

BECOMING WHOLE

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Leviticus 19:1-2; 9-18 and Matthew 5:43-48

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The old testament reading for today is from Leviticus chapter 19, which begins this way:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: tell the people of Israel this: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. (Lev 19:1-2)

This is followed by a whole long list of actions including: leave food in your fields for the poor and the stranger; be honest, kind, generous, AND: *love your neighbor as yourself.*

And from today's gospel lesson, echoing this ancient text and riffing on it like a jazz musician, we get from Matthew more Jesus wisdom on how to live abundantly:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?...Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"(Matt 5:43-48)

Or, as The Message renders this last verse "...*what I'm saying is, grow up. You are kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.*"

You have heard it said (I am sure!) that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west; in fact, more than one quarter of Americans today believe that the sun revolves around the earth, because after all, we *are* the center of the universe; but I say to you, we are specks of stardust on a little blue rock hurtling through space, held *in motion* by mysterious forces.

You have heard it said that life is random, mechanistic and meaningless; but I say to you, all life, each speck of stardust on this tiny rock, the product of 14 billion years of unfolding, is beloved, and unfolding still. The evil and the good; each speck endowed with the power to transform and be transformed by love. As the 13th century Sufi poet Hafiz wrote, "nothing evolves us like love."

Evolution (as we are exploring in our “Painting the Stars” conversations on Sunday mornings) is way more than an explanation of biological processes—it includes but transcends “Darwin, dinosaurs, and DNA.” Evolution is increasingly understood across a wide array of disciplines from biology to theology, as *the* mysterious force at the core of reality, from the cell to the self to community, culture, and cosmos.

Franciscan scientist-theologian Ilia Delio writes: “The foundation of things is not so much a ground of being, sustaining its existence from beneath as it is a power of attraction toward what lies up ahead. Evolution is no background to the human story, it is the human story.” Which invites *us* to grow up, and open up to deeper exploration, participation, and transformation.

This evolutionary perspective suggests, at the very least that: everything is alive; everything is on the move; and that movement, that unfolding, is in some sense, purposeful. Life is moving toward, says Delio “ever increasing wholeness and consciousness and something more—love.”

We are talking big history, here, and when we do, according to eco-theologian Michael Dowd we are talking about 14 billion years of grace. Which Delio says is like a 30 volume set of encyclopedias, where Earth appears somewhere around volume 21. Its not until volume 30, the last 2 words, in fact, that we encounter: *human being*.

And the story is far from over, because evolution continues in and through us. Teilhard de Chardin, the 20th century French scientist-theologian and father of evolutionary spirituality, claimed that we humans are the universe becoming conscious of itself. Self consciousness, a breathtaking evolutionary development, with terrifying and magnificent potential.

This dynamic, deep-time perspective is present in a way, in the mythic tales of our ancestors, which was revolutionary at a time dominated by nature worship and a cyclical understanding of reality: endless, seasonal repetition. How different the Hebrew notion of *Yah-weh*, breath of life, moving right within nature and history, drawing everything forward, toward something entirely new.

This “something new” is represented by the symbol “promised land” in the biblical story of all stories, Exodus. It takes place in the wilderness—where most human stories unfold—with a people on this epic journey away from slavery toward freedom. When the people are willing to walk in unknowing, trusting in the mysterious Source of Life that sustains them daily-- in fire and wind and desert bread—the journey draws them onward. But when they turn back, seeking the certainties and easy answers of life in bondage, when they cling to fear and doubt and self protection, the journey stalls. Which must happen *a lot*, because the people are in the wilderness for 40 years, which in bible speak means really really *really* long time.

So, in this wilderness bewilderment, comes wisdom teacher Moses to offer the people a better map for journeying on--those famous 10...well, they're not really commandments (there is no imperative verb form here). They are more like promises that invite a certain way of living with predictable consequences. This is a covenant, a two way, dynamic arrangement: trust in God, Source of life, and this will lead directly to the unfolding of a certain kind of people and community made ever more whole through the practice of generous, openhearted, other-centered living. Today's Leviticus passage echoes this covenant understanding of a community sustained and transformed by these ever expanding circles of compassion.

And these ancient stories, and expanding circles, continue to unfold in and through Jesus. Early in Matthew's gospel Jesus, too, makes his own really really long wilderness journey, on his way toward the coming "kingdom of God," the new testament symbol for freedom and abundant life. Jesus embodies this way, in his teaching and his living, as he heals the sick, feeds the hungry, and welcomes all who have been cast aside. Jesus listens deeply to the world within and around him, and seeks to make whole all that he finds broken; in the end, he loves the world until it kills him. And *that* boundless love somehow gives birth to entirely new human possibilities.

That same covenant invitation is unfolding still and inviting us into ever increasing circles of compassion, drawing us toward the kingdom coming. This has nothing to do with perfection, moral or any other kind. The Greek word here (in Matthew) is *telios*; it implies moving toward completion, growing into one's God given identity. It is all about *becoming whole*. Writes Delio "Christian life is a commitment to love, to give birth to God in one's own life and to become midwives of divinity in this evolving cosmos. We are to be wholemakers of love in a world of change."

And the journey toward wholeness, she says, is not so much up and out as it is inward on the way forward. Becoming whole means, in part, that we must recognize and embrace our brokenness; only when we claim and care for our own particular broken bits, can we share them rather than project them onto others. It is precisely in our own struggles, weakness, and failures--that we connect most deeply with one another, and surrender most fully to the divine Source of all wholeness.

To be wholemakers of love in a world of change means, of course, attending to all who suffer, welcoming everyone no matter how strange, and embodying compassion every day in every encounter. It also means deep engagement with passion, creativity and beauty, immersion in creation itself, discovering all the ways that we humans have been given to *love the world for all its worth*. It means deep listening and practiced attention because so many broken places in this world can only be seen with the heart.

All of us are in the wilderness, and we all have a choice to embrace that, to trust in life and its unfolding, or turn back toward bondage, whatever our particular form of it may be--addiction in its many guises, control, self absorption, clinging

to the way things used to be. In a way, we face the invitation every day: choose life—so every day, in ways small and not so small, we choose. Or not. Whenever we choose life—through compassion, appreciation and gratefulness -- we allow for new life and possibilities to emerge in and through us, sometimes beyond our imagining.

Teilhard de Chardin that brilliant thinker whose evolutionary ideas continue bursting forth today, was a pariah in his own time. A Jesuit priest, he was forbidden by Rome from ever publishing, teaching or lecturing in any public way. The powers that be perceived him as so dangerous that they exiled him to the desert, literally, where he worked and wrote and lived out much of his life. And in this frustrating, painful and isolated wilderness his most profound work was created. It was only after his death (on Easter Sunday in 1955) that his vision burst forth into the larger world, with creative power beyond his wildest imagination.

De Chardin, genius scientist, was a man of deep faith, which sustained him in the wilderness and helped keep his hope alive; his practice included the frequent repetition of a favorite prayer. It goes like this: **trust in life**. That's it: trust in life.

And I find this both totally ridiculous and profoundly comforting. Life—our lives—do have this tendency toward wholeness, and immense capacity for compassion, even right in the midst of bewilderment and suffering; trust in life can and does bear fruit in the most unexpected ways, in our lives and through them.

Trust in life. That my friends is our challenge, our invitation and it can be our prayer. It is one that we can claim, explore and practice together. Because the most fruitful wilderness journey is one we make with companions. So pay attention, listen deeply to the new life emerging in you and around you. Engage it. Share it. And trust. And, you know, after 14 billion years, God only knows where this might lead.

See Ilia Delio, "Love at the Heart of the Universe," *Oneing* Vol 1 No 1 (Spring 2013)