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Jesus As a Standup Comic

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A question I get from time to time is why this gathering is called "Ordinary Life."

After preaching and teaching for nearly thirty years, I took a four year period of time for a reflection and further training. The reflection was about what my life work was about. The training was in Jungian analysis.

During that time I began to formulate the things that, to me, seemed to matter the most. One of them, perhaps one of the most important, was the conviction that the division between what some people call "sacred" and "secular" might at times be convenient and useful but that such a division of life or people was arbitrary and not true. I still believed that religious ritual and symbolism were useful but, again, the result of human and social construction. I knew because of some of the teachers and experiences I had that some people and some moments were closer to the sacred than other people and moments seemed to be. The more I spent time with these people and experiences the more I came to know that the mystic is the person who expect to experience the transcendent in "ordinary life."

The teachers I worked with all, without exception, talked about the importance of moving beyond dualistic mind, beyond belonging and belief systems, to non-dual mind or mystical seeing and experiencing. That is what and that is all a mystic is - someone who has moved beyond belonging and belief systems.

The trick is that it is within belonging and belief systems that they do their teaching. But they are not bound by these systems, they are not constricted by them. Everything and everyone is included. Developing the ability to stand back and observe "what is," is critical to the process of growing into the persons we truly are and remaining faithful to that identity.

We have to learn to do this in encountering our inner world. We have to learn to stand back and observe the drama and not get captured by it. It is also true in the outer world.

During this four year hiatus I came up with a couple of things. These are things you have heard or seen before.

One is my definition of what is the essence and content of spiritual practice. It goes without saying that one of the essential, at least to me, building blocks of the foundation I wanted to base the rest of my days on included the necessity of having a daily spiritual practice.

The evidence is in about this. If you want your life to go better, have a daily practice. I didn't say that this will enable you to avoid difficulties, disappointments and death. I do affirm that your life will go better.

As I said, the evidence is in on this. "EEG and MRI observations of the brains of Tibetan monks while they are engaged in their traditional loving kindness meditation reveal pronounced increases in electrical activity and blood flow in the left pre-frontal cortex. This is a part of the brain associated with states of happiness and well being." (This quote and the data that follows comes from the book *Always We Begin Again*.)

People who engage in centering prayer get similar results. Having a daily practice helps people live longer and it fights off dementia. Being happy and maintaining loving thoughts increases levels of serotonin, the chemical that reduces anxiety and increases calmness.

In every culture, the people who are engaged in altruistic activities are those who are the happiest while a recent study shows that those who own and carry the most guns tend to be the angriest. Study after study shows that people who meditate daily are less depressed, anxious and angry than they were before beginning this practice. I could go on and on but you can see where all of this led me.

The question I asked myself was: What is it that people who are at the highest levels of doing and loving in all cultures have in common? As I began to answer that question for myself, I came up with this:

The central truth of and for spiritual practice is “paying attention” and developing the resources to be present to “what is.” Central to this spiritual practice is growing in the capacity to be non-judgmental.

This is faith-friendly. This is faith-neutral.

All of life is available for this curriculum. All of “ordinary life.”

I’ve packed a lot into five hundred words. Make sense?

I began to journal about the characteristics, beliefs and behaviors the people I admired the most had. This is years before I heard of Cindy Wigglesworth.

You remember that when she was here, she started her presentation by asking, “How many of you know people who are very smart or skilled in some area but have the relationship skills of lint?” (That’s not an exact quote.) Just as many people think they are above average drivers, clearly that is not true.

I’m fortunate to be alive today. So are you. On Tuesday night as I was driving home from the office, a woman ran a stop sign in front of me. By slamming on my brakes, I missed her broad siding me by only a few feet. Had I been 10 seconds earlier she would have slammed her car into the driver’s side of mine. It is very challenging to remain “non-judgmental” during and after such moments. But, I teach about being non-judgmental so I’m in the ballpark. Just sometimes out in left field.

One of the first of what I would end up calling “the principles of ordinary life” I wrote was: We suffer from wanting to be one up in life. That’s just my way of saying what all the great spiritual teachers have taught.

Buddha begins by teaching that life is suffering.

Jesus talks about the necessity to die in order to life.

Robert Johnson says that one of the tasks in life is to develop a strong enough ego to know how life works and to make life work for you. As I have said in my

teachings many times and will likely continue to do so, there is nothing in our culture that supports this way of thinking. Sadly, there is little in most so-called organized religion that supports it.

Ours can be a scary world. This has always been the case but because of our ability to communicate and be communicated with, we are consistently and relentlessly bombarded with news that could lead one to conclude that we are done for.

The second of the principles I wrote and spoke about is that there is no life in negativity.

Years ago I was invited to be the closing keynote speaker at a major conference. It was the tallest cotton, to use a phrase I got from my Dad, I had ever been in before. All the speakers were introduced the day before I was to speak. The title of the talk I was going to give was: "Sanity and Leadership: You Can Have Both." Later that day while wandering the halls one of the attendees came up to me and said, it was a throw-down challenge, "You are not one of those people who is going to talk to us about the importance of having a *positive mental attitude* are you?" I responded, "Well, I'm one of those people who believes a positive mental attitude is better than a *negative mental attitude*."

As I kept observing people that I admired and respected, people I wanted to learn from, I think that one of the things that stood out from all the others was how happy they were.

One of the first people along this path I encountered was Thich Nhat Hanh.

Tey, as he is called by his students, is a peace activists who was exiled from Viet Nam, along with other Buddhists monks who refused to take sides in the war. He has been living in France in a place called Plum Village for many years now making occasional trips to raise awareness and money about peace. He has written over a hundred books.

One of my first experiences of him was at a conference on mindfulness and the practice of psychotherapy. (I've told this story before but it has been a couple of years.)

At that conference a therapist asked him what advice he had for helping our clients deal with anger. As a Buddhist, he had a great deal of difficulty with that question. For Buddhists anger is the chief corrosive agent of the Self. Finally, in an effort to better understand the question, he asked the woman who put it to him, "What do you do now to help your clients deal with anger?"

She said, "We get them to express it."

"How do you do that?" he asked incredulously.

She said, "We give them a big padded bat and put a pillow in front of them. We encourage them to hit the pillow until they have exhausted themselves and gotten all of their anger out. What do you think of that?"

He thought for a moment and said, "I think you better talk to pillow and see what pillow think of that."

One of the first lines I wrote down from my time with him was:

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Waking up this morning, I smile.
Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.
I vow to live each moment fully
And to look at all being with eyes of compassion.

* * *

Another one is:

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I vow to offer joy to one person in the morning
and to help to relieve the grief of one person in the afternoon.
I vow to live simply and sanely, content with just a few possessions,

and to keep my body healthy.
I vow to let go of all worries and anxiety
in order to be light and free.

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Tey had a stroke a few years ago and though he has recovered somewhat, his health is still frail.

After a long time of being immersed in experiences with and teachings of this man I came up with the third principle of Ordinary Life. It is the one that has gotten, for some reason that is inexplicable to me, the most push back. It is:

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We have a moral obligation to be happy.

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Tey would teach, “Live with a heart as light as a feather.”

Think about it: I wake up smiling, lighthearted, joyful, light as a feather. This coming from a spiritual system that begins: life is suffering, you are going to suffer and die and so is everyone you love. Isn't that a hoot?

It is a teaching that comes straight from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The parable, the myth is that when you die, you go into a place where you wait. When your time comes you go to stand before a tribunal. One of the three of them cuts you open. There is no pain. You're dead. The second one reaches in and takes your heart and places it on a balance beam scale.

If your heart is heavy, you go back to source.

If it is close to balance, you have to come back and do it all over again.

If, on the other hand, your heart is light, then you get to go to the next level.

So on one side of the scale they put your heart. On the other side a bird's feather. This is where we get the phrase, having a heart as light as a feather.

As you know, hopefully, I've been using as my road map for giving these talks my experience with the teachings of Jesus found in the Gospel of Thomas. I'm just taking them one at a time.

The one we are up to for today is what has opened the door for me to talk about our moral obligation to be happy.

Jesus was a Jewish mystic. Out of his mystical experience where he came to an understanding of his true identity as someone who came from the source of all creation, he called it being a child of God, he looked around and saw that the system in which he lived was not just and not compassionate. This didn't fit what he experienced. His experience was that God was love. Love means including and taking care of.

He knew that God is inconceivable. "God" is a concept. He knew that rules, beliefs and belonging systems did not contain and control God or God's love, inclusion, justice and compassion. He knew that God could not be directly said. Perhaps, however, the God experience could be communicated by deeds and stories.

So he did outlandish things. He consorted with the very people the religious leaders said were to be excluded. He held them up as examples. He said to the religious leaders, "The whores and the bums are going to make it before you."

People did not like what he did and said. And, we have had to "pretty it up" in order to make it tolerable for us.

He would say, "There is another way." People would respond, "Where? How? Show us? Tell us what this other way is like."

So he would tell a story.

“There was this kid who asked his father to give him his share of the inheritance.” That’s like wishing your father is dead in that culture. “He got the money and went off and wasted it on wild and riotous living. His big brother stayed at home and worked his rear end off doing the right thing. The boy's father ached for his lost son. Every day he looked down the long driveway that led to the road, hoping he would return. One day he did. The father was overjoyed, threw away all thoughts of chastising him and, instead, threw a lavish party for him. His older brother was incensed at this and wouldn’t come to the party. This is what broke the father’s heart.”

“Wait a minute! Are you telling me I have to forgive like that?”

“Or,” said Jesus, “how about this? A guy is going from Houston to Sugarland when he is car-jacked and left by the freeway for dead. A Southern Baptist on his way to preach at a revival saw this and drove right by it. A Roman Catholic priest on his way to say mass also sees it and drives on past. But, a guy who has been considering joining ISIS sees it, stops, takes him to Memorial Herman and says, ‘Take care of him. Don’t worry about the insurance. Here is my American Express card. I’ll come back in a few days and if you need more money, I’ll pay it.’ Now, who was the good guy in this story?”

“You mean I have to pronounce somebody like that good?”

Or, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor.” Is he naive? Does he really think that beggars and street people, that the destitute are the nice people and those who are lucky enough to be in the top whatever percent are correspondingly evil? Does he have some sort of romantic delusion about the charms of poverty?

Jesus didn’t think like that. He lived in a situation where the system was not just. In any situation of oppression where injustice wears a mask of normalcy or even necessity, the only ones who are innocent or blessed are those squeezed out deliberately as human junk from the system’s own evil operations.

To quote John Dominic Crossan: “A contemporary equivalent: only the homeless are innocent. That is a terrifying aphorism against society because like the aphorisms against the family, it focuses not only on personal or individual abuse of

power but on such abuse in its systemic or structural possibilities - and there, in contrast to the former level, none of our hands are innocent or our consciences particularly clear.” (Found in “Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography.)

“So, tell us because we are so slow to get it, what is this realm of being and doing you are talking about like?” And he says:

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"Let me compare it to a mustard seed,
the smallest of all seeds.
When it falls into prepared ground,
it grows into a great tree capable of
sheltering the birds of the sky."

* * *

Really?! That's it? We were expecting something a little bigger. We thought it would be compared to something great, not to something small and insignificant.

What has set these people, and they are a stand-in for us, to expect something big?

Well, they were Jews who had grown up in a tradition where a couple of metaphors had influenced their beliefs about the kind of future that would be theirs if and when they were set free from Roman oppression.

One was out of early Jewish history and poetry of the giant cedars of Lebanon.

The other is from the apocalyptic book of Daniel where there is a tree that reaches all the way to heaven and its branches cover the entire earth.

We have been immersed in our own myths of bigger, more.

Jesus is doing stand-up comedy here. This is a parody. The might cedar has become a pesky garden weed. God's kingdom is not a new world power. It is pervasive. Just unrecognized. It is not noisy and arresting.

God's real realm is seen, says Jesus, as a noxious, unwanted intrusion.

However you interpret it, this parable has a sense of humor about it.

Those of you who are Bible scholars here are aware that this saying appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke and that it has been accommodated in those writings to fit the Jewish expectations of the time. What you have in the Gospel of Thomas, say the scholars, is closer to the original teaching of Jesus. The original teaching is shocking in its modesty.

Every culture wants to convince those who live in it that cultural preferences, popular vote is the same as Holy Ground, God's will.

You are aware of the push in many states to pass laws of "religious freedom." These laws are designed to protect those who want to refuse service to anyone for whatever reason, in this case because they are gay, that would be okay. In America we prize the freedom to practice religion or religious beliefs. If your religion teaches against blood transfusions and you have surgery, the hospital has to honor your religious beliefs.

At any rate, the lack of clear thinking about the current hubbub over the "freedom of religion" laws is best punctuated by jokes. Thank God for people who make them.

(Here a series of cartoons is shown. You can find them on the Ordinary Life website.)

Thomas Paine said, "To argue with a person who has relinquished reason is like administering medicine to the dead."

When we ask Jesus, "What is it you want me to step in to?" We have to not know the answer before we ask the question.

Another way of saying this is like this: Jesus cannot speak to egos. Wise and useful teachings can only be taught to Selves.

The ego want to hold on, be in control, be right, be safe.

The Self is trusting, willing to let go, expects to see the Sacred in Ordinary Life.

The self is open to the endless instant that is God.

There some words by W. H. Auden that I want to close with. They comes from his piece "For the Time Being."

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He is the Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.

Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;

You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.

Love Him in the World of the Flesh;

And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

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So here is your joke for the day:

Life is a game.

The first rule of this game is:

This is not a game.

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