

Comfortable With Uncertainty

I'm calling this talk "Comfortable With Uncertainty."

The fact that we are living in the midst of the huge paradigm shift I am trying to speak to in both a religious and spiritual way is something that makes all of us feel insecure or threatened. Though in some areas of life we can find change exciting and/or invigorating, in most areas and ways we find change difficult. Especially if these changes are in areas where we have fixed ideas and opinions, or strongly held beliefs.

Though I am fairly certain that the predictions about the future of the Christian movement are correct, that is without major changes being made the future of Christianity in the West is as bleak as can be, I cannot with the same confidence or certainty tell you what the future looks like. Nor can anyone else.

The reactions to the paradigm shift we are experiencing are profound. The ambiguity about the future is troubling. How can we live comfortably in the midst of all of this? How can we be comfortable with uncertainty?

This title is not original with me. I got it from Pema Chodron. Pema Chodron is an American Buddhist nun and is very popular among not only Buddhists but also people of all religious and/or spiritual persuasions all over the world. She is the resident teacher at Gampo Abbey which is the first Tibetan monastery in North America. She has written and taught extensively and, in my opinion, has a gift for giving great titles for books and coming up with memorable lines. In addition to "Comfortable With Uncertainty," she has also written, among other books, "The Places That Scare You" and "When Things Fall Apart." If you do a search for "Pema Chodron Quotes" you will find some great ones. For example, "Let difficulty transform you. And it will. In my experience, we just need help in learning how not to run away."

One of my favorite cartoons is Non Sequitur by Wiley Miller. Sometimes the cartoon is a single panel and sometimes it consists of several panels stretched over a couple of days. This one series really captures so much of the truth of the psycho/

spiritual journey. One of the characters has gotten all caught up in the desire to “grow up,” to be older than she is. Like Alice in Wonderland she has fallen down a rabbit hole where she encounters doors with various ages on them, though she doesn’t know what they are at the time. She also encounters her “guide,” though she doesn’t know this either. They go along for quite a way until they finally reach the edge of a cliff:

“What’s this scary-looking thing?”

“The road to serenity . . . There are plenty of easier, mundane roads in life, but only this one will lead you to true contentment of the soul. It’s the leap of faith that stops most people.”

“How are you supposed to see your way?”

“By following your bliss.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for this.”

“Yes, I know dear . . . Sometimes we just need a little push.”

“Wait . . . What?!”

“Bye for now, dear. Just remember it’s never too early to start following our bliss . . . but we don’t need to be in a rush to grow up.”

“Poomph! Wait, did she say, ‘Our’ and ‘we’?” (She arrives at “blissfulness.” And, I would add, a return to Ordinary Life.)

What a wonderful tale. So full of truth. We have to take the risk of falling into the unknown. Sometimes we do need a little push. Usually life accommodates. One of the first things my teacher said to me was, “My job is to push you off the path. Your job is to get back on.”

Lots of things push people off the path. We read about them every day in the paper and see them on the news. Power, greed, envy, sex, money, drugs and other things can do it.

Joseph Campbell who introduced us to the phrase “follow your bliss” was clear that it didn’t mean to do whatever made you happy but to do what gave your life meaning, to do what it was your unique gift to contribute to the evolutionary journey.

We never think we are ready for this undertaking.

It is never too soon to start.

We don’t have to push the process.

If we are open to see, there is always Sacred Presence with us. And, after enlightenment, as the Buddhist say, you have to do the laundry.

So, here is another Pema Chodron quote that is very to the point of this talk:

“When we resist change, it’s called suffering. But when we can completely let go and not struggle against it, when we can embrace the groundlessness of our situation and relax into its dynamic quality, that’s called enlightenment.”

Her writings are full of this kind and quality of commentary. The Buddhists are masters of this because, though you will find aspects of this in all the living religious and wisdom traditions, Buddhism is virtually founded on the notion that nothing lasts, that things are always coming into and passing out of existence. This is true not only of our circumstances but also of ourselves.

Not only did I get the title of today’s talk from her, I’ve used this title for two talks previously I’ve given during the course of teaching Ordinary Life. One in March of 2003 and one in February of 2004. I went back and read those talks and wondered, “Who was that guy who wrote this stuff?” Don’t worry. You are not getting a regurgitated form of either of those talks today.

I want you to notice that the title is not “Getting Rid of Uncertainty.”

Our religious practices and spiritual faith should be designed to empower us to live into whatever future we have not with wariness, but with trust. And, with lives marked by humility, authenticity, responsibility and service. It is this that I want to expand on in this talk.

Last week we talked about the fact that doing psycho/spiritual work is just that, work. It is not exotic or other worldly as some seem to think spiritual practice is. It is first of all doing the mental discipline required to being open to a different way of looking at things, perhaps even an entirely different world view. I likened it last week to moving to a different country that requires a different language, different customs, different neighbors, etc. It can involve the disappointment or disillusionment that comes with leaving a once former position and moving into another one.

Let me give a couple of scenarios.

Suppose you have a little or perhaps a lot of church going experience. Maybe even you went to Sunday School as a child. You know about the collection of writings that is called “The New Testament.” You have heard it read from in worship services with the assurance that it is “the Word of God.”

Perhaps you have next to no church experience. Even so, it is virtually impossible to live in this culture without knowing about the Bible and that it is considered the authoritative collection of writings for Christians, “Holy Scripture.”

Unless you have taken a course on New Testament studies, have read a book on the Bible by someone like Marcus Borg or John Shelby Spong or heard someone like me speak, the likelihood is that you think when you hear something from the Bible read, and this is virtually a mental reflex based on how we think about other books, especially those that are presented as history, that what you hear is something that falls into the category of being like a news report. Then you learn that this is not the case for any of the writings we have in the Bible. This begins to open you, if you are open to it, to a different way of thinking about the Bible.

Shortly after Jesus was executed some guy named Mark did not sit down and write a history of the life of Jesus. Mark is the first of the four narratives we have of the Jesus story. And, it is the shortest.

The fact is that this writing was the product of several decades of Jesus stories that were in circulation among the early Jewish followers of Jesus. Not only that but these stories and the telling of them and the order in which they are told are the result of their being marinated in Jewish ritual for decades. If it would be helpful, I can sometime outline the Jewish liturgical year and show you how the Gospel of Mark was designed to cover a six month period of the year - much like the liturgical year of the Christian church really covers a six month period - from Advent, the birth of Jesus, through the crucifixion and resurrection, to Pentecost, the birth of the church.

I'll get into what it means to claim that the writings in the Bible are "divinely inspired" in a later talk. However, the notion that God had an angel dictate what to write down is a pious legend. That, however, is precisely what some evangelical Christians believe.

In the pages of what we refer to as "the Old Testament," there are stories that go back as far as 3,000 years. For generations these stories weren't written down at all but, rather, passed on in an oral tradition. This was the way the Jews told their stories as they tried to figure out who they were, where they had been, how they got there and what to do next. As I illustrated last week, their thinking evolved over time so that they moved from attributing some events to God to attributing those same events to Satan.

The notion of "facts" and "precision," - as for example, in reporting how old someone was - did not have the same meaning for these people as they do for us. The Hebrew language has great difficulty quantifying things. This is why when the story-teller wanted to indicate that someone lived a long time, they said, "Methuselah lived a total of 969 years. And he died." (Genesis 5:27.)

The stories, instructions and "laws" that were written in the Hebrew Scriptures were shaped and changed depending on what group the story-teller represented in any given period.

The same is true in the narrative portions of the collection of Christian writings. Taking their cue from Jesus who told parables, his early followers told parables about him. They weren't reporting factual matters. Besides these parables were told anywhere from 40 to 90 years after the death of Jesus. By that time each of the developing narratives had developed its own bias and different point of view of who Jesus was and what he did. This is why the four narratives that we do have, four out of a large number that were not included in the collection called "The New Testament," are so different from each other.

The fact is, however, that the way these sometimes very different stories have been told over the centuries has successfully masked this difference. There was no malicious intent behind this. The fact is, however, that some of the stories Christians cherish the most - the birth narratives and the accounts of Jesus' death - have such huge differences that they cannot be reconciled.

The reactions to this sort of information are incredibly varied.

Some people hear this sort of thing and think, "Wow! Tell me more." This was my reaction when I first read the writings of Marcus Borg and John Shelby Spong.

Others want to hang on to an interpretation or view of the Bible they were given when they were children in spite of the fact that biblical scholarship left such positions well over a hundred years ago - if not longer.

Again, there are many reasons for this. The older, more familiar ways bring people comfort. They have been reciting the same creeds for decades, singing the same hymns, reading the same prayers. They don't stop to think about meaning but rather enjoy the habit of communal worship that involves these things. I do not fault anyone for doing, just for not being aware of what it is they are doing.

There is, and this I think is what accounts for such high church attendance on Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday, a "feel good" quality about hearing that Jesus was a special "savior" born of a virgin and that he came back to life on Easter after having been executed.

Messing with any of this makes many people very uncomfortable. That is why people new to Ordinary Life, or even some who are not, will say things like, “Do they know what you are teaching?” I am teaching nothing that is not accepted in and among the most highly regarded biblical and Jesus scholars. I am not trying to prove that a particular doctrinal position is correct but rather trying to make Jesus and his teachings come alive for you and me and others in relevant and useful ways. I am not a defender of the faith. Faith in the reality of “what is” doesn’t need to be defended. Nor to the values of peace, love and joy. And, patience - or being non-judgmental.

I’ve given this title to the theme I’ve undertaken in this talks: “Living in the gap between the ‘no-longer’ and the ‘not-yet.’” Though I pointed out at the beginning of this undertaking that this has always been the case - we are always between the last moment and the next, between the last breath and the next - ours is an unprecedented time. When it comes to the digital revolution alone this is true. There are some of us who are part of the last generation of people who can remember when there were no cell phones and there are some people who can never remember when they were not. The word “land-line” is a newly coined word just in in our lifetime. Before there were cell phones, we had no use for such a word. Just as we had no need to distinguish a laptop from a desktop computer.

I’ll read you a quote by Thomas Berry. I first heard Berry quoted in the writings of Iliia Delio and then by Richard Rohr. Now he seems to pop up everywhere.

Thomas Berry was a priest, eco-theologian, earth scholar, author and teacher. He lived from 1914 until 2009.

Here is the quote:

“It’s all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we are in between stories. The Old Story - the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it - sustained us for a long time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purpose, energized action, consecrated suffering, integrated knowledge, guided education. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime, punish

transgressors. Everything was taken care of because the story was there. But now it is no longer functioning properly, and we have not yet learned the New Story.”

Precisely! And this causes us discomfort. Not to know, that is, not to have embraced, the new story in the way we had the old is disorienting. We didn’t really have to embrace the old story. It came with the air we breathed.

Michael Dowd makes a helpful distinction between what he calls “flat-earth faith” and “evolutionary faith.”

When Dowd used the phrase “flat-earth faith” he is not talking about people who believe the earth is flat. However, there are still such people who believe that it is. And, they have their reasons. I visited their website and looked at some of their FAQs. The first one was, “Is this a joke?” Answer: “No.” If you want to risk breaking your chin bone when your mouth drops open, I encourage you to visit their home page.

What Dowd means by “flat-earth faith” is any perspective in which the metaphors and theology still in use came into being at a time when people really did believe the world was flat. Well, that involves a lot of stuff. All five of the “fundamentals” of Christian Fundamentalism reflect a “flat-earth faith” perspective. The main doctrines of Fundamentalist or Evangelical Christianity have not changed since the time of Copernicus.

This of course, applies to religions other than Christianity. It would affect the understanding of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism as well. But, I’m referring to the practice in Evangelical or Fundamentalist Christianity of treating the Bible as if it were a scientific text as well as to the doctrine or interpretations that developed during this “flat-earth” world view.

But, this is not limited to Christian Fundamentalism. Most Christian churches recite either the Nicene or Apostles Creed in their worship. Both of these creeds were created during a “flat-earth” mindset and require those who recite them to speak as if they too accepted a literal interpretation of the Bible.

Though I will speak to this topic briefly in this talk, at some point I'll talk about how it is possible for me to continue to worship in a liturgy that is based on or grows out of a "flat-earth" worldview. I'll say here that the very fact that such liturgies don't reflect the growing understanding we have of the cosmos is one of the reasons people don't attend worship services. What is worse, in my opinion, is that if people attend a "flat-earth" liturgy that worship has at best a huge cognitive dissonance with the culture and at worst it influences the conviction that religion has nothing to do with what we call "the real world." Or, that religion and politics don't mix. Which is about as big a "getting it wrong" when it comes to the teachings of Jesus as can be.

It is always easier to see this in another religion or culture than it is in our own. Look, for example, at a misunderstanding of Islam by young men who live in a sexually repressive culture but who are promised that if they martyr themselves for the cause of Allah, which in this case is a commitment to anything that even hints of an evolutionary consciousness, an abundance of sexual pleasure on the other side of death awaits them.

A theology that teaches or assumes that what matters most is in the past or is something that happens after we die is not able to support an ethic that teaches that all people on the planet are members of one family and are, as Jesus clearly taught, to be the neighbor we love, is not a workable theology.

See if this make sense to you: if we hang on to a notion that God is off out there somewhere, not really present unless we somehow cajole him into being present, and further, if we hold it that we are created in the image of this God, then it is easy for us to be outside of things and people as well. We will see the world devoid of the Sacred and therefore not entitled to worthy ethical consideration.

One thing that can help us be comfortable with uncertainty is to do the spiritual work required to develop the faith and trust that there is nothing and there is no one that and who is not sacred. This is the nature of the cosmos in which we live.

The other thing we can do to be comfortable with uncertainty is to grow in knowing and living the knowledge that the opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certitude. I'm certain of that.

This involves moving from a “flat-earth” faith to an “evolutionary” faith.

I want to begin by saying that the faith required to be comfortable with uncertainty is not hard to find. It is just hard not to run from.

Many years ago I was found by a prayer written by Thomas Merton. I began then and have continued until now reading this prayer every single day. It is part of my daily practice. You can make it part of yours. I’ve read it in here before and will likely do so again because it so perfectly illustrates what all the spiritual giants, in whatever tradition, show to us. Namely, a humility about being that is so far removed from the arrogance we see in our culture at every turn. The great saints are not certain. They want to follow the truth and they hope they are - but they are not sure. Listen:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following
your will does not mean
that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire
in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything
apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this
you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always
though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear,

for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me
to face my perils alone.”

The word that the Buddha used for the practice that leads to mindful living, and “mindful living” would be a useful synonym for “evolutionary faith,” is “cultivate.” Like the farmer cultivates the land in hopes that the seed planted will yield a useful crop.

History shows that in every tradition, particularly in uncertain times, people go to spiritual teachers and ask, “What are we to do?”

Flat-earth religion is full of certain answers about this. Evolutionary faith isn’t. Flat-earth religion is what is called “private faith.” Evolutionary faith is public. It is based on evidence, on reality. It says that there is nothing you can do to be. Now, in the process of being you will notice other people who are in that same process who are doing certain things. These will likely be useful for you to do. Though there is no guarantee that doing them will give to you the same outcome that some other person who does these things attains. Because the doing of these things came into their practice out of their being and not in order to be. If you understand this, then do those things in order to discover your own. What you will end up achieving is a wonderful gift - yourself.

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