

The Great Escape

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Across the landing at the top of the grand staircase in the Morgan Memorial wing of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, CT there is a gallery arranged as a *kunstkammer* or cabinet of art and curiosities, a sort of precursor to today's museums, in which objects from around the world, wrought by human hands as well as nature, are displayed. In addition to the objects, various quotes adorn the space. On one wall is a quote by St. Augustine, "The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page." On another is quote by Leonardo Da Vinci, "A beautiful body perishes, but a work of art does not die." As well as this one by Aristotle, "In All Things of Nature There is Something Of the Marvelous." Two short quotes by the Northern Renaissance humanist and theologian Erasmus also grace the gallery's walls, "Man is but a bubble" and "Time reveals all things."

These quotes are intended to elicit reflection. Their presence on the walls of a gallery may seem strange to us today, but it was not an uncommon practice in the past to incorporate such things into architectural design, interior decoration, and indeed a variety of everyday objects including ceramics, metal and glassware, as well as musical instruments. Keyboard instruments in particular were often inscribed in elaborate lettering, usually in Latin.

Surprisingly, mottos adorning the inside lid of countless harpsichords, clavichord, spinets, and virginals didn't always concern music making. Indeed, examples are known of inscriptions which advise, "Audi vide et face si vis vivere in pace" ("Listen, look, and keep quiet if you want to live in peace"). Another proclaims, "Plus fait douceur que violence" ("Gentleness is more effective than violence"). And an inscription on a 16th century Venetian spinet housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York rather bluntly instructs, "Non mi sona si tu no ha del buono" ("Don't play me unless you have the skill.")

Today it is more common to find quotes, inspiring and otherwise emblazoned on coffee mugs, t-shirts, bumperstickers, or attached to email signatures than carved into the frieze of a public building or hand-painted on a musical instrument. Still, regardless of where you encounter them, it seems clear we humans are attracted to and like to keep our sights, quite literally, on little nuggets of advice, inspiration, and occasional wisdom.

An observation that, to me, raises at least two questions.

This first is why? Why do we do this? What's the point, for example, of instructing or advising via quote, readers of your email to, "Spread joy." or "Keep the faith." or "Be the change that you wish to see in the world." Why wear a t-shirt that says, "Just Do It" or "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans." And what are we doing when we drink from a coffee mug that says, "It is better to speak less, and best to speak kindly" or "Please cancel my subscription to your issues."

I suppose for most, the question of why we display or keep these saying visible, is because we claim to be inspired by and/or aspire to practice what we "preach" via these quotes and aphorisms.

Which leads me to a second question, how well do we abide by the sayings we claim inspire us and/or we aspire practice?

I mean, I've been cut off and flipped the bird by people sporting a "Jesus is my co-pilot" bumpersticker and I've listened to people rant about some disfavored group or perceived enemy while clutching a water bottle bearing the popular message, "Coexist".

I get it. We're human. And I'm no stranger to occasional bouts of demonstrative hypocrisy myself. And so I don't think a lack of perfection is a very good measure of how well we abide by our favorite aphorisms.

A far more accurate measure to my mind is the degree to which we find ourselves willing to ponder these sayings, fail at measuring up, and yet still try again and again. Indeed, chances are, if we're not challenged by them, if we find them too easy, we may in fact be using them as a way out, an escape, if you will, from what writer and episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor calls, "the hardest spiritual work in the world."

And what is this work, according to Taylor? "To love the neighbor as the self – to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it." (From An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith)

Now, many undoubtedly understand Taylor to be talking about love at the level of ethics and morality, sometimes called the "works" of faith. Things like sharing, helping, giving, working for justice and the like. These are important, but they are

not the only understanding of love to which the “hardest spiritual work in the world” refers.

Indeed, Taylor’s words bring to mind a well known aphorism that seems to be enjoying renewed popularity these days in certain circles, perhaps because unexamined, it offers easy escape from the work of love at the level of ethics and beyond, “Charity begins at home.”

Although often accorded the weight of scripture and sometimes erroneously cited as such by those seeking to employ it as justification prioritize one’s material and social needs before or at the expense of other’s, as in, “Me first” or “America first”, this saying is actually found in the writings of Sir Thomas Browne, a 17th century English doctor, polymath, and writer.

Indeed, in his Religio Medici (The Religion of a Doctor), of 1643, Browne writes, “But how shall we expect charity towards others, when we are uncharitable to ourselves? Charity begins at home, is the voice of the world; yet is every man his greatest enemy, and, as it were, his own executioner.”

I don’t know if Browne was familiar with the writings of Lao Tzu, but his observation on charity shares striking parallels to the wisdom expressed in our responsive reading this morning, “If there is to be peace in the world...”, indeed, anywhere “out there”, there must first “...be peace in the heart.” For the word charity comes from the Latin, “caritas”, meaning “love, affection” and is related to the Greek word, “charis”, meaning “love, grace.” While “home”, spiritually speaking, is related to the heart, traditionally understood as the seat of wisdom.

The idea behind both Sir Thomas Browne and Lao Tzu’s observations is not a new one. The world’s great spiritual teachers have long insisted that what’s “out there” (in the world) begins “in here” (within us) with our search for the God to whom, Heraclitus claims, “everything is beautiful, good, and just.” A god, mythologist Joseph Campbell notes, is not a fact but “a metaphor for a mystery that absolutely transcends all human categories of thought, even the categories of being and non-being.” A mystery whose contemplation and encounter engenders the cultivation of compassion for our nature and condition.

And yet we ignore and neglect this mystery within us, content to occupy a cage we mistake for freedom, depriving ourselves and our neighbor the fullness of our own humanity and capacity to love. “But how shall we expect charity towards others, when we are uncharitable to ourselves?”, Sir Thomas Browne asks, as we repeatedly focus our attention away from listening to the wisdom of our hearts to changing the external, on changing other people. Creating gods we take as fact, who favor one group over another, sorting humanity and imposing conditions to

identify and separate the good from the bad, the worthy from the unworthy, the lovable from the unlovable.

All of which begs the question, are those instructive aphorisms in our email signatures, on our coffee mugs, t-shirts, and bumper stickers, tools to help us with the “hardest spiritual work in the world” or are they another way we hope to “use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control” someone else in the hope of effecting the external?

Now, I can imagine some are still back arguing with Heraclitus’ assertion, “To God everything is beautiful, good, and just; humans, however, think some things are unjust and others just.” After all, what about war, bigotry, hatred?...what about our social justice efforts?

Fair questions to be sure.

As it happens I was listening to a lecture given by Joseph Campbell recently during which he shared an observation that addresses such questions. At some point in his life, Campbell befriended a Tibetan monk. Now this monk was among those who escaped with the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 during a brutal crackdown by the Chinese military in response to ongoing rebellion in Tibet. Campbell notes, the crackdown saw monasteries burned, monks, and lay people tortured and killed. A horrendous campaign of violence and oppression the likes of which the world has unfortunately witnessed over and over again to this very day. Of his friend the monk, Campbell then says, “I have never heard in my five years’ relationship with this young man, one word of recrimination of the Chinese. Not one.” Campbell adds, “On the level of ethics, he condemns that kind of action, but he does not condemn the Chinese.”

To many such a response is at once inspiring and impossible, or at least unimaginable. Yet, this is the love at the center of what Buddhists call Buddha Nature, the love that permeates Christ Consciousness, the love we claim as the center of our Unitarian Universalist values. And it is love beyond the level of ethics, of doing “good works” that Barbara Brown Taylor surely includes when she asserts love of neighbor as ourselves is “the hardest spiritual work in the world.”

It’s hard in part because we cannot reason or will our way into such love. It is not an intellectual exercise or riddle to solve. It is a truth that arrests us, discerned through metaphor and myth, actions and experiences that do not define it, but point to it, which is to say, that transcends the rigid dualism we take as fact and that keeps us, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, in a “prison of yourself.” The same dualism that divides, categorizes, and separates people and experiences into

worthy and unworthy, good and bad, enemies and allies, in groups and out groups, and so on.

Taylor is right, this is not easy work. I know, I fail at it every single day. All I need to do is read the news these days and I'm sunk. But I start over each day, right here (within) mindful of Sir Thomas Browne's lament, "Charity begins at home....yet is every man his greatest enemy, and, as it were, his own executioner." For the world without is a reflection of the world we cultivate and sustain within.

And so may the aphorisms you keep close, whether printed on a t-shirt, displayed on the rear bumper of your car, or tacked onto the end of your digital communications, be capable of breaking open your heart and mind, so you may risk both failure and movement toward, "an encounter with another human being... as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself." Indeed, may the words you seek to live by prove not your great escape but channels for the streams of love, truth that sets you free.

Amen and Blessed Be