

Living Life As A Miracle

There are two quotes that I use from Albert Einstein often.

One is, “No problem can be solved with the same level of consciousness that created it.”

This is reason enough for leaving a story that is not serving us well for another that can create the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.

In every wise and useful spiritual tradition I am aware of the goal of being involved in the spiritual practices of that tradition is to awaken. That is, of course, a very dualistic way of speaking. There is no place to get to because we are already there. We awaken from the dream of separation to know that separation is not true and never has been. We are and always have been connected with all that is.

We do our practices, we give ourselves to the work of growing in learning to see with the eyes of the mind, the eyes of the heart, the eyes of the Self so that we might be gifted with the awareness that the story of separation in which we are immersed is not true and never has been.

Unless a person is mentally unbalanced, everyone has a desire for health, love and wholeness. We live, however, in a culture of dualism that pressures us toward contraction, fragmentation, division and separation - the dualism of “me and that.”

Even though it is in the nature of humans to grow old, get sick and die; the mechanism of the cosmos is toward healing. Wounds heal. We can participate consciously in this process but not at the same level of consciousness that creates the story of separation. Seeking relief from separation doesn't work. We can only awaken from the dream of separation, from the nightmare really, of separation and recognize that it isn't true and never has been.

You know in your bones without my having to marshal any evidence for it that it is our attraction to wholeness that drives our healthiest and noblest choices. It is who we truly are.

I know, I know: we experience ourselves as separate individuals. We live in a world where we find ourselves having to account for ourselves as separate individuals. We have different roles for different parts of our lives. We have roles to play and rules to follow. The wholeness that the cosmos is is indifferent to our illusions of separateness. We have been conditioned and educated even to think of “the whole” as something out there, separate from us. We’ve been taught that the good of the individual, the family, the group, the political party, the nation is more important than the good of the Whole.

What is so ironic, and perplexing, is that separate thinking is so productive. The very consciousness that is creating so much confusion, division, conflict and fragmentation are the very processes that have advanced so much knowledge and progress. They are the very things that, for example, create the telescopes that allow us to explore light-years into the cosmos. All of this has been an enormous blessing.

But it has also been a curse. It has estranged us from our very source of being. We are, I fear, addicted to it. We live in what Terry Patten calls a “consensus trance.” This trance, or level of consciousness, has led us into the conflictual and destructive places where we are today. This conflict is not only between humans but between humans and the very planet on which we live.

It seems that an increasing number of people in the world and in this country simply do not reside in the same moral and epistemological world as people who speak of union and wholeness. Apparently a growing number of people don’t believe in or trust anything that transcends partisanship. What people care about is prevailing against their opponents. Evidently at all costs.

Let me ask you a question: Who is the most trusted person in the United States?

I know there are people we like, people we cheer for, people we want to win. But what voice do you trust?

You are not about to hear a diatribe about “the good old days” because there is no such thing. Things are different than they were and are evolving, changing. I’m going to amplify on this more next week but in order for change to occur, old

orders have to pass away and sometimes this involves great chaos, much fear, sometimes lots of denial, dark nights of the soul to use the phrase from the mystic “John of the Cross.”

I’m thinking about things like what is going on in the larger Methodist Church right now. The Methodist denomination is heading for a General Conference this coming February where a decision will be made public about the issue of full inclusion of all people at all levels in the life and work of the church. You wouldn’t think this should be a big deal if you listen to Jesus. But, it is. Just like in our political culture, judgements are being made across ideological lines that are straining relationships and causing some people to feel excluded and others to feel that they are just protecting the doctrine.

In the Roman Catholic Church new revelations about the sexual abuse of children and youth for decades by clergy are shaking the Church to its core. I can tell you as a therapist who has worked with people who themselves or their children have been sexually molested by clergy that such abuse constitutes a spiritual trauma that some folks never recover from and it blocks them from any exploration of useful spirituality.

Roman Catholics don’t have the corner on the sexual abuse market. Evangelicals like Bill Hybels are in it as well. Hybels was founder of Willow Creek Community Church, which has been a pattern for many churches seeking to grow in their membership and influence. Hybels was exposed to have a decades long pattern of predatory sexual behavior. He was looked up to and used as a role model by hundreds of people.

Many leaders in one stream of evangelical Christianity either shrug their shoulders or turn a blind eye to our president’s affair with a pornographic actress during his third marriage. No parent would want either one of these people as a role model for their son or daughter yet somehow it is permissible in our leaders.

In all of these cases one wonders how the church regains its credibility or can speak with moral authority. What are the main things that we value? How do we keep them as the main things?

Who is the most trusted voice in American culture? I don't have an answer for that. What I was thinking the other night while listening to people on one so-called "news" program shouting, literally shouting, at each other is that I miss Walter Cronkite. He, at one time, by a national poll was listed as "the most trusted voice in America."

What we see happening in our culture is the end of an era. I spoke at length to Michael Dowd this week about his coming here and we got to talking about the things that are going on in American culture and politics today. He said, that looking back over the long sweep of human civilizations, we have all the marks of the end of an era. "If," he said, "the precondition for creativity is chaos, then get ready for a lot of creativity because we are about to undergo a lot of chaos."

Thomas Merton once said that "religion will not survive based on tribal consciousness. It will do itself in." I think we can extrapolate from that that nothing will survive based on tribal consciousness. One of the things we can learn from history is that we don't learn from history. The way I would restate that based on this current theme of living in the gap between the "no-longer" and the "not-yet" is that no matter what "good" we undertake to do, if done out of the story of separation, it will not ultimately save us. For that we need a miracle.

Which leads me to the other line of Einstein's I like:

"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." I'm calling this talk "Living Life As A Miracle."

We have begun to talk about miracles and the miraculous in these times together. I'm continuing to deconstruct the Christian Fundamentalist teaching that the miracles of Jesus are things that literally happened. To embrace the miracle stories that are found in the Jesus' narratives at the literal level is to merely skim the surface of their deeper meaning. Such skimming is, I believe, the major sin of our culture. Not only when it comes to religion and spirituality but also when it comes to life in general. The sin of superficiality is doing us in. We are, in the words of Neil Postman's critically important book, "entertaining ourselves to death."

You don't hear many reports of miracles today. They seem to have gone the way of the dinosaurs. I can remember a time before digital cameras and cell phones when we would hear, from time to time, reports of flying saucers. Usually they came from the rural South. Not so much any more. Although people can do wonders with Photoshop.

To a thinking person in this post-Copernican era and age of science the kind of miracles one reads about in the Bible are just difficult to buy into. All you have to do is use Google to find out the truth about what anyone claims to be a true miracle.

A biblical and church scholar I respect a lot, a man who is a member of the Jesus Seminar is John Shelby Spong. I know that some of you have read his latest, and what will be his last, book, "Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today." I highly recommend this to you as a very readable and accessible way to get an overview of what progressive biblical and theological scholarship is saying today. Spong writes, "In a post-Newtonian world, supernatural invasions of the natural order, performed by God or an 'incarnate Jesus,' are simply not viable explanations of what actually happened. Miracles do not ever imply magic."

Miracles do imply something but not magic. That's superficial. Our spirituality, if it is to transform us, must go deeper than that.

So what can we possibly mean in talking about miracles or the miraculous?

If you have been here even once before, you know that one of my teaching goals is to contribute to biblical and spiritual literacy. This is a time for boldness. I want our spiritual and religious work to awaken and liberate us so that we can be empowered to change the world. We are the people we have been waiting for.

Let me be clear: I'm not trashing the church or our country. I am so enormously grateful to the history that led me here. I benefited from it so much in so many ways. But I also don't want to be blinded by or bound to it in such a way that I can't participate in constructing the very future that my past taught me was

important. What I have learned from it is that how we behave is far more important than what we believe. Peace, love, joy and patience trump doctrine every time.

I want these times together to challenge us to move - whether we have to crawl, limp, walk or run - out of our comfort zone into a space where loyalty to tribe does not blind us to what is or bind us to beliefs and behaviors that contribute to separation.

We must learn how to be present to Intelligent Heart with intelligent hearts.

What I want to teach about today is not a miracle, though the literalist would take it to be. It is the story that is most commonly known as Jonah and the Whale - though the word "whale" is never mentioned in this brief parable. The term used is "great fish."

We are going to the Balkans in a few weeks and I have been reading one history of that area of the world. It has been the site of one of the largest genocides on the planet - the largest was that done to Native Americans in this country. All of the killing that was done there was fueled by religious fundamentalism - from the Christians, the Muslims, the Orthodox and the Catholics.

Embodying peace, love, joy and patience from an integral perspective is hard. I'm thinking of adding "humility" to this list. Ken Wilber writes, "No one is smart enough to be wrong 100% of the time. Every perspective is both true and partial." This would lead us to what he calls "epistemological humility."

So back to the story of Jonah. In order to understand it we have to have some understanding of what was going on in the Jewish mind at the time.

Around 600 BCE, the city of Jerusalem was invaded and captured by the Babylonians. The Jews had lived in relative peace and protection for several centuries so this event was a profound shock. The Jews had come to believe that they lived under the protection of God who lived in the temple in Jerusalem. They believed that they were indestructible and that God would protect them. Both of these beliefs were now destroyed. After all, they had for centuries lived with the belief that they were God's chosen and favored people.

So, for several generations the Jews were in exile from their homeland.

Finally, after two centuries the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians and the Jews were allowed to return to their homeland. They began to rebuild their homeland. They wanted to make sure that they didn't experience such a fate again so they wanted to figure out why God had allowed this to happen to them so they would never again experience defeat and exile.

At first they thought it was because their forefathers had not been faithful to the covenant and because of that God had punished them. But, that story wouldn't work because it dishonored their parents - a clear violation of one of the Ten Commandments.

So, they came up with a better idea. They would blame someone else, some other group. Alien influences were to blame. Some of their weaker ancestors had married foreign partners. These Gentiles, as they were called, brought corruption to their nation. They polluted the faith and they compromised racial purity. If that was the case, then the solution was clear: they must purge their country and their population by banishing these non-Jewish elements from the land. The new land was for Jews only. (Any of this sound familiar?)

So the laws were put in place. Vigilante squads were given instruction to check blood lines back ten generations. This is how the Jewish state entered a period of internal violence. Many of the laws used today to exclude homosexuals were formed in this very period. Actually, there is only one reference in Leviticus. Other laws were put in place at this time to absolutely separate the Jewish people from all others. These laws included laws about marriage, circumcision, dietary laws, etc. These are referred to as "the purity laws."

There was a prophet, we do not know his name, who didn't like what was happening. He wanted to challenge what was becoming a prevailing attitude. He couldn't do it openly. If he did, that would be interpreted as inviting a new defeat and another exile. He had to attack these attitudes in a subtle way. But they had to be attacked because they contained the elements of self-destructiveness in them.

We have a lot of policies in place, in politics and in religious establishments, that are only going to end up shooting ourselves in the foot. But the people behind the policies don't see it that way. They claim they are only maintaining doctrinal purity or insuring the "win" for their group they have been fighting so long and hard for.

At any rate, this guy decided to write a story, a fanciful story filled with the exaggeration of a world of make-believe, but so enchanting that everyone would want to hear it. When he finished it, it appeared suddenly and anonymously in Jerusalem at the height of ethnic cleaning. As was the custom, the town crier gathered some people around him and this is the story he read:

The Story of Jonah

Once upon a time there was a prophet in Israel whose name was Jonah. God called to Jonah and told him that he must go to preach to the people of Nineveh. "Nineveh!" proclaimed Jonah. "You must be kidding. That is an unclean Gentile city. Why would you want me to do something that weird?" God was adamant, however, and God's message was clear, so Jonah had to respond.

He did so in the classic way that people do when they are told by an authority figure to do something they really do not want to do. Jonah said yes but he meant no, since he had no intention of obeying.

Jonah, however, went through all the motions of leaving. He went to his home, packed a suitcase, went down to the port and booked passage on a boat, but his ticket was to Tarshish and not to Nineveh. One does not go by sea to Nineveh. He reasoned, however, that if caught, he could claim that he had misunderstood and by that time, God would surely have had second thoughts anyway.

All went well as Jonah boarded the ship, unpacked his suitcase in his stateroom, put on his Bermuda shorts, got a good book and positioned himself topside in a deck chair as the ship pulled out into the Mediterranean Sea. The trip was uneventful until a dark cloud in the sky seemed to be shadowing the boat. Aware of this dark presence, the captain tried to escape it by turning the boat first to the right and then to the left, but the cloud turned in concert with the boat. While the rest of the sky was clear and blue, this cloud got darker and darker and from within it

came flashes of lightning, the roar of thunder and finally rain. So strange was this phenomenon that the captain drew the obvious conclusion: Someone up there does not like someone down here. In what he regarded as a scientific fashion, he sought to identify the culprit. He drew straws and the lot fell on Jonah.

“What is this that you have done, Jonah?” the captain asked. “Well, God did tell me to go preach to the Ninevites, but I knew that God could not possibly care for the Ninevites, so I booked passage on this boat instead.” The captain, who did not care for Ninevites either, understood and thought he could ride out the storm, until a bolt of lightning struck nearby and a wave from the sea swept over the boat, hurling Jonah’s deck chair from one end of the ship to the other.

That was when the captain weighed his own security against Jonah’s decision and decided that Jonah had to go. So, with the help of three deck hands, Jonah was seized by his limbs and on the count of three the men heaved him overboard.

Jonah never hit the water. God had created a great fish (the word “whale” never occurs in this story), which had been swimming in tandem with this boat, waiting for its moment in the drama. Jonah fell into its open jaws, which closed over him, and Jonah found himself living in the belly of this great fish.

Jonah had amazing adaptive qualities, so he settled down to make his new home comfortable, rearranging the furniture and hanging the curtains. For three days and nights, Jonah lived in this new, but somewhat confining, Mediterranean condominium, until even the great fish could not tolerate Jonah any longer (perhaps he smoked!). So it was that with a great primeval belch, the fish threw up Jonah, who tumbled head over heels onto a conveniently located sandbar in the midst of the sea.

As Jonah was clearing his head and taking in his new situation, he heard a voice saying, “Jonah how would you like to preach to the people of Nineveh?” With the stench of the fish’s belly still clinging to him, Jonah didn’t have to think long. “Okay, God,” he said, “you win. I’ll go.”

Once Jonah was in Nineveh, but still convinced that God was making a mistake, he opted for a new form of resistance. In Frank Sinatra fashion, he concluded, I’ll do

it, God, but I'll do it my way! I'll preach to the Ninevites, but I'll preach by muttering under my breath and I'll do that only on the back streets and alleyways of the city.

So around the city Jonah went, muttering: "God says to repent. Repent and turn to God," hoping no one would hear. To his amazement everyone heard. Crowds poured into the streets from every house and condominium of the city, confessing their sins, tearing their clothes in repentance and begging for God's mercy.

Jonah was apparently the most successful evangelist in the history of the world! Modern televangelists would eat their hearts out for this kind of response.

Jonah, however, was angry. Storming out of the city, he said: "I knew this would happen, God. That is why I did not want to come. These wretched people deserve punishment. I know you, God! I know you will forgive! Why, God, does your love not stop at the boundaries of my ability to love?"

Jonah found a spot outside the city where he sat and sulked. The sounds of the revival could be heard as "Sweet Hour of Prayer" and "Just As I Am" and "Amazing Grace" were being sung by the penitents. God was strangely silent, however, and night fell.

When Jonah awoke, a giant plant had grown up near his head. During the day Jonah found protection from the desert sun in its foliage and sanctuary from the biting desert wind in its trunk at night, but God was still silent and night fell once more.

That night God created a worm that ate the giant tree, leaving only a small pile of sawdust. When Jonah awoke, he was distraught at the loss of his beloved tree. He wept, mourned and felt the depth of bereavement.

Finally, God broke the divine silence and said, "Jonah, how is it that you can have such passionate feelings and empathy for this tree and yet you appear to have no compassion at all for the one hundred and twenty thousand people who live in Nineveh, to say nothing of their cattle?"

That is the story of Jonah. Imagine: it is being read on the streets of a city where ethnic cleansing is taking place. It is a hilarious story. The people roared at the depth of Jonah's bigotry - until, they realized that Jonah was themselves.

(I got and adapted this telling of the parable of Jonah from John Shelby Spong's work.)

The Bible is the only book I know that is not only written from the perspective of those on the bottom but also contains this self-critical element.

The little book of Jonah is in the Bible to say that the love that God is is unbounded by any limits humans put on it or by religion's inability to be inclusive. There are no boundaries on the love of God. This is the message of Jonah. How dare any one or any institution put anyone beyond God's embracing love?! The book of Jonah stands as judgment against such attitudes.

It's a great story. I hope we can hear it. If we can, we will live miraculous lives.

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