

## **For healers, peacemakers, and prophets**

*No human being should ever be patient with prejudice at the expense of its victims*

William Sloane Coffin<sup>1</sup>

### ***The Sermon's Context***

I've been thinking a lot these past three months about some intersecting realities. The issue of spiritual alienation; the issue of spiritual exile from one's native communal homeland; the issue of needing to learn, or perhaps even to create, a new language because an inherited language no longer works to help us in the journey we each must make from life into death. As we emigrate, from our communities of origin for any number of reasons but most specifically because the community of our origins has betrayed us, dislikes us intensely, or simply keeps us from our own spiritual journey, we encounter the need to create a new community. Inevitably, we are forced to seek new words and new understandings.

Having no inherited religious community to sustain me here in the Upper Sonoran Desert, the world and its varied wisdom traditions<sup>2</sup> have become my community. Having no shared ritual to sustain me, the lighting of votive candles, the understandings of Amerindian medicine wheels and varied forms of Amerindian animal medicine practices, and walking the labyrinth have become my liturgies. Having no named god to pray to, silence becomes revelatory. Hearing (and seeking) no preached sermons to inspire me, guide me or comfort me, I read.

Yet, some of the earliest values of my Mennonite childhood remain: I believe in truth-telling with the new Buddhist-inspired proviso of compassionate truth-telling. I believe in integrity with the proviso that this is a life-long spiritual education project. We learn more from the shame of our integrity mistakes than we ever do from our successes. I believe in active peace-making not just the refusal – however important this is – to kill the enemy in times of war. I have come to believe that justice is important but even more important than justice is accountability. I believe in kindness. I believe in gentleness with the

self as well as with others. I believe in gratitude. I believe in friendship. I believe in love. I believe in joy. I believe in trust until trust has been broken. Then I believe in caution. I believe there are times to yield to the will of the group and that there are other times when one must, if necessary, stand alone on principle.

Since my twenties, I have recognized the need to doubt that which deserves doubting. Since my forties, I have also come to believe in the wisdom of non-knowing that which can not be knowable by human apperceptions – for example, the precise nature, attributes, attitudes and concerns of the gods – indeed the factual existence of all of humanity’s named gods. Holding my doubts lightly has allowed me to smell the presence of false teachers and to reject their authoritarian and paranoid ideological messages of divisive separation and alienation.

***Thinking about Roman Catholics who have “befriended”, confronted, and then educated me in their written work:<sup>3</sup>***

*I come often to the questions: why, seeing the corruptness up close do these particular individuals (Baum, Carroll, Doyle, Gumbleton, O’Dea, Robinson, Sipe, and Wall) remain Catholic? Why do they remain Christian? Why do they continue to care about what the Pope does or what the bishops think? Experiencing the social corruptness of their church’s hierarchy and the spiritual deadness of its dogma and the evils of its praxis, why don’t they just walk out the back door of their denomination into the flowering spring meadow of personal, emotional and spiritual freedom?*

In thinking about this question, I return to an adaptation of the insight I literally received in a very conflicted, and, in my perception, hostile and interpersonally violent, Goshen College season. One day in my office as I was trying to figure out how to emotionally and psychologically survive the religiously-inspired authoritarian nastiness all around me without losing myself, I *heard* an inner voice say to me, *God (or the gods) does not call peacemakers to work in places of peace.*

Years later I now also comprehend that *God (or the gods) does not call healers to places of health, well-being, and wholeness*. When individuals and their communities live in a condition of wholeness and health, they need no healer.

Now, facing and examining my impertinent questions of these particular Roman Catholic sexual violence activists and prophets, it seems a logical adaptation or extension of the above principles to state that *God (or the gods) does not call prophets to bear witness to principled socio-cultural institutions that already demonstrate integrity and spiritual wholeness*

Stated positively, (a) *the gods call peacemakers to places of violence, conflict, hostilities, and an absence of peace; (b) the gods call healers to the places of wounds, illness, pathologies of all kinds, and, perhaps most especially, soul sickness; and (c) they call prophets to speak out against corrupted social environments where the powerful and the controlling rob the vulnerable of their personal share of human dignity and personal safety.*

For the peacemaker to complain about the absence of peace; for the healer to complain about the absence of well-being and health; and for the prophet to complain about the presence of corruptness or the blind, hypocritical, arrogant and usually malicious absence of integrity: these complaints miss the point. Their call is to live in these degraded, sick places and to bear witness.

The gods do not promise comfort. They do not promise success. They do not quell inner fears of abandonment, shunning and isolation. They do not surround us with the comfort of warm fuzzies. They do not still our impatience for a different kind of social ordering. They do not bring sleep on sleepless nights. They do not even prevent our addictions to our fantasies of success.

The gods simply show us a naked problem in all of its ugliness and then suggest, in the quietness of our inner spirit, that there is a need for a new message and a new way. When we see and when we hear we are, whether or not we recognize or comprehend it, called forth to be a messenger of the gods regarding a new human pathway into the

future. We are called to forsake the safety of silence for the dangers of speech.

Since those who hear, attend to, and accept the call to bear a truthful witness have no guarantee of success, they must learn how to develop a deep sense of tragic compassion for the suffering of others as well as for the consequent suffering in their own lives – the suffering that is a direct consequence of their decision to enter into solidarity with the violated and suffering ones who litter their life's pathway. Having nothing to offer but their own lives, they must learn how to be fully present in what Henri Nouwen<sup>4</sup> calls *hospitality* – the creation of space for the wounded, violated, abused vulnerable other to enter and to find a welcoming and believable home.

Such healers, peacemakers, and prophets must also, as it were, develop hospitality for their own selves – for they too need healing as they live and work inside the toxic wastelands of human-caused human suffering. The task, as American Buddhist Jack Kornfield<sup>5</sup> so eloquently and so simply states it, is to work for justice and peace in the world by confronting violence and injustice without allowing the spirit of hate, violence and anger to claim our own spirit.

Railing against the gods because they have drawn us to see and to hear the pain of the world is futile. Once one learns to hear, to see and finally to truthfully comprehend, one cannot go back to blindness, deafness, and ignorance. In gaining sight, hearing, and an active comprehension of truth, we are forever changed. We deny ourselves this awareness at a great cost to our soul.

### ***How do I make sense of such a call?***

#### ***My questions re-stated:***

*Why, seeing the corruptness and experiencing their community's betrayals and overt hostility, do these individuals remain Catholic? ” Seeing the spiritual deadness and lack of integrity as manifested by their church's oligarchy, why don't they just walk out the back door? In a contemporary secular democracy, religious traditions have become voluntary associations – no one is compelled by the dangers of the stake*

*or the perils of water and fire to remain bound to any specific religious or spiritual community. No one is required to remain where others disdain and abuse them in the name of some god.*

Essentially, it seems to me now, the healer, the peacemaker, and the prophet must each come to realize that they are profoundly alone in their personal universe of moral and compassionate decision-making. There are no gods to provide guidance for life, just other people. Perhaps no one else, except their own deep or inner self, has even heard their now awakened and impassioned, perhaps even enraged response to someone else's human-caused human suffering.

We need to learn how to make visible that which has been, up until the moment we begin to act, invisible – perhaps even to ourselves but most certainly to others. We must learn how to manage our responses to being despised, betrayed and hated.

Called to be healers, peacemakers, and prophets, this is the ambiguity we must live with. There is no perfection – in us or in others. Betrayed, we must still, to stay healthy, continue to learn how to trust. Homeless, we must make a home. Stripped of our citizenship, we still need a communal identity. Alone, without gods, we must embrace our spirituality.

This means that we must learn to live as tenderly with our own selves as we do with those whom we love and care about. We can, indeed must I think, learn how to create a sustainable sense of being family for ourselves – that place where we are loved and cared for; that place where we are at home. We must recognize and serve our own deepest needs even as we seek to minister to the needs of others.

Here I find great personal comfort in the ancient teaching that the gods do not measure us by our successes or by our failures but by our faithfulness. To do that which we understand is essential to do opens paths we may never have foreseen. Each step into the freedom of integrity prepares the way for future steps. When I asked Rollo May if he thought, as a practicing psychoanalyst, all human actions were pre-determined ones, he replied something to the effect

that as we risk taking baby steps in true freedom we create a less determined future for ourselves and others.

When I think about Jeremiah, Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, and Gandhi too, I realize there was a spiritual pathway from not seeing and not hearing to their prophetic messages. They had to have taken small steps, initially, away from the socio-culturally determined path of their heritage because they saw and recognized evil and a lack of integrity among the powerful. Seeing what they saw and knowing what they knew, they decided to step forward and say to the gods, *here I am. Speak with my voice. Act with my life.*

### ***Jesus enters our conversation***

I personally do not believe that the human Jesus in the moment of his baptism clearly saw his crucifixion. I also seriously doubt that a heavenly voice comfortingly accompanied him as he walked out of the river. Whatever his divinity, it is the potential divinity of each human being who confronts situations of evil and oppression. In his human imperfection, there was no magical assurance ahead of time that the gods were walking with him.

Most certainly, Jesus' admiration for (perhaps as an idealistic and devoted disciple) his spiritual predecessor (John the baptizer) likely caused him great personal suffering and self-doubts when John was beheaded for his own prophetic utterances. In learning about John's murder, Jesus most likely had intuitions about the response of corrupt civil authorities and corrupt religious authorities to any prophetic message of critique or calls for collective repentance and conversion. He must certainly have heard the murder's underlying, although likely unspoken, message loud and clear: the gods did not always rescue those they called from the political and social consequences of bearing witness. Challenging and critiquing the powerful usually brings retribution.

### ***Soul Force***

When I look at life in this way, what I see is that the healer, the peacemaker, and the prophet are one soul-force in a world filled with

human suffering. They are not, therefore, three but one. This can become the basis of a new community – one in which the wounded healer seeks to become healing; one in which the wounded peacemaker seeks to become peace; one in which the exiled prophet seeks to become integrity. The message to others, to have integrity, must first both inform and then transform the self.

Exposure to human evil and the pain it inflicts on the vulnerable and the innocent eventually means one must face the presence of evil within the self – the desire to harm one's enemies in rage because of the harm they do to others.

Philosopher Sam Keen<sup>6</sup> is correct. The spiritual task of the healer, peacemaker, and prophet is to refuse to become a hologram or mirror image of that which they protest and hate in others.

The Buddha is correct. We must become brave enough to pull the arrow of suffering out of our own heart.

Essentially, it seems to me now, the healer, the peacemaker, and the prophet must each come to realize that they are essentially alone in the universe of moral and compassionate decision-making. There are no gods, just other people. No one, except the inner self, has initiated the call nor heard an inner impassioned response to work which needs to be done. No one except the inner self can comprehend the cost of making, their *here I am, use me* response.

In the isolation of making moral choices, in the inner struggle of the soul for human decency and civility, each of us need to find and make a community for the living of our lives. We must, somehow or other, find the courage to make a new home and community for ourselves even as we seek to make one for others.

We need to learn how to make visible that which has, up until the moment we begin to act, been invisible – perhaps to ourselves but certainly to others.

We human beings are social animals. We do not thrive in alienation from other human beings. Yet, as we ourselves are, every human being is fallible. Each is capable of betrayal. Each is capable of

cowardice in the face of evil. This is the ambiguity we all live with. There is no perfection – in us or in others. Compassion for human suffering allows us to search for, and perhaps find, equanimity in the face of our shared humanity with others.

It is, therefore, a truism: in our human aloneness and fallible mortality, we need a safe community. We must, somehow or other, make a trustworthy home for ourselves.

As we begin to learn compassion for others, we must also learn to live tenderly and compassionately with our own selves. We can, indeed must I think, learn how to create a human family for ourselves. The gods who have absented themselves from human history cannot do this very human act for us.

We are, therefore, simultaneously totally alone inside our human skins and totally present in our shared consciousness with others. We are more like each other than we are isolated singular cells of humanity.

The fears of one are the fears of all; the hopes of one are the hopes of all; the violence of one is the violence of the collective. We are each simultaneously responsible to the deep inner self and to the global community in which we now live.

The justice we fail to pursue or the act of enraged violence we commit represents an individual failure of love and compassion. It is, however, also a failure of the whole. This means that any successful act of healing, or peacemaking or helping to put an end to structural violence also belongs to the whole.

What happens, therefore, to a Roman Catholic child who is being raped by a priest belongs to me. I cannot look the other way and say *I am a Mennonite. This child's suffering is none of my concern.* However I can do it, no matter how imperfectly I do it, I must speak out and I must join my Roman Catholic colleagues in protesting the violations and the betrayals of the children. I must link, no matter how distantly, my hands to the work of theirs. I must breathe, with them, their intense hope for this child's or that child's healing and freedom.

In addition, I must also recognize that our shared culture – as North American citizens and as members of the now deeply corrupted forms of worldwide Christendom - forms the decadent soil in which such forms of violence as the priestly rape of a pre-pubertal child proliferate and are treated as culturally acceptable.

Recognizing what I recognize, and knowing what I know, I must also speak out against the patriarchal spiritual hegemony - that breeding ground of the human will to dominate and to do violence against others by invoking the names and powers of God.

<sup>1</sup> (2004). Documentary: *William Sloane Coffin, An American Prophet*. Westminster/John Knox.

<sup>2</sup> I first heard Huston Smith speak in Berkeley during an academic sabbatical. As soon as he talked about all of the world's religious traditions as wisdom traditions – to be consulted as we searched for meaning and healing in our lives – I knew I had found a spiritual and intellectual home. A wisdom tradition is neither infallible nor inerrant. It is historical wisdom to be examined in a contemporary culture – maybe very different from its originating culture. But a wisdom tradition is a people's collective way of examining questions of value, meaning, and spirituality. Any specific tradition's gods do not even have to be understood and interrogated as actual beings. They can be seen as powerful mythic metaphors for human unknowing, as guideposts for deep living.

<sup>3</sup> The American Black essayist Bell Hooks, on meeting Vietnamese Buddhist spiritual teacher Thich Nhat Hanh for the first time in Plum Village, said to him something to the effect that *I feel so attached to you, as if I've known you for a long time*. Nhat Hanh is reported to have replied, *even if we had never met in person, we would be interbeing connected to each other*. That is how I feel about these amazing 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Roman Catholic avatars. Never meeting them, my life still intersects with their lives because they have become my teachers. They are teaching me to see and they are teaching me to hear. They are ahead of me on a human path through the dark, enchanted forest of human suffering. In their own journeys to sight and hearing, they left stone cairns (books, articles and interviews) along the path so I and others like me who, as healers, peacemakers, and prophets, seek a new way can find and follow the path. They and I do not share a common language of the spirit because of the immense linguistic and theological gulf created by the Anabaptist trials by fire and water during the Protestant Reformation. Nevertheless, there is, inside me, a sense of deeply rooted connectedness - as if my inner spirit has searched for them, as if my soul recognized theirs, as if my inner spirit has been longing for such a meeting with them before I knew their names or their work.

Many years ago now, when I lived in my second language, I heard a clear, inner message while I walked on an almost deserted Central American beach – homesick and tired of feeling alone, desperately longing to go home to a well-comprehended English-speaking geography. As I walked, indulging my loneliness by picking up tiny shells, I suddenly heard a very clear inner voice: *This culture and its language can support and sustain you even as your home culture and language supports and sustains you. Stop fighting it. Trust it. Open yourself to it.*

I did and I began to make friends who tolerated a beginner's Spanish. Because of their patience and their willingness to be hospitable and fully present and because of my persistent trust in the quiet voice of the ocean, together my Costa Rican acquaintances and I bushwhacked open a path through our mutual cultural misunderstandings into a sense of genuine friendship. A new inner language of cross-cultural understanding and collegiality was forged. Trust replaced alienation. My land of "exile" became a second homeland.

<sup>4</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen (1972). *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in contemporary society*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Kornfield (2002). *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*. New York, Bantam.

<sup>6</sup> Sam Keen (2006). *Faces of the Enemy: Three Slide Lectures*, San Rafael, CA: Sam Keen Productions