

Conversations With Life

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“Listen to the stones in the wall. They try to speak your name.”

For Thomas Merton, it was easier, perhaps, to find the stillness that allowed him to speak to stones. He was a Trappist monk—a Catholic—a writer and peace activist.

One of his books is called “Dialogues with Silence.”

For modern, talkative people like ourselves, this doesn’t sound like a very interesting way to live.

Pema Chödrön, also a monastic but she of the Buddhist variety, admits that by modern human standards a nun’s life is pretty boring—and it also includes conflict.

“Because it’s a monastery,” she writes, “there’s nothing you can do at Gampo Abbey that’s fun, unless you like to meditate all the time or take walks in nature, but everything gets boring after awhile.”

“Occasionally we’ll see a video, but that’s rare and usually there’s a dispute about what it’s going to be.”¹

¹ Pema Chodron, *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 141.

It's refreshing to hear her say that, because sometimes we imagine that advanced spiritual teachers are beyond such things.

We might think that they'd have reached a constant state of grounded being in the world—that they'd never feel bored, or confused, or angry, or worried.

That they'd always always be in touch with Wisdom,
with a capital "W."

Looking at the Thomas Merton poem a little more closely, we can see that he, too, does not have a handle on such rock-solid wisdom either. Listen to what he says:

"Who (be quiet) are you?"

"Be what you are (but who?)"

"Be the unthinkable one you do not know."

"Speaking (I do not hear) to your own being."

In this poem, I hear him having a dialogue with himself, with his own human limitations.

Ironically, they are revealed through his desire to know...to understand...to get it right.

There is a "wrestling with Being" here...a wrestling with that infinite Creative Mystery out of which we all are born.

Some people might call it an argument with God. Others would call it existential angst. I don't think it matters what you call it.

It does involve, though, a dialogue.

And throughout history, people of many religions have given that Creative Mystery a shape and a personality, so they could better understand the conversation going on.

In the ancient Hebrew text of Genesis, Jacob wrestles with the angel and eventually asks, “What is your name?”

The Presence will not offer a name, but says that Jacob is blessed, for wrestling with God and life.²

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The “Divine Conversation” is described in contemporary poetry as well as ancient texts.

In the opening lines of his most recent CD, Leonard Cohen continues in the Jewish tradition by writing “lines of dialogue” for God:

*“I love to speak with Leonard
He’s a sportsman, and a shepherd
A lazy bastard living in a suit.”*

The cd is called “Old Ideas”—and I think by that he means ancient ideas, not just song ideas he had lying around.

In modern life, songs and art and poetry can help us hear that there is a Bigger Conversation going on.

So what on earth would be the benefit of speaking to stones?
Of simply being still, and listening?

² Genesis 32: 22-32

Why instead wouldn't it be better to write a better song, or preach a better sermon, or make a clearer argument, or start a more worthy project?

Well, all of these things are an essential part of being human. Without them, not much would get accomplished.

But they're not *everything there is* to being human.

And without staying in dialogue with the "Something More," it seems to me we run the risk of losing touch with what is inherently good and worthy in ourselves.

It seems to me that's what so many religious teachers have tried to tell us...although, as we know, so often the truth of the original teachings has been obscured by arguments over procedure or doctrine.

Thomas Merton reminds us: *be still. Listen to the stones in the wall. They try to speak your name.*

I was interested to hear what Unitarian writer and minister Rebecca Parker had to say about stones.

She writes that because of post-Newtonian physics, "The building blocks of the universe turn out not to be tiny bits of hard matter, but tiny activities. Science now reveals to us a world that is relational, interactive, co-determinate, chaotic, intermittent and ever-changing."

"Rocks are not what they used to be. Now we understand that inside a stone, there is a vibrating dance of activity."³

³ Rebecca Parker, "The Rocks Will Cry Out," in Rebecca Parker and John Buerens, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 103-104.

As Thomas Merton said about stones: “all their silence is on fire.”

Whereas people in ancient times viewed “God” as an unmovable being—a rock on which to stand—many modern theologians see that divine “Something” as a creative process of eternal call-and-response.

A conversation that never ends. Of which we are a part.

Now, one challenging thing about the new physics, as I’ve heard it described—and I can’t pretend to understand it—is that it is so mysterious.

At the subatomic level, waves and particles don’t operate in predictable ways that we currently understand.

That can even be annoying or troubling for people who like things to be sensible and manageable. I’m one of those people.

We like to “know” things and we value our reason and our intellect. But now science as well as religion is teaching us that there may be more to Life than we thought.

To have conversations with life today requires an openness to unpredictability and what may seem, to us, to be “other”—or different or simply wrong.

Fortunately we can encounter this baffling “otherness” every day in the form of other people and how they think and behave.

As a result, any community or relationship is an ideal place for spiritual growth.

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The actor Tina Fey may strike you as an unusual spiritual teacher, but frankly I think that many comedians are.

She was trained in improv theatre, and wrote in her recent book “Bossypants” that the secret of creating a wonderful improvised scene is to say “Yes, and.”

That is, to welcome in whatever comes, no matter how unexpected, and then add your contribution.

She also reminds us that there are no mistakes, only opportunities.

She writes, “If I start a scene that I think is very clearly a cop riding a bicycle, and you think I’m a hamster in a hamster wheel, then guess what? I’m a hamster in a hamster wheel.” Or maybe a police hamster.⁴

On the surface, improv theatre may look like a whirlwind of busy activity—and as I think many of us know, it’s hard to stay in touch with Ultimate Meaning in the midst of a whirlwind.

At times, life may look more like a comedy skit than a peaceful day at the monastery.

But at the heart of the improv conversation, there is the “Yes, And.”

And in the heart of everything, no matter how uncontrollable or complex the circumstances, there is the still point of “I Am”, of Being itself, of Inherent Worth.

When we touch that truth, we may come to know a deep peace.

A peace we’ve never known before.

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⁴ Tina Fey, *Bossypants* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2011) p. 85.

When we come to know, in our bones, that we are part of a much larger Conversation—a creative process that is evident in the smallest stone and in the furthest star—we connect with the eternal.

The eternal has nothing to do with going to another place. It's about encountering the sacred here and now.

These glimpses of “heaven” if you will—when we are released from what we might call “surface tension” and anxiety—are always here waiting for us.

Every great spiritual teacher, whether ancient or modern, has told us that.

And yet, of course we forget. And that's okay, too.

If we did not fall asleep, if we did not breathe in as well as express...we would not be alive.

Perhaps like some of you, I sometimes find it difficult to sit in the space between rocks and hard places.

To listen to the Mystery, instead of talking back to it.

The great spiritual teacher Parker Palmer offers his perspective on how “the Teacher Within” might guide the conversation.

He writes:

“I have no particular methods to suggest, other than the familiar bones: solitude and silence, meditative reading and walking in the woods, keeping a journal, finding a friend who will listen.

I simply propose that we need to learn as many ways as we can of ‘talking to ourselves.’

He continues, “That phrase, of course, is one we normally use to name a symptom of mental imbalance—a clear sign of how culture regards the idea of the inner voice!

But people who learn to talk to themselves may soon delight in the discovery that the teacher within is the sanest conversation partner they have ever had.”⁵

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I think the “inner teacher” is a wonderful way to think about God or Divine Presence.

I also think there’s great value in having conversations with Presences outside ourselves—that is, that go beyond the boundaries of our individual selves as we intellectually understand them.

It’s helpful to notice those times when the universe really does “speak our name” in a way that makes us stop and catch our breath.

We probably all have examples of personal “ahah” moments, synchronicities that wake us up, experiences that seem to defy our logic and that point to a “Something More” beyond our understanding.

One of my favourites was described by Carl Jung—who understood the conversation going on between the rational, conscious mind and the “trans-rational” dimension that is also part of life experience.

He wrote about a woman who, he said, “always knew better about everything.”

⁵ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 33.

“After several fruitless attempts to sweeten her rationalism with a more human understanding, I had to confine myself that something unexpected and irrational would turn up...something that would burst the intellectual [wall] she had set up.

I was sitting opposite her one day...listening to her flow of rhetoric.

She had an impressive dream the night before, in which someone had given her a golden scarab—a costly piece of jewelry.

While she was still telling me this dream, I heard something behind me gently tapping on the window. ... I opened the window immediately and caught the insect in the air as it flew in.

It was a scarabeid beetle, whose gold-green colour most nearly resembles that of a golden scarab.

I handed the beetle to my patient with the words, ‘Here is your scarab’.”⁶

Now that’s a conversation with Life.

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This sermon has become like a beach full of coloured stones...so many pieces of wisdom to pick up and converse with...and I’m grateful to Unitarian faith for making that possible.

It is my hope that you pick something up, from something that I’ve said, or, perhaps even the space between the words.

In conversations between friends, the words that are unsaid are as important as the ones that are spoken.⁷

⁶ Jean Shinoda Bolen, *The Tao of Psychology: Synchronicity and the Self* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 14-15.

I hope that we may learn to listen to the “stones” in front of us...

Anything that seems unmovable, or that we can't see our way past.

I hope we can trust the times of un-knowing...the space between insights and decisions.

That we can trust the inherent teacher at the foundation of our Being...and speak from that place, which is both rock solid and ever changing.

Perhaps the conversation itself, and our faithful and loving engagement in it, will carry us through the passages of confusion.

As we say “yes” to the call of the Presence in each other and in Life itself, we may together create a conversation that is life-giving and sustaining...not only for us, but for all those yet to come.

Blessings to you all.

⁷ Paraphrase of a quote by John O'Donohue.