

Seeking What Cannot Be Given

These talks that I offer in here are not in any particular order. But, then, neither is life.

These talks are ordered by my decision, some time ago, to learn about and then base my talks on my own reflections and meditations on passages from the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Thomas is in no particular order. Some passages seem to have some connections between them. But, the Gospel of Thomas is not a story. So, for the most part, the teachings found in Thomas are not in any systematic order. Consequently, neither are my talks which are based upon them.

As I began with, life is not in any particular order either. Because we live with the illusion of control and the belief that life proceeds in an orderly fashion, we are asleep to our lack of control most of the time.

Jesus came on the scene and his main theme was a realm he referred to as “the empire (or kingdom) of God.” That is powerful and political phrase the impact of which is largely lost on us because we don’t think of ourselves as living in “an empire.”

Those who first heard the teachings of Jesus were oppressed, marginalized and systemically executed by the Roman Empire. So when they heard about another and possible empire, it got their attention.

Though I am not going to do this, there are many reputable scholars who draw striking parallels between our governmental system and the Roman Empire. This can be said of other political systems as well. Whenever Paul, the church’s first theologian, talks about “principalities and powers,” he is talking about “the system.” We live in and are part of a system. It so wraps us up in so many ways, most of which we are as unaware of as a fish is unaware of the water in which it swims.

Jesus promoted another system and perhaps the question he was asked the most was, “What is this empire or rule of God you speak of like?” His answers were mostly actions, then stories, then riddles and sayings.

You can group his responses into four broad categories.

He said that this rule of God was -

Not under our control.

That it -
shows up where we least expect it.

It disrupts business as usual.

And, is a reign of justice and compassion.

We don't wake up every morning hoping for any of these things. These are the things, however, that we fall asleep to. We love power and control and the illusion that we can stay in control. Further, for most of us, our ideas of justice and compassion are nowhere near what Jesus, or other spiritual masters in the Jewish prophetic tradition, had in mind.

You know how you can be out driving and fail to notice that there is a speed bump up ahead, though here we refer to them as "road humps"? You hit one of those things without reducing your speed and it startles the daylights out of you. Or, you hit it at the requested speed and it just irritates you.

We love power and control and the illusion that we can stay in control. This is one of the reasons we get startled by life so often. We fall asleep or think we have all of our ducks in a row and can keep them there and that we sort of have the hang of things and, oops!, we hit a speed bump. A death of one sort or another is a pretty good speed bump.

I think Jesus loved throwing speed bumps in front of people then standing back and watching their reaction.

In the very first class I taught in Ordinary Life, and I used this phrase often in the beginning, I said that I wanted to leave you with molasses in one hand and feathers in the other. That is to say, to offer you something that makes us think.

I also said: If you are disturbed by what happens in this class, that's good. In spiritual practice it is good to be disturbed. The goal is to be disturbed as long as we can be disturbed. When you are not disturbed, it's only because you are not disturbed. It's not because nothing is disturbing. Of course, because everything is always the way it ought to be, because the system operates perfectly, nothing is really inherently disturbing. Of course, as long as we can't be disturbed, we can't know that. So, if we want to wake up, we will want to continue to be disturbed and to pay very close attention to being disturbed for as long as we are disturbed - because nothing is really disturbing.

Now, if you understood that and can smile about it, you'll probably enjoy this class. If you didn't understand it or you didn't smile about it, this is an excellent opportunity for you - although you might not have as much fun as the folks who smiled about it.

What I want to do in my own life, and then offer to those of you who choose to show up here, are some views of, insights into and practices that we can use in our everyday lives, in Ordinary Life, to empower us to be more widely, wisely, deeply and usefully involved in process of becoming centers of freedom and love. Real freedom and genuine love are comforting and disturbing matters. I want these teachings to be accessible to as many people as possible whether they consider themselves "religious" or not.

I know that there are some people who are not familiar with the various models of psycho-spiritual development that are so essential to understanding what I am attempting to communicate. So, occasionally I will offer one - as I did a couple of weeks ago in referring to Jim Fowler's "Stages of Faith Development." I know that others of you are well acquainted with these models of growth. I'm convinced looking out on our society that most people, even - or especially - people in places of power and influence, have not an operational clue about this information.

However, there is a path that we human beings can use to unfold ourselves, or be unfolded, into our True Selves. I want to be aware of and share what is possible for us as we move from the day of our birth to the days of our inevitable dying and death.

There is a path we can follow to come to know ourselves. If you don't who is doing the spiritual practice you undertake, no matter what it is or in what tradition, there is a problem. You can read spiritual books until your eyes fall out and listen to spiritual teachings until your ears fall off, undertake the most intense of spiritual practices; but if you don't know who is doing the reading, the listening or practicing, the problem remains.

Here is something I have learned from the mystics: even though they know that they do not die when they die, even though they know they are not limited by their limitations or defined by their difficulties; they still know that they have work to do. Why should we think any differently about ourselves?

I am aware that there is a broad diversity of people who attend this gathering. For some of you when I say things like, "no label applies to me" or when I refer to a work such as "Being Nobody, Going Nowhere," it makes you wonder if I am what is referred to in some circles as a "true believer."

There are others for whom I either use too much Jesus talk, or not enough; too much Buddha, or not enough; too much Jewish mysticism, or not enough; and so on.

Wherever you are on the religious/spiritual spectrum my hope is that we are all here, as this is what my work and teachings are about, to deepen our awareness of our being immersed in Sacred Mystery and Sacred Mystery's desire to find expression through how we live. We are created for this awareness and living this awareness as birds are for light and fish are for swimming.

One of the most important works I've read in the past few years is Kathleen Singh's book, "The Grace in Dying: A Message of Hope, Comfort, and Spiritual Transformation." I want to read to you a paragraph from the introduction:

“As we deepen our understanding of the entire human journey, from conception through death, we deepen our capacity to live more fully and freely, awed by the fact that we are alive. We become different beings through the transformative power of our insight into the dying process. We become larger, more integrated, and somehow more real with this expansion of our horizons and remapping of our boundaries. We enter levels that allow our now deeper being to open to what is - giving and taking, in living and in dying, with fewer gimmicks and simpler truth, with less frivolity and more joy, with less suffering and more gratitude.”

All of this is a way to get into the teaching from the Gospel of Thomas that we are up to for today. It is one that is similar to the very second teaching in the collection. When you hear it again, you will see why I said what I did about being disturbed in our spiritual work. Here it is:

“Those who seek, should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed they will marvel, and will reign over all.”

Here is the teaching we are up to for today:

Yeshua says,

Seek now, I say,
and you will find
that for which you search.
You see, I am ready to tell you
everything you were asking earlier
and did not explain,
but at the moment
no one is searching out anything.

We will run into something very similar to this in two sayings down the road.

Those of you who have any background in church attendance or biblical knowledge, are probably more familiar with other versions of this same teaching. It is found in what Jesus Scholars sometimes refer to as “restful assurances.” They

may have caused more religious difficulties and misunderstandings than any of the other of Jesus teachings. Here they are:

Rest assured:

everyone who asks receives;

everyone who seeks finds;

and for the one who knocks it is opened.

People at low levels of what I refer to as “recent Christianity” hear these words as the door that allows them to enter “the prosperity gospel.” If there is anything you want - a new job, house, boat or parking space, just ask for it and it will be yours. On the other hand, some people going through a great personal crisis, usually the impending death of a loved one, desperately ask to be spared that ordeal and, when that is not forthcoming, they give up on the whole enterprise. “I asked God to spare my loved one. God didn’t do it. What kind of a loving God is that? I’m done with the whole thing.” Further, those who are stuck at earlier stages of faith development and who are convinced that they already know and believe the right stuff and belong to the right group, have no need to search further or to ask for anything. That’s why I gave this talk today this title: “Seeking What Cannot Be Given.”

This is a sneaky teaching. It has a kind of “Catch-22” quality in it. “Catch-22” is a novel by Joseph Heller that is often referred to as one of the great novels of the 20th century.

(You can read more at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catch-22>)

In the novel a character who is an army pilot, John Yossarian, wants to get out of the dangers inherent in flying wartime missions. There is a rule that says that if you are crazy, you don’t have to fly. But anyone who applied to stop flying was showing a rational concern for his safety and was, therefore, sane and had to fly. This is called “the double-bind.” There is a quality of double-bind in this teaching and I’m willing to wager that even those of you who are so familiar with some version of this saying have likely not seen it.

If you continue to ask, seek, knock; it implies that you haven't found. You're still looking. But, if you don't ask, seek, knock; that implies you are not doing your spiritual work.

However this teaching first showed up, it is Jesus at his best; throwing spiritual speed-bumps in front of all sorts and conditions of people, from those at the top who ran the show to those who were so far at the bottom, they had nothing left to lose. The high and the mighty had nothing to ask for. Those at the bottom felt they had asked and received nothing.

Like many, if not most, of Jesus teachings, this one requires that we move into the house of wisdom if we are to understand it. Inside the house of wisdom we are able to go beyond the teaching by being open to embrace and reconcile apparent contradictions.

Some spiritual teachers refer to this a "third eye" seeing. The third way is not simply a third opinion. It is another space where we develop the ability to hold the truth in both positions without diminishing or dismissing either one of them. This is the leap from knowledge and information to understanding and wisdom. We don't live in a culture that has a lot of room for this.

What it means to be "smart" in our culture is to have the ability to debate your position in such a way as to beat your opponent. So we end up never experiencing things in their wholeness, never learning to be honest about the dark side of our own stance. Our egos get wrapped around a one-sided opinion. If you doubt this, just watch the political news. Volume and entertainment have become a substitute for truth and substance.

We must learn to accept paradoxes or we will never truly learn to love anything or anyone, or see them correctly. Normal dualistic thinking can't see that some one or thing, for example, could be human and divine at the same time. But, that is exactly what Jesus taught. "I and the Father are one." And, even for those who would embrace that, when he said, "And so are you," defenses and denial went up.

Recently we looked at the teaching in Thomas, and it is found in the Jesus narratives as well, where Jesus says, "Come unto me, all you who are tired . . ."

This is the way Eugene Peterson renders the teaching:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

What we said then is that Jesus is not referring to himself but is quoting Jewish Wisdom literature and it is Wisdom, referred to as the feminine Sophia, who is inviting us to enter into, as it is referred to in the Jewish writings, "the house of wisdom."

Alan Watts said that the loss of paradoxical thinking is the great blindness of our civilization which many of my most important teachers, especially people like Carl Jung and Robert Johnson, said is what happened when we repressed the feminine side of our lives as the inferior side. It meant the loss of subtlety, discrimination and the capacity for complementarity.

Richard Rohr says, "Each of us must learn to live with paradox or we cannot live peacefully or happily even a single day of our lives, because everything on this earth is some mixture of positive and negative charges, just like the atom itself. In fact," he goes on, "we must even learn to love paradox, or we will never be wise, forgiving, or possess the patience of good relationships."

Seek and you will find. The fact is, however, and this is from the world of physics, we cannot see in total light or total darkness. We must have variations of light to see at all.

Jesus was a contrary guy. He had no trouble being contrary. He, in the mystical Christian tradition, is one bucket of contrariness: human yet divine, physical yet spiritual, a male body and a female soul, killed yet alive, powerless but powerful, victim yet victor, failure yet savior, marginalized yet central, singular yet everyone, incarnate yet cosmic, nailed yet liberated. (I got these words in part from Rohr.) This is the job of real religion: to put the contradictions together. When Christianity

became a competing religion instead of a journey with everyone toward union with all that is, it missed the boat. It became a religion of belonging and believing instead of a path of and for transformation.

Seek and you will find. You can't find what you already have, or think you have.

Now, if we keep all of this abstract rather than making it concrete, we can fall into the delusion that we are being non-dual when in fact we have fallen back into dualistic ways of thinking except now we know that what we believe is really the correct and right position.

We need a specific concrete reality and reality is always a mixture of light and dark, good and bad, attractive and unattractive. Because the dualistic mind does not know how to hold the tensions, it can easily confuse rigid, right or wrong thinking with faith itself. In the mystical, spiritual realm faith does not mean knowledge, logic or correctness.

The religious ego likes to stay at the universal level. It loves to say, "I love humanity. It's just so-and-so I can't stand." If God is love, God is love not just for all humanity but for this one person, this one time, this one place.

So I want to try to make this concrete.

I said in the preview that went out about today's talk that the teachings of Jesus are not meant to be matters of morality about how to behave or dogmas to believe. Rather, his teachings are about geography. That is, they tell us where and how to stand in the world. We use them like a spiritual GPS.

We all have followed our own complicated paths to this place today. Mine included growing up in a confusing context of racism and love. Being partly mothered by a black woman during my growing up profoundly shaped me in many ways. One way led me to get involved in the early days of the Civil Rights movement. I had graduated from high school on the eve of the Supreme Court's desegregation decision. The time was ripe.

My level of awareness and education at that time was very parochial. I was Baptist - another mixed blessing. Believe it or not, we Baptists had some heroes. One of them was Will Campbell. Will Campbell was a Baptist minister and a civil rights pioneer. He wrote one of the most beautiful and challenging books ever written, "Brother to a Dragonfly."

(To read more about him go here - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_D._Campbell)

Those of you old enough to remember the comic strip Kudzu might remember a character in that strip, The Rev. Will B. Dunn. That character was modeled after Will Campbell.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kudzu_\(comic_strip\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kudzu_(comic_strip)))

In "Brother to a Dragonfly" Campbell recounts a time in the late 1960s when he was to be a speaker at a conference of the US National Student Association, consisting of representatives of the young New Left radicals of that time. Before he spoke, the conference viewed a documentary called "The Ku Klux Klan - An Invisible Empire," which showed such horrors as the murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi, the castration of Judge Aaron in Alabama, and the murders of four little girls in a Sunday School class in Birmingham. It took the viewer inside a Georgia Klan Klavern hall where an initiation ceremony was in progress. At one point the candidates were lined up in military formation and shouted the command "left face." One scared and pathetic figure turned right instead, bringing confusion to the formation and bringing cheers, jeers, catcalls, and guffaws from the conference audience viewing the film. Campbell writes:

(You can access this documentary here - <https://www.amazon.com/Invisible-Empire-Ku-Klux-Klan/product-reviews/1576874907>)

I felt a sickening in my stomach. Those viewing the film were alleged to be on the cutting edge of social change - black and white, women and men, who had been taking over campuses in recent months. They used words like "establishment" as if it were poison. Who were they beyond that? Most of them were from middle and upper class families. They were students or recent graduates of rich and leading

universities and colleges. They were mean and tough but somehow I sensed that there wasn't a radical in the bunch. For if they were radical, how could they laugh at a poor, ignorant farmer who didn't know his left hand from his right. If they had been radical, they would have been weeping - asking what had produced him.

After the film, it came time for Campbell's speech, and then he was to lead a discussion on the film. So, he stood up and said:

My name is Will Campbell.

I'm a Baptist minister.

I'm a native of Mississippi.

And I'm pro-Klansman because I'm pro-human being.

Now, that's my speech.

If anyone has any questions, I will be glad to try to answer them.

The last sentence was not out of his mouth before all hell broke out. Blacks and whites were shouting at Campbell and storming from the hall. The next half hour was sheer pandemonium.

Campbell later said it was one of the few times he felt fearful of bodily harm. He later reflected, "It was the first time I had realized the power of words. I had intended to begin a dialogue, maybe even a heated dialogue, but I had not intended to start a riot."

Finally, with just a few people remaining in the audience, Campbell writes,

It took time to get my little band of radicals settled down enough to put out to them that just four words uttered - "pro-Klansman, Mississippi Baptist preacher" - coupled with one visual image: white - had turned them into everything they thought the KKK to be: hostile, frustrated, angry, violent, and irrational. And I was never able to explain to them that pro-Klansman is not the same as pro-Klan. That the former has to do with a person, while the other with an ideology.

Because I had had some experiences with him and because he was a legend and powerful charismatic figure in the sixties for me, I read Campbell's book when it first came out and have pursued it often since then. As I said, it is a beautiful and

challenging book. One memory of being with Will Campbell was an occasion when he led a communion service using for the elements Jack Daniels and saltine crackers. I thought that was pretty cool.

I wasn't in the audience that day. Had I been I would likely have been one of those who stormed out. I was very good then, and still can be, at making logical, justice-filled arguments about how wrong it was to be pro-anybody who did as much damage as the KKK did, and does. To come across as "pro" that was damaging in and of itself.

But, what I've come to know is that I don't see everything. I think I do. Just like you do. Just like everyone does. But clearly we don't.

One thing the teachings of Jesus seek to do is to give us clear eyes, correct our vision, open our hearts.

Seek now, I say,
and you will find
that for which you search.
You see, I am ready to tell you
everything you were asking earlier
and did not explain,
but at the moment
no one is searching out anything.

Let's stop many times during the day and remind ourselves who we are and where we are, of where we live. If we do that, we won't be miserable and the world will be better.

Who are we? We are who we are in Sacred Mystery - no more, no less.

Where are we, where do we live? We are right this moment held in the heart of Sacred Mystery.

That way it cannot be said of us that "at the moment no one is searching out anything."

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