

Chapter 18

Badness you can get easily, in quantity: the road is smooth, and it lies close by. But in front of excellence the immortal gods have put sweat, and long and steep is the way to it, and rough at first. But when you come to the top, then it is easy, even though it is hard.

-- Hesiod (C. 700 BCE) *The Theogony*

I could see the house in the distance. I knew that our talk would soon be over and I would be headed back to the real world. But how would I see it now? How would my perspective of the people and things around me change? Would they change at all? I wondered, and yet, I knew that they would.

“Once the things that we have talked about this weekend spreads to others, and I believe it will, do you think these revelations, or realizations will have an effect on the people who hear it?”

“No, I don’t think it will.”

“Really?” I exclaimed, “Why not? It all makes perfect sense!”

“There are several reasons. Religion is a huge, well-oiled machine. It provides jobs for hundreds of thousands of people. Religious organizations own valuable property all over the world, take in millions of dollars, and wield unbelievable political power over a vast international congregation. The Catholic Church is one of the most powerful organizations in the world, if not the most powerful. Religion has been bundled in a neat little easy-to-manage package. Theologies are set in cement. It will take more than our little discussion to rock the boat of religion no matter what it may reveal. Do you think preachers, teachers, religious universities and thousands of religious bookstores are going to make any kind of radical change? Of course not. Tradition is a commanding force. Religious holidays are celebrated annually. People are

comfortable with the stories and religious ideologies that have been passed down for centuries. Any concerns or skepticism about religion, while bothersome, are not troublesome enough to cause most people to go to the effort of making radical changes. The clergy and leadership of all religions will label these truths that we have discussed as blasphemy or heresy. They will attempt to convince their congregations with the same old rationale and rhetoric that they have used for years that while the things discussed here are reasonable and logical and effectively satisfy the questions concerning the inconsistencies of the various religious documents and doctrines, they are not stronger than faith; and the masses will follow as they always have," he said sadly.

"But we are talking about the truth! We are talking about the unification of the world! We are talking about a religion that has existed from creation, a religion that offers freedom and a better world in which to live!" I insisted.

"That's true, but popular religions don't want a universal religion even though they say they support it. Acknowledging a universal religion would take away much of their power and their identity. They would no longer be exclusive. They would no longer own God. The only universal religion they would accept would have to be their own. In earlier times, religion was a way to establish an identity. Once, the Hebrews were no more than a small part of the general population, nomads wandering from place to place. But when God, through Abraham, selected them to be the chosen people having their own God and their own set of religious rules, they became a unique people. Similarly, in the Middle East, until Muhammad had his vision and message from God through Gabriel to his people, they had no real identity. But with the message from God they became unique with a special religion of their own. Having a unique religion was like having your own country with distinct boundaries, except with religion the boundaries were set by laws and a unique ideology. Today, with international travel and global business, we are experiencing the rapid synthesis of cultures. More than ever, people are striving to maintain their

uniqueness. Religion is one way of maintaining that distinction. Therefore, due to the potential loss of religious identity, popular religions will not listen to the truth, no matter how much sense it makes. If God, Himself, proclaimed this truth with a thunderous voice from the mountaintops it would fall on deaf ears.”

We reached the house and climbed the stairs to the deck.

“The second reason this information won’t have an impact is because many people feel that they need to belong or be a part of something. Religious organizations satisfy that feeling of belonging. Some find contentment in just being part of a family, but many others need a larger family to satisfy this yearning. That’s why civic organizations, social clubs, religious institutions and even political parties have survived for so many hundreds of years. If we can get together with other people who think like we do, believe what we believe or enjoy what we enjoy then we feel at home. We feel like we have somewhere we belong. Even if there might be some aspects of that organization that we disagree with, it is better to have a place and friends and a cause that we can call our own than it is to rock the boat and feel left out.”

“So this message will not be heeded?” I asked.

“No.”

He paused briefly and then looked over at me. “What about you? You say you believe that the things we’ve discussed should make a difference in the world. What about you? You were raised in a religious environment and are active in traditional religion. Will you make changes in your life as a result of this discussion?”

I thought for a long moment before answering. I didn’t want to be dishonest in my response.

“I think I will, to some extent,” I confessed. “I will admit that I am very deeply planted in my faith. I, too, have grown accustomed to the hymns and stories that I have heard since my childhood. I will have to admit that changing these things will be extremely difficult. I will have to give it serious thought.”

“But I thought you agreed that a change is warranted in light of these discussions,” he replied.

“Warranted, yes. But will it lead to a major change in my religious faith? I’m not sure. I know it should because I believe what we have discussed makes sense and it’s closer to the truth than what my religion teaches, but plugging that in, making those changes, trying to overcome years of indoctrination will be very difficult if not impossible. I love the songs that I grew up singing, the prayers that I grew up praying, the stories that I grew up hearing, and the theology that I grew up believing. I’m not sure how this discussion will change me. I do know I will look at things differently. I will study, and maybe slowly, over time, I will be able to make adjustments, but I’m not sure. I believe I have the answers to my questions. I don’t know how I will handle sitting in church now and hearing things that I truly believe are deceptive. I’m just not sure what the future will bring for me.”

“Even though you believe what we have discussed is closer to the truth than what you now profess?” He asked.

“I’m ashamed to admit it, but truthfully, yes. As you have said, tradition is a powerful force,” I admitted.

“I admire your honesty. And that’s exactly why this discussion will do little to change anything. I do think there will be those who are seriously interested in discovering the truth who will consider these things and it will make a difference in their life. I believe there will even be some ministers, priests, rabbis, Imams and other religious leaders who will see the truth in these discussions; those who have already been uncomfortable with what they have been preaching and teaching for years. They will know that what is spoken here is closer to the truth than what is being proclaimed in the churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. But, will they change? Maybe, but probably not.”

We found our chairs and gave our feet a rest. The breeze had picked up and the smell of rain was in the air. Dark clouds

had drifted in. Samuel continued his thoughts on the future of religion.

“Fortunately, the future of religion depends on the young, the twenty and thirty-something’s who are not satisfied with the status quo. Those who have not been indoctrinated since childhood into the teachings of traditional religion; those who are searching for answers to the deeper, more important questions of life and are disillusioned by the inconsistencies of religious doctrine; those who are weary of getting the same old unsatisfactory explanations from religious leaders concerning those inconsistencies; those who recognize the ineffectiveness of religion. Those are the ones who might make a difference in the years and decades to come. Those are the ones who will usher in the new reformation.”

“But what if a person wants to know the truth. What if they are willing to change for the sake of truth? Where do they start?” I asked.

“I believe they must start where all men do when contemplating the more important aspects of life, the place where all great prophets started.”

“And where is that?”

“Where did Jesus go just before he started his ministry? What did Buddha do when he was searching for enlightenment?”

“Well, I think the Bible teaches that Jesus went into the desert,” I said.

“I think you’re right. He went into the desert by himself for an extended period of time to think, to meditate and pray. And while he was there the Tempter came and tempted him to live his life in a way that might have been more lucrative for him, but not in the best way for mankind. It is interesting that a very similar story was told much earlier of the Buddha just before his enlightenment. It seems he was exhausted trying to discover the way of illumination so he sat down under a tree, determined to sit there until he was enlightened. While he was there, the Tempter came to him and tempted him with many of the same

temptations that were offered to Jesus: physical pleasure, financial gain. But Buddha, like Jesus, chose the best way, the way to peace and benevolence. Once they had made their decision, they had a rush of peace and knowledge, or as Buddha called it, enlightenment. Similar parallels can be made with Mohammad and even Moses who went to the mountaintop to talk with God in order to find direction.

“The journey begins with a sincere desire to discover the truth, no matter what it takes and no matter where it leads. It requires an open mind, realizing that what you discover might stand in stark opposition to what you have always believed. And then, it requires time and patience. The old scriptures do offer the truth: seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened. If you sincerely, open-mindedly and persistently search for truth, you will find it. You will have to make some serious decisions when confronted with the truth just like these great men did, but peace and purpose follow the right decision. And then, you must realize that the search never ends. We must always test our beliefs and convictions to ensure that we are still on the right path. Guatama Buddha said,

‘Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.’”

“But you think the majority of people will not change.” I repeated.

“I’m afraid not. Remember, real change comes slowly as men and women become disillusioned with the status quo. As the inconsistencies of religion give birth to skepticism, many will seek to know the truth. As they view the world’s condition and

realize that religion is being used as a tool for creating division among the nations, rather than making the world a better place in which to live they will question the value of religion. As they seek truth, change will inevitably come. Truth will not be hidden for long. It will always survive. It will always find a voice.”

“After making this arduous journey that has taken so long and, now, to assume that it will not make a difference, how does that make you feel?” I asked.

“It has made a difference in me,” he confessed. “I am not responsible for what comes from this effort,” he said quietly. “I am only responsible for seeing that it has been accomplished. My spirit and the spirit of God within me agree that what needed to be revealed has been revealed.”

The weekend was over. It had been an amazing three days. I left that afternoon. In one weekend I had been transformed from a person who doubted God and religion to a man who lives with the certainty that God does exist; from a man who felt the weight of the world to a man freed to experience life with no fear of what is to come. The God of the universe who lives in all creation also lives in me and there is nothing in this world we cannot do together. As I drove down the dusty road I remembered Samuel telling me about a mystical vision experienced by Black Elk, an American Indian Holy Man. This was what he saw.

“Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one

mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.”⁸²

⁸² John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, Washington Square Press, New York, 1972