

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Matthew 27:46, Psalm 22:1)?” You may recognize these as the words of Jesus on the cross. Jesus was actually quoting Psalms 22 as he cried out; but imagine that this particular man, the Jesus that the New Testament proclaims as both the Son of God and as God the Father as part of a Holy Trinity cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus knew his role. He knew his fate was sealed long before his crucifixion...yet, on that cross...at that crucifixion...he appears to ask for an explanation to that which he doesn't fully understand.

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 3:11)....Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else (Exodus 4:13).”

This is Moses at the burning bush. God is choosing him to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt. Although Moses may not be confident in his particular abilities to do the thing that God commands, Moses is essentially questioning God's choice...God's will.

“As I see my people, O Krishna, arrayed eager for battle, my lungs fail, my mouth is parched, trembling comes upon my body, my hair stands on end...my mind is in a whirl (Bhagavad Gita, 1:28-30).” This is Arjuna, the troubled warrior of the Hindu

holy text the Bhagavad Gita. A battle is about to begin. He is not fearful of battle, but he is troubled about his role and his duty in battle. He sees his cousins and former teachers across the battle lines. As a member of the kshatriya (the warrior) caste, his whole life has been leading to this moment; his whole life will be defined by moments such as these. Yet, at the moment of battle, he pulls back; disillusioned; he has questions.

Why is this? What is it that leads to this lack of understanding, this questioning, this disillusionment? Of course, there may be many reasons but I believe that at the root of these fears lives the primordial fear of the unknown. I'm not alone in thinking this, many theologians, philosophers, social scientists and psychologists agree with me; and the most salient example of this primordial fear of the unknown rests with our own mortality. What lies beyond death's door?

"To die, to sleep--

To sleep--perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene 1)."

Hamlet here reminds me of a story where a man commits a crime, is found guilty and condemned to death. On the day of his execution he is taken to the gallows and he is told that he will be hung until dead. And just as a hood is placed over his head the king intervenes and tells the man that he will die but that he will be

given a choice: he can agree to his gallows death by hanging or choose a fate that lies beyond a door...but not just any door. This door, a dark, oily, heavy metal gate is bound with numerous locks, chains and deadbolts. Surely that which lies beyond, that undiscovered country, must truly be ominous. Dante's hell? In his fear of what lies beyond, the criminal chooses to continue with his gallows death...a known death...death by a means he knows and understands. Before his hanging he is shown what lies beyond that horrible door. And what lies beyond is... freedom...the remainder of his mortal life.

How do we deal with the undiscovered country? How do we deal with the lack of understanding, the questioning and the disillusionment and doubt that our mortality shows us? How do we deal with the unknowns of our daily lives...and that accompanying primordial fear of the unknown that then seems to permeate the very air we breathe, hour by hour, moment by moment.

Humorist Dave Barry writes, "I can win an argument on any topic, against any opponent. People know this and steer clear of me at parties. Often, as a sign of their great respect, they don't even invite me. (Dave Barry, The Sun, November 2012, p48)."

For Dave Barry to win an argument on any topic against any opponent means he must have it all figured out. Everything is all laid out there in front of him...all locked up and buttoned down. Nothing gets by him or escapes his attention...without a doubt. Doubt has no place in such a philosophy, and if talking about religion, doubt has no place in its theology.... And therefore faith has no place either.

There is a word that I use to describe a person who subscribes to such a philosophy, such a theology... that, doesn't leave little room for, but leaves *no* room for doubt or faith. And the word I use to describe such a person is this: fundamentalist.

Have you ever tried to have a conversation with a fundamentalist? In their own minds, they can win an argument on any topic, against any opponent. Their arguments run like a one-way street. Your arguments against them don't matter because in the fundamentalists' mind, you are inherently misguided; you, as their opponent, and a fundamentalist seems to see everyone as an opponent, are inherently wrong. They don't even listen to you.

Thomas Merton writes,

The [fundamentalist] attitude is one of gross disrespect for reality, upon which the worldly mind seeks only to force its own crude patterns. The [fundamentalist] is the slave of [their] own prejudices, preconceptions and

limitations. The [person] of faith is ideally free from prejudice and plastic in [their] uninhibited response to each new movement of the stream of life.

From The Pocket Thomas Merton p155

Ay, but here's the rub, you may have assumed that a fundamentalist is a label that I'm using to indicate a *religious* fundamentalist...but that's not the case; that's only half the story. We also have secular fundamentalists. There are secular fundamentalists who, in their own minds, can win an argument, on any topic, against any opponent. Like the religious fundamentalists, their arguments run like a one-way street. Your arguments against them don't matter because in their mind, you are inherently misguided; you, as their opponent, and they seem to see everyone as an opponent, are inherently wrong. They don't even listen to you.

In the Thomas Merton quotation I just read, I substituted a word. I used the word "fundamentalist", but he used the word "secular". His original quotation begins as follows:

The secular attitude is one of gross disrespect for reality, upon which the worldly mind seeks only to force its own crude patterns. The secular person is the slave of [their] own prejudices, preconceptions and limitations.

From The Pocket Thomas Merton p155

In the full quotation, Thomas Merton also criticizes religious fundamentalists as having the same shortcomings as the secular fundamentalists.

I say “ideally” in order to exclude those whose faith is not pure but is also another form of prejudice enthroned in the exterior.... For there exists a kind of “hard” and rigid religious faith that is not really alive or spiritual, but resides entirely in the exterior self and is the product of conventionalism and systematic prejudice.

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I am probably wrong...but I've been thinking that deep down, in the deepest unconscious recesses of who we are, fundamentalism, religious and secular, is a way of dealing with that primordial fear of the unknown; and the primordial fear of our greatest unknown, our own mortality – the undiscovered country.

When it's all locked up and buttoned down, when everything's laid out in front of you, all is visible, you can win any argument...any argument against yourself that is...any argument to assuage own primordial fears.

In my opinion, such fundamentalism, religious or secular, is a denial of truth. And I may be wrong, but again, in my opinion, in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, doubt and uncertainty comes with the territory.

Psychologist Rollo may writes that:

Commitment is healthiest when it is not without doubt, but in spite of doubt. To believe fully and at the same moment to have doubts is not at all a contradiction: it presupposes a greater respect for truth, an awareness that truth always goes beyond anything that can be said or done at a given moment. (Rollo May, The Courage to Create, p21)

Again Thomas Merton writes:

The sacred attitude is then one of reverence, awe, and silence before the mystery that begins to take place within ... the [person] of faith abandons [themselves] to the...stream of reality and of life itself. The sacred attitude is then one of deep and fundamental respect for the real in whatever new form it may present itself.

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So, do you win lots of arguments? How many parties do you get invited to?

Is your faith...or if you're uncomfortable with that word, is your philosophy of living locked up, buttoned down – a steel trap? Do you believe it to be “fundamentally” sound, “fundamentally” true?

If you have the courage to do so, ask yourself whether your faith, your philosophy, is simply keeping you safe from that fear of the unknown and of the undiscovered country. I'm not going to pull any punches here. If this is the case for you, if you've let the fundamentalism of your "truth" imprison you, it may take a lot of time, a lot of deep reflection to begin to even glimpse the unknown that you've hidden from yourself.

In the Hebrew Bible's book of Isaiah, God call upon Isaiah but Isaiah doubts himself. He feels he is unable to fulfill what God is calling upon him to do: " 'Woe to me!' He cries. 'I am lost!' (Isaiah 6:5)." Then, unexplainably, an angel comes and comforts him. Then, amongst his doubt and lack of confidence, the Lord then whispers to him, " 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And Isaiah says, 'Here am I. Send me!' (Isaiah 6:8)."

In the face of (and alongside of) existential doubt and uncertainty, may you reject fundamentalism, and in faith, have the courage to say, "Here am I. Send me."