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Living Religiously

Once upon a time a man was arrested and thrown into a deep dungeon. The authorities tried to forget he existed. But his friends didn't forget. They poked around discreetly until they found where he was. They got a copy of the prison key and slipped it through the tiny, high window in his cell.

The man hid the key in a crack between stones and bided his time.

Soon a festival day arrived. The guards were confident their prisoners were secured. So they slipped out into the streets to enjoy the entertainment.

The man retrieved the key from the crevice in the wall, unlocked his cell, opened the door and gave the key to the man in the next chamber. Then he quietly left the prison, blended with the crowds and was free.

His neighbor in the next cell was astounded. He held the key to his heart in gratitude for the miracle it had performed. He placed the key on the roughhewn board that was his bed, kneeled on the floor and began to worship it.

Today, in his cell, he is ever hopeful that one day his faith in the key will be strong enough that it will free him too.

This morning I'd like to talk about living religiously.

The keys to living religiously include love, empathy, courage, humility, generosity, inherent worth, interdependence, serenity, ease and so forth. We already know these. We already have these keys to freedom.

They are right here in our cells with us. They are in the walls of our homes, if you will. They are in our mind-hearts.

So this morning I'm not going to talk about the keys themselves. I want to talk about using them to engage our depths, engage the world and unlock our cells.

This morning I'm not going to talk about thinking religiously, dreaming religiously, worshiping religiously or even searching religiously. I want to talk about *living* religiously.

Knack

Karen Armstrong, in her book *The Case for God*, suggests that in the West we've lost the knack for religion. I agree.

But then every age has its strengths and weaknesses. And every age is better at seeing the blind spots of other people and times than seeing its own. Jesus said "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3)

The scholar Peter Berger put it this way: "The *past* is relativised, in terms of this or that socio-historical analysis. The *present*, however, remains strangely immune to relativisation. ... The New Testament writers are seen as afflicted with false consciousness rooted in *their* time, but the analyst takes the consciousness of *his* time as an unmixed intellectual blessing."¹

¹ As quoted by Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, Toronto. 2009. P. 325

If we can set aside the bias of our own time, we may find clues to living with greater authenticity and freedom.

So let's go back a few centuries.

Logos and Mythos

Pre-modern people knew there were two different ways to experience, think and talk about life. The ancient Greeks called these *logos* and *mythos*.

Logos or reason is about the external world. If we want to know how to make lamb stew, build a house, create a deadlier weapon or organize a city, *logos* is how we perceive, think and speak.

Logos is practical, aware of the flow of time, forward looking and aggressive in looking for ways to improve or control the surroundings. *Logos* became the language of science with its emphasis on controlled experiments and objective observation.

However, there are important aspects of life that reason can't reveal.

If we want to know what it is like to raise a child, we can't learn this from books, on-line study courses or even the advice of a wise friend. We learn through years of raising a child and experiencing how love, burden and sustained attention pull us beyond ourselves.

If we want to know the value of a piece of music, we can't learn this by gazing at the score, analyzing the relationships between the notes or finding out what a fine fellow the composer was. We come to know its value through listening to the music and engaging it in our body and being.

If we want to know deep compassion, we can't shy away from life's misfortunes. We have to encounter pain and suffering and allow them to rip our hearts open until they flow with kindness.

If we want to know love, we don't learn by studying endorphins or watching others interact from afar. We allow the messiness of our being interact with the messiness of another until empathy makes the boundary between self and other a little fuzzy.

If we want to live religiously we can't sit in our isolated cells bowing to distant beings or worshipping magical beliefs. We can't sit at home thinking magnificent ideas about the nature of life and the universe. We can't just cast a meditative gaze on an object until we are familiar with every subtlety and nuance.

To live religiously we have to grasp the nature of the cell we are in, find a key that can unlock it, place the key in the lock, turn it, open the creaking door and stumble out into freedom.

Mythos is a style of perception, thinking and speaking that engages these inner depths. *Logos* is about the external world that we can physically touch or see. *Mythos* is about the inner world that we can only feel, sense or know in our minds. *Mythos* is about value, meaning and worth.

Logos and science know nothing of value or meaning. Science can tell us the difference between a mountain and a valley, between a star system and a molecular system, between an ape and an insect. But it doesn't say one is better or worse than the other. Pure science and pure reason are value neutral.

Logos or science can tell us why we got cancer and perhaps even cure it. But it can't help us cope with the fear, disappointment and grief. And it can't tell us how to die well. That is outside its realm of competence. That is in the realm of *mythos*.

We know intuitively that love is better than hate and generosity is better

than narcissism. But science can't teach us that. That is not the arena of *logos*. It is the arena of *mythos*.

Story and Metaphor

Some of the tools of *mythos* are story and metaphor. Let me give you an example of how we use them in this congregation.

We are proud of our OWL program. O.W.L stands for "Our Whole Lives." It is a sexuality program centered around our values of inherent goodness and self-responsibility. There are different versions of the program for different age groups.

One of the tools the program uses is scenario. For example, when my wife, Erika, and I led an earlier version of the program many years ago, one of the scenarios we used with high schoolers went like this:

Marvin and Jane were friends. They'd known each other for six months. They both liked the outdoors and bicycling. So one Saturday they went on a long bike ride together.

After riding for a few hours they stopped beside a stream to eat. Lying in the grass and resting, Marvin leaned over. He wanted to touch Jane's breast from outside her clothes. She pulled away and said she was uncomfortable.

We'd stop the scenario at this point and ask: "How sympathetic do you feel toward Marvin and toward Jane?" "What do you think each is feeling?" "What are some ways they might handle the situation?" And so forth.

We used lots of scenarios and the kids suggested more they wanted to talk about.

Obviously, we did not get into these discussions until we'd built trust and established safe ways for people to

share as much or as little as they wanted.

These scenarios were not *logos*. They were not factual. They were not proscriptive with declarations of external right and wrong. They were *mythos*. They were about inner value, meaning and importance. They were about how to live comfortably and happily in various situations.

We used stories because we knew they were timeless: we knew sooner or later the youths would find themselves in similar situations in real life. We offered a protected setting to explore what was important to them, how they felt, what they valued and how they might handle themselves. We wanted them to grow in competence and confidence in this vital area.

In centuries past people shared scenarios of heroes fighting with demons, of people finding their way through labyrinths in the underworld, of ambitious people flying too high. The Bible has stories of God flooding the world, Moses confronting the Pharaohs – the corporate elite of this time – and more. These scenarios were called "myths" because they were *mythos*.

We can't grasp the value of myths by analyzing them objectively like a literary critic or scientist. We have to engage them internally.

In ancient times, people didn't listen to them passively. They didn't sit quietly in a movie theater eating popcorn as they watched them on a screen.

Myths were enacted in rituals and ceremonies. People put themselves into them and felt them from the inside. They knew that sooner or later all of us wrestle with psychological demons, get lost in the labyrinths of complex

relationships, feel stirrings of unbalanced ambition, face disasters and get called to speak truth to power.

Getting inside these myths develops competent and confident in these vital areas. They learned how they might live heroically, compassionately, effectively, ethically and in ways that enriched and empowered.

This is what it means to live religiously. Myth, story and metaphor are evocative tools that helps us grow.

Dialog

Another tool of *mythos* is a style of encounter – a way of dialoging.

Socrates of ancient Athens is an icon of the life of reason – *logos*. But his style of conversation – Socratic dialog – was *mythos*.

Socrates was humble, insisting that he knew nothing. He began by appreciating the value of each person and their experience. His questions were intended to be evocative and inspire his students to look at things in different ways.

Today what passes for dialog – particularly political dialog – tries to shame an opponent rather than search for deeper meaning and value. Today, many listen to others only to find points they can use against them.

Socrates would have cringed. He knew deeper truth is shy. It does not find its way into the light through combat. It needs to be coaxed and encouraged. Above all else it needs civility, kind regard and patience.

Socrates was not meek. He irritated the elite of his time enough to get condemned to death. But his style was gentle *mythos* not aggressive *logos*.

Death of Mythos

Now, let's shift our focus from the pre-modern world to modernity. The Modern age began in the 17th century. The Western Enlightenment saw *logos* mature into rigorous, objective, scientific methodology.

And it was incredibly successful. Starting with Galileo, the advances of scientific understanding have been breath taking: astronomy, physics, medicine, food production, flight, electricity. Arguably science has done more to relieve human suffering than anything else: we've extended life expectancy by several decades.

Science was so successful, that we became intoxicated by it. It became so powerful that it crowded out other ways of perceiving, thinking and speaking. *Logos* colonized and oppressed *mythos*. Science was in vogue and myth was passé.

Today the word "myth" no longer means a timeless story about our inner life. "Myth" means "factually inaccurate." To call something a myth is to say it is wrong.

Today our math, science and technological disciplines are advanced. Our intuitive disciplines are developmentally delayed.

As I mentioned last Easter, if we had asked a premodern priest or peasant, "Did Moses really part the Red Sea?" "Did God actually flood the world?" "Did Jesus literally walk out of his tomb?" most would have looked at us like we had brought a bowling ball to a soccer game or a deck of cards to a chess match. We would have shown ourselves to be severely underdeveloped in *mythos*.

In modern and post modern times, *mythos* was so out of favor that even the

faithful applied *logos* thinking to Biblical stories. In 1870 Hodge and Warfield first formulated the idea that the Bible was literal, infallible and factually accurate. By the early 20th century, a new track of religious thinking developed called Fundamentalism or Biblical Literalism.

To be sure, there were always some literalists. But it wasn't until the 20th century and the complete repression of *mythos* and metaphorical thinking, that it became epidemic.

Biblical literalists and theistic literalists gave rise to their opposite: atheist literalists – people who applied strict scientific thinking to religious metaphor and concluded it was a hoax. But this is a topic for another time.

My point is that today many people are immature in the area of *mythos* – in the area of religious perception, thinking and speaking. This is a by-product of our times and the incredible success of *logos* scientific thinking. We have lost much of the intuitive knack for religion.

Living Religiously

The problems we face in the world today are not questions for *logos*. That's like hammering a screw into a piece of glass – it's the wrong tool. Today's difficulties are not solvable by technology and pure reason.

Global warming, the Gulf oil hemorrhage, eco-crisis are not about how we control the world but how we relate humbly to Mother Earth.

The current economic depression is not the result of technical systems failure but of greed, power and self-indulgence trumping compassion and care of everyone.

Political gridlock is the result of minds and systems locked in immature,

self-serving power struggles the ignore the larger good.

The politics of extremism and the popularity of intolerance are the product of underdeveloped *mythos*: lack of empathy, heart, generosity and *mythos* intelligence.

Living religiously means the recovery of *mythos* by whatever name. It means recovering modalities that deepen our capacity to wrestle with meaning, value, injustice, suffering, compassion, inner stillness, generosity and so forth. It is learning how to live well. And, yes, how to die well.

Specifics

What are some specific ways we can cultivate *mythos* in our everyday lives? How do we move beyond religious literalism and atheist literalism to religious depth and breadth?

Let me offer a four brief suggestions. Then I'll invite you to share what helps you.

1. Waste time

"Waste" some time everyday. Time is part of *logos* thinking. So step outside of time for a while: stay present more than worrying about what's next; exercise timeless imagination; *be* more than *do*; use intuition more than logic. Exercise those *mythos* muscles. Do some of this everyday.

2. Nature

Spend time in nature and away from computers, email, voice mail, TV and all those gadgets that encourage us to multi-task. Researchers at the University of Washington and elsewhere document how multi-tasking creates a false sense of urgency ("Gotta respond right now!"). It tires the brain and decreases our capacities.

The natural environment reverses these effects. So listen to birds and the rush of the river, smell the trees, feel the sun and breeze on your skin. These stimulate *mythos* and help bring *logos* and *mythos* into balance.

3. Stories

Hang out with mythic stories. The story about using the dungeon key is an example of a mythic story. Whether it is a factually historical event is irrelevant. It is timeless and suggestive of timeless wisdom – but only if we feel it from the inside.

4. Conversation

Avoid religious *argument*. Engage in religious *conversation*. Avoid conversations that are *provocative*. Engage in conversations that are *evocative*. Avoid conversations that seek to *win*. Engage in conversations that *illuminate*. Value kindness more than bravado and empathy more than winning or losing.

Deeper truths are shy. Wisdom can't be pounced upon and dragged into the light. So cultivate Socratic dialog that values multiple perspectives. If you

disagree with someone, find some way you agree with them before you speak. Express your doubts as questions and wonderings rather than confrontation.

Sharing

Briefly, what are some of the things you do to cultivate mythos? ...

Wisdom not Information

Religion was never meant to give us information about the world. It was meant to give us wisdom in relating to one another. It was never meant to answer questions we can reason out. It was meant to engage us more deeply in issues that can't be answered definitively: how to relate to death, why do bad things happen to good people, how do we respond to persistent injustice and other aspects of life we can't control or fully understand through reason.

May we mature I these ancient, timeless, intuitive ways of knowing so *logos* and *mythos* live together in harmony. May we engage life, unlock our cells and discover greater and greater freedom.

May it be so.