

“Becoming Ourselves”

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James Mack

Opening Words: by Jerry Herman

I am what I am, and what I am needs no excuses.

Prayer: Today’s prayer is a meditation, from “DailyOM.com”. After I’ve read the meditation we will have a few moments of silence.

All the major spiritual traditions serve the purpose of offering us a roadmap to guide us on our individual journeys to enlightenment. These roadmaps are made up of moral codes, parables, and, in some cases, detailed descriptions of mystical states. We often study the fine points of a particular narrative in order to better understand our own and to seek inspiration and guidance on our path. In the same way, when we plan a road trip, we carry maps and guidebooks in an effort to understand where we are going. In both cases, though, the journey has a life of its own and maps, while helpful, can only take us so far. There is just no comparison between looking at a line on a piece of paper and driving your own car down the road that line represents.

Some people seem well-suited to following maps, while others are always looking for new ways to get where they’re going. In the end, the only reliable compass is within, as every great spiritual guide will tell you. The maps and travelogues left behind by others are great blessings, full of useful information and inspiration, but they cannot take the journey for us. When it is time to merge onto the highway or pull up anchor, we are ostensibly on our own. Strange weather patterns, closed roads, and traffic jams arise in the moment, out of nowhere, and our maps cannot tell us what to do. Whether we take refuge in a motel by the side of the road, persevere and continue forward, or turn back altogether is entirely up to us.

Maps are based on observations from the past and we are living in the present, so we are the only true experts on our journey to enlightenment. We may find that the road traveled by our predecessors is now closed. We may feel called to change direction entirely so that the maps we have been carrying really no longer apply. These are the moments when we learn to attune ourselves to our inner compass, following a map that only we can see, as we make our way into the unknown territory of our own enlightenment.

Reading: by Irish poet, philosopher, and former Priest John O’ Donoghue

One of the amazing things about creation is its plentitude and diversity. No two stones are the same. No two fields are the same. No two waves or stars or faces are the same. No two thoughts are the same. It is amazing, really, that we manage to find any similarity at all. It is there, of course, because without it we couldn’t achieve continuity. But the true calling of everything is to be itself. There would be huge problems in creation if things decided not to be themselves- if leaves, for example, decided that they were really feathers, or streets decided they were rivers.

Sermon: "Becoming Ourselves"

I was born and raised in a "normal" middle class Southern Baptist family in Tennessee. Now, to be "normal" in Memphis, my home town, in the early sixties meant going to church every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. Some of my earliest memories are of Sunday School on Sunday mornings, Sunday worship services where on at least one Easter Sunday morning, while the rest of the church was singing "Up From the Grave He Arose" I belted out "Here Comes Peter Cottontail". It's not so much that I actually remember this happening, but that my mother has reminded me of it many times over the years. It's another one of those family legends, you understand.

As I started elementary school and grew into adolescence, the children's and youth groups of the church were my social sphere. I tried to form close friendships with the most well-liked boys in my Royal Ambassadors class that met on Wednesday nights. (Royal Ambassadors was sort of the Southern Baptist version of the Boy Scouts.) But, while I attained a degree of popularity because of my amazing sense of humor (I told great jokes and could make anyone laugh), there was no denying I just wasn't like the other boys my age. It became more and more apparent when my friends excitedly signed up for little league baseball. Although my dad tried and tried to encourage me to play baseball, I flatly refused. I wanted no part of it. At that tender age, I began to learn what it meant to be different, and to not fit in. I spoke and acted differently than the other boys my age, and it was obvious they didn't understand.

I've never forgotten the sting of my older sister's words, who was probably fifteen or sixteen at the time, during a family conversation one evening. She tearfully complained to my parents that none of the boys she was interested in dating would ever come over to our house to see her, because I was there. I was a "sissy", not like the other boys, and none of her friends could stand to be around me, she said. I guess what hurt most was that, from what I remember, neither of my parents had anything to say in my defense.

And so it began. With no one to encourage me to feel good about me, I grew to hate who I was inside, to believe that the part of me that was different from others was evil. I longed to be just like everybody else. I mean, it was obvious, if I was ever going to make any friends at all, and survive eighth grade and beyond, I'd have to be better at "fitting in". At that young age everyone wants to be like their peers, it's all about being part of the group. What did I do? I became very self-conscious about my every mannerism and speech pattern, I tried to make a new James. I desperately wanted to change my nature.

I did find solace in the church youth group, many of whom were pretty nerdy themselves, but not quite on a par with me. Sharing my religious experience with other kids my age gave us a common bond we wouldn't have had otherwise, and I took comfort in knowing God loved me. Unfortunately, though, the God we were being taught about and worshiping was a God that was full of love for us only as long as we measured up to the standards our church leaders held for us. I was never told that God loved me just as the person I was. Please don't misunderstand me, I'm not criticizing any religious denomination this morning, what I'm sharing is simply my own personal experience.

As I grew into a teenager, and of course was expected to date, I had several unenthusiastic attempts at relationships with girls. Most of these ended the same way, as the girl would become really frustrated when I reminded her over and over that “Jesus wouldn’t want us to “go too far”; it just wouldn’t be “Christian”. What an easy out for me, and what good Christian young woman could argue with that?

Then there were the guys I developed crushes on. Being in total denial about my sexuality, I wasn’t sure why it felt so good to be around certain boys my age, but I convinced myself it had something to do with being “brothers in Christ”. After high school, I chose the Southern Baptist College I went to in large part because my “best friend”, who I was totally infatuated with, was going there, and we would room together. Going away to college was a good step for me, though, it afforded more opportunity to explore how I really felt about life and it was there I first began to question the beliefs I’d been raised with.

Thank God for raging hormones! When I was twenty- one, and couldn’t stand it any longer, I burst out of the closet, and began the wonderful, amazing journey of discovering who James really is. After coming out I moved from the South to New York as my quest continued. While now a proudly gay man, I still wasn’t ready to trust and follow the light that was inside me. In fact, I didn’t have any sort of spiritual practice the thirteen years I spent in New York. The painful, tender wounds from my past took a long time to heal. Then, when I was ready, I guess I felt the call to Provincetown. Not long after moving here, I was drawn to the Meeting House, where my spirit began to get nourishment again, only this time I learned to look within myself to find God. It hasn’t been easy, though. All that religious dogma that had indoctrinated my brain from childhood played a big part in shaping my mind and being. All I was taught while growing up about the hell that awaited me if I didn’t obey the rules, and the wrath of God that I would have to deal with if I didn’t “tow the line”, is still here somewhere inside. Thankfully I’ve learned how to deal with it, as its power over me has grown fainter over time, and therapy has helped a lot, too. But it will be one of those voices I’ll have to choose not to listen to for the rest of my life.

How might things have been different if I hadn’t felt the need to deny my own uniqueness and imitate the other “normal” kids around me as I grew up? If I hadn’t been taught that God hated the way I was inside, that being gay was an abomination? What if, instead, I had been told that the person I was-- awkward, effeminate ways and all, was okay. More than okay, that everything about me was a wondrous unique creation and meant to be celebrated. What if my individuality and creativity as a child had been celebrated and encouraged, instead of stifled?

One of my favorite movies is *Billy Elliot*. It’s the story of an eleven year old boy from a working-class family in England, who just isn’t like the other kids. The film opens as a neighborhood party is being held at his family’s home. Billy’s family is new to the neighborhood and trying desperately to fit in and to impress their new neighbors. While Billy’s parents are entertaining downstairs, mixing cocktails and serving hors’d’oeuvres to their new neighbors, co-workers, and his father’s boss, we see Billy is busy upstairs in his parent’s bedroom, putting on his mother’s jewelry, her bright red lipstick, and clumsily stepping into her high heels. Once he’s gotten the whole outfit just right, he opens the

bedroom door and begins his triumphant descent down the stairs to proudly show his new look to his parents and their new friends in the crowded living room. You can imagine the rest! As the film continues, Billy, the son of a coal miner, is on his way to boxing lessons (imagine whose idea that was!) when he stumbles upon a ballet class. He secretly joins the class, knowing that his blue-collar family will never understand. Under the guidance of his teacher, Billy's raw talent takes flight. But when his father discovers his son's ambition, Billy must fight to hold onto his dreams. For me, the beauty of this film is this one young boy is able to reach beyond his place in the world and follow his heart's desire, and in being true to who he really is, he becomes a wonderful success doing what he loves and even his parents support his choices in the end.

Of course, "Billy Elliot" is a Hollywood story, and not real life. But, on my path I've learned that if we really look within ourselves and find the beauty that is there, nurture those qualities that we find, and follow that truth, we will become the unique, spiritual, holy creatures we were meant to be. It's all there inside us already. God is not only all around us, God is in us. God IS us.

I'll never know how my life would've been different had the real me been nurtured and encouraged to grow from the start, but I can certainly see the fruits of having been in tune with the light inside these last few years- I've rediscovered my voice, I met the love of my life right here at the Meeting House, and together we've been given the gift of performing together, sharing a message that the world so desperately needs to hear. And I've been allowed the privilege of leading this congregation as your president- I couldn't ask for more!

What is it that keeps us from enjoying the freedom of being our best selves? For me, it was the shame and narrow-mindedness of my family, my friends, and my world at that time. For some, it's the need to be a success at our job, the need for acceptance by friends, for others it's a partner's affection that we're afraid of losing, that keeps us from listening to our inner voice and being what it asks us to be. But whatever the obvious reason we have for choosing to "try to fit in" rather than utilizing the power to become fully ourselves, I believe the root cause is always the same: FEAR. For me, fear of a vengeful, fire and brimstone-hurling God was drilled into my psyche from childhood. Underlying my fear of being different than my peers was the fear that God would banish me to hell if I listened to my inner voice and allowed myself to be who I was. For you, it might be fear of losing your friends or your comfortable life. Billy Elliot's father (and my parents, too) feared their son's unusual habits because they didn't understand them. It's human nature to be afraid of what we can't explain or understand. And if fear is left unchecked, we grow to hate what we fear. But we can move beyond being ruled by our fear if we acknowledge the holiness that is within everyone of us, even those of us we don't especially like or can't understand. Just like the beauty we see in nature all around us in leaves, rocks, and the sea, each of us is a unique, magnificent being. We each have our own special place in creation that is ours alone, no one else can be us. Trust what is inside.

Closing Words: by 18th century Hassidic Master Rabbi Zuzha, who, on his deathbed, with his disciples gathered about him, said: *When I get to the world to come, they will not ask me "Why were you not Moses", rather they'll ask "Why were you not Zuzha?"*