

Waking Up

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Jesus is here, and he wants to resurrect somebody! —Rumi

Ancient Witness: Luke 17:20-21

I want to start this morning with a favorite story. It's from a favorite person of mine, Anthony de Mello, who was a Jesuit priest, was born and lived in India, was a mystic who drew upon other religious traditions such as Buddhism and Taoism. He died in 1987 and about decade later, Cardinal Ratzinger, before he became Pope Benedict, declared his views incompatible with the Catholic faith and dangerous. This made me like him even more.

This gentleman knocks on his son's door, "Jaime, he says, wake up!" Jaime answers, "I don't want to get up, Papa." The father shouts, "Get up, you have to go to school." Jaime says, "I don't want to go to school." "Why not?" asks the father. "Three reasons," says Jaime. "First, because it's so dull; second, the kids tease me; and third, I hate school." And the father says, "Well, I am going to give you three reasons why you must go to school. First, because it is your duty; second, because you are forty-five years old; and third, because you are the headmaster." Wake up, wake up! You've grown up. You're too big to be asleep. Wake up! Stop playing with your toys. (Anthony de Mello, Awareness)

Spiritual awareness is about waking up. It is about the quality of the lives we are living; it is about being filled with happiness, serenity, freedom and compassion.

There's a story of a fisherman who gets up before dawn as he had done so many times before. And as he is walking along the shoreline in the pitch dark, he trips over something. So he feels around and finds this bag of pebbles in the sand. He picks it up and takes it with him to his boat, occasionally taking out a pebble and throwing it into the ocean. Soon the sun starts to come up on the horizon, and he looks down at the few remaining pebbles in the bag. And he sees that they are not pebbles at all, but precious gems! And this is the human experience, isn't it? We go through most of our lives throwing our days around as if they were pebbles until we awaken, until it dawns on us that each day, each moment, is a gem beyond measure.

As de Mello wrote,

Most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep. They're born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they breed children in their sleep, and they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and the beauty of this thing that we call human existence. (de Mello)

Instead of fully grasping the beauty of human existence we walk around in a daze, a stupor. We are preoccupied; our attention is elsewhere. It is like we are drugged. The lights are on, but nobody's home.

Furthermore, we resent being told this. It sounds like bad news to us, so we often kill the messengers. Sometimes we even crucify them. But this truth shouldn't shock and dismay us too much. In fact, being asleep is normal, really. It is typically human. It shouldn't surprise and upset us. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk and activist once wrote:

Our society makes it difficult for us to be awake. There are so many distractions. We know that 40,000 children in the Third World die of hunger every day, but we keep forgetting.

We keep forgetting. It is very difficult for us to stay awake. It reminds me of T. S. Eliot's line, "Human beings cannot bear too much reality." So we go back to bed and pull the covers over our head. Living in a dream world is easier to take.

In Naomi Klein's book, *This Changes Everything*, she underscores the revolutionary changes that are needed in the face of the crisis of global warming. And while the science of this devastating reality is undeniable, we are as a society, in various stages of denial. She points out that a massive collective effort is required, not unlike the mobilization for a world war. I agree with her that the problem is not technological; it is moral and spiritual. It's about waking up to the needs of the planet and our sisters and brothers. To paraphrase Karl Rahner, we'll all become mystics or we'll cease to exist.

I read an interesting book by Tara Brach, who says from her Buddhist perspective that many of us are lost in a "trance of unworthiness." When we are in this trance we forget our own goodness. She writes:

Especially when things seem to be falling apart—we lose a job, suffer a serious injury, become estranged from a loved one—our lives can become painfully bound by the experience that something is wrong with us. We buy into the belief that we are fundamentally flawed, bad and undeserving of love. (p. 148, Radical Acceptance)

When we are in this trance we mistakenly think that our lives are painful or out of control because it is our fault. We think that if we had only done better, if we were somehow different, things would have gone right.

And this feeling that we are unworthy puts us to sleep; it hypnotizes us. And Brach points out that we unconsciously do all kinds of things when we are under its spell: We become our own worse critic and blame ourselves for everything. We keep ourselves busy and occupied. We hold back, play it safe and avoid risking failure or trying something new. We live in the future and avoid the present. We focus on other people's faults. We blame others, and all these so-called strategies only temporarily relieve us from the weight of failure. They only distract us from the pain but do not help us see our own basic goodness. Instead, we often only go deeper and deeper into this trance of unworthiness.

On the other hand, these times when things seem to be falling apart can also help shock us out of our trance and wake us from our sleep. As Emerson said, "When it is dark enough, you can see the stars." Sometimes we need the dark night of the soul to lead us to the dawn of awareness. In the *Tao te Ching* Lao Tzu said, "If you want to become full, let yourself be empty; if you want to be reborn, let yourself die." Jesus said, "whoever loses one's life will find it."

Brach, from a Buddhist perspective, writes that the alternative to this trance of unworthiness is the *path of radical acceptance*. Instead of resisting, one is able to let go. Instead of continually trying to filter out the bad, one embraces the whole self, the whole world, reality just as it is, without judgment or regret. She tells this great story:

One day a young Catholic priest was making his rounds at a community hospital and he came upon this woman, emaciated and with the yellow tinge of an afflicted liver. He sat down next to her bed and asked how she was doing. "I'm lost," she replied. "I've ruined my life and every life around me. There is no hope for me. I'm going to hell."

The priest sat in silence a few moments. Then he noticed a framed picture of a pretty girl on the dresser. "Who is that?" he asked. The woman brightened a little. "She's my daughter, the one beautiful thing in my life."

"And would you help her if she was in trouble or made a mistake? Would you forgive her? Would you still love her?"

"Of course I would!" cried the woman. "I would do anything for her! She will always be precious and beautiful to me. Why do you ask such a question?"

"Because I want you to know," said the priest, "that there is a picture of you on God's dresser."

In his message of unconditional forgiveness and love, the priest was giving back to this woman her goodness and innocence. From a Buddhist perspective, when we can regard our mistakes and transgressions with the eyes of compassion, we release the ignorance that keeps us bound in hating and blaming ourselves. We see that our imperfections don't taint our basic goodness.

This is what the spiritual life is about—waking up to a “basic goodness” that is within us and that is within the whole world, which is a continual process, not just a one-time thing. This is what it means to be reborn, to be raised up, to be resurrected, to be set free—again, again and again.

Jesus, it seems to me, was all about this. He experienced being in union with the Divine, and he wanted others to experience the same thing. And when Jesus talked about this state of being in contact with this Mystery, which we call God, he mostly used parable to describe it. And his main image was that of a kingdom or an empire that was quite unlike any we could imagine. It was an un-kingdom or an un-empire.

And so in Luke we here Jesus say, “The reign of God will not come in such a way as to be seen. No one will say, ‘Look, there it is!’ Because it is within you.” In other words, this kingdom is here and now, right under your noses. (We should also remember that Jesus is talking to his opponents, make his statement even more remarkable.) This realm, this state of union with God is within any person. The problem is that we don't see it.

Other religions traditions have their own language to describe this reality, too.

It is said that after his enlightenment, the Buddha passed a man on the road who was struck by the extraordinary radiance and peacefulness of his presence. The man stopped and asked, "My friend, what are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?"

"No," said the Buddha.

"Well, then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?"

Again the Buddha answered, "No."

"Are you a man?"

"No."

"Well, my friend, what then are you?"

The Buddha replied, "I am awake."

I believe that we can certainly say that Jesus, too, was "awake." Jesus, of course, was a lot of things. Marcus Borg points out that Jesus was a healer; he was a wisdom teacher; he was a social prophet for justice and nonviolence, and he was the initiator of a movement. But first and foremost, Jesus was a Jewish mystic. He was a "spirit person." Mystics simply are people who have an awareness of experiencing the Sacred Presence. The mystic says this: "Everybody already has what they need to be incredibly happy and satisfied! The only thing they need to do is to wake up and see it." It is not the kind of peace and happiness that the world or society offers—the happiness of achievement and acquisition. It is the peace of simply accepting and being accepted. Radical acceptance is to accept the life we are living—every part of it—and the basic goodness at the core of each moment. This peace is not world-denying; it radically *embraces* the world.

So Jesus had this profound awareness of God, and it was this awareness that guided these other aspects and everything that he did. He felt radical acceptance. And it was this awareness that led him to challenge injustice, to live with compassion toward others, to be filled with an inner calm and happiness.

As a spirit person, Jesus' life had a "raised up" quality. He was awake. I like to say, Jesus was raised up long *before* Easter! He was resurrected *before* he died! And what Jesus was about was this: He said that you, too, can be awakened. You, too, can be raised up, resurrected. The reign of God is right under your nose, he said, and you can live in it. You, too, can know happiness, peace and freedom. Your picture is on God's dresser.

Carl Rogers once said, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change." When we become aware of this presence that regards us with love and compassion, our lives transform. When we can see the basic goodness in ourselves, we can also see this goodness in others. The Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, described a moment of his own awakening:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depth of their hearts where neither sin nor knowledge could reach, the core of reality, the person that each one is in the eyes of the divine. If only they could see themselves as they really are, if only we could see each other that way all the time, there would be no more need for war, for hatred, for greed, for cruelty. I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.

This is what it means to be awakened, to be raised up. It is to see the secret beauty in ourselves and others. It is to see there is no need for war, hatred, greed or cruelty. It is to see that the divine is shining through the world all the time.

“This,” said Merton “is not just a nice story or a fable. This is true.”