

## Traveling Toward Transformation in an Attention Grabbing Culture

Those who are awake live in a state of constant amazement.

Those who are awake also live in a state of perpetual gratitude.

This talk is my response, in part, to this teaching from the Gospel of Thomas:

\* \* \*

Give attention to  
The Living Presence  
While you are alive  
So that when you die and have  
The desire to do so,  
You may have the power to attend.

\* \* \*

I say “in part” because for the very first time in this series I’m going to spend two weeks on this particular teaching.

If these two statements are true, and I believe they are, one of the ways we can evaluate where we are on the path toward enlightenment is to check in occasionally with how we are doing on and with the amazement and/or gratitude scale.

It takes some real effort to pay attention to this, especially in our culture. Our culture, not just that of this country but what is becoming the global culture, is doing everything in its power to grab our attention and to distract us from what really matters. I don’t mean to imply that there is some sort of unified conspiracy to do this. A lot of groups and things compete for our time, energy and - especially - money.

I’m calling this talk “Traveling Toward Transformation in an Attention Grabbing Culture.”

I have and use a lot of tricks to bring me back to the things I say that matter to me. Since my devices demand some sort of interaction during the day, I use them also to remind me to stop and call to mind what I'm grateful for, to look around me and pay attention to "what is." (I love my "Meaning to Pause" bracelet.)

I keep, and have recommended that you do as well, a gratitude journal. Here is something I wrote this week: "I'm grateful I live in a culture that offers me so many opportunities to practice being non-judgmental."

I was being sarcastic, of course.

It does seem, however, that almost everywhere I go, every direction I turn there is someone or something to "get my goat."

These things rank, as someone else would likely see them, all the way from the mundane and petty to matters that are massively appalling.

At the petty end of the spectrum, for example, is this: the other night we went to the Hobby Center to see our granddaughter dance in a ballet performance. She is, to us, amazingly good and beautiful. Seated next to me at the performance was a boy, I'm guessing nine or ten-years old, who, throughout the two hour performance, intermissions and all, played a violent video game on his over-sized device. Granted he had the sound turned off and the screen somewhat dimmed and granted that he likely was forced to be there by his parents to attend a sibling's performance at a ballet which "real boys" are not supposed to like, but give me a break. An irritating distraction for me and a waste of his precious life.

At the appalling end of the spectrum of things about which I can so easily be judgmental was an article in the New York Times last week about the number of children, three-years of age and younger, who have died of self-inflicted gunshots. A recent article in the New York Times reported how in just one week four toddlers shot themselves to death.

Sha'Quille Kornegay, age 2, had been napping with her father when she found the 9-millimeter handgun he often kept under his pillow. It was equipped with a laser sight that lit up like the red lights on her cousin's sneakers.

There are 30,000 gun deaths in this country every year. This is a tenth of the number of those killed in the 9/11 attacks.

A mother, driving through Milwaukee, was killed after her 2-year-old picked up a gun that had slid out from under the driver's seat. Imagine years later that child being asked, "Where is your mother?" "She's dead." "Oh, I'm sorry. How did she die?" "When I was two years old, I shot her."

It was an accident, of course. They all are. These children fire a parent's pistol while playing cops and robbers, while riding in a shopping cart, after finding it in the pocket of the coat their father forgot to wear to work. Shootings by preschoolers happen in this country at a rate of two a week. These so-called accidents are really preventable and we are not willing to prevent them.

My job as a spiritual teacher is, among other things, to keep the lights on. I don't think I am being histrionic when I say that we live in a time of darkness, ignorance and illusion. Also, there is, according to those who are way smarter than I am, significant evidence that we are living at the end of an era. I don't mean like at the end of the "Roaring Twenties." Ours is more like the end of the Roman Empire.

Regardless of what one thinks about the origins or causes of climate change, the fact is that our globe, our earth, is experiencing a crisis. One example of this is the melting of the polar ice caps. When this source of water is gone, then what?

It was Karen Armstrong whom I first heard use the phrase "Axial Age." Her claim, along with a growing number of other great thinkers from a variety of disciplines, is that we are living in the midst of a global shift in consciousness.

I think I have mentioned to you before that we are the last generation on the planet to know what life was like before smart phones and digital devices.

All over the world people are struggling with the new conditions that have been forced on them by changes brought on by the digital revolution that has affected everything. A growing number of people are finding that they are being forced to

either abandon, entrench or reassess their formerly held religious and cultural convictions.

In her book, *A History of God*, now published in more than thirty languages, Armstrong provocatively and exhaustively illustrates how humans have had to redefine the sacred at critical historic junctures in order to meet new spiritual needs created by changing cultural conditions. She says that the period 800 - 200 BCE has been called “the Axial Age” because it proved pivotal to humanity. This is the beginning of the Iron Age which allowed better weapons to be built to meet humanities growing aggressive nature. This was also the time when individual consciousness was just beginning. People were no longer living in isolation but in aggressive economic communities. Power was shifting from kings and priests, palace and temple to the marketplace. Inequality and exploitation became more apparent.

The Axial Age marks the beginning of humanity as we now know it. People became more conscious of their own existence, and their limitations. A few people, according to Armstrong, sensed fresh possibilities and broke away from the old traditions. People who participated in this great transformation were convinced that they were on the brink of a new era and that nothing would ever be the same.

This was when all the great world religions came into being. And in every single case, the spiritualities that emerged - Taoism and Confucianism in China, monotheism in Israel, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism in India, and Greek rationalism in Europe - began with a recoil from violence, with looking into the heart to find the sources of violence in the human psyche.

The conviction that the world was awry was fundamental to these spiritualities. Armstrong says, “One of the things that is very striking is that all the great sages were living in a time like our own - a time full of fear, violence and horror. Their experience of utter impotence in a cruel world impelled them to seek the highest goals and an absolute reality in the depths of their beings.”

It was after the violence of generation after generation in China, for example, that Confucius, around 500 BCE, summed up the essential dynamic of compassion in what we know as “the Golden Rule:” “Do not do unto others as you would not

have them do unto you.” On continent after continent it was violence and suffering that propelled a spiritual quantum leap forward.

Today we are in the midst of a second Axial Age. Armstrong, and others, say it began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Since that time Western civilization has transformed the world. The changes, particular economic, during the last four hundred years have been accompanied by immense social, political and intellectual revolutions.

I quote her again: “I feel that we are - all of us - at one of those junctions in history when we are holding ourselves, our past, our future, and our integrity in the palms of our own hands. This is a moment when, if we allow that integrity to fall out, we might never recover it in the same way. Once again, a radical change has become necessary.”

Old forms of faith no longer work. Many people are trying to find new ways of being religious.

For many people the notion that “the Sacred,” or “God,” has a history may be disturbing but all one has to do is look at the evidence. All three mono-theistic religions have understood their notion of God differently at different times. When one understanding of God ceases to have meaning or relevance, it is replaced by another.

If you read Armstrong’s book, you come to understand that atheism has always been a transitional state. Jews, Muslims and Christians were all considered atheists by their contemporaries because they had adopted a new and revolutionary notion of the Sacred. When someone says to me today that they are “atheist,” my response is, “That’s probably a good thing. Tell me which ‘God’ you don’t believe in. I likely don’t believe in that ‘God’ either.” The notion that there is a “Sky God” out there somewhere is not wise or useful. Indeed, such a notion actually, in my opinion, interferes with the spiritual journey,

I want the work I do to contribute to our become transformed persons who can make a contribution to transforming this lost, suffering, terrifying world. We can’t make a difference in the world until we become different ourselves.

Becoming different takes effort. It takes discipline. If people put just a fraction of the time into growing spiritually as they do looking at their devices, that would be helpful. Somehow, some way we must regain the sense that all human life is sacred. Our spirituality must keep up with our technology or our future is not good.

Sadly, much of spirituality or religion in our time has been turned into a commodity to make people feel good or to be entertained. Or, it has been turned into a weapon to defend some in-group and destroy those outside.

I don't intend this to be a downer. Quite the contrary, I believe this present time full of suffering, fear, violence and despair presents us with the prime conditions for a renewal of spirituality and spiritual values. Yes, there is ample evidence of the negative in the world, the disappointing, the dangerous and destructive. There is also, however, growing evidence of hope and possibility.

I personally think this is good, that this is a great time to be alive. I'll elaborate on this in a moment.

But these times scare the bejabbers out of some people.

I want to try to speak to that.

Psychologists and others have spoken about the various shocks that have come into human consciousness over the centuries and how they have been defended against. Several of these have been mentioned: The Copernican notion that the earth is not the center of the universe, the Darwinian notion that we live in an evolving system, the Freudian understanding that most of who we are is unconscious to us.

I think most of us take these things more or less for granted. However, for many people they are, when they become personal, devastating to the point of becoming wounding.

I think that seeing the truth of "what is" can be powerfully liberating. Most of you know, for example, that when I came back from my first experience with Ilia Delio

I was as energized as could possibly be. She put into words what I have sensed, read about and come to understand over these past many years.

We live and are part of an energy system that is expanding, evolving, creative and entangled. And, so immense there is no way we can get our minds around it. But, if a person tightly holds on to a notion of specialness, that their race, country and/or religion is the one singled out and blessed by some God off in the sky somewhere; this kind of understanding can be most disturbing.

Just so with the notion of what is known as “the theory of the atonement” in Christian theology. As I have said before, this has been the most successful bad theology ever written. But, some people have staked their entire religious understanding on the notion that Jesus died for their sins. If that is taken away, I personally think it is liberating in terms of an understanding of personal responsibility and trust. But, for some people, they cannot imagine a religion without that understanding. They have built their religious life around that particular belief and it makes them feel secure.

In my own spiritual work I am going deeper and deeper into the spiritual dimension of understanding the Enneagram. Here, much nearer the end of my life than at the beginning, I am still coming to understand that I am not who I thought I was at all. For some people such insights are very powerful and empowering. For others, especially those who explain their undesirable or offending behaviors by saying, “This is just the way I am!” such insights leave them feeling stripped and exposed. There are aspects of ourselves that our personality’s defenses work overtime to keep concealed. This discovery can be like setting out on a grand adventure or profoundly disturbing.

The facts about the world in which we now live - a global one, a world where resources of all sorts are running out, a world of violence - is very frightening to some people. What rushes in to fill the vacuum of lost certainties is a fear that is a spiritual issue. Rather than being frightened many people become angry and are appealed to by people and causes that promise them security.

We have to practice our spirituality in this kind of distracting culture. If we are not aware, it can affect us. The Sufi poet Rumi says, “Have I lived among the lame so long that I’ve begun to limp myself?”

I have spent my professional life being interested in what Rudolf Bultmann called “authentic existence” and Harry Emerson Fosdick, two people who have had a profound influence on my life, called “being a real person.” How does what we believe shape who we are and how we live? How do our beliefs themselves get shaped? What do we believe about ourselves, about the world in which we live, about each other, about what we believe?

Everybody wants to experience love and peace and security and forgiveness and abundance and joy. But the ways our culture invites us to secure these things only leads to more despair.

I believe that this is a great time in which to be alive. Furthermore, if we are to deal successfully with either the personal/private/intimate issues or the incredibly complex public matters of our time, if we are to deal with these successfully, it is vital that we see this to be a great time to be alive.

When I talk about this time, this world, as a great one in which to live, I’m talking about the various worlds in which we. All the way from our various personal personal worlds to the cosmos.

When I was a child and was afraid of the dark, I used to make a lot of noise when I went into a dark room in order to keep from being so scared. To say to you that this is a great time to be alive is not like that. I think that there are valid reasons for making such an assertion.

For one thing, ours is a time when we cannot seek for ease but when we must strain for the very best. Some periods of human history are like lullabies and some are like a spur. Which of the two, in the final analysis, do you think is likely to be the greater? The truly great times of history have been rough times because they, like our own, offered no ease. They demanded the best and there were people who rose to the need.



There was a time when Victor Hugo was a success in France. Then a little man named Napoleon came on the scene. With superb courage Hugo withstood Napoleon. What he got for that was nineteen years in exile. He hated every moment of it. But out of it came his greatest work. Of that period his biographer says, "He was miraculously inspired. Books that were far stronger than everything that had gone before came from his hand and he became twice the size of the man he had been." Even Hugo himself exclaimed, "Why was I not exiled before?" Now, what if instead of making such a creative response to a tragic time, he had settled back, distracting himself by watching American Idol and saying, "My! What a horrible time in which to be alive."

I'm concerned about what is going on. I'm concerned about people I love being safe in this city. I'm concerned about what is happening to us economically. A wider and wider division between those at the top and those at the bottom is becoming apparent every day.

History shows that in times just like ours, turbulent times, whole generations have been brought to their senses; people called upon to be adequate have proven adequate; creative gains have come from sadness. It is not useful to see this as a terrible time in which to live.

This is also a great time to be alive because it is a time when we cannot remain the same. Change is being forced upon us and we must make momentous decisions that will affect, for good or bad, our entire future. The problem with this is that we don't like change. We think we can play it safe by staying put. This is one of the biggest illusions that ever was. One of the secrets of peace of mind is to know about impermanence.

I hear it all the time : "Tell me how I can be different without changing." I hear it from me most of all. I look at our world, at our country, and see that we want to try to change the world without changing our isolationism, without changing our ideas of absolute national sovereignty, without changing our racial prejudices, without changing our economic ideas, without including all humans at the table because of their sexual orientation or race or religion. Then history, tired and impatient with our lethargy and our reluctance to alter anything, hurls us out of our peaceful decades into a time like now, and says, "Now you've got to change!"

When that kind of time comes, like it or not, it is a great time to be alive. We are in the middle of an exciting time. Choices face us that haven't faced people before. When you have the conditions that exist today and the voices calling to be heard that are calling out today, one thing you can bet on - some kind of change is coming. The item on the spiritual agenda is not to endure it, not to profit by it, but to cause it. It's an exciting time.

One of the other things that makes this a great time to be alive is that it is being revealed with unmistakable clarity the false reliances we have been trusting in. For example, we've trusted in war. War is not solving our problems. It is complicating them.

Education, in spite of its fantastic achievements, isn't going to solve our problems. One of the most thrilling stories in history is the spread of literacy, the invention of printing, the publication of books, the privilege of schools. But that didn't solve our problems. Because the question remains: what are we going to use our education for? To what end?

Just because we are scientifically and educationally mature doesn't keep us from going berserk as a country and suffering breakdowns no so-called primitive society ever knew.

I contend that this is a great time to be alive because it drives us back to the things that are basic. My belief is that the more we become burdened with problems, the more we need something basic by which to live our lives. We need some great faiths and we need some great convictions and if we get them, then this will be a great time indeed.

Great times call for great spiritual understandings. This time calls for a spiritual path that is big enough for us to walk into a new day.

The spiritual path as I understand it is mystical. Meaning, it is beyond our dualistic ways of thinking. Here is what I'll come back to elaborate on next week. We walk a spiritual path toward Sacred Mystery, with Sacred Mystery, in Sacred Mystery. Doing this work, my belief is, will transform us and our world.

Science had to get rid of old ideas and discard ancient superstitions in order to be useful. It didn't do it by shrinking the universe and making it simpler. It has enlarged the universe and made it more profound and vast than ever before. It has not said, "Look at how little you have to think." Rather it has said, "Look how great a cosmos you live in and what great things are open to you."

We can speak to this age like that. Our problem is not to see how little we can believe but what great things we can discover and make real to a world that desperately needs them. This is a great time for great convictions. This is a great time to be alive.

The future depends on what each of us does every day. After all, as someone has said, a movement is only people moving.

I want to close today by reading to you some paragraphs from "The War of Art" by Steven Pressfield. He is the author of "The Legend of Bagger Vance." These words beautifully illustrate the what I've been trying to say:

"In my twenties I drove tractor-trailers for a company called Burton Lines in Durham, North Carolina. I wasn't very good at it; my self-destruction demons had me. Only blind luck kept me from killing myself and any other poor suckers who happened to be on the highway at the same time. It was a tough period. I was broke, estranged from my wife and my family. One night I had this dream:

(Let me insert here two things: One, I hope you know a smidgen about Jungian dream analysis. John Sanford in his book, "Dreams: God's Forgotten Language," says that to have a dream and not honor it is like getting a letter from God and not reading it. Second, almost two decades ago doing Jungian dream analysis saved my life.)

Here is Pressfield's dream:

"I was part of the crew of an aircraft carrier. Only the ship was stuck on dry land. It was still launching its jets and doing its thing, but it was marooned half a mile from the ocean. The sailors all knew how screwed up the situation was; they felt it as a

keen and constant distress. The only bright spot was there was a Marine gunnery sergeant on board nicknamed 'Largo.' In the dream it seem like the coolest name anyone could possibly have. Largo. I loved it. Largo was one of those hard-core senior noncoms like the Burt Lancaster character, Warden, in 'From Here to Eternity.' The one guy on the ship who knows exactly what's going on, the tough old sarge who makes all the decisions and actually runs the show.

“But where was Largo? I was standing miserably by the rail when the captain came over and started talking to me. Even he was lost. It was his ship, but he didn't know how to get it off dry land. I was nervous, finding myself in conversation with the brass, and couldn't think of a thing to say. The skipper didn't seem to notice; he just turned to me casually and said, 'What the hell are we gonna do, Largo?'”

Well? What the hell are we gonna do, Largo?

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