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Selflessness 5: Beyond Reason

The distance between the rails on US railroads is 4 feet 8 ½ inches. It's a peculiar number. It's not 4 ½ feet or 4 ¾ feet but 4 feet 8 ½ inches. Who came up with that?

The British did. The first locomotive in the United States was bought from an English company in 1831. As American railroad technology caught up with the English, we began to sell back to them. It helped commerce to have similarly sized trains.

So how did the British come up with 4 feet 8 ½ inches?

That was the standard size for wagons. There was a whole industry for building carts and wagons. So it was convenient to use this equipment and standards for making railcars.

But this begs the question: why did wagons have a wheelbase of 4 feet 8 ½ inches?

The old roads in England had ruts that were roughly that far apart. Wheels were likely to break if they didn't fall into the smoothly worn ruts.

Okay, so why were those old ruts that far apart?

The early roads in Europe were built by the Roman Empire. When they were busy conquering the continent, they build long distant roads to move their troops and military equipment rapidly. Those roads accommodated Roman chariots and wagons. Since all chariots were built by and for Imperial Rome, they had the same wheel spacing. The roads have been used ever since.

But why did Rome use that wheel spacing?

Horses pulled their chariots. When two harnessed horses walk side by side, their hooves are roughly 4 feet 8 ½ inches apart. The wheelbase was designed to travel over that same ground.

So, back to the original question, "Who came up with the spacing of our rails?" The answer: a horse's rear end.

Ruts

Some of you have heard this history.

I poked around the internet to see if it was true. Most sites said it was a false urban myth. But in explaining why it was false, they quibbled about trivial details and accepted the sweep of history as I presented it.

Whatever the case, literal and metaphorical ruts can be very persistent. And some are quite useful.

Horses were a primary power for transportation into the twentieth century. The size of a horse hasn't changed much since the Roman Empire. A consistent standard for road size was convenient and intelligent.

Hiking in the Sierras, I usually follow trails – ruts. I was climbing up to Red Lake Peak near Carson Pass when my trail petered out. Bushwhacking over loose gravel on steep slopes at high altitudes is slow. And dangerous. I usually prefer ruts.

Most mornings I put skim milk, fruit and protein powder into a blender, stir it up, pour it into a glass and then sit at my

computer to see what emails need immediate attention. I try to reserve the rest of the morning for working on sermons and other material because my head is clearest early in the day.

This routine – or rut – serves me well. It simplifies some decisions and frees up creativity and energy for things I care more about.

However, not all ruts are helpful. If I had a coke and pop tart and watched a James Bond movie every morning, that rut would not serve me so well.

Addictions of all kinds – drugs, alcohol, anger, poor eating, compulsive thinking, sex, gambling – can be problematic ruts.

The Christmas season has many ruts – we call them “traditions.” Some are wonderful. Some are not. Some are both.

But the most intransigent ruts may be in our beliefs, values and ways of thinking. When we’re strongly attached to a point of view, we may follow along a familiar rut while paying little attention to the countryside through which it leads.

The other day I heard Mitch McConnell, the US Senate Minority Leader, say, “The American people do not want to raise taxes on the wealthy because they are the ones who create jobs.”

I thought, “Wasn’t trickle down economic theory discredited decades ago? Today, the wealthy have more money than any time in the last 80 years. And they’re sitting on it.”

Of course, it is much easier to see the ruts in the thinking of someone we disagree with than in our own.

So this morning I’d like to talk about ways of examining our own thinking and value systems, recognizing ruts that are no longer useful and bushwhacking our way out.

To do this I want to focus the highest area possible: what we see as ultimately most important and ultimately most real. If our thinking is fluid and responsive in these areas, the other areas are relatively easy.

Selflessness

This is the fifth sermon in a series on selflessness. I know: five sounds like a rut. This is the last of this series.

My thesis has been that our sense of self is a rut. It’s a convenient rut to be sure. Our idea of a separate self is a social convention that serves many useful purposes.

But many of the dire problems we face today are driven by an over-developed sense of self. Violence is fed by lack of empathy for others. The ecological crisis is exacerbated by an emphasis on “what I want now” rather than sustainable habits. Political gridlock is enflamed by childish egos – people who’d rather embarrass an enemy than serve the common good. The economic crisis is rooted in a system that encourages greed.

And a self-centered search for spiritual wellbeing is like a mountain trail that peters out in high altitudes. The highest fulfillment is only possible with selflessness. It’s a paradox: to find the greatest happiness for ourselves we have to get rid of ourselves. Not easy.

Practices

So, in this series we’ve been exploring spiritual practices that help ease us out of the rut of self. There are three great realms of experience: inner experience, relational experience and objective observation. We’ve looked at the inner practice of meditation that explores our inner sense of self until it dissolves into selflessness. We’ve looked at relational practices like guidance and channeling that open our relational sensitivities until

we merge with something larger than ourselves.

This morning we'll look at the objective realm and how reason – our rational faculty – can be a tool for spiritual practice. We'll use logic to take us to the limits of reason and keep going. As we keep going, words fail and the mind can fall into a luminous silence in which we see beyond the ruts of language.

In this series, we've explored practices from Eastern and New Age traditions. So this morning, as we enter the Christmas season, I'd like to explore a practice from the Christian tradition.

Apophatic¹ Method

This practice is called “the apophatic method.” It uses precise logic to examine the nature of God. It was all the rage in Europe for almost a thousand years. Since some of us are not at home in God language, I'll describe the process twice: first in the medieval context and then in a modern context not dependent on religious language.

Denys the Areopagite²

This practice is attributed to Denys the Areopagite, the first Athenian convert to Saint Paul. But “Denys” was a pseudonym for a monk writing in the late fifth or early sixth century, CE. He had a profound effect on the great theologians of Medieval Europe. The fact that Denys is almost unknown today is symptomatic of the spiritual malaise in the West and of the hijacking of religion by literalists and fundamentalist. Denys was neither.

Denys imagined God coming into us in an almost erotic eruption of divine goodness. For him, creation was not something that happened in the distant

past. It was ecstatic bliss ignited when the divine blows our minds.

It's impossible to understand this rationally. So Denys created a practice to help people experience the limitations of language, fall into inner silence and get blown open.

This is how it worked:

He began with reflections on the 52 names for God found in the Bible.

For example, Psalm 18:2 says: “*The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge ...*” To liken God to a rock tells us something about God's strength, endurance and protection.

We know that God is not literally a rock. Rock is a metaphor. We're saying God is *like* a rock not that He *is* a rock.

But when it comes to more abstract qualities, it's harder to remember that all language is metaphor.

For example, we might say, “God exists.” If we reflect deeply on what this means, we encounter a problem. Our understanding of existence is limited to our experience as human beings. God is so much more than a human being. The word “existence” as we understand it cannot encompass all that God is.

So we have to say, “God does not exist in the ways we understand.” This is helpful. But creates a problem. According to the medieval mind God obviously exists in some ways. The best we can say is “God does not not exist.”

Can you feel your mind starting to boggle. The logic is clear. But following the implications causes the head to spin. This is a sign we're coming out of our usual ruts. Confusion is a good thing. If we relax, it's fun!

So let's try it with another divine attribute: “God is all knowing.” Feel all the implications of this statement.

¹ ap-o-pha-tic

² ar-e-op-a-gite

Again, we run into the problem that as humans, all we really know is human knowing. Divine knowing is far greater.

So we must say, "God is not all knowing as we understand it." As we reflect on this we run into this problem that God must know. So we say "God is not not all knowing."

If we take these reflections to heart, we see the limitations of language: we're grappling with a truth that words do not capture.

Language brings our mind along set paths. One path leads to a lake. It's a lovely lake. But we suspect there's more to life than lakeshore. So we deny this path by leaving it and taking another that leads over a mountain pass. The view is exhilarating. Still, we sense there is more to life than this grand view. So we try to take it all in – the lake, the mountains, those two paths and the pathless wilderness around them.

There are no words for this. So the mind falls silent. If we fight it, it's uncomfortable. If we relax, it becomes luminous and pervaded with joy. This not knowing mind may be able to see greater truth. There is no guarantee. But with this joyful, relaxed stillness, the mind may slip out of old ruts and have fresh insight.

Karen Armstrong in her book, *The Case for God*,³ summarizes:

Denys's spiritual exercise took the form of a dialectical process, consisting of three phases. First we must affirm what God is: God is a rock; God is One; God is good; God exists. But when we listen carefully to ourselves, we fall silent, felled by the weight of absurdity in such God talk. In the second phase, we deny each one of these attributes.

³ Armstrong, Karen (2009-09-22). *The Case for God* (pp. 125-127). Anchor. Kindle Edition.

But the "way of denial" is just as inaccurate as the "way of affirmation." Because we do not know what God is, we cannot know what God is not, so we must then deny the denials: God is ... not placeless, mindless, lifeless, or nonexistent. In the course of this exercise, we learn that God transcends the capability of human speech and "is beyond every assertion" and "beyond every denial." It is as inaccurate to say that God is "darkness" as to say that God is "light;" to say that God "exists" as to say that God does "not exist," ... The exercise leads us to apophasis, the breakdown of speech, which cracks and disintegrates before the absolute unknowability of what we call God.

As our language fails, we experience an intellectual ekstasis. We no longer pay mere lip service to God's ineffability; the fact that "there is no kind of thing that God is" has become an insight that ... "drives us out of ourselves." ... Denys's dialectical method leads to an intellectual rapture that takes us beyond everyday perceptions and introduces us to another mode of seeing. Like Moses at the top of the mountain, we embrace the darkness and experience no clarity, but know that, once we have rinsed our minds of inadequate ideas that block our understanding, we are somehow in the place where God is.

Ultimacy

Did you get all that? Let's come at it again from a modern context.

In a series last Spring I defined God as that which is ultimately most important and most real to us. Using this definition, we can create a modern apophatic method. And I've seen it bring people to silence.

I invite you to enter this process and perhaps share some of it with one or two people around you.

This is how it works:

To begin, ask yourself, "What is ultimately most important? What is ultimately most real?" Sit with this and

write down a half dozen words or short phrases each of which suggests an answer to those questions.

The first time I tried this I wrote:

Kindness
Spaciousness
Openness
Courage
Release
Non-resistance

These are just my words. They may not be the ones that work for you. So reflect on words or phrases that work for you. Write a few down if you like – or just remember them. Ask yourself, “What is ultimately most important or most real?” and find a few phrases that point toward a few qualities.

...

We want to take enough time to feel what these words point to and how important or real that is for us.

Next, for each phrase, look for an opposite that is also important or real. All words have many opposites. Only look for opposites that you also values. For example, an opposite of kindness is hatred. But I don’t find much value in hatred. Another opposite of kindness is fierceness. I think fierceness can be very important. So I put that on my list as an opposite of kindness.

My second list included:

An opposite of kindness is fierceness.
An opposite of spaciousness is presence.
An opposite of openness is focus.
An opposite of courage is receptivity.
An opposite of release is steadfastness.
An opposite of non-resistance is tenacity.

I invite you to find opposites that work for you and your list. We’ll take a few moments and do this silently.

...

You may not be able to come up with opposites for all your words. That’s fine. A few are enough for now.

...

It’s valuable to share these kinds of reflections. So let’s take a few moments to do so. If you like, turn to one or two people around you and share whatever you like from this process. If you had trouble figuring out how to do it, you may be able to help each other. If it went smoothly, share some of what came to you.

If you’d rather remain silent, that’s fine. Just go inside and hold some of these opposing qualities. Don’t try to resolve them. Hold them both at once.

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<Congregational Sharing>

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Closing

If Denys the Areopagite was alive today he would not be leading workshops at Esalen. He didn’t view apophysis as a peak experience for special people. Openness to opposites was a way for ordinary people in everyday life to get out of mental ruts and see life anew.

For example, if we’re in a healthy, long term, committed relationship, there are ways it doesn’t work. We have conflicting tastes in books or food or music. We have interests we don’t share. Our partner has habits that irk us. And there are more places where we do fit together very comfortably.

What do we do with this contradiction?

Nothing. We don’t push it away or ignore it. We just open to all of it. We don’t have to cram the relationship into any category. We relax into the love and tension and let that take us deeper. At its depth, the relationship fits no namable

category. How could it? No two humans are the same. No two relationships are the same. The truth of a healthy relationship is both tangible and defies the categories of language in some areas.

Another example of the apophatic method could be relating to the Christmas season. If we are of the mind to celebrate it, there will be aspects that touch us deeply and aspects that stress or depress us. We may feel tenderness in giving gifts and resent the pressure. We may feel like Bob Cratchit and Ebenezer Scrooge at the same time.

Denys would encourage us not to decide one way or another but hold all of it in sweet tension.

The deepest experiences of life go beyond the personal. They are not "my

pain" or "my joy" so much as just "the pain" or "the joy." "Me," "mine," "you," and "yours" are just language conventions not found in direct experience.

And the experience is *not* not mine and *not* not yours.

If this boggles the mind, Denys would say, "good." We're leaving the ruts of conventional thought. Relax and let it be. Let the mind fall silent. Let the sense of self lighten into pervading joy.

William Blake wrote:

*He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise.*