

Footprints

Gospel of Thomas Logions 70 and 3; Ox Herding Pictures #2 – Footprints

September 15, 2019

This morning we're going to talk about the second Ox Herding picture, called Finding the Footprints. But before we do that, I want to back up a little and set the stage again. Specifically, I want to address the question of why it makes sense to put up a series of thousand-year-old Buddhist pictures on the wall of a Christian church. Just in case you were wondering...

So I created a visual to help me. It's a triangle with vertices labeled Head, Hands and Heart. You could make this a three-legged stool or a three-stranded braid; I just like triangles. This is a super-simplistic way to categorize all the different aspects that are encompassed when we talk about religion. They are:

- Head: talking about God, reasoning, theology, reading, thinking
- Hands: doing God's work in the world, social justice activities
- Heart: experiencing God, inner work, contemplation, mysticism

These are very different and we can each locate ourselves somewhere in this triangle, depending on our preferred modes and activities. Everyone is a mix and if you're kind of evenly distributed, you're right in the middle.

As an example, it wouldn't be a surprise to find the Shafsky's here at the Hands vertex. They're practically the definition of what "Hands" is all about. And you won't have trouble locating me, either – probably hanging out near the Head corner. I've spent the last twenty years experimenting with ways to move myself a little more toward the middle, but I still know where my sweet spot is. And isn't it a good thing that we're all different? All the gifts are needed; all the gifts are good. It's sort of like having a Myers-Briggs description – there's no right or wrong way to be, there's just understanding ourselves and each other.

You can locate individuals in the triangle, you can locate pastors, you can locate entire churches, entire denominations, entire religions within this triangle. For example, let's talk about our own Congregational heritage. Big on The Word (that's the Head vertex) and big on caring for those in need (Hands). Not so much on the contemplative, mystical side. Again, not a judgment, just an understanding.

How did we get to that situation? There was a more mystical style of being Christian in the early days, but it didn't end up getting included in the orthodox standard. Some of it went underground, showing up in the Gnostic literature for example, and some of it went into the desert, with the Desert Fathers and Mothers and the beginnings of monasticism. That's where it stayed, so that through the years, the mystical Christian writings that we inherited have mostly come from the monastics.

When the Protestant Reformation split off and pared down the ritual aspects of Catholicism in favor of reading the Bible and preaching the Word, it didn't take long before Head and Hands were the dominant forms of expression. That's our heritage. So if we want to add more "Heart" to the mix, to move ourselves more towards the middle of the triangle, it makes sense that we would seek resources from groups whose dominant expression is Heart. Buddhism is one such.

This cross-religion resourcing is reminiscent of what happened almost 30 years ago now, when a group of Jewish rabbis and writers went to India to visit the Dalai Lama. The exchange got written up in a book called "The Jew in the Lotus." Both sides had questions for the other. The Dalai Lama wanted to ask the Jews how their people had survived being in exile for so many years, since he now found himself the leader of a people in exile. He figured the Jews must have learned a thing or two about survival, both of people and of their religion, under those circumstances. The Jews wanted to ask the Dalai Lama why it was that as Buddhism moved into North America, a disproportionate number of converts came from Jewish backgrounds. What were they looking for? The Dalai Lama could have drawn this triangle for them, because he basically pointed to the Heart corner. Then he went on to point out to them that they had a "Heart" tradition within Judaism, namely Kabbalah, the mystical form of Judaism. His advice was to go home and teach their people about it. Which they did.

So when we find ourselves talking about inner journeys, about the benefits of meditation, about experiences of the Sacred, it's all about balancing our heritage of Head and Hands with some experiential Heart work. It's why we have a variety of preachers. Every preacher has a "sweet spot" in this triangle, a particular mix that is their comfort zone. That's where they preach from, no matter the topic. If we want to explore different areas, the easiest way is to hear from different people.

I've been reading a lot of Joseph Campbell lately. In "The Power of Myth," his book of conversations with Bill Moyers, I came across this interesting tidbit:

Moyers: You speak of the poets and artists. What about the clergy?

Campbell: I think our clergy is really not doing its proper work. It does not speak about the connotations of the metaphors but is stuck with the ethics of good and evil.

Moyers: Why haven't the priests become the shamans of American society?

Campbell: The difference between a priest and a shaman is that the priest is a functionary and the shaman is someone who has had an experience. In our tradition it is the monk who seeks the experience, while the priest is the one who has studied to serve the community.

Campbell was Catholic, but the same could be said of Protestant ministers. We might want to keep this in mind as we begin to think about our next spiritual leader.

Back to the Ox Herding pictures!

What gets people started on an inner journey? What pulls them towards Heart? Everyone has their own story, but often they will describe an urge they don't quite understand, a tug, a dissatisfaction, an itch. It's as if your internal filter starts to change... as you look at all the incoming data from the world, what you respond to starts to change. Whether reading or listening, topics begin to look interesting that never did before. I've always liked the lines of Hindu yogi Sat Prem:

If you are thirsty, the river comes to you.

If you are not thirsty, there is no river.

That whole internal Heart world has always been there, always been available to you. But if you are busy with other things, it's simply out of sight. Then magically, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears."

Often there is a precipitating event that gets this exploration started. A mid-life crisis, for instance, or the untimely death of someone close to you. It was interesting to me how many of my fellow PSR students could trace their turn into spirituality to an unexpected death. Such an experience jolts you out of your normal rut and you begin to ask Big Questions: Why am I here? What is my purpose? What will happen after I die? and so forth. The author of one of the commentaries on the Ox Herding Pictures says, "The search can't start until the question arises." (John Loori, Riding the Ox Home, p. 3).

To ask the Big Questions is ultimately to look inward and begin to understand that your True Self and your ego self really are different. You cannot begin to wrestle with the Big Questions until it is quiet inside. How you get quiet inside is by following a spiritual practice. It can be Centering Prayer or meditation or chanting or mindfulness. It doesn't matter *which* practice, it matters that you follow one and do it every day. It is not necessarily easy. And it will change you.

By the way, I am here to tell you that reading about it is not the same as doing it. I know. I've tried.

It's also true that not everyone feels this urge, and that's OK. It's very individual. Some people seem born into the Heart corner and you wonder why it is so easy for them. Everyone is different. It only matters that you follow your own path.

In the Ox Herding Pictures, the Ox represents the True Self. (At least, that's one interpretation!) In the first picture, the Boy is searching. He believes the Ox exists, perhaps because others have told him so, but he has no real proof for himself. In the second picture, he finds footprints. That's a big deal. Footprints are not the same as the Ox, but footprints mean the Ox exists and it was here. Perhaps not that long ago. Footprints constitute evidence. It IS real. I'm not making this up.

For me, the early footprints came through music. I recently went back and read the very first sermon I ever gave, which was here in January of 2000. I was so new to being in church again that it felt odd to say the word "God" out loud! But the sermon was about my experiences with a song – Debbie Friedman's L'chi lach. Repeatedly, when I would sing the song for someone, the response from them was tears. Whether they were "religious" or not didn't seem to matter. There was something very fundamental going on, some energy connection, that I experienced and that felt new to me.

That's the key, isn't it? It was an experience. Not talking, not reading, not thinking, but experiencing. The essence of Heart. Just a moment, fleeting. But enough to convince me that there was something going on that was worth my time and effort to explore. It was a footprint.