

Teaching/Learning

What if the best way to teach is to begin by "not knowing" and the best way to learn is to claim that you have infinite wisdom? Ah, but that makes no sense. Or does it?

Throughout the New Testament Jesus is referred to as teacher. Also rabbi but much more frequently as teacher. On Sunday I find that preaching is teaching with less homework and more music. But it is not teaching in the way that I stand up here, pour out wisdom into the little pails you bring and sit back content in the wisdom I have to share. My favorite quote about teaching is from William Butler Yeats, an 1800's Irish poet. He said, "*Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.*" To preach the good news, to share in Spiritual Community, my goal is not to persuade you to accept my view but to be inspired to find your own Truth. It occurred to me as I reflected on the quote that to light a fire, you must be aflame. If I am to light a fire in teaching and preaching, I have to **be** the fire.

I have to be ablaze with the Spiritual fire in my life and in my experience in order to bring that to you. And fires must be tended. If left unattended, the fire burns out; it exhausts what fuel it has and dies. This is the teacher who comes to the task believing they know everything and it is just their job to place that information in front of the student and hope they have the good sense to pick it up and use it.

From the InsightMeditation website: " 'Not-knowing' is emphasized in Zen Buddhist practice, where it is sometimes called 'beginner's mind.' An expert may know a subject deeply, yet be blinded to new possibilities by his or her preconceived ideas. In contrast, a beginner may see with fresh, unbiased eyes. The practice of beginner's mind is to cultivate an ability to meet life without preconceived ideas, interpretations, or judgments. Not-knowing means not being **limited** by what we know, holding what we know lightly so that we are ready for it to be different. Maybe things are this way. But maybe they are not."

Probably my most startling lesson in "Beginner's Mind" came my freshman year of college in English writing. I was a high school honor student and considered myself already a capable writer. Imagine my shock when the first paper I turned in came back with a "D". I gasped. I had never gotten a D in my life! What was wrong with this teacher? I went to him, a little indignant. He explained it was an adequate paper but he felt it was far beneath my capacity as a writer. He was grading not on how I compared to other students

or even standards but what he thought my potential was. I had to set down my belief that I already knew everything there was to know and begin again. And the teacher had to set aside a belief that there was some marginal line that students should be able to cross and that was the extent of his duty. Instead he took on the possibilities unknown and set out to reveal them as he taught. By the end of the class I was again earning A's and I wrote a final paper that explored a concept he had never considered even though he taught the same novel every semester. I am not sure either of us would have been pushed to that level if I had not gotten a D on the first paper. And I was most excited not about the grade but about discovering a new idea.

When I begin to prepare for Sunday sermons, I have a topic or title and then I have to learn it. I have to research and let the wisdom be revealed to me. Sometimes I do begin with some preconceived notions about what the topic means or is saying. I am always surprised at what unfolds. And I try to keep looking with an open mind because it is exciting when I have new things to share, new insights. And it is the excitement of Spirit active **in me** that I think comes through and connects with you. I rarely think I have magic words but I always pray I have the energy of Spirit to share. That is my fire that I have to try to feed during the week.

But if the teacher begins with "not knowing", doesn't the student begin the same way? Well, here is an odd paradox about learning. It seems the less you think you know, the less you learn. Jane Elliott was an elementary teacher in a small town in Iowa in the 1960's. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr, she developed an experiment for her classroom. She divided the students by eye color: brown-eyed children and blue-eyed children. First, the blue eyed children were treated as superior. They had privileges the brown eyed children were denied. They were told how smart they were and how dumb the brown eyed children were. And guess who performed better on tests? The blue eyed children. UNTIL the tables turned. Now the brown eyed children were superior and the blue eyed children were told how stupid they had become. Now guess who did better on the tests? Yes, the brown eyed children now were the best learners. It was a complex lesson in diversity and the costs of bigotry and discrimination but it also demonstrated the impact of what we believe about ourselves on our ability to learn. How many times do we sabotage our learning process by telling ourselves we are too old, too young, not smart enough? Women aren't strong and men are not gentle. We don't have the computer/math/language skills to do that? And what happens when we keep telling ourselves those messages while we try to learn? Because I don't need other people to tell me that. I have a voice inside my head that

tells me. Well, sometimes those messages just makes it difficult. Sometimes we either give up or never even try.

But what might happen if we approached every situation with the belief that we have instant access to infinite wisdom? This covers not just academic or skill based situations, because every moment is a learning opportunity. We have the wisdom to learn new ways to be in relationship, to learn new skills we have to share. The truth is we DO have access to all the wisdom we need, IF we are open to it. And if we suspend our judgment of what it is we need and what is required, we find we are much wiser than we thought.

So is it better to be the teacher or the student? Is it better to teach or to learn? In Luke 6:40, Jesus said, "A disciple is not above the teacher but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher." Student and teacher equal and learning and teaching in equal balance. How do we become fully qualified? The parable after this line is the admonition to not worry about plucking the speck from someone else's eye when there is a log in our own. We must claim the gifts we have to share, willingly sharing AND be willing to receive new insights and ideas in every moment. Ego usually prefers to teach, puffing out its chest with the knowledge it has and is eager to press upon others. Ego knows the right way and will assert that superior position so that others may come to know the right way. That's just how helpful Ego is!

Yet I find that teaching and learning are more like giving and receiving. Unless you stand open to the flow, you block one or the other. If I am in the flow of infinite wisdom then I know there is always something I have to share and I know there is always more to be revealed to me. I cannot give without receiving and I cannot receive without giving.

For the past several years, maybe 10, I have been drawn to the writings and life of Henri Nouwen. He was a Dutch priest and theologian who was born in 1932 and who died suddenly in September of 1996. He was a scholar who worked at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka Kansas for many years and who taught at Harvard and Yale. I don't always agree with some of his writings about a theology of suffering but I am pulled by some essence of spirituality in his writings. Nouwen was uncomfortable sometimes in his role as spiritual authority and was troubled by conflicts within himself. He found himself most profoundly affected in the last years of his life by his association with Jean Vanier and the L'Arche communities. In L'Arche homes, people with intellectual and other disabilities live in community with each other and with nondisabled persons. Vanier's concept is that everyone has something to

share and living supporting one another brings a greater richness to everyone's life. The last years of his life were spent at Daybreak, a L'Arche community outside Toronto Canada. His roommate and responsibility was Adam, a young man with profound intellectual disabilities as the result of a seizure disorder. As he writes in the book *Adam: God's Beloved*, Nouwen, the man of education and intellect, was disoriented at first with his role in the community. Adam was unable to speak but Nouwen discovered a deep peace in his presence that defied teaching and intellectual discovery. I found a wonderful quote by Nouwen:

"You don't think your way into a new kind of living. You live your way into a new kind of thinking." His thinking was changed by living in a new way.

It is only by living the truth that we begin to prove it in our own lives and deepen our understanding of it.

If we begin to live--letting go of the belief that we are right and the need to be right, we open ourselves to ideas and insights that can transform our lives; our health, our relationships and our material conditions. If we begin to live accepting that we are powerful and wise spiritual beings, we will step out confident we are the ones to bring peace and end the practices of lack. We teach by example and we learn by opening to the wisdom already within us. We can co-create an awakened world of peace, harmony and abundance, not by believing we have all the answers but by being open to answers as they are revealed and by being a living example of the principles as we understand them.

This week, live your life open to the flow of wisdom in and through you. And tell me next week what was different.