

ON TRANSPARENCY AND THE WIZARD OF OZ

A writer recently contacted me about a book he was putting together of truthful stories about the challenges of the spiritual path. He said that he was tired of all the teachings that suggested the journey was easy or pretended that the teacher had achieved some spiritual status and was special.

I agreed to see him immediately.

This business of false or exaggerated claims is not a new problem. The great world religions assert or imply that their way is the best way. That has been, and still is, a source of conflict. It is not much different in shamanic and tribal traditions where there can be uncomfortable arguments, for example, about what elements should be placed in the four directions. Esoteric and occult study groups have been notorious for their exclusivity.

And, of course, as I often like to remind people who get spiritually earnest, there are also the great men's hair-do debates. If women think they have a problem with their hair, it is nothing compared to some spiritual men for whom their hair is a sacred gateway to the divine. What will it be today, sir? We have several choices. Completely shaven for humility. A tonsure so the soul can escape through the crown chakra. Abundant hair and beard, each strand an antenna picking up spiritual vibrations. A top knot so that the spirits can lift you up into heaven.

But religious hats are also entertaining. The bigger the hat, the bigger the spiritual status. Bishop's mitres. Tibetan Buddhist top hats. Great feathered bonnets. Animals' heads. Fantastically decorated hoods and crowns

In fact, first year anthropology students learn that you can recognise religious artefacts, because they are only used by special people on special occasions.

So the logic here is that if you get the right hairdo, the right sacred hat and the right special objects, then you will have attained spiritual status. You can see this in spiritual traditions all across the world. Big chief always wears the best and loudest outfits.

This is all rather like the Wizard of Oz. He appears to be extremely powerful, lord of thunder and lightning — until Dorothy pulls back the curtain and reveals a small insecure man pulling levers and pressing buttons. It is all show and no substance.

Plus there is the added problem that these people in special clothes assert that they have all the special answers.

And then there is the even greater problem — that people want to believe them.

INTRIGUING PARADOXES

This can create a difficult position. I do not want to offend anyone or deflate their spiritual path, but I also don't want to collude in giving respect to a spiritual teacher or teaching just because they have the clothes and the status, or appear to be confident and certain.

Sometimes people like me — your friendly meditating writer and freelance mystic — are given status because we have books published or write in an enlightened manner.

Sometimes status is given just because someone is teaching spirituality or preaching or leading ceremonies.

But inside the status is just another human being, another Wizard of Oz. That's me. That's you. Of course, it can be lovely and reassuring to have status, but those of us in the spiritual biz need to beware of ever taking it seriously. Power corrupts. The more emotionally insecure we are, the more likely it is that we will believe that our own status and power are true and meaningful. I won't name names, but I imagine you yourself can think of a few people like this. (It might even be you! Or me!)

This is made more difficult because there are many people who are looking for a perfect mother-father figure who will make them feel safe in a challenging world. So you end up with insecure followers following insecure leaders, which is a typical and very human group-soup to be found in all areas of life especially in religious and spiritual teaching.

It is also often made even more confusing because many of these insecure or pumped up teachers also bring through and carry a blessing. This is one of the most intriguing spiritual paradoxes: a flawed human radiating a blessing. This will be the subject of a future column.

REALISM

What I want is a spirituality that is realistic about the human condition.

I want leaders and teachers of spirituality to be honest and open about their own internal challenges and weaknesses, and to stop pretending they are special or perfect. I am tired of the pretence. It is also emotionally exhausting and unhealthy for the teacher.

The traditional justification for all this pretence was that the masses needed the stability and reassurance of an established and authoritative spirituality. This was the way to control the rabble and maintain a stability. This was, and often still is, the justification for all that pomp and false dignity. Often of course it is a cunning argument used to justify the abuse of power.

We know better.

It is now over 150 years since Sigmund Freud was born and founded contemporary psychology. The most profound insight of his psychology, which has coloured the way that all of us today understand the human condition, is that beneath our conscious mind and behaviour are unconscious thoughts, feelings and instincts that are really driving us. What a powerful revelation! We are not really what we appear to be, what we present to the world or even who we think we are. *We are highly strung creatures seeking to survive, driven by primal needs and defence patterns, putting on a front.* (Of course, we are not only that – but we forget those unconscious realities at our peril.)

Freud is often presented as hostile to spirituality, but his major revelation gives tremendous support to our spiritual development, mapping how we create our own unreality and how we are conned by our own thoughts and emotions.

This richness of the human condition — the weakness and the courage, the insecure neediness and the cosmic consciousness — is the source of great art. I often opine that it is artists, not spiritual teachers, who really understand the human condition. Look to Shakespeare or Beethoven for a fuller understanding of all that we encompass – the tragic-comic mask.

So let me finish this column by recommending a wonderful compassionate novel, which some of you may have read, about the early days of psychiatry and neuro-science, Sebastian Faulkes' 'Human Traces'.

There are no easy answers, but compassionate and insightful enquiry into the human condition is a good start.

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