

Lessons of the Two Faced God

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It is good to be here together. I introduced today's subject earlier in the Story for All: Janus. The two faced god who was re-created beautifully by members of our community. I am going to talk a bit more about Janus and consider some of the lessons that this two faced god has to offer us here and now. It is, maybe surprisingly, quite fitting to turn to this ancient Roman god now: not only is Janus the namesake of January, this two faced god also resonates with the year 2020: We are in a time when our national and global politics, our social media and communication systems are being threatened by untrustworthiness, double-dealing, deceit – all terms that have come to be negatively associated with being two faced, or Janus Faced. And the year itself, 2020. The eye doctor's term for perfect eyesight. 20/20: if we have ever needed more perfect vision in our aching, burning, fractured world this may be the year for it: with eyes towards the past, we reckon with past injustices in truth and reconciliation projects like the witness stones we heard about last week; looking towards the future, we try to imagine and enact more responsible and sustainable ways of living on this precious Earth. And there are, no doubt, a host of personal changes and growth points that we are each reckoning with this year in our own lives. More perfect vision, trustworthiness, honesty: these would be useful, indeed.

So, Janus, we turn to you with more than intellectual curiosity: how can we work wisely with our ability to remember and look back at our collective and individual histories? How can we live into our futures responsibly and creatively, guided by our inner wisdom, our deepest values, and our spiritual callings? Goodness knows, looking backward or forward is often not comfortable or easy: bearing witness to past injustices brings up anger, impatience and grief; and the future can look pretty scary. Looking back at my own life, at least for myself, can often become a ritual of regret, turning over decisions that are no longer available to make, longing for past moments of happiness, wondering 'what if?' Looking forward often feels mostly like worrying, expecting, hoping, fearing, fantasizing, and always planning, planning, planning. These constricted, unsettled mind states that can come from restlessly or anxiously looking to the past and future, are why, I think, being two-faced, like Janus, has gotten a bad rap. If we say or hear that someone is two faced or double dealing, what we mean is that we don't know what else that other person is thinking at a given moment, what other agenda may be lurking behind what is immediately visible. To be in the presence of two faced energy, our own or someone else's, is to experience distractedness, absent-mindedness, an inability to be fully present and connected to those around you. These may be habits of mind also familiar to you, and I hope we can find a way around them today. Grounding ourselves in the present, I will invite you to open yourself to looking back at your journey so far, and forward to what may lie ahead with care, honesty, and trustworthiness. If you do experience feelings of regret or sorrow in looking back, simply note their presence. Consider welcoming them, reframing them: regrets are not thugs come to beat you up for decisions you can't possibly take back. Consider instead that they might be messengers, returning to whisper about something still missing from your life, pointing the way to future doorways that you might yet need to explore. If you feel anxiety about the future, note that it is happening, and come back to the present. Find something you can trust here and now. It could be simply your breath, your heart beating, or just sitting in this room for this amount of time, with nothing else to attend to.

So, how can Janus help us wisely take stock of our spiritual and embodied journeys?

As I've said, Janus was known to the Romans as the god of doorways. He was the gatekeeper; his symbols were a porter's staff and a set of keys: these symbols show how closely he was connected to doorways. Because every door and passageway looks in two directions, Janus was called -- *Janus bifrons* -- the god who looked both ways. Janus was named in prayers at the start of events, festivals, and initiation rituals. Gifts were given in Janus's name to bless the first month of each new year, a time of new beginnings and transitions as the world (at least the northern hemisphere) begins its tip out of the darkest days of winter and towards spring, light, and rebirth. And it seems particularly noteworthy that the doors of Janus's temples and the city gates dedicated to him were ritually left open during times of war: this was in order to welcome soldiers safely home, and also, I think, because periods of upheaval and transition, like war, require special vigilance.

In our own lives, even if we are not at outright personal or political war, this need for vigilance in times of change remains true. Think back for a moment, on a time of significant change or transition in your own life. If you feel that you are in such a time right now, I'd encourage you to ask for help from Janus and look a little farther back to a transition you have some distance from. [pause] It may be helpful to picture a place in which you processed or experienced some aspect of that change. [pause] Does everyone have a time of transition in mind? If you pictured the transition as a doorway, what would it look like? (and maybe it did involve an actual door, if you left a home or job, or started at a new school or institution). Was it a massive, intimidating door? Was it small and difficult to find? Was it a revolving door that spit you out a few times before you finally succeeded in getting to the other side? Did you go knocking at some other doors first that ended up being bad fits before you found this one? Was it a warm and welcoming doorway, one you'd longed long to find? Perhaps it was a door that felt more like a trap door, opening suddenly and unexpectedly under your feet, leaving you breathless and unmoored for a time before you found new footing on fresh, solid ground. Or maybe it was a door that stood open for quite some time (or continued to appear and reappear despite your best efforts to ignore it) before you finally found the courage or wisdom or sheer frustration to walk through it? As you sit with the image of your transition, ask yourself how you perceived the door at the time. Welcome? Unwelcome? Hardwon? Disastrous? At what point in the process did you recognize it as a transition, as a doorway that would change the way you lived your life?

Though change can sometimes be methodical, planned, linear, more often, deep changes come about in more haphazard and non-linear ways, with as many moments of confusion as of clear sight (rarely is it with 20/20 vision that we experience change, only in retrospect can we see the path, which is where we get the phrase 20/20 hindsight). Kim Chernin writes in her book *Reinventing Eve* about the often haphazard process of change. It may ring true for some of you, it certainly does for me. Change "is not a predictable process. It moves forward fitfully, through moments of clear seeing, dramatic episodes of feeling, subtle intuitions. Dreams may arrive, bringing guidance we frequently cannot accept. Years may pass, during which we know that we are involved in something that cannot be easily named. We may wake to a sense of confusion, know that we are in dangerous conflict, cannot define the nature of what troubles us. All change is like this. It may circle around, snake back on itself, find detours, lead us on a merry chase, starts us out it seems all over again from where we were in the first place. And then suddenly, when we least expect it, something opens a door, discovers a threshold, shoves us across."

This can sound like a somewhat violent process -- wandering in a wilderness, experiencing confusion, then getting shoved across a threshold. As in the wars Janus looked over, we may find that in our own lives, times of transition are marked by conflict, upheaval, a loss of peace, sometimes even a sense of violent awakening. This is often necessary as old and outlived ways are done away with and new worlds are born. Even in the most healthy of births, there is, after all,

blood and pain. One of my favorite theater directors, Anne Bogart, who runs the SITI company, talks about “the violence of the choice.” She says, “Art is violent. To be decisive is violent.” When you choose to do one thing, even placing a chair in a specific place onstage, you necessarily kill off the other possible choices. This terrified me a little the first time I heard her say it, but it also rang true. It is why decisions can be so hard. It is why certain doors feel so difficult to walk through in our lives, because in choosing one thing, you are decidedly not choosing something else. Looking, let alone moving into our own futures, carries a kind of violence as we kill off other possible futures (or see them vanish before our eyes). And yet, as in our own births into this world, this violence of choice and change is one we cannot fully live without.

The quote on the front of the order of service today, from poet and spiritual leader Jan Richardson, speaks to this: “May you have the vision to recognize the door that is yours, courage to open it, wisdom to walk through” (Sanctuary of Women, 47). Recognition, courage, and wisdom. Transitions require of us high forms of consciousness, and a good deal of bravery. Recognizing the “doorway that is yours” can help us make changes in our vocations, geographic locations, relationships. Looking back, I imagine you see such transitions in your own life.

Passing through such doorways are essential to our spiritual journeys as well.

Richard Rohr, author of *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, argues that transitions, and particularly the unexpected, radical transitions, are, in fact, essential to our spiritual growth. Without falling or failing, plummeting through one of those trap door transitions that sends you into free fall; or without making the choice to walk through a particularly challenging doorway that requires some loss of comfort, without these experiences, we will not find our footing in what he calls “the spirituality of the second half of life.” We will continue doing our “survival dance,” holding it all together like we think we are supposed to, achieving, amassing, comparing, hustling, not knowing about the “sacred dance” that is waiting to unfold within us. Rohr assures us that the first half of life, in which we learn the rules, abide by expectations, construct our ego, build a sturdy “house”, is absolutely valuable and necessary. And I’m sure all of us can look back in our own lives and see times when we were [or are] busily immersed in this kind of constructive work – childhood, young adulthood, midlife. Without a strong foundation, Rohr says, we cannot ever leave that first house and venture forth on our deeper spiritual journeys. As some of us have likely experienced, if we do not receive a strong foundation from our early life, then we often need to take time to rebuild or repair it later in life, through therapy, recovery programs, healthier relationships. Because the first part of life is essential to getting to the second. All human cultures throughout history have, in some way, valued traditions, laws, boundaries, authority, and moral codes. Of course, rebellion against these structures is part of our hardwiring (think of a three year old you know, or of yourself as a teenager). Rebellion, restlessness, the need for new growth happens again and again in our lives, and, if done with awareness, in ever deepening ways. The problem (what Rohr considers to be the only actual sin) is if we cling to the structure, security, and social expectations of the first half of life beyond its time and beyond its service to us and others. If we ignore the call of doorways that will lead us deeper into life’s mysteries, then we risk shutting out our own unique holiness and the spirit of life that surrounds and moves within us. If we cling to our own survival dances, we may be refusing to let ourselves learn our sacred dance and all it can offer to the world around us. This doesn’t mean that we should stop being responsible parents or quit our jobs, after all we are all in a complex web of house building and responsible care giving for ourselves and others. What it means is that we open ourselves to seeing and walking through the more mysterious doorways that mature life offers us, the doors that call us from within, that speak to our deeper sense of purpose and spiritual curiosity. “None of us go into our spiritual maturity completely of our own accord, or by a totally free choice,” Rohr writes. “We are led by mystery [...] or we fall into it by some kind of ‘transgression.’ [...] The familiar and the habitual are so falsely reassuring, and most of us make our

homes there permanently. The new is always by definition unfamiliar and untested, so God, life, destiny, suffering have to give us a push – usually a big one – or we will not go. Someone has to make clear to us that homes are not meant to be lived in – but only to be moved out from” (xvi-xvii). Hearing an inner voice is often what starts a hero and heroine’s journeys, the call to step beyond the familiar and explore the wilderness of what appears to be the wide world and turns out to be our own souls. This may be felt as the pull of a kind of “homesickness” in our soul, as Rohr puts it, a longing that will lead us away from where we are, even if where we are is a place we call home. It is a homesickness that will lead us toward, around, and back to a deeper, truer Home. Jan Richardson describes this process in a beautiful poetic blessing she wrote for a day in the liturgical calendar known as Women’s Christmas, or more commonly, Epiphany (in the early days of the new year). It is called “The Map You Make Yourself.”

“You have looked at so many doors with longing, wondering your life lay on the other side. For today, choose the door that opens to the inside. Travel the most ancient way of all: the path that leads you to the center of your life. No map but the one you make yourself. No provision but what you already carry and the grace that comes to those who walk the pilgrim’s way. Speak this blessing as you set out and watch how your rhythm slows, the cadence of the road drawing you into the pace that is your own. Eat when hungry. Rest when tired. Listen to your dreaming. Welcome detours as doors deeper in. Pray for protection. Ask for guidance. Offer gladness for the gifts that come, and then let them go. Do not expect to return by the same road. Home is always by another way, and you will know it not by the light that waits for you/ but by the star that blazes inside you, telling where you are is holy/ and you are welcome here.” (Circle of Grace, 77-79).

Some of you may be thinking, this sounds great, but where will I find the time? The good news is that the invitation to such a journey does not require weeks on a meditation cushion or a through hike on the Appalachian trail or a major life event. This can begin amidst the messiness and ordinariness of everyday life. So in closing, I will offer a short meditation that brings these big spiritual journey questions into a very mundane practice: opening and closing a door in your house. I’m drawing it from a lovely little book called *Simple Ways* by Gunilla Norris. In it she takes spaces and objects from daily life – around the house, parts of the body, mundane activities – and uses them as gateways into recognizing the sacred all around us. This meditation is called The Door. And to begin it, I will ask you to picture a door in your house. It could be your front door, a door to your bedroom or office or bathroom, any door will do, it should just be one that you open and close numerous times a day or week. [pause] I invite you to make this door in your home an object of inner study. Consider: “How might we be recalled into the present by turning the handle of a door? Could a hand on the doorknob remind us that we have the power to unlock our inner doors? Could we pause here and feel the moment of opening or closing as one of decision-making? We may only be going into a familiar room, but we can enter it with the understanding that every day we enter into our habits, our attitudes, our *inner* living rooms. Could we use opening or closing this door as a means to slow down, to ask ourselves what new doors there are to pass through, both in our relationships and occupations? Could turning the handle of this door be an opening to prayer?” Blessings on you and on all the thresholds you have crossed to get here and now. Blessings on all the doorways that await you.

May it be so.