

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUESTIONING: NOT BEING AFRAID TO ASK; GENESIS 12:1-4a, JOHN 3:1-17; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC

The thing that sets humans apart from other species is our ability to question. What sets us apart from each other is our willingness to use that gift.

I am reading Irish novelist Colm Toibin's biography of the great American poet Elizabeth Bishop (Toibin is the author of *Brooklyn* – maybe you read the book or saw the movie). Elizabeth Bishop was born in Nova Scotia, separated from her mother at age five because of her mother's mental illness, her father died before that when she was very young. Bishop was raised by a grandparent, then moved, as a teenager, to Massachusetts to live with an aunt.

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, is considered exquisite in its restraint, its uncanny accuracy of small detail, its taking nothing for granted examining the everyday world and objects around her – her writing is nothing if not a life long questioning of the natural world, of human relationships, and of the human experience – like her poem on losing things from her mother's watch to her nation of origin and its austere landscape to her lover. Almost none of her poems provide what might be called “answers” to her deep questions. In fact, her questions are virtually the answers themselves. They shape her life and give direction.

Bishop fulfills Rainer Maria Rilke's famous advice to a young poet: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. The point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

There's advice we can take to the bank! Not easy to adhere to or practice, but there is wisdom and truth in what Rilke writes to his young poet.

Living and loving the questions may be even more relevant now than in 1934 when those words were written, for ours is an age that is impatient and wants immediate answers. What this has led to, of course, is a steady diet of “easy answers” to difficult questions from science to religion and the bible, from health care to politics.

Indeed, the new health care bill in congress seeks to eliminate the painstaking questioning process that led to the current bill. Months of budget calculations, interviews with consumers, heads of corporations, economists and industry experts are being cut out to quickly pass into law a program for the health of our nation that is based on little more than speculation and economic self interest.

But a democracy is based on questioning – debate and dialogue in legislative chambers and judicial courts. This is the high calling of elected officials and citizens – to keep our minds open long enough to engage the debate, consider alternative answers and arrive at the best solutions.

A commitment to open, unbiased inquiry is lacking in the current congress where ideological conformity and allegiance are more valued.

The truth is we often struggle to live in the ambiguous world of not knowing, of not yet having an answer. Carol and I are fans of the television show *The Big Bang Theory*. It revolves around four young adult 'nerd/scientists' – the epitome of which is Dr. Sheldon Cooper who thinks he has all the answers to life – a premise that makes the show a spoof on our society's blind faith in wonky, techno/science.

For Sheldon everything, even love, has a rational explanation like when he says to his female counterpart, "I have a genetic propensity for you and feel our mating would strengthen the gene pool of the race." Sheldon is the logical, final outcome of the Enlightenment – the idea that reason will open all doors, dispel all mystery and explain even God.

Because he has all the answers to life Sheldon is the most laughable of the characters. His oversized brain has stunted his emotional growth. His hero is Star Trek's Dr. Spock; but he lacks even Spock's half human self-awareness. The girl next door, a struggling actress and waitress is the most human of the show's characters. She speaks a different language than Sheldon; her conversation is laced with emotion and common sense, so he never seems to be able to understand her.

Of course, basing our lives on rational deduction alone does not lead to ultimate fulfillment and happiness. At some point it all comes crashing down. Sheldon's meltdowns reveal the unpredictable and inexplicable side of life – like the turn of events that led to Elizabeth Bishop's loss of both parents at an early age, then the loss of her homeland. Yet, that was the crucible in which her questioning set her on the path to become a great poet.

Or Nicodemus in today's reading. We know instantly something is up when this well-known scholar of the Bible and religious authority goes under the cover of night to seek out Jesus.

Something provokes him to take this risk. We don't know what it is. Maybe the loss of a loved one, some impasse in his relationship with his wife or as a parent with his child or maybe his well-ordered, low risk, measured life suddenly felt hollow and bankrupt of purpose and meaning. We don't know nor does it matter. This is what Howell Raines calls the moment when the black dog catches up to you.

Nicodemus opens the conversation with Jesus with a compliment. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs you do unless God is with him."

Jesus reads Nicodemus' heart. The flattery falls flat. Jesus gets to the point and names both Nicodemus' problem and what he longs for: "I assure you, unless someone is born 'anothen', it is not possible to see God's kingdom."

'Anothen' in the Greek means either 'again/anew' or 'from above.' Nicodemus stumbles on the word. He asks Jesus how it is possible to literally be 'born again.' And here, like C.S. Lewis' four children in the *Narnia Chronicles* stepping into the wardrobe and entering the Kingdom of Narnia, we leave the world of the flesh and enter with Nicodemus in this dialogue with Jesus the world of the Spirit.

This is the world of the Gospel of John, a world of juxtaposed opposites – light and dark, good and evil, spirit and flesh. Nicodemus’ problem is that he lives entirely in the world of the flesh – a world where human existence proceeds solely on its own power, is organized according to its own norms and rewards and, therefore, is immune to the renewing power of God.

The world of the flesh is blind to the world of the Spirit – not to the *idea* of the world of the Spirit which the world of the flesh discounts and rejects; but to an *authenticating experience in the world of the Spirit*; Jesus tells Nicodemus, “unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it is not possible to see (verse 3) and to enter (verse 5) God’s kingdom.”

There is plenty of room for religion in the world of the flesh – we have a gazillion PhD programs in biblical studies, comparative religion, religion and ethics, religion and psychology, theology, ecclesiastical history; and there are more than a gazillion books written on and about religion. It is interesting that we read the sacred texts less and less and commentaries on those texts and commentaries on the commentaries more and more. Often, these secondary sources are merely rehashed ideas of a previous generation. So with each new book on religion we are further away not only from the voice of the biblical author and community but also any personal authenticating religious experience that is, confrontation with God.

This is the world Nicodemus represents. Given his status as a Torah scholar he is an expert in Midrash – the voluminous, complicated commentary on the Torah – Midrash is the endless debate by the rabbis of every possible nuance, key word, and legal application of the sacred text. It is brilliant and fascinating; it requires a lifetime of arduous study; but by itself it is not a gateway to the world of the Spirit.

Ironically, this controlled, God-dissected religion in the world of the flesh often undercuts the goal of religion – to love God and serve our neighbor: the rich ruler who keeps the commandments but refuses to sell his possessions, give to the poor and follow Jesus; the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan who ignore the wounded traveler; the Pharisees who object to healing on the Sabbath. This is the very world Jesus comes to disrupt, break open and transform.

The world of the Spirit, on the other hand, is an entirely different world. It is a world where the “ruah” or ‘breath’ of God in the Hebrew, blows, not according to human will but God’s will. Just as the wind of the Spirit blew over the face of the deep at creation and brought life into being so the Spirit blows into our lives and brings about the new church, the new person, the new creation God intends.

People who inhabit the world of the Spirit are open and vulnerable to the untamed wind of God. How does one get from the world of the flesh to the world of the Spirit? Not by human effort but only by God’s grace.

Jesus opens the door to the world of the Spirit for Nicodemus – but it is Nicodemus who must step over the threshold just as the children in the wardrobe do to get to Narnia.

It is not clear, from today's story alone if Nicodemus takes that first step. But he finds himself, in his midnight interview with Jesus, in a new place. Not unlike Abraham who hears God's summons to go with his household to a new land.

Nicodemus, like Abraham, is faced with the decision to trust the voice that summons him. Abraham does – six thousand years ago; or we would not be here today. Forget John Calvin or St. Augustine or the apostles or Jesus or the prophets or any of them. Abraham was the first to hear God's call to enter the world of the Spirit, to leave the comfortable and familiar for a new land.

Nicodemus is where he is in the story today because he was willing to find Jesus and ask a few questions. In fact, he was willing to humble himself, to trust Jesus, even to look foolish especially for someone of his status and authority asking Jesus how to be born anew.

Which is where we began – we are the species that asks questions and what sets us apart from one another is our willingness to use that gift.

It is an art and discipline – Socrates based his methodology for awakening the minds of his students on a system of asking questions. No one needs to awaken the mind of a child; children are naturally intellectually curious; what looks like their play, said Fred Rogers of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, is really their hard work questioning, figuring out life. Poets and scientists are known for their childlike curiosity, their ability to keep open minds. “The key to continuing to make discoveries is the ability to keep the ‘why’ alive,” said one scientist. The truth of things is so elusive, so mysterious and thick, even weird that it keeps beckoning us, seducing us, alluring us.

The late Scott Peck said it's not just cynicism or busyness that gets us stuck in life but laziness. When confronted with life's predictable crises we dig in, or keep to the routine, or burrow down. We avoid seeking new approaches, alternative routes and personal inquiry.

In their meeting Jesus said to Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

A resident in the world of the flesh would be baffled by that statement. But Nicodemus took a chance; he left the safety of his ivory tower. He asked, on the face of it, a silly question and that's the answer Jesus gave him.

I remember when I confessed confusion about my personal life and asked God, if there was a God, to help make sense of it. It was my first prayer as an adult. I was fifteen. Divorce and a death prompted me. The very question, ‘Do you exist?’ made me realize I was looking for a personal God not an intellectual category or concept. I'd stepped into a new world. The old rules were too small. You could say I was ‘born anew from above’. The same thing happened to Nicodemus. The next time he shows up is at the end of the Gospel with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body to be buried. The rigid old scholar was seeing this world as if for the first time. His willingness to look for Jesus one night, risk looking foolish and ask some questions opened his eyes. My guess is some of us need to take a chance and do the same thing. +