

Being Present to the Wind
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It may surprise you to find out that God and the devil are on speaking terms. They get together regularly to shoot the breeze. Sure, God and the devil talk to others, as well, but there is something special about the times the two of them are in conversation. They understand each other very well. One day, God and the devil were walking along, in the middle of one of their conversations. In the distance, they saw a man pick up something. “Hey, look over there.” said God to the devil. “Man has found truth! You might become unemployed. Are you concerned?” “No, I’m not concerned that man has found truth,” said the devil. “I’m going to help him *organize* it.” That is how the devil came to be in the details. ;)

Krishnamurti had an allergy to organized religion. Some Unitarian Universalists have an allergy to organized religion. Can Krishnamurti’s insights help us to forge a distinctive Unitarian Universalist approach to religion, one that includes skepticism about any scheme which purports to organize truth? “Truth is a pathless land,” he famously said. In this age of GPS devices, which use global positioning satellites to tell us where we are and how to get to where we want to go, what is the significance of understanding truth as a pathless land?

Krishnamurti was born in India in 1895. His father was a government worker who retired and moved his family to the town of Adyar in Madras (now Chennai), where he found work at the Theosophical Society. The Theosophical Society was founded in New York City in 1875, 20 years before Krishnamurti was born. “After several iterations the Society's objectives have evolved to be to form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or colour; to encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science; and to investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.”¹

The group’s search for the new World Teacher was taking place behind the scenes in the early 20th century. A Theosophical leader spotted the adolescent Krishnamurti on a beach and said that his aura was without selfishness. He was raised under the guidance of this man, C.W.

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosophical_Society.

Leadbeater, and by a woman named Annie Besant (whose words were used as chalice lighting words this morning). Krishnamurti was put forth by them as the new World Teacher, Lord Maitreya. Theosophists formed an organization called “The Order of the Eastern Star” to promote this new World Teacher.

Just when the Theosophists thought they had Krishnamurti’s trajectory figured out, he shocked them. “In 1929, at the age of 32 . . . he announced his decision to step down from any formal role or plan to promote him as a World Teacher, resigned as figure head of the Theosophists, and cut all ties to any notion of a religious or spiritual organization . . . [He said] ‘Man cannot come to [truth] through any organization, through any creed, through any dogma, priest or ritual, not through any philosophic knowledge or psychological technique. He has to find it through the mirror of relationship, through the understanding of the contents of his own mind, through observation and not through intellectual analysis or introspective dissection.’ For the rest of his long life, he taught not as an authority but as an investigator looking into life’s fundamental issues through questioning all assumptions, and challenging his listeners to do the same.”²

I resonated with Krishnamurti’s insights when I first read his words in the mid 1970’s. They nourished me for the 20 years of my religious life between Lutheranism and Unitarian Universalism. We benefit from revisiting and wrestling with religious teachings that once were important to us, seeking to plumb additional depths that may be there or to acknowledge with a degree of sadness that we were swimming in a shallow pool all along.

My wrestling with Krishnamurti’s insights was occasioned by my more recent development of an anti-racism, anti-oppression sensibility. For me, this sensibility is rooted in history – learning about history and valuing history, especially “people’s history” (thank you, Howard Zinn, rest in *peace*, though only if you *want* to). Anti-racism work and anti-oppression work of all kinds require paying attention to paths – who determines the destination, who makes the paths (voluntarily or under duress), leads and who follows, who carries the supplies, who prepares the

² See the “Introduce K to Others” packet on the website of the Krishnamurti Foundation of America, <http://www.kfa.org/introduce.php>.

meals, who cleans up, whose stubbed toe occasions a halt for rest, whose twisted ankle matters little.

Is truth a pathless land primarily for the economically or educationally privileged or for the spiritually gifted? After all, access to a path to empowerment can make or break quality of life for the oppressed. It is easy for someone who has all his or her needs met to wax philosophical. In this excerpt from his poem “Meriting the Wind We Inherit,” Unitarian Universalist minister Dick Gilbert writes this about history:

“Meriting the wind we inherit.
 There is a play, Inherit the Wind.
 The Scopes Monkey Trial is its story.
 Brady, Bible-thumping defender of a theological status quo,
 invokes a verse from Proverbs:
 “He who troubles his household will inherit the wind.”
 Freely rendered: troublemakers get their just deserts.
 This church, this movement –
 “Troublemakers” in the household of faith –
 Not to tear down, but to build up;
 Not to undermine faith, but to undergird it
 With reason and compassion;
 Not to reject the past – merely a rough draft –
 But to improve upon it.
 History is something old and something new,
 Too often borrowed,
 More than occasionally true.
 history is what our forebears warned us about,
 Our children blame us for – and more.
 It is something other people have done –
For us, to us, even sometimes with us.
 It is something we inherit, sometimes merit,

And observe – or serve.
 History is the only play in town;
 The theater around the corner – or continent,
 Just up the next block – or country,
 Or here where we stand – and understand . . .
 Where are we going?
 If we knew, it might not be worth going there.
 Not knowing, we can shape the time
 To fit the need of neighbors and ourselves.
 We are the meaning makers
 And the history takers
 And the tradition breakers
 And the creed forsakers
 And status quo shakers.
 We are the interval
 Between celebration and anticipation,
 Between frustration and elation,
 Between abdication and consecration.
 Seize the moment.
 Grasp the times (nettles and all).
 Take the first step into the future,
 The real home of every last one of us.³

For the future to be the real home of every last one of us, for no one to be homeless in the future, we have to care about the paths of history. Truth begins as a land of paths for those seeking freedom. For example, according to *Between the Lines: Sources for Singing the Living Tradition* (our hymnal), “Many of the African American spirituals sung today were ‘map songs’ that gave coded directions to safety zones or to the underground railroad for runaway slaves. Many spirituals and folk songs created during slavery passed along messages of secret meetings, family

³ “Meriting the Wind We Inherit” by Richard S. Gilbert in the 1981 Unitarian Universalist meditation manual entitled *To Whom It May Concern*. I believe the copyright holder is the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York.

ties, warning, and escape. The spiritual “I’m On My Way” is believed to be an announcement of an escape attempt and an invitation to join.”⁴ “Follow the Drinking Gourd” told slaves to follow the big Dipper to freedom. Truth begins as a land of paths for those seeking freedom.

The notion of truth as a pathless land is a bit aggravating because it seems to downplay the patterns of relationship that give rise to institutional racism and to other forms of oppression. Holding truth as a pathless land almost sounds like the philosophical equivalent of a “get out of jail free” card for those of us who are averse to accountability. After all, if truth is a pathless land, why bother to turn around and look back upon our footsteps to see what – or who – has been trampled or jostled.

Yet in a different sense, Krishnamurti is correct. At a certain point, truth is a pathless land. I heard him speak in Ojai, California in the early 1980’s. He died in 1986 at age 90. I resonate with his way of being in the world, paying attention to what is going on within the self, paying attention to what is going on interpersonally in a room, and paying attention to what is going on in the world at large.

In part, we participate in religious communities to share our struggles and to share the ways in which we find solace. I share this with you because, in part, it is how I find solace. My sense of self is that I am a floating nexus of attention. I am the energy of attention congealed temporarily into human form. Of course, this human form has to pay bills and bleeds. But my sense of self more fundamentally is that I am simply attentive energy, energy that is part of an adapting system of energy.

Attention is what enables the system of energy to adapt. By paying attention to “what is,” I do my part in helping the system of energy adapt. When I encounter difficulties, disappointments, loss, pain, I try to respond by paying attention, bringing to consciousness what is unconscious, as much as possible, from moment to moment. I believe this process of paying attention, of inquiring, from moment to moment is what Krishnamurti meant by meditation.

⁴ *Between the Lines: Sources for Singing the Living Tradition*, second edition, Skinner House Books, Boston, 1998, p.39.

I find that difficulties, disappointments, loss, pain belong to my “small self,” my self in lower case letters, if you will. My “large self” consists of full capital letters. Those full capital letters are not any particular color, so they are not visible; they do not stand out in the foreground against the background of life. In fact, those full capital letters are transparent. They appear to be invisible because the world shines clearly through them.

In that pathless, full caps land, difficulties, disappointments, loss, and pain are noticed in passing. When I act for social justice and nothing much seems to happen, I find that discouragement belongs to my “small self”, the self in lower case letters. In the pathless, transparent full caps land, my “large self“ notices the discouragement in passing.

Unitarian Universalist minister Earl Koteen is familiar with Krishnamurti’s teachings, and we talked this week (you may want to check out his blog at <http://callingministers.blogspot.com/>). He said, “One of the lessons from Krishnamurti that is directly applicable to Unitarian Universalism is the gift of presence that arises in silence and in inquiry. The mind’s chattering may go on, but we not be as attached into it as we have been. It’s so easy to become dogmatic and have the sense that we have the answers. We can learn to hold beliefs and *values* lightly, and to love our questions.” Referring to the “wild West,” he continued, “There were places where you had to check your firearm before entering town. We should do the same with our thoughts. Check your beliefs at the door before you enter community.”

What does it *feel* like when truth is a pathless land? Not, what is it like intellectually? Intellectually, regarding truth as a pathless land means questioning assumptions and approaching life with a spirit of open-hearted inquiry. In terms of *feeling*, for me, it feels like being present to the wind. Actually, it feels like being present to wind and to waves.

Wind and waves are passions, individual and collective. I do not mean “passion” in some narrow sense. Passion is what animates us, what we care about. Passion is the energy of attention becoming aware of itself. If we do not want to be stuck in life’s doldrums, if we do not want to be “dead in the water,” we need passion, and we need to attend to the passions of others.

It is one thing not to have a path. It is something else not to have a destination. There may not be a path to truth, but truth is out there. By being present to the wind, we move using the power of our passions. We move using the passions of others, as well. The flotilla sails toward greater awareness and greater fairness for all. May we remember the paths of truth (the paths of history). May we question assumptions and inquire with an open heart in that other territory of truth which has no path. May we be present to the wind. May it be so!