

I Know Not What

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It is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

and a temple for idols and the pilgrims to the Kaa'ba,

and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Qur'an.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take,

that is my religion and my faith.

(Ibn Arabi)

So many times as a minister and a member of a Unitarian congregation I have heard addresses that talk about the Unitarian advocacy of reason in matters of spirituality. As the old Unitarian maxim goes: 'freedom, reason and tolerance'. Well, today I would like to turn this on its head, and in so doing relay to you something of my own journey and hopefully clarify the limits of reason in gleaning a deeper understanding of the our own meaning-seeking journey.

It is without doubt that reason is needed in our life otherwise we might end up unwittingly accepting the beliefs and paths of others without our own discernment. Our reason is, of course, a vital tool that we have, but it is not the only tool. There is, in my mind, a limit to reason on the spiritual path, a limit to what we can know with our reason. Wisdom of the human journey often lies at the edge of our capacity to 'work things out'.

As a student at university I sat with my Christian Spirituality tutor, Sister Benedicta, a world-renowned theologian and philosopher on Christian mysticism. One of our many conversations centred around the Trinity. I had read a lot on the Trinity and was still a little, actually quite a lot,

baffled by it. The conversation meandered for some time until this mild-mannered but fierce theologian stated, 'The Holy Trinity is a mystery.' I can remember thinking at the time: 'A mystery! What a cop-out!' On reflection, I think that what she was trying to say is that there is a place in our spiritual journey that lies at the edge of our reasoning capacity. It has been well documented within many paths of world religions that journeys often contain within a desert time where nothing makes reasoned sense.

You have all probably heard of the famous saying 'the dark night of the soul'. In common understanding the phrase is used to describe a period of suffering. Do any of you know where that saying comes from? It comes from the work of the sixteenth-century monk St John of the Cross, a Carmelite, mystic and saint who lived predominantly in Spain. Contrary to its modern popular use, it doesn't mean those times in life when we are suffering – in fact it is the opposite. St John of the Cross uses the term 'dark night of the soul' to describe an essential part of the spiritual journey. As the seed needs the darkness of the soil to germinate, we too, if we are to grow, must learn how to deal with our own times of confusion and bewilderment and to welcome these times as they turn out to be rich in growth and of blessing. If we approach these times in the right way the darkness and bewilderment give way to light and clarity.

Have you ever experienced a difficult situation where the struggle of life seems rather like a hill with no brow? Can you remember being in a situation of suffering that ultimately led to a better, brighter and more peaceful life? I will leave those questions to percolate in your minds ...

The other day I was listening to a Radio 3 play entitled *The Door*. The story was of a man who was a member of a rather quirky family that had at its helm an eccentric grandfather. The family were a little different in that they, under the lead of the grandfather, were observers of the moon and due to this had built many roof observation domes that looked out upon the night sky. Within this story the

grandfather had, through his hard work and fascination, learned how to predict many of the things that happen in life. On working out the secrets of the moon and how to predict events, he took out loans to improve his equipment with the thought that people would fight to find out what their future might hold. It turned out, however, that people were terrified to find out what the future could bring and avoided the grandfather and his lunar prediction systems like the plague.

Within this fascinating short story there was one part that stuck with me. The grandfather had a particularly close relationship with his grandson. In one act of the story they are sitting in a room with many chairs. The grandson says, ‘This room was not like the others in the house as it was a place that only grandfather and myself went into. The room was filled with chairs and maps of the stars and there were several doors. Although there was one door which was grandfather’s favourite and, when in the room, he would touch and even caress the door frame. This door was not like any other door which led to another room or outside. This door led to nothing. I asked my grandfather why this door was there, to which he replied, “This is the doorway that leads to nothing and it must stay that way because it is a symbol of all of our lives. Many doors that we think will lead to somewhere actually turn out to lead to nothing. That is why I keep the door to remind me of the futility of everything.” I peered through the crack in the door for the hundredth time only to see a small line of light with dust dancing in it.’

This short story was a dark comedy, and we can see the reasoning of the grandfather in his pessimistic view of life: his experiences had coloured his perception the world in which he lived. We see this kind of negative interpretation of those difficult times poetically summed up in the book of Ecclesiastes, when it states,

1 The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2 Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,

vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

3 What do people gain from all the toil

at which they toil under the sun?

4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,

but the earth remains forever.

5 The sun rises and the sun goes down,

and hurries to the place where it rises.

6 The wind blows to the south,

and goes around to the north;

round and round goes the wind,

and on its circuits the wind returns.

7 All streams run to the sea,

but the sea is not full;

to the place where the streams flow,

there they continue to flow.

8 All things are wearisome;

more than one can express;

the eye is not satisfied with seeing,

or the ear filled with hearing.

9 What has been is what will be,

and what has been done is what will be done;

there is nothing new under the sun.

10 Is there a thing of which it is said,

‘See, this is new’?

It has already been,

in the ages before us.

11 The people of long ago are not remembered,
nor will there be any remembrance
of people yet to come
by those who come after them.

These verses point towards the ultimate futility of life and I have found them to be of no use whatsoever when I have encountered those difficult times that life tends to throw up.

I don't know if anyone here has ever watched or read the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*? There is a character in it called Marvin the paranoid android who manages to turn the positive of situations into a reason for moaning. Both the grandfather and the writer of Ecclesiastes remind me of him. However, the writer of Ecclesiastes does express something that is fairly common in our human experience. I think that we all reach points in life where the daily round of work, relationships and problems can obscure the horizon for us. Many of us respond to these situations, feelings and thoughts in a less than skilful way – me included!

But this would be a mistake according St John of the Cross, as he describes these times as 'a night more lovely than the dawn'. Now why would he say such a thing? Surely these times are to be avoided at all costs? Just imagine for a moment that you accidentally put your hand into a fire. As soon as you feel your skin burning your immediate reaction would be to remove your hand as quickly as possible to avoid further injury. Now surely with emotional pain we would do the same: remove ourselves from the pain as quickly as possible.

But we are told in many religious traditions that this might not be the right way to move forwards. Hafiz, the Sufi mystic and poet, states in one of his poems,

Fear is the cheapest room in the house.

I would like to see you living

In better conditions.

And we heard in our earlier reading from the work of Maulana Julaludin Rumi in his poem 'The Guest House'(see below) that the way to deal with emotional suffering is not to become over-disheartened by our suffering but to gently bear it with love.

Similarly, St John of the Cross doesn't encourage us to escape our bewilderment and suffering to enlightenment but to be comfortable with *nada* (Spanish for nothing) or what he also describes as 'I know not what'. So what is this 'I know not what'? It is a state that envelops us and into which we must pour all of our preconceptions of what life should or could be.

One of my favourite songs is from a band called ALO (Jack Johnson's band). The words of the song go: 'Welcome to your barbecue, where we roast all the dreams that never came true.' Just because life rarely lives up to our expectations it doesn't mean that there is no joy in what didn't expect to happen. According to St John of the Cross, everything must 'be dissolved into these times of Godly darkness', into *nada* or I know not what.

So what is the key to entering into these times? I would say a faith or trust in the ultimate benevolence of life. For me it has centred around the belief that there is a Being behind creation and indeed within the deepest core of our selves, that the fabric of life is a benevolent love that wants us to be at peace and made whole but sometimes we have to be willing to enter into and go through our suffering so we can say the words of Ibn Arabi (from our meditation earlier):

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and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Qur'an.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take,
that is my religion and my faith.

Friends, I know that life can sometimes take its toll on us; it is often hard and seems like a slog. But when we enter into these times of darkness of 'I know not what', let us trust that we are being shaped and sculpted to fit into a greater reality than the one that we currently know.

Amen

THE GUEST HOUSE

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honourably.

He may be clearing you out

for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.

meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.

because each has been sent

as a guide from beyond.

(Jelaluddin Rumi, translation by Coleman Barks)