

The Question Box
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When I used to give interviews, about my books and so forth, I was given the advice, never answer the question you're being asked, instead answer the one you wish you had been asked.

So these are the questions that came to my inbox this week.

I am haunted as an ecologically literate human, by contradictions and tensions between my thought and actions. The constant reminders of discordance between being embedded in a society that ignores limits to growth and lacks respect for non-human life and knowing that many of my actions contribute to worsening the ongoing collapses happening around us is uncomfortable.

My question: How can I develop a satisfactory way of living with and accepting the contradictions between my ecological knowing and my actions?

My question: what do we mean by the Holy? What makes some places, people or things sacred?

My question: Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount suggests that having bad thoughts is tantamount to doing bad things. You've heard it said, do not kill. But I say the man who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. You've heard it said, do not commit adultery. But I say the man who lusts in his heart has as good as committed the transgression. But aren't bad thoughts nothing compared to bad deeds?

My question: why spend so much money exploring space when there are so many more pressing needs here on earth?

I do like these questions and will get around to answering them, but here's another question for you, one that nobody asked. Do the world's great religions agree on any foundational truths or spiritual teachings or any shared moral framework? Or are the differences between them greater than any commonalities they share? Buddhists are non-theistic, Hindus worship dozens of

deities, Unitarians (it's been quipped) believe in at most one God.. So what do Pema Chodron, Jimmy Swaggart, and Pope Francis really have in common? Without trying to minimize the divergent forms faith has taken around the world, I'd say that when you peel away the layers of the onion, it all comes down to love.

"Love your neighbor as yourself," it's written in Leviticus. Maybe you were taught in your Methodist Sunday School that the Old Testament God is one of wrath and judgment not love or forgiveness, but that's just wrong. The Talmud calls the command to love one another one of the two great pillars of Judaism, the second being to love God, the two being much the same (because you can't really love the Creator while despising your fellow creatures), so much so that Jesus and the other rabbis of his day, like his contemporary Hillel, cited the love principle as containing the whole of the Torah, the rest being merely commentary.

Christians picked up on this idea and ran with it.. "Hate what is evil. Cleave to what is good. Be devoted to one another with brotherly love. Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Repay no one evil for evil ... If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people." So says Paul.

For Hindus and Buddhists, the related words are *karuna* and *metta*, compassion and lovingkindness. Charity,, mercy,, and non-violence are the fruits of a heart that embraces every living being as the manifestation of one overarching reality. For we are all jewels in Indra's net :bright gems in a vast network of polished surfaces where each one reflects the brilliance and luminosity of all the others. Peace in the world begins when we see the light in others and know it also as our own. .

Confucius, who lived about the same time as the Buddha, is recorded as saying "surely the maxim of loving-kindness is this: do not do to others what you would not have done to yourself." The cardinal virtue of his philosophy was *jen*, often translated as human-heartedness or empathy. A sense of human solidarity, mutual positive regard, concern for the feelings of others, regardless of rank, is the mark of what he might call a cultivated individual.

And this is my answer to the question about thoughts versus deeds. If you can balance on one foot or walk down the centerline of the road without wavering, does it really matter if you've had two shots of bourbon? If you haven't hit another vehicle or caused major injury, so what if you are two sheets to the wind? In like manner, if you're intoxicated with fantasies of revenge or drunk on a brew of petty grievances and negativity, does it really matter so long as you don't break the law or deliberately hurt other people? I'd say it does matter. There's a verse from the Buddhist scriptures, the Dhammapada:

The thought manifests as the word, the word manifests as the deed, the deed develops into habit, and habit hardens into character. So watch the thought and its ways with care, and let it spring from love, born of respect for all beings.

What it means to me is that if your soul is clenched into a grimace or your heart wears a perpetual scowl, your face and then the energy you project out into the world begins to reflect that. The rabbi Jesus had a way of exaggerating moral maxims, perhaps for the sake of effect or to make a point or maybe because he thought the world was ending anyway. He had a rather apocalyptic outlook, leading to sayings like "If your eye offends you, pluck it out", not admonitions that can be taken literally, but even so can be taken seriously, because in a way the world is ending soon for all of us. "In a boat down a fast-rushing creek, it feels like trees on the bank are rushing by," says Rumi. "What seems to be changing around us is rather the speed of our craft leaving this world."

So if you want your final thoughts to be thoughts of kindness, praise, gratitude, and forgiveness, rather than recrimination and regret and unrequited retribution, you might begin practicing now, because you never know when your last moment will come.

That's why Buddhists practice *metta* meditation, to train the mind in the paths of gentleness: *May I be at peace, may I be free from suffering. May you be at peace, may you be free from suffering. May all beings be at peace, may all beings be free from suffering.*

What's holy is to see the infinite in the least and humblest. It helps me to relate it to the word *iconic*. In orthodox, Eastern Christianity, an icon is an image that

offers a portal to some transcendent state or value outside of ordinary reckoning. In everyday usage, an iconic image is one that captures something timeless or beyond the everyday. On August 14, 1945, for example, the photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt caught a shot of a nameless sailor embracing and kissing an utterly anonymous nurse in the middle of Times Square on V-J Day, signaling an end to World War Two. The soldier and the young woman swept off her feet became instantly emblematic of something bigger than themselves: the hope for peace, an end to carnage and bloodshed, *eros* (or the love principle) triumphant over death or *thanatos*. And it's interesting that several men and women have come forward over the decades claiming to be the subjects of that famous photograph. Many have seen themselves depicted there. I don't think they are lying, or mis-remembering, necessarily. Because it's really a snapshot of every man, and every woman, all of us who lived through travail and tragedy and somehow survived intact. And it would be a defilement, a desecration, a violation of what's decent, to use that iconic image to sell toothpaste. Because what's holy lives on a higher platform than the getting and spending that dominates daily existence, a level that touches the eternal.

Recent images from the James Webb Space Telescope struck some people that way, it seems. The very first, released from NASA last July, revealed glimpses from the universe as it looked thirteen and half billion years ago, just a gasp and a heartbeat after the Big Bang, but already a heaping smorgasbord of galaxies and nebulae resembling a July Fourth fireworks finale. The theologian Rudolf Otto, author of the classic volume *The Idea of the Holy*, said that that the primordial experience of the holy is one of awe, trembling, an awareness of one's own insignificance before the power and magnitude of creation, an intimation of what he called the *mysterium tremendum*. The Webb captures that. It's a big, baffling yet beautiful world, beyond comprehension yet home to all we know. To remind us of that, the Webb cost just \$10 billion, less than the price of one aircraft carrier. So while I don't like space tourism for billionaires, I think real research may be worth it, although you can get just about that same rush by walking outside in the middle of the night in northern New Mexico and looking up. There's the Milky Way, and Orion, the Pleiades and all the old familiars, yet just as strange and unapproachable, as marvelous and distant as ever.

Yet now we are being told, "Don't Look Up." That's the title of a Netflix mockumentary about climate change. Based on the premise that an approaching comet

is about to obliterate life on earth, politicians promote the mantra, “Just don’t look.” Ignore the science. Ignore your own senses, which tell you that wildfires are getting bigger, that summers are getting hotter, that glaciers are melting, that rivers in Europe are drying up. How do we live lovingly and responsibly on a planet that is being altered and irrevocably diminished by the reckless success of our own human enterprise? Each of us has some agency, choices that we make. For example, we own just one car, have solar panels, eat a vegan diet and have a single biological child. But I cringe every time I have to buy a cucumber wrapped in plastic. It’s inescapable. Even a multitude of individual decisions aren’t enough to counter the trend toward a hotter future, rooted in a corporate industrial imperative of ever rising profits and interminable growth. And yet it remains incumbent to minimize our own footprint, to live simply, mindful of the interconnected web of which we are a part. As the Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale wrote, “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything but still I can do something. And just because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something I can do.” What we can do, without limits, is to continue to care for Creation as if it were our own flesh and blood, which it is. As the Creek poet Joy Harjo writes,

Recognize whose lands these are on which we stand.
Ask the deer, turtle, and the crane.
Make sure the spirits of these lands are respected and treated with goodwill.
The land is a being who remembers everything.
You will have to answer to your children, and their children, and theirs—

At this point, there is no question of overcoming or reconciling the contradictions, only of recognizing whose land it is: refusing to be indifferent, saving what we can, mourning what we must, celebrating what we are still able of this intricate tapestry of life. Much is perishing.

In these circumstances, hope can be hard to find. It’s difficult to keep the faith. All that remains is to love the Earth, love its creatures, love each other as if our lives depended on it, for indeed they do.