

Truth is Better Than Fiction, Learning to See in the Dark

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For one thing, I don't want to waste your time.

As Southwest Airlines says, "We know you have many choices when you fly. Thank you for choosing Southwest."

Just so, I know there are many other things you could do with your Sunday morning, other places you could be. Thank you for being here. By my calculations when we are finished here today we will have spent an accumulated 94 hours together. That's four days! I want to respect that and not waste it.

Further, I don't want you to leave thinking, "Well, I've heard that before."

It seems, however, that all the world's great religions can be boiled down to a few simple sentences. Not that embodying any of these is easy.

Buddhism can be boiled down to three words: Be. Here. Now.

There are the five pillars of Islam: The faith that there is One God. To pray five times a day. To do acts of charity. To fast, especially during the month of Ramadan. To make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

Jesus reduced Judaism to two laws: Love God with all that you are and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Most of the teaching of Jesus can be condensed to a few matters: love one another, love your enemy, forgive, include everyone, follow me.

One of you gave me a copy of a book that I could not put down. The book is "God is Disappointed in You" by Mark Russell and cartoons by Shannon Wheeler. It is an honest, and quite offensive (be warned!) summary of every book in the Bible.

The book started with Russell mentioning to his friend Wheeler, that he had summarized the book of Job in three paragraphs for a friend who had never heard the story. Wheeler said, “You should do that for the entire Bible. I’ll draw the cartoons for it.” It was a project that took three years. Russell said that his, and this is a quote, “personal mission was to try to catch things just as they’re getting out of bed, to get a look at the truth before it puts its makeup on.”

If you are a person who reveres and holds sacred the Bible, don’t read it. But, if you want a summary of what is actually in the Bible, I commend it to you.

Early on he talks about how people look to the Bible for guidance on everything from bombing another country to entering the cheese competition at the County Fair. Most people know a smattering of what is in the Bible but, again to quote, besides what people may have picked up as children in Sunday School, “the rest of the Bible remains a sort of religious hot dog, something they eat on faith without having the first clue of what’s actually in it.”

I was particularly struck by what Russell wrote in introducing the book of Acts and the letters of Paul:

“It was easy for people to love Jesus Christ. He told great stories, he healed the sick, and chances were good that when he visited, he’d leave you with some free fish. Christ was easy. Christianity was a pain in the ass. First, there was the question of what exactly Christianity was.” Precisely!

Being Christian, for most people, has something to do with being doctrinally correct. In the very early days of the movement this was not so. Jesus had a mystical experience with God, whom he referred to with the intimate phrase “Daddy.” He invited others into that realm of reality and he did it by inviting them to see, to open their eyes, to become aware. In all of the narratives - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - there is a great emphasis in deed and word on people having their sight restored and we need such because for the most part we occupy the position, at least I do, of thinking I can see clearly now when in fact I am as blind as a bat.

Here is an example:

For a variety of reasons I began basing the talks I offer in here on the Gospel of Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas was, as I hope you now know and recall, discovered as part of what is known as the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945. It didn't make it into an English translation until 1959 and was not generally available until 1977. The manuscript that was found was in Coptic and is now in the museum in Cairo.

When, however, scholars got their hands on it they realized that there were even earlier manuscripts that they already had in Greek and dated around 130 that are fragments of some of the same sayings found in Thomas.

At any rate, when it became available I got and read the Gospel of Thomas. It might as well still have been in Coptic or Greek. Because I had not yet, except at the most superficial level, been introduced to non-dual thinking or to the importance of mysticism. Non-dual mind, mysticism are both the same.

I hope you don't let the word "mysticism" scare you or put you off. It simply means moving away from mere belief systems and belonging systems to inner experience. It's more complicated than this, of course, and we'll get to some of that in a moment.

Several things contributed to my move toward mystical spirituality. One of the things was and is the failure of organized religion to take a prophetic role in dealing with the issues of our time. It is embarrassing to me how the church has fought a rear-guard action on almost every significant social issue of our time. So called evangelical Christians were among the biggest supporters of the invasion of Iraq.

Perhaps even more important were the spiritual teachers I have had over the years. I would include among those Thich Nhat Hanh, Richard Rohr, Jim Finley, Thomas Merton and many others. Several things stand out to me about these people, things they all have in common.

For one thing, they are all happy, light hearted people. Thich Nhat Hanh is the man behind my most resisted teaching: we have a moral obligation to be happy. You are aware that this man has seen more horror than any of us can imagine.

Second, they live in a very large world and they invite others to join them there.

Third, they know there is a tradition of perennial truth that matters. That is, they know about the basics, the things that matter. And, when they talk about these things they can seem very “conservative.”

Fourth, they are not attached to some particular formulation or dogma. They are not “defenders of ‘the truth.’” In this sense they come across as very “liberal.” They have this ability to hold together what in spiritual writings is referred to as “the tension of opposites.” They are comfortable with contradiction and paradox.

Somewhere along the way in being with these people, studying the teachings of these people, reading their works or about them it became crystal clear to me that doctrinal religion divides and mystical spirituality unites.

I tried to say last week that I am aware that this approach can be empowering and exhilarating. And, it can be terrifying, if not wounding. If a person has based their whole life on a doctrinal understanding of themselves, their culture or their religion; it can be devastating to lose that.

Yet, here we are listening to Jesus say, “Open your eyes, see what is. The truth will set you free.” And he says, this is by interpretation, “If you try to prove something as objectively true about the Sacred, you’ve missed it.”

One of the things I said last week is that we live in a time a great darkness, ignorance and illusion. There are signs of hope and optimism. Those signs are not what gets the attention of the media. Those signs don’t run for public office. Or, are dictators of countries.

Though I am limiting myself to the teachings of Jesus and his followers, I think you can see this in all wise and useful traditions. In the Jesus tradition there is a huge emphasis on the importance of seeing, of paying attention. By his actions and

his stories he is constantly enticing people to see things and people differently, from a different perspective, to delve more deeply, to become as children in the way we see things - with freshness and amazement.

Over and over Jesus, and his followers, stress the importance of attention as a spiritual force.

I'm calling this talk today: Truth Is Better Than Fiction, Learning to See in the Dark. It is based on this saying from the Gospel of Thomas which I introduced to you last week.

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 want to break this saying into two parts to deal with it.

Give attention to the living presence while you are alive.

All great spiritual traditions universally recognize a special kind of looking as the "force of attention."

Attention and paying attention is one of our greatest of human powers - and it is the most under-utilized. What is being called "the new physics," the kind of thing Ilija Delio talks about, is proving now what the ancients knew. When we pay attention to something we enter into an energy relationship with it. What we pay attention to and concentrate on grows in our experience - whether they be houseplants, relationships or fears.

Energy flows where attention goes.

That's why I called last week's talk, traveling a spiritual path in an attention grabbing world. Because what most often gets our attention in no way contributes

to our true identity nor does it contribute either our purpose or meaning as expressions of the Sacred. More often than not our attention is passive and the advertising and media world are masters in seducing us to pay attention to what enhances their “bottom line.”

It is a real spiritual skill to know how to pay attention, to give attention. When our attention is placed on something with a deliberate intention and maintained there by a conscious presence, it does indeed become a force larger than life. It actually grows and generates energy.

We were introduced to this notion in the very first couple of teachings in the Gospel of Thomas. The very first one is:

“These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and Thomas wrote down. He said, ‘Whoever understands these sayings will not experience death.’” Of course, this does not mean physical death. More about that later.

Then, the second saying is: “Let the one who seeks continue seeking until they find what they are looking for. When they find it, they will become troubled. When they become troubled, they will be amazed, and they will rule over all.”

The fifth saying in the Gospel of Thomas is this:

Learn to recognize what is present
right in front of your face,
and what is hidden from you
will be disclosed to you.
For there is nothing hidden
that will not be revealed.

And we will encounter other similar sayings through the rest of the Gospel of Thomas. Jesus, like other mystics, knew well that the chief feature of who we think we are is never here. We are always, it seems, someplace else. Either up ahead in the future, making plans or borrowing trouble, or else back in the past, brooding over old hurts and misdeeds. When we are present the elusive quality we call aliveness actually reveals itself here and now.

Please note: what I'm trying to teach is being "fully attentive in the present moment" not "to the present moment." In the first we show up with all of who we are. In the second we show up with just our minds.

I said earlier that mysticism is moving away from belief systems and belonging systems to inner experience and that it was also more complicated than that. Let's wade into that territory.

It seems to me that more and more I am encountering people who have been profoundly wounded by a religious background. They are sometimes angry about this, resentful. More often than not, they have simply given up on the journey altogether. That's one group I encounter.

The other group are the rigidly religious. They have beliefs or denominational stands that mean much to them and they defend them to the point that causes church splits that are profoundly hurtful.

I'm very hesitant, outside of a group where I feel fairly well known - like this, to tell people what I do. I don't want to tell people I'm a spiritual teacher, ordained minister, licensed psychotherapist or any other similar label. More often than not, it will come out.

Last Fall to celebrate our anniversary we enjoyed what is known as a "stay-cation." We got a place at a funky B&B in the Montrose area. In the mornings we would enjoy the breakfast at the B&B and then head out walking or taking Uber to places people come to Houston to visit.

I enjoyed visiting with the people who were staying at that B&B. Until Saturday morning. We walked in and a guy was also having breakfast there. Not staying there but a good friend with the B&B owner. As we walked into the dining room he looked up and said, "Oh hi, Dr. Kerley. I know Dr. Kerley from church. He is one of my pastors." You could feel the energy in the room shift.

If it comes out that I'm a psychotherapist, and it is a group we are traveling with, it won't be long before someone will get me aside to talk about the most personal of

problems. Not theirs, of course. It usually has something to do with “a friend of mine.”

If it comes out that I’m a minister and someone engages me in a conversation about that, the response is usually one of two things. Not said but clearly communicated.

On the one hand it is as if people are fearful that I have lost my mind. The implied, and sometimes spoken, message is, “You don’t actually believe that stuff do you? Why are you people against the gays?” It is just embarrassing.

On the other, if I manage to say a smidgen about my faith and practice and how no label really fits me, the implied, and sometimes spoken, message is, “Don’t you believe the Bible. You believe in Jesus don’t you?” It is as people are fearful that I have lost my faith.

I’ve either lost my mind or lost my faith. Of course, the words “mind” and “faith” are dependent on how the people having the conversation with me define those words.

Frankly, a lot of what organized religion has said was true over the years is fiction. In most cases symbolic and mystical teachings and understandings have been forced into dualistic literal mind-sets and when new light shows the fallacy of these, as I say, people either go limp or become rigid.

What I’m here to tell you is that Truth is better than fiction. Actually, it was Mark Twain who wrote, “Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn’t.” I want to show how the truth of Jesus is much better than the fiction that the Christian religion cooked up. And yes, there is hope - more solid and real than the ground you are standing on.

Those of us who are interested in the spiritual adventure must live with the fact that the innocuous and/or offensive belief/behavior systems of much religion are probably the major cause of the growing number of people who call themselves atheist or who want nothing to do with religion. They see that the beliefs and behaviors have not generally created people who are stronger, more caring or

creative than other groups - often a lot worse. I wish I didn't have to say this but it is true. Religion either creates the very best people or the worst.

Jesus makes this point in many of his sayings and stories. Mere belief systems split people apart, whereas actual faith puts all out parts back together. One of the difficulties mysticism has in this world is that it takes major surgery and much of one's life to get head, heart, and body to put down their defenses, their false programs for happiness, and their many forms of resistance to what is right in front of them. (I got this from Richard Rohr.)

I quoted Karen Armstrong last week, author of "The History of God." One of you sent to a quote by her from another one of her books: "The pursuit of knowledge is exhilarating, and science, medicine, and technology have dramatically improved the lives of millions of people. But 'unknowing' remains an essential part of the human condition. Religion is at it best when it helps us to ask questions and hold us in a state of wonder - and arguably at its worst when it tries to answer them authoritatively and dogmatically. We can never understand the transcendence we call God, Nirvana, Brahman, or Dao; precisely because it is transcendent, it lies beyond the reach of the senses, and is therefore incapable of definite proof."

So why does the mystical approach have such difficulty with so many folks?

One of the reasons we've been talking about: Organized religion has been content too long with people being religious but not spiritual.

It seems to me that Christianity suffers from two other very foundational problems, which were not problems for Jesus or those who followed him.

First, we do not seem to believe in the active, dynamic reality of the spiritual world. For most of us, the "real world" is this physical, material world. So when I use words like "mystical" or "mythic" or "collective unconscious" many more traditional church folks think that I have wandered off the map.

We have been so caught up in the world of forms, or what we can see and measure, that it becomes all that we take seriously. If religion is to be reborn at any dynamic level that is really going to change us and then change society or change the world,

we must understand that *spiritual reality, consciousness, or Spirit, if you will, is the true reality; all the rest, including the material world, emerges from it.* That's a switch even for people who think of themselves as religious. True spiritual cognition does not come naturally to us.

The other foundational problem with mysticism gaining traction in our lives is individualism. What Jesus refers to as the Reign of God or the Kingdom of God and what Paul refers to as the Body of Christ is first of all a *corporate* reality. "Salvation" is taking place systemically, collectively, and historically. How did we miss that? In the Hebrew Scriptures, Yahweh made promises to Israel *as a whole*; very few were made to individuals. The prophets usually criticized Israel as a whole. But by the sixteenth century, Christianity was primarily focused on how individual people can go to heaven, which is sad in its smallness. The corporate, collective, social, historical, cosmic message was largely lost, and remains forgotten and hidden.

If we could embrace the reality of religion's short-comings, we could regain or experience perhaps for the first time the recovering of sight that Jesus taught and demonstrated, we would develop our ability to see in the dark, strengthen our faith in a kind of light that can illumine the night without having to turn on the lights, we will develop another set of senses that shows us what is real. The light of our world or culture attends to surface matters, it allows us to skim over things - and people.

Learning to attend to what is lets us see in the dark with a light no one can turn out inside us - unless we allow them to do so. Even when we lose track of it, we know where to find it again.

If we could learn to be attentive to every moment of our lives, we will discover the world anew. We will discover it to be a completely different world than the one we have come to believe in. When we take our cues from our culture rather than from our essential essence, we are allowing what Jesus called "the blind leading the blind." Whoever remembered and recorded all those stories in the Bible about blind people begging to be healed, knew how to see.

The great message of those who became Jesus first and most faithful followers is “there is a light that shines in the darkness.” If we don’t go into that darkness we won’t see it. Grace comes to us in the dark.

You know the hymn: “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

The death that is spoken about in this saying is not about physical death. It is pointing to what it means to be transformed, to enter into that realm Jesus referred to as “the kingdom” or “realm” or “rule” of God.

I want to be very clear: I am not saying, nor is this teaching saying, that we can attain the presence of God, or of the Sacred. We can’t. Because we are already in the presence of the Sacred. What is absent is our awareness of this. Sacred Mystery is maintaining us in being with every breath we take. We have nothing to attain, or to learn. We do, obviously need to unlearn some thing.

To become aware of God’s loving presence in our lives, we have to accept that the culture in which we live is in a mass hypnotic trance. We are sleep-walkers. No one likes to be told this because we are so sure we are awake. But all great spiritual teachers have recognized that we human beings do not naturally see; we have to be taught how to see.

Somebody was asking me about prayer the other day, saying it simply didn’t make sense to ask God for things. Of course not. Prayer is not about saying words or thinking thoughts. Prayer is, rather, a stance. Prayer is a way of living in the Presence, living in awareness of the Presence, even enjoying the Presence. The mystic is not just aware of God’s Loving Presence, but trusts it, allows it, delights in it and knows that not even death is a threat to it.

All spiritual disciplines have one purpose: to get rid of illusions so we can be present. To quote my teacher, Richard Rohr: “These disciplines exist so that we can see what is, see who we are, and see what is happening. What is is love. It is God, who is love, giving way God every moment as the reality of our life. Who we are is love, because we are created in God’s image. What is happening is God living in us, which us, and through us as love.”

This is the truth. It is better than any religious fiction you have ever heard or believed.

This truth is what we use to see in this dark world.

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