

Engaging Religion

By The Rev. Francesca Hughes

There's a story from the "crazy wisdom" tradition about a fabled teacher, the Mullah Nasrudin. The Mullah would often do crazy things to illustrate truths for his students. One day a student was walking down the Mullah's street late at night. He saw the teacher down on his hands and knees underneath the street lamp, apparently looking for something. The student rushes over and says, "Teacher, what are you looking for? Can I help you?" "I dropped my keys," says the Mullah.

So the student gets down on his hands and knees and begins to help look. They search for some minutes before the student says, "They really don't seem to be here. Where were you standing when you dropped them?" And the teacher points *across the street* to where his little house is, and says, "I dropped them over there by the front door." The student, exasperated, demands, "Then why are we looking for them here?" "Because this is where the light is," says the Mullah.

A crazy story, right? Why would we look for something where it's easy to look instead of where it's likely to be? But the truth is, we do it all the time. And we do it in religion when we take all our own views for truth without doing very much checking. It's easiest. And our own views are pretty convincing. Mine certainly are. We do it when we engage religion on the tribal level only. It's the most obvious, but it's also the easiest.

The tribal level is the level on which many of us have based our own views. Of course. We see people behaving badly and we draw conclusions. Sometimes they're not incorrect, really, either. But they stop a little short.

Here's the tribal view. From the theistic viewpoint it's "God loves us best. We are right and everyone else is wrong. We are the elect." This might just be a good excuse for trying to take other peoples' belongings or their territory, or it might actually have some ostensibly religious content. For us it might be, "We are right. Our viewpoint is objective; the only way."

On the tribal level, we are concerned with who is right, with condemning fighting and territorialism and spiritual imperialism and other people for their selfish and arrogant uses of power.

But it's fairly easy case to make that that issue is more about human nature than it is about religion. In this case religion is just a handy tool. And while some might have carried selfishness and arrogance and use of power to amazing extremes, we **do understand** dealing with those qualities in ourselves. We may not cause any wars, but **we may stand by carelessly while our own selfishness and arrogance and unexamined use of power cause trouble for ourselves and for others.** And the place they cause the most trouble is interior, isn't it? Inside ourselves.

The second level, phrased theistically, is, "God loves us all and we each manifest God's love." Clearly the UU translation of this is an emphasis on ethics and justice. This is the level at which we try to inhabit the Kingdom of Heaven, or to create justice and peace on earth. At this level we're not concerned with who is right, but only with how we personally can become more like our ideal of human being.

The third level is really a mystical level. Mystics of all religions are closer to each other in thought than they are with fundamentalists of their own religion. On level three the Light of God shines through all beings. We become transparent to the Truth, the Source. It's an advanced level, of which most of us, including myself, can only dream.

When we talk about what religion is, our own story is the lens through which we see everything. And it's probably a good idea to examine that lens, that story, for logic and clarity. **Freedom is not actually about doing what we think we want to do. It's really more about being aware of what influences us and being able to choose rather than to react blindly.**

In my own life, religious baggage was rather different. I was never frightened by a fundamentalist in my cradle. I was never told I was going to hell. But, raised as a Jew in the fifties, I certainly *was* told that a large number of my people had been killed because of who they were, by Gentiles, and that I should never trust a Gentile. This was the water in which we swam growing up.

Now on one level I wasn't buying this. But of course, some of it *was* perfectly true. I did not, however, hold onto this baggage. I was able to put it down, probably because I *wanted* to have faith in other people. You have to *want* to put religious baggage down. **It's really much easier to stay in that tribal hostility and blame religion for it. That's living in our suitcase.** How many of us live in a suitcase of religious baggage, and because we're smart and have the arguments down we just revel in those arguments? **We can be very well defended to our own detriment.**

I once proposed a ritual for working with religious baggage. I suggested that we get a cartload of big, ugly rocks and put them in the chancel. And that everyone should bring a suitcase. Perhaps there would be angry music. And we would pick up rocks that looked like all the things we don't like about religion. Take as many as you want. Put them in your suitcase. Now let's walk around the sanctuary with that suitcase, once around for every year of our life. Carrying the suitcase is tribal level.

Probably most of us feel like we're at the second level. We work for peace and justice and try to be the best we can be. Right? The Lao Tzu reading reminds us that if we hope for peace in the world we really need to work on peace in our own heart, our own homes. So much easier to wish for world peace in the abstract than to work with the difficult and unlovable and critical and utterly awful people in our own lives. Than to look at and deal with the difficult and unlovable and critical and utterly awful dimensions of ourselves, too. That's the point.

We tend to get stuck on beliefs. We think that what we believe is the essence of religion. And it's certainly the start. But the essence of religion is *practice*. And, of course, oneness with the Source of Love and authentic being. It's the *manifestation* of our beliefs. We can talk about beliefs until we're blue in the face and still not be doing anything about religion, or, indeed, about creating peace. **Belief and practice should be connected by polarity and inform and illuminate and enrich one another. Because religion is not about what we believe so much as it is about *who we are*.**

Religions of practice get a lot of bad press from our point of view. Islam and Judaism are systems that put a lot of emphasis on observations. And the words "meaningless" and "observation" are coupled together a little too much, in my opinion.

Sometimes when I practice meditation, it doesn't seem very meaningful. Nothing is happening. My mind is rushing off in all directions. But I've made the effort. And it builds up. Sometimes it doesn't seem meaningful. But it's a practice.

Every moment of practice that goes towards becoming a consummate *musician* does not appear to be meaningful. It's often tedious and the musician would much rather be doing something else. But she's not going to become concert quality without it.

It's hard to practice *anything* without some kind of imperative. Anything that is not immediately natural to us is problematic. We forget. We don't feel like it. I'm not talking about walking in the woods because we like it. That's very nice, but it probably doesn't lead to spiritual growth or change. People who find it natural to be pleasant all the time are not doing a practice; they are doing something that's natural to them. I'm talking about the difficult task of self-awareness.

And I'm not saying I'm there yet, either. For awhile I wondered whether it was okay to tell other people these things when I'm not doing so well with it myself. It's okay because I know the difficulties. I haven't got it right either. And it's not getting any easier.

What about this. Most of us have a little trouble with negative thoughts of some kind. But we can change those. With awareness and intention, we can notice when they start and put something else in their place. If we have anger, self-reproach, disappointments, anxieties, we can replace those thoughts with something healthier. We need the awareness and the intention, and of course, something easily to hand to replace them with.

We probably have little patience with observances, especially since we tend to assume that people do practices and make observances and then go out and behave badly. I don't think that's a very legitimate, or even a logical, assumption. Certainly some people do it, but some of us do it too. I've come out of church myself and snarled at the person in front of me in traffic. It's a *practice*.

Once, I was at a retreat at the Tibetan Buddhist Nyingma school in Berkeley, California. We were being taught one of the many visualization practices, and I couldn't do it. So I raised my hand and the teacher responded. "I can't *do* it," I said. "Of course

you can't do it," he said. "It's a *practice*." A practicing Orthodox Jew will tell you that observances are a constant walking with God. But sometimes you don't *feel* like you're walking with God. Sometimes you just do it. You say blessings and you don't *feel* like you're raising the sparks of matter to God, but you do it.

There's a story from Islam, and I have to tell you that westerners don't like this story. It doesn't make sense to us. The story is about one of the pillars of Islam, the giving of alms. Observant Muslims will give a certain amount every week or every month, to fulfill the law. In the story, a woman comes upon another woman in the street, a beggar. The beggar is in rags and has three children with her. The woman has already given alms for that week and she is not under any obligation to give more, but she gives the beggar some money.

Across town is another giver. A man who has not given his alms for the week comes across another beggar, much less deserving. The beggar in this case is an unsavory looking individual and not at all attractive in the same way as a woman with three children is. Nevertheless, the man is required to give alms that day, so he gives the beggar some money.

The question is, who is the better giver? For us it certainly seems that the woman is, since she gave to a deserving person when she had no obligation to do so. But in Islam, the man is the better giver. He gave alms because he wanted to submit to God's law.

Who here likes this ending? I thought so. But from the Muslim point of view, the observance is independent of the circumstances. And I'll tell you why. If I have decided to meditate every morning, there's going to be a morning that I don't feel like it. In fact, I don't meditate every morning and nowadays I never feel like it. The observance, or the commitment to practice, is there so that, whether we feel like it or not, we establish and maintain practice. We may not like "whether we feel like it or not" in a religious context. But we should examine our reasons closely.

A few years ago I attended a conservative synagogue for a time. The rabbi was very good. He was really transmitting. One day he told a story of a rabbi in a small village in the old country. People thought it was funny that he greeted everyone everyday,

even strangers. Every time he went out he would greet *everyone* he met by name. It's an interesting practice. I did it once for a few months. It was a time in my life when everything was terrible. Everything. I had to do something to make it more bearable. I greeted everyone at work every single time, every day. Everyone. And they greeted me back. I made connections. It really helped. It's hard to do, until you get started. It takes energy. But it gives it back. It's a practice.

It's an error of perception to think that because we believe something we live it. To manifest our beliefs takes intention, commitment and *practice*. How are *you* *personally* going to work on creating peace in your own heart today? How am *I*? How are *we* *personally* going to create peace around us? We have to start with ourselves. If we are angry and struggling for power within, chances are that that is what we will manifest outward. Can we work on creating peace, not by making donations or working for candidates or circulating petitions, although all those things are good, but by including and starting with work on ourselves? In truth, we don't know how to. Our culture doesn't support it. But there is self-help literature out there that certainly appears to be developed from older religious traditions. Affirmations and positive self-talk are versions of this. It's not the religious discourse that supports it, but the **healthcare conversation**. It's healthier.

First, we would have something to put in the place of harmful thoughts. It can be a prayer or a mantra or inspiring phrase or poem. And every time you detect a negative spiral, you re-focus your attention on the more positive content. It's repetitive, and that's okay. We often repeat negative things to ourselves for hours, why not positive? **Our negative thoughts may give us the sense that we are problem solving**, but probably we're not. Theorists say that it's our human nature to problem-solve in our heads all the time, to give ourselves a sense of control. Sometimes that sense of control is pretty illusory. We can try something a little more creative.

One of my favorite meditation teachers, Eknath Easwaran, talks about developing a mantra that becomes a natural fallback in the face of negativity. He says that when the mantra becomes a habit, it can be like the Highway Patrol, and come zooming out, ready to intervene, whenever a negative thought goes weaving across the road.

I've been dealing with being easily irritated for years. It mostly happened in traffic and I thought it was impatience. Recently I was reading a Buddhist book that mentioned being easily irritated and I thought, "That's it! It's not impatience. I'm easily irritated!" There was, amazingly, something empowering about that. Naming something seems to give you power over it. It's not the same as *labeling*, in which we *confine* a particular thing to a certain name. *Naming* is something that gives you a handle to work with, not a limitation to struggle against. Oddly, using a different name for my problem did seem to help. And I had always taken personal responsibility for my issue, which I thought was the only way to go. Once, I was talking with some colleagues about being irritated in traffic, and one of the nurses said, "You don't have to *own* that. That's part of our society." I didn't buy her point of view. I thought it was just making excuses for myself.

But recently I've come to see that some issues are so recalcitrant *not just because we personally* can't fix them, but because we swim in a sea of others, of society, thinking and acting in certain ways. Sometimes the idea that we are completely independent of the influence of others is not precisely the case. Our family of origin retains tremendous influences, even after years away from them. Habits developed through family modeling are extremely strong. So, yes, we do have personal **responsibility** to work with our issues. But the reasons they sometimes seem so recalcitrant are not exclusively within the realm of personal choice. So it's hard.

"Entropy" is a term from thermodynamics. On an elementary level, it means that nature tends from order to disorder in isolated systems. It refers to the tendency of things to fly apart. I think it applies to human being as well. Because it's really like that, isn't it, when we try to do something different. New years resolutions, for example. And when we try to change behavior and create positive mental states we are working against *entropy*.

What effect does our presence create? In Tibetan Buddhism they talk about generating positive energy. Rather than indulge in negativity without even noticing what we're doing, we can re-arrange our mental furniture. One way of taking joy is that we would rejoice in the goodness of others, and in our own goodness as well. I always start

with rejoicing in the goodness of those who work to feed the hungry. Then, those who work to save and care for animals. And those who work to preserve the earth and the trees and the wild spaces. We can encourage ourselves to try new ways with enthusiastic effort. The right kind of effort is a key issue. It should be joyful.

This adventure of the soul is a journey into the desert. The Exodus story in the Bible is ostensibly a historical drama about the Jewish people leaving Egypt. It's also an allegory about the journey of the spirit out of bondage and into freedom. And it mostly involves 40 years of sand. The teacher tells us about possibility. The pharaoh is the allegory for the ego; it won't let the spirit go; at least not without a number of plagues. Sometimes we see a vivid example of this in life. Someone who had a certain kind of personality becomes very ill, and their personality changes to one of more spirituality and compassion. Finally, we find what we need to start the journey and there's a time of elation, until the more tiresome aspects of the journey become apparent. There's a lot of sand and we don't seem to be making any progress. In the Exodus story, the people begin to long for the leeks and onions of Egypt.

When I was at the meditation school, we found that as we became more deeply and systematically involved in the practice, there were long periods of nothing apparently happening, interspersed with dazzling moments of insight. It was too late to stop. But there was an awful lot of wilderness. One day at breakfast one of the others said, "Why can't we just go to bars and watch television, like other people?" We all laughed. It wasn't that we couldn't. It was that those things were no longer interesting. We were longing for the leeks and onions of Egypt. But the only thing to do was to go on.

And what about that third level, where the energy of Being shines through us and we become transparent to Truth, to the Source of Being? Sounds like I must be talking about God, doesn't it? Well, maybe we could call it God. But the point is, how can *we personally* become transparent to love and truth and the Energy and Power of Being that illuminates and transforms? We don't have to discuss God to address this. It's not a perception that relies on the concept of God.

Engaging religion on a tribal level is the easiest, but it doesn't take us very far. Before we condemn others for using religion to get what they want, we should, perhaps,

check our own behavior for clarity. Belief is not practice. Before we get caught up in discussion of what we believe, it would be useful to check for what we are actually *practicing*, not just in our political life, but personally, every day. Really to make free choices, we have to check our own story for both influence on us and for truth. If we're carrying a lot of baggage, it will make our spiritual life very *heavy*. Along with creating peace in the world, we must at least *look* at what it would mean to create peace in our hearts. To create peace in our hearts, we might have to work on changing or rearranging our mental furniture, and it won't be easy.

Entropy isn't a theological concept; it's a law of physics. Spiritual work is a journey into the desert, with lots of sand. Joyful effort is the key to working with the wilderness. Clarity and energy and transparency to Truth are the promised land.