

Ronald Arms: Married to Amazement

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Seekers Church
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Married to Amazement

After thirteen years with Seekers, the time has come for me to leave. I want to use a teaching story about death to frame what I would like to share. Departure and death have more in common than their first letter. They both touch the fear of the unknown. They both involve letting go. Moreover, they are both hard to talk about in meaningful ways. I hope that the story will help.

Nachiketa came face to face with death. Brahmin priests encouraged his father to make a grand donation to insure himself a good rebirth. On the day of the offering his father said, "I give all my cattle, my gold, all of value to the priests of the temple." "All you value?" asked Nachiketa angrily. "What about me, your son?" "Very well," answered his father also angry. "I give you to Death." Nachiketa's eyes blazed as he replied, "I accept."

Nachiketa went deep into the forest and waited for death to show himself. He came at last to the Land of Yama, the King of Death, also known as the Keeper of the Accounts. There, death's assistants explained Yama was away. "He is out collecting rent," they said. "Fine, I will wait," said Nachiketa.

When Death returned his assistants told him of this unusual young man. Lord Yama went to Nachiketa and apologized. "I

will make up for keeping you waiting by offering you a boon. You may choose three blessings for your journey."

Nachiketa asked first for forgiveness for himself and all that he touched. "Let my father look upon me with the same joy as the day I was born." "Your first boon was a wise one Nachiketa," said Lord Yama. "What's your second? Speak!" Nachiketa then asked for the blessing of inner fire. He knew his journey required a full aliveness of being. Finally, the Lord of Death asked Nachiketa for his last boon. "I ask for that which is immortal." At this Lord Yama said, "I will grant you your third boon." In addition, he handed Nachiketa a simple and yet extraordinary gift – a mirror. "If you wish to find the secret of immortality you must look directly into yourself. Then you must ask yourself repeatedly the greatest of all human questions, "Who am I?" Look beyond your body and your thoughts. In that way you will find what you seek."

Forgiveness, inner passion and that which is immortal are three ways this story and our gospel lesson can help us think together about my departure from Seekers.

Forgiveness

Just after Elian returned to Cuba, Mike came into our family room ranting and raving about how much money the United States government had spent on this little six year old boy. He was none too gentle, nor very kind in his remarks. I promptly told him, in much the same manner, "If you can't say something nice, be quiet." We often judge each other too quickly and too harshly. This happens in today's gospel lesson. The people from Jesus' hometown are quick to criticize him. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us? And they were deeply offended with him." As we take leave of each other, this temptation will be all too real once again. I hope that in paying attention to forgiveness we may

experience its blessing.

I begin by asking your forgiveness. You cannot participate in a community for thirteen years without stepping on a few toes, disappointing friends and foes alike and otherwise making your share of mistakes. As much as I am aware of some of my shortcomings, I also remain blind to others. That means in some instances I will leave without even knowing the ways in which I've offended some of you. No doubt, some will interpret my departure as an affront. I do not know much else to do but to share with you the ten words that can change the world, "I am sorry. I have made mistakes. Please forgive me."

Nevertheless, in departing I also need to forgive. Myself to begin with. My anger, my impatience, my stubbornness. I am sure some of you could gladly help me expand this list. Before we can truly forgive others, we need to know how to forgive ourselves. One of the gifts I have received here is an appreciation for the spirituality of imperfection. I do not yet completely accept the mixture of good and evil that I am, but I am more at ease with my complexity. This makes it possible for me to work at forgiving others.

A cartoon in a San Francisco paper showed a man walking down the street with a signboard that proclaimed, "Jesus is coming!" Half a block behind was an Asian looking fellow wearing a signboard that read, "Buddha Here Now!" Probably we should add a group carrying a Seekers Church banner followed them. Departures, like parades and protests, can be criticisms of people we do not agree with. In asking for forgiveness and in forgiving we enrich our convictions with compassion. Moreover, this practice turns compassion from a religious word into a living force. In the final analysis, it is not how much we agree that will make a difference, but how well we love. I do think I have learned to widen my circle of compassion here.

Inner Fire

Nachiketa's second request was for inner fire. This is not an effort to improve ourselves, or to attain something special. It is a boon of aliveness. Nachiketa did not ask to get to the end of an imagined journey, but to be fully where he was. The true task of the spiritual life is not found in faraway places, or unusual states of consciousness: it is here with us. To teach his disciples about inner fire Jesus sends them out without money, food or extra clothes. He knows they will find God, who cares for the sparrows and counts the number of hairs on our head, at work in the world. They will not need the usual sources of security because the experience of inner fire is available to them. It is available to them even when they are not in his company. In sending them out, Jesus reminds the disciples that the Kingdom is constantly in the midst of human life. The amazing truth is that the ordinary is the tool of the Divine. Eternity is now ongoing. The Kingdom can only be entered now and by none other than us.

Jack Kornfield tells of taking a 3 and a 5-year-old to the Ringling Brothers circus. As a treat, he bought ringside tickets, right in the center two rows back. The children liked the clowns and the tigers. Most of the other acts were too far away, too small to seem especially remarkable to a young child's eyes. Then the elephants came out, with their feathered plumes and sequined riders. In formation, they circled the ring twice, coming right near them. Then they stopped while the ringmaster talked. All at once the big elephant in front of them began to pee; a huge flood cascaded to the sand below, making a giant puddle. The children's eyes grew wide. Then the elephant began to poop. Large, bowling ball sized spheres thudded to the ground, one at a time. Each was observed with increasing wonder and excitement. When they got home, and for weeks after that, the children talked about going to the circus. Moreover, what they told and recounted repeatedly was the story of the elephant. That was the most

amazing circus act of all. This pulpit amazes me. It is not usually a circus act, although we do share stories that are recounted over and over. Preaching reminds me that we are not primarily a people of the Book, although the Bible and the written word matters to us. We are not primarily a people of tradition, although the Church of the Savior and our various heritages play a role in shaping us. If you will forgive my Methodist upbringing, we are primarily people whose hearts have been strangely warmed. We are a people ablaze with Pentecost. Time and again, what amazes me is how Spirit filled our worship and community lives are. Our prayers are full of attention. We frequently are aware of others. Many of us know an inner fire personally. We are on a first name basis with Spirit. We are married to amazement. Still none of us can command God's presence. It is beyond our capacity to control. When we talk about "no one but us," it is important to keep a right relationship between practice and grace. A Rabbi said, "Full experiences of God can never be planned or achieved. They are spontaneous moments of grace, almost accidental." Later he was asked, "Rabbi, if God realization is just accidental, why do we work so hard doing all these spiritual practices?" His reply, "To be as accident prone as possible."

When we are married to amazement spiritual accidents are waiting to happen. I leave Seekers convinced that amazement is an important search engine for the Sacred. Moreover, this provides me a source of confidence. I depart knowing that the Hidden Holy is available to me in daily life. You have helped me nurture practices that make me accident-prone. While our journeys may take us in different directions, our possibility of being present to the Creator keeps us connected.

Undying Blessings

Nachiketa's final request was for knowledge of that which is immortal. And Lord Yama offered him a mirror. When I saw the altar decorated with a mirror this season it confirmed my

hunch this story has lessons to teach us. The mystery of identity is a central one. It is a sacred question.

In sending the disciples out Jesus asks them to work with the question of identity. Will they be healers? Will they travel lightly? Will they risk rejection? Will they dare do as little as Jesus did in his own hometown? These are the questions with which he asks them to wrestle. Ours may be different, but the task is the same.

I have celebrated Easter in the past by listening to the musical "Man of La Mancha". In the play, the Knight of Mirrors confronts Don Quixote and he too must struggle with who he is. The act of leaving as well as being sent out brings us face to face with the Knight of Mirrors. We can vainly use a mirror to see how pretty we look. On the other hand, we can more wisely use it to adjust whatever is out of place, perhaps to pick out the spinach we have between our teeth. However, another option is to use it to go beyond our body and our thoughts and ask again, "Who am I?"

As long as we see ourselves as a fixed identity rather than a group of actors who takes turns appearing on stage, we will either think too highly or too lowly of ourselves. Our multiplicity of selves changes according to mood, task, role and company. Sometimes our various selves collaborate, and sometimes one takes over. Moreover, we cannot always help ourselves. Perhaps you saw the article in the paper, 'A Wisconsin psychiatrist convinced a patient she had 120 separate personalities – including those of a duck and the devil – and then charged her for group therapy.' Happily, most of us are not that interesting. Nevertheless, none of us is an individual pure and simple. We each are a nexus of relationships and roles. Therefore, if one of our selves misbehaves, the important thing is not to overreact. We can call for reinforcements. (Quoted and adapted from Lifecraft by Forrest Church)

Working once again with the question of identity does this. I am approaching retirement. In five years, or sooner if I'm unlucky, I will be asked to begin what Robert Greenleaf called a useful old age. I am quite unsure of what direction to take. I have been navigating some rough seas lately. Moreover, while I have kept my bearings for the most part, there is still much to do. As I head into that future I want to sweep up loose ends, polish skills, and clean up. My prayer life, my journaling and my exchanges with my spiritual director all suggest it is time to move on.

Lest this seem too compulsive or capricious, let me share one final story with you. "In Tibet one famous yogi had lived for years practicing ardently in a mountain hut supported by the villagers below. Then one festival day he heard that all his supporters were going to visit him. The yogi carefully swept his hut, polished the offering bowls on the altar, made a special offering and cleaned his robes. Then he sat back and waited, but unease came over him. Who was he trying to be? Finally, he got up, scooped up several handfuls of dirt and threw them back on the altar. Those handfuls of dirt were said to be his highest spiritual offering."

However we work with the sacred question of identity, we need to look in the mirror again, look beyond our body and our thoughts, and be open to what life has to teach us. Moreover, if when looking in the mirror things seem too perfect, too neat, too orderly then we should be ready to scoop up several handfuls of dirt and make them our highest spiritual offering.

Conclusion

There is one more event in the story of Nachiketa. At its conclusion, we see the young man bowing to Lord Yama a final time, totally at peace. And then as if by magic the landscape of the Kingdom of Death changes to the spring rice fields of his native India. In this, a last secret is revealed to him –

death and birth are not separate. Renewal comes by dying. When we have faced death and aloneness, we are unafraid to live, and life flowers under our feet. Everywhere we go becomes holy ground. As the poet, Mary Oliver puts it,

*When death comes
Like a hungry bear in autumn
When death comes and takes all the bright coins from his
purse
To buy me, and snaps the purse shut...
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
What is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?
And therefore, I look upon everything
As a brotherhood and sisterhood...
And I think of each life as a flower, as common
As a field daisy, and as singular
And each body a lion of courage, and something
Precious to the earth.
When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

Mary Oliver

Seekers has been a place where I have learned more about compassion. You amaze me. You have helped me look at death and aloneness, and not be afraid to live, even outside this community. In this spirit, as we go separate ways, I bid you farewell and offer you my thanks. May the blessings of forgiveness, inner fire, and that which is immortal be ours.