

## *The Jordan River is Disappointing*

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So one of the things that I was looking forward to when I visited Israel and Palestine in 2018 was seeing the Jordan River. I had imagined that with all these big events happening in the Bible, with all the songs about it, that it would be special. In some ways, for the religions that center themselves on the Israelite's story the Jordan River needs no introduction – it is simply the river. And yet when I got there, I was so disappointed. It was more like a creek. I'm telling you this thing was not intimidating or impressive or what I had imagined for all the happenings of scripture. It was less impressive than much of the rivers and streams I had grown up with. They say that the flow is more regulated now and that's why it's slowed to such a trickle, and that it was bigger then. I was just a couple of hundred years too late to see the river.

And so what do we do with that sense of disappointment in our spiritual journeys. What do we do, especially, I want to talk about today, with our disappointment with religion. Because religion can be pretty disappointing, and I say that as someone who has dedicated his life to that same project. But I think the lessons here are also for the variety of institutions that can disappoint us, our political leaders, for instance, or even the institution of marriage or family. The truth is, sometimes we show up expecting one thing in life and we get another, and dealing with the gap between those two without just throwing up our hands and leaving is something that we should probably think about.

People come to church for many different reasons – some come to reconnect with the faith of their childhoods, some come to deal with grief, some come to heal, others are looking to serve others, some are looking to make connections in the community. Many of those folks find what they are looking for, but it would not be a stretch to say that why people stay connected to churches is different from why they originally came to church in the first place. For me, church held a lot of promise about being actually able to know what the well-lived life looked like, to find the answers to life's big questions, to figure out how to connect my life with the life of the Divine. Now, I've made some progress on those goals, but not in the way that I thought I would. I found a lot less answers than I thought I would for an institution that has allegedly been considering these questions for a couple thousand years. I found instead more questions, and I found that the longer I was at church, the better, the more ethical, the questions became that I asked. That was a valuable experience, but there was initially some disappointment there. What do you mean your all just as tired as I am? What do you mean you have all the same problems I do? What do you mean you have spent the last 30 years asking that question? It was a gift to discover church was a community of people who were asking those questions, striving for real connection, and doing it together. I never would have experienced that if I didn't get over my initial disappointment.

Some of you have got some disappointment with the leadership or lack thereof of religious institutions. You turn on the TV and you see someone who's allegedly a spiritual leader getting paid to lie about God and you wonder whether you really have to be in the same religion as that person. Look – I get that disappointment. Some of you are disappointed about the lack of offense that progressive religious people bring to conversations in the political and ethical sphere. I do get frustrated that it seems like the people with frankly bad opinions are sure of themselves and the people I know in progressive religious circles are so radically unsure of what they know.

Some of you have been disappointed by trying to work on a spiritual practice like meditation, or prayer, or any number of things and having it not make an impact in your life. You don't feel happier or more compassionate – instead all you've got is another thing on your to do list that you feel bad if you don't make it to. That's pretty disappointing.

When there's space between our expectations and reality, disappointment often rears its head for us to deal with. When that happens we have to take a step back, breathe, and know that whatever decisions that we need to make are OK. I would say that you shouldn't be too hasty though, because you might just find out that you were missing the point of the institution anyway. Upton Sinclair famously wrote *The Jungle*, which American history records as giving us stricter safety regulations around food due to the gruesomeness that it depicted in the meatpacking industry. This was not what Sinclair intended at all – Sinclair was a socialist who was writing about despair, squalor, political corruption, greed, the impossible working conditions of turn of the century factory workers, the way that they get turned into cogs in the machine and alcoholics. Not much of that part resonated – people were disgusted by his depictions of food sanitation. Sinclair was disappointed by the fact that his intended message didn't get through, but some good came out of his book anyway. People missed the point of his book and instituted reforms that this country still has today.

I feel like we oftentimes miss the point of religion. We come seeking answers, when really we can learn how to ask better questions. We seek to be comforted and we can find that the tradition actually challenges us to be better and do better. We find religious leadership to be lacking, but in communities of faith all around this country it is the people gathered in the pews that are the real leaders of religious communities. Sometimes disappointment simply shows us that there are more opportunities than we had even considered. Sometimes we are disappointed in religion as we knew it, but find a vibrant spirituality that can sustain our life's work. We may find that we thought we were looking at the moon, but instead we were looking at the finger pointing at the moon the whole time. Disappointment in religion can point to something deeper and lead to further engagement if we let it.

They say don't meet your heroes, or see how the sausage is made, but I'd add this one: don't visit historic rivers that you think are going to be cool. Well, actually, yeah you should. Because the Jordan River was smaller than I thought, it was a creek, it was not

impressive, and that's the beauty of that disappointment. It reveals that God didn't need a stage to write God's drama on – God used normal everyday people like you and me, people with profound disappointments in our lives, who are seeking real meaning. Because if some of the great moments of our tradition's history were at that river, then great things can happen even here, if we accept that they can happen anywhere. Disappointment is a step on the spiritual path, but you should not let it be the end. Blessed Be.