

"Being Born Again: Re-Birthing Our Views of the Body"

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Dignity of Philadelphia

Based on John 3:1-17

*(My apologies for I have been reading in a book *Become What You Are* by Alan Watts and this informs and is in dialogue with my reading of scripture reading for today.)*

Nicodemus was not an abstract thinker. He was into specificity. He liked concrete details. Now, usually these kinds of folks go into banking or become accountants. But perhaps becoming a religious professional paid better in his day. At any rate, I really like this story because it so starkly shows the difference between concrete thinkers and mystics. Jesus gives a mystical response to the praise he has heard, a truly zen response that sounds like a koan. If he can figure out the sound of one hand clapping Nicodemus will understand a deep truth. He will begin to have an appreciation for Mystery.

We live in an age where the media identifies those who talk in concrete terms about religion are designated as religious spokespeople. You can't get any more concrete than "God-hates-fags." Pardon me for repeating this disgusting slogan. There is nothing abstract about "life begins at conception" which is equally disgusting to me. And yet, I believe that if you can say "I have been born again." You probably have not been. Being born again as Jesus was talking about it has to do with a gentle shifting as the wind blows and we know not from where it comes. Or, as Alan Watts, the Anglican who became more Zen in his spiritual journey, said you cannot concentrate and *think* about concentrating at the same time. It is impossible. You can't be concrete in your thinking AND abstract at the same time. So, you can't say with absolute certainty "I'm born again" and at the same time have the experience of the gentle transformative experience of being birthed.

Or as Watts puts it, this is like another Buddhist simile, it "is like a finger pointing at the moon, and one must take care not to mistake the finger for the moon." In other words let us remember that "religion does not point to itself." It points beyond to the unfathomable. Nicodemus, in his religious garb and all his religious training still had not grasped the depth of humanity's ignorance of all things mysterious. And yet this is the very language that Jesus uses.

The Body

We have in the church and in the culture some very concrete views about the body that, if unexamined, can lead to pain and suffering particularly for women and for the sexual minority communities. Here are just a few:

1- "Marriage is only between one man and one woman."

Why? “Because God says this is the natural order.” And the resulting suffering is that financial and legal protections are not allowed to same gendered partners or partners who choose to have open relationships. This concrete thinking creates a certitude for some and a 2nd class citizenship for others.

2- “Sex is putting male part A into female part B.”

Why? “Because God says heterosexuality is the way we are to procreate and that is the purpose of sex.” And the suffering here is the reduction of pleasure to an instrumental purpose and the trivialization of sexual intimacy to only body parts rather than emotional or relational intimacy. This concrete thinking creates a climate that focuses on climax rather than on the process of intimate communication. It focuses on arrival rather than the journey. And concrete thinking says those who agree are ‘normal’ and those who vary are “deviant.”

3- “Society has the right to force women to bear children.”

Why? “Because God says women’s bodies are for reproduction.” And the suffering here is obvious; unplanned children, ill-advised marriages, financial hardship on families, loss of female control over her own body and her own destiny as others step into, eg politicians and those with an authoritarian religious perspective. This creates a structurally-imposed secondary status for women and makes them victims of their own sexuality. Concrete thinking means those who want to control women win and the women, lose. (And if this alarms you please sign a postcard and talk to me afterwards about the bills currently moving through congress and Harrisburg to ensure this happens.)

We have other views of the body that are not healthy. Our culture says women must be a certain size and have a certain look and then corporations who feed off women’s poor body image making billions of dollars of profit. Increasingly, it feeds off men as well.

We have a culture that gives males the power to dominate women and then has historically turned a blind eye to rapes, in marriage or not, and physical battering that results.

When someone points to the moon one does not stand there and look at the finger. One instead follows the pointing to the moon, according to Alan Watts. This is what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus. Jesus’ teachings and his miracles combined were not about physical rebirthing, a rather logical but stupid conclusion. It is about pointing to something else. Jesus was about changing the way we view things.

What Spiritual Rebirth of the body looks like...

When someone points to the body and sees sin I suggest that it is time for a rebirth, a looking toward something beyond.

When we look at gender and see only 'either-or' or 'top and bottom' I suggest it is time to look higher.

When we look at female and see only second class or inferior then I suggest we are not looking at the moon.

Can the body be the doorway to a Mystical experience?

Can the physical intimacy with our significant others lead us to a spiritual ecstasy that gives a glimpse of the Divine?

Can the feminine be a foretaste of the nurturance of God?

Can our different genders be complementary so as to give us a variety of ways to be in the world and thereby increase our appreciation of the wonders of diversity in all of creation?

Our task...

And now comes the hard part. If we can lift our eyes off the concrete and follow the pointing fingers, Watts tells us that there is no visible moon to which the finger is pointing. And, while Christians say the finger points to God, God is actually a construct that gets used and hardened into concrete as well. Too often when we say "God" we are talking in concrete terms and not seeing Mystery and certainly not experiencing it.

But Jesus' words to Nicodemus are like the finger pointing to the moon that isn't there. Jesus points beyond God to the experience of God's Love.

One cannot adequately describe the experience of Love. It has to be lived.

One cannot understand a Love that does not want to condemn but wants to always love and save. It has to be experienced.

Watts says the experience is here and now, in this moment. And Jesus says that as well in other passages. "The kingdom is here, in you." "The kingdom is now." It is not down the road when I decide to convert or really repent. It is how shall I convert the living of each waking moment?

Shall we concentrate or shall we think about concentrating?

Shall we pray or shall we live to that our lives are a prayer? Shall we give a gift or shall we live so each moment is lived generously? Shall we decide one day to be more loving or shall we be love now?

Jesus was love now. Here. Now. for that is the Mystery, that is the wind blowing where it will. Now go and do likewise.

References to Alan Watts are from "Become What You Are" 1995 Shambhala Publications