Pure Imagination

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It's been a while, but every now and then I encounter a person, usually in a big city and on a busy street corner, wearing a sandwich board upon which is inscribed something along the lines of, "Repent! The End Is Near." Predictably, most people simply walk around such individuals as if they are nothing but a familiar, quirky feature of city life. Which is to say, by and large, they ignore them. But what if these sandwich sign messengers are on to something?

My sister and I stood side by side in silence. Both of us contemplating the large canvas hanging on the wall before us. At some point my sister walked toward the painting, leaning in closer still, to read the museum label beside it. I expected she'd move on to the next painting, but she stepped back and we continued to stare at the piece. With a blend of curiosity and slight frustration in her voice, she commented, "I don't get it."

Anyone who visits or spends time in a museum will eventually utter or hear these words from the lips of those in earshot. If the work we're viewing is representational, "I'd don't get it", may mean we don't recognize the story or subject, particularly, nowadays, if it depicts some obscure Biblical passage or historical event. Likewise, much of the allegorical meaning of objects in a picture are no longer common knowledge, leading modern viewers to focus more on the aesthetic appeal or technical mastery of a work of art rather than its power to invite reflection on the human condition. But more often than not, "I don't get it" is a response to nonrepresentational or abstract art.

The painting my sister and I were viewing when she uttered, "I don't get it." was a canvas by Mark Rothko, whose is known for his color field paintings. Even if you don't know his name, you've undoubtedly seen his work. Think large square or oblong canvases with one or two smaller fields of color, often with soft edges that seem to float atop or merge with a larger field of color underneath and delineated by the canvas edge.

Sometimes the contrast between the fields of color is dramatic, but the Rothko my sister and I were viewing was one that was so subtle that it appeared, at first glance, to be monochromatic. And so I could understand my sister's response. At the same time, I didn't want to let it pass because although she claimed, not to "get it" something about it was nonetheless holding her attention.

And so began a conversation,
“What do you mean you don’t get it?”, I asked her.
“This painting”, she said, “What is it supposed to mean?”
“Who says it supposed to mean anything?”, I replied.
“I don’t know. So what’s the point of it?”, she asked.

Since we’d spent considerable time staring at the piece, I asked her,
“What have you noticed about this painting staring at it?”
“What do you feel looking at it?”
“Where do your thoughts go as you look at it?”

She shared that the longer she looked at the painting the more she noticed it really wasn’t a single color as it first appeared. That it has a depth that wasn’t immediately apparent which she felt made it come alive so to speak. She also observed it made her feel calm or grounded. A feeling that was only interrupted when she became focused on “getting” what the painting was supposed to mean, that alleged loftier pursuit that makes bores of dilettantes, intimidates countless others, and seemingly bores everyone else to tears. An exaggeration, perhaps, but reflective nonetheless of a bias in favor of analysis with art.

It’s a subtle shift to imagine another way art might speak to us and one abstract artists like Rothko were interested in. As Rothko once told curator William C. Seitz, “One does not paint for design students or historians but for human beings and the reaction in human terms is the only thing that is really satisfactory to the artist.” And for Rothko that meant the ability to convey what is most important to humans—not the world around them, but their emotional life, noting, “The fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions,” (Source: Artsy.com)

If a subtle shift in imagination opens another way to access art, how might such a shift impact religion’s ability to speak to us today?

Wait a minute!, you might say, doesn’t religion already rely too much imagination? After all many today consider religion to be utter fiction featuring made up gods and their allegedly divine rules directing through historical and scientific fantasy, a planet and populace whose very existence is dependent upon the whims of some deity or deities they can’t see.

But what if the naysayers, like the monkey in our story for all ages, have based their conclusion on a misunderstanding. What if imagination has a different role or purpose to play in religion, a legitimate purpose?
And so it does…metanoia.

Metanoia is a Greek word found the Christian scriptures and most often translated into English as, repent. And so we return now to the person on a city street corner wearing a sandwich sign inscribed, “Repent!” The message, often presumably dismissed as a silly warning from a moralizing religious zealot is actually an invitation. Although the person wearing the sign bearing the message may not realize it, repent or metanoia in Greek, the language of the Gospels, means [as the late Biblical scholar Marcus Borg notes], “to go beyond the mind that you have.” Indeed, it is among the first messages one encounters in the Christian Gospels.

Why?

For one, it seems the Gospel writers were aware of how challenging Jesus’ teaching are. Indeed an often overlooked feature of the Gospels is Jesus’ annoyance or frustration with people who don’t get what he’s trying to say, including his own disciples. Indeed, many of the teachings of Jesus, like the following from Matthew are admittedly hard to reconcile with the mind we have, that is, the mind shaped by our culture: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…” Such teachings are as confounding today as they surely were in Jesus’ time, and as readily dismissed as “pie in the sky” even if they sometimes make it onto bumperstickers.

Many religious teachings, regardless of the tradition, including those that get paraphrased, made into bumperstickers, or find their way into email signatures because they make us feel good are often simultaneously ignored in practice as if they are nothing but cheerful non-sense.

In a scene from the 1971 film “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory”, Willy Wonka, played by Gene Wilder is accused of spewing nonsense by a father of one of the children. To which Wonka counters, “A little nonsense now and then is relished by the wisest men.” And while this reply is surely taken by many as a reminder of the importance of playfulness in life, we might also take it to indicate there is wisdom to be found in pure imagination, which is to say in what seems non-sensical, beyond our capacity to make sense of or explain with the mind we have.

Imagination is crucial to clearing the hurdles set up in our minds by the society in which we live.

Now, we’ve been speaking about this as it relates to Christianity, but imagination has the same critical role to play in every religion.

For each, in their own way, seek or encourage us to go beyond conventional thinking. In Buddhism, for example, a central teaching centers on the idea of liberation through non-attachment. A concept that goes against conventional ideas of acquiring and holding on to material possessions, people, ideas, etc. for security. And Unitarian Universalism, in naming shared values: interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation, generosity, and equity centered around love invites each us to use our imagination in their application, the actual living of our faith, particularly in a culture that does not broadly share all these values or limits them to select people.

Imagining is not thinking harder about things. It's not seeking to analyze, explain, or resolve something. It is conjuring, feeling, experiencing, encountering, entering. And this is why stories are a favorite means of communicating religious teachings and insights. They're designed to transport us past visible horizons, over the rainbow, into a new reality.

Indeed, recall the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't inspire a nation by saying, "I have a plan!" He said," I have a dream!"

Religion not only invites us to dream the dream, but to live into it…like sisters piling into a rusty old abandoned car to transport them to the beach, the market, Sunday school….anywhere, any town and using using leaves to pay the fare.

Stories like those found in religious texts we today dismiss as myth, by which we mean untrue, were never meant to report an event or inspire trite musings like, what would Jesus or whoever do. They were and remain myths in the truest sense, that is, they convey a greater than literal truth.

Thus we must ourselves enter these stories, not to memorize or analyze them, but to live and breathe them. Only then do we discover their relevance and familiarity and realize they're not stories about people in another time and place, they're stories about us, right here, right now.

Most of us probably didn't have a rusty old abandoned car to play in our yard growing up, but we can enter a poem about it and recognize in it the yearning to venture beyond our limitations or a defiant determination to get out of some rut that has us feeling stuck. In a similar vein the Bible tells us Jesus was tempted by the devil to be someone else, that is, to conform to the expectations of the world rather than be true to himself. Who here hasn't run into that situation? And according to legend, the Buddha tried all kinds practices before one "worked", if you will. Sounds kind of UU, doesn't it?

Bringing our imagination to religious stories doesn't mean we figure out how to literally do or reenact what Jesus or the Buddha did. It means we discern what is present to us in these stories, let go of the urge to figure it out or make it make sense to our conditioned mind. Imagination is letting the story work on us not the other way around.

These are easy examples to relate to, of course. Nonetheless they are far from the trivial gobbledygook the modern world assumes religion to be or that religious people and institutions themselves too often make of their faith.

Many far more challenging opportunities to "view paradise" as the song goes, await us if we can but bring ourselves to take religion and religious stories seriously, not literally. Let us then dare to accept the invitation to go beyond the mind we have and into a world of pure imagination.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be