

*“Yes! Yes! Yes!”*

**Bill:**

We begin this time today with a quote from Teilhard de Chardin. I am quite positive these are the first words of his I was ever exposed to. As far as I can tell, he wrote them in 1936 - a year before I was born. I encountered them sometime in the early '60's. The quote I have in mind is this:

“The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides, and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire.”

There is no telling in how many times and places I have encountered this quote between when I first discovered it and now. Many, many times.

What made both Holly and I think about it is that today we are concluding our talks based on the collection of sayings from the early Jesus community known as the Lord's prayer. The phrase we are looking at is traditionally rendered, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”

Neil Douglas-Klotz renders the last line like this:

“For you are the ground and the fruitful vision, the birth-power and fulfillment, as all is gathered and made whole once again.”

And Eugene Peterson, and this is what took us to Teilhard, translates it like this:

“You’re in charge!  
You can do anything you want!  
You’re ablaze in beauty!  
Yes. Yes. Yes.”

## **Holly:**

I love how congruous these lines are from Teilhard and Peterson’s interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer. This is one of the most popular quotes from Teilhard, and despite its poetic beauty we are kind of left wondering what does it really mean? I want to suggest that it is, in some ways, about alchemy, how the elements combine to create not just matter, but also energy. Fire is one of the five Platonic Solids, which represent the five basic elements: earth, air, fire, water, and the ether or the cosmos.

- The **cube** is associated with the **earth**, and reconnecting energy to nature.
- The **octahedron** is associated with **air**, and cultivating acceptance and compassion.
- The **tetrahedron** is associated with **fire**, and perpetuates balance and stability.

- The **icosahedron** is associated with **water**, and enhances creative thought and expression.
- The **dodecahedron** is associated with the **universe**, and represents mystery and meditation.

Plato stated that the dodecahedron was “used for arranging the constellations on the whole heaven.” But the universe began in fire.

The universe is in constant evolution, and the elements continually conspire to “harness the energies of love.” For certain fire existed before Prometheus “discovered” it, but human use of fire has led to incredible, awesome polarities.

On the one hand, beauty. One of the most magical, mesmerizing things I’ve watched is glass blowing. Talk about being ablaze in beauty! On the other hand, destruction. 100 years ago this Memorial Day, one of the worst acts of racial violence occurred in the Greenwood Area of Tulsa, OK with the burning of Black businesses and residences instigated by a white woman’s claim that a shoeshiner had assaulted her. The claim was never proven, but the massacre and ensuing fires that occurred hospitalized 800, destroyed 6000 residences, and 39 officially pronounced dead, with hundreds more unaccounted for. It also destroyed an enclave of hope and prosperity in the Black community. As recently as October 2020, evidence of mass graves containing the remains of murdered Black people have been excavated. What was called “Black Wall Street,” a prosperous business area

in a place still blighted by segregation and JimCrow, was destroyed.

Fire creates.

It also destroys.

We are ablaze in beauty.

We arise from the ashes.

Yes yes yes.

I see fire and love as congruent, and of course when we talk about love, we talk about things like “burning passion,” the “flame” of love, the “warmth” of being held. Fire is both matter and energy, equated with action, passion, and transformation. It is an evolutionary and ecological necessity with both destructive and creative powers. Love is like this, able to hold this same tension of opposites. It is never one dimensional. Perhaps what Teilhard is suggesting is that Human energy is an aspect of fire, and amalgamation of all the elements really, that activates love into form. What does that even *mean*, how can a feeling become a form? How can we harness a feeling to to become a thing that we can touch and feel?

### **Bill:**

It is impossible to live in American culture without knowing something about Jesus. Christmas is, of course, the big holiday for the Religion of Consumerism. Easter is unavoidable as well. My hunch is that if you are listening/watching this with us today,

you have not only likely grown up with Jesus but know a fair amount Jesus stuff. We know the familiar parables - the parable of the prodigal son and the Good Samaritan. You likely know many of the Beatitudes we have recently gone through. I recently conducted a funeral and I can safely say that less than five percent of the people in attendance were church attending people. Yet, when it came time to recite the Lord's Prayer in the liturgy, everyone could do it.

However, I fear that what most people come away with when it comes to Jesus is that he is a historical figure to be admired or someone about whom to have certain beliefs. The question that people hear the most about Jesus is "do you have faith in Jesus" or "do you believe in Jesus"?

The fact is that for the better part of its history, the Christian movement has put a lot more emphasis on the things we know about Jesus. In fact the word "orthodox" has come to mean having the correct beliefs about Jesus. This has been the emphasis of organized Christianity for well over sixteen hundred years. In the beginning, however, what being Christian is about is not merely admiring Jesus but, rather acquiring his consciousness. It has come to be held that the appropriate way to relate to Jesus is through a set of beliefs.

In the early church the goal was to acquire the consciousness of Jesus. This is the central challenge Christianity ought to be handing us. How do we learn to respond to the world with the

kind of healing love and wholeness he had? To borrow a phrase from Paul, how do we put on the mind of Christ. How do we see through his eyes? Feel through his heart? This is what actual orthodox Christianity is really all about. It's not about what we believe. It is about what we do.

This is the fire that burned in the hearts of those first followers of "the way," it is what de Chardin is talking about and it is what I hear you getting at in talking about alchemy. Spiritual work is about allowing this brooding creative force to hover over us and pull us forward in the way we are talking about today.

### **Holly:**

An analogy I relate to, and it's certainly apropos today on Mother's Day, is the alchemy required to carry, birth, and raise a child. In pregnancy, a mother's body contains another's heart, mind, organs, and bones in her body. She carries all the potential feelings, all the potential talents, all the potential mistakes a child will make. It's like Rumi's poem, the birdsong begins in the egg. If my child is a musician, it begins in me, in his ancestors generations ago. Both the material and existential being begin in the mother. Gah. This is both so ordinary and so extraordinary at the same time!! Then, labor and an unmedicated birth induces searing pain and overwhelming joy, holding on and letting go co-arise. It burns like fire and it can immediately be followed by a huge feeling of relief. I remember holding my son for the first time, having just felt the most intense pain ever—

they literally call the passage through the birth canal the ring of fire. I am telling you Johnny Cash had no idea. Immediately I was just awash with love. I remember saying, “There you are! I’ve been waiting for you!” And, like, immediately, a flame was lit in my heart. If you’ve ever been loved by a mother, you know that love can be fierce and “ablaze with beauty.” I don’t know exactly how this relates to the Lord’s Prayer, but let me offer this: Jesus was about a new world order. He taught that we, regular old humans, were part of ushering that forth. I know a birth image is literally sticky and uncomfortable and squeamish, but the mother’s energy is in ALL of us. If we could harness it, we could literally birth a new world.

Mothers and children are both separate and forever linked, autonomous and embedded. I’ve heard it said having a child is like having your heart beat outside of your body. And literally that very same heart once beat *inside* my body. It is your heart ablaze in beauty, walking around in the world. I know there are good mothers and bad mothers out there, and I don’t want to minimize the harm that a mother can do, but I think we all have ideas and wishes about “mother love,” and I guess I just wonder if we couldn’t learn to love the world, love all the creatures in it, with the energy of a tender and fierce mother? Can we allow the heart of the world to live in us, too?

This last line of the prayer and Teilhard’s quote is less like a closing and more like a challenge. “You are ablaze in beauty, now go discover fire. Yes yes yes.” What this makes me wonder

is, what does it take for us to say “yes” to the challenges of the world, and to this very particular, specific moment in time? A friend sent me a picture of this sign the other day - The sign said: “I love you.” You’re probably thinking, “You don’t even know me.” But, if people can hate for no reason. I can love. - and I say to it, why the heck not? How do we learn to love the world and everything in it as a good mother loves her child — as an extension of ourselves? Teilhard understood the universe as more than a place in which we exist. Through ongoing evolution and transformation, the universe exists *in* us, just as the child exists in and apart from the mother.

But still, *how* do we do this? So much points back to developing a daily spiritual practice, a softening of the body and relaxing of the mind, to help us hold suffering with joy, grief with hope, pain with healing. In stillness, we can learn to appreciate dynamism, to stoke the fires within that help us show up in the world as our true selves.

Okay, but *still*, what does this look like? With a spiritual practice, love begins to live outside of our body and informs action. Fredrick Douglass wrote, “I prayed for freedom for twenty years, but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.” Meaning he got up and walked toward freedom. He’s exactly right, it’s not enough to be in prayer and hope that through prayer things will begin to magically happen.



Let me go back to mothering for a sec. I can have ideas about mothering, read about it and learn all the best practices, ways to be a mindful parent, but if I never put it into action, there is no alchemy, no transformation. Let me give a really personal, vulnerable example. Mothering is not all stickers and stars and unicorns. If I'm being honest there are moments when I just want to walk away, and I'm sure my own mother would nod in agreement! We've been having a particularly challenging time with one of our sons, who is really wanting to exercise his autonomy. He's pushing against boundaries, and probably on some unconscious level is working out something neither he nor I can quite put words to. He is my son who is adopted, and there is a core wound there...an abandonment wound that I have to hold space for until he can articulate it. He's literally pushing against us, in a way, I imagine to test how far he can go until we just throw in the towel and say, "I give up." Well, I'm stubborn, ask anyone who knows me, and I don't give up, so I sure as heck am not giving up on my child.

I've asked friends who are therapists and mothers, one who is a child psychiatrist; I've asked Bill, who has reminded me about this playful thing called emotional judo, and I've had to *be love* to my son in a different way. I'm so grateful for the spiritual practice of contemplation that I've developed because it's given me more space between the trigger and the response. Even though my values don't change from kid to kid, I've had to parent each of my kids using different tools. I've had to transform fire into water, and sometimes water back into fire.

Remember Teilhard's quote: love harnesses all the elements. Shoot, I'm learning to be water and fire in the same moment! "What you are doing is not okay. And I love you." I swear I could not be even a half way decent parent without also attending to my own spirit.

The really hard thing to accept is that deep love makes us more vulnerable to deep hurt. And I really think we are a hurting world right now. We have never been exactly here, in this moment, ever before. This is a time when calling upon our tools, the ones we've cultivated through practice and acquiring wisdom, will come in really handy. Yes we have to use the tools in new ways, or in alchemical language, transmute the elements. The elements themselves don't change - earth, air, fire, water, and ether - but the ways we harness them must if we want to re-discover fire.

**Bill:**

Can I offer a personal example of using tools that lead to transformation? This is also a way I can sneak in the religious literacy stuff I like to talk about.

A couple of years before I began teaching Ordinary Life, which was in 1998, I got introduced to Marcus Borg. Our former Senior minister, Dr. Jim Bankston, had attended a week of Borg's lectures and brought me the cassette recordings of them.

That's how long ago it was. The first book of Borg's I read was "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time."

Reading Borg got me interested in the Jesus Seminar and the scholars who made it up. I had been reading the works of John Shelby Spong for a number of years but this really opened me up to the scholarship that was taking place in both biblical and Jesus studies. As a matter of fact, it was Jesus Seminar scholar, Stephen J. Paterson whose writings on the Gospel of Thomas got me interested in spending several years delving into that collection of Jesus sayings.

The Jesus Seminar was founded in 1985 by Robert Funk, one of the leading New Testament scholars at that time and the Seminar was made up of about 50 biblical scholars and 100 lay people who were committed to a collective search for the historicity of the deeds and sayings of Jesus.

The reaction to the Jesus Seminar on the part of some people was vitriolic to say the least. The Seminar dared to say what biblical scholars had been saying since the early 19th century and that is that there are sayings and deeds attributed to Jesus that are not historically accurate. Up until the time of the Seminar, those kinds of conclusions stayed in academic circles and didn't make it into the public's eye. The Jesus Seminar went out of its way to make its work public.

I want to encourage you, when this time today is concluded, to go to the Wikipedia article about the Jesus Seminar and read for yourself about its methodology and conclusions.

One of the things to come out of the Seminar was a book titled *The Five Gospels*. I think this book should be not only in your library but also be read by anyone who is seeking to use Jesus as a teacher and guide in the living of life.

In this book you will find the four Gospels that are in the Christian collection as well as the Gospel of Thomas. They are presented in the order in which they were written - Mark, Matthew, Luke, John and Thomas. The translation is that of the Seminar's, mostly Funk's. (I think the Gospel of Thomas should be first). Interspersed all along the way is a commentary about not only what the passages mean but also why the Seminar came to the conclusions they did.

If you do get this book you will see that some of the sayings of Jesus are in red ink, some in pink, some in grey and some in black. Red means that the conclusion of the scholars was that Jesus did say the passage quoted, or something very like it. Pink means that Jesus probably said something like this. Grey means that Jesus did not say this but it contains his ideas. And, black means he did not say this. You can read all about the criteria they used by reading either the Wikipedia page or the introduction to the book. (In that light, here is what the Jesus Seminar's translation of the Lord's Prayer looks like.)

This book, “The Five Gospels,” was published in 1996. Three years later Funk published his on Gospel of Jesus. Which, if you have never sat down and read a narrative of the Jesus story from first to finish, I recommend it.

## **Holly:**

Teilhard’s concept of alchemy and transformation does not sidestep pain. Just as the final push in labor is often the most intense, so too, a collective groan emits at the birth of each new level of consciousness. Pain conscripts itself to memory, even if only in the body. In part, transforming suffering requires truth telling, which is the first step toward personal and collective liberation. Here is a real-world example of how an old wound is being transformed. Right now an old friend of mine and brilliant artist, Rick Lowe, and another acquaintance and social anthropologist, Marlon Hall, are working on the Greenwood Art Project. They are collecting stories from the descendants of those who survived the Tulsa Massacre, some of whose were able to rebuild, but never saw Black Wall Street return to its former glory. From what I’m reading and learning, this event has never been publicly remembered properly. It’s certainly not something I was taught about in school. These stories live in people’s bodies; they are whispers in ethos of the environment.

You can see here what remains in many places, concrete steps leading to the ghosts of houses and business.

Descendants of families who still live in the area bear the scars of untold stories. They have been bottled and kept shut, but airing them allows the community to heal from the ashes—albeit 100 years later. Remember the first law of thermodynamics: matter can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only change shape. In this case matter became memory, and now memory healed can find new ways of being in the world. We recently got this children’s book for the boys that teaches about the Tulsa Massacre.

When fire is managed, like a controlled burn, it is restorative and nurturing and transforming. A controlled burn needs air. Stories need air. Memories need air so that the memory keepers can help societies and communities become whole. I think about the Young Adult novel, *The Giver*, in which the memory keeper is given the burden of holding every single terrible and beautiful event in history so that others don’t have to. The community has no pain. Which means they also have no joy, thus there is no transformation.

There is a Hindu legend about a time when all humans were gods, but they abused their divinity. Brahma, the chief god, decided to take it away from them and hide it where they would never find it again.

Brahma called a council of the gods to help him decide where to hide the divinity. “Let’s bury it deep in the earth.” But Brahma

said, “No, that will not do; one day they will dig deep down into the earth and find it.”

Then the gods said, “Let’s sink it in the deepest ocean.” Again Brahma replied, “No, not there, for they will learn to dive into the deepest waters, and search the ocean bed and find it.”

Then they said, “Let’s take it to the top of the highest mountain and hide it there.” But again Brahma replied, “No, for eventually humans will climb every high mountain on earth; someday they will find it again.”

The gods gave up and said, “We do not know where to hide it, for it seems there is no place on the earth or in the sea that humans will not eventually reach.”

Brahma thought for a long time and said, “Here is what we will do with the humans. We will hide their divinity deep down inside them. The humans will search the whole world, but they won’t look for it inside their true selves.”

Ever since then, the legend concludes, humans have been roving the earth, climbing, digging, diving, exploring, and searching for something that is already inside.

Sometimes it feels like an act of insanity to believe in the strength of love or the audacity of hope. I read the short meditation “Leap” by Brian Doyle in *One Long River of Song*

and fell asleep that night with the image of bodies tumbling head over heel over head as they flung themselves from the South Tower on 9/11. What is so hauntingly beautiful about his word picture of two people clasping hands in the most horrific circumstance—knowing they will not survive the leap—is his focus on the fact that we are capable of “such extraordinary ordinary succinct ancient naked stunning perfect simple ferocious love.” This simple gesture of holding hands signifies everything beautiful we are capable of even in the face of terror and fear and quite literally in the thick of the fire. Such grace, such astounding grace, is why we are here at all. Everything we know was created from that first primordial fireball known as The Big Bang. We have that fire in our bones, in our hearts. We already have it *inside*—thus we already have the ability to harness the elements and transform them into love. Holding hands did not change the outcome of the couple’s death in the story “Leap,” it did not save them, but for just the briefest moment it transformed evil into love, and forever seared in our minds is the image of these two people, surely terrified, choosing a simple act of love in the last seconds of their lives. Human beings are capable of such “greatness and holiness within them like seeds that open only under great fires” in every moment.

Part of Teilhard’s vision for humanity is to deepen our awareness that we belong to a vast reality, that we can trust in the slow work of evolution. May we be in awe of the sun’s fire coursing through our veins and the ancient stardust in our bones;



in awe of the miracle of material existence and the ineffability of spiritual experience; in awe of love's ability to transform suffering into liberation. If we can imagine new ways of living in communion, make space for truth telling, and healing that leads to collective liberation...if we follow this trajectory, we guarantee the last word will be love.

**Bill:**

I want to read to you a brief, three sentences, paragraph from Diarmuid O'Murchu's latest book, "Doing Theology in an Evolutionary Way."

"For almost two thousand years we have adopted a patriarchal backdrop to our understanding of the Christian faith, and the ensuing shape of Christian theology. Most Christians are not even aware of this baggage. Consequently, many of us inhabit an inner space badly damaged by *internalized oppression*. In keeping with the spirit of nonviolent living, as Jesus wishes all Christians to live, we should never collude with our own oppression. Christians have been doing that for centuries."

I believe that what we are seeing being played out in the current political divisiveness of our time is part of what Joanna Macy calls the Great Turning. What we are in midst of is a true unveiling that is drawing our attention, if we will but see it, to the disasters that "business as usual" has caused us and is continuing to cause us.

I also believe that what our spiritual work must be about in going forward is whatever it takes for us to be reconnected, or perhaps better said, for us to be wisely and usefully connected in four places: to ourselves, to each other, to the earth and to Sacred Mystery.

Joanna Macy calls this “the work that reconnects” and she sees it as a journey that has four stages.

The first is gratitude where we experience our love for life.

The second stage is one where we honor the pain in this world, some of which we have been the unconscious but complicit actors in creating. Some of which, as O’Murchu refers to, we experience without even being aware of. Jesus was good at seeing and advocating for those who suffered.

Then, the third step, is to see our connection with life in all of its forms through all of the ages.

Then, we develop the skills and courage to live in this world as open human beings. That is, we live with an awareness that we are part of the great web of life along with everyone else and all that is.

If we live with the consciousness of Jesus, we won’t need to dodge, deny or numb out in seeing and facing the suffering and

dangers that are affecting our world. I further believe that as we live into the kind of empowering community Jesus taught and lived, we ourselves will live with not only compassion for our suffering brothers and sisters but also with more energy to be with the suffering in ways that can lead to healing. This is the love we are to say “yes” to.

Say “yes.” First and foremost say “yes” to and about yourself. So many people are so hard on themselves.

I am coming more and more to see how important we are to each other in this process. It takes both courage and awareness to live this. And it takes giving up on our usual way of measuring things. We really do need each other. Even if the instrument you play in this orchestra is the piccolo, the orchestra is not complete without you. There is no Shakespeare without the printer and the book binder. It takes courage to accept your acceptance. It takes courage to believe that everybody is accepted; that all of us are blood relatives, that peace and justice for all is the beginning and end of life; that love cannot be defeated.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite were condemned for simply doing nothing to help the wounded traveler who had been beaten by robbers. In the parable of Lazarus and Dives, the rich man was condemned simply for doing nothing to relieve the needs of the beggar who was at his gate everyday. In the parable of the Last Judgment, those who were relegated to outer darkness were condemned simply

because they had done nothing to minister to such human needs as hunger, thirst, and nakedness.

Here is a working fact of life. You lose what you don't use. I grew up very close to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky and have taken extensive tours of it. The fish in the waters in Mammoth cave — they have no eyes. Over the evolution of time, not needing eyes, they fish didn't develop them. Use it or lose it.

The other side of that is that regular use of what we have been given increases our competency. If you want to ruin a garden, you don't have to plant weeds in it. Just leave it alone. You want to wreck your marriage, just don't bother to work at maintaining it. We treat our cars better. You want to lose your faith, just don't work at it.

What you become depends not so much on what you have been but on the degree to which your past is shaped by what and where you are today. The only way I know for you or me or anyone to do that is by saying "yes" to some things.

First to yourself.

Say "yes" to the disciplines and techniques and practices that help you grow into your True Self.

Say "yes" to this earth as if our lives depended on it - they do!

Say “yes” to that Sacred Mystery that gave birth to all who are and all that is.

Someone asked the the guru on the mountain top, “What can I do to attain Enlightenment?”

“If you wish Enlightenment, there are two things you must know. The first is that all efforts to attain Enlightenment are of no avail.”

“And the second?”

“You must act as if you did not know the first.”

Say, “yes.”

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