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The Great Turning

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When Adam and Eve were walking out of the Garden of Eden, Adam turned to Eve and said, “Well, my dear, we live in an age of transition.”

So do we. Nothing lasts. Everything changes. We ourselves and the sea of energy in which we momentarily find ourselves is characterized by impermanence. Even though the stone Buddha has sat apparently motionless for eons, it itself is constantly changing.

Even though I don't care for any label to be applied to myself, my exposure to Buddhism and Buddhist teachers over the years has, I believe, helped me be a better follower of the teachings of Jesus than I might otherwise have been. But, that is another subject for another time.

Of course, there is change and there is change. Sometimes the shifts are subtle and sometimes they are seismic.

Starting in the 1960s a number of major changes began to occur in our country, our world and our lives. Some of us lived through, even participated in the civil rights era. Many of us can remember precisely where we were the days Kennedy and King were assassinated and when we watched as Walter Cronkite talked us through Neil Armstrong's stepping onto the surface of the moon. We've lived through the change that occurred in so-called popular music and on and on.

The specific change I have in mind is the shift involved in many people turning attention and energy away from religion and toward spirituality. How and why did that happen?

Though there are no doubt many things to which to attribute this change. I will mention four:

One was the teaching of Alan Watts. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Watts) He is the one who almost single-handedly introduced Buddhism and Eastern

Philosophy into American consciousness. He is one of the smartest persons I have ever been exposed to. The great quotes I've captured from him over the years are virtually endless. I'll offer you three:

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The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it and join the dance.

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No valid plans for the future can be made by those who have no capacity for living now.

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You are a function of what the whole universe is doing in the same way a wave is a function of what the whole ocean is doing.

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Another thing that contributed to the shift away from religion and toward spirituality was the introduction of the Twelve-Step Program of Alcoholic Anonymous into American culture. Although AA was founded in 1935, just two years after the end of prohibition, it wasn't until the 60's that there was a proliferation of twelve-step programs applied to everything from over-eating to over-shopping.

Anyone who has read what is referred to as "the Big Book" or a history of AA is aware of the critical role Carl Jung played in the founding of AA. Bob Smith, one of the co-founders of AA, along with Bill Wilson, had heard that Jung had some success in treating alcoholics. After interviewing him Jung told Smith that his problem was hopeless. Smith, who had been in and out of hospitals for years in an effort to deal with his alcoholism and who had gone to a great effort to see Jung, was stunned and disappointed by this response and said to Jung, "What, then, am I to do?" Jung's reply was, "I don't know. Perhaps you could try religion."

Later Jung would write, when Bill Wilson told Jung about this in a letter, that he, Jung, had concluded that alcoholism was a misguided attempt to experience the Spirit with spirits. I had always wondered why we referred to alcoholic drinks as "spirits" until I read that.

You can see the influence of this encounter with Jung reflected in the first three steps of AA:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood him*.

Another thing that contributed to the shift away from religion and toward spirituality was the publication of Scott Peck's book, "The Road Less Travelled." That book, made popular by Peck's speaking and Peck's own efforts to get the book reviewed in major publications, contributed to it becoming one of the bestselling books of all time. It still remains Simon and Schuster's bestselling book - ever. It remained on the best-seller list for six years.

I don't believe, at that time in history, if that book had been written by a minister it would have sold as well. But, it is a book full of religious, or spiritual, topics: discipline, love, sin, grace. Someone told me just this week that Ann Lamont describes grace this way: "Grace finds us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."

I remember in the early days of my private practice people coming to sessions and telling me how their lives had been transformed by that book - as well as by Simon and Garfunkel's song "Bridge Over Troubled Waters."

You know the first line in the book "The Road Less Traveled"? It is: "Life is difficult." That is the first premise of Buddhism. The concept is also in the teaching of Jesus but America's religion of consumerism has trumped it, at least covered it

up, by teaching that anything is possible, wealth is God's will for you and all unhappiness is remediable.

Perhaps, however, the biggest contributor to an interest in spirituality over religion was a six episode series of television programs on PBS where Bill Moyers, a seminary classmate of mine, interviewed a man named Joseph Campbell. The series was called "The Power of Myth" and it captivated the minds and imaginations of the viewing public.

It was if the television set was a camp fire and around it sat the natives listening as if for the first time to Joseph Campbell tell us the stories that informed us about who we were and where we came from. People then, hungry for more, went on to read Campbell's seminal work "The Hero With a Thousand Faces." People were encouraged and made hopeful by his phrase "Follow your bliss." We got caught up and captivated also by the Star War movies that were modern tellings of ancient and persistently true mythic stories.

I think there is perhaps no more incendiary word to introduce into a conversation about religion with some people than the word "myth." One of my deeply spiritual but absolutely non-religious friends defined a myth this way. "A myth is everybody else's religion but your own."

When it comes to almost any religion and the documents that inform that religion, such documents usually referred to as "Sacred Scripture," there is a sharp division between those who see their Scriptures as humanly constructed documents and those who hold it that their Scriptures are not only divinely inspired by their particular deity but, in some cases, either actually dictated by their God or literally handed over from God to humans as in the origin of the Book of Mormon.

My experience when I've tried to have a conversation with a Fundamentalist Christian, which I am now convinced one cannot do, and pointed out that their belief in a literal virgin birth is also found in other religions of the ancient world, they will say that isn't possible because their virgin birth is unique while the other religion's is false or "made up." Some people look at various stories told in various religions, like the virgin birth, and say, "it never could happen, never did happen, never will happen." This is what I call the "impossibility option." Other people will

approach the same matter, in this case the virgin birth, and say, “Yes, it is improbable but it happened once to our religious guy back there a long time ago.” I call this “the uniqueness option.”

It seems to me that if something is true it has to be true all the time for everyone or not true at all. To hold it that mine is the only divinely inspired religion seems sadly mistaken.

There is a series on CNN - these sort of programs abound during the Lenten and Easter season - called “Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery.” The most recent program was about James, the brother of Jesus. When asked why more people didn’t know about the fact that Jesus had siblings, Bruce Chilton, the Jesus scholar, said that because of the doctrine of the virgin birth, many people didn’t want to believe that Mary could have had other children. He said, and this is a quote, “This is one of those instances where theology trumps truth.” That’s sad.

I have seen countless instances and so have you where social mores and the convictions of a congregation have trumped the Truth and constrained behaviors of clergy. It exists in our own so-called United Methodist Church where clergy are not permitted to perform marriages between two persons of the same gender. The message everybody needs to hear is, “You are safe here and the same rules apply to everybody.”

I got a fabulous cartoon this week. Jesus is shown holding a church. There is a voice off-stage saying, “What’s wrong Jesus? You said you wanted a church for Christmas.” Jesus is looking at the church in his hands and saying, “Yea, I did. But, I’m having trouble getting it out of the box.”

Given the new cosmology that has been so inspiring to me and which I’ll talk more about in a moment, it seems increasingly ridiculous to hold it that God waited until Jesus to reveal herself to humans and to share the horrible "plan of salvation."

Sydney Harris, the columnist, once wrote: “Most of us are broadminded enough to admit that there are two sides to every question - our own side, and the side that no intelligent, informed, sane and self-respecting citizen could possibly hold.”

When I first began my effort to put psychological principles and spiritual truths together, beginning in the late sixties, I found some words by Reinhold Niebuhr that have served as a compass for me ever since. Listen:

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Nothing worth doing is completed
In one lifetime,
Therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful makes
Complete sense
In any context of history,
Therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, no matter how virtuous,
Can be accomplished alone.
Therefore we must be saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own;
Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

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I want my teaching to be constantly and consistently about these realities. These are the things that remain when all else is gone - faith, hope, love - and the critical need for forgiveness. You can believe in these and practice these regardless of the particular religious path you choose to follow. So, if someone asked me what I believe, I'd start here. With propositions about us and life that one can hold regardless of what specific religion one chooses to practice.

I take what I call a sacramental approach in my approach to the sacred. I believe that religions - all religions - are human creations. We create our religion in response to our experience of the sacred. We use the language and symbols of the culture in which we grow. We create and stand in a tradition which exists in a

community of practice. These creations and practices are aimed at maintaining identity and “controlling” events and people. Sometimes they contribute the conditions that lead to transformation. More often than not, these “transformations” grow out of a need to reform the religion of which they are a part.

Let me be very clear. No religion is going to save you. You don't need saving, just coming to the realization of your true identity. Besides, all religions are human constructs and no human system can contain reality. Religions are created by specific tribes of humans using the symbol system available to that group of people at that particular time. Many people suffer from tremendous wounds religion has done to them. One of the biggest, in my opinion, is forcing people to believe that theology expressed in exactly the same terms that satisfied people three or fifteen centuries ago, people whose outlook was so different from ours, will be enough for today.

One of the humor publications I take - we have a moral obligation to be happy - contained in the most recent issue these words by the late George Carlin:

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Religion has actually convinced people that there's an invisible man - living in the sky - who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not way you to do . . . And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever 'til the end of time. But He loves you!”

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In that same publication there was this:

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I don't know if God exists, but it would be better for His reputation if He didn't.
(Jules Renard)

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I believe that once you know that the truth about religion, having a religion can be very valuable. Even fun. Even essential. Because, we can't have faith, hope, love and forgiveness alone. If you choose to have a religion, make sure that it has a "self-critical" element as part of it. Ancient Judaism had this in the prophets. Jesus was in this tradition. Much of contemporary Christianity seems to lack this prophetic element.

I attempt to do this with my own religious beliefs and practices. I don't believe or practice the same as other "Christians." Actually, there is no such thing as a "Christian" religion. Because, within Christianity there is much, much diversity. This is true of every religion I know.

One of the worst aspects of any religion is that it can lead the practitioner to believe "I have found the true religion and, further, the true version of that religion."

This judgmental and fearful stance is contrary to my understanding of the love that God wishes each of us to realize and practice.

I have heard Marcus Borg standing right in this room say that his favorite way of explaining a myth was to put it this way: "I don't know if the following story really happened but I know it is true."

I have wanted to talk about this turn away from religion toward spirituality because although, I believe, all spirituality needs some container to hold it, the container is always a human construct. The container is usually constructed of myths. We are on a path of attempting to gain understanding and wisdom by growing in our knowledge of ourselves as informed by the mystical teachings of Jesus. The teaching we are up to for today from the Gospel of Thomas is one about the creation myths that the Jewish people at the time of Jesus had inherited.

Here is the teaching:

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Blessed is the person who existed before being created. If you become my disciple and hear my words, these stones shall serve you. For there are five trees in paradise that do not change in summer or winter and whose leaves do not fall. Whoever knows them shall not taste death.

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Those of you who have any version of the Gospel of Thomas will be aware that this is my own paraphrase.

A little boy had a much older sister. One day he asked her, “Where do babies come from? How did I get here?” His sister blithely answered, “The stork brought you just like the stork brought me.” He went to his mother and asked her, “Where did I come from? How are babies born?” His mother, not quite ready for this conversation, said, “Well, the stork brought you just like the stork brought me.” A few days later, when he was visiting with his grandmother, he put the same set of questions to her. “Where do babies come from? How did I get here?” She too replied, “The stork brought you just like the stork brought me.”

Later he went to his room and added to the report on his family history he was writing for a school project, “There hasn’t been a natural birth in our family for three generations.”

Jesus must have been a hoot to hang out with. “Hey Jesus, want to go get something to eat?” He might respond, “For there are five trees in paradise that do not change in summer or winter and whose leaves do not fall.” “Sure, okay, whatever.”

This teaching is a complex and puzzling one. Mystical teachings are meant to be. Likely we could camp out here and plumb the depths of this one for a long time.

What I want to focus on is the notion of creation and what that might have meant to those who first heard this teaching and why they held on to it as being important.

Just like the family in which the little boy asked his questions, the human family has, from the beginning told stories, none of them true but all of them more than true, about creation.

I typed “how many creation stories are there” into Google and got 54,700,000 results in less than a minute.

(Here are links to two fascinating articles: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_creation_myths , and this one is really interesting: <http://listverse.com/2014/01/11/10-creation-myths-as-strange-as-the-bible/>)

At the time the creation stories were put into the Hebrew Scriptures, scholars say sometime around 800 BC, creation stories abounded in that part of the world. Again, as is true about Jesus and stories about Jesus, especially the birth and death stories, most people think they know the creation story as it is told in the Bible. The creationists are firmly convinced that God created the earth in seven days. Actually there are two creation stories in the Hebrew Scriptures and they are very, very different.

The Book of Genesis begins with two contradictory creation accounts (1:1-2:3 and 2:4-3:24). In the first, God created humans (male and female) after he finishes making all of the other animals. In the second, God made one man (“Adam”) and then created all of the animals in order to find a helpmeet for Adam. God brought all of the animals to Adam, but none of them appealed to him. So God made a woman from one of Adam’s ribs to serve his helpmeet.

In the time of Thomas, it was held that the first creation story, the one that took place in seven days, was perfect. It is the one where God, at the end of each period of creation looks at what has been created and says, “This is good.”

The second creation story, which is told as if the first creation never happened, begins with God creating man out of dirt and woman out of man. Not an ideal state.

Though I do not want to get into the concept of Gnosticism today, I don't believe that Thomas is a Gnostic writing because Jesus wasn't a Gnostic. Jesus was a Jewish mystical teacher.

The teaching here is, I believe, for those who first heard it was to convey that the goal of spiritual work was to inhabit the first myth and not the second. It is this first creation story that fits Jesus' notion of the "rule of God." To live in this order is to claim one's identity as a reflection of, or being made in, the image of God. It is this kingdom that is spread out on the world and people don't see it. It is this that exists inside everyone yet people are not aware of it.

By the way the rocks and the trees in this teaching are things that held critical roles in the minds of the people at that time. Rocks were used to make sacred spaces and symbols of the tree is all through the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Paul even refers to the cross as a tree.

We are participating in a great turning. It is one some people deny, some resist. But whether people see it or not it is here. People at the time of Jesus lived, as far as religion went, in a mythic world and, as far as politics went, in a very unjust one.

Up until just recently our globe has lived in a Newtonian world. Lately, we have moved into the world described by Einstein. It is the same world. We just have a different way of understanding and, therefore, experiencing it.

Newton's world is simple, law-abiding, controllable. Einstein's world is complex, chaotic, uncertain. Now, which set of those words described what Jesus called "the rule or kingdom of God."

I got this illustration from Ilia Delio. Imagine a thirty volume set of books. Each volume has 450 pages. Each page represents a million years.

Volume 1 through 20 consists entirely of the Big Bang.

Volume 21 is where earth appears.

Volume 22, life appears.

Volume 30, dinosaurs go extinct on page 385.

Volume 30, mammals appear on page 390.

Volume 30 - page 450, last line, humans appear.

What I am calling “The Great Turning” is a turning away from a religious world view governed by a theist understanding of the Sacred to what I am calling a “fluid mystical” cosmological understanding of Sacred Mystery. In what is called “classical theism,” The “divine” order and the “created” order are two separate orders. In “mystical fluidity” or “process philosophy or theology” the “divine” order and the “created” order are the same or share the same order of being. God is in the world, the world is in God. The mystic experiences this: I am not God but I am not other than God either. I am not you but I am not other than you either.

We are part of a creation that is evolving. Evolution is not a story about how we got here. Evolution is a way to describe what we are involved in and where we are headed. Evolution is not the background of the human story. It is the human story. In mystical spirituality, the story is not about our being called from something but, rather, being drawn to something that is up ahead. Creation is not located at the beginning, in the past, it is up ahead. Creation is on going.

Meister Eckhart put it this way: “God is the newest thing there is, the youngest thing there is. God is the beginning and if we are united to God we become new again.”

We live in a world where all religions, certainly this is true for Christianity, are increasingly irrelevant. I remember so clearly hearing Jim Bankston, former and beloved Senior Minister here say, “The church has lost its opportunity to be prophetic (he was speaking of the homosexual issue). The task of the church is to see now whether it can remain relevant.”

Last week we talked about the primary influences on the life of Jesus, the things that shaped his ministry and teachings. They were the facts of his parentage and his choosing John the Baptist at the beginning of his ministry. Soon we will focus

some attention on who Jesus chose to direct his ministry to. It was the outcast, those who, for one reason or another, didn't belong.

It seems to me that any attempt to follow Jesus in our time must speak one message loudly and clearly: You are welcome here. You are safe here. Christ doesn't save us from the world but for the world.

The creation story that Jesus called people into was one of love. The creation that we are part of and learning about through cosmological physics and quantum mechanics is one that is constantly evolving toward a higher level. The theological word for the entanglement we are part of is - love.

Heaven is not a place of disembodied spirits. Heaven is an embrace of love that transforms this world. Heaven is not another world. Heaven is this world fully seen. Let's turn toward that.

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