

J.C. and Me
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I started working on this sermon twenty years ago, the night I first came face to face with Jesus Christ. Our meeting was unexpected. I was at a wedding in New Orleans. The ceremony was so boring; it reminded me of why I never went to church. As my eyes wandered lazily around the chapel, they finally settled on one piece of décor. Hanging behind the pulpit was a life-sized crucifix.

Now, being an Italian wedding, this was a Catholic church, and no one does crucifixes like Catholics. Mel Gibson would have been proud. I had always found such graphic images a bit revolting. But as I looked with fresh eyes on His impaled form, I felt a shock of recognition. I thought to myself, “Yeah, I’ve been there, too.”

Up to that moment, I had never felt much interest in Jesus. I was raised agnostic. My attitude could be summed up by the poet Chris Chandler: “If Jesus died for my paltry sins, he was over-reacting.”

In a way, I was lucky to grow up without Jesus. Many of my Unitarian friends had Him stuffed down their throats, by people who called themselves Christians but didn’t display much love for their neighbors. He can still be a touchy subject. We look for wisdom in all faiths, but some of us prefer not to look in the pages of the New Testament.

But are we throwing the divine baby out with the bathwater? Does the story of Jesus offer unique lessons that can enrich people of all faiths? Is Christ too important to be left entirely to Christians?

Now I still don’t call myself a Christian, because I don’t take Jesus as my personal lord and savior. But in the years since that wedding, we’ve had a relationship, J.C. and me. I’ve worked out my own personal understanding of his message and his mission. It’s probably not the same as yours or Pope Benedict’s or George W. Bush’s. I pick out the parts of his story that appeal to me and I discreetly overlook the rest. But as far as I can tell, that’s what most believers do.

Here, then, is what one born-again Pagan Unitarian has learned from Jesus Christ.

First and foremost, Jesus is a split personality, in several different ways. He’s half-divine and half-human. He is Jesus the Man, and He is Jesus the Myth.

I’ve spun a lot of wheels searching for Jesus the Man, but he’s as hard to pin down as a Holy Ghost. Outside the Gospels, Roman historians had virtually nothing to say about Him.

Inside the Gospels, written 30 to 70 years after his death, we find wildly different accounts of the same events. And where they agree, I keep asking myself, Will the real Jesus Christ please stand up? Was He the Prince of Peace, who taught us to love our enemies and turn the other cheek? Or was He a warrior, who came to bring not peace but a sword and to cast sinners into hellfire? Was he a spiritual outlaw, who attacked the hypocrisy of organized religion? Or was he out to replace one religious bureaucracy with another?

To further cloud the matter, there are fifty or so Gospels that didn't make it into the New Testament. In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus speaks like a Zen or a Sufi master, all riddle and paradox. In the Gospel of Judas, the ultimate bad guy turns out to be the ultimate good guy, betraying Jesus only because Jesus asked him to. The Gospel of Mary Magdalene suggests that Mary was his lover or his wife. That would explain one of the few details on which Matthew, Mark and John agree – that Mary was the first person to whom Jesus revealed himself after he emerged from the tomb.

Who was Jesus the Man? I don't believe we'll ever know, at least, not until He comes back and sets the record straight. His genuine words and deeds have been so mixed up with mythology that, 2000 years later, it's impossible to separate one from the other.

But perhaps we don't really have to cull fact from fiction. What if we focus on the fiction, on Jesus the Myth? What if we view him as a legendary hero, in the tradition of Hercules or Siegfried or Cuchullain or Hiawatha? What if we take a hint from Jesus himself, and interpret his entire life story as a parable?

From this angle, the Son of Man turns into everyman. His life becomes a hero's journey, a series of lessons that map out the stages of the spiritual life. They offer a uniquely Christian answer to the question that's at the heart of every religion: What is the meaning of suffering?

Not everything is unique about the Jesus myth. He's not the first human to have a divine Dad. Nor is he the first half-human to come back from the dead. Both these stories link Jesus to other myths around the world, from the Egyptian god Osiris to the Norse god Balder. Perhaps the closest kin of all is the Greek god Dionysus.

Dionysus is born once when the King of the Gods, Zeus, gets one of his daughters pregnant. Zeus' wife is jealous, and she urges her uncles to eat the baby god for dinner, leaving nothing but his heart. Zeus devours the heart, sleeps with a mortal woman, and Dionysus is born again. He becomes the god of wine, which will also be the favored beverage of Jesus.

Greek culture was still going strong in the land where where Jesus walked. The New Testament was written entirely in Greek. It doesn't take a large leap of faith to imagine that a flesh-and-blood man got mixed up with a mythical demigod, and perhaps with an Indian half-man whose name is similar to Christ: Krishna.

Is there a universal meaning in this universal myth? Why does the divine get mixed up with the human, all too human? That's the first stage in the Christian myth: the legend of Christ-Mass.

Historically, the first Christmas is doubtful. But symbolically, the story is clear. Every child is a divine child. Each of us enters this world as an innocent, trailing clouds of glory as we come. As we celebrate the divine infant, we remind ourselves of our own inner child. Beneath layers of emotional scar tissue, a divine spark still sputters.

In the Gospels, Jesus speaks highly of this state of spiritual innocence: “Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The problem is that we can't stay children forever. Growing up is partly a process of growing an ego, a psychic privacy fence that buffers our inner child against spankings, schoolyard bullies and report cards. We shield our vulnerable hearts, but bit by bit, we forget why we came here in the first place. We surrender our youthful ideals, in exchange for cars, day-care and mortgage payments. We enter upon our own Missing Years.

But just as innocence can't last forever, neither does our psychological armor. There comes a time when we start to wake up to ourselves, to recollect our divine purpose and to chart a new course for our lives. It happens to Jesus at the ripe old age of 30. These days, we call it a midlife crisis. It's a time to go off by ourselves, to retire into the desert and to contend with our demons. They'll tempt us with the fame of Paris Hilton and the riches of Bill Gates. But we may decide that we have a higher calling, and laughing down our devils, we emerge with a mission that's truly our own.

Like Jesus, our troubles are only beginning.

In his new career, Jesus Christ is a superstar. He heals the lame, he walks on water, he raises the dead, and he draws multitudes. And perhaps he falls into a new temptation: He begins to believe his own PR. Eastern paths say the more enlightened you become, the subtler your temptations. Too much attention to working miracles can be a detour from the path.

Perhaps that's why Jesus has so many mood swings. He has episodes of Christ consciousness, but He is still half a man, and he is still wrestling with his ego. He feels anger, when His disciples play stupid or when he runs into loan sharks in the Temple. He feels hurt, when old friends chase him out of his hometown. He feels fear, when He kneels in the garden, and he faces the thought of death.

That night in Gethsemane, Jesus realizes it's time for radical spiritual surgery. If He is to be true to his soul, it's time to give up everything he holds dear. He accepts the idea that he will die, and he will suffer torture and humiliation along the way. What gives him the courage to proceed is an inner conviction that His only way out is through. His Jesus self must be crucified, that his Christ self may rise in its glory.

Christ's attitude towards suffering is the heart of his myth, and it's what sets him apart from other spiritual teachers. The Buddha, for example, has a very different prescription. We don't need no stinkin' suffering. Just give up our attachments to worldly things, which are destined to pass away.

How soothing is our typical picture of the Buddha, smiling a knowing smile in the stillness of meditation or laughing and slapping his belly at the cosmic joke. How different from our typical picture of Jesus Christ.

He would probably agree with Buddha that all life is suffering. Incarnation is our gift to enjoy, but part of that gift is that we will lose the ones we love and, in the end, our own bodies will betray us. It's a package deal. There's no Get Out of Jail Free.

But Jesus chooses a different way out. He doesn't steer clear of the dark night of the soul. He embraces it, literally, with a passion. Is he crazy? Is he a holy masochist? Or is he teaching us a deeper truth?

His deeper lesson, I think, is that all suffering is not created equal. The suffering of which the Buddha speaks is largely unconscious. It's the pain that's inevitable when we hitch our happiness to an illusion. It's what Jesus means, I think, when he says "The wages of sin are death."

The passion of Jesus is very different. It's what the Russian sage Gurdjieff called Conscious Suffering. It's about looking life and death straight in the eye, facing the tragic beauty of the human condition, and saying, "Bring it on." Many religions have a god who dies and is reborn, but more than any other, Christianity makes that archetype its central mystery. Our God becomes one of us, that He might suffer at our side.

The symbol for this spiritual ju-jitsu is the Cross. Like most great symbols, it's shared by many mythologies and has many layers of meaning. Dionysus was identified with trees. In the Native American Sundance, a dancer is hung by cords from a tree. He sacrifices himself to bring blessings upon his nation.

A more esoteric interpretation of the Cross, from Gurdjieff student Maurice Nicoll, calls it the intersection between eternity and time. The timeless part of our selves is the vertical line that crosses the horizontal line of time. As we raise our level of being, our souls move upward on the vertical line.

Writes Nicoll, "The diagram of the Cross represents a single moment in a man's life. Eternity and Time meet in Man, at the point called *now*. But this point only becomes *now* in its full meaning if a man is conscious."

The Myth tells us that Jesus was the only begotten Son of God. The meaning tells me something different: That we are all God's children. We are all half-human, half-divine. As long as we live in the waking dream in which we spend most of our nows, the clash between our true and false selves is the root of suffering. But when we begin to live consciously, the same struggle is transformed into the root of enlightenment.

Sometimes we build our own crosses. Mostly, life makes them for us. But sooner or later we're all destined to hang on one. It's a hard truth to realize that God will not save us, or perhaps, He cannot save us. His own Son gives us permission to ask, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

The real good news of Jesus the Myth is that God cannot spare our suffering, but he can share our suffering. If we turn our heads and open our eyes, we might come face to face with Him, right there at our side. Like us, He's exposed to the elements, naked as the day we were born. A crown of thorns is wrapped around His sacred heart, but they can't choke out the sacred spark. The chill wind is whipping it up, till it burns without being consumed, in flames of true love. He tells us, "All is forgiven." It is finished.