

Being Profoundly Disturbed By Great Joy

Today, using a question that Jesus asked, I want to share with you what has got to be one of the most controversial, at least one of the most resisted, teachings I have ever offered. Certainly, it is the most misunderstood.

The question that I have in mind that Jesus raised in his teachings is, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?” (Mark 2:19)

Eugene Peterson translates the passage in which this saying appears like this:

Jesus said, “When you’re celebrating a wedding, you don’t skimp on the cake and wine. You feast. Later you may need to pull in your belt, but not now. As long as the bride and groom are with you, you have a good time. No one throws cold water on a friendly bonfire. This is Kingdom Come!”

My version of this this is: We have a moral obligation to be happy.

No teaching I have ever offered, not even my teachings about the virgin birth or the substitutionary theory of the atonement or my understanding of resurrection, has gotten as much pushback has this one.

This talk is about how that teaching came to be. It is also intended to be an illustration of what it means to listen to the messages that come to us from the depths of our unconscious.

I have kept a dream journal for many decades. I quoted John Sanford last week as saying, “Having a dream and not honoring it is like getting a letter from God and not reading it.”

Here is a dream I had. It was so vivid. So intensely real. Though the content of the dream is disturbing, even frightening, during the dream itself, I felt no anxiety whatsoever. Nothing seemed amiss.

In the dream I had gone back to Columbia, Tennessee, which is the town in which I lived from the time I was six until I left home to go to college. The reason I had returned there was to visit an undertaker at a funeral home there. In the outer world this funeral home is a place I have been in many times. I have attended or conducted or spoken at many funeral services in that place.

The difference between a funeral and a memorial service is that at a funeral, the body is present in a casket, that is usually open. The difference between a casket and a coffin is the shape. The word “casket” is borrowed from the French and means “a box in which we keep precious jewels.”

I went to this funeral home because I had business of some sort to conduct with the undertaker. These people are called “undertakers” because they under take tasks no one else wants to do. When I arrived he was busy embalming a body. So I waited in the vestibule of the building which was an old antebellum home that had been turned into a funeral home. That is true in the outer world as well.

In a time before the current funeral industry came into being, when someone died, the body was washed and dressed and placed into a coffin which was placed in the room in the home that was called “the parlor.” That is where the family would receive visitors. Then the coffin would be taken to a church for a funeral service to be conducted.

When the funeral industry began to take over dealing with the dead, they called their establishments “funeral parlors.”

American architects didn’t know what to call the room that used to be the parlor in American homes. The “parlor” once used for the viewing of the dead now became the “living room” rather than the room for the dead, or the dying room. That’s the etymology of that word in our homes we call “the living room.” Then, interestingly enough, the establishments that took care of the dead became known as “funeral homes.”

At any rate, in my dream I am standing in the vestibule of this funeral home waiting to see the undertaker. All along the walls of every visitation room were caskets. Each was open and each

contained a body. Usually there is only one casket to a visitation room but these rooms were all lined with caskets. I noticed something strange. One of the bodies was breathing. I could clearly see the chest moving up and down. I went over and looked in the casket and there I saw the body of my father. He looked as if he were asleep. He was clearly breathing.

I walked back to await my meeting with the undertaker. Before long he emerged wiping his bloody hands on a towel. He also had blood on the smock he was wearing. Clearly he had been busy embalming a body.

We greeted each other and I said, “Before we get down to business, there is something you should know. There is a body in that casket over there that is breathing.” The undertaker replied, “Oh yes. We know all about that. That man is afraid of the process of being embalmed. He is about to die. We are keeping an eye on him. As soon as he dies, we are going to close the casket and bury it.”

In the dream that made perfect sense to me.

I woke up.

I had that dream almost twenty-five years ago. It shook me to my core. Although it took me a while to work out the meaning of the dream in the living of my life, I knew immediately that it sought to convey a powerful message.

The location of a dream and the characters in a dream are all there, created by the unconscious, for a purpose. In this dream I was taken back not only to my home of origin but to a specific place there. I was taken not to a school or a hospital but to a place where dead things and people are prepared for burial. Except in this case one of the characters, namely my father, was still alive. Dying, but still alive.

Jung said that the greatest burden any parent can give a child is that parent's own un-lived life. All the characters in our dreams represent aspects of ourselves. Dreaming about one's parent evokes that particular parental complex. Which, in this case, isn't about my father in particular but about all the hopes and fears, messages, strengths and weaknesses. By the way, this dream occurred about ten years before my actual father did in fact die.

The undertaker in this dream is that part of me that I can draw on who is capable of dealing with the sacrifice, or sacrifices, involved, that's what the blood stands for, in undertaking the tasks that need to be done to put away that which no longer serves me and that I no longer need to be in service to. That part of me is capable of noticing when something is about to or needs to die and dealing with that. And, doing so rather matter of factly.

At the time this dream occurred we had been members of St. Paul's for about ten years. I had been asked, within two or three weeks of joining if I would teach a Sunday School class here. I agreed to teach a class, which I called "Mind and Spirit," for twelve weeks. That twelve-week period stretched into ten years. During this time I had allowed myself to become an unpaid staff member here. I was participating in worship every week, I had begun to do weddings, funerals and baptisms. Sherry and I taught a marriage seminar here four times a year. I mostly loved every minute of it but it was not what I had agreed to do.

This dream, and another one of equal power, send me the message that that part of my life needed to be allowed to die and get buried. So, I quit. That was the second time in my life that I can honestly say that working with dreams saved my life.

I had no conscious idea that I was going to quit that work. I had no idea what I was going to do with the hours it took to prepare lessons. What I did was immerse myself in Jungian analysis and training. That intense inward journey led me to seek clarity about what would be the principles by which I would live the rest of my life on this planet. I would call them the principles of Ordinary Life.

Jung says that our lives are a brief interlude between two mysteries and that our task is to make that pause as luminous as possible. What new life wants to emerge in this world through

me? I believe it is the responsibility of each of us to answer this question with as much clarity and courage as possible.

Once after giving a talk somewhat along the lines of this one, one urging people to live more reflectively, pay attention to their inner lives, take up a meditation practice and the like, someone came up to me and said, “Why should I do any of this if I am happy with the way things are going in my life? Besides, I already feel like I have more to do than I can manage.” I can certainly understand the last part of that. The only problem is that you may not be living your life, but someone else’s. This is why I encourage you to read “The Examined Life.”

Kabir the 15th century Indian mystic, poet and teacher wrote -

“There is one thing in this world you must never forget to do. If you forget everything else and not this, there’s nothing to worry about, but if you remember everything else and forget this, then you will have done nothing in your life.

“It’s as if a king has sent you to some country to do a task, and you perform a hundred other services, but not the one he sent you to do.”

Though I did gain clarity during this time that my calling is that of being a spiritual teacher, I had no idea that it would take this shape. What I initially did was respond more deeply to the people, both living and dead, who resonated deeply within my

own being. The thing or things that they had in common was that each of them emphasized the essential nature of non-dual mind and integration.

One way to define “integration” is that it is the process of recognizing disowned, repressed, denied aspects of ourselves and bringing them into our awareness in a way that we can own them rather than being owned by them. The more I spent time with these people and the experiences my involvement with them offered me, the more I realized that they experienced what we might call the transcendent and the transformative in “ordinary life.” In “what is.”

Again: The teachers with whom I resonate, both living and dead, experience the transcendent and transformation in “ordinary life.”

One powerful paradox I encountered is that, to a person, each of these people, though they talked about the importance of moving beyond belonging and belief systems, did their teaching within the context of belonging and belief systems. But, they were not, are not bound by these systems. They are not constricted by them. To a person they each in her or his own way taught about the importance of doing one’s inner work in order to live with integrity - that is, growing wholeness - in the outer world.

Some people are frightened of the words “mystic” and “mysticism.” No need to be. A mystic is someone who has moved beyond belonging and belief systems.

Though I have been committed to some kind of spiritual practice for decades, I did the ten-day meditation training well over quarter of a century ago, this period of study only intensified my belief and practice about this.

Folks, the evidence is in on this. If you want your life to go better, have a daily practice. No, it won't help you avoid the inevitable difficulties, disappointments and deaths you will encounter; but it will make your life go better. You'll live with less fear and anxiety.

In every culture, the people who are engaged in altruistic activities are those who are the happiest while those who own and carry the most guns are the angriest. Study after study shows that people who meditate daily are less depressed, less anxious and less angry than they were before and than people are who don't have a practice. There are thousands of years of study and experience to back this up but you will never know until you try it for yourself.

Those of you who use the We Croak app have seen the quote that says: Meditation can turn fools into sages. Unfortunately, fools seldom meditate.

The question I asked myself was: What is it that people who are at the highest levels of doing and loving in all cultures have in common? What I came up with, and many of you have seen this before, is that the central truth of and for spiritual practice is “paying attention” to “what is.” And, developing the resources to be present to “what is” in a non-judgmental manner.

This is very faith-friendly.

It is very faith-neutral.

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

I began to keep a journal. What was it that the people I most admired, whether they were living or dead, had most in common? Being smart was not on the list. Though many of them, if not most, were brilliant, they were more: they were wise, understanding, compassionate. I’m sure you have known people who are brilliant but are jerks, who have the relational skill of lint. Most of such people have no self-reflective capacity. Most people think they are above average drivers, too.

By the way, I can be just as reactive as anybody. The other day a driver ran a stop sign right in front of me. If I had been just ten seconds earlier, she would have slammed right into me. I was judgmental. But, I thought, I teach about being non-judgmental.

So, I'm still in the ball park. Out in left field but still in the ball park.

When we dream and we ourselves show up as a character in the dream, that character is a representation of our ego. The dream exists to teach the ego a lesson. This is the hardest thing to learn about dream interpretation. Which is why it is helpful, if not essential, to have someone to talk to your dreams about. The goal is not to get rid of the ego. You can't get rid of the ego anyway. Don't want to. One goal of spiritual work is to develop a strong enough ego in order to endure the inevitable losses we experience in this world.

One of my teachers, Robert Johnson, said, "You have to have a strong ego. Not an inflated ego. But a strong ego, one that knows how life works, how life is, and one that is not frightened by that knowing."

As I remind you from time to time, there is nothing in our culture that supports this sort of growth. There is very little in organized religion that supports it.

The first principle I wrote about "ordinary life" is that "we suffer from wanting to be one-up on life."

This is not new with me. Buddha begins his teachings by saying, "Life is suffering." Over and over Jesus taught about the necessity to die in order to live.

You can borrow this work I have done for your own life but you still have to do your own work. Getting clear about what your core basic beliefs are and getting clear about which ones serve you and which ones don't is the beginning of taking charge of your destiny as a human being. If you don't do it, the culture will do it for you.

I will warn you: doing this work will involve some death and dying. We want to do this "death and dying stuff" before we actually die. Meister Eckhart, a great mystic who has been a major guide for me wrote, "God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by subtracting."

For example, if you are going to have a daily practice, you are going to have to give up something - sleep, TV, Facebook, Twitter.

My goal today is not to tell you what your practice has to look like. I want, rather, to teach about how I got to a fundamental aspect of what I teach. I will say that I think it is helpful to have some way to remind yourself on a daily basis what the nature of life is and what qualities you want to bring to the world. What are the disciplines you are committed to practicing that will keep you healthy and growing in body, mind and spirit? What are the truths about life that, if you ignore them, will cost you in the long run?

I have some things that I read every single day. Among them are what are called “the five remembrances” from Buddhism.

I am the nature to grow old. I cannot escape growing old.

I am the nature of have ill health. I cannot escape having ill health. My cardiologist said to me, “Having a body is like living in a house that is on fire.” He was Buddhist.

I am of the nature to die. I cannot escape death.

All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.

I inherit the results of my acts of body, speech and mind. My actions are my continuation. This is my understanding of what the Buddhists mean by “karma.”

Now here is something I discovered. The people who embrace these realities are the happiest people I know. You’ve never met a spiritual adept who was a sourpuss. You never will.

Thich Nhat Hanh would be one example.

His books are full of his teachings about happiness. One I read every day is:

Waking up this morning, I smile.

Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.
I vow to live each moment fully
And to look at all beings with eyes of compassion.

Think about it: this comes from a spiritual system that begins with: life is suffering, you are going to suffer and die and so is everyone you love. Isn't that a hoot?

Jesus was a Jewish mystic. What's a mystic? Someone who is outside the belonging and belief system. That's all. Though they learned from within it and love it, they speak to it from outside it in the hope of reforming it.

Out of his mystical experience with John the Immerser Jesus came to an understanding of his true identity. He came from the source of all creation. He called it being a child of God. He believed everyone shared this identity. He looked around and saw that the system in which he lived was not just or compassionate. What he saw didn't fit with his spiritual experience. His experience of God as love meant including and caring for everyone.

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

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

People did not like what he said and did. Even we have to “pretty it up” to make it tolerable for us.

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

So he would tell a story:

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

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

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

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

“Or,” he would say, “the rule of God is like a wedding feast where people have an abundance of good food to eat, are just a little tipsy and have just attended an event where they wept for joy.”

This, to me, is one of the most amazing statements, or depictions, in the entire Jesus narrative. The Jesus scholars say that this is one of the authentic teachings of Jesus. Jesus didn’t teach about the kingdom of God being some mythical place we get to some day after we die but, rather, if he spoke from the kingdom of God and invited people into it, he was inviting people into an ongoing celebration.

He is doing what he is doing, teaching what he is teaching, the religious leaders are giving him a very hard time for it. They are

very critical because he doesn't fit their understanding of how things are to be and he says, "Can the wedding guests fast while the feast is still going on?" Of course not. We may or may not like it, it may or may not fit with our social and political commitments but the fact is, plain as can be, Jesus declares that life is a wedding banquet intended for everyone. As long as he is around, there is to be a feast.

The gospel accounts are not factual news reports. They are metaphorical in nature. They are parables. By the time they were written Jesus was dead and gone. But, for them, he was still around. So, that's how they lived. That's why the early Jesus followers grew to be such a powerful force. (Although that got out of hand when the Roman Empire coopted the movement.) People were attracted to a joyful, loving, compassionate, giving community of people.

I'm not sure of this but I think some people didn't, or don't, like the notion of having a moral obligation to be happy because they took it out of context, interpreted it like happiness is understood in this culture. "We have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Happiness, just like love and compassion, isn't something that is "out there," something you pursue. Happiness is the result of getting the inherited and learned roadblocks out of the way so it can find expression through how we live.

Over and over the spiritual masters tell us that we stand in the vestibule of the funeral home expected to pay attention to what has to die next. Life is constantly unpredictable, uncontrollable and challenging. I am coming more and more to see and understand that the real secret of freedom is extending the space between these unpredictable, uncontrollable and challenging events and how we respond to them. If we do not find or create meaning out of them, we become embittered. If we do, we find joy.

I remain convinced that knowing our true sacred identity and lightheartedness, or joy, are indivisible. I don't mean to imply that we are to constantly go about having a goofy grin on our faces. That's silly.

The Dalai Lama, who seems to be always smiling, said, "The most important characteristic of a spiritual teacher is joy." In the same interview where he said that, he was asked if he would rather go to heaven or to hell when he died. Of course, Buddhists don't have the Western or Christian understanding of either. But, he understood the question. He answered, "Oh, if I could help more people, I'd rather go to hell." Then he just laughed. That's an example of the moral obligation to be happy. If you have sat with someone as they are dying and been with them through that process, sad as it is, there is also an inexplicable joy in it.

I do not know what it will take, some sort of massive education, to move us from a mentality of “I, me and mine” to one of “we, us and ours.” There will be no real and lasting happiness for us until we do.

The moral obligation to be happy doesn't exist in a vacuum. It rests on a foundation of compassion, generosity and, especially, inclusivity. If and when we can see that we are connected to all that is and all who are, we will experience joy.

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