

Meditation

"A Riff on Renee," (from "Discourse on Method")

My third maxim was to endeavor always to conquer myself rather than fortune, [to] change my desires rather than the order of the world, and [to] accustom myself to the persuasion that, except our own thoughts, there is nothing absolutely in our power. - René Descartes

As we will hear later in my sermon, it was René Descartes who shifted the center of human gravity into the mind, the cogito. Ever since, the Western world has been the rational world. This is that for which Descartes is known but this is not the end-all and be-all of René Descartes. René Descartes was a person of faith and as such, took his inner life very seriously.

The citation I just read is a case in point and with the background I've just given you, is worth hearing again:

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What Descartes is telling us in this reflection is that **one's principle task in life is the ordering of one's inner life.**

Those of you who have followed my ministry for a while now know that the ordering of one's inner world is also a major theme of mine because *everything else in life follows from this*: the degree of personal contentment, meaningful interpersonal relationships, and the odds of Fortune's favor.

Given this pandemic that has beset us, a universal Zen stick of sorts that has smacked us on the head, we are now questioning our priorities. So, this seems like a good time to take stock of Descartes's wisdom and ask ourselves where we stand relative to this principle task; the ordering of the inner life?

With this in mind, let us spend the next few moments together in silence...

Sermon

When I was a kid I loved to go exploring... the woods at the end of my street (describe). There I could escape the pressures of my life, explore the creative landscape of my mind, and walk-through nature's door to commune with Spirit.

When I grew older my exploration moved to the realm of the spiritual... from the Christian House of Prayer to the ashram in southern India. My spiritual spelunking has run the gamut.

During my days in Divinity school I began to map the psyche and its relationship to the universe. I made numerous attempts at this, none of them satisfactory, mostly because my fine motor skills were lacking (I even struggled drawing acceptable stick people!). Then I happened upon this image **[screen share]**, which made me abandon my efforts. Simplistic though it may be, this image perfectly captured the very idea I was trying to express.

Upon seeing this image I developed a very brief love affair with cartography, especially ancient cartography. I was amazed how ancient cartographers so accurately mapped the world. It was during this brief love affair with cartography that I happened upon the ancient cartographers' habit of writing the phrase, "Here Be Dragons," in the ocean depths.

[End screen share]

“Here Be Dragons” became one of the pithy little sayings that would roll around in my head from time to time, especially during inane conversations with certain types of individuals. In the rankings of the sayings that roll around in my head, I would say that “Here Be Dragons” is second only to “*illegitimi carborundum*.” (I’ll let you Google that one later...)

But the phrase “here be dragons” represents for me is the fact that the psyche abhors a vacuum as much as does nature. The mind needs to understand and where it can’t understand, it fills the vacuum with speculation.

This speculation creates the illusion of understanding; the illusion of knowledge. This illusion of knowledge is what we call a “myth.”

“Here be dragons,” then, was a myth. It was a myth that filled in the gaps of human understanding regarding the natural world.

Myth is incredibly important to the human psyche, as the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out:

And this is a universal law: a living thing can be healthy, strong and fruitful **only when bounded by a horizon**; if it is incapable of drawing a horizon around itself... it will pine away slowly or hasten to its timely end. Cheerfulness, the good conscience, the joyful deed, **confidence in the future** – all of them depend, in the case of the individual as of a nation, on the existence of a line **dividing the bright and discernable from the unilluminable and dark...** (Nietzsche, “Untimely Meditations”)

What Nietzsche is telling us is that our experience in life has to take place within the realm of understanding, with the *belief* that we have knowledge about the world in which we live. Even false knowledge, false beliefs... false myths play an important role for the human psyche. Without myth, without horizon, Nietzsche warns us, the human psyche is set adrift:

Let us think of a culture that has no fixed and sacred primordial site but is doomed to exhaust all possibilities and to nourish itself wretchedly on all other cultures - there we have the present age, the results of that Socratism which is bent on the destruction of myth. And now the mythless man stands eternally hungry, surrounded by all past ages, and digs and grubs for roots, even if he has to dig for them among the remotest antiques. (“The Birth of Tragedy”)

Nietzsche was spot on about all of this. Hence my love of Nietzsche.

Let me bring this back to the matter at hand: “Here Be Dragons.” As long as human activity occurs within the known, within the understood, within the confines of the myths the mind had generated, humans are able stay safe from the unknowns that are filled with speculation. That’s my take away from my brief love affair with ancient cartography.

Now, let's consider the *nature* of the mind's speculative activity. When the mind speculates, it tends to speculate negatively... fearfully. Time doesn't permit me to delve into why this is the case but suffice it to say, are negative and fearful speculative tendencies reflect the ego's survival agenda. The ego always needs to be on the lookout for what might threaten its existence.

Here's an example of speculation from the ancient Christian tradition. Some of you have heard me talk about the Desert Father Evagrius, especially if you've taken the enneagram with me.

[Tell the story of Evagrius' "invading thoughts."]

It wasn't until Freud introduce us to the unconscious that humanity slowly began to give up speculation about demonic activity haunting the inner world. What Evagrius referred to as "invading thoughts" we now know as unconscious mental activity, which becomes conscious in silence.

Evagrius fearful speculation is just one example of "Here Be Dragons." The ancient world was replete with such speculative mythology and played an important role for the human psyche.

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We no longer live in the world of ancient cartographers. We now live in the post-enlightenment age, the age that has overcome myth (as Nietzsche indicated), the age of science and technology, the age of Descartes, actually. It was René Descartes that shifted the gravitas of our human identity from the dark, negative tendencies and fears of the unconscious to the bright, constructive tendencies of the rational mind. And he did it with the stroke of a pen: "Ego **cogito**, ergo sum." "I think, therefore, I am."

With this simple phrase the mind became the thing. And from the mind... our scientific and technological age, also, per Descartes:

As soon as I acquired a few general notions concerning physics and began to test them in various situations... I believed I could not keep them secret without sinning against the law that compels us to seek the good of all people. For these notions have shown that it is possible to arrive at a type of knowledge that is very useful for life. Indeed, in place of speculative philosophy one can find a practical philosophy, by means of which... we may render ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature."

From the quark to the quasar, we have become "masters and possessors of nature." Nothing symbolizes this more than the emergence of CRISPR, the scientific method whereby we may now direct our own evolution by the precision editing of our very own genetic code. (Hopefully, you all caught my sermon about this.)

We are the heirs of Descartes, the Enlightenment, and untold numbers of unnamed scientists who have helped us master and possess nature.

We have been rocked to sleep in the cradle of knowledge, lulled into a false sense of security because we nary take a thought in this scientific and technological age - of existential dread.

But now, in the midst of our sleep, awash in this false sense of security: **"Here Be Dragons!"**

This pandemic has beset us like a haunting from an uncharted territory. Existential dread... and I mean this in a very real sense... not as some shallow literary illusion... has beset us. Death can no longer be pushed to the outer edge of our awareness. How are we to respond?

We can put our faith in science, though our best scientists tell us we're looking at a two-year window before they can create a vaccine to inoculate us against this virus. Or, we can revert to old theological tricks, like the man I saw on the news the other day, carrying the sign that read, "Jesus is my vaccine!"

I don't know about you, but **I'm putting my faith in Fauci!**

But in the meantime... well, let me just personalize the rest of the sermon and you can relate to it as you will...

I recognize that this pandemic is one instance where the rubber hits the spiritual road. Does the spiritual life to which I have been committed for so many decades hold any meaning in circumstances like this? How does it inform me about living my life while I wait for that scientific solution to what ails us?

I know this much... we are all in this together. We are all battling the dragon!

There's a broad range of responses in the face of dragons. On one end of the continuum we have those in utter denial, filling the beaches and marching on state capitals. On the other end of the continuum we have the frontline troops, trying to save lives in our hospital rooms and marching up to attics to sleep when they return home, so not to expose their loved ones.

Then there's the broad middle range. What I've noticed about the broad middle range is that there's been a reassertion of the negativity and fear that fueled the speculation of uncharted territories in ancient days. This is perfectly sensible as we are now wandering through uncharted territory...

So the compelling question for me is, where do I land on that continuum? In other words, **how am I going to "show up" under the circumstances?** How does my spiritual life inform me about my living at a time like this?

I don't know about other people but a significant way that I view my life is through the lens of my interpersonal relationships. What kind of Presence am I in the lives of others? I often view myself through this lens, and our current circumstance only magnifies that perception.

With this in mind I harken back to the meditation I did prior to this sermon. The gist of that meditation was this: "One's principle task in life is the ordering of one's inner world."

The world's spiritual exemplars, from Jesus to Rumi, have repeatedly called us to a state of consciousness that is unique in the world. They have called us to the state of love and required of us the difficult inner work necessary to discover, cultivate, and become that love.

There is another entire sermon I could write about love as a state of being but for the sake of time, I'm going to cut to the chase, then end with a reading from Ram Dass.

What those in our immediate orbit need from us - not only during a time like this but always - is a non-anxious presence that embodies the love of which the likes of Jesus and Rumi spoke.

Think of it like this... People vibrate at different levels. That vibration reflects their state of consciousness: fearful, aggressive, anxious, sleepy... what have you... In the midst of all this vibration, these states of consciousness, there is a need for a higher vibrational level, a consciousness that reflects love.

Love is powerful... unafraid... reassuring... unifying... and love slays dragons.

By being a nonanxious presence that embodies love, we have an effect on the world, especially those in our immediate orbits. We create a presence into which people can enter that can help them overcome whatever reactivity they are experiencing.

Another way of saying this is that what I have learned over the years of my spiritual journey is that a group of people can only rise to the level of consciousness of the most conscious individual in that group.

As a father, as a partner, as a friend... and as a spiritual leader, I feel that I am called to strive to be that presence. I am called to strive to embody love as a state of consciousness into which people can enter to help them overcome whatever reactivity they are experiencing.

Ram Dass says something similar in his book, "The Only Dance There Is":

The only thing you have to offer another human being, ever, is your own state of being. You can cop out only just so long, saying, I've got all this fine coat – Joseph's coat of many colors – I know all this and I can do all this. But everything you do, whether you're cooking food or doing therapy or being a student or being a lover, you are only doing your own being, you're only manifesting how evolved a consciousness you are. That's what you're doing with another human being. That's the only dance there is!

"...everything you do... you are only doing your own being, you're only manifesting how evolved a consciousness you are."

Love is the highest conscious state we can offer to another. And, it is what is needed in circumstances such as this. In sum, "Love Slays Dragons!"

Namaste, my friends: the love in me recognizes the love in you, and when we are in that love together, we are one.