

Embracing Reality

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Lake Street Church
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*Go, go, go, said the bird: humankind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.*

—T. S. Eliot, in “Burnt Norton”

Readings: Luke 17:20-21

There’s a story about a fisherman who goes out early in the morning before the sun comes up everyday. One day in the predawn darkness he comes across this bag of pebbles. And to occupy himself, he starts throwing them in the sea. As the dawn approaches, however, he discovers that his three remaining “pebbles” were actually these precious gems! And so it was too late! (But not too late, really.)

Life is like that, sometimes. Often we throw our days—our moments—into the sea, unthinkingly, without seeing that we have this treasure, this sack full of precious gems. We get distracted. We focus on other things. Sometimes it takes a lifetime before the sun comes up, before we have a dawning within, and we can see that we have these precious gems. But it’s never too late to realize this and stop tossing them away.

Today I want to talk about opening our eyes and embracing Reality. I once heard a spiritual writer describe spirituality in this way—embracing reality. And at the time, I resisted. I said to myself, “No, spirituality is about embracing *God*, not reality. Reality has many negative aspects that I don’t want to embrace. There is evil and suffering, injustice and oppression.” But I have since changed my mind. I *do* think that enlightenment is about embracing Reality.

Don’t get me wrong. The presence of God is important; it heals us, saves us. The Sacred Spirit is *real*. Only now I believe that it is a *package deal*. Reality is an undivided whole. To accept the Sacred Presence, one must accept the *whole thing*. And this is what it means to discover Life, happiness and contentment.

But human beings must go through a discovery to find it, because our greatest strength can be our biggest weakness. With our ability to think and reason comes the tendency to distract ourselves, to fool ourselves.

So often spiritual teachers, including Jesus himself, use children and animals as examples of how we can find contact with Reality and true joy. Matthew Fox, that wonderful modern mystic noticed that this was how Jesus, in fact live his own life. Fox wrote,

Jesus trusts the universe, trusts the beauty and order he beheld in the birds and flowers, in the up and the down, in the sky and in the earth. From that beauty he urges us to trust as well.

But what does it mean to “trust the universe,” to trust Reality, to embrace it? Part of it is this: *in our effort to avoid pain, we also filter out true happiness.* We focus on the past—victories and defeats, accomplishments and failures. We focus on the future—goals and achievements. And we avoid living the present moment, tossing away the precious gems as if they were pebbles.

We focus on things—houses, bank accounts, cars, computers, cable, cell phones. We live in an age of creature comforts. We get distracted.

But who can blame us from wanting diversions? There’s lots of pain out there. Just read the newspapers! The human ability to see things coming, future possibilities, can sometimes be our weakness. And we can be governed by anxiety and worry.

So this is why I put a portion of the poem, “Burnt Norton,” by T. S. Eliot in the bulletin:

*Go, go, go, said the bird: humankind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.*

Too much reality is difficult to take. So we attempt to filter it out. Only when we filter out Reality; we filter out God; we filter out the holy.

Albert Camus had this great line:

If there is a sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this life.

Jesus was saying that in your life there is this implacable grandeur. No matter how hard, no matter how difficult it may be. Despair and pain might be part of this life, and that’s no sin. But when you are wishing for different life, a different set of circumstances, either in this world or the next, then you miss it. You miss that which is truly holy.

Several years ago, cognitive psychologist Timothy Miller wrote an excellent book called, *How to Want What You Have*. This sounds simple but is so difficult. Because we are conditioned to always want more: to strive, to achieve, to acquire, to yearn, to hope for more. But learning to want what we have—embracing our lives—allows us to embrace God. “In the end,” writes Miller, “wanting what you have is a profound form of worship.” (p.57)

Miller puts it this way:

This is the precious present, regardless of what yesterday was like, regardless of what tomorrow may bring. When your inner eyes open, you can find immense beauty hidden within the inconsequential details of daily life. When your inner ears open, you can hear the subtle, lovely music of the universe everywhere you go. When the heart of your heart opens, you can take deep pleasure in the company of the people around you—family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers—including those whose characters are less than perfect. When you are open to the beauty, mystery, and grandeur of ordinary existence, you “get it” that it always has been beautiful, mysterious and grand and always will be. (p. 4)

Does that mean that there isn't pain, ugliness and negatives in our lives? Absolutely not! I do not wish to minimize these things. Sometime, to use Hobb's famous phrase, “life is harsh, brutish and short.” And these things can sometimes overwhelm us and distract us from the preciousness and the grandeur. But it is always present, always there. In the heart of my heart I believe this. And one does not experience this by whitewashing the past or sugar-coating the future. Quite the opposite. And so we begin by forgiving Reality for being exactly what it is right now.

One does this by learning to “want what we have” and by receiving the whole package. Do you love your life? That's the question. Loving our life is like loving a person—you love the whole person, not just selected parts. Love your life and let go hoping for another.

What am I talking about? I'm talking about trusting the universe and embracing Reality. You've all heard the serenity prayer, attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr and used by 12-Step Programs:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can change,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

I want to focus on the first one today. After all, this is 99% of life, isn't it? Let's face it, almost all the stuff that happens, we don't have much to do with, we don't control. But it think most of the time we don't truly accept it. At best we ignore it, but we don't accept it. We put up with it, but we don't accept it.

What does it mean really to accept things? I think it means more than we usually think it does. I think it means more than just “put up with,” or “resign oneself to” or “grin and bear it” or “endure.” Another similar phrase in recovery is “let go and let God.” But I think that accepting things is also much more than “letting go.”

I believe it is “letting in.” I believe that it means to embrace and hug reality, to take the world as it is. When we truly accept our circumstances, our reality; we don’t resent them; we don’t resist them; we don’t become numb to them.

Tara Brach writes about this kind of acceptance of one’s life in her book, *Radical Acceptance*:

Radical Acceptance reverses our habit of living at war with experiences that are unfamiliar, frightening or intense. It is the necessary antidote to years of neglecting ourselves, years of judging and treating ourselves harshly, years of rejecting this moment’s experience. Radical Acceptance is the willingness to experience ourselves and our life as it is. (p. 4)

Instead of aversion, instead of resisting, it is to say, “yes” to the good and the bad. Unconditionally. It is to stop trying to filter the negative. Does this kind of acceptance mean “approval?” Of course not. It means simply to approach life and reality as an undivided whole. A package deal.

The spiritual concept I’m talking about is “nonduality.” Richard Rohr wrote,

Jesus was the first nondual religious teacher of the West, and one reason we have failed to understand so much of his teaching, much less follow it, is because we have tried to understand it with a dualistic mind. (The Naked Now)

Dualism is the normal and typical way of seeing things. It divides experience with labels, categories and concepts: good/bad, us/them, right/wrong, sacred/profane, God/world, life/death. It hates paradox and resists mystery. Again, here’s Rohr:

Dualistic people use knowledge, even religious knowledge, for purposes of ego enhancement, shaming, and control of others and themselves.

Contemplation (nondualism) is impossible if we’re trying to prove we’re right. Nondualism is to see with totally different eyes and often comes when our defenses have been broken down and certainties stripped away.

Whenever we appreciate the goodness and value of something while still knowing its limitations and failures marks the beginning of wisdom and nondual consciousness. Most humans are not very good at such “allowing.”

So with a nondual perspective there is darkness—one doesn’t deny this—but a light shines in the darkness. It’s a package deal. A nondual way of knowing is more like “unknowing” and simply experiencing reality as an undivided unity. And we see that there are no divisions and distinctions, really. “There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.” We are all one in the Christ-consciousness. And so we hear Jesus say that “God makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust,” that that we are called to love

all, even our enemies. Even the distinction between us and our enemy is not real. It's a package deal.

I have to stop here and say that achieving nondual awareness (enlightenment) is simple, but also very, very difficult! This is why we call it spiritual *practice*. This nondual consciousness is fleeting and momentary, at best, in all honesty. But even the briefest moment is life-changing.

One way to practice accepting Reality is to acknowledge how brief our life is. It may sound morbid, but this is a path to Reality that each tradition acknowledges. "You are dust, and to dust you shall return," is one of the oldest spiritual affirmations. "The grass withers and the flower fade," wrote the prophet, "all life is grass."

Part of the Benedictine rule is to remind oneself that you are going to die—every day meditate on this reality.

And the Buddhists have an instruction to imagine that you have a bird on your shoulder all day who is constantly talking into your ear, and the one thing that bird is saying it reminding you that you are going to die.

If we are about to embrace this and accept this, we are on our way to embracing and accepting Reality as a whole. And we treasure Life in its entirety. And many of those who really do face the unavoidable reality of their own death have had the sun come up in their living and the awareness dawn upon them of the precious gem that each moment truly is, leading to a full and deep embrace of Life.

I remember in elementary school when we would line up to receive vaccinations. Most of us would close our eyes, grit our teeth and brace ourselves for that shot in the arm we knew was coming. This is how we go through much of our lives, bracing ourselves and trying to filter out the negative, instead of relaxing with our eyes wide open. We resist and don't experience ourselves and our life as it is.

This means accepting even our own negative feelings—our sadness, our sorrow, our fears, our anger, our anxiety. Even in these we can discover implacable grandeur. As the poet Rumi wrote:

*Don't turn away.
Keep your gaze on the bandaged place.
That's where the light enters you.*

This kind of radical acceptance of life, of embracing reality, is a door to the kingdom of God. Author Storm Jameson put it like this:

*There is only one world, the world pressing against you at this minute.
There is only one minute in which you are alive, this minute here and now.*

The only way to live is by accepting each minute as an unrepeatable miracle.

The only life we have is what is going on right now, complete with its pain, its boredom, and its worries, but also with its beauty and its implacable grandeur. Remember that famous line by John Lennon? “Life is what happen when we are busy making plans.” Let us not squander ourselves with fantasies for the future. Let us embrace our reality, this unrepeatable miracle that holds the kingdom of God within it.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online and on CD at the church, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to Commitment:

You have an appointment with life—you should not miss it. The time and space of your appointment is the here and the now. If you miss the present moment, you miss your appointment with life, which is serious. (Thich Nhat Hanh)