Lessons from Down Under

What I Learned While Researching and Writing my Dissertation

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It's been thirty years since I left the Southern Baptist faith and stopped considering myself a Christian. In my scramble to find a new star to guide my course, I feel fortunate to have stumbled upon psychology. It happened shortly after Peggy and I married in 1988 and wanted a church community that didn't require us to believe anything. It seemed like a tall order at the time but we'd heard that Unitarian Universalism is a liberal church without dogma and decided to give it a try. It so happened that Rev. Phillip Ashley Smith was guest speaker the first time we visited the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. Phil had been minister at First UU in the late 50's and early 60's, but went on to become a Jungian psychotherapist and practicing Buddhist. He'd recently retired from his practice in California and moved back to Louisville with his wife Sharon.

He was speaking about the *Soul*. In all my years as a Christian, with all the emphasis upon saving souls, I'd never heard a sermon about the soul or anyone talking about what exactly it is or why it needs to be saved. The soul was about death not life, about Heaven not Earth, about the future not the present. So nobody ever spoke about it as being something at hand that needs to be nourished and understood while we are still living and breathing.

Phil's sermon was an exception. Although most of what he said went way over my head, something inside me was stirring. I had shivers going up and down my spine and butterflies in my stomach, and an unrelenting inner voice commanding me to introduce myself after the service and ask to get together with him. I resisted the voice and turned away from the receiving line several times because I was both shy and not in the habit of asking strange men for their numbers. But the voice was stronger than my discomfort and I finally introduced myself by timidly asking if we could get together. We had lunch that week and Phil went on to become my mentor and one of my greatest friends ever until his death just a couple years ago. It was Phil, in fact, who got me back into the ministry and conducted my ordination and installation service at the Clifton Unitarian Church in 1999.

A decade earlier, however, he started me upon my new path by encouraging me to study the writings of psychologist Carl Gustav Jung. I devoured most of what Jung wrote, which is no small task, most of which also went over my head. But I also immediately came to understand that my soul is not something separate from my life, but is essential to it; that my soul is not my immortal self, but is my Self, right here, right now. It includes the part of me that's conscious of myself, as well as the part that is unconscious of who I am. Freud, Jung's mentor, who first discovered the importance of the subconscious mind, treated it as a dark closet in the deeper

recesses of the mind in which we suppress our troubling memories and thoughts. But Jung came to treat the Unconscious as a great ocean of Self in which the conscious self, or *ego*, is but a drop. For Freud we are mostly a Self with an unconscious, but for Jung we are an Unconscious with a self.

This was the first time in my life, in my mid-twenties, that I understood the importance of caring for my own soul, especially by coming to terms with the trauma of my own childhood. I began paying attention to the hidden meaning of my dreams and reflecting upon archetypal images from the *Tarot* and the *I Ching*, images Jung believed come from the ancient Collective Unconscious belonging to us all. Reflecting upon these images helped me better understand many of the unconscious forces motivating me back then; to deal with some of the pain I'd repressed; to bring more of myself out of the shadows; to embrace the beauty and power of the unknown, of the mystery, even within myself; to walk more aware and surefooted on this Earth; and, the best part, as far as I'm concerned, to accept that I am a work in process that will never be complete—to accept my imperfection and enjoy the thrill of continually growing and being changed for the better.

Psychology really did become my guiding star as well as the gravitational force that helps keep me grounded in reality. It is the bible of my faith and my source of wisdom and strength. For those who find such prose surprising, keep in mind the word *psychology* itself simply means "study of the soul," and what could be a more religious endeavor and meaningful experience than striving to understand and feed one's soul?

With this background in mind, there can be little wonder that, when I began working on my Doctorate of Ministry, the psychology of religion would be the inevitable subject of my dissertation. Although what I had already come to understand and appreciate about psychology had inspired me in this direction, all that I newly learned while studying and writing my dissertation has proven to be equally as enlightening and transformative.

The dissertation itself is a 179 page, five chapter document entitled, "Pathway and Pathology: What the Psychologists Say about Religion." In case you're wondering about the date, I gave my oral arguments during a conference call back in 2011 while I was here in Spokane, candidating to be your minister. It was here in this church that I had the privilege of first being introduced as Dr. Eklof. In many cases my subject, which involved a general survey of classical psychology and developmental theory, might seem too broad for a dissertation, but, earning a Doctorate of Ministry didn't require me to be overly narrow in my focus, and, in the end, I wanted to have as thorough a grasp on the subject as possible. As the first lines of my epilogue say:

> My continuing effort to develop a broad understanding of what psychology has to say about religion has not only helped inform my ministry, but has been a transformative process for me personally. It has, I feel, made me a more balanced

> and grounded individual in that I am now much less magical in my own thinking and far more appreciative of just how elusive reality can be (of how easy it is to deceive myself).

In my first chapter, "Father Religion and Gender Equality," I began exploring the misogynistic and patriarchal tendency in mainstream religions because I wanted to understand why, from a psychological perspective, we so often create dominant male gods. In the end I came to believe it is because we are primates, and like most primates, humans originated from small groups of nomads governed by a dominant male to whom loyalty was given in exchange for protection. In this sense, I agree with Freud, who said, "From Darwin I borrowed the hypothesis that [humans] originally lived in small hordes, each of the hordes stood under the rule of an older male, who governed by brute force, appropriated all the females, and belaboured or killed all the young males, including his own sons."[1] If this is so, if we begin with primate history, and not strictly human history, then the question, "Which came first, patriarchy or matriarchy?" is easily resolved. Human civilization begins and remains rooted in a patriarchal psyche that is too often willing to give up its freedom in the name of safety and security.

Today, since our societies are so large and it's not possible to be ruled by one dominant male, we tend to project this tendency onto surrogate father figures, like Ronald Reagan, Vladimir Putin, or the great Silverback in the Sky. In fact, it is my opinion the reason Donald Trump is so inexplicably popular is precisely because he offers so few details about his plans, which makes him a perfect empty vessel for containing our projections.

Freud believed this need for a surrogate father figure was the beginning of religion; that after rebelling against their own tyrannical fathers, probably killing them, the patricidal sons eventually eased their guilt by erecting a totem to replace him. For a time, however, before the invention of hierarchical, patriarchal religion, they attempted a more egalitarian society, including the inclusion and empowerment of women, which led to matriarchy and goddess religions.

First century Christianity is a good example of this. They lived in communes sharing all their property together and eliminated ethnic, class, and gender differences. As the Apostle Paul said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[2] They took this so literally that some men took to dressing like women and some women like men in church, causing a controversy that's actually addressed in the New Testament. That's right, there were transgender Christians in the 1st century. Unfortunately, after a short time, before the century was over, the hierarchy reestablished itself and wives became the property of their husbands and slaves the property of their masters once more.

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[1] Freud, Sigmund, *Moses and Monotheism*, (Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Hew York, NY, 1939, 1967), p. 168.
[2] Galatians 3:28

Even so, this recessive meme, the idea of gender, economic, and ethnic equality, continues to remain in the human meme pool, ever bending the arc of history toward justice.

In my next chapter I look at the fundamentalist mindset in terms of developmental theory and make the case this mindset and its characteristics are comparable to those at the earliest stage of psychological and moral development. In my own terms, I summarize this mindset as *extremist* (thinking that is polarized, absolutist, and irrelative), *irrational* (thinking that is illogical, contradictory, and inconsistent), *subjective* (thinking that is biased, unconscious, and unreflective), *punitive* (thinking that is vengeful, angry, and destructive), and *authoritarian* (thinking that is submissive, overbearing, and ubiquitous, hierarchical, and usually patriarchal).

Since, developmentally speaking, these are also akin to the qualities used to describe the thinking of children younger than five, I conclude that fundamentalism is a kind of institutionalized fixation in which adults are collectively stuck at this earliest stage of development. Mature faith, by contrast, ought to reflect the same qualities developmental psychology suggests are typical of mature people, based not on a belief in an authoritarian leader or surrogate father imago, but upon certain universal principles like love and justice for everyone, regardless of who they are or what they believe.

I'm going to talk more about this particular topic in a few weeks, but, for now, the most transformative part of this research for me was in acknowledging how much the kind of fear and paranoia associated with fundamentalism had impacted my own thinking, causing me to tilt at windmills by giving in too easily to conspiracy theories, looking for enemies to preach against in order to make me feel safer and better about myself. Again, as I write in my epilogue, "While it might seem simple to identify those institutions and individuals in which [these characteristics] are normative, it is not always so easy to admit when they crop up in ourselves. Segregating these characteristics out, however, has certainly made me more aware of these tendencies in myself." The result, my friends, has been a mind more open and at ease with myself, as well as a preacher who is far more hopeful and positive than I was before, which, I hope you will agree, you have become the beneficiaries of given that this important work in my life and career was completed only upon my arrival here.

In my next chapter, "Freedom or Belonging: A Human Dilemma," I discuss this defining tension within all of us, the epitome of human angst, between being included, being safe, being able to participate in the benefits of society, by doing what is expected of us, thinking, acting, and looking like everyone else; and the opposing desire to be free, individual, authentic, the wish to be accepted for who we truly are. Like many of us, I've been wrestling with this tension my entire life, which, exhausting as it can be, is better than settling for one side or the other. If we give up our own freedom and authenticity just to belong, we end up as mindless shells who unconsciously accept the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others as if they were

our very own. If, on the other hand, we give up society entirely in order to be ourselves, we become isolated and alone, if not narcissistic and sociopathic, unhealthily rejecting our nature as social animals.

Again, those of you who have been around for a while have heard me speak to this tension often since I've been here. Certainly, it is a part of the human condition any good minister must address in order to help individuals understand and cope with it the best they can. But, on a more subtle level, this same angst is also the basis for addressing social injustice. For there are many who are unable to engage in this struggle because our society has already settled the matter for them. If they are the wrong color, the wrong gender, the wrong sexuality, from the wrong country, or the wrong economic class, they are automatically left out. For them the only struggle is to be included in the system so they can access the benefits of society, like jobs, education, and housing, along with fair access to public accommodations and equal treatment under the law.

Likewise, many of those who benefit from such injustice, have been conditioned, through both reward and punishment, to believe they are naturally superior to others. They too, however, suffer from not adequately coping with this innate tension. For they are afraid of losing everything they have, all the benefits of belonging, like good jobs, neighborhoods, and incomes, leading to a life of constant fear of others, a paranoid existence afraid that at any moment some evil outsider is going to come and take it all away. They are constantly under "red alert," which may also help explain the popularity of Donald Trump who is promising to build walls and deny visas to those considered a threat to the status quo.

As psychologist, Robert Kegan says, "The two greatest yearnings of human life… may be the yearning for inclusion (to be welcomed in, next to, held, connected with, a part of) and the yearning for distinctness (to be autonomous, independent, to experience my own agency, the self chosenness of my purposes)."[3] Were I not aware of the pivotal role this basic tension between freedom and belonging plays in our lives and in our society, I wouldn't be much of a minister. On a personal level, I'd constantly drive myself crazy trying to impossibly please everyone, unable to express my own opinion, and, on a larger level, I'd be like many ministers, upholding the status quo by supporting social biases rather than addressing the injustices and wrongs that leave too many people out.

My final chapter, "Magical Thinking and the Omnipotence of Thought,"[4] takes on the tendency many people have to either believe they can control the world with their minds, through the power of positive thinking rather than power of positive action, for instance, or by denying empirical facts and inconvenient truths in favor of their

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[3] Kegan, Robert, *The Evolving Self*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982), p. 142.
[4] For those who've noticed, I've skipped over discussing my fourth chapter on "Developmental Theology," due to time constraints and since I have earlier addressed developmental theory in regard to fundamentalism.

own autistic, unfounded desires, ideals, and beliefs. But the "aha moment" for me in this part of the work came in realizing that feeling like we have an answer, even if it's a good one, deceives us into false security. That's the power of thought, the power of having an idea, even if it's a solid, fact based, logical idea. We feel better about the world, safer and more secure, if we believe we have the right ideas, whether they are based on faith or science.

We don't like the gaps, the uncertainty, the unknown, so we fill all the emptiness with answers, whether we call them God, or logic, or say they are based on sound evidence. Just because there must be a logical answer for everything, however, and I believe there is, is not the same thing as saying we have a logical answer for everything. Part of our psychological health, rather, is based upon our ability to live without answers, to let the mystery be, "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts," as the poet John Keats said, "without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

Our Universe is mostly comprised of emptiness, dark matter, dark energy, and black holes. And the known universe isn't even a spec compared to all that remains unknown. We are, as I began, mostly unconscious, so it makes sense, even as we strive to understand, even as we gravitate toward the light, that we ought also become comfortable living in this vast ocean of the unknown. As Saint John of the Cross said, "When I speak of darkness, I mean the absence of knowledge… [You must] learn to be at home in this darkness."[5] In short, studying the psychology of religion, delving into the unconscious, has made me more of a mystic than ever before, and has made me aware that as a minister I must work to help others feel at home in this darkness, wrapped, I hope, in the awe and wonder of its mystery.

Finally, studying the psychology of religion has helped me understand that religion is, itself, a neutral factor in our wellbeing. It can either be a source of additional anxiety and neurosis in our lives, or something that helps us better cope with what is. It can drive us deeper into our delusions, or give us the fortitude to face reality. Reality, as I say, is at once the most abundant resource in the universe, and it's rarest gem. For reality is all there is. Whatever is, is real, even if we can't explain it. Yet, because we are so limited in our capacity to grasp reality, to cope with reality, and because we are so overwhelming unconscious of all most everything, each fleeting glimpse of reality a precious gift.

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[5] De Nicolas, Antonio T., *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, (Paragon House, New York, NY, 1989), p. 41.