very first time, you get just as wet.

You don't enter the river for the first time and come out just a little wet. Nor, after the many times, you don't come out dry saying, "I can't get wet any more. The river did not grant it self to me. I've used up all my wetness."

One who has entered the river many times may still have a profound realization of wetness. Nevertheless, one who has just entered for the first time is just as wet.

Also, it doesn't matter whether you enter the river after living on its banks for many years or whether you have travelled hundreds of miles in order to enter the river you are just as wet either way. It isn't as if the one who has travelled hundreds of miles gets more wet as a reward for the journey. Near or far, just as wet.

It also doesn't matter whether one enters the river after great and careful and determined deliberation to do so. Or, whether one falls into the river from the back of a pier. One gets just as wet. The one who arrives in the river by way of a difficult and courageous process is not rewarded by getting more wet than the one who fell in.

Also, it doesn't matter whether one enters the river in broad daylight or whether one enters the river by way of the secrecy of the dark, kind of a closet river-enterer who slipped in while no one was watching. Both get just as wet.

It also doesn't matter whether one enters all alone or whether one enters with thousands and thousands of people one gets just as wet.

You know something else? It also doesn't matter what you believe - as if people with a certain belief system get more wet than those with a different belief system.

It doesn't matter whether you are saint or sinner. Both get just as wet.

We might call this the graciousness of the river.

Jewish and Christian language refers to it as "the grace of God."

Jesus most radical teaching is "the sun shines on the good and the bad."
God's grace is upon all. What we frequently lack is awareness of this.

This is not to say that river entering is risk free. The ego self is fragile. This is why an experienced river-enterer like John or Jesus can be helpful. But, the only way you personally get wet is by entering the river. Not by reading about it. Or, hearing about. Though those can be helpful tools to get your courage up - especially if you fear the water is cold and the river is deep. If you don't get the identity question answers correctly you can read books about river-entering until your eyes fall out, you can listen to talks like this until your ears fall off.

Your experiential identity of who you are in God is all that matters.

Sooner or later you are going to get into the river. It is where you came from. The way I see it is that meaning and happiness and joy and shared love come from the willing awareness to come to that place now.

So, shall we gather at the river?

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