

“Epiphanies and Chaos”

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Meditation

Adapted from Larry Kushner's new book, “Invisible Lines of Connection.”

Munich. Nazi Germany. Late 1930's. A Jewish woman riding home on a city bus when two SS men suddenly board the bus and begin examining identification papers.

Most of the passengers were annoyed but a few were terrified. Jews were told to leave the bus and get into a truck around the corner.

The woman watched from her seat in the rear as the soldiers worked their way down the aisle. She felt certain it was only a matter of time. Thoughts ran through her head of never being able to see her family – her children – again. Indeed, they would never even know why she didn't make it back from work. She began to tremble, with tears streaming down her face.

The man next to her noticed that she was crying. And politely asked why.

"I don't have the papers you have. I'm a Jew. They're going to take me away."

The man exploded with disgust. "You stupid [expletive]," he roared. "I can't stand being near you."

The SS men turned and asked what all the yelling was about.

"Damn her," the man shouted angrily. "My wife has forgotten her papers again! I'm so fed up. She always does this!"

The soldiers laughed, and moved on.

The woman never saw the man again. She never even learned his name. Her treasure was delivered to her – unsigned. The presence of Kadusha – as the Jews know it. Or epiphany, as it is called in the Christian tradition. It is the Sacred. The Presence of the Holy. A revelation of the divine that jumps out of the ordinary so that we have to see it. It is what reveals our true purpose. The path that was meant for us. Sort of like following a star. A star which can appear anywhere. Even on a Munich city bus.

Sermon:

I stole his pictures once. Drawings. Snakes and castles. Just the kind of thing an eight year old would think was cool. I took them right off the dresser where he had proudly framed them and I brought them to school. I showed my friends and, as expected, they received great accolades. Everyone asked if I had drawn them. A fear crept in at that

moment. I would have felt somehow inadequate if I said 'no.' Out of a need for recognition I wasn't sure I would get on my own, I told them I did. But I immediately felt like I had failed in something much larger than feeling adequate.

When I opened my mouth, it just came out all wrong. Like I was caught off guard. Or unprepared. I had a strong impulse to say that I was proud of him. That he was creative and talented. That I admired him and that I was proud he was my brother. But in the heat of the moment, my own darkness frightened me and it came out different. It would take years more for the right thing to come out.

I ratted him out once too. On Halloween night. Twelve year olds making mischief. Throwing newspapers from on top a hill at cars below. Until I hit one. A slick, supped-up Chevy Impala that happened to belong to Chris Bartlow, the neighborhood thug. He and his teenage goons brought the car to a screeching halt, got out and ran up the hill looking to beat the tar out of us. I was slow in my get-a-way and couldn't find a place to hide. I saw my brother, Doug, crouched in the bushes and, at the last second, just as they came into view, I ducked in next to him giving away his hiding place.

It wasn't supposed to end up like that. I knew, in my mind, what it meant - that he was someone I could trust. He was my hero. My older brother. And protector. I knew the noble thing would have been to let him hide and take the rap. But I didn't do that. In fact I was even ready to open my mouth and say, 'he did it,' when Bartlow's girlfriend, who once babysat us, recognized us and prompted the thugs to let us off easy. I simply was not ready to play the role I 'could have' played. To be the person I wanted to be. That would have required going a whole new route for me.

There is something that happens when we stand in the midst of our deepest fears that asks something crucial of us. Asks us to choose. The chaos of the moment forces many conflicting thoughts and emotions to compete for our attention; and the outcome can be a clarifying or a confusing one. It can show us a better picture of our true self. Or it can reveal what is still missing within us. We are poised to experience an epiphany either way. But the difference is that one way points us on a path long worn down by fear. The other way gets us home by another way.

Like it was for the man on the Munich bus, choices are presented to all of us. Usually thrust upon our reality without warning. Without time to prepare. A crisis unfolds before us and our mouths flop open and the future waits to see what comes out - will it be a holy word? Something that brings new light into the prevailing darkness? Or will it be a studding homage to our fears? Fears which keep us so stuck in places of exile and separateness?

It seems interesting that our lives are marked with these critical questions like turning points. Defining tests, not only of our character, but our destiny. And the destiny of the world around us. We can see in these moments that so much about who we are and where we are called to go are decided. But we don't often consider how our action, or inaction, decides what the world around us becomes. That we are part of that

determination. It may not seem fair – that it all comes down to how we respond in a crucial moment, at a single point in time, where fear abounds and chaos reigns. We were not told. We hadn't prepared.

Except we have prepared. All our lives are preparation for the next moment. We learn from experience. Listen to the yearnings telling us what kind of person we want to become. We wrestle with our past failures and fears. Dreams that reveal our thwarted desire of being better than we have known ourselves to be up to that moment.

Noted psychologist, Carl Jung, knew that we, as human beings, are forever longing for positive change or personal growth. We long to escape from habitual patterns that keep us stuck. That keep us from our desires to 'seize the day,' or 'be the difference we long to see,' or even to 'just do it.' He often talked about our imagination, our dreams or the stories we hear as the sources of our preparation. A training ground for us to do our soul work. The place where our unconscious presses against the boundaries of our knowing and struggles into consciousness – lifting us toward our aspirations. These dreams reveal short, symbolic possibilities of what our lives might be. Asking us, 'are we ready to take on what is next? – to become what we are called to be?'

For Jung, it was our unconscious – sharpened in stories, sometimes revealed in our dreams – which was constantly at work preparing us. It was our unconscious that constantly posed the question of whether we would remain on the tried and true path that got us where we are, or asked us if we were ready for a new way? To grow larger than what we'd been? And since our unconscious is always at work, there was likely always some prompting, some revelation, some sign always somewhere in front of us – like a star hanging overhead – just waiting for us to notice. Shining as bright as it could. All we have to do is look up. Be willing to be taken by surprise. And be changed. In other words, we are all, without knowing it, waiting for our next epiphany.

Jung, and student, Joseph Campbell, believed that epiphanies are almost always readily available. As common as stars in the sky, if we are just ready to notice. We only recognize and respond to a small percentage of the stimuli in front of us. And our epiphanies just stand in line with that small percentage, waiting to be noticed. Epiphanies – the understanding of how to partner ourselves with the divine – how to align ourselves with the right - are not only visible to some. They are not only for those who are already good, who prepare diligently or who were born with the right stuff. Epiphanies are for anyone who is able to see past their own darkness.

Campbell would have pointed out that it was not as though the man on the Munich bus had been in that situation with the SS agents a thousand times. It was not as though he sat next to the terrified woman every day and had practiced the right thing to say in the right moment. It was not as though he prepared. He was simply ready to see. Simply open to a new call. A different path. Home by another way.

Epiphanies are that way. Always there. Seldom noticed. Too often, our attention is so wrapped around our own bus ticket, our own destination, our own set of needs and fears

and quest for control or self-preservation. We are too caught up or too busy to notice that a star, shining overhead, pointing us to somewhere new. We don't see the need – even when it is a person sitting right beside us experiencing terror, who's world is so dark she can't imagine even the next moment. Someone who needs just the smallest portion of our light to prevail.

And here's the thing - all the while, we fail to realize that what we need – what stands in the way of discovering our own epiphany – is just being open to experiencing the smallest portion of her darkness – just enough to provide the necessary contrast to see the star above us. A star that can be seen even on a Munich bus. Even in our own, busy, hearts. What so often keeps us from discovering our own epiphanies is our propensity to spend so much time in our own darkness – our fears and insecurities – and very little time in the darkness of those around us.

Last Thursday the world celebrated a day known as the feast of the Epiphany. Such a name might make one think we would all be gluttons of epiphanies the planet over. We couldn't possibly have another epiphany. We're stuffed. And thus, the world's woes would be over. The suffering of millions would be at an end. The devastation from the war, from the Tsunami, would be cured.

But unfortunately, such is not the case. Darkness still hangs over our world. Fear still abides. Chaos still reigns. At one time, I might have thought this meant the feast was a failure. But now I see it differently. Perhaps we have simply made the conditions right for epiphanies to occur. Because of the chaos, because of the fear, the uncertainty – a darkness abides in this world. A darkness we can't help but enter into. And when such is the case, it creates the perfect condition for us to begin dreaming. Preparing. To step onto a different path than the one we have known. To see a light we've been waiting to notice. And follow it to where a new world is waiting to be born.

The feast of the Epiphany is sometimes referred to as the twelfth night. It is the day in the Christian calendar commemorating the arrival of the wise men at the manger to see the baby. It is considered by Christians to be the day the Gentile world (ie. The wise men) discovered what the holy would look like in human form.

That is from a Christian perspective. But let's not look at it from that perspective. Let's look at it from the perspective of how Jung, or Campbell might see it. A mythic journey perspective. A symbolic story of a quest to find the holy amidst the darkness.

The land that Jesus was born into was ruled by a man named Herod – a man who ruled in absolute power by keeping the people poor and in fear. Thus, in a lot of ways, it was a very dark time. In their own fear, the people of the land could not see a way out. They had no epiphanies before them. But for the three travelers it was a different story. Some say they were wise-men - who did not succumb to fear. Some say they were kings, who weren't concerned about being over powered. Some say they were Magi – or astrologers – who spent their lives noticing that stars could point out new ways – like epiphanies – on their journey.

So it was these three announced their intention to journey into the darkness. They must have said it loud enough so that Herod received word. For the story says that their journey made Herod think. Herod had been foretold of an ancient prophecy that a baby would be born in that town. And that this baby would grow up to be king of all Israel. Fear was something Herod not only subjected on his people, but something he had much of himself. And he feared his own power would be threatened by this new king. He asked the wise-men, slyly, if they would return from their visit and inform him of the boy's whereabouts – since he wanted to go offer his blessings as well.

What do we know of the Magi's journey? The story describes them traveling in darkness until the star appeared. We know that the seeing the star brought them exceeding joy. That they stopped and reveled in a baby born in such a harsh place. And that they gave of their gifts.

But one of the more subtle parts of the story reveals that the experience somehow changed the men. That along the way they had had a dream. One which warned them not to return to Herod. And so, being changed by the experience, they set out to make their way home by another way.

This is an epiphany. Being willing to let go of one's own course – our own concerns and trials and business. Venturing out until you encounter a darkness you are not familiar with – one for which you are not even prepared. Having a dream of a different way. Giving what gifts you have to offer. Being part of change. And finding your way home by another way.

Was this not just what happened on that Munich bus? A man willing to let go of his own concerns. Letting himself venture into a young woman's terror, long enough to dream of a different way. Giving what he could give. Being part of change. And finding a way home by another way. For the woman, but also for himself.

Is this not what is happening in our world today. With the death toll from the Tsunami so high, people everywhere are preparing themselves to let go of their own concerns. Venturing to imagine other people's terror long enough to dream of a different way. Giving what that can. Changing what they are able. And helping themselves – and the world – find a way home by another way.

I know this is what I experienced this week. As I mentioned in joys and concerns, while I was driving home from the Mountain, my brother called me and told me he was diagnosed with a malignant tumor on his tongue. He told me that he would be going into have it removed the next day, along with many of his lymph nodes.

I listened as he calmly gave me the details. I waited until after we hung up to pull over and cry. And then I was aware that I had forgotten to tell him I loved him.

Well, it's not the kind of things that brothers say to one another all that often. And I

realized that I couldn't ever remember saying it to him. Even though I have always looked up to him, admired him, bragged about him, counted on him, and have been proud of him, I guess I just spent most of my life caught up in my own fears of it feeling awkward, thinking about my needs.

But that's what an epiphany does. It lets you venture out of your own concerns long enough to venture into someone else's terror. Dream of a different way. Give what you can. Change what you're able.

So it is from chaos that our most profound epiphanies arise. I had been planning on visiting my brother next month in Portland. Spending time with him, doing what we've always done. But now everything has changed.

I will still go to Portland. But now I think there are a few more things that need to be said. I think it's finally time for me to find my way home by another way.

To the Glory of Life.

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