

## The Way of Paradox

I had a bit of a shock this week. I thought I had remembered, from seminary days, a book on the teachings of Jesus, titled “The Hard Sayings of Jesus.” So, I got on the Amazon site and put in the phrase “The Hard Saying of Jesus.” I found at least a dozen books with that title. So, I put the search term - the hard sayings of Jesus - into Google and within seconds was informed that my search yielded 13,800,000 results!

Now, to me, this is about as funny as things can get. I can't think of a teaching of Jesus that isn't hard - at least when heard through our cultural filters. I have been living with, working to hear and understand the teachings of Jesus for years now and the words of Jesus are both an invitation and an indictment. Both at the same time.

During his brief life Jesus sought to undermine the conventional wisdom of his time. That is to say, he took matters that were of central concern and importance to people and turned them upside down.

I'm sure, even for people only barely acquainted with Jesus and his teachings, most people know that Jesus is referred to as “the way.” Sadly, for many people Jesus gets in the way. The first label given to the community of people formed by Jesus was “people of the way.” This is not a term that comes from or is unique to what got called Christianity. It is a very Jewish term and concept. When Jesus taught that there were two ways to walk in this life, he was using a concept that would be very familiar to his Jewish hearers.

As you are aware, he taught that there was a broad and spacious way we could walk in and through life. Or, there was a straight and narrow way. One of the best conferences I ever attended with Jim Finley, and you can buy this on CDs, was one called, “Following the Mystics Through the Narrow Gates.”

The Jewish religion of Jesus was all about a way to live and be. There is the way of the Exodus, the way through the Sea, the way through the Wilderness, the way of the Torah, the way of returning from Exile, the way of Wisdom, the way of Life.

Over and over the prophets of Judaism called the Jewish people to choose the way that led to life and not the way that led to death.

The broad and easy way Jesus spoke against is not a way of obvious wickedness. Rather, the broad way is simply the way most people live most of the time. Our lives are structured out of the conventions of the society in which we live. We have some “taken for granted notions of what life is about and how to live.” We even have a term for this. We call it “conventional wisdom.” Except it isn’t wisdom at all. Indeed, it is doing us in. I think if there is one thing I have learned in and from the world of psychology, and it is something I can forget in the blink of an eye, is that we don’t live in a world of convention. Rather, convention lives within us and it does so mostly at a very unconscious level. We learn to value what our culture values, pursue what our culture tells us to pursue and see as our culture sees. This is true for all cultures and for the people who make them up.

Our challenge is this: how do we keep faith and be the spiritual beings we are, be faithful to the way of Jesus, in our kind of world?

In my effort and commitment to increase both spiritual and religious literacy, I have absolutely no interest to debate with people about the literal nature of the Bible, the virgin birth or whether we have souls that flit off to heaven or go to hell and burn for ever when we die. (We don’t.) What I am wondering about almost all of the time is how thoughtful and intelligent people such as yourselves can find and live out a deeply spiritual life that is concerned about social justice, expressions of kindness and compassion in the highly competitive and often brutally irrational world within which we live? How does one keep the faith in such a culture as ours where so-called “born again literalists” are pushing and winning with an agenda that is a heretical betrayal of what Jesus was all about?

Our goal is to live with the awareness that Jesus had, that he was a beloved child of God, and that this Love Source wanted and did find expression through him and seeks to find the same through us.

One of the solid things I’ve learned from my work in psychology is this: what we think is the difficulty that needs solving in our life and world, and in the various worlds in which we live, is something about which we are almost always mistaken.

We want a way out of the various messes we are in when, in fact, what authentic faith has to teach us is about a way in. A way into ourselves and a way into the world and various worlds we inhabit. That way is the way of paradox. Which is the title of this talk - "The Way of Paradox."

Life is not, contrary to what our culture would teach us, a game to win. You can't win. Don't play it to win. Play it to play. And, play in a way that keeps everyone else in play as well.

I do not know and won't claim to know what Jesus would say to or about our culture. I do know that he very clearly had an agenda that sought to undermine the conventional wisdom of his own culture. That is to say, he took matters that were of central concern and importance to people and simply tossed them aside.

For example, he totally disregarded the purity laws of his time. Read the story for yourself. He was always getting into trouble for doing the wrong thing at the wrong time and with the wrong people.

The honor system that gave people status he simply poked fun at. "When you are invited to a party," he said, "don't seek the seat of honor. And, don't seek the lowest seat in order to show how humble you are." Tricky guy, that Jesus.

He really gave a hard time to the wealthy. He was clear that it was easy for money and what people thought it afforded them to get in the way of the life he wanted to offer people. On that list would be major things like security and survival, esteem, power and control, and the ability to "buy one's way" into or out of things.

A cherished target of his, however, was the family. During that time people didn't leave home. The extended family gave people security and identity through out their lifetime. The family was the primary unit for economic production and, consequently, for material security. Family was the primary source of one's identity. It was the primary in-group to which one gave one's allegiance.

All of this - the so-called "hard sayings" of Jesus, a way to be and the overthrow of convention wisdom - was stirred up by and leads into our looking at the teaching we are up to in going through the Gospel of Thomas and, then, seeking to see the

relevance it has for the life we are constructing for ourselves and others, for the lives we are living. Here is that teaching -

Yeshua says,

Whoever does not reject  
father and mother  
in the way I do  
cannot be my student.  
Whoever does not welcome  
father and mother as I do  
cannot be my disciple,  
for my mother brought me forth,  
but Truth gave me life.

Let's break this teaching into two parts,

First this:

Whoever does not reject  
father and mother  
in the way I do  
cannot be my student.

Our first reaction to this teaching is to declaw it. Jesus didn't really mean this, we say. But, as I have indicated, tribal loyalties can be devastating to personal growth and cause devastation to others. Indeed, as we can see today, tribal mentality and tribal loyalties cause a threat to our entire globe. Jesus has another teaching where he warns against putting new wine in old wine skins.

I've seen and perhaps you have experienced as well families who want their children to carry on their business, adhere to their religion, continue to live in their home town, vote in their political party. People who have moved away from their place of birth decades ago can still refer to that place as home.

Wanting our children to have a spiritual path is laudable. Wanting them to have our spiritual path is ego.

A version of this teaching is found in at least four places in the Jesus tradition. It is in Luke, Matthew and two places in Thomas. It is a teaching that has certainly caused its share of anguish over the centuries. And, no doubt, it is a challenging teaching.

The word “hate” used has nothing to do with our familiar definition of an emotional state of extreme anger and rejection. It is used here in a special way.

I wish it were the case that all families were places of safety and security for the people in them. Sue Johnson, who is the originator of what is called Emotionally Focused Therapy, says that the two requirements for a good partnership in marriage are for the people in the marriage to be able to experience and create two emotional states. These states are covered in two phrases:

You are number one to me.

You are safe with me.

I wish all children were born into families where not only they are wanted but also the parents themselves are emotionally intact.

That, of course, is not the case. Perhaps you know this by your own personal experience. I think one of the reasons that some of us make better grandparents than parents is that when we became parents we not only didn't have much of a clue what we were doing but drew on unconscious archetypes of the kind of parenting we had received.

Even if parents are highly dysfunctional - like being crazy, abusive, alcoholic or the like, the bonding between a parents, especially mother, and the child is, from the child's point of view, essential for survival.

In my training a young boy, four or five, was brought into the emergency room at the hospital. His mother had poured gasoline on him and set him on fire. It happens. As the people in the ER were trying to remove the burned clothing from

his body, he was screaming at the top of his lungs, “Mommy! Mommy! I want my mommy!” And, she was the crazy woman who had done this to him.

Even in the best of family situations we pick up beliefs and adopt behaviors that frequently keep our hearts from being free to accept the deep invitation a teacher like Jesus offers to those who hear him.

What, from the mystical point of view, this teaching means is, “be wary of,” or “don’t get caught by” something on the horizontal axis that keeps you from loving and being loved on the vertical axis.

This teaching, unlike the other three places where it is found, has a second point. It is this:

Whoever does not welcome  
father and mother as I do  
cannot be my disciple,  
for my mother brought me forth,  
but Truth gave me life.

What this means is being free to love. The values stirred up by tribal loyalties, what has been called recently in our culture “family values,” are matters like sentimentality, clinging, expectation, duty. None of these are truly love. They speak more of our own needs and attachments than of that other kind of boundlessly free and freeing energy that is unconditional love, love with no strings. But that kind of love, Jesus implies, can never be generated on the horizontal axis alone, not even out of the deepest feelings of tenderness and intimacy. It always requires the direct participation of that divine non-attachment, or non-identification, which gives the other the space to be.

We all have a parentage and lineage on the horizontal axis, of course, and this must be, if we are lucky and are able to do it, respected and cherished. But our true parentage is not of the world. Something deeper than human flesh and blood called us into being — and continues to call us into being with every breath we take. It is important to get to know this “something” — because only when we set our course by its bearings will our human relationships run true.

So, we have the horizontal axis. This is what is called “being in the world.” But, there is the vertical axis. This is called “not being of the world.” Again, this is one of Jesus most famous teachings. “You must learn to be in the world but not of the world.”

This is confusing, challenging, perhaps even, off-putting.

Remember, I’m calling this talk today “The Way of Paradox.”

Jesus had his own original and unique way to present this teaching. But, it is not original with him.

Five hundred years before Jesus Buddha taught the same thing.

Buddha said that there is suffering in the world. All humans, all sentient being, suffer, and that the root cause of suffering is attachment.

A superficial hearing of this teaching might lead one to think that the way to avoid suffering is not to have attachments. But, we do get attached. We form bonds and relationships with all sorts of things and people and ideas which, when they leave us, as they inevitably do, cause is grief and pain. How are we to figure this out? How do we live the way of paradox? How can two things be true at once?

Let me show you a couple of things.

(Here were shown three examples of “ambiguous pictures”: one that can be seen as either a duck or a bunny, the classic crone or young woman and a combination of both.

The duck/rabbit illusion is over a century old and first appeared in a German humor magazine.

The old woman/young woman is also a very old example of an unstable picture. Then some genius cartoonist at the New Yorker put the two together. The old/young woman is showing, via a shadow show, a child the duck/bunny picture.)

I use these to hint at the reality that two apparently contradictory matters can be true at the same time.

In spiritual mysticism this is called sometimes “the way of unknowing.” I’m calling it the way of paradox. There is light in darkness.

We know about the darkness that is in our world giving birth to insecurity, untruth and danger. We sometimes get a glimpse of the fact that the darkness has its origins within us. It is that very real part of us called the unconscious, that about us which we do not know but which gives guidance to so much that we do.

Yet, at the same time, there is light. Not only light that provides much needed guidance and help in solving our problems in the outer world but also that light that is dawning, however slightly, within each of us of the awareness of Sacred Mystery. The very fact that you are in this room today attests to the reality of this light.

We cannot attain more of this light and the life it has for us. Paradoxically we already have that for which we seek but we will not gain growing realization of this by remaining what, where and who we are now. We have to let go.

I hinted at this in the talk last week when I said that we have to give in to the lure of mystery, adventure and truth.

What I am adding to this list today is the notion of detachment. What I mean by detachment or “having no attachments” is not regarding as real our roles or functions, our thoughts or feelings.

One of the most important kinds of meditation practice you can have is that of sitting and learning to notice the various thoughts that arise in the mind and emotions that come to the surface and notice that there is a part of you that is doing the noticing and that you are not these thoughts and emotions. You don’t even have to believe in Sacred Mystery to do this kind of meditation. If you do this practice long enough you will eventually become aware of something within that is not these thoughts or emotions. If I am watching something, then I must be different and distinct from what I am watching. The fact that I am able to watch my thoughts



and emotions means that they are different from me. I am not them. Indeed, I am none of those things which I am accustomed to regard as myself. I am not my body, nor my mind, not my emotions, not all of these things taken together. So what am I? What is me?

There is something within us which is at all times perfectly detached, tranquil and serene. It is neither excited or depressed.

As I mentioned earlier, my clinical training began in a hospital setting and we saw people who were often in dire straits. I am thinking of a woman whose daughter was killed in a tragic accident. For weeks afterwards the mother of this child was her depression. As time passed, when I would ask her how she was doing, she revealed the progress we hoped for by saying, "I am not as depressed as I was." Meaning, she was developing that observer status to her emotions. She could have an emotion and not be that emotion.

The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says that our thoughts and emotions are like ripples on the surface of a deep lake. The surface is not the reality of the lake. Deep down there is absolute calm. Strange fish live down there but that is another matter for another time.

If you want more guidance in what we are talking about right now, I could not give you better or more accessible information than to point you toward Michael Singer's book, "The Untethered Soul."

We are that which contains it all. Unless we become aware of what mystics like Thomas Merton call the "true self," we shall become tyrannized continually by our thoughts and emotions, by that which gets kicked up by all that seeks to stimulate us in the outer world - all the way from Presidential tweets to how the Astros are doing. We come to depend for our sense of well-being on our moods and activities of the moment.

It is easy to see, I hope, from what I'm saying, that the True Self has a very high degree of detachment from the everyday world and from what we normally refer to when we use the phrase, "well, this is truly who I am." Who we truly think we are most of the time is largely a matter of random and accidental circumstances.

This is why all great spiritual teachers are interested in the present moment. It is not that nothing else matters. It is just that nothing else matters.

One example I use of this is that of the pilot of an aircraft who flies with the awareness of an artist. That pilot can tell you within three seconds when the plane will touch down. That pilot flies far out in front of the plane. And, that pilot is, at the same, time totally present in the cockpit.

Back during the 1970's there was an enormously popular inspirational author, Richard Bach. His best known book was "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." Bach wrote a great line on detachment. It was, "If you love someone, set them free. If they come back they are yours; if they don't, they never were."

Of course a lot of people couldn't resist making fun of that line:

If you love someone, set them free. If they come back, it means nobody liked them. Set them free again.

If You love someone, set them free. If they come back, it is because they need money.

The best one I saw was, "If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it will always be yours. If it doesn't come back, it was never yours to begin with. But, if it just sits in your living room, messes up your stuff, eats your food, uses your telephone, takes your money and doesn't appear to realize that you had set it free - you either married it or gave birth to it."

We don't have anything we cling to - whether that be a person, an idea, a status. This is why labels are so dangerous.

Jesus didn't teach people to hate. He taught people to detach. You will find this in his teachings over and over. You will find this in all wise and useful spiritual tradition. Notice what blocks the flow of love from or to you. Notice what shuts you down. What gets in the way of realizing and expressing your true identity.

The price of wisdom may mean the separation from everything we think we hold dear.

This does not mean we have no loving connections. We do. But, the ones that matter on the horizontal plane can best be nurtured by our work to connect with our true source on the vertical plane. Again, this is something Jesus taught over and over.

My true mother and sisters and brothers are those who are here around me.

To refer to Thich Nhat Hanh again, he teaches that we should relate to all people as if they were our mother because our true origin is to be found in everything that is and all who are.

Here is the key to this “hard saying” of Jesus:

Whoever does not welcome  
father and mother as I do  
cannot be my disciple,  
for my mother brought me forth,  
but Truth gave me life.

I think that in this teaching today Jesus is saying, or reminding us, to forget everything we think we know about how life works especially at the egoic level, at the horizontal level. We cannot avoid being in that world. But we can avoid being of that world - or the various worlds we are seduced into. Jesus is teaching, “Don’t love as the world loves. Love as I love. Indiscriminately, tied by no tribal rules or roles.”

Over and over in many varied ways Jesus says to us, “I am a beloved child of God. Wisdom is my mother. You, too, are a beloved child of God. Let wisdom birth you. Walk the way of paradox.”

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