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Sacred Ambiguity

by MELANNIE SVOBODA SND on MAY 6, 2019

In my book, *Traits of a Healthy Spirituality*, I said that one of the signs of a healthy spirituality is the ability to live graciously with a certain amount of ambiguity in our lives. By ambiguity I mean uncertainty, lack of clarity, indefiniteness, doubt. At times we may even experience ambiguity with regard to our faith.

Poet and author, Kathleen Norris, is the author of several wonderful books, including *Dakota* and *The Cloister Walk*. She writes of her own conversion to the faith. One day she visited a Benedictine Abbey and was drawn to the prayerful services there. Eventually she began attending the liturgy of the hours. But she



assumed that her personal doubts “were spectacular obstacles to faith.” She confided in an elderly monk who told her that her doubts were “merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow.” Our doubts and uncertainties with regard to our faith, then, are often calls to live our faith on a deeper and more authentic

level.

In the gospel, the people who had no doubts were the Pharisees who had run-ins with Jesus. They were absolutely certain about their faith. They had all the answers. For them, everything was black and white, good or evil, right or wrong. There were no “gray areas,” no “in betweenness.” Consequently these Pharisees could tolerate no ambiguity. No wonder Jesus drove them crazy with his interpretation of the Sabbath, for example, with his socializing with sinners and women, and with some of his attitudes toward prayer and fasting.

About Sister Melannie Svoboda, SND

Sister of Notre Dame, teacher, student, author, speaker, listener, friend, poet, farm girl.



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About Sunflower Seeds

Each Monday I'll post a short reflection, a simple musing on some aspect of spirituality—the everyday kind of spirituality that



includes things like walking in the park, slicing an onion for the casserole, caring for a child, studying for an exam, reading a line from scripture, laughing at a joke, or mourning a significant loss.

Along the way I welcome your questions, comments and insights too. After all, we're all in this life—this spiritual life—together!

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Jesus even told a parable about being comfortable with ambiguity: the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Mt. 13:24-30). The workers on a farm inform the landowner that weeds are growing among the young stalks of wheat. The workers suggest they immediately stomp into the field and pull up all the weeds. But the owner says, "Hold your horses!" (That's a free translation.) "In your eagerness to get rid of the weeds, you might pull up some of the precious stalks of wheat!" He urges patience. "Let them grow side by side a little longer," he says. "Then when we can clearly differentiate between the weeds and the wheat, you can go into the field and pull out the weeds."



Jesus not only told a parable about living with ambiguity, he himself lived with considerable ambiguity throughout his life. As a twelve-year-old boy he was certain it was all right for him to stay behind in Jerusalem for a few days. After all, he was spending that time in the Temple. Only when he was discovered by his anguished parents and scolded by them, did he realize how insensitive and "lacking in wisdom" he had been. Early in his public ministry he endured the uncertainty of his mission. Was he to go around curing people of their illnesses? Was he sent only to the Jews? Was he supposed to lead the people against the Romans as so many were assuming he would do? As he saw his enemies growing in their hostility towards him, was he supposed to back down, flee, fight, or surrender?

In my retreat work, I talk with a lot of individuals who struggle with doubts and uncertainty. I usually suggest that this is a good sign. Their faith is alive—and it is ready to grow. The faith that sustained them in the past needs to develop more to sustain them in the present... Faith is a *living* relationship, ever changing, ever growing... Their understanding of who God is is constantly evolving. It is never "finished" or "final."



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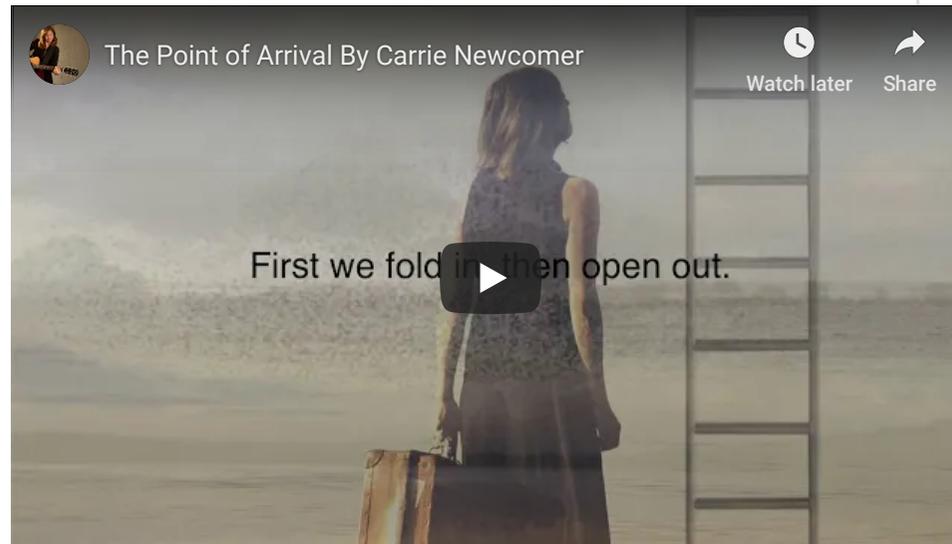
May our prayer today be something as simple as this: Loving Jesus, help me to live more graciously with ambiguity, uncertainty, and doubt. May they lead me to ever greater trust in you. Amen.

With regard to your faith, what are you certain of? What are some of the ambiguities of your faith?

How has your image of God evolved over the years? In other words, who was God to you when you were a child? a teenager? a young adult? middle aged? today?

PS: *I ask your prayers for a retreat I'm giving for the Sisters of Providence at St. Mary-of-the-Woods in Indiana from May 5-10. They tell me over 100 women will be on this retreat entitled, "How Can I Keep from Singing?" I appreciate your prayers!*

Our song today is "The Point of Arrival" by Carrie Newcomer. The song sings of doubt... endings... letting go... and arrivals. One of my favorite lines is, "There's a faith that's only found in doubt." Let me know what you think of it...



Do you have anything you'd like to add to today's blog? If so, please response below.

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John E Hopkins May 6, 2019 at 3:42 am



Good Morning!

A lot of food for thought here. First, really agree with "Faith is a living relationship, ever changing, ever growing." Your words evoke the words of Isaiah: "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not...See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Perhaps those who dwell in the certainty of faith cannot evolve past the letter of the law? Perhaps the legalistic din of certainty makes them death to the roaring waters of God's love? The good news is Jesus never let chapter and verse get in the way of breaking bread with those perceived as "other."

I think it was Peter who said, "Love covers a multitude of sins." Please, God, that's true!

REPLY

Kathleen Magiera May 6, 2019 at 5:29 am



Good Morning!

I have a broader of image of God now in my sunset years. Less certainty, more trust. Gracious uncertainty is what I am hanging on to in my soul.

God's mercy is more evident to me with fewer rules.

I like the line in the song "First we fold in, then open out."

Kathleen

Thomas DeFreitas May 6, 2019 at 6:27 am



A fertile topic for discussion! But first, I love the photograph of the wee chapel in the middle of nowhere. It is wonderfully comforting to look at, on some level.

My certainty (and I waver slightly in this, sometimes!) is that God is compassion and mercy. That God cares deeply about what we do and about what happens to us. That God wants our good.

For at least 2 decades, I adhered, clung for dear life, to what I now call the horrid little security of ecclesial partisanship. Being Catholic was like belonging to a political party. If I “agreed with the Church” on the hot-button issues, then everything was fine, no matter if my life was otherwise a shambles. This was a mortal rigor.

Nowadays, I’m noticing two things. The first is that grace is (at least potentially) everywhere. I’m learning from people who don’t fit into “Church-approved” categories, whose “views” or whose lives might not get the Supercatholic Seal of Approval. And often learning more from them than from the Catechism or from Scripture! I’m learning from people who, like myself, are very much “in process,” people who might be carrying as much baggage as the nearest Samsonite outlet, but whose setbacks and problems have made them large-hearted rather than narrow.

The second is that my communities save me. I used to sneer at the word “community.” All the phrasal verbs we hear: to do community, to be community, to build community, to have community, and so on. But the reason the phrase appears so often in the work of spiritual writers is that it is essential to live in a community, or in several communities. I have a poetry community, an apartment-building community, a church community, a family community, a municipal community, and a community that strives toward serenity, courage, wisdom. Oh, yes, and various online communities!

So, at nearly fifty, I’ve jettisoned some of the crippling “certainties,” the cramping and narrowing views, of my 20s and 30s. Living with a degree of ambiguity, or at least of acceptance that everyone is in a different place and that is perfectly all right ... this has led to a kind of spiritual re-enchantment, if you will! Rigor has been replaced by romance.

REPLY

Ed Johnson May 6, 2019 at 6:28 am



Hello, Sister,

The future is all about doubt. And it is this very doubt that moves me towards trust....trusting in God's providence in my life. Often easier said than done, of course. But when I reflect upon doubt and ambiguities from the past, I once again realize how my faith, trust, and spiritual growth have been nurtured by those very experiences. Thank you, Sister. May you and the Sisters of Providence share a wonderful week together!

Ed J.

REPLY

Terri B May 6, 2019 at 8:15 am



Dear Sr. Melanie,

First, thank you for tying several Gospel disconnects to ambiguity. Have never heard these formally addressed in a homily – ambiguity overcome by love (opening out)! Also love the line in the song, “This is where I lay down what I don’t want to haul around”! Great images too!

Living with ambiguity and dwelling in mystery- I carry these themes into this new week and look forward to more of my certainty being “tilled up”, ready soil for new faith! Thank you..

REPLY

Mary M Nausadis May 6, 2019 at 8:52 am



The question of, “What are you certain of?” gets the absolute answer of....God's love, for me and all creation. I really am certain of that, and that is what is the foundation for all my study, prayer, community, action. I have the hope of helping others to believe with all their hearts that they are God's beloved.

There's lots of ambiguity in living life and one of my greatest challenges is to allow people to be where they are at this time in their lives. It is an awareness that I bring myself back to on a regular basis.

There is not another church I would want to be attached to, but there are so many things about church law and the catechism that I believe God is way beyond.

There was a time when what “Father” said was the law, but I've grown much

beyond that and have formulated my own theology that I live by at this time anyway. It will change and I am eager to see how.

I so appreciate a place that is safe to share some of my ideas that are important to me right now and also hear how others see life.

Thank you, Sr. Mellanie

REPLY

Barbara May 6, 2019 at 9:04 am



What strikes me in the heart is from Carrie Newcomer's song, "this is where I lay it down, what I don't want to haul around" and "the place where I begin again". I believe we all are in the midst of beginning again every day and being able to lay down all of the things that break us up. The older I get (and I am in my 70's) and more I believe we are all here to help one another. Thank you for what you do. You have helped tremendously. One little extra, the song you included a few weeks ago "Stand in your love" is something I listen to every day. Thank you, thank you.

REPLY

Karen Walder May 6, 2019 at 9:39 am



This is very thought provoking ... I never thought about how questioning (doubt) truly is a sign of interest, curiosity, seeking. To question, one has to be open for the answer, to be open to change (of view or stance). Its an inflection point. Thank you once again for my weekly Monday morning reminder to get my head out of the weeds and look up!

REPLY

Jean Canatsey May 6, 2019 at 10:21 am



Good morning, Sr. Melannie!

I loved the song with all it's thought provoking images. My husband and I listened twice and I'm sure I will listen again. At almost 80 years of age my life is full of ambiguities. I often question my faith because it no longer seems to resemble the "official" stance of the church I grew up in (and still love.) The icon of the Trinity hangs in our foyer and I often stop and gaze at it. I am absolutely convinced that

God is love and that "All" are welcome to sit at the table. As Fr. Ed Thompson used to say, "God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us."
P.S. My husband of 63 years is 82 years old today! Hallelujah!

REPLY

Shirley May 6, 2019 at 11:51 am



Another great blog and I love the song.
Prayers for your next retreat!

REPLY

Lori May 6, 2019 at 8:40 pm



sr. Melannie, i tell you-it's as if i never went to school in alllll my years-now age 71. Can;t formulate any sentences that represent any concrete thought. But, i do know that my faith is stable right now-have had MANY doubts over the years-and even recent. But i am certain of one thing-that is a relationship with Christ that has a definite "friend" type bond that can't be shaken-and i have DOUBTED our Lord for so much at times but He always takes me back.
I'll be praying for you this week at retreat.

REPLY

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