

## "Starving The Hungry Ghost"

I am calling this talk I want to offer you today “Starving the Hungry Ghost.” It is my reflection on the following teaching from the Gospel of Thomas:

Yeshua says,

Two will be resting on a bed.  
One will die,  
the other will live.

Salome said,  
“Then how is it, sir, that you,  
coming from the one Source,  
have rested on my couch  
and eaten at my table?”

Yeshua said to her,  
“I am he who has appeared to you  
out of the Realm of Unity,  
having been granted that which belongs  
to my Father, its Source.”

“I will be your student!” she exclaimed.

“Then I say this to you,  
if you become whole  
you will be full of Light.  
If you remain fragmented  
darkness will fill you.”

I am so grateful that I get to be here doing this with you. I’m glad you benefit from it. Or, that you hold out the belief that you might yet.

And, I am so grateful that I decided, or was led by divine/cosmic entanglement, to delve into the Gospel of Thomas as a guide for these talks.

The Gospel of Thomas unearthed in 1945 and first published in English in 1959 has had a tremendous impact on our understanding of the movement that became Christianity. One of the books I have on the Gospel of Thomas says that it is “almost as if an audible recording of the voice of Jesus had been discovered. That is to say, that even across the reaches of millennial time and even through the curtain of translation from languages known to but a few, for many of us the words in this text have the power to touch an unknown part of ourselves that brings with it an undeniable recognition of truth and hope. When it was said of Jesus, by those who were at first bewildered by him, that he spoke ‘as one having authority,’ what is surely meant is that he and his teaching authenticated itself by their power to awaken that same hidden, self-authenticating part of the human heart and mind.”

Once again, I’m going to let the words of this teaching try to worm their way into your being. Then, we’ll come back and talk about them.

Here they are again:

Two will be resting on a bed.  
One will die,  
the other will live.

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“Then how is it, sir, that you,  
coming from the one Source,  
have rested on my couch  
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“Then I say this to you,  
if you become whole  
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We can read these words at many different levels. Really to see them is a task that invites us to something much more demanding and joyous than simply reading them off the pages of ancient scrolls or modern translations and interpreting them according to familiar habits of either intellectual analysis or that which is required by one’s particular religious persuasion. It is not for nothing that the first words of this collection of the sayings of Jesus are: “Whoever lives the interpretation of these words will no longer taste death.”

In the mystical realm, which is what we are talking about, this is not merely a figure of speech.

When I use the word “mysticism” I don’t want to scare anyone or cause anyone to think this is not substantive stuff. At the moment, what I mean by “mysticism” is: moving beyond dualistic thinking into non-dual mind and a return to our True Selves.

Neither of these things is easy.

I mentioned to you last week that I have found, or been found by, a very helpful chapter in the book “The Spiritual Dimension of the Enneagram: Nine Faces of the Soul” by Sandra Maitri. I consider this chapter so important that I have put a pdf of it on both the Ordinary Life and my own website. It is not a quick, easy read but it is one of the best explanations I have read recently of how we lose contact with our essential nature in the process of developing an ego. The process of losing contact with our essential nature is universal: everyone who develops an ego goes through it - unless one is born a saint or insane, that is, they never develop an ego structure.

Ironically, developing an ego structure is a necessary prerequisite for spiritual development, since part of the ego’s attainment is self-reflective conscious. Without it, we could not be aware of our own consciousness. To quote Maitri,

“Different traditions explain the reason for this seemingly inevitable and apparently regrettable process in diverse ways. Ultimately it remains a mystery, and our beliefs about the purpose behind this loss are immaterial. It is simply a given, and we can either deal with our estrangement or remain asleep to it.”

Dealing with our estrangement, I am coming more and more to see, is what our spiritual work is all about.

There are three major steps that are inevitably taken by anyone in order to develop an ego. The first is that we identify with our body. “I am my body.” We begin to develop a notion that we are a separate physical self.

The second major factor has to do with inadequacies in the infant’s environment. Things can interfere with the growing child getting proper care-taking. Since infants cannot verbally communicate their needs, the ones taking care of the infant, usually the mother, have to guess what is going on with the child.

This process, and I’m quoting again, “is the genesis of the illusion of duality, the spiritual issue par excellence in which we experience ourselves and Being as two distinct things.”

The third factor contributing to losing contact with Being is a parental lack of “attunement” to our depths. The fact that we were raised by parents who themselves believed that they were ultimately discrete entities, unless we were born to totally enlightened parents, profoundly shapes our consciousness.

By the way, when I have read and re-read this chapter, I have thought especially of those children born in places like Syria, Iraq, and other places of extreme violence and poverty. What of their future?

Our Essence, who we really are has many different qualities. Right now I am suggesting that we focus on three of these: peace, love, joy. In Christian lingo these are the marks of transformation, or resurrection to Life.

To a large extent we become what our care-takers, particularly our mothers, see us to be. Because, even in the best of circumstances, our essential nature is not held

up and mirrored back to us, we gradually begin to lose contact with it ourselves. Most spiritual traditions refer to this process as “the Fall” in one form or another. Some traditions, like Buddhism for example, hold it that we are already “enlightened.” We just don’t know this.

Most people who would be in a demographic like this know about enlightenment but know about it at the ego level or with dualistic thinking, which isn’t knowing at all. This is one reason we talk of spiritual development as making conscious what is unconscious.

At any rate, in this process of falling away from who we truly are, we come to believe that there is something wrong with us, or missing about us. This emptiness forms the core of most people’s inner experience, whether they are conscious of this or not.

We try to fill these empty places or correct these perceived deficiencies in all sorts of ways. Initially it may be a pacifier or a “blankie.” By adulthood, this filling of holes “can take the shape of seeking worldly success to fill the hole of powerlessness, seeking recognition or accumulating priceless things to fill the hole of valuelessness, doing something considered societally important to fill the hole of worthlessness, climbing mountains to fill the hold of weakness or impotence, seeking a partner to fill to hole of feeling unlovable, and so on.” We take ourselves to be someone who is weak or unlovable or lacking perseverance or brilliance or whatever quality we have lost touch with inside of ourselves.

We develop a self-image that becomes, for us, a solid reality about who we are. “I am a such-a-such sort of person who has a personality that is (fill in the blank.)” This is one of the reasons, our friends and lovers have the peculiar habit of reminding us of our parents. This is also, this falling away from our true Essence, is one of the reasons we can’t believe that someone really loves us or would love us if they really knew us. Or, conversely, that they must not be as wonderful as we first thought if they actually do love us. Or, if we either do or don’t get the recognition we sometimes receive or fail to. “Either there has been a huge mistake or those dolts don’t have the sense of a gnat if they don’t see how great I am.” All of these self images are based on a sense of lack.

In Buddhism the ego, this filling up behavior, is referred to as “the hungry ghost.” Without having a significant daily practice or having been pushed beyond the ego’s boundaries by a huge suffering, we go after in our living for things that will satisfy the ego. We try to feed the hungry ghost.

One major addiction that the hungry ghost has is to the notion of being right. We take our thoughts and opinions, especially about ourselves, as if they were real. Ours is a culture in which we move forward by having right answers.

Clearly there are times when having right answers is essential. When we are dealing with technical matters such as doing surgery or flying an airplane there is a real need for clarity and correctness.

When it comes to doing spiritual work, being on the path that returns us to our true Selves, clarity and correctness are not so important. Indeed, one of the great spiritual works of all time is called, “The Cloud of Unknowing.” Not, of knowing. One of the ways, in my opinion, to discover if a religion is bad religion - and there is a lot of bad religion around today - is to see if it has more answers than questions.

The problem is that for many people, especially frightened people, this always searching and questioning is not very satisfactory. The fact is, however, that the only one who truly knows knows that he or she does not know. They know that they don’t have the final word on love or courage or freedom or compassion or justice.

It is in an effort to satisfy the hungry ghost that we feed it the kind of junk food that gives it an immediate sense of superiority and righteousness. Most people would actually prefer “satisfying untruth” to “unsatisfying truth.” The fragile ego needs so much pampering.

Because I am interesting in knowing, understanding and attempting to live the teachings of Jesus, I am using his teachings as a foundation for these talks. Jesus never talked about any of the issues that seem to have preoccupied organized religion for centuries. He never mentioned, for example, the issue of homosexuality that has so consumed the church. I love Richard Rohr’s quote about

how the church has been more interested in what goes on in bed rather than whether someone had a bed in which to sleep.

The one thing Jesus was consistent about was his insistence on the goodness and the reliability of God. As far as the rest of his teaching is concerned he couldn't be appointed to teach in any Christian seminary today. Yet, believing in him has become for many who call themselves Christian the cornerstone of what it means to be a Christian.

The church, or organized religion, has an ego just as individuals do. When the church has lived out of the ego, just as is true for each and every one of us, it has fallen into two true heresies. These are things we do in an effort to feed the "hungry ghost."

The first is the heresy of "silliness." By silliness I don't mean acting goofy. That is probably good for the Soul, for our true Essence. Think of the absolute abandon with which a child lives. I'm talking about the silliness of living as if the ego were the whole show, was who we are, held the truth about what matters.

Remember: the ego is formed by "contraction." The "hungry ghost" pulls into itself and feeds its hunger by comparing, competing and separating itself from others. It demands answers and satisfactions. This has indeed led to some silly stuff.

I have asked my beautiful bride to come and share an experience with you.

(At this point Dr. Sherry Beeman came and shared the following:)

"Several years ago, 1993, Bill and I flew to Seattle, to be with dear friends of ours who had moved from Houston to Seattle. They introduced us to that beautiful area and we loved going there to be with them. On this trip, Linda, the wife, had planned a hiking trip on the peninsula. Linda, who has since, very sadly, died, was always the planner, especially of outdoor adventures. It was a wonderful outing. We saw gorgeous snow-capped mountains, river rapids and black bears-yes, black bears. A mom and her two cubs. We watched and then very quietly, walked away.

“We took the ferry across to the peninsula and rented a car to go to our motel. When we arrived at the motel, the marquee outside said “Esprit 93.” We wondered what that meant, but thought little about it. We checked into our rooms and got ready to go to dinner at the motel’s restaurant. While brushing my hair in the bathroom, I heard a voice in the adjoining room say, “You always have better hair than I do.” It was a peeved male voice. Curious.

“The dining room was full, lots of patrons.

“As we sat looking at the menus, I glanced up at someone walking nearby. I was puzzled. I leaned close to Bill, speaking in a low voice, not to be overheard by anyone. I said, “I think that is a man dressed as a woman.” Well, I was overheard. The waitress, who had walked up as I spoke, said, “Oh, yes. That’s what Esprit 93 is - a convention for gays, lesbians, cross dressers and bisexuals.” No big deal to her. For the rest of the evening, the four of us - 3 of us psychotherapists, supposedly trained in objectively observing all sorts of human differences - sat wide-eyed, looking at all the people walking by, wondering who was a man dressed as a woman or vice versa. A fascinating evening. And, oh by the way, the older we get, the harder it is to tell, which is which.”

Why did I ask Sherry to share this with you? Because recently, for some bizarre reason, there has been an explosive concern about trans-gender bathroom usage. Those men, dressed like women, twenty-three years ago, used the women’s rest room. It’s been going on for decades. So?

To focus on this rather than the issues that have fueled a political dysfunction in this country, the fact that there is a mass shooting every day, that we as a society are shooting ourselves in the foot by not providing adequate education for all our citizens is absolutely silly.

If I were to spend time giving other examples of silliness done and said in the name of Jesus, we’d be here for an awfully long time.

The other heresy occurs when religion and its leaders have taken faith from meaning an ongoing and on-growing relationship with Sacred Mystery into certitude. I want to be clear: knowledge is essential in the living of life. But, it



won't take you into the Presence of the Sacred. Only Presence will do that and only Inquiry will do that. Asking over and over and over again: God, who are you? God, who am I?

Faith isn't about believing. It is about trusting. Not trust that something is factually true but trust, as far as our spiritual work is concerned, that the Sacred is of a certain character.

Forgive me for bringing her up all the time but this is one of the reasons I was so energized by discovering, hearing and reading Ilia Delio. She nailed for me what I'm calling the character of the Sacred: incomprehensible mystery, expanding, evolving, creative and entangled. If you want to put all that into one word, that word would be "safe."

In the Jesus narratives he would frequently say to people, "Your faith has made you whole." He never said, "Your correct doctrine, your moral principles, your dogmatism have healed you."

The correct definition of "sin" is to fall for one of these heresies. We already have what we are looking for. St. Augustine said, "Seek what you are seeking - but don't seek it where you are seeking it."

So, let's go back to this teaching for a moment.

Two will be resting on a bed.  
One will die,  
the other will live.

Salome said,  
"Then how is it, sir, that you,  
coming from the one Source,  
have rested on my couch  
and eaten at my table?"

I was going to call this talk today, "What To Do While Waiting For The Other Shoe To Drop."

So, this guy comes home to the boarding house where he has rented a room. This is decades ago. He has an upstairs room. He has been out to the bar and overstayed himself. He sits on the edge of the bed and begins the process of getting ready for bed. He takes off one shoe and lets it drop noisily to the floor. Then, remembering those who lived below him, he rather silently removed his other shoe, the rest of his clothes and got silently into bed. Just as he was drifting off to sleep, a loud voice comes from below, “Well, drop the other one would you? Drop the other shoe!”

That or some vaudeville show is likely the origin of the phrase, “Waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

People in the time of Jesus had the same concerns we do. When is it all going to stop? Life expectancy then was short. Times were brutal. The population to whom Jesus appealed were considered “the expendables.” He was matter-of-fact about it. Two of you are together one day and the next day one of you is gone.

By the way, the bed here in question is where people lounged around the place where they shared a meal together.

This saying of Jesus was probably a proverb in the culture much like our “here today, gone tomorrow.”

The function this teaching served for the early community was, that being the case, now what? What are you going to do while you wait for the other shoe, death, to drop? Salome, who was one of the women present in the parable created about Jesus’ resurrection, has a turn around moment. Jesus, here, is presenting the same message but in different words he came out of what is referred to as the “temptation experience,” with; that he is one with “what is,” evokes from this woman, the response, “I want this too.” It is a turning point in her life as it is in anyone who gets a glimpse of wholeness.

Jesus says to her, in essence, “If you work to become who you are, you will be enlightened. If hang on to the belief that you are your ego, you will live in darkness.”

I'll leave it for you to decide whether we live in a dark time or not, a time beset by silliness and dogmatic certitudes. Even more personally, you'll have to determine for yourself where you are on the journey with peace, love and joy.

What I know is that there is a path that we can follow that takes us from one level to another on the on-going journey where we deepen our experience of and time spent in peace, love and joy.

And it is that path that we can work diligently to follow while we wait for the other shoe to drop.

I don't know about you, but on a personal level just about the time I feel I've got the hang of this religious/spiritual journey, something comes along to show me how imprisoned I am; caught in some stance that separates me from myself and others. These things include bad habits, false beliefs, cultural norms and so forth. Again, I don't know about you but I can be so bound up that I don't see how separated I am from who I truly am. And, because of that, I suffer.

I was so pleased when I picked up Sandra Maitri's book to read that she never teaches a course on the Enneagram without telling a particular Sufi story. It is one of my favorites. I've told it to you before. But maybe today, after hearing more about how we get separated from our true Selves, the story might mean more, push you into more non-duality, toward mysticism. Perhaps, even awe.

This story comes from the Sufi tradition.

Once there lived a metalworker, a locksmith, who was unjustly accused of crimes and was sentenced to a deep, dark prison. After he had been there awhile, his wife who loved him very much went to the King and beseeched him that she might at least give her husband a prayer rug so he could observe his five prostrations every day. Prayer five times a day is one of the pillars of the Muslim religion. It wouldn't hurt any of us or our world to engage in that practice, would it?

The King considered her request a lawful one, so he let the woman bring her husband a prayer rug. The prisoner was thankful to get the rug from his wife, and every day he faithfully did his five prostrations on the rug.

Much later, the man escaped from prison, and when people asked him how he got out, he explained that after years of doing his prostrations and praying for deliverance from the prison, he began to see what was right in front of his nose. One day he suddenly saw that his wife had woven into the prayer rug the pattern of the mechanism of the lock that imprisoned him. He now knew how the lock worked. Once he realized this and understood that all the information he needed to escape was already in his possession, he began to make friends with his guards. He also persuaded the guards that they all would have a better life if they cooperated and escaped the prison together. They agreed since, although they were guards, they realized that they were in prison, too. They also wished to escape, but they had no means to do so.

So the locksmith and his guards decided on the following plan: the guards would bring him pieces of metal, and he would fashion useful items from them to sell in the marketplace. Together they would amass resources for their escape, and from the strongest piece of metal they could acquire, the locksmith would fashion a key.

One night, when everything had been prepared, the locksmith and his guards unlocked the prison and walked out into the cool night where his beloved wife was waiting for him. He left the prayer rug behind so that any other prisoner who was clever enough to read the pattern of the rug could also make his escape. Thus, the locksmith was reunited with his loving wife, his former guards became his friends, and everyone lived in harmony. Love and skillfulness prevailed.

A man is in prison, unjustly so, and his wife sends him a prayer rug.

The woman in this story is the personification of wisdom. Sofia is her name. “Wisdom” was a name Jesus used for God. There is a wisdom available to us that can lead us to walk the path of freedom and love.

It doesn't come easily.

This is reflected in the story by the man's praying five times a day for years before it dawns on him and, when it does, he realizes that the truth he needs for freedom has been right in front of his nose all along.

He does, however, have work to do.

He must take the guards - those aspects of himself that he might at first consider his enemies - and make useful items of them. In the process he works to develop a new relationship with those aspects of himself Jung called our Shadow. In Enneagram work it is called becoming aware of the lower functioning aspects of our personality type. In religious language it is called being aware of confessing and repenting our sins. The result of this work is that he is set free.

Please be aware. Freedom is not a place we get to any more than love is. It is a process, a path we walk, sometimes with immense difficulty, until we drop the body. What I am saying is that if we do the work of waking up, our lives can be a wonderful unfolding of beauty and joy. This is what happened to those early followers of Jesus and it is why they started a movement that attracted and transformed others.

Jesus had the expansive understanding of both God and of people and he kept saying in word and deed, "There is a magnificent, richly furnished mansion in which to live. Beautifully kept grounds all around. But you are living in a dingy closet in the basement." And to people in power who forced that view of identity onto others, he gave them hell. Spiritual teachers who have offered wise and useful teachings have consistently reminded those who would listen, "You have fallen asleep to yourself and your own lives." And its true. Most of the day we walk around preoccupied by ideas, anxieties, worries, judgments and the like. Seldom are we present to ourselves and to our immediate experience.

The opportunities we have to be bound for freedom and love are limitless.

May we make the most of them - Before the other shoe drops.

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