

. . . Quite Contrary

**Essays on teaching, leadership and
the Gospel of Mary of Magdala**

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January 24, 2026 edition

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Prefatory Note

This is my second compilation of essays published originally on Substack. These essay-series—the first, *In the Spirit*, was published last summer—are my attempts to find a path forward from the profound dysfunction that currently afflicts our national culture as we endure the ludicrous reboot of the Gilded Age, all those wealth mongers living extravagantly and callously at the expense of working people, democratic values and traditions overridden to serve an autocratic elite, the world order destabilized by geriatric buffoons at the behest of an addled electorate who prefer an authoritarian regime that serves their xenophobic interests no matter the suffering it inflicts on “others,” all of it flying under the false flag of a nationalistic-religious fundamentalism unguided by any moral compass at all, let alone a “Christian” one.

In “In the Spirit” I used quantum mechanics as a “gravitational lens” to proffer an alternative ethic founded not only in ancient wisdom traditions and radical Christianity, but in the fundamental nature of the universe we live in. In this series, I use the “lost” Gospel of Mary of Magdala similarly to examine matters pertaining to teaching and leadership in the current dystopia of the American experiment. The “weft” of my argument opens with a very blunt retort to I.A. Richards’ famous assertion that “rhetoric should be the study of misunderstanding and its remedies:” “Sorry, Ivor, there is no remedy for misunderstanding! The best thing to do is avoid it.” Subsequent essays proffer an assortment of concepts and strategies designed to be prophylactic toward that end, including “passive listening,” “safe” spaces, and “unconditional trust.” Other essays explore the intentional dismantling of the public education system in the US over the last 25 years, the coincident and equally intentional diminution of higher education, and the valorization of “ignorance” as a means to assert control over everyday Americans. The “woof” of the argument is a series

of close readings of the Gospel of Mary of Magdala, examining the many misunderstandings it enacts in the context of the cultural clash between Gnostic and Orthodox Christianities during the first few centuries of the first millennium CE, the sum of which reveal that many of the most intransigent problems vexing us today were baked into the system right from the outset. It all ends, surprisingly (even to me), on a positive note about the future, the current madness clearing the ground for what's next and new. And good.

The book's title is, of course, the last half of the first line of the famous nursery rhyme that begins "Mary, Mary . . ." It is generally believed that little poem has some religious meaning pertinent to the vexed position of Catholicism in 16th century England, the Mary being Mary Tudor or Mary Queen of Scots. You can Google it if you want to know more. Here's a snippet from one commentary on the poem, by Jacob Uitti, the spirit of which I like:

More likely, the rhyme is about feminine growth of some sort, which is a fundamental, crucial part of human existence. The species is furthered by women, who give birth to . . . wisdom and governance and anything else that comes from humanity.

And it is the thoughtful women—the contrarians—who perhaps are best at that, in the end, who lead us into the future.

I endorse, and share, this particular brand of contrariness with all the Marys, including Mary of Magdala, who have found ways to speak up, over and over, despite millennia of oppression by patriarchal and authoritarian systems expressly designed to silence them.

Misunderstanding

*A thought went up my mind to-day
That I have had before,
But did not finish, -- some way back,
I could not fix the year*

Emily Dickinson

At some point in the middle-third of my career as an English professor—as Emily Dickinson says, “I could not fix the year”—the faculty in my home program, which had always been called the Composition Program, decided it was time to add the term “rhetoric” to its title, all the rage back then. We convened a meeting, which included three recent hires, all of whom felt rhetoric should have primacy. At the get-go, one of them made a strong case for this. After a bit of generally consensual discussion, I intervened with what I considered to be an innocuous gesture, simply to say that my own investment was primarily in pedagogy, for which entry-level instruction was a crucial site of practice. Historically, those courses were generally called “composition” courses, so I felt an allegiance to that term. Nothing to see there. Just a statement, not an argument. The person who initiated the conversation, though, took this not simply as a challenge but as a personal critique, neither of which were remotely on my radar, and responded aggressively and dismissively. Most of the others seemed to endorse that response. I knew right then that my position was anathemized and, more importantly to me, my relationship with this colleague was permanently and irretrievably broken. I could have done many things in that moment, but I chose simply to go quiet, which I’m quite good at, not just in that contestatory exchange but in the extended conversation that followed.

I've written a lot over the last few years about an assortment of Christian heretical texts and will have more to say about one of them in particular in this series, the "lost" Gospel of Mary of Magdala. Whether it is two millennia ago or two minutes ago, I know that once one's position gets branded as heretical by the powers that be—as mine was not only that day but more broadly in my discipline, which was making this move to a rhetoric-centered identity everywhere, more reflexively than mindfully, I thought—there is no good exit strategy. Best just to keep your inner peace and, if possible, find a different audience to speak with.

In any case, "a thought went up my mind to-day/ That I have had before" and I want to pursue it further. Right around the time I finished my "In the Spirit" series I became preoccupied again with the problem at the root of moments like that one: misunderstanding. I, like every human who ever lived, know all about what that is experientially. My interest in it conceptually was piqued about 50 years ago when I first read I. A. Richards' *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, based on a series of lectures he gave on a visit to Bryn Mawr college in 1936. I was interested back then in thinking about the proper province of the "field" to which I was about to dedicate my professional energies. I read a lot of other texts that address this matter, most meaningfully to me the Platonic dialogues in which Socrates engages contentiously with the "sophists" (itinerant teachers whose programs were kind of like "finishing schools" on steroids for wealthy young men, the Harvard Business Schools of the day) in his intellectual community, figures like Lysias (the object of inquiry in the *Phaedrus*), Gorgias (a formidable contestant with a dedicated posse of followers); Meno (a wealthy young protege of Gorgias whom Socrates engages in a particularly acrimonious debate), and especially Protagoras (a "star" in this "field.") The theme of all these arguments is virtue, and the pertinence, if any, of rhetorical instruction in promoting it. That term—virtue—may seem quaint, even antique in our current parlance, set aside usually to talk blandly about matters of religious decorum or female sexuality, the

saintly or the dainty. But for all of these contestants (and for Plato who ventriloquizes them) the matter at hand is much more general and urgent, pertaining to “the good” in ethical, even moral, terms, right up my alley. In every case, Socrates is skeptical that “rhetoric” (at least of the sophistic variety) can be a foundational discipline toward that end, most famously in his argument with Protagoras which starts with his seemingly innocuous question—“What is the field of rhetoric?”—and ends with his dismantling it as a vacuous pseudo-discipline.

2400 years later Richards clearly believes otherwise, asserting confidently that “rhetoric . . . should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies,” the sentence that will hover over, around or behind everything I’ll be writing in this series. Fair enough, I thought when I first read it. But gradually over the years, as I learned more and more not just about my field but about the academy—its values and the professoriate who enact them—and then both recollected (from as far back as I could remember) and reflected on my personal and professional experiences, I came to believe what I have said quietly in my head many times over the years, responding directly to Richards: “Sorry, Ivor, but there is no remedy for misunderstanding. The best thing to do is avoid it, which is no mean task in the human universe. There are ways to avert misunderstanding ahead of time, but to believe you can cancel its effects in the aftermath—i.e., return to the state of accord before it happened—is delusional.” That leaves a rhetorician in a real pickle. What’s the point of any of it if it’s ultimately ineffectual at its most important function? I’ve been thinking this through, as I said, in stages, for some time, and what will follow here in the coming weeks is some of what I now have to say about all that.

Last July, as I was finishing up my “In the Spirit” essays, I went through a dramatic personal upheaval, a transformation in my spirit that I had been working assiduously toward pretty much forever, but quite dedicatedly so since I retired seven years ago. I presume

all those pieces I was writing about various “wisdom” texts and traditions helped to precipitate it, which indexes the value of persistent work in promoting growthful change. I was sitting on the couch in my living room one afternoon nothing-doing, as Laozi would say, and suddenly the inside of my head felt like it popped up through the top surface of its big bubble and puffed out into a much smaller bubble that I thought, over time, might expand, not replacing the one that spawned it, but adding a new dimension to it, a quantum leap of consciousness, if you will. In that moment, I thought, hey, maybe I had become enlightened, my work done. I know now that was inanely hubristic. Both “I” and my experience of the world are different, in quite salutary ways. I feel calm and peaceful most of the time no matter the circumstances. I have ceased exerting any inordinate energy to amplify my “social network,” which I felt was compulsory when I arrived alone in Olympia 7 years ago, a process that did not go well. Now it is better. And I laugh a lot more than I did, often for no apparent reason. The motto I concocted to describe this state of mind was “I don’t want anything I don’t have and don’t have anything I don’t want.” A sentence I like from the *Tao Te Ching* that says essentially the same thing has been translated variously as, for example, “He who knows that enough is enough will always have enough,” or my preferred version: “When you realize there is nothing lacking, the world settles by itself.” And a settled internal world in a world as profoundly unsettled as ours right now is a great blessing.

I have always savored solitude. Now I can’t imagine a better way to spend my time. I could go on and on about the ways that metamorphic moment changed my way of being in the world. But I am certain I am not enlightened. Just happier being who I am. Where I am. Right now. Nothing-doing what I’m doing, whatever it is, in the moment. In retrospect, ironically, one of the things that precipitated this change was a series of perceived misunderstandings, none of which I could rectify despite my best efforts. I finally just conceded, to myself, that being “understood”

in the human universe was not generally in the cards for me. And, honestly, I think it's rarely in the cards for anyone, at least at the deepest level. But it is, I concluded, possible both to minimize misunderstanding as a chronic state in relationships and even to approach something akin to understanding asymptotically—in that you never get there but come closer and closer, like infinity in certain graphed math equations. It just takes a lot of work to do that, maybe the most important work anyone can do to promote personal and communal happiness, even peace, in the world in front of them or the world at large. I'm pretty sure that's when I decided to write this series, which I'm imagining now as a compendium of commentaries, strategies and techniques to at least become conscious of, perhaps even liberate oneself from, some of the natural tendencies that cause misunderstanding.

Which gets me back to that quote from Richards: “Rhetoric . . . should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies.” Though it is not an express feature of his talks, the rise of fascism in Europe is clearly on his mind, evident in the underlying angst that seems always to be agitating his thinking. While he may be talking about more commonplace misunderstandings, the big one, that shadow of impending doom in Europe, haunts them all. Obviously, he believes that rhetoric can serve a remedial function in situations of both sorts. I have always been skeptical of that. The immediate thought that crossed my mind in the meeting I describe above was: “There is no remedy for this misunderstanding.” It felt so instantly intractable that no amount of “talking” was ever going to lead to recovery. Which is why I went quiet. The question I began to ponder back then was whether there are in fact tractable misunderstandings, even if that one wasn't. My current answer, based on experience and evidence is: “No, not really.” At least not solely and specifically via “rhetoric,” whose function, if it has any at all in matters of that sort, should not be remedial but prophylactic.

That is especially so in relatively new relationships, which often collapse under the strain of such disruptions. Anyone who has dated to meet a potential partner knows all about that. One little conversational glitch occurs early on, often provoked simply by anxiety, and it's over. For more well-established relationships, like within families or marriages, where the stakes are exponentially greater, misunderstandings can be mitigated over time, but their effect is never null, in the same way that wounds leave scars even after they have healed. So: Try not to misunderstand! Which is way easier said than done, of course, given that the "said" part relies on language, the primary instrument of "rhetoric," which is (in my view and in the view of all those sages I wrote about last summer) a very weak medium for "understanding" anything of magnitude. Richards already suspected this, I assume, having spent years working with his colleague C.K. Ogden to concoct something they called Basic English, a lexicon of about 800 words that could be arranged together via a limited set of syntactical structures to assure clearer communication. My guess is he hoped a resource of this sort would be sufficient to remedy the misunderstandings that were threatening to tear Europe asunder. Not only didn't that work, anyone with an ounce of intuition about human nature and its love affair with the confabulatory capacity of language understands that it can't. Pretty much ever. Which is to say, again, the best remedy for misunderstanding is not to fall prey to it. That's what I want to write about in the series of essays that will follow here.

I'll begin with a working hypothesis: "Understanding," at least in its most fulsome, finished form, is a myth. And not one of the good ones, because it is so easy to presume it's there when it's not, which not only creates problems that can't be solved, but can make it seem those problems are not there in the first place, or, after attempted interventions, there any longer. The worst of both worlds. Nor is language/rhetoric adequate on its own to "remedy" misunderstanding, since it is one of the primary causes of it. But I

do believe there are things human beings can do to make the latter less likely and the former at least aspirational.

Because misunderstanding has been on my radar for such a long time, I've written about it a number of times. In *The New Not-Normal*, for example, I document what it feels like to live as a neurodivergent in a sea of neurotypicals. Spoiler alert: misunderstood! And I wrote about it more generically in *In Dreams*, where I proposed "not-understanding" as a means to avert misunderstanding by keeping one's stake in any ongoing conversation or relationship always open-ended, in play. I argued that since our universe is defined and regulated by time, we and Nature, by our very natures, are captive to eternal changefulness. Any presumed understanding is, by definition then, by dint of its implied finality, a misunderstanding within moments of its occurrence. Now, these several years later, having immersed myself in wisdom traditions, including quantum mechanics, I want to revise that term to "un-understanding," which suggests that avoiding misunderstandings requires not just a static resistance to closure, but an ongoing dismantling of the finalized states of mind that promote closure in the first place. The difference is this: Not-understanding is passively passive, un-understanding is actively passive, which sounds pretty obtuse, I know. I have a piece in process where I work out in more detail how I differentiate those two modes of passivity, beginning with what William Wordsworth calls "wise passiveness" in his famous poem "Expostulation and Reply." I wouldn't necessarily say the former is "dumb passiveness." But a distinction of that sort suggests the magnitude of the difference I have in mind. Or you can think about it in terms of the common political stance of "passive resistance," which is decidedly different from simple passivity in that it requires intentional non-action and a deep commitment to the possibility of change, even as it strives to do nothing in the face of force.

One of the wonderful after-effects of reading wisdom texts, including quantum mechanics, is the buzzy afterglow that suggests

what they “mean” is always right up ahead, just out of reach, tantalizingly elusive, teasing further inquiry. You want to keep returning to them, not with a conviction that you will “figure them out” once and for all, but with the faith that un-figuring them out is actually the point. In my “In the Spirit” series I wrote about some of the things Jesus and Laotzi and the Buddha and the Indian Vedas and Werner Heisenberg and Edwin Schrödinger, and many, many poets have said/written. None of them proffers the possibility of “one and done” interpretive event. Initially, they are in fact quite baffling, like an Emily Dickinson poem: You don’t “get” it immediately. So you either conclude it is un-gettable and walk away (i.e., misunderstand it as kind of impenetrable nonsense); or you come back once or twice and presume you do get it (another mode of misunderstanding); or you keep coming back with the openness of un-understanding, not just resisting the temptation to finish the “getting,” but actively dismantling each previous getting to allow the next one to come into being.

That is the difference between acquiring wisdom and memorizing information. The latter is one and done. The former both aspires to become “one” and is never “done.” We are, especially in the West, afflicted by a belief that our primary modes of reception—reading and listening—should lead very quickly to finalized states of “knowing.” When they don’t we assume the problem is out there, not in here. Even quantum mechanics, as “hard” a scientific system as you can imagine, says finally that irresolution (literally an always-slightly-out-focus state of being), what Werner Heisenberg called “uncertainty,” is built into the very fabric of our universe at the deepest level. Certainty, as in absolute precision, the rock-solid promise of Newtonian mechanics, is precluded. Simple as that. All the worthy gurus and poets I know of presume the same thing. The goal is not to reach “stop,” or even to forge ahead, but to keep circling up and around, like the falcon in Yeats’ great poem “The Second Coming,” “[t]urning and turning in the widening gyre.” What happens in that gyre sounds pretty scary in the poem: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/ Mere anarchy is loosed

upon the world.” That’s stanza one. Stanza two opens this way: “Surely some revelation is at hand.” Much better. The one he’s envisioning as he writes this in the aftermath of WWI, the old order in rubble, looks to him like a “rough beast.” But its time has come because “Twenty centuries of stony sleep/ Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle.” Waking up from an addiction to familiarity and fixity always feels at first like a rough beast. But once you get a taste for the ongoing revelations it proffers, you will never want to retreat to such a “stony sleep” again. Sages know this. Their theres are never quite there. And when you circle up and around them long enough, the gyre widening, you find that their theres are there everywhere. Once you accede to that truth, our worlds, from the tiniest particle/waves, to a simple conversation, to the most complex social and intellectual systems become, in their mystery, not frustratingly evasive, but beautifully elusive, worthy of chronic and recursive re-readings. The un-understanding process I have in mind is kind of like that.

I say in *In Dreams* that what I call “not-understanding” is

a liminal state in which meaning-making has no final destination or endpoint, no place to put a period at the end declaring “understood” as the outcome. “Misunderstood” is, after all, just an aberrant form of “understood.” It may be a stretch to suggest that understanding is always to some extent also misunderstanding. But the more I think about that, the more I believe it to be true. What is imperative is continued listening, careful attention, constant adjustment, a lovely (to me) extended process of “coming-to-know.” In short, not-understanding is not only not misunderstanding, it is the very means by which misunderstanding can be avoided. (78-9)

Un-understanding goes further, suggesting that there is no “may be a stretch” to it. It is simply true. And it inverts the previous

sentence to say: “‘Understood’ is, after all, just an aberrant form of ‘misunderstood,’” not vice-versa. The moment you presume you understand anyone or anything once and for all, you don’t. That is especially so with rhetorical matters, which is where I and I.A. started (and parted at loggerheads) here. I’ll be exploring some ways to navigate this terrain in the essays that follow here. I hope you will join me and find at least some of what I proffer worthwhile. In other words, I hope you will un-understand what I have to say in all the best ways.

What is or isn't an -ism before it's an -ism?

What is most monstrous is sequence.

E.L. Doctorow

I was watching a YouTube last night that purported to explain “postmodernism.” It wasn’t that bad. But it ended up highlighting for me, once again, the untoward effects that can (and do) occur when pretty much any well-intentioned philosophical enterprise is transfused into mainstream culture. I’ve had a lot to say over the years about the deleterious effects of both the modernist ideology that regulated my schooling and the postmodernist ideology that regulated my professional life. There are two elements of their argument with one another that have animated my inquiries: their respective takes on the status of truth and on the role of language vis-à-vis “reality.” One of the underlying assumptions of postmodernism, as this video pointed out, is that in some way, more or less, given whom you’re reading, linguistic/discursive systems precede/produce/create reality. I just don’t buy that, at least not always. There are things that are to me ineffable, which is to say they come before or after language. Many of the gurus and sages I wrote about last summer agree. I could go on and on to argue all of this out. But that’s not what I want to do today. I just want to look at how terms that end with -ism can lead to misunderstandings. One of the advantages of living through the transition from one -ism to another, as my generation did vis-à-vis the two I mention, is you get to meet and know the latter before it has been fully commodified by its new name. I had no idea what postmodernism even was let alone what it would become back in 1976 when I first read Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*. Reading that book just felt exciting, fun. At the most practical level, that’s what an -ism is before it’s an -ism: exciting, fun. Afterwards, not so much.

Looking back now through the lens of the -ism that swallowed Derrida and me and all of us, I see something else entirely. For example, I had no inkling back then that destabilizing truth and valorizing language would help to create the current dystopia in our body politic. I truly enjoyed reading Derrida for the first time, and I made use of his method in my own work. But I have a massive problem with how Donald Trump enacts his main street take on what postmodernism became for all the power brokers who never read any of its foundational texts. Deconstruction, for example, uses a very sophisticated set of tools to take apart the walls of words that masquerade as truth to hold us captive to the powers that be. Trump uses a bulldozer to level what's commonly agreed upon and then repeats lies over and over until they take its place, building a new set of walls detached even from obvious facts to return us into the captivity of the powers that be: the East Wing to Ballroom approach to deconstruction. In some ways, I now believe, you can't have one without the other. At least in Western culture truth and power are always dancing the tango. Just a matter of who gets to "lead." Once you presume the former no longer exists (which is not what Derrida said, at least in its most simplistic form, though that's how he and his cohort got translated into popular culture) you only have the latter. I'm not sure what's going on then, but it's not dancing. That's one of the things I now believe -isms end up doing: They serve power at the expense of truth. And they forget how to dance.

The text I'll be writing about today (with this in mind) and then intermittently over the coming weeks (with other things in mind)—in the way I wrote about quantum mechanics in the "In the Spirit" series—is the "lost" Gospel of Mary of Magdala. It may seem odd to open my inquiry with a text as remote and esoteric as this gospel, most likely originating in the second century CE, one that never came close to making it into the Biblical canon. The first and second centuries were the golden age of diversity in what was called back then "the Jesus movement." Local communities often produced their own gospels to tout the "good news" as they

understood it. Scholars suggest that as little as 1% of those materials survive for us to read today for many different reasons, including, of course, their destruction at the hands of the orthodox Catholic Church as it Romanized itself during the 4th and 5th centuries. I would not for example be reading this one now if a tattered partial copy of it hadn't emerged in an Egyptian marketplace late in the 19th century, a 5th century translation into Coptic from a Greek version (a fragment of which survives) that most likely dates to the 2nd century, pretty early in the game.

By the 5th century, this gospel likely had few devoted adherents—the orthodox Christian machinery was not a hotbed of feminism—and had already been precluded from the canon, like the other gospels that didn't make the cut, because it was heretical. The version I'm looking at, translated now into English, of course, wasn't even published until 1955 due a Keystone Cops-type series of accidents and impediments along the way. Though it was not part of the Nag Hammadi trove unearthed in Egypt in 1945, it is available in the Gnostic Society Library, a compendious online source for the surviving non-canonical gospels, if you're interested. I'm using the Karen L. King edition, which includes an extended and insightful commentary. I had read the text multiple times before I read that commentary (always my preference), and I agree with her analysis in almost all of its elements. I did NOT choose it to write about it here because I want to endorse its ideology—much of it I don't—but because it is treasure trove of teaching moments either founded in misunderstandings or resulting in misunderstandings. And I want to explore some of them, with a hope I might get to experience it the way I experienced Derrida: exciting and fun, before an -ism made it stop dancing.

Let me be clear at the outset: I am not a scholar of Biblical history or exegesis. I've done a lot of scholarly work in my own field, which is not either of these, and I've read enough of both to know what they are and what they do. They are useful and important disciplines. But they are not pertinent to what I am or what I want

to do with this, or any, wisdom text. What am I when I approach materials of this sort? I am a poet. What do I want to do? I want to teach myself to become more awake. Simple as that. I've had a lot to say over the years about both poetry and teaching, way too much to summarize here. But just so you know where I'm coming from: I valorize figure over representation in relation to verbal truth-telling; and I valorize dialogue over display in relation to pedagogical truth-seeking. All the sages I most admire speak/write figuratively, and they teach by indirection and recursion, both of which (in my opinion, if well-implemented) translate power out of realm of authoritative systems and into the realms of individual self-creators.

There are lots of Marys in Jesus' orbit, including, of course, his mother. Mary of Magdala is the most enigmatic, deemed variously to be anywhere from his most trusted confidant with whom he shared his deepest secrets (the story subtending this gospel) to an almost irrelevant reformed sex worker who plays a bit part in the resurrection narrative (the story subtending the orthodox Bible.) There is evidence (of sorts) to support each of these narrative lines, and many others. I take an interest in all of them and endorse none of them. I was raised Catholic and have spent some time studying the New Testament canon established as the foundation of the Romanized Church 1600 years ago. From the outset I, like many others, have noted the anti-feminist, sometimes misogynist, inclinations in that tradition both institutionally and textually. I've also spent some time listening, as deeply as I could, to what Jesus said and did during his time on earth, including how it pertains to matters of gender. I am now absolutely certain Jesus does not share and is not the ordinary source of those inclinations. Paul, some of the apostles, the early Church "fathers," yes, in spades. But not Jesus. So whenever there's a shred of material surviving to highlight that, as is the case with a number of the "lost" gospels—one of the reasons, I believe, they *got* "lost"—I like to read it. This is one of them.

I'll begin where this gospel does, at least in the currently available version. The first four pages were missing in the text purchased in that Egyptian marketplace. So we enter it with Jesus answering a question, apparently from one of the apostles, this way:

"... Will m[a]tter then be utterly [destroyed or not?]" The Savior replied, "Every nature, every modeled form, every creature, exists in and with each other. They will dissolve again into their own proper root. For the nature of matter is dissolved into what belongs to its nature.

Anyone with two ears able to hear should listen!"

Right off the bat, if you read this text any time after the 5th century, these references to "matter," "form" and "proper root" flag it as Gnostic, the dominant lens through which we now see (and misunderstand) most of the "lost" gospels. But when this text was written there was no such thing as a Gnostic (capital G), and the term Gnosticism as a broad-based category of religious denomination wasn't coined until the 17th century. Early Christian (1st/2nd century) devotees to this or the other "lost" gospels self-identified simply as Christians. If you asked any of them what Gnosticism was all about, as if it were a distinct sect, they would have had no idea what you were talking about. The Greek communities where this gospel most likely gained its initial purchase sometimes used the term *gnostikoi* in its everyday sense as "those with knowledge," especially of the self-generated sort. Which means in practical terms that they trusted direct experience over authoritarian orthodoxy, a big problem for the early Church fathers who devoted a lot of effort first to marginalize (Paul) and then to eliminate (Irenaeus, Augustine, Jerome, et al.) these dangerously anti-authoritarian tendencies. If you know anything about the life and death of Jesus, I think you can already see the irony, the hypocrisy really, of that move. So, in keeping with my theme here, if you're reading this or any of the other "lost" gospels

to figure out what Gnosticism is, you've already misunderstood them in fundamental ways.

What later came to be called Gnosticism had many variations in the early church, all of which share two fundamental features: a belief that spiritual wisdom was an inner-oriented mission and not the result of external indoctrination and that the realms of spirit and matter were distinct from one another, in some cases mildly, in some cases so radically that the natural world is considered a faulty creation of a malevolent demiurge, our bodies corrupt shells that need to be shed ASAP. One of them even claims that Jesus' crucifixion was not a corporeal event but an illusion. There, Jesus stands outside of the scene as an amused witness. The Gospel of Mary is not that. It proffers a very subtle version of these dualistic tendencies. To equate it with the more radical forms of early dualistic systems that later were comprised under the heading of Gnosticism is to misunderstand it. Jesus says two things here about the "matter" side of the binary: "every nature . . . exists in and with each other," and "the nature of matter is dissolved into what belongs to its nature," which suggest to me at least that the body and the spirit are companionable forms while they are here and that the universe we inhabit is unified and communal at the most fundamental level, both of which I agree with. I'd go so far as to say that the dualism expressed here is less extreme than the one that animates Augustine's metaphysics, which was and remains at the heart of mainstream Christianity.

As to the primacy of self-knowledge: The Gospel of Mary strongly endorses an inner-oriented conception of the true locus for spiritual knowledge (*gnosis* in its vernacular sense). In other words, it is anti-authoritarian, which is, I believe, the main thing that got it in hot water with orthodox Christianity. This gospel reads Jesus the way I do: The light is within, always with you; you just have to locate it, amplify it, and follow where it leads, into "the kingdom," which is right here, right now, not in some ethereal heavenly realm or at the end of time. If you do that well enough, you will, like

him, become enlightened. Simple as that. Part of that process, as Jesus makes expressly clear in the Gospel of Thomas and implicitly clear in this one, involves transcending gender, which is what makes this gospel important for recovering a genuine sense of a Christianity Jesus would be comfortable with.

Okay, so matter will be dissolved into its proper root. Jesus doesn't even allude here to the non-material realm of spirit, though he may have done that in the missing opening pages. What he refers to is "modeled form," which indexes this gospel, written first in Greek, to the culturally extant dualistic commonplaces derivative from Plato, which, again, didn't get turned into -isms (Neoplatonism and Gnosticism) until later on. In any case, this whole issue is introduced here so briefly and blandly that I'm not sure it's even possible to understand it enough to misunderstand it. All of which is to say that some misunderstandings are rooted deep in the heavily but invisibly freighted names we concoct, almost always *ex post facto*, to brand ideological movements, presuming then that they are retroactively true. Pretty much any name that has -ism at the end of it is one such.

My own field is full of terms of that sort: Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism, et al., on the grander scale; or the New Criticism, Imagism and Confessionalism, et al., on a more local scale. All of them create the illusion that a grand vision preceded some relatively modest, often experimental behaviors. Wordsworth did not sit down with a concept of Romanticism fledged in his head and set about laying down its foundation. He just wanted to write some poems of a kind that weren't in vogue at the time. The Southern Agrarians didn't set out to invent a New Criticism. They just wanted to reassert some of the traditional values of the ante-bellum South pertinent to reading and writing poetry. Ezra Pound was just looking for an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between words and things, which turned out to be what he called the image. Robert Lowell was just trying to get his head straight, had no interest in confession at all,

as best I can tell. Once you get to an -ism it's easy to lose sight of all that granular humanity and mundanity. And when you apply it blithely looking back, a lot gets lost, i.e., misunderstood.

On a more structural level, anyone who tries to render their experience to others via language has to confront another dilemma. Experience, direct experience especially, the kind that poets and spiritual visionaries specialize in, flows continuously, and often has a feel of atemporal simultaneity. Words don't. They parse, string things out over time. That's where my epigraph comes in. Language compels us, by its very nature, to create sequences where, at least in relation to direct experience, there aren't any in the first place. For example, one of the primary ways we make our experience legible to others socially is story. One of the things I noticed very quickly after my wife died, and wrote about back then, was that I no longer had regular conversations with her about "my day," a mode of storytelling we all engage in with partners. After a while, absent that pre-condition, I simply stopped translating my daily experience into narratives, even for myself, such that if someone who hadn't seen me for weeks asked what I was up to, I was literally at a loss for words. I could, of course, tell them what I had done that day, but the rest of it had simply gone directly into my internal inventory, *sans* transcription, remembered in my body and spirit, but not logged in via words. My "life" flowed like a river, one continuous stream moving at its own irregular rate, deeper or shallower, often with recursive, swirling eddies. When you want or need to explain all of this to others socially, you have to convert those currents into the currency of words, slicing it into bits, which come in fixed denominations that narrative conventions orient linear-forward via whatever exchange rates regulate such transactions in your historical moment or cultural context.

Under such a regime, which is simply socially normative, a certain degree of misunderstanding is built into the equation from the get-go, on both sides of the equation. Direct experiences are

irreducible by their nature to conventional narration. Same with transcendent experiences. So rendering them to others is a problem. But there are quite powerful modes of dialogical discourse that work pretty well for that, the ones poets, mystics, gurus, sages, musicians, even mathematicians tend to prefer, the ones that rely on figure and recursion rather than representation and sequence. And there are as well entirely non-symbolic vehicles for communication. I've written repeatedly for example of the sorts of intimate relationships I enjoy in the forests I walk through repeatedly over extended periods of time. Recent research tells us the things that live there have very sophisticated ways of communicating with one another, none of which involve words. And if you enter their domains with an open spirit, they will, in time, find ways to communicate with you. And vice-versa. That may sound naively new-agey, but the direct experience of such relationships is so profoundly compelling to me that I often feel less misunderstood in these spaces than in the human communities I try to tell my stories to.

Which gets me to the final thing I want to say about this passage. Jesus concludes his brief remarks with his famous “ears to hear” trope. What I like about this iteration is that he says it takes “two ears” to hear if you want to “listen.” In my opinion, the most basic foundational skill you need to develop to avoid misunderstanding is to listen. I'll be writing about that in detail in a subsequent piece, maybe two (I have a lot to say about it!). I say “develop” rather than simply rely on because culture and society gradually deprive us the ability of “hear” in the way Jesus mandates. We are, I believe, born with a capacity to hear “with two ears,” a skill eventually indoctrinated out of us, the same way we are indoctrinated out of our innate capacity for direct experience and into the mazes of discourse that become our primary social currencies. What forms does this “indoctrination” take? Most are categorical, the beliefs, stereotypes, biases, and prejudices that we assimilate (mostly via language) pertinent to race, gender, social class, sexual, religious and national identities, etc., *ad infinitum*.

More than a few of them are -isms. Hang around for a while with very young children and you realize they don't have these. They learn them. Jesus says over and over that you need to unlearn them to have any chance of entering the kingdom. His tendency to foreground children as a model for adult behavior has at least partially to do with this: Children know how to hear with two ears.

The addition of “two” also suggests to me, metaphorically, that hearing is not simply a mechanical process. Our cliché of “in one ear and out the other” conveys the same implication negatively. If you imagine listening as learning how to allow what is being heard to go “in” both ears simultaneously, the chances it will leak out the other is at least reduced—because it will be running into itself somewhere in between. Beyond that, if you borrow the moderate dualism of this particular gospel, you realize that while hearing may begin with “matter,” all those physical vibrations turning into psychic events, it takes mental, even spiritual, work to convert them into astute and durable meanings. In other words, we have two kinds of ears, outer and inner, matter and spirit. Listening requires both. If you can't use the second kind, you will misunderstand to some degree pretty much everything that arrives via the first.

I spent my career teaching discussion-based classes, 20-30 young people convened in small rooms to learn what I was there to teach. Having useful discussions in sites like this can be challenging. To do it well you need, together, to listen with both ears. My preferred term to characterize that kind of interaction is “dialogue,” whose roots mean simply to converse mindfully between, which foregrounds the mutuality of this kind of discourse. Where you situate the dominant locus of authority in an arena of this sort is determinative. Many teachers would argue that as the experts on the matters at hand their position in the dialogue should be primary, proprietary even. I went the opposite way. For any significant learning to take place, I believed it had to arise within the student, the same way all of my own best learning arose in me.

So I construed my role less as a “professor,” whose roots mean to declare (literally confess) on behalf of, and more as a “respondent,” whose roots mean to answer (literally pledge) back. Which is to say that the most important work I had to do was listen to what was being proffered and then cultivate it into genuine knowledge. That’s easier said than done.

One skill I had to develop when a student spoke (in response to some prompt, say) was to temporarily empty my head of my own predilections at that moment—the plan I had for that day, the vision I had for the course, all the things I already knew about the subject at hand, why I posed that question, how much time was left in class, all of it—to hear not just a series of words that I could use to extend my preconceived agenda, but to hear a human being seeking meaning. And to use what I heard (with my own two ears) to say something sensible and pertinent back, restoring then all of those contextual matters I had just set aside. That was the foundational unit of the form of dialogue I preferred. Hear with two ears, pledge something back. And, if possible, do it with everyone present at least once each class period. Whether or not I could orchestrate all of these “units” into something wholistic required a different kind of discipline that I’ll go into in more detail, as I said, in subsequent pieces. That remains the mode of listening I aspire to in every conversation I have.

I’ve just said something about how I conceptualized my own two ears. But what about the students? How do their ears come into it? They are along the way listening to both me and their colleagues, hopefully carefully and beneficially. But I want to say a few things about how they learn to listen to themselves, which is, to me, how discourse gets turned into knowledge. I’ll use the analogy of singing. I like to sing. I write some of my own songs, but mostly I sing covers. When you first start to sing covers, the tendency is to simulate as closely as possible the original performance. Sooner or later a singer realizes that their own voice is not a limitation that needs to be overridden but a foundational resource for creating

their own version of a song. Once you begin to find your distinctive voice, even if, as in my case, it's not a particularly "good" one, you begin to invest your performance with your own emotional and experiential resonances. It may not sound as perfect as the original, but it has an authenticity to it, becomes "moving" in a way different from the original, especially to you in the moment of performance. That's what you have to proffer, uniquely, both to yourself and to any potential listener, with the hope they will be similarly moved not just by your voice but by a desire to cultivate their own.

That gets me halfway there with my singing analogy. The second half involves recording my performance and then listening to it, someone else's words made authentically my own coming back to me through vibrating air, moving my spirit in another way altogether. It is an eerie experience hearing your own voice singing someone else's words as if they are your own. Which is to say that they don't belong fully to their source nor to you. Your spirits share them. That's the first step in true learning, whether it originates in reading or viewing instructional material or listening to a teacher. You make others' words your own by listening with two ears. Do that enough, and pretty soon you develop a distinctive voice that also intimates what *you* want to say about the subject at hand. You stop regurgitating or ventriloquizing, you begin to profess. And a freshman, if you help them learn to listen with "two ears" to what *they* think and say, can learn to profess and to feel how confidence-inducing it is to do so.

When I record my singing, I usually do it with multiple takes. The version I choose to put on my phone to listen to while I walk is usually the one that brings tears to my eyes, even if it's not technically the best-sounding. These tears have nothing to do with sadness; they have to do with authenticity: I hear me singing myself into being through someone else's words and I'm moved by it. That process began with having two ears to hear the original, evolved through having two ears to hear myself, and was

consummated in that final act of listening to those merged voices as if through both sets of ears simultaneously. The learning process is analogous. You start by simulating your sources, often simply by quoting them. But, over time, as you read and listen more and better, something magically alchemical begins to happen: All those words you borrowed from others start turning toward your own. You need fewer and fewer quotation marks and footnotes. You can hear yourself singing your own song via the songs others have created. That, in my opinion, is how you become distinctively good at what you are preparing to do with your professional life, a genuine scholar.

A further inversion along this path is to learn to listen to the words that now come out as yours as if they are someone else's. My template for thinking about the way this works is how I consume my own writing. I've said many times that what I write feels, in the moment of composition, to be coming from somewhere "outside" of my local-in-that-moment me. It's more like I'm typing than writing. Writers use terms like the unconscious or the muse or "flow" to suggest what that experience feels like. Which means I need to do a lot of re-reading to figure out what I just wrote. Some of that is the compulsory revisionary work I do before I "publish" what I've written, the "getting it clean and right" part. But the version of re-reading I'm interested in here is the kind I do *after* I publish something, whether my books or my poems, each of which I re-read repeatedly, anywhere from 10 to 30 or more times, often spread over many years, depending on what I want to glean from them. That may sound inane, even narcissistic: Why would I need to re-read repeatedly what I have already processed in order to write it, acting as if it was written by someone else? Well because in certain important respects it was written not just *for* someone else, but *by* someone else, my not-there-me. So, in order for my now-here-me to fully know what I purport to know in my writing, I need to learn and relearn it repeatedly, *ex post facto*. And I do that via re-reading, a process that is the opposite of learning a cover. In this case, I'm hearing my own words come back to me as if they

are someone else's rather than someone else's coming back to me as if they are my own.

So how does this pertain to Mary's gospel? I said above that I approach texts, especially wisdom texts, as a poet. That's the practice of listening I described. And I said that what I want to do is teach myself to become more awake. That's the practice of rereading I described. Finally, I inhabit as carefully as I can the words of others until I am moved enough by them to begin to transfigure them into mine. That's the practice of singing I described. Put them all together and that's the practice of teaching I aspire toward. I don't have a "class" in front of me now, of course. No matter. In an email I received just last night, a friend who knows me deeply said: "You are your best and most trusted interlocutor." Which is to say that I live with my class now 24/7. We have a blast together. This term I have a wonderful colleague with me here. Her name is Mary. She doesn't talk much but has cool things to say. I'll see what sense I can make of them in the coming days, before they got co-opted by an -ism, doing my best not to misunderstand.

Can you hear me now?

My daughter was a teacher for 20 years, pre-school through middle-school, before she moved out of the classroom and into public administration. When she interviews for positions now that foreground leadership skills, her interrogators ignore that experience entirely, as if it is not applicable in their “real world” arenas. She has extraordinary leadership skills. Whenever I ask myself where and how she acquired them, I come to the same conclusion: in front of all those classrooms motivating young people to learn.

We tend in the American culture to devalue, even derogate, the profession of teaching and teachers in general, as in that famous diss: “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” If you think that’s true, stand up day after day in front of groups of 20-40 young people rotating through your little room one after another day after day and try to turn it into a space where they will not only learn what you have been hired to teach, but come to love the process of doing so. Together. With you. Do it for a few years. You will either have turned yourself into a good teacher who knows what to “do” to show students how they “can” too; or a petty tyrant (mean or snarky, both the same) from which position you can oppress recalcitrant young people forever. The same goes for leadership positions in the workplace, where you are charged with assuring that teams of various sizes and kinds reach goals or meet quotas. Do it for a few years. You will either have turned yourself into a good leader that your teams will eagerly support and follow; or into a “boss,” the default model for supervising others in our culture, from which position you can oppress recalcitrant subordinates forever.

I say this at the outset to indicate my belief that teaching and leading go hand in hand: A good teacher is a good leader, a good leader is a good teacher. You need exactly the same skills to be successful at either. I'll be writing about one of them today: listening. My imagined audience as I wrote this was not primarily teachers (who may yet find some of it useful) or workaday world leaders (who might also glean something of value), but those interview teams who presume that candidates like my daughter bring five years of pertinent leadership experience to their table instead of twenty-five. I'm not suggesting to them that teachers should be a target demographic to recruit from. I'm saying that good teachers are already good leaders. To discount what they have to offer is to say already that you don't know what good leadership is and will most likely end up hiring the "right" person for your organizational culture but the "wrong" person to lead you forward.

...

*"The eye — it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.*

*"Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.*

*"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
Of things forever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come
But we must still be seeking?"*

*“Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may,
I sit upon this old gray stone,
And dream my time away.”*

William Wordsworth

During the latter stages of my career I acquired a reputation as an effective teacher of “discussion-based” classes. About 10 years before I retired, I was invited to give a brief (30 minute) professional development presentation for interested faculty about my “tricks of the trade.” First thing I told them is I had no tricks, didn’t believe in them. If they came for that they would leave disappointed. There were, though, certain things, I said, you can do to create a classroom culture in which genuine dialogue can flourish. They were simple, everyday things that people do in social situations all the time, which for some reason professors think are not pertinent to this obviously social situation: learn names, ask open questions, listen carefully, respond authentically, give your interlocutor(s) an equal chance to speak, those kinds of things. Then I did a couple of quick demonstrations to illustrate the difference between doing and not doing them. Disappointment radiated from the audience like heat from a fireplace. I think they thought I was withholding my secrets out of selfishness or spite. I never saw the reviews my performance (mercifully) and was never invited back. But had I been, I would have said and done exactly the same thing.

“William” is talking (above) to his buddy “Matthew,” who has been chastising him for sitting passively—and what appears to him to be mindlessly—on an “old, gray stone” instead of making something of himself. There are two kinds of misunderstanding Matthew embodies in this interaction. One of them has to do with William’s mode of learning, premised on “conversing” silently with “things forever speaking” rather than “seeking.” Matthew

simply cannot fathom what that means and doesn't try. Which leads to his second kind of misunderstanding, of William himself as a human presence who's doing his best to make himself known to his "friend." Matthew hears him. He's just not listening. I mean that "two ears" kind of listening Jesus keeps asking for and seems so rarely to find, the kind that brings your interlocutor into being in that moment, not just heard but "seen," in the way we use that term figuratively when someone else recognizes us as fully human, present, right here, right now, the kind that says "I may never fully understand you, but I refuse to misunderstand you by presuming I already know exactly who you are or what you're trying to say."

There's tons of stuff out there in the marketplace about something called "active" listening. A lot of it is useful, some of it quite good. But I want to draw on my 50 years of experience of teaching discussion-based classes to say some things about the efficacy of "passive" listening. I know that sounds like an oxymoron. So I will, below, be very specific about what it means, to highlight how hard it can be, in case you might be inclined to think otherwise. I have no quarrel with active listening. It is a crucial skill if you want to be a good critical thinker and a productive agent in dialogical interactions, especially right after you've done some passive listening. But if you want to be a really good teacher, a really good leader, pretty much a really good anything in the human universe, making sure your two ears can hear not only "with" but "against" your will is important. It's on that other frequency, the one your head is too set in its ways or too distracted to tune into, that crucial information is traveling. Lending your ears to it is what makes passive listening, and sooner or later you, "wise."

My runway here is going to be a long one, starting 2500 years with one of Plato's dialogues, *The Protagoras*. In this dialogue Socrates has an extended argument with Protagoras, a famous "sophist" in his day. Sophists were basically itinerant teachers who, for a fee, would instruct students, mostly sons of the wealthy, on how to

become socially and politically successful. Socrates engages in this conversation on behalf of a young Athenian, Hippocrates, who is head-over-heels taken with Protagoras and wants to become his devoted student, which Socrates believes is a huge mistake, one that risks his very “soul.” So basically, you have three over-the-top players in this game: Protagoras who has every reason to believe he is the cat’s meow of teachers, Hippocrates, who thinks Protagoras is superman, and Socrates, who thinks Protagoras is sham, a scam, even demonic, all that soul-sucking business. Not the best ingredients for a good “class.”

Their argument ends up, as many of Plato’s do, centered on “virtue,” which boils down here to the difference between becoming “better” (in socially normative ways) and being “good” (in morally performative ways), an eternal human conundrum. It opens with the trope of the “better man” Protagoras promises he will make of Hippocrates (or anyone who comes into his orbit) little by little every day. Socrates pesters him to admit that his “better” means simply prominent, powerful, even famous, for all the “right” reasons. Socrates as always wants to promote “the good,” by means of which, if his career is any indication, you may also become prominent, powerful, even famous, but for all the “wrong” reasons. Protagoras was rich and revered. Socrates was impoverished and put to death. ‘Nuf said about that.

There’s not a lot of “wise passiveness” going on between these two. Both have fixed, pre-formed agendas, they disagree fundamentally, each wants badly to “win,” using every trick in the book to do so, and, in the end, they both “lose” in quite a comical way (Plato has a cool sense of humor!) It’s a fascinating contest, but neither of them ends up teaching or learning anything, i.e., changing based on their interaction. When I wrote about this piece in *Writing/Teaching*, I argued that Hippocrates, who witnesses all this but never says a word, may well have learned a lot—like whether he wants to take classes from either or neither of these guys. And we might also from our own extrinsic position as

equally silent witnesses, if we imagine ourselves into his place. Or not. No way to know for sure in Hippocrates' case. He still never says a word. You'd have to read the whole thing to decide whether you would. Then we could talk.

I call attention to this mostly because the two main players have an ongoing sub-argument about interrogation and display as modes of pedagogy, specifically who should get to ask the questions and who should get to give the answers. They go back and forth until it gets settled the way Socrates prefers (as everything pretty much always does in his arguments.) He gets to do what he does best: ask the prickly, probing, pain in the ass questions he was so adept at. Protagoras gets to do what he does best: provide elegant, often smart, always long-winded, sometimes boring as hell responses. It is an odd admixture of what we called in the academy the "lecture" and "discussion" methods of teaching. Neither of these was my preferred mode of teaching, because neither party in interactions of those kinds changes much, the whole point, in my opinion, of a genuinely pedagogical "dialogue," the term I favored to conceptualize classroom discourse. [Yes, we call Plato's texts "dialogues," and they are, all of them, back and forth conversations between or among smart people. But they are more like arguments than dialogues in the way I want to recommend here.]

My go-to source for defining what genuinely dialogical interactions are is Mikail Bakhtin, a 20th century Russian rhetorical theorist, most especially via his concept of "unfinalizability" as he outlines it in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984). He introduces the concept this way, describing the distinctively realistic way Dostoevsky deploys his characters:

They all acutely sense their own inner unfinalizability, their capacity to outgrow, as it were, from within and to render untrue any externalizing and finalizing definition of them. As long as a person is alive [s]he lives by the

fact that [s]he is not yet finalized, that [s]he has not yet uttered the ultimate word. (59)

The application here is to the concept of “understanding,” which has a finalized aspect to it. When we reach that state of mind, we tend to think that we are done, have something stable and durable that we can rely on going forward, if not forever at least for the foreseeable future. So we stop. Bakhtin says not so fast. So do I. To be alive is to change. So good listening practices need to be ongoingly alert and responsive to that vitality, whose primary feature is changefulness. If you don’t finalize, you can’t understand. And by the calculus I laid out in my previous essays in this series, you won’t *misunderstand*. The ways Matthew does, for example, both not good.

Bakhtin generalizes unfinalizability, as it applies broadly to human life in the world, this way:

A [wo]man never coincides with [her]self. One cannot apply to [her] the formula of $A=A$. . . [T]he genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non-coincidence between a [wo]man and [her]self. . . . The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself. (59. I revised the gender in these passages because I think Bakhtin, were he alive today, would do that himself.)

I especially like that baffling second sentence, which suggests to me that “the personality” of an individual can only be “genuine” when she is non-coincidental with herself, a kind of radical freedom from the before and after in the moment, which is related to the A that was already there but alters it into something non- or extra-A in the serendipity of the interaction, such that “the formula of $A=A$ ” “cannot apply.” Ever. It is in that indeterminate liminal

space, the now-A on its way to becoming the next-A, that growthful teaching and learning become not only possible, but joyous.

Here's how that state of being felt to me when I stood in front of a class after I posed a question. I knew that everyone in the group already had something in front of them prepared to offer in response. I explain how and why below. Sometimes I'd ask for a volunteer to get started, sometimes just call on someone by name, someone whose body language suggested to me an eagerness to reply. Knowing names and noticing non-verbal cues are both crucial for passive listening. Again, I explain how and why below. At that moment, every aspect of the trajectory or subject of the course, my "plan" for that day, what I already knew about the person about to speak, and, especially, about my take on the question at hand had to go silent. Some of those things were like fixed rails my thinking would be barreling down, the overall "agenda" that led up to and then might lead away from this moment. Some of them were like inner "noise," the kind, say, that arises (for me, given my temperament) from anxiety in social moments or my obsession with "getting to the point." Some of them were like the below-water parts of icebergs, the vast reservoirs of knowledge I'd worked hard to acquire, the ones I might presume gave me an overdetermined sense of judgmental authority in relation to the topic *du jour*, prodding me to prove I deserved to be standing in front of the room at that moment, a chronic blah, blah, blah bogeyman for teachers and leaders in our culture. None of that actually went away completely or forever, of course. It got temporarily set aside, sidelined, submerged, suppressed (depending on which of the contributors to not-listening you want to focus on.) Passive listening begins with un-hearing all of that. It's like standing in a very peaceful, almost timeless, inner space that is fulsomely empty. When I entered that state, what the person in front of me said seemed almost magical, absolutely fascinating. It filled up that space with itself. And the possibility for an authentic in-the-moment response emerged

natively in that moment. In other words, I could say something back that (I hoped) would feel to my interlocutor both genuine and generative. In those moments, I was not only teaching, I was learning.

So, if you want to listen better, learn how to quiet all that head-buzz for an instant whenever you choose, how to “will” yourself into a state of mind that silences willfulness. The first and hardest step toward that end is realizing that all that stuff is there in the first place, taking up so much space between your two ears there’s no room for what’s floating toward you from another human presence to find a path toward being heard. In the companion poem for the one I quote William describes all of this in even more detail. The final two lines are:

Come forth, and bring with you a heart

That watches and receives.

That’s what “wise” passiveness feels like: a state of full attention, watching and receiving, aural becoming visual and vice-versa, a type of synesthesia that good teachers and leaders not only “can” “do” but want to. To create an arena, whether in a classroom or a workplace, where this state of attention can flourish routinely, not just for you but for everyone, there are very specific conditions that need be met. I only have space today to write about one, so I’m picking the most important: safety.

I’ll begin with the typical dynamic that tends to emerge “naturally” in any group setting, whether it’s a classroom or a meeting space. Some of those present will be over-talkers, most under-talkers, some non-talkers. In a culture of that sort, left unattended, the over-talkers will dominate the discussion, to the chagrin of the under-talkers and the relief of the non-talkers. Some of this is determined by temperament, some by gender, etc. The “why” doesn’t matter. It’s the “what to do about it” I’m interested in. I

realized early in my career that moderating the over-talkers and drawing out the non-talkers was key to having a genuinely democratic classroom, one where the under-talkers could also emerge and flourish. In other words, everyone talked about equally. Creating a culture of that sort takes some work. That's where safety comes in.

There is always a degree of risk when one speaks up in a group setting, which means that most people most of the time are experiencing some form of performance anxiety. The school setting, which often operates on an economy of "right or wrong," is obviously fraught. No one wants to be called out as "wrong" in front of their peers. Teachers do that mindlessly all the time. The same economy applies, though more subtly, in most workplaces, where wrong and right tend to get translated into "smart" and, well, "less smart." Ditto about how you don't want to feel in front of your peers. Changing that dynamic means changing one's fundamental assumptions about what students/workers bring to their respective "tables," especially by understanding that those who talk a lot are not by default right or smart by comparison to those who don't talk at all. Quite often it's just the opposite.

Because many teachers and bosses presume that those in their charge are recalcitrant partners in the enterprise, they define their main "job" as oversight (often literally) and judgment, two things most people in subordinate positions don't particularly enjoy and become quite adept at evading when they can. Which means that pretty much everyone in the group is on the defensive to some degree. And with good reason: They have been abused or victimized themselves, or witnessed how others were, often enough in school or workplace settings to know they want to avoid that outcome. So how to counter that? Here's what I finally concluded, at least in my little domain of classrooms, where "participation" was a power- and grade-related currency: Both those who talk too expansively and excessively and those who don't talk at all are managing language to cope with their anxiety

about accountability. Non-talkers go out of their way to avoid accountability by not saying anything, over-talkers “flood the field” with a fog of words so dense that they can’t be held accountable for any of them. Same problem, opposite strategies for dealing with it. So what’s the solution? Mine was to focus on relieving that anxiety, the first step toward safety. I found out that once performance anxiety diminishes, imbalances level out, and it happens surprisingly quickly. No one talks too much, no one is always silent.

Before I talk about how I did this, let me be absolutely clear about one of the things safety does not mean in such collective spaces: that anyone can say “exactly what they think” without consequence. Classrooms and workplaces are spaces people gather to get some work done, ideally collaboratively. And the primary purpose and outcome of that work is futural. For students it is preparatory for their professional contributions to society. It is not to sort people by grades. I’ve observed hundreds of teachers and classes. In the best ones, the assumption is that everyone can and should succeed, and within reason they do. In other words, your job is to elevate everyone not just to *your* “passing” level, but to *their* peak level. In the worst, the assumption is that those who come in with the tools for success ready-made will succeed at the expense of others, and they do. In other words, your job is to cull, not teach. I’m sure you can do the math to translate this into the economy of the workplace. If you think about what you do and why in front of a classroom in futural terms, its magnitude becomes awe-inspiring. In the workplace, the futural purpose is similarly external to the meeting space. It may be figuring out how better to care for troubled children. It may be how better to produce and sell widgets. In either case, the purpose of a meeting is not the meeting itself or, much worse, to schedule another meeting because this one failed to come to its intended realization. It’s to take what you learned there and apply it outside the meeting, creating a new future in your arena of responsibility.

Once students or workers begin to believe that their work is accomplished simply by showing up for class or attending meetings, you have lost the room. Or, more accurately, the room has lost you. So it follows that what gets said needs to be pertinent both to the overall purpose of that work and to the moment in time it happens to occupy on its path toward fulfillment. It is the obligation of the leader to instill that sense of duty to the collective, behaviorally at least, and, when necessary, assertively, until it becomes second nature. You can use fear to do that, of course, the preferred weapon of tyrannical teachers and bosses. But fear is the enemy of safety. In my experience, setting clear (and high) expectations and believing they are both warranted and achievable, creating a shared set of practices to enact them, following those unwaveringly, and treating everyone respectfully are better ways to get you there.

As to my preferred shared practices: My goal in every class session was to hear from every student pertinent to the question at hand about equally. I always had everyone write a brief response, either ahead of time or to an in-class prompt. So I knew everyone had that in front of them. Right off the bat then, every possible response was in the Goldilocks zone: Not nothing, not overmuch. After a while this mode of both equity and efficiency became habitual. I also made it a point to know every student's name by the second class session. There are multiple ways to do that; it just takes some effort. At the beginning of the second class, I'd go around the room and call each student by their name, just to be sure I got it correct. Does this make a difference to them? On a few occasions, after I was done, the class applauded. So, yes, it makes a difference. It says I know you as a distinct individual, I see you there, we are here together. So let's get to work. In that failed presentation to my university peers, one of my demonstrations was the difference respondents felt between my just pointing to them or saying "you, in the back row" and calling them by name (which I asked them). Everyone felt more "seen" in the latter case, more

like a human being than an avatar. They tended to relax rather than freeze.

Then, as I said above, I would respond authentically. One of my other demonstrations that day was the felt difference between getting a response clearly pertinent to what you said or having the one in charge say nothing and simply point to someone else to “contribute” to the discussion. Visible and invisible are two of the metaphors people used. From which position would you most likely be inclined to “participate” again? My job then would be to make connections, that, over time, pieced these contributions together into something cogent, something that by the end of the session I could summarize: This is what we (including me) learned today; this is where it takes us in our extended journey together this semester; this is where I want to start next time. That’s how all of that stuff I set aside to listen passively comes back into play: the syllabus, the class plan, everything I knew about the subject, my obsessive inclinations for closure; they are all essential to reach this intersection between now and what’s next.

I want to conclude with what I think is one of the most destructive cultural commonplaces about “safety” in group settings: that it is fostered via nurtural behaviors associated with maternity. This is, to me, the primary reason our culture demeans teaching as profession, by, for example, refusing to pay teachers a fully professional wage or by assuming experience of this sort is not transferrable to “the real world.” The underlying premise to support that inequity is that most teachers are either women or are otherwise feminized and would be happy to do this nurtural work for free, the way we assume (in an equally toxic way) that mothers will and should do that work for their children no matter how miserable we make their lives. This attitude not only infantilizes those in our “care,” it infantilizes those providing care. That is not safety. It is abuse. Children are people; workers are people. Let me repeat that: Children are people; workers are people. You may think that goes without saying. If so, I invite you to remember as

many of the times in your own schooling that you were treated like a fully-fledged human being with all the rights we associate with that status. And then all the times at work you were treated likewise. If those are the preponderance of your memories, you are blessed. Most students and workers are not.

So, finally: Good teachers are good leaders. Already. If you're interviewing one you will understand how "good" they will be at the latter if you ask them about how they did the former. If you don't, you're not interviewing them. You're interviewing yourself, unable to hear them with two ears, unable to see what's right in front of you here and now. Go out and sit on "an old gray stone" for a while and learn how to listen.

Dark Matters

*as each wave reaches
the beach a search
for stillness ceases*

*where do they go
these repeating ripples
deleting at my feet*

*sea and stone
still exactly what
and where they were*

*all that reaching
breached abruptly
the way speaking*

*seeks listening
word after word
yearning to be heard*

I wrote this poem a few days ago after a walk along Budd Inlet in Squaxin Park. I find the repeating patterns of waves endlessly lapping ashore quite mesmerizing, my wondering how all that water gets recycled back into the system. It's as if each wave just drops off the edge of the sea and disappears into the cobbled beach, the way escalator stairs do at the top and bottom. You know something must be turning them back around, you just can't see how. The poem has two applications here: First, to my own "word after word yearning to be heard." I've started this essay over and over this week trying to gain some traction on the next phase of my response to The Gospel of Mary of Magdala, little wave after little wave getting sucked back into stony silence, no way forward. Second, to Mary's "speaking," which "seeks listening:" Her words

are lapping ashore here in Olympia a couple of millennia after she uttered them, having been at first intentionally misread and then, by that means, silenced completely. I'm trying my best to hear them with two ears, but it's turning out to be more difficult to do that than I expected. Today, I feel at an intuitional level like I finally know what I want to say. It's just that it's all there at once, meanings twisted over and into other meanings, more a palimpsest of images than a sequence of sounds, all space, no time. Now I need to convert them into the currency of words strung out in long lines, all time, no space.

When we were kids my brothers and I often went fishing at my uncle's farm, the three of us out on the lake in a rowboat. The gear we had was pretty primitive, especially the cheap open-faced reels common back then, so prone to backlash. If you've never fished, a backlash is when you cast your bait and instead of the line zipping out where it might entice something, it just mashes up together on top of the reel, maybe 30 feet of line tangled in huge ball. I mean like Gordian-knot tangled. I didn't much enjoy fishing, so my job was to untangle the backlashes, each of which might take 20 minutes of step-by-step ins and outs, a surgically precise procedure. By the time I had one done, there was invariably another. So I got good at turning space (those gnarly knots) into time (the long lines.) Writing is often like that to me. I see the whole thing in my head, tangled up into itself, like the many contorted dimensions imagined by string theorists; and I need to figure out how to parse it into forward-oriented words and sentences. In the former state, it is synthetic, one thing all at once; in the latter it is laid out, many connected things arranged processionally. I keep wanting just to show you the damn knot, assuming you might enjoy unwinding it. But most readers would rather fish.

Quite often I enjoy that process of untangling. But not this week. As I said, I've been trying over and over to write my commentary on the next tiny section of the Gospel of Mary of Magdala, mostly

some things Jesus says to the group before he leaves. I keep trying to hear “with two ears” what he is saying as if I were back there, right next to him, without 2000 years of history in between. That’s way easier said than done, I’m finding, like trying to emulate the child Jesus has invited up to stand next to him as a model for all the adults listening. The child does not have to become “like” a child: She “is” one. The adults, like me, well, we’re not. Jesus is “there.” I am not, I’m “here.” “Like” vs. “is,” “here” vs. “there,” that maddening “not” always between them: That is the human conundrum in a nutshell, especially when language is involved, lots of “like” and “here,” “not” much “is” and “there.” I’ve now read and reread the next section of Mary’s gospel many times, feeling as if my reading is growing more and more eccentric. I understand, from what I know about how Christianity has (d)evolved over the last two millennia, what I’m supposed to make of the things Jesus says here: Either they are heretical and need to get lost; or they lay down an alternative track for Christianity and need to be resurrected. But the more I read it, the less it sounds like either of those. That’s where “dark matter” comes in.

As you know if you follow my work, I am a closet physics geek, a discipline rife with a faith that a “theory of everything” (the current mantra) is right around the corner. At certain historical moments, there is a general sense that all it will take to get are there a few finishing flourishes. One such moment happened toward the end of the 19th century. In 1874 Max Planck, of Planck’s constant and Planck-length fame, was told by his professor, Philipp von Jolly (what a great name!), that he should study something other than physics because there was so little left to know in the discipline. Undeterred, he set out to settle one of the few remaining “problems,” a glitch in the mathematics of blackbody radiation called “the ultraviolet catastrophe” (sounds like an Andy Warhol installation.) In 1900, he finally concluded that the only solution to the problem was to divide up light energy into little packets he called quanta. He didn’t know exactly why or what that meant, just that it brought the math into consonance with real-world evidence.

But instead of tying a bow on physics (okay, *now* everything is settled, let me go major in philosophy or finance), it flung the package wide open again, revealing the vast, alien terrain of quantum phenomena that lay unexplored. From “little left to know” to “yikes, we know next to nothing.”

There is a similar “catastrophe” brewing right now based on the observations of the James Webb Telescope, which is taking pictures of things way, way out there that, given the commonly agreed upon origin story for our universe—a singularity Big Banging us into being 13.8 billion years ago—apparently shouldn’t exist. This has astrophysicists in a lather about maybe having to go back to the drawing board on their “standard (Lambda Cold Dark Matter) model,” something they believed a few weeks ago was just a few tweaks shy of complete. Two casualties of that “going back” may turn out to be the fudge factors invented in the 20th century to make astronomical observations balance out mathematically: dark energy, presumed to constitute about 75% of what’s out there, stretching spacetime like air blown into a balloon full of galaxies; and dark matter, presumed to constitute most of the rest, holding galaxies together as if they are encased in some sort of gravitational mesh bag. Basically, then, 95% of the universe is “dark” to us. Hardly a “theory of everything” just over the horizon! The only reason, as best I can tell, that wasn’t already perceived as a Sargent Schulz-level muddle (“I see nothing! I know nothing!”) was the assumption that at least we had names for these two things, had some idea what they did, even if we had no clue what they were. Now, once again, we may know neither.

Fritz Zwicky came up with the concept of “dark matter” in 1933 to account for his observation that the galaxies in the Coma Cluster (again, a wonderful name!) were moving so rapidly that they should be flying apart instead of remaining intact, which they clearly did. What his data needed to explain this anomaly was the gravitational pull of a lot of matter that simply didn’t seem to be there. So he fudged it in, calling it “dark.” Forty years later Vera

Rubin and Kent Ford performed detailed observations of individual stars on the Andromeda galaxy. They noted that the stars at the outer edges were moving just as fast as the inner stars, as if the whole galaxy was ensconced in an envelope of sorts that kept it spinning more like a giant wheel than a swirling vortex of individual stars, the outer bands of which would spin off into deep space. Dark matter became the explanation for that “halo.” Rubin said that “in a spiral galaxy, the ratio of dark-to-light matter is about a factor of ten.” Further studies have settled on about half that, 5:1, still a huge chunk of stuff that simply cannot be accounted for by normal observational means.

One effect of matter on the cosmological scale is that it distorts light coming from a galaxy cluster whose path to our eyes is blocked by another one. We can, amazingly, actually “see” the one behind because its light diffuses as it flares out on its way around the gravitational sink—that intervening obstruction—standing between it and here, like water spreading around a rock in a stream. That phenomenon, called “gravitational lensing,” can make the light appear blurry, haloed, distorted, stretched, even multiplied into an array of ghost images. The degree of that effect should be easily calculable based on the known mass of what we see, the visible “rock,” but the figures just don’t jibe unless you punch in a lot more mass, about 5 times more. Then, *voila*, the numbers work. Even more strangely, gravitational lensing sometimes occurs when there doesn’t seem to be anything at all obstructing the incoming light. It’s as if a big blob of gravity is just sitting there in empty space. Again, you can calculate its mass via the distortion, but you can’t see any “rock” at all to account for it. As in the case of Planck’s solution to the ultraviolet catastrophe, no one yet knows exactly what this stuff is. But math and observation concur, so it must be there.

“So what?” I can hear you asking. As in “So, what could all of this meander possibly have to do with what you’re writing about, your impasse with Mary’s gospel?” Well, begin by imagining the inside

of your head as a universe filled with all the visible matter you've learned intentionally along the way and all the dark matter you've absorbed unconsciously over the course of your lifetime to organize what and how you see, the apparently "true stuff" allowing you to hallucinate a reality that makes sense in your cultural context. And "you," as a center of consciousness, are like the JWT, looking out through all of that at brand new things almost beyond your ken. It's one thing to see all that incoming light blurred through a lens you know is there, the ones you've labored to install yourself. I wrote last time for example about the seismic shift I had to make in my reading and writing habits to "retool" myself professionally once postmodernism showed up. I also needed, along the way, to do a similar kind of work with many of the assumptions I inherited from family/culture, pertinent to things like racial, gender, and class values, for example, that had passed their sell-by date. One thing you learn via maneuvers of this sort is that what you previously took for granted never really goes away. It just gets overwritten. It's all still there except, as Derrida says, "under erasure." Those things are like the "known unknowns" military minds like to index as they plan their battles. You can factor them out when you need to and factor in the revised versions. It's another thing altogether, though, to see that light being blurred by what appears to be nothing at all. Clearly, the lens doing that must also be a cultural construction, except you have no idea how it got there or what it is, the dreaded "unknown unknown" that can (and often does) derail the best laid battle plans.

That's where I am now with this gospel, vision blurred, not sure how to clarify a "reading" I can stand behind. When I end up in positions of this sort, and I do quite often, the best way forward for me is to start writing, somewhere, anywhere. So that's what I'll do. I guess the most obvious place to start is with the theme that animates this series: misunderstanding. My purported goal in "rhetorical" situations, like this one, is to minimize the effect of whatever is diffusing the light confusingly on its way to me. In order to do that I have to decide what or who I would, ideally, like

most to foreground amongst all the tangles the rhetoric a specific situation enacts. In the Gospel of Mary, the proffered arrangement of authority seems clear: Jesus understands pretty much everything; Mary is the one among the apostles who comes closest to understanding him; the male apostles misunderstand her (and him) at the outset, at least a couple of them less so as it closes. That's how this set of interactions seems to progress, misunderstanding-wise.

The section of the gospel I've been reading is the only one where Jesus is present and speaks in his own voice. No way to know where what he says here came from, but it is gnomic and mysterious in the same ways that his "sayings" are in the Gospel of Thomas. So I attach a lot of credibility to it. Everything else in this gospel is dramatic or narrative, i.e., all those other players misunderstanding one another. When you're untangling a backlash, you need relatively early on to find (or create, by cutting the line) an endpoint to thread with. I'm going to make my end-of-the-line in this case—what I most hope not to misunderstand—what Jesus says.

Okay, next step, what's in the way of that? For one (big) thing, the dark-matter-accentuated lens of that -ism I wrote about last time: Gnosticism, which was invented after the fact to make sure texts of this sort got lost and stayed lost. That ulterior motive is enough for me to conclude it is by definition a misunderstanding of what this branch of the Jesus movement was all about. So I need to factor out the way it distorts the light trying to make its way to me from behind it. Gnosticism, in its simplest form, has two main features: the valorization of self-knowledge over outside authority (which the Church that emerged a few centuries later hated) and a dualism that sharply distinguishes matter from spirit (a version of which the Church turned toward own purposes). If I can factor that "lens" out somehow, maybe I won't completely misunderstand what Jesus says in this section of the gospel. But as soon as I begin to imagine what a pre-Gnosticism-inflected Jesus might say and mean, an

even bigger gravitational lens behind it comes into play: Gnosticism is a Western invention and is organized in stereotypically Western ways, both in terms of the always-at-odds conflict between power and agency (item one above) and a polar-binary dualism of the material and spiritual realms (item two.) And getting rid of that -ism doesn't get rid of the cultural bias upon which it is founded. Those pre-understandings remain. And they really get in the way.

More and more over the years, as I listen to what Jesus actually says, my ears hear it diffused more through an Eastern than Western lens. There are all those mythic tales about where Jesus went during his "missing years." Could have gone home to do some woodworking with his dad, of course, not the worst way to prep for messianism. Or, more to this point, to Persia to learn about Zoroastrianism, or even India or Tibet to learn about Buddhism or Taoism. When Jesus speaks, he sounds to me a lot more like Lao Tzu or the Buddha or a Magi than like Abraham or Moses or even the Old Testament prophets. So I'm going to pull the end of the line through that loop: East over West. Now, instead of either/ors I can get to plus/ands, which is how Jesus' imagination seems to me to work. Things the West sees as contraries and contradictions suddenly turn into enigmas and paradoxes. Again, Jesus. What through the Western lens becomes inimically oppositional, our eternal obsession with turning ones into twos so there's something to pick a fight with, becomes through an Eastern lens amicably superpositional, the twos-into-ones Jesus' "love your neighbor" vibe exudes.

Now I feel like I'm getting some of the tangle out of my knot. And I'm beginning to see why I'm having such a problem with the rhetoric of this gospel. As I said, the implied dialogical structure of the gospel is that Jesus understands everything, that Mary understands Jesus, that at the outset the apostles misunderstand both Jesus and Mary, and that she is able to win over at least some of them at the end. A neat package. But given where I am now,

having factored out the gravitational lens of Gnosticism and shifted my vantage point toward Jesus from the West to the East, it's also possible that Mary misunderstands Jesus, too. Some of the stuff she talks about after he leaves the scene (a Platonic re-figuring of Egyptian Book of the Dead stuff) doesn't sound to me like him at all, not only in general but even in light of what he says in the section I'm trying not to misunderstand now.

Which is to say that one of the gravitational lenses I need to come to terms with is the bias of the gospel itself—one of the outcroppings, this one in Greece, of Paul's Gentilization of the Jesus story—not only in its local moment but now as it is being recovered in an era hoping to balance the anti-feminist scales in a Church (and a culture) that is way out of whack in that respect: that Mary understands Jesus and speaks for him. I think you'll see why I might be skeptical about that after I finish my reading of the whole gospel. But, at least right now, I think I can go back to what I've been trying to do all week: say a few things I actually think about the next little section, trying to hear "with two ears" Mary's words as they lap ashore here, hoping I'll be able to hold onto a few of my own words worthy of being heard before they vanish into the beach.

Sorry, Not Sorry . . .

Time for an apology . . . or, more accurately, an “*apologia*.” In traditional literary terms, an *apologia*—whose roots mean “to speak away from”—is a note not of regret about what you’ve written but a way to saying “this is what I’m up to here and why.” Who can possibly forget John Henry (Cardinal) Newman’s “*Apologia pro Vita Sua*,” a barnburner in this venerable tradition, on all the best Victorian dressing tables! He obviously had a lot more to ‘fess up about (the whole “*vita sua*” thing that led him to convert to Catholicism) than I do (a few Jesus-y Substack posts that incline the opposite way.)

As I said last time, I am a physics geek. I am not, by intentional choice when I was a young man, a physicist. Which is to say physics serves as a useful reservoir of gravitational lenses to help me understand things that may not have much to do with what actual physicists do. Likewise, you know if you visit my work regularly, I am a Jesus geek. Which is a whole different thing from being a Jesus freak. That’s what this *apologia* is about.

As I make clear toward the end of this post, the only mind I’m ever trying to proselytize is mine. I know from experience how hard that can be. It’s pretty stubborn. To the extent that I have been animated by any “ambition” at all in my life (and I’ve been told more than once that my “problem” is I don’t) it has been to wake up. That process has escalated dramatically in my retirement, in part because I now have so much more time and solitude to work on my spirit. Which means being more open to spiritual traditions in cultures other than my own, of course; but it also means coming to terms with the ways my native spiritual traditions have “formed” me, for better or worse, without my knowing how.

That's why I study wisdom texts. The ones from cultures other than my own, especially those from the Eastern traditions that interest me, will inevitably be inflected by the Western consciousness I've been indoctrinated into. There are ways to mitigate the effects of the myriad gravitational lenses that get in the way when I'm puzzling over those "alien" texts, which takes a lot of work, all of it worthy. The challenge is even more formidable, though, in relation to the wisdom texts that originate in my home culture. To riff off David Foster Wallace's famous "what's water?" graduation speech: It's almost impossible to see the water you've been swimming in all your life. It just "is." One way to make it more visible is to swim to another pool altogether, one where the water is different. You may notice, hey, this one seems clearer or murkier, looks odd in interesting or aggravating ways. It will never become your "native" water, but it reveals the fact that there is such a thing as water. When you swim back to your own, that perspective may open ways of seeing what had previously been invisible to you.

Since I was raised as an old school Catholic in a stridently Christian culture, that's my water. I want to get better at seeing it. I'm not trying to entice anyone to swim over to mine, or even to translate my way of seeing this water over to their way of seeing the water they're swimming in. That's the difference between a geek and a freak. And that's the gist of my *apologia*, a lot shorter than Cardinal Newman's. You're welcome.

...

So, here's the section of the Gospel of Mary Magdala I said I was struggling with last time:

Then Peter said to him, “You have been explaining every topic to us; tell us one other thing. What is the sin of the world?”

The Savior replied, “There is no such thing as sin; rather you yourselves are what produces sin when you act in accordance with the nature of adultery, which is called ‘sin.’ For this reason, the Good came among you, pursuing (the good) which belongs to every nature. It will set it within its root.”

Then he continued. He said, “This is why you get si[c]k and die: because [you love] what de[c]ei[ve]s [you]. [Anyone who] thinks should consider (these matters)!

“[Ma]tter gav[e bi]rth to a passion which has no Image because it derives from what is contrary to nature. A disturbing confusion then occurred in the whole body. That is why I told you, ‘Become content at heart, while also remaining discontent and disobedient; indeed become contented and agreeable (only) in the presence of that other Image of nature.’ Anyone with two ears capable of hearing should listen!”

When the Blessed One had said these things, he greeted them all. “Peace be with you!” he said. “Acquire my peace within yourselves!

“Be on your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, ‘Look over here!’ or ‘Look over there!’ For the child of true Humanity exists within you. Follow it! Those who search for it will find it.

“Go then, preac[h] the good news about the Realm. [Do] not lay down any rule beyond what I determined

for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else you might be dominated by it."

After he had said these things, he departed from them.

Peter opens the dialogue saying Jesus has been "explaining every topic to us." I have no idea if all that previous wisdom was in the missing first four pages of the only version of the gospel we have. If so, they must have been some dynamite pages. In any case, one little niggling thing remains: sin! Peter phrases his question in an unusual way: "What is the sin of the world?" His phrasing echoes the famous passage from the Gospel of John, most likely extant before this one was written, which quotes John the Baptist when he first sees Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" This proclamation is repeated in every Catholic mass at the moment the priest sanctifies the "bread" (all those wafers) and "transubstantiates" it into the body of Christ. So it's a big deal. Right off the bat, I have to try to imagine what that expression might have meant to early Christians not only before this particular brand was declared heretical, but before there was an institutional Church inserting it into its ritual, the wafers becoming Jesus. Hard for me to imagine the first Christians thought that, literally I mean. For one thing, they probably started with actual bread they made themselves.

Paul leans pretty heavily into this way of thinking about "communion," but not so definitively that Martin Luther wouldn't refuse to break bread with the Catholic Church on this matter about 1500 years hence, arguing (using Paul) that the change is *consubstantive* (as in bread and body mix *with* one another) rather than *transubstantive* (as in bread turning *into* body.) This is the kind of stuff religious communities go to war over! In any case, Jesus' response is a stunner: "*There is no such thing as sin; rather you yourselves are what produces sin when you act in accordance with the nature of adultery, which is called 'sin.'*"

I assume “no such thing” means that both Adam’s sin (which orthodox Christianity soon agreed was indelible, inherited at birth by all of us, and which Jesus was sent here to rectify), along with the worldly sins we accrue by our own means, are illusions (“sin” is in quotation marks here), like the sleights of hand a magician uses to distract us from what’s actually happening. In other words, if you presume that sin (especially the “Original” one) simply “is,” you’ll never free yourself from it. So, the Church fathers reviewing this gospel a couple of centuries later for a thumbs up or down wouldn’t have had to read any further. This one is out.

I think one of the reasons I was so vexed by this presentation has less to do with what came after it—Gnosticism—than with what came before it: Paul’s letters, the earliest New Testament scriptures. Paul’s missions were paramount for seeding Christianity into the regional Gentile communities, his strategy for franchising the brand worldwide. He visited Greece many times (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth), so he must have seen it as a crucial cultural context for this new message to take root. Typically (historically) when Christianity (or any new religion) is introduced (or forced) into another culture, its basic premises get translated through the gravitational lenses of whatever was there in the first place. Those things get overwritten, but they don’t go away, at least immediately, what I called surviving “under erasure” last time. For a Greek audience, the ways in which embodiment in the world is corruptive would have been inflected by Pythagoreanism or Platonism. Not that everyone would have been adept with those texts, just as we are not adept with Newton or Descartes or often even the Bible. It’s just the water they’re swimming in, what’s taken for granted. Pythagoras was one of the first Western thinkers to posit an immortal soul ensconced in the body. For Plato, who shares that belief, it becomes form (perfect templates) vs. matter (flawed imitations), two terms that appear in this gospel. Those things would have been commonplaces for most Greeks of that era.

None of this jibes very well with the Jewish tradition established in the Torah or even with the version of Christianity that Paul (who was Jewish) was trying to convey to Gentile audiences. In both cases, human beings are by definition “fallen” creatures, Original-Sin-stained at birth, in need of redemption from the outside in, not the inside out. The Old Testament God is a strict, sometimes savage enforcer of not only his commandments but of the mundane cultural practices of the Jewish community. Paul’s God is equally stringent: The only means of salvation, from his point of view, is via the “grace” that comes, via Jesus, from God, outside-in, which demands unqualified “faith” in the savior who came to take away “the sin [no quotation marks] of the world.” Good works? Nope, not the pathway. His vision is a dark one, and it became, via Augustine in particular, the winning one in the battle for the heart of Christianity waged in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Which is say that Paul’s rhetorical challenge is a formidable one with Greek audiences. And, as you can see from the way this gospel thinks about “sin,” he was either only partially successful or failed miserably, “misunderstanding” on a grand scale. Gnostic approaches to the Jesus story may have been made possible by Paul’s evangelism, but they are founded, as in this case, on Jesus’ words, his actual “sayings” (wherever they came from) diffused through a Greek lens, not Paul’s. The lack of consonance between these two “rhetorics” continued to afflict the Church for centuries. For example, during its most formative years (4th and 5th centuries), Augustine’s main opponent was Pelagius, whose cultural heritage was Celtic not Roman. He was therefore instinctively comfortable with Jesus’ message of love and innate goodness and baffled by Paul’s emphasis on submission and innate sin. What little remains (after some purposeful burning) of his original *oeuvre* includes some commentaries on Paul’s letters. As you read them you marvel at the fact that he doesn’t seem to see the actual words! He turns Paul into anti-Paul—no sins except the ones we make ourselves, and even those are easily forgivable—a perfect example of the sort of culturally induced gravitational lensing I’m looking

at here, where sin becomes “sin,” a function of the adulteration of one’s personal “good” by inattention and a lack of discipline, not a birthright.

Why should any of this matter? It matters to me for this reason: As I said, I was raised as a Catholic. So I just absorbed unconsciously the Pauline version of the faith that is historically dominant now. It became a “gravitational lens” through which all kinds of other things diffused their light coming toward me along the way. In cases of this sort—foundational assumptions—it makes a big difference to me, (mis)understanding-wise, whether I do or don’t become conscious of and account for those distortions. I’ve been thinking through this particular parallax for years now, trying to factor out as much of the diffusion of that lens as I can in order to understand what it means *to me* to be a Christian. That’s one of the reasons I gravitate toward the lost gospels, which valorize exactly this sort of self-initiated knowledge.

My original version of Christianity, the one I grew up with, simply got excised during my middle years, “lapsed” in the argot of Catholics, because it no longer served me. That’s the first choice you have when you see one of those blobs of distorted light in what looks like empty space: Can’t be anything there, so I’ll ignore it. But once you conceive of something like dark matter, you can go back, look again, recalculate everything until what was of value and importance in that incoming light can be recovered. It requires self-reflection, critical inquiry, and research to do all of that. I happen to enjoy those things and have time to do them now. By the same token, I understand that what I have to say about it is clearly blasphemous and often strays way toward the esoteric. My excuse/justification (thus my apologia above) is that unlike the original Paul (who I am like in many ways, often to my chagrin), I’m not trying to persuade anyone else of anything; I’m trying to figure it out for myself. And that, to me, is what Jesus keeps saying, not only in the lost gospels that most interest me, but in the Synoptic Gospels as well, if you listen to his actual words with two

ears: Figure it out for yourself. To come to terms with that imperative means going back to the sources. This particular gospel is another opportunity to do that and I'm trying my best to hear it with both ears. What I've come up with so far is admittedly eccentric (and will get more and more so as I delve into the later sections) vis-à-vis the current scholarly consensus about what it says. But, as Wordsworth observes in that poem I've quoted before: I "*cannot bid [my] ear be still; . . . / Against or with [my] will.*"

The discourse in Jesus' response to Peter's question is evocative, quite startling really: He doesn't say he came "to take away the sin of the world," a Pauline trope. From his vantage point, *sin doesn't even exist* as a thing in itself! It is a product of what he calls "adultery," which in this case pertains not, of course, to extramarital sex but to adulteration, how embodiment in the material world can contaminate "the good [small g] which belongs to everyone," which is to say it is both universal and personal. "The Good [capital G, implying some godliness] came among you," Jesus says, as a sort of gravitational force to guide you on your way. Keeping your personal good anchored to that larger Good will "set it within its root." That's how I read that passage: I was born good; universal Good helps me to stay on track. If I get really good at "good" I can become "Good."

This may seem a stretch, but I hear echoes here of the argument among quantum theorists about the nature of consciousness. I.e., is consciousness a product of individual material brains in an otherwise material world, or is consciousness a universal field that material brains tune into while they're here? The latter may sound kind of new-agey, but some pretty staid figures, like Max Planck and Erwin Schrödinger, believed exactly that: Matter, they say, is derivative from mind not vice-versa. Whether mind does/can exist without seeking/finding expression in matter is a paradox never resolved. I'll save that one for my analysis of the next section of

this gospel. But all of that is, to me, one possible lens through which to view the “Good” vis-à-vis “good” imagery here.

The “root” metaphor Jesus then turns to does seem to set up a more stereotypical binary distinction between mind and matter (referenced once more in the conclusion of this section); but it is a relatively lax and gentle one, by comparison either to some other “gnostic” gospels, which see the human body as a toxic, illusory shell, or to the orthodox Christian assumption, via Augustine, that I am “born bad,” Adam’s sin branded on my soul for perpetuity. In Mary’s gospel, the good is both something I’m endowed with and something I can do/enhance while I’m here, with the help of the Good. I just need to curate the relationship between the two, taking care not to “love what deceives [me]” which is what will make my personal good “sick” and “die.” Pretty sound advice, in my opinion, at least figuratively.

I hear this same message echoed in the Celtic assimilation of Christianity, one vested in the innate and fundamental goodness of not only every person, but every other being, every other thing in the universe. No Original Sin, no obsession with sin itself. Just “the good” with “the Good.” That was the vision promulgated by Pelagius in the 4th century in Rome, and a lot of people liked it. Augustine didn’t and waged an extended war of words to extirpate both Pelagius (via excommunication) and what he stood for (via book-banning) from Christian orthodoxy. Their argument is transacted in a very interesting way: Augustine founds his in Paul’s letters, Pelagius in Jesus sayings. I have a choice here: listen to Paul or listen to Jesus. One of these must be a misunderstanding. I think you know by now what choice I’ve made.

In light of all this, the next passage becomes vividly lucid instead of gnominically opaque:

“[Ma]tter gav[e bi]rth to a passion which has no Image because it derives from what is contrary to nature. A

disturbing confusion then occurred in the whole body. That is why I told you, 'Become content at heart, while also remaining discontent and disobedient; indeed become contented and agreeable (only) in the presence of that other Image of nature.' Anyone with two ears capable of hearing should listen!"

The first sentence is a pretty good summary of what Socrates envisions in his encomium on love in *The Phaedrus*, using the ethereal imagery of chariots drawn by “contrary” steeds (black or white) on one’s spiritual journey around the circuit of the heavens, trying to escape from the metempsychotic cycle that keeps us from ultimate transcendence or enlightenment. In the Greek community that espoused this gospel, Paul’s darkness gets filtered through the gravity of that lens. In other words, his mission may have brought Jesus to the attention of this Gentile community, but they heard Paul’s words their way, not his. That’s what warrants their balance between being “content at heart” and “discontent and disobedient,” the first tenet of the gnosis-related aspect of this gospel: Trust your own judgment, listen to your own heart, create a body of knowledge yourself. Do not trust or accede to the pre-processed knowledge being enforced by outside authorities (including Paul, who adds a pretty stiff authoritarian spine to Jesus’ message of love and redemption.) That “other Image of nature,” the one to keep before you, is “the Good.” Socrates and Jesus would disagree about many things. But not that. And Paul would disagree with both of them.

The last several passages say pretty much the same thing:

“Be on your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, ‘Look over here!’ or ‘Look over there!’ For the child of true Humanity exists within you. Follow it! Those who search for it will find it.

*“Go then, preac[h] the good news about the Realm.
[Do] not lay down any rule beyond what I determined
for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else
you might be dominated by it.”*

Don't be distracted, Jesus says, by anyone else's "over here" or "over there." Those directives are instruments of deception drawing you away from your self-inscribed destiny. It's no wonder, then, that this gospel was quashed. Even more radical is Jesus' revision of the "Son of Man" trope that the Synoptic Gospels use to define who Jesus is and what he came for. That figure is enigmatic in the Jewish tradition, and Paul never uses it specifically in relation to Jesus (only to the Biblical Daniel); but he borrows its aura to valorize Jesus into the Christ figure. He generally prefers the appellation Christ Jesus rather than Jesus Christ to emphasize his identity with God and his familial role in redeeming "Man" from Original Sin. Here Jesus says something different: *"the child of true Humanity exists within you. Follow it! Those who search for it will find it."* He opens with the figure of "the child," whom he so often proffered as a model, and then uses the plural, gender-neutral "true Humanity" (instead of the masculine Son/Man orthodox version) that exists "within you," within everyone, not solely in him or in some heavenly up there. The "good news" he wants the apostles to preach pertains to what he calls "the Realm," suggesting (to me at least) that it is, when we get it right, both transcendent and right here, now.

Jesus follows that with an injunction to "not lay down any rule beyond what [he] determined for [them]," nor to "promulgate law like the lawgiver." Which is to say that whatever law you establish is personal not universal. And he points out, wisely, that any such laws, when they are generalized, will not only dominate others, but will insidiously dominate you. The use of laws as a method of domination is one of the complaints even the standard-Bible Jesus has with the Jewish community of his day, their obsession with following ritualized rules while forgetting what they were intended

to foster. My favorite passage in this vein is in Matthew 15, Jesus' retort to the Pharisees who complain that his disciples "don't wash their hands before they eat," as if that's reason enough to dismiss what they say. I recall a time in my own professional life when all someone who wanted to dismiss what you said had to do was find a discrepancy in one of your footnotes and claim this tiny, inadvertent carelessness must index a huge, egregious carelessness in your whole project. The good old days?

Jesus' response to the Pharisees is quite pointed:

"You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

*'These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.'*"

Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them."

In Mary's Gospel Jesus highlights the "search" and "you will find it" trope of the orthodox Bible. No asking or knocking, which orient the line of sight out there rather than in here. Big difference there in terms of whom you should be "following" and how: Trust yourself not some self-proclaimed authority. Do it now, don't wait. That is in the most practical sense what *gnosis* (self-generated knowledge) is for, and that's what it meant to be among the *gnostikoi*, those who knew. Sounds to me like a community I might be inclined to join if was Greek back then, maybe tired of the over-the-top drama of the gods in the Greek pantheon, all their plights and gripes, the constant "bickering brattle," to quote Robert Burns apt description of the dither he initiates when he

inadvertently evicts a mouse from its nest with his plow, which the Greek gods specialized in: “maidens” raped by geese, hijacked to Hades, or turned into trees; families fraught with fratricide or parricide; men warring endlessly at their behest, pillaging as a rite of passage. If some enigmatic sage “*greeted*” me with “*Peace be with you!*” And suggested “*Acquire your peace within yoursel[f]*,” hey, I might be inclined to “follow,” too.

Trust Me . . .

The fireman told himself a lot more garbage of this nature. Then he told himself some true things.

Donald Barthelme

One of my uncles owned the newspaper in the small town I grew up in, four huge double-fold pages of local news published weekly. The text for the stories was generated on a machine called a linotype, a mechanical monstrosity as big as a pickup truck cab that made a deafening slamming and clanking noise as it assembled the print for each page, steampunk on steroids. The operator was essentially a typist using a small keyboard to activate a series of multi-jointed, spider-leg-like steel rods that selected each letter, a bit of cast lead, and slammed it, in its sequence, into a page-sized wooden box. There was a vat of molten lead always on hand next to the machine with an assortment of molds. When you finished printing the page—on an even bigger machine—you dumped the used type into the vat to be recycled. When you needed new letters, you ladled the molten lead into the little molds, waited for them to harden, and put them into their feeder tubes on the linotype. The whole process was well, sublime, in the way that term was used in the 19th century: can't-take-your-eyes-off-it scary, as if this awesome machine might someday fight back and you wanted to be there to see it even if it took you out in the process.

I bring all of this up because last night I had a dream set in a western town in the 19th century about a lotto-type lottery.

Each number for the prize was assigned to its own bespoke linotype machine. To enter, you didn't buy a ticket, you bought the machine itself, then backed up your buckboard and carted it off. If your number was selected as the winner, you had to bring in your linotype and print it off in front of the judges to prove it was a match. Because each number was attached to the machine that verified it, therefore expensive, there was a lot of thievery going on, bands of cowboy marauders stealing other people's machines, sometimes with considerable violence. I'll skip all the violence part. The pertinence here was my personal sense, in the dream, that the drawing couldn't come soon enough, just to get it over with so things could get back to normal, somebody with a pot of cash they likely stole from someone else, the rest of us returning to our routines, pretty much the current culture in a nutshell. That's how I feel about this essay. It has been taking up all the space in my head, all the time in my day, for more than a week now. The giant machinery in there keeps clanking away generating pages that then get dumped back into the lead melter so I can start over. I'm tired of it. The contest is over, and I know I haven't won. So today I'm going to piece together the pages I still have scattered around on my computer desktop and get back to my soothing everyday routines.

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I've used the epigraph up top, from one of Donald Barthelme's stories, multiple times over the years. I like the extremity of it, suits my temperament. I know from experience that the difference between garbage and true things can often be difficult to discern, they look so much alike. Particularly when I sit down to write, just words trying to do work that they're not really cut out for. So easy for it to go wrong. Especially since I rarely know where I'm headed until my fingertips start typing. At my age, after all I've been through, all I've learned and lived, now completely outside of any culture that regulates or evaluates what I "tell myself" when I

write, the only thing I can do is trust—not in that “myself” I’m telling things to (I’m quite sure now that such a thing, as a singularity, doesn’t even exist), but in all those not-myselfs I’ve kept company with along the way, my family, my friends, the myriad authors who have come to life with me, the students who joined me in all of those small rooms—yes, trust that somehow my fingertips will draw on all of that love and wisdom and open a way for “some true things” to end up on the page. So, that’s my theme today: trust.

I started thinking toward it in my last “leadership” post. I wanted to tell all those interview teams out there who devalue, even demean teaching as a form of leadership what they’re missing when they do that. I had to decide where to start. I went back and forth in my head between what I think are the two most important preconditions teachers need to create before the real work of learning can happen. You stand up in front of groups of people year after year, sitting there silently, skeptical, presuming they will be disappointed, unseen, unheard, as they generally are, but hoping against hope that this time, this course, even just this day, this hour, will be different. It is an awesome experience to take in that scene and realize that you may be the one to fulfill that hope, if you do your work well.

The preconditions I had to decide between as starting points were safety and trust. Neither of them, you will note, has anything to do with what your “expertise” is, what you know that those in front of you don’t. They have to do with creating a sense of community where learning what you are there to teach will have some chance of fluorescing. That’s what having a “vision” means: You look at an empty space and see what you want will fill it. The imaginative part is done. The rest is work. The relationship between safety and trust in almost any communal setting is a sort of chicken and egg thing. Hard to decide which comes first. I just instinctively picked safety to start with, and in retrospect, I think that was a good choice. There are very specific behaviors and practices that

“create” a sense of safety, some “true things” I could write about. Most people have pretty reliable instincts to tell them when they’re safe and when they’re not. So it doesn’t require a lot of intellectual enterprise or critical thinking. You do certain specifiable things and a space will feel safe.

Trust is proving far more elusive, in part because it is so amorphous, almost diaphanous, there and not there at the same time. So there’s reason to be chary. Even a mid-level sociopath can mimic it almost perfectly. I’ve been trying for days now to get started. And that’s what I’ve been doing: starting, over and over. I have several openings going. I like them all, but they all stop short, and they don’t seem to seam together well, either. I’m beginning to think maybe that’s the point. Trust has many facets that don’t seem to seam together well, especially in a culture like ours, founded on lying as a way of life. This specific moment is an especially grievous one in that respect. Anyone with half a brain can see that. But it’s not just now. It’s always. Some of those ways of lying are essential, really, just to survive, to get by, to keep from going under. Or to simulate normalcy when what is going on is anything but, either personally or culturally. Sometimes you need to lie to yourself or others just to stay safe or get through the day. I have no problem with any of that. But there must be some true things my fingertips can find to say about how a sense of genuine trust can be built up from nothing. Maybe that’s what all these beginnings are about, not “false” starts but gestures toward some true things that can’t quite be said. Each one reads more like a “thought experiment” than an analysis. I keep reaching a point where I think I can hear “some true things” whispering furtively up around the bend, but when I turn the corner it turns out to be a pack of racoons rummaging on a landfill: “a lot more garbage of this nature.” So, I think what I’ll do is copy each of them here one by one, then see if I can get anywhere with it, kind of “finish” it. If I can’t, at least you’ll have some “experiments” to give some “thought” to pertinent to this matter of what it is that makes good teachers good leaders and vice-versa.

Thought Experiment #1: Consistency

It takes years of study and a semester of supervised practice to become eligible to teach in most public schools. One of the odd things about the academy at the university level is they take a bunch of twenty-somethings with no prior training or experience and stick them in front of classrooms to teach freshmen how to write. Coincident with that is usually some sort of ongoing staff meeting or course, like the one I found myself in during my first semester in grad school. I had no clue what I was doing, so I was hopeful it would be helpful. I recall one of my colleagues in class, someone who exuded an air of confidence, bravado even, about his professorial status, something I did not have. Each of us had to say something, after the fact, about how we handled our first class. I can't recall what I said. I can't recall what I did that first day. Well, that's not entirely true. I remember a bit of it. But it's too embarrassing to document here. What *he* did, though, has stuck in my mind for over 50 years now, which is why I'm telling this story. He said he walked into class on the first day with an apple in his hand and proceeded to eat it, all of it, slowly, before he said anything. His point was the students would by that means intuit that he was "authentic." Or something like that. He never explained it. Just assumed, I suppose, that the drama of this scene would convey its significance to us lesser mortals. This was, remember, 1972, not far removed from "the summer of love" and Woodstock, flamboyant embodiment the trope of the moment. I have no idea how his students perceived this, but I recall thinking at the time it was more likely they concluded he was a huge doofus who, like them, had an alimentary canal, grateful he was only showing them how the front end of it worked.

The question I wanted to ask my colleague that day, and am quite sure I didn't, was "so what do you do on day two?" That is after all how time works. There is always a day two. Who are you going to be that day? Which gets me to the main thing I believe any leader needs to display in their public role: consistency, a presence that

inspires a confidence not simply that the same leader will keep showing up, but, more importantly, that the general protocols organizing the work will be the same tomorrow as they are today. I came of age during the Age of Aquarius, “authenticity” all the rage. One problematic consequence of that sort of exaggerated self-presence in professional relationships is its instability; it has no center of gravity, changes from day to day, even minute to minute. My mood, my moment. Everyone knows people who are mercurial in that way. Up, down, smarmy, ragey, no apparent rhyme or reason. It’s maddening, chaotic, narcissistic, the exact opposite of consistent. The only thing you can trust about someone like that is that they are untrustworthy.

An identity of the sort my grad school colleague was operating on relies on the assumption that there is a pretty simple “self” sitting inside there, and the main point is to let it “express” itself. The rhetorical movement that emerged in the 1970s flew, in fact, under the flag of “expressivism:” “get real,” “let it all hang out,” “strut your stuff,” “show ‘em what you got.” An identity founded on that assumption will, by definition, be hard to trust because it is rooted in the mood of the moment, which is always fleeting. Every wisdom tradition I know of says that such a self is illusory, a delusion even. I’m not saying you have to become a Buddhist sage in order to teach or lead. But you do need to find a fairly stable version of “yourself” that shows up today, whether it’s rain or shine in your “authentic” insides. And then show up with it every day. Or you’ll go through a lot of fruit in a semester.

So what’s the alternative? For me it was to create a public persona that I could reliably inhabit whenever I entered a classroom. I always thought of it as a version of “me” that was better than my at-home me, my best self not my felt self. You might argue that a persona of this sort is not a “true thing.” I would argue it is way more true than the capricious version of me I have to endure when I’m home alone. It is aspirational, oriented by a set of consciously considered values, a moral compass that points always toward

what I believe to be “the good,” especially in my social and communal relationships. A “me” that’s better than me. To do that, of course, you need to be mindful and have some critical acumen. If you don’t have those inclinations and an ambition to use them to embody something “good,” you shouldn’t be hired to teach or lead anyone. Period.

One way my hypothetical interview team (the one I’ve been trying to persuade in my head to value teaching experience as a mode of leadership) might find out whether a teacher was “good” at what she did is to ask her how she handled “problem” students. Ordinary teachers, the ones on autopilot, always have a stock answer for that question. Blah, blah, blah. Sounds pretty good. The best teachers—and I worked closely with lots of them during my career—don’t, at least in part because they consider the term “problem,” as it is applied to students, to be problematic. All teachers face students *with* problems. At the most basic level that’s why they’re there: They don’t yet know what you are there to teach them. But that doesn’t mean that they *are* problems. One of the things you notice very quickly if you observe a lot of teachers teaching is that the really good ones have far fewer “problem” students than the ordinary ones. And a big reason for that is they are consistent: clear from the outset about expectations, parameters, and boundaries, clear from the outset about potential consequences when violations of protocol disrupt the productivity of other students or of the community as a whole. And they apply those consequences dispassionately. Every single time. Nothing personal. No drama. No one is ever “bad,” they are just not contributing to the overall hum of the community at that moment. One of the best teachers I ever worked with was masterful at exactly that. She taught second graders at an inner-city urban school, the kind most people would be intimidated by. Her classes were almost balletic in their precision, everyone calm, cooperative, productive, kind to another and to her. You could tell instantly when you were in their company how much they respected and admired her. When there was some disruption she would use a

combination of barely audible verbal clicks and subtle hand gestures. I had no idea how to “read” them, but everyone else there did. Whatever was going on settled immediately. To an outsider like me, it all appeared almost magical. That’s what consistency does. And it’s not magic.

I was having a conversation with my daughter just this afternoon about all of this, trying to sort through my confusion about the role of “trust” in the classroom. I’ve seen her teach. She’s in the same league as the one with the clicks and fingers. We ended up talking about how you create a version of yourself that is so credible, so predictable, so reliable, and so morally present to students, in other words obviously trustworthy, that they respect and admire it instinctively.

I won’t go into all the things we talked about, but one of them was “love,” a third rail in discussions of pedagogical method, at least during my professional moment. We live in a culture that tends to read that term through a sexualized lens. Even Christians, who have been inundated with the discourse of love as it was embodied in Jesus have a hard time generalizing it into situations that involve the exercise of authority in relation to others, especially when it pertains to other people’s children. It seems always to drift toward our current fetishistic obsession with pedophilia, with “grooming,” which are, of course, the exact opposite of love. In any case, we both talked about how we had to filter through, filter out, “liking” and “not liking” students as an active element in our front-of-class presence. That takes some work. Teachers are people, students are people; you “like” some more than others, at least at the outset. It can take a while to do that filtering. My litmus test as to the efficacy of my work was this: Right before each class started, I’d glance across the whole room, take in everyone. What I wanted to feel in that moment was that I loved, not liked, loved, everyone present equally. The equally part was important. Early in my career it might take me half a semester to get there. Later on I could do it in a week or two. But it was always a pivotal moment when I felt

it. The only scholar in my field who wrote about love in this way, as an active force in the pedagogical transaction, I mean, was bell hooks, a Black feminist thinker who died just a few years ago. Her work, her writing, her spirit, they are all transcendent. And they made most people in my line of work uncomfortable. She founds the mode of love that animated her teaching in the sense of community she inherited from her family and culture. It was inspiring in both its depth and its everydayness. It is “patient,” it “endures.” And it is radical, as in gets right to the root of it, beyond cliché, a “true thing.” That’s the kind of love that animates the best classrooms I’ve been in.

And what’s the stereotypical opposite of love? Fear. The worst teachers, the worst bosses, the worst priests, the worst politicians, you name it: Fear is their preferred currency. Love is off the menu. Fear is all over the place, chaotic, unstable, untrustworthy. Fear creates “problem students.” Love doesn’t “solve” them; it defuses them. Then you can address calmly the real problems that schools and classrooms and teachers are there to address on our general behalf. With clicks and fingers instead of yelling all day long. That’s how the best teachers will answer your question if you just give them time.

Thought Experiment #2: Transparency

If you’re my vintage you remember the plethora of TV shows during the 1960s premised on various kinds of deception. What’s My Line?, I’ve Got a Secret, To Tell the Truth, and Who Do You Trust? are just a few of them. Lying was a staple of comedic entertainment, all the way down to the “laugh track:” “Is it live or is it Memorex?” (You have to be of my vintage to remember that one, too!) The underlying assumption in all of them seemed to be that if you were clever enough you could suss out the truth through the haze of intentional falsehoods.

Fast-forward 60 years. The challenge now is exponentially greater and way less funny. Texted links designed to empty your bank account. Deepfakes used as clickbait. Bots flooding the blogosphere with alternative facts to create alternative realities. Soothing “truthiness” instead of facts. Makes the ‘60s look like child’s play discernment-wise, not just TV-land but the whole culture premised on duplicity, dissimulation and deceit. Still, sooner or later you have to figure out “who do you trust?” Just as students do while you’re standing in front of them on day one. They’re skeptical. Why wouldn’t they be? They’ve seen a lot of people lying. They have reason to be wary.

Back in the early 1970s, after I abandoned physics as a potential career path, I toyed with the idea of becoming a therapist. There were all kinds of exciting things happening in the mental health arena back then as the general culture moved away of a highly medicalized institutional model—the “sanitarium” (voluntary) or “asylum” (enforced) approach to custodial care—and toward more “humanistic,” community-based systems. Theorists like Abraham Maslow (self-actualization), Fritz Perl (gestalt), Rollo May (existential), Carl Rogers (client-centered), et al.: lots of fresh air. Maybe the most radical was Thomas Szaz, whose book *The Myth of Mental Illness* is a devastating critique of mental hospitals as modes of incarceration, of the mental health establishment as an instrument of oppression, of surgical “cures” like lobotomy, and, as his book’s title implies, of the general cultural obsession for politicizing aberrant behavior as illness. The fact that his family left Hungary for the US in 1938 when he was 18 is a likely contributor to his deep skepticism toward what he called “the therapeutic state.” I throw him in here because while all the others still have some general currency in the field, no one seems to talk much about Szaz, who did so much to deconstruct the 19th century-based model that dominated mental health practices back then. Anyway, I read a lot of that stuff and took some courses in psychology as a “cognate” field during my MA work in English. I

finally decided to stick with teaching as my professional path. At this point, I can't even remember exactly why. I just did.

But that work invited me to think about how power orchestrates relationships in authority-inflected professional settings. The therapeutic relationship is organized in ways that can be difficult to calculate. Most often, clients control the purse strings, the "capital." So they can opt in or out at any time, which gives them considerable control in a culture like ours. But they opt in because they are in crisis, looking for help, which makes it hard for them to exit once they've entered. The therapist is the credentialed "expert" so carries the sort of authoritative weight we tend to ascribe to doctors in our culture. But their interventions are far less prescriptive, so harder to credit causally in the healing process.

Still, vexed as it is, the power dynamic tacit in this relationship is generally agreeable to both parties. Which is to say that it most often works non-abusively. Therapists make a living, clients get better. I bring all of this up because there is sometimes a temptation to transfer this seemingly benign dynamic out of the "couch and chair scene" and into other settings where it becomes considerably more problematic. The dialogical techniques typical to the therapeutic relationship seem on the face of it ideally suited to classroom and workplace settings, for example: supportive, humane, tolerant. So what could possibly go wrong? Well, in a word, lots. Because the power dynamic in these spaces is fundamentally different from that "couch and chair scene" of a counselor's office. Students and workers are not "unwell," for example, and are most often not there voluntarily in the same way a "client" is. Teachers and bosses, who control the capital—pay or grades—are accorded power on a much different, and potentially more destructive, scale than health professionals, at least in part because there is no Hippocratic oath—the "first do no harm" mantra—that guides and constrains their interventions.

Here's a story about a workplace experience in my first job that illustrates what I mean. About a year after I was hired, the dean brought in a new chair (without the faculty's assent) and charged him to remake the department. Doesn't matter how for my purposes here. The pertinent fact is that everyone who was untenured knew they were in some jeopardy, likely to be recycled for new hires more in line with the revised identity. Wasn't a pleasant realization, but understandable in the sort of corporate "churning" culture that animates late-capitalist American R-1 universities. My main problem was with how the new chair navigated the early stages of the transition via the many faculty meetings he called. At the outset he said expressly that he wanted to use a Rogerian "rhetoric" to negotiate his relationship with us. So, instead of simply declaring his intentions or explaining specifically what he had been charged by the dean to do, he said he wanted to "get to know" us as individuals, what our visions and thoughts were, etc. He would ask open-ended questions, mirror what was said, never assert a position of his own, Rogerian to a T. One after another we were invited to be "honest," i.e., self-revelatory, about who we were, what we cared about, our attitudes toward the upcoming transition, etc.

This would have been an unhealthy process even if he had been trustworthy. But he clearly wasn't. Which is to say you suspected that everything you revealed during these "confessions" might well be used against you at some point. And it was. That's what happens when you translate a relatively benign method for negotiating an unbalanced power relationship from one professional context to another. I'm sure you can do the math here. It has many variables. But the key ones are that this "therapist" can terminate you instead of vice-versa, and you're there not because you think you need help, but because he does. So my approach was to reveal as little as possible while I pretended to do otherwise. And when the opportunities arose, I fought back. I was terminated, of course, but it took a while, and, really, I both invited and deserved it.

All of which is to say that I have a big problem with the whole “vulnerability” trend that has migrated from the therapeutic setting into workplace cultures. It assumes the powers that be in that arena have your own best interests at heart, are, in a word, trustworthy. That is quite often (I’m tempted to say most often) decidedly not true. I recall a moment in an especially volatile graduate seminar I was trying to manage about 35 years ago. A woman in the group wanted to intervene in whatever divisive topic was on the table at the moment. She started off by saying, “I want what I say to be off the record . . .” I stopped her right there, said that in institutional arenas of this sort nothing is ever reliably off the record. Even things said in tenure decision meetings—expressly, almost sacredly, confidential—make their way into the general culture. I used to joke that if you wanted something to become common knowledge, tell it to someone “in confidence.” If you wanted absolutely everyone to know it, say you were proffering it “in the strictest confidence.” And even if what she said never got beyond the room, everyone there would remember it, for better or worse. Which is to say that “in confidence” and “off the record” have an entirely different valence in school and work settings than they have in a doctor’s office, where there are both legal and professionally sanctioned guard rails. Your “vulnerable” revelations in those spaces will not likely be used against you. They quite often will be in schools and workplaces. So I say ix-nay on the “tell me how you really feel” movement in those settings, the equally ugly opposite face of “authenticity.”

Which gets me to the primary conduit for “trust” in contexts of this sort: transparency. Basically, you need to be upfront about what the goal is and the roadmap you intend to follow to get there. For example, that new chair above could have told us all what the dean had charged him to do with our department, how it might impact the identity currently in place, how it might impact us collectively. He could have said he’d be upfront with us individually as that became pertinent and necessary. He had to know most of these things to take the job. Instead, he invited people to reveal things in

those “open” meetings that came back to hurt and haunt them. In other words, pretty much the opposite of what Carl Rogers was all about.

For a university teacher, that first step toward transparency is a course description and syllabus, which is like a contract: This is what I see as the nature of the subject at hand, this is the kind of work we’ll be doing, in this sequence, to accomplish it. Here’s how you’ll be evaluated and when. That doesn’t mean you can’t change any of that along the way as conditions require. Just that you need to be upfront about (and document) that, too. Workplaces are somewhat more vague and complex in this respect. But good leaders do essentially the same thing: They tell workers what the “syllabus” is; they stick to it until it needs to be revised (as it almost always does); they tell workers how it’s likely to impact them, and how they’re expected to contribute to it. And they document the process dispassionately.

Transparency is not the same thing as honesty. Honesty is personal, transparency is communal, explicitly pertinent to the purpose and desired outcomes in the “business” at hand. You might think this goes without saying. But think back on the teachers and bosses you’ve had in your life. How many of them were pristinely professional in this respect? As opposed to, say, being authoritarian, petty, playing favorites or penalizing for reasons often opaque? Or telling you all kinds of “true things” you didn’t want or need to know to do your work well. I’ve learned most of what I know about good teaching from bad teachers along the way: as in, hey, Paul, if you’re ever in a position like that, these are the things you should never do. What I should do instead often took some time to figure out, and I made my share of mistakes. But knowing what not to do makes it more likely that whatever you decide to do instead will be better. Transparency got on my to-do list very early on. In the first grade actually. I witnessed something on the first day of class that led me to conclude that this arena, “school,” was not the best place just to “be yourself,” be “honest,”

“vulnerable.” It was a place to do your work, and, unless you were lucky enough to have a good teacher, keep your head down, beat them at their own game if you could. And to remember: If you ever get a chance to stand up in front of a room like this to help others do their work together, DON’T DO THAT!

Thought Experiment #3: Change

My general goal in this “leadership” thread has been to highlight the skills and qualities good teachers develop that make them especially strong candidates for leadership positions in the broader marketplace, skills and qualities that are generally ignored in the vetting process. This morning, pertinent to this, I crafted this question: If you were looking for someone to lead some part of your organization, which credential would you value more highly: a record of successful teaching or an MBA from Harvard? I think you already know my answer to that, but I want to say some things about why it is.

Harvard established its business school, and that famous degree, in 1908 as the production line was becoming the dominant model for manufacturing. The purpose of the degree was, as best I can tell, to produce a cadre of middle managers to promote worker efficiency. Such managers were not, obviously (they were getting MBAs at Harvard!), skilled workers who “came up through the ranks.” They were outside “experts” often without any significant “work” experience at all. There were, again as best I can tell from what I’ve read, two pillars that propped up the program: At least initially, one was Taylorism, a quasi- (as in, from my point of view, faux-) scientific approach to improving workplace efficiency. It was one expression of the general movement in capitalist theory, starting in the Gilded Age, to glue a very appealing veneer of quasi- (as in, from my point of view, faux-) mathematical objectivity (via such things as “marginalism,” e.g.) to a cultural ideology that, at least at the outset (see Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*) had a tacit moral aspect. You can

Google Taylorism or marginalism, which will introduce you to a cascade of other-isms, if you're interested in this history. Same with Smith's book. It's a slog, but you will realize how little of his cultural swag has survived the mathematicization of capitalism over the last 150 years.

The other pillar of the Harvard model, the one I want to focus on here, pertains more to ethos than expertise: the “hale fellow (and I do mean fellow, since that's what they were for most of the history of the program) well met” ideal, the gregarious, neurotypical temperament the program established as the preferred leadership model in the business culture. If you didn't bring this temperament with you to the program (and as best I can tell from anecdotal accounts, it was, and may remain, an unconscious factor in the admissions process), you acquired it forcibly while you were there. Or you weren't there long.

So, another recruitment question: If you had two candidates with Harvard MBAs, one who went into the program as a “hale fellow,” the other who wasn't but adapted to that prerogative while he was there, which would you prefer: the one who didn't change because he fit the mold or the one who did because he didn't? One of the shibboleths in the current “leadership” marketplace is “Change Management.” You can buy a certificate in it—often a “preferred” credential in job posts—for about \$5K and a few months of work. All of which suggests that changing yourself might make you better at managing change, giving guy #2 a leg up. But in my opinion, neither of those dudes have changed, at least not meaningfully. The first one hasn't because he wasn't compelled to. His native temperament was hunky dory in this context. The second one was forced to change from the outside-in, most likely against his will, or at least for all the wrong reasons. He almost assuredly did not change his temperament, just papered over it with the preferred one. He will simulate that preferred neurotype for as long as he can. Then he'll come apart at the seams. I'd pass

on both of them. If you want to learn how to manage change, teach for a while.

The first sentence of my first scholarly book is “To teach is to change.” My point then and now is this: The best teachers change themselves all the time, often in response to the changefulness they’re promoting in their students, which is what, after all, they have been hired to do. Change is not at all the enemy of consistency, it is its closest ally. In this universe, everything is always changing. That’s what it means to be alive, and everything here is alive. Including the people in front of us for whom we are accountable. The only question is whether the changes you orchestrate for yourself and others are mindful, arising from the inside-out, or mindless, imposed from the outside in. The best teachers “manage change” with and for others in the former way because that’s the way they have learned to do it with and for themselves. As I’ve said repeatedly and forever in my work, and as every wisdom tradition I’ve studied says, neither remaining what you “are” because it works culturally in the moment, or adapting what you “are” to suit a normative template in order to “pass” in that culture, makes you well-suited to lead other people. Just the opposite. I started this whole line of thinking last time by saying that teaching and leading go hand in hand. You can’t do either one well without the other. So, when you have a choice, pick the good teacher. That Harvard guy will always find a soft landing spot elsewhere. And why should you care if he gloms up the work, as long as it *is* elsewhere?

Okay, so I didn’t win the lottery. But now I can get back to normal again, where these days, for me, telling the difference between “some true things” and “more garbage of this nature” most often seems more manageable than it does when I write. As my son says when you ask him if he wants something he doesn’t: “I’m good.”

A Very Mary Christmas!

Last night I had a dream about my first marriage, which you can tell from the fact that I use “first” did not end well. This whole series is a response to I.A. Richards’ call that “rhetoric should be the study of misunderstanding and its remedies.” One way of misunderstanding the failure of that marriage, my dream made clear, is to believe that it was the result of misunderstandings. It wasn’t. The phrase “irreconcilable differences” does not index misunderstandings. Such differences arise when what is actually happening runs so counter to what you think and believe should be happening that there seems to be, well, no way to reconcile them. There were a few things my dream made clear about that: First, there is always a way to reconcile two into one; you just can’t see it because you’re blinded by lies, the ones you’ve been told and the ones you’re telling yourself. Second, reconciliation does not mean one of the two must concede in favor of the other; they both have to yield completely to make way for an entirely new one. I.e, forget about forensics, wake up. Or walk out!

The specific details of the dream are irrelevant here. The only pertinent fact is that the differences at issue back then were reconciled (in the dream) so simply it was stunning, almost hilariously so. That’s what I want to say as prologue to my next commentary on the Gospel of Mary, where reconciliation seems hard to come by.

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Last Friday, December 19th, was Epstein Files Day, which will at some point become a national holiday to celebrate the moment law and lie became so deeply interwoven they were indistinguishable from one another, a sort of anti-Guy Fawkes day: In our case the Department of Justice and the FBI, in order to *avoid* blowing up

“the king and the House of Lords,” decided to blow themselves up instead. That takes some doing and a lot of gumption. So give them credit for that. Anyone who expected the legally mandated release to go smoothly, transparently, and on time is as naïve as I. A. Richards was when he believed that “rhetoric” could actually provide “remedies” for the sorts of “misunderstandings” that, in 1935 as he gave his lectures, were hurtling the “world” toward its next Roman numeral war. Lies are not misunderstandings. They are expressly designed to displace one reality (usually founded on commonly agreed upon facts) with an alternative one (which is not.) Simple as that. You can’t reconcile differences of that magnitude by having a debate. Again, the “remedy” is to wake up. Or walk out!

Which gets me back now to The Gospel of Mary, all of Jesus’ apostles gathered together for his post-resurrection speech before he sends them off to do his work. You’ll remember from my last entry that Jesus has just delivered some stunning messages about “the sin of the world” (“[t]here is no such thing!”); about “the Good . . . which belongs to every nature;” about the paradox of becoming “content at heart, while also remaining discontent and disobedient;” about acquiring his “peace within yourselves;” about searching for, finding and following “the child of true Humanity [who] exists within you;” about “not promulgat[ing] law like the lawgiver;” each one of which undermines a comfortable lie the apostles lean into to ease their way.

The rest of the gospel is kind of like the final stages of my first marriage, a lot of “rhetoric,” not much “remedy.” But I think it’s really important to go through it, see if I can hear it “with two ears.” Here’s the section that comes right after Jesus’ brief speech:

After he had said these things, he departed from them.

But they were distressed and wept greatly. “How are we going to go out to the rest of the world to announce the

good news about the Realm of the child of true Humanity?” they said. “If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?”

Then Mary stood up. She greeted them all, addressing her brothers and sisters, “Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. Rather we should praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us true Human beings.”

When Mary had said these things, she turned their heart [to]ward the Good, and they began to deba[t]e about the wor[d]s of [the Savior].

Peter said to Mary, “Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than all other women. Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, the things which you know that we don’t because we haven’t heard them.”

Mary responded, “I will teach you about what is hidden from you.” And she began to speak these words to them.

She said, “I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to him, ‘Lord, I saw you today in a vision.’ He answered me, ‘How wonderful you are for not wavering at seeing me! For where the mind is, there is the treasure.’

I said to him, ‘So now, Lord, does a person who sees a vision see it <with> the soul <or> with the spirit?’

The Savior answered, ‘A person does not see with the soul or with the spirit. Rather the mind, which exists between these two, sees the vision an[d] that is w[hat ...]’

A couple of gender-related things to note: First, the “all” Mary addresses includes “brothers and sisters,” both plural. We only hear from her and the “brothers,” but there must have been other women present in this select group. And second, Peter says Jesus loved Mary “more than all other *women*.” Not necessarily more than him and his male colleagues, which leads to some contention later on when he realizes he did that, too.

One of the more comical aspects of Jesus’ relationship with the apostles is their chronic inability to understand the meaning of his enigmatic sayings. Even when he explains one to them they seem befuddled. Here’s another example of that. Instead of being filled with the peace he just left them with, instead of being inspired by his insights, made resolute for their mission, they “were distressed and wept greatly.” The question they pose is telling about the “irreconcilable differences” between what “the Realm of the child of true Humanity” means to them and what Jesus has just told them, pretty clearly, it means to him. All they can think about is whether they will be “spared” (as in not crucified, I assume), which pertains to their bodies, the very “matter” Jesus has said expressly is not the point.

I’ve said several times along the way that what we now call Gnostic (capital G) ideology has two primary pillars: One is a dualistic conception of our universe. In this gospel the binary is “matter” and “mind,” the latter of which Jesus says “exists between” “the soul” and “the spirit,” a formula almost as perplexing as his prior claim that “there is no such thing as sin.” I wish I could get my hands on the next four pages of this text, which are missing. I would really love to hear how Jesus explains this dynamic. But, absent that, I’ll just have to try my best not to misunderstand it.

The second pillar is a kind of knowledge, *gnosis*, that is “irreconcilably different” from dogma. There are two alternative paths toward understanding what *gnosis* is: One is stereotypically

Western, founded on contradiction, the this-is-not-that and that-is-not-this paradigm; the other Eastern, founded on paradox, the this-is-also-that and that-is-also-this paradigm. The male apostles and most of the gnostic sects that coalesced in the second and third centuries are committed to the former. Jesus, to my way of reading him here, in the lost gospels generally, and, on the basis of all that, also in the canonical gospels, is committed to the latter. Which means that the only way not to misunderstand him is to shift paradigms. The result of this will be instant “recognition,” the term used later in this gospel to differentiate those who know themselves from those who don’t; and which, in canonical post-resurrection narratives generally differentiates those who know Jesus when they meet him from those who don’t.

So how to get from “who *are* you” to “I *see* you?” One way to start is by deciding how you want to sequence these two pillars. It makes a big difference (in my opinion) whether you start with dualism to understand *gnosis* or start with *gnosis* to understand dualism. In the former case, *gnosis* will end up as knowledge acquired indirectly (its everyday sense in the Greek vernacular); in the latter, *gnosis* will end up as wisdom arising directly (its specialized sense in most esoteric traditions.) I’ve used the term “direct experience” many times since I started this page. Basically, it’s a way of seeing that bypasses conventional, calculative modes of thinking, the ones where the choices are zero or one; it’s instant “recognition,” the way someone you love leaps out from among everyone you don’t in a group photo. It’s the result of insight, not obedience; of remembering not forgetting; of revelation not explanation. My guess is you’ve entered that state of mind many times without recognizing it as the childlikeness Jesus keeps insisting on, one we didn’t *grow* out of but have been *trained* out of.

The various complex cosmologies that early Gentile-Gnostic-Christian communities generated to translate what Jesus said into their own cultural idiom, thereby (in my opinion again)

misunderstanding it, are perfect examples of the Western instinct gone haywire. There were any number of them sharing the same general script. If you want to know their myriad variations, Google Valentinus, or the Sethians, or Neo-Platonism. Then you can follow links until your head spins. The gist of them is this: There is a higher level of ideal being (sometimes called the Pleroma) where a spiritual singularity (sometimes called the Monad) is surrounded by its various perfect emanations (sometimes called the Aeons), one of whom (usually named Sophia) kind of accidentally-on-purpose ends up creating a lesser god (usually called the Demiurge) who then creates the degraded material world where we happen to reside, the bottom of the barrel spirit-wise. Alone among all the beings down here, we retain a spark of the eternal spirit in us, thus the possibility for escaping and getting back up there. An assortment of minions called Archons, basically prison wardens working for the Demiurge, try to keep us distracted with earthly addictions (delights and fears) while we're here, and then, after we die, to trick us into coming back for another go, in some versions because the gods feed on our suffering, in others just because they're dicks. Jesus' mission, as the "son" of the singularity, the Word, the logos, was to come down and show us the map to get out. I'm not saying this whole arcane system applies directly to this gospel. It clearly doesn't. And it doesn't to most of the Nag Hammadi trove, either. I proffer it just to give a taste for the generic way many of the communities we now call Gnostic imagined their cosmology, by contrast with the orthodox version coalescing around the same time, the one we're familiar with.

That cadre of duplicitous Archons (you'll get a glimpse of them later in this gospel) striving to keep us suffering in the "fallen" world, fully under their control, may sound like gargoyles from a dystopian science fiction novel. But if you understand them as (stereotypically Western) figurative projections of psychological phenomena they seem less absurd. One modern take on all this comes from Carl Jung, who was quite enamored by the esotericism of Gnosticism in general and the Nag Hammadi trove in particular.

He saw these inimical forces not as otherworldly beings but as myriad expressions of our own “shadow,” which we need to bring into the light and come to terms with while we’re here. Once we *recognize* them in that way (which is what Jesus recommends later here) they lose their power to impede our ascent.

Alternative ways for running this gauntlet had been in currency for centuries in Eastern wisdom traditions, which proffered a variety of methods to free oneself from deleterious worldly attachments: In Buddhism it is extended meditation, which leads to an understanding of one’s dependent origination (connection to everything) and the no-self (free of attachments); in Taoism it is waking up, which leads to practices like spontaneous self-so-ness (*ziran*) and non-intentional nothing-doing (*wu wei*), both of which free mind to play in the moment; in the Vedic tradition it is the surrender of “I-ness” that leads to the merger of individual self (atman) with universal Self (Brahman). Each of these considers the ego-based self (that staple of Western identity) to be an externally induced illusion trapping awareness in mazes of personal desire, anxiety, fear, suffering, every disruptive aspect of worldly experience that arises from embodiment-absent-reflection. In other words, we become our own Archons, self-imprisoned. Recognition, the way Jesus talks about it later, is the key to unlock that cage. What I hear Jesus saying here (and in the Gospel of Thomas, which also gets mistakenly pigeon-holed as Gnostic), and even in the canonical gospels, is that if you shift to paradigms of this sort, the self/soul dualism will be resolved amicably rather than reified monstrously.

My “In the Spirit” series last summer was, in part, an attempt to renegotiate the “standard model” of Western dualism via quantum mechanics. Some of the most prominent quantum theorists came to understand the relationship between “mind” and “matter” in exactly the way Jesus describes it here. Max Planck, Irwin Schrödinger, Federico Faggin, and Eugene Wigner (about as non-mystical a quartet as you’re likely to find), among others, came to

believe that in this universe, if you assent to its fundamentally quantum nature, the former precedes and produces the latter. In other words they are not incommensurable, not irreconcilably different, not polar opposites waving at each other across an endless abyss. Not only can't you *have* one without the other, you can't *know* one without the other. Things like superposition, uncertainty, and entanglement, foundational to quantum mechanics, make those conclusions inevitable. And they upend the longstanding Western assumption that consciousness is a byproduct of personal neurology, a temporary field embodied brains generate while they're alive, all of us separate automatons knocking about in a universe of inanimate "things," perceiving them, manipulating them, controlling them. The quantum approach posits consciousness as a field built into the foundational fabric of our universe, one our embodied brains plug into, by means of which we collaborate with reality creatively.

Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem, published during the heyday of the quantum revolution, leads inevitably to the same conclusion. His theorem seems remarkably tame on its surface, basically asserting that any consistent system of axioms will contain true statements that cannot be proven within that system; in other words, no such system can prove its own consistency without going beyond itself to another source, which is similarly subject to the same conditions, until you reach a system that is irreducibly indeterminate. In Gödel's terms, this means you ultimately reach a reservoir of meaning that both resists brute computation (the illusion that you can get to its nature via 1s and 0s) and eludes precise measurement (the illusion that observation is objective rather than participatory.) In other words, you end up exactly where Planck, et al. ended up: Mind precedes and realizes itself in matter and energy. Consciousness is its inbuilt mode of self-awareness, a universally extant field just like the ones that regulate the various expressions of matter and energy. It is not merely a spark imprisoned in my carnal body; not merely electrochemical

excitations in my private brain. It is active and generative everywhere.

In the Western/non-quantum paradigm, the self, experience, all of it, belong locally, deterministically to “me.” Everything else is not-me. In the Eastern/quantum paradigm, “I” am in a non-localized, indeterminate relationship with everything else. That’s the difference between *gnosis*-as-knowledge assumed indirectly and *gnosis*-as-wisdom arising directly, which is exactly, and I mean exactly, what Jesus is trying to get his recalcitrant apostles to understand here and pretty much always. Doesn’t matter whether the powers-that-be want to “spare” them. They are always already spared if they enter the kingdom, the keys to which Jesus has just handed them!

You see a similar example of Jesus’ difficulty getting through to the apostles in the canonical gospels when James and John (In Mark) or James’ and John’s mother (in Matthew) ask Jesus for a favor. Here’s the version from Mark (10:35-45):

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

“What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

“We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

You can hear the frustration in Jesus’ voice: “You two guys don’t really get it, do you? You want a privileged position guaranteed ahead of time? That’s not what this is even about. You think this “cup” I’m talking about is a refreshing drink? Think again.” And the other ten are indignant, I suspect, not because of the ignorance and impertinence of the sons of Zebedee but because they’re thinking, “Hey, what about me? Why can’t I be on the right or left?” The version where their mother makes the request is even weirder. Here, in the Gospel of Mary, having already witnessed Jesus being crucified, gathered together now after his resurrection to plot a path forward, Jesus before them explaining quite plainly what they need to know to fulfill his and their mission courageously, all they can think about is avoiding his fate, distressed and weeping.

“Then Mary stood up” and got them “turned . . . [to]ward the Good.” Do they get on with the work? No, they “debate” Jesus’ words. Peter, always a little pissy around women, immediately asks her to tell the rest of them something she knows and they don’t. So she talks about her “vision” with Jesus. Why did Jesus appear to Mary and not to the other apostles? He basically explains

why: “How wonderful you are for not wavering at seeing me!” In other words, she recognizes him! Peter doesn’t and he doesn’t like that Mary does, a contentiousness that gets worse as this meeting progresses.

Mary asks Jesus how we can “see” such visions. His answer is stunning, implying (to me) that conventional ideas of “soul” or “spirit” misrepresent the relationship between body and “the spark.” It is “mind” that sees. I’m not sure exactly what this “mind” is and does. There are possible analogues in Greek, Egyptian and Eastern esoteric traditions. But it is clearly not the mind that Descartes posed against matter at the center of the modern Western paradigm, one that replicates the soul/body binary that organized orthodox Christianity from the get-go. It sounds to me more like the “mind” those quantum scientists say we link into while we’re here, consciousness. As I said, I wish I could read the next four pages, but I’m so grateful that at least this sentence remains. Because what Jesus says about “mind” opens a way for me to think of it not as a “me-ness” but as a “not-ness” by means of which I experience infinite “thus-ness,” what makes me *a part of everything*, not *apart from everything*. What a beautiful thing!

A Person? No Problem!

Last night I had two separate dreams set in the same location, a large restaurant with maybe 20 tables, each seating six. I was there for a workplace holiday dinner. As the dream opened, all of us workers gathered in a waiting area. Those who were more social and/or had been working there for a while (I was neither) started to aggregate into small groups, 4, 5, 6 people, chatting. Those of us who were newer hires or less social hung out separately at the fringes. When the doors to the dining room swung open, the pre-assembled groups ambled in, picked out their tables quickly and got seated. We “singles” started wandering around among the tables, looking for a suitable landing place. Every time I spotted an open seat, someone else beat me to it. Soon there were half a dozen of us looking and no open seats left. At the back of the room was one table that the wait staff had set aside to help stage the dinner. A manager told them to bring in chairs for the 6 of us to sit there. All fine. The dinner was served buffet style so everyone had to head up to the line, get their food, and return to their seat. When my group came back with our meals, the wait staff had reclaimed our table. They told us, quite rudely, to take any open seat we could find, which meant displacing someone from a seat they expected to find when they came back. None of us was willing to do that. So they told us, again quite rudely, that there might be another table in a separate room. As we headed out to find it, I woke up, feeling awful.

The second dream opened very similarly, all of us gathered in the waiting area. A number of waiters came in with lists of 6 names for each table, groups pre-sorted by the company’s management team. They escorted each group to their table. They got to me toward the end. The waiter escorted me in by myself. We ambled through the packed dining room toward

the rear where there was a single seat, soft black leather, more like a lounge than a dinner chair, with a black leather ottoman in front of it. The managers (at a table of their own across the room) looked over at me, as if wondering whether, from my point of view, they got it right. I sat down, put my feet up, settled in, looked back at them, smiled and gave them a thumbs-up, which they returned to me. Many of the other diners looked my way and smiled, as if they, too, realized it was just right. I assume there were other “singles” who got the same special treatment. Dinner was served at the tables. A waiter brought me a plate which I ate from my lap. I woke up, feeling wonderful.

...

Yesterday I was out at Woodard Bay, my go-to woods here. I was wondering while I walked why I decided to shuttle the “teachers as leaders” weft through the “Gospel of Mary” warp to weave this series. Seems like such an odd pairing. I tossed around a couple of possibilities but nothing settled; I was enjoying my walk so I let it go. Last night I had those two dreams. If I had had either one of them separately, I may well have ignored it and gone back to sleep. I have dreams in both of those general registers quite commonly. But back-to-back like that made them seem relevant to what I’m trying to figure out. So I got up and typed the notes that ended up as my preface today. As I sit here looking at it I can hear in the back of my head the faint echo of the conundrum I ended my last Gospel of Mary piece with: How do you get from “Who are you?” to “I see you!”, or vice-versa, a shift that, in the gospel, seems to pivot on “recognition?”

I was reading a book about leadership last week that made a good point about trust, the subject of my “Trust Me” essay: Other people are far more likely to trust you if you trust them. That made a lot of sense to me. When I started teaching freshman writing back in the 70s, I didn’t have much of a foundation of my own for how to do

that work. So I looked at lots of textbooks, hoping to find one I felt comfortable with. I focused especially on the forewords designed to promote the book's "approach." Almost all textbooks have two, one addressed to the teacher, one to the students. And they pre-figure those audiences in quite different ways, based on tacit assumptions about what a "teacher" should do and what the "students" in front of them most need.

After I read about 30 of those self-promotional scripts I was getting pretty pissed. Primarily because they premise their pitches on what is lacking on both sides of the pedagogical transaction. For the teacher, it was the implication that I didn't have, and was not qualified to develop, an approach of my own for task at hand, only to decide which among the many that were competing for market share was preferable. This is a particularly galling expression of what I said way back at the outset of this series pertinent to the general derogation of the figure of the teacher in our culture: the assumption that a teacher is not a legitimate professional but a transactional agent for mediating (i.e, dumbing down) legitimate knowledge (provided by "experts") into terms students can understand. In other words, teachers need these textbooks at least as much as student do, maybe more.

The forewords to the students were similarly demeaning, their voices a weird combination of authoritarian and smarmy, full of promises to erase deficits or correct erroneous habits. Again, after about 30 of those, same effect, see above. One of their common pre-figurations of the student was as a recalcitrant simpleton, essentially a vessel waiting grudgingly to be first emptied then filled. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1967, trans. into English 1970) Paulo Freire, a Brazilian scholar/teacher, offers an astute critique of this set of assumptions under the rubric of what he called "the banking method" of teaching. Here's the AI generated description of that, which is pretty accurate:

The “banking method of teaching” . . . describes a traditional, oppressive education model, where teachers act as authorities, “depositing” static facts into passive students’ minds (like empty piggy banks). It’s characterized by rote memorization, non-interactive lectures, and a lack of critical thinking, stifling creativity and reducing students to mere receptacles.

The alternative Freire proposes is called “problem-posing education.” Again, AI, and pretty accurate:

Problem-posing education is a liberatory teaching method . . . that empowers students to critically analyze their world through dialogue and shared inquiry, turning them from passive recipients into active problem-solvers focused on transforming reality, grounded in their experiences, and fostering critical consciousness and collective action.

Here’s a thought experiment that will allow you to imagine the difference that makes from a teacher’s point of view looking out on that sea of faces on day one. In the former case, you see an array of blank slates waiting for you to inscribe what you know (or have been told by your textbook) on them, removing whatever stands in its way. They are all the same, the “who are you?” question answered already: flawed and vacuous. In the latter case, you see an array of complex stories waiting for your help to revise them toward the purpose at hand. Unless you move as quickly as possible to “I see you!” you just can’t do that. I think you can calculate for yourself which of those two teacherly orientations you would prefer and, likewise, based on your own ample experience as a student, which you would prefer on that side of the room.

Freire’s system is an interesting amalgam of Marxism and Christianity, in the vein of what was called “liberation theology” in

the volatile politics in Latin America in the 70s and 80s. Freire was imprisoned and exiled for his anti-establishment pedagogical work with sugar cane cutters in Brazil, just to give you an idea of how radical that shift can look in authoritarian contexts, which schools are at least to some extent in every culture, including ours. His discourse tends to be dense in the way Marxist theory is, leavened by a Christian undertone. bell hooks, whom I mentioned in an earlier piece, inverts the balance between those two as she translates a similar pedagogical initiative through the lens of late-20th-century Black feminism. In both of their enterprises, then, a sort of background-Jesus figures in, more as a radical subversive (as in the gnostic tradition) than a transcendent moral icon (as in the orthodox tradition), which may be one batten on the loom that is bringing my weft and warp together here.

One of the side-effects of the time I spent with those textbooks, which ultimately turned into the article I mentioned in a piece I wrote last summer that got me fired from my first job and hired into my next, is it changed my whole way of thinking about the classroom dynamic, inspired me to trust myself and my students more and marketplace artifacts less. In effect it “gnosticized” my pedagogy: Follow the light in here, ignore the authorities out there. All of this preceded by a couple of decades the wholesale transfer of pedagogical authority out of the classroom and into state houses, via things like No Child Left Behind and the “standards” movement, all of which turned out to be way worse than the textbook trade in undermining the autonomy of teachers. Now it wasn’t just multiple competing sales pitches but single-minded legislation saying: “You are not to be trusted to do this work. Trust us instead.” If you think any of that was a good idea, you don’t know much about the current state of either public or higher education in our country right now. And you were never a teacher.

There are basically two alternatives when it comes to trusting others: conditional, i.e., trust no one until they earn it; or unconditional, i.e., trust everyone until they don’t deserve it. I’ll

just cut to the chase and say I think that both the textbook industry and the political machinery would have been much wiser to trust both teachers and students unconditionally. Conditional trust invites stereotypes much like the ones I found in those forewords and hear now in political boilerplate, cultural tropes imposed from the outside in, diversity based on rigid categories rather than fluid identities. In other words, the way they answer the “who are you?” question ahead of time eliminates their need to ever say “I see you!” Unconditional trust, on the other hand, is founded on equity, everyone sharing the same “unalienable Rights,” their differences emerging from the inside out, the infinite variegations that “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” cultivate from sameness. Unconditional trust starts with a gesture that says “I see you!,” allowing the “who are you?” to emerge naturally along the way.

I outlined one such gesture in my previous piece about trust: Learn names quickly and use them regularly. Anyone you call by name knows instantly that you “see” them, which invites them to “see” you back, and both of you to remember the interaction as personal rather than generic, a process that, over time, builds a genuine relationship. Do this *en masse* over time, and you build a genuine community. In each of my dreams, workplace leaders planned something nice for their employees. Same restaurant, same seating arrangement, same workers. The only difference is that in one case they personalized the experience on the basis of knowledge about individuals, in the other they didn't. Probably, for the vast (normative) majority of diners, that made little or no difference. They ended up sitting with people they liked and having a good time. But for me and for many others I suspect, it made all the difference in the world. Just as Mary's recognition made all the difference to Jesus: “How wonderful you are for not wavering at *seeing me!*” Even Jesus liked to be seen. He trusts her enough then to tell her his “secrets,” she trusts him then even more. That's how that works: You trust students (or workers), they trust you, which makes you trust them, and they you, *ad infinitum*.

In my experience, conditional trust never turns into unconditional trust. Like that guy I wrote about last summer my wife was dating when I met her, who kept saying she was “almost perfect” except for “this.” Once she attended to “this” there was always a “that.” I’m sure you know the type. I’d rather have someone say “get the hell out” than tell me I was “almost perfect.” They both end in the same place. The former saves lots of time and wear and tear. And, again in my experience, unconditional trust never turns into conditional trust. If the violation of trust is egregious enough to break it, there is just distrust. Forever. If it’s not, it can be restored. I know that’s all speculative and arguable, but it’s what I believe.

So what difference does any of this make in a pedagogical relationship? I’ll start with a story I’ve told before. My first real “teaching” experience was as a volunteer tutor at a local community center when I was in college. I was assigned a 2nd grader called Tommy. The only guidance I got, via a note from his teacher, was “Tommy can’t read.” Okay, I thought, that’s where I’ll start then. The only reading material I had with me that day was the local newspaper. So after I got to know Tommy a bit—he was a VERY rambunctious but disarmingly sweet young man, always smiling ear to ear as he sat fidgeting. I pointed out one of the headlines just to calibrate what “can’t read” meant. He could read big print words pretty easily, so that was good. Then we looked at article. He struggled through the first sentence, not bad, but was clearly jumping out of his skin. Finally, he asked me if he could run around the room once. It was big room, a gym I think, and all the tutoring was going on in the middle so I said “sure.” He did that, sat down and started reading again, better. After a minute or so, he asked if he could run around the room again, and “sure.” We went back and forth like this, the reading intervals getting longer between the running intervals. The upshot was Tommy knew how to read. He just couldn’t sit still very long. And why should he? He was 7 years old. For many hundreds of generations his ancestors spent their childhood running around. They weren’t sitting still for seven hours a day listening to someone drone on.

But this was 1969 in the American rust belt, so he got pawned off to me as someone who “can’t read.” Not “doesn’t read at grade level.” Can’t. A difference gets turned into a disability.

Over the last century or so, our culture has created a dizzying array of medicalized categories to sort “problem” students. Often they are used to provide personalized help. Just as often they are used to isolate, penalize and stigmatize. What at one point in history would have been within the normal range is now listed as a “disorder” in the DSM. Tommy for example would these days be diagnosed ADHD, probably prescribed some medication that would extend his attention span. He would likely find school more tolerable, be more successful, demonstrate more clearly that he knew how to read. Whether that’s for the best is a question that never gets asked. A difference is not necessarily a disability. Could we design schools and curricula so that children like Tommy—and lots of them are like Tommy, except better at controlling it—could learn in a healthier and more humane way? Yes. Should we? Yes. Will we? No. It would mean smaller classes, more and better-paid teachers, more and better-paid teacher aides, different kinds of classrooms. The dominant culture these days hates many things: two of them are public education and the taxes that pay for it. And we have taken lately to adding a toxically ableist hatred toward anyone who doesn’t quite fit the budget, like Tommy. Cheaper and easier to medicate him than to accommodate him.

So what’s my point? One of them is the general expectation in both schools and workplaces that everyone will either fit into the cookie-cutter mold of someone who can (or can at least credibly pretend they can) do the job. If you can’t do either of those things (and way more are doing the second than the first, including me for most of my school years), you become a “problem.” The best teachers I’ve witnessed don’t operate in that paradigm. And, as I said, they have far fewer “problem” students than those that do. They take time to get to know their students as persons not problems, they enjoy the process, and (my point) most of those

persons then perform up to their potential instead of down to the lowest common denominator. Like Tommy. He could read, if you just gave him a chance every now and then to run off a little steam. In fact, as time went on just the fact that he knew that was an option led him to use it less often.

The final thing I want to write about may seem disconnected from trust. It was a term highlighted (in green) in the subtitle of the book I referenced at the outset: family. As in treat your workplace collective like they're family. The culture described in the book is clearly admirable, respectful of workers, healthy, way better than most workplaces. It is full of very wise and detailed advice about how to get there. Hard to complain about any of that. Still, I'm chary about using that template to organize anyone's leadership approach, most especially teachers, who have long suffered from involuntary maternalization, the assumption that, male or female, they have overdrive child-rearing instincts that draw them toward such work and, therefore, that their compensation can be calibrated down, they will work endless hours, and they won't complain.

On a much more practical level: Think about the extended "family" you grew up with and around. If I thought of mine as a prototype for my classroom I would never have chosen to teach. Way too many of my relatives were intransigent, difficult people. They didn't, and wouldn't, listen to me in any case, no matter my status. What would I do if I walked into a classroom and projected that as a template to "see" the students there? Yikes, not good! So, no, that term doesn't work for me. Maybe your "family" template is more benign. In which case you still have to decide what familial role you want to play from your position of authority. The most obvious choices are paternal or maternal (neither of which is necessarily precluded by your gender.) I don't like either option. Students, I know from experience, tend to "see" teachers, at least at first, through the lens of family models geared to age and gender. You are what you look like to them. Over time, I morphed from older brother, to dad to granddad. I understand that instinct for

familiarizing a new authority figure via the matrix you're born into and know like the back of your hand. The fact of the matter, though, is I was not any of those things literally, I didn't want to be, and I worked my way out of them as quickly as possible.

As to the other side of that equation: No matter what their age, students and workers are not YOUR children. And none of them, even the youngest, should, from my point of view, be cast as "children" at all, at least in the ways our society defines that cohort as less than fully human, both legally and culturally. All of it is bad as a foundation for demonstrating trust. If they're not persons, equal to one another and to you in that respect, they will know that, believe me, and act accordingly, most likely by becoming problems.

My daughter read the book I've alluded to before I did. She admired the familial workplace culture its author wanted to promote as much as I did. But there were aspects that, in her view, tended to "infantilize" workers. When I looked again, I could see that, too. If your role model is "mom" or "pop," and your students or employees are "children," well, a certain degree of infantilization is inevitable. Just because all the parties might like it doesn't make it good. Even the expression "MY students," one I have always used routinely, is problematic. Those people sitting in front of me were "mine" only in the sense that some administrative procedure delivered them to the same classroom I was assigned to on day one. My job then is to teach them not "raise" them. And they should also be free to get to know me without being constricted by parental stereotypes. Which means (no matter what all those textbooks implied) there is no universal template you can simply adopt to lead effectively. A good leader can be gregarious or reclusive, serene or passionate, serious or funny, etc., etc., *ad infinitum*. The main thing is that *your* identity is not some default cultural trope borrowed from a textbook; it is created intentionally with real work that is always ongoing, allowed to flourish just like those presences you're with, always in process, never finalized.

All of which I now see answers the weft and warp question I started with. No matter which side of the room you're looking from, right relationships get built from the inside out not the outside in. That way everyone gets to become a full-fledged person instead of a problem. That's the difference between presence and absence, between agency and autopilot, between having fun and toughing it out. What makes it possible is a safe space that promotes mutual trust founded on recognition, the "I see you!" that then leans on listening to move toward "Who are you?" Full stop. Maybe I just should have written that sentence at the outset instead of these three long essays on teachers as leaders and saved us both some time. Except I didn't know how to write it until now.

I recall during my college years deciding to prove for myself how Einstein came up with his famous $E=MC^2$ equation. You have to put a lot of different things together—Maxwell's equations, the Michelson-Morley experiment, and I honestly can't now remember what else, only that they were all already there in the current landscape of physics. When you do, and assert that the speed of light is a universal constant (Einstein's special sauce), it works out automatically—you can actually do it, if you want, using algebra instead of calculus—and it's so obviously true you wonder, "Why did it take so long to get there?" Einstein, a nobody working as a patent clerk, showed us his work in a couple of essays he wrote in 1905, one on the electrodynamics of moving bodies (about 30 pages long), one on inertial energy (a 3 page addendum.) I've shown you my work in about the same number of pages. And you didn't have to do the math!

Cramming for the Exam

I had a dream last night about death. Not mine, somebody else's, somebody I didn't even know. We were out of town, my wife and I, to attend their funeral, staying with the deceased's family, about ten of them living together in an old house, one you could tell had once been grand but was now disheveled, down on its luck. Several of them were older colleagues of mine from the early days of my career, people I haven't thought about for many years, was surprised I even remembered. The others were TV characters I recall from my childhood. Their house, the family dynamic, the overall mood, the night before a funeral, it felt like being inside a Flannery O'Connor story, an old, outworn world in the process of falling apart. Late that evening, some bickering that had been ongoing since we arrived erupted into a fist fight, two men duking it out—for real, fists to the face—over something stupid, clearly a fight that had been brewing for years. Maybe generations. I watched them go at it for a while, then I and some others stepped in. I made some comments about the importance of “maintaining decorum” when you were in the company others. About keeping your chaos to yourself, where it won't do any damage. Even to you, because you know it so well. In some ways it is you. Then I went to my room and called to schedule a flight home. The next day. I would miss the funeral I came expressly to attend. I asked my wife if she wanted to come with me. She also had no connection to the deceased, was there for me, and said yes, of course. When we were leaving the next morning, everyone else in the family was packing up, too. Moving out. I wasn't sure if it was before or after the funeral, which no longer seemed to matter to anyone. No one said a word to us or to one another, just ambled out of the house and through the yard carrying their packed bags off into the surrounding woods. There was something surreal, even absurd, about the

scene. Funny in a way. I was very happy. I thought this is what resurrection feels like. When I woke up, I smelled roses.

I have no idea how this applies to what I'm trying to write about in this series, misunderstanding, or the specific section of The Gospel of Mary of Magdala I'll be writing about today. But I'm sure it does. Maybe I'll figure that out along the way here, maybe not. Doesn't matter. I am positive that whatever had to get figured out did while I was asleep. It's one of those things that doesn't need to be clear. Just done. And maintaining decorum means I should probably keep that part of it to myself in any case.

[You may be wondering about these dreams I've been opening with lately, whether they're real or made up. I sleep very wonkily, wake up fully alert after every REM cycle, so numerous times a night. In those interims I remember the dreams I've just had quite clearly. I typically take a few seconds to think: "Do I want to remember that or not?" 95% of the time, what I remember seems either trivial or outlandish beyond any possibility of sense-making. So I go back to sleep and those dreams disappear into oblivion forever. For some dreams I think: "That might be worth thinking about." In which case I scribble a few quick notes to jog my memory when I get up in the morning. Every now and then I think: "That's really interesting," and I get up and type something up about it. In any case, I have an inventory of actual dream "footage"—words cuing mental imagery—that I use to help me sort out my life. Often, as in these recent cases, I feel like a dream I've had is applicable to what I'm writing at the moment. I just don't know how or why. So I transcribe the dream and then start to write. If the writing actually works with the dream, I leave the dream in. If not, I take it out. That's how it works.]

...

There are two sections of this gospel left for me to consider. The final one, which I'll get to next time, brings the ongoing bickering among the apostles to a final boil, precipitated by what Mary tells the apostles in this section, the "secret" Jesus shared with her and no one else. There is a pretty big missing chunk in the manuscript at the outset, so it starts *in medias res*. What remains is basically a set of instructions about how to run the gauntlet (of the Archons I mentioned last time, though they are not named as such here) that you'll encounter immediately after your death, so you won't be tricked into coming back here for another round. It clearly presumes some foreknowledge of the exotic cosmology that was espoused by early gnostic communities. Given the most likely vintage of this text, I'm guessing it would be one of those extant in second century, like the one promulgated by Valentinus. Valentinus' project was to merge Pauline Christianity with Platonism. One of the texts recovered in the Nag Hammadi hoard in Egypt in 1945—The Gospel of Truth—outlines his vision, may even have been written by him, originally in Greek. The version recovered at Nag Hammadi is a Coptic translation, like the Gospel of Mary, so was likely familiar to its author and her community.

It's important to remember that Valentinianism was not, in its day, an esoteric cult. It was a mainstream mode of Christianity in these early Greek communities, widely accepted and practiced. Valentinus was Roman, so he was popular in Rome, too. Enough so for some of the early orthodox Church fathers, like Irenaeus, to get in quite a lather about him, heating up the heresy branding iron. Didn't take long—maybe another hundred years or so—for not just Valentinianism but most of the gnostic movement to be driven "underground," and then maybe another hundred or so for its canon to end up literally underground, where it lay dormant for over 1500 years.

Pretty big gnostic brush fires flared up from time to time, like the Paulicians in the 7th century, the Bogomils in the 10th century, the Cathars in the 11th century—to give an idea of how enduringly

appealing this mode of Christianity was. All were stamped out. With considerable prejudice. Burning and burying, I mean, not just books but bodies! To understand the manic extremity of the Church's response to these heresies, you need to know something about how their cosmologies differed. I gave a brief snapshot last time of the generic gnostic cosmology, which I'll copy here to refresh your memory:

If you want to know the myriad details of the gnostic cosmology, Google Valentinus, or the Sethians, or (later) Plotinus. Then you can follow links until your head spins. The gist of it, as it applies here, is this: There is a higher level of ideal being (sometimes called the Pleroma) where a spiritual singularity (sometimes called the Monad) resides with its various emanations (sometimes called Aeons), one of whom (usually named Sophia) kind of accidentally on purpose ends up creating a lesser god (usually called the Demiurge) who then creates the degraded material world where we happen to reside, the bottom of the barrel spirit-wise. Alone among all the beings down here, we retain a spark of the eternal spirit in us, thus the possibility for escaping and getting back up there. An assortment of minions called Archons, like prison wardens working for the Demiurge, try to keep us distracted by earthly matters (delights and fears) while we're here and then, after we die, trick us into coming back for another go, in some versions because the gods feed on our suffering, in others just because they're dicks. Jesus' mission, as the "son" of the singularity, the word, the logos, was to come down here and show us the map to get out. What he says earlier in the text about the primacy of direct experience and self-fledged knowledge is the primary way we outwit the Archons while we're here. This section has to do with how we outwit them after we die. I'm not saying this whole arcane system applies directly to this gospel. It

clearly doesn't. And it doesn't to some of the Nag Hammadi trove, hardly at all to the Gospel of Thomas. I proffer it just to give a taste for the alternative ways some of the communities we now call Gnostic imagined their cosmologies and the "One True God," by contrast with the orthodox versions that was coalescing around the same time.

The orthodox cosmology is quite different, especially in relation to the One True God problem. It began to take root deep into the second millennium BCE. The top god back then was called El. He had a cadre of minions who administered his various domains in the Canaanite lands. One of them was called Yahweh, a tempestuous "war and storm" god who was assigned to Israel, maybe to give the Israelites, beaten down from the exile from Egypt, a bit of *chutzpah*. So he is their local god. By the time he introduces himself to Moses at the burning bush on Mount Sinai as "I am who I am," he is basically saying *he* is now the one true god, not El. Not long after that, he hands Moses the stone-engraved commandments, the first four of which—no other gods, no graven images, no name in vain, and keep the sabbath holy—make clear his supremacy as a matter of law not opinion. So the first stage of his ascension is accomplished. El gets a couple of cryptic mentions in the Old Testament, but for all practical purposes he has been deposed. Which leaves a variety of what had been lesser gods competing for supremacy. One of them was Baal (another war and storm god represented by the bull icon). Moses, now fully convinced that Yahweh is the One, forces his people to forsake the Baal cult. So Yahweh basically takes over Baal's war and storm franchise; and ultimately all the rest of the local competition among the Israelites. And he does it, with the help of Moses and his successors, via a process more like corporate mergers than pitched battles, sort of like Larry Ellison agglomerating an unstoppable media empire to trumpet his political propaganda. And if you think that's too strong a word, check out CBS: Bari Weiss is in; Stephen Colbert out; 60 Minutes is more like "wait a

minute;” Fox News Lite right around the corner. That’s how Yahweh did it, too.

In any case, by the end of the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE Yahweh’s status as the One True God was indisputable. And when the orthodox Church fathers decided in the 4th century CE that their canon (the New Testament) would be appended the Old Testament, Yahweh became the template for the Christian One True God, too. I think you can already see the problem the early Church had on its hands and why they got so apoplectic about it. Not only, as I’ve said repeatedly, does the gnostic ideology say we have built into our standard equipment the instruments to guide us to salvation, making the elaborate hierarchy of authority the church had assembled at best irrelevant, at worst obstructive, it also maintains that the orthodox god is not the One True God but a raged, inept sub-deity created by mistake who then creates us by mistake, the only thing down here with a “spark” of heaven to guide us back up there. Not much chance of a rapprochement there. Better to burn and bury, which is what happened. Which reminds me: One of my books was (and may still be) banned by the US military academy libraries. The MAGA movement is pretty potent, but amateur in the anti-DEI business compared to the Catholic Church of the first millennium. Real pros. If that sort of expertise starts to develop around here, I’ll be sure to bury a copy of my book so someone digging up potatoes someday will find it and think, wow, I had no idea stuff like this existed back then.

Back to the text: Since several pages are missing at this point, it’s hard to tell exactly which “branch” of gnostic theosophy is animating this community. But they clearly accept the basic spirit/matter binary and the primacy of self-knowledge common to all of them, the keys to “the kingdom” as it were. What Mary says is that Jesus told her, and no one else, the specific things you need to do immediately after death to get past those malevolent gatekeepers whose mission is to send you back here instead of letting you pass into the higher realm of spirit. In some of the

scarier iterations of this process, these gatekeepers are not just deceptive, showing you various kinds of fake lights for example, some of them illuminated apparitions of people you might want to meet up there; they are demented, wanting to send you back so your suffering can continue to produce a food—what Robert Monroe called loosh in *Far Journeys* (1985)—that the gods rely on for sustenance. Yikes! This gospel is much milder than that, but you get the drift: This after-death rite of passage is a big deal.

In any case, here's what the surviving portion of this section says, if you're still interested, opening again *in medias res* because of the missing pages:

And Desire said, "I did not see you go down, yet now I see you go up. So why do you lie since you belong to me?"

The soul answered, "I saw you. You did not see me nor did you know me. You (mis)took the garment (I wore) for my (true) self. And you did not recognize me."

After it had said these things, it left rejoicing greatly.

Again, it came to the third Power, which is called "Ignorance." [It] examined the soul closely, saying, "Where are you going? You are bound by wickedness. Indeed you are bound! Do not judge!"

And the soul said, "Why do you judge me, since I have not passed judgement? I have been bound, but I have not bound (anything). They did not recognize me, but I have recognized that the universe is to be dissolved, both the things of earth and those of heaven."

When the soul had brought the third Power to naught, it went upward and saw the fourth Power. It had seven

forms. The first form is darkness; the second is desire; the third is ignorance; the fourth is zeal for death; the fifth is the realm of the flesh; the sixth is the foolish wisdom of the flesh; the seventh is the wisdom of the wrathful person. These are the seven Powers of Wrath.

They interrogated the soul, “Where are you coming from, human-killer, and where are you going, space-conqueror?”

The soul replied, saying, “What binds me has been slain, and what surrounds me has been destroyed, and my desire has been brought to an end, and ignorance has died. In a [wor]ld, I was set loose from a world [an]d in a type, from a type which is above, and (from) the chain of forgetfulness which exists in time. From this hour on, for the time of the due season of the aeon, I will receive rest i[n] silence.”

After Mary had said these things, she was silent, since it was up to this point that the Savior had spoken to her.

So there are “seven Powers of Wrath” that impede your soul on its path to the spirit realm, each of which challenges you in a specific way. Basically, what Jesus says you most need to do is keep your composure, “see” them, giving them answers based on that “recognition,” as in: “I know who you are, so don’t try to gaslight me into falling for your tricks.” Here we meet the second (desire), the third (ignorance), and the fourth, (which for some reason subsumes these two along with the others.) The Karen L. King edition of this gospel, the one I’m using here, offers a detailed analysis of these shenanigans, if you’re interested.

These instructions are reminiscent of the spells in the Egyptian Book(s) of the Dead, designed to help the Pharaohs wend their way upward to take their rightful places among the gods, which would

have been familiar to Greek theosophists. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, written later, follows the same type of recipe. I have zero interest in any of those. And not much in this iteration, at least if you take it all on face value, this duel of wits after death to find a way to ascend. What Jesus says in his own voice in this gospel, and generally elsewhere, is do it here and do it now. This is the kingdom, not that off ramp where you'll be hounded by liars and cheats. So you better confront, "see," these inimical forces ahead of time. Maybe he and/or Mary made that clear in the missing pages. Maybe not, no way to know. My point is this: The Jesus we know from his own words says, over and over, that the real work of coming to terms with all of these "Powers" must happen while you're alive. And if you do it well, this after-death rigamarole, if there actually is one, will be a piece of cake. You know the pertinent Biblical passages about that as well as I do.

I can hear many of you saying: "Well, that's why the church banished this stuff and why you should embrace its preferred path to real salvation." But is that path really better? Both Paul and Augustine and countless others thereafter say all you need to do to be saved is get baptized and have absolute faith in the risen Christ. Good works play no part in it. Sounds pretty simple compared to that grueling interrogation, right? Except right off the bat, maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of unbaptized human race is precluded. And as to absolute faith: Jesus says in both Matthew and Mark that if you have faith "small as a mustard seed" you will be able to move mountains. If moving mountains is the test, well, I have never once been able to move a mountain, and I've never met another Christian who could. That doesn't mean there aren't any, but my guess is it would be a microscopic sample. So I'm hoping there's more to it than faith. And over the centuries the Church has added a whole bunch of other things that might disqualify you from the eternal light, like apostasy, or heresy, or unforgiven violations of commandments, or even just getting married after a divorce without paying for a get out of jail free card from the Pope. I recall the first time I took my second wife home to meet my parents. The very first thing my

father, a “devout” Catholic, said to me was: “You know you’re going to hell, don’t you.” So, really, how is that blocked path any better than this gang of goons gunning for you?

As to coming back, with or against one’s will, via reincarnation or transmigration, I have no particular gripe with Buddhist or Platonic versions, both of which suggest that lives in this world offer a potentially progressive path toward escape-velocity enlightenment. I can handle that. But I’m not a fan of this version. If you have to endure everything here only to encounter a bevy of clever pettifoggers whose primary job is to trick you into coming back again, then this system seems Albert Camus-level absurd. The best response to that would be Bill Murray’s in “Groundhog Day:” Kill yourself over and over until there’s not even a shred of a soul left they would deem worth saving. Then you won’t have to wake up every morning listening to “I Got You Babe.”

One possible analogue for these Archonic impediments in the orthodox tradition is the well-known list of “seven Deadly Sins” (pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth). There is some general overlap between them and the “seven Powers of Wrath” Mary talks about here. I actually prefer her list, which has a quasi-Buddhist aspect, in that it focuses more on those things that inhibit spiritual growth and less on physical excesses. The latter imply that our real problem here is with embodiment, which I don’t believe, and, oddly enough, I don’t think this particular gnostic-Jesus does either, despite all the stuff about “matter.” I especially like the inclusion of “ignorance” in her list. Greek wisdom traditions understood that ignorance was a greater threat to the common good than evil because it was so much more prevalent, in that those hordes of the ignorant make ideal pawns for the few genuinely evil leaders that arise among them. You can see evidence of this in Stoic philosophers, in Plato, even in the mode of historical analysis practiced by Thucydides, all of whom call attention to the devastation caused by believing with certitude all manner of things that are obviously, even demonstrably untrue.

Dietrich Boenhoffer, who died in a German concentration camp, provides an illuminating modern critique of the insidious role of this kind of ignorance (he calls it stupidity) in the rise of Nazism in Germany. He says in “*After Ten Years:*”

Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind in human beings at least a sense of unease.

I call attention to this to highlight the power of the most distinctive feature of gnosis-based thinking: its aversion to authoritarian assertions of what is true and what is not, which is expressly designed, in Jesus’ opinion, to promote exactly this kind of ignorance. The aura of certitude creates an ideal cauldron for cooking up cults. Self-knowledge (which, you know if you pursue it, is never absolutely certain of anything) is the antidote. That’s the main thing that got this brand of Christianity in such hot water with the “powers that be” as the Catholic Church catalyzed its identity in the 4th and 5th centuries. The difference of opinion about the One True God is a pretty big deal. But I still think the emphasis on self-knowledge rather than institutional authority is a bigger sticking point. It makes the elaborate hierarchy the Church erected to assert its power pointless. No “powers that be” ever give in that easily.

This may be one way of reading the pertinence of that weird dream I had last night: We live in a quasi-Christian culture that celebrates ignorance founded in misplaced certitude, that pretends to honor life while it revels in death: a mass murder a day (but guns are great); US citizens gunned down in the streets simply for protesting (but Iran is monstrous); all those “peace” deals (the news of which don’t ever seem to reach the killing fields), deadly detention camps (for the good people who mow your lawn and

clean your hotel room), bombing fishing boats, lethal injections, etc., etc. Pope Leo called out this contradiction about a month ago. Fell on a lot of deaf ears, including among all the “devout” Catholics in the administration and on the Supreme Court. As most of what Jesus says most often does down here, when push comes to shove, or shove comes to gunfire.

My dream’s advice? Stop waiting around for the f’n funeral. Get on a plane and go home, not to some nether heaven you need to squeeze your way into, but the one right in front of you, so breathtakingly beautiful, among those you love and who love you, no matter how few they are, so breathtakingly beautiful. Wake up, see with two eyes, hear with two ears. If it takes acing the logic portion of the GREs to get from this world to the next, I might just pass on it, come back down here for another semester, pick up a few extra credits just for the heck of it. Who knows, maybe what’s up there isn’t that great anyway. Or even “there” at all.

... Quite Contrary

I was a university professor for 45 years, working at what are called R-1 universities, the R standing for research. The other pole in the binary that regulates performance in these setting is teaching (T). Over the course of my career the balance of power between R and T gradually migrated toward the R until, during my final years, at least where I worked, T was largely irrelevant both to professional status and to the promotion and tenure process. About a decade before I retired, I submitted my portfolio for promotion to full professor. My credentials at the time met the then-current guidelines with plenty of room to spare. I had an acclaimed scholarly book and the equivalent of at least one more in significant articles, exceptional teaching and service credentials. What could go wrong? Well, at the meeting called to consider my case, the most elite senior faculty in my department (the R-is-everything people) decided to create a new set of guidelines for promotion to full professor. The resulting document was two pages long. The first criterion was “two books.” The “book” category was specifically delimited to preclude combinations of related articles, no matter their importance in your field; edited collections; collaborative projects; and textbooks; four of the historical mainstays for advancing knowledge in my field. The only books that counted were “scholarly monographs,” which in this context meant single-author texts in a narrow postmodernist (cultural studies/critical theory-based) register, the kind of books that the elite faculty had written to become elite. The rest of their document was an almost comically circuitous and duplicitous attempt to say: “Yes, we will count all of those other things you do, if you have the two books, but if you have the two books, all those other things are beside the point.” Reading it was like walking “up” an Escher stairway: a lot of dizzying exertion to end up on the step you started at. There was, of course, some standard boilerplate about the importance of teaching and service. But the

same dynamic applied: No degree of excellence in either could replace a book; and if you had the two books, an absence of significant credentials in either or both was not a problem.

To understand how such a bad faith argument could arise in a purportedly “humanistic” setting, you have to know something about how the general culture in higher education evolved over the course of my career. The university was, for most of American history, a service-inspired institutional force in our culture, which is what I believed it to be when I started my career in the early 70s. Over the next 30 years—the heyday of neoliberal capitalism and Reaganomics in the 80s, driven by the “he who has the most things wins” mantra; the expansion of the finance bubble in the 90s, which delivered a windfall of bank-sponsored student debt into university coffers; the ascendancy of cultural studies as not one but the only matrix for producing legitimate research—that spirit gradually morphed toward the corporate model typical to Western capitalism.

This shift obviously had an impact on the idea of “the good” animating the overall project of the university, and, not surprisingly, I ended up on the losing side. The tenure stream faculty in my department was smaller the day I retired than the day I started. The administration had at least tripled in size, maybe quadrupled. What had been one dean became four or five, orchestrated upward, each with an office and a staff; what had been a team of financial managers became layers of fiscal and investment specialists; and, at the top of the pyramid, a bevy of lawyers. I have no idea how many, just that almost anything of consequence you wanted to do had to get their nod. In the process, the overall system became strictly hierarchized. What had previously been collaborative processes in which faculty had not only a voice but some authority became exclusively top-down chains of command. Like I said, corporatization with a capital C. Like the Church with a capital C I’ve been writing about here:

people subordinated to systems instead of systems serving people. Ass-backwards!

Because money and relative status became intertwined in this matrix, every school in the R-1 pantheon, including mine, began to compete to rise higher in “the national rankings,” primarily by elevating admission standards (for students) and tenure and promotion standards (for faculty.) Moving up even a notch or two was cause for chest-thumping. If you think any of that was a good idea, take a minute to look now at where higher education stands in the cultural marketplace. A mid-level congresswoman (about to resign now after her moment in the MAGA main beam) could compel multiple university presidents to skulk off without a fight either from them or their boards of trustees, the latter of which then cut back room deals paying many millions of dollars of tribute to recover some portion of their illegally withheld federal research funds. Profiles in courage! And that’s just for starters, you know, if you follow the news.

What is happening now to K-12 public education in our country, as what’s left of the eviscerated Department of Education is carted off in parcels to other agencies, is sad and frightening. Those working in that domain did nothing to deserve such a dire fate. What’s happening in higher ed is different: American universities created themselves, with great bravado, the very conditions that have led to their demise. Those may seem like strong words, words I’m sure many of my former colleagues would disagree with. Especially the elite faculty who wrote those absurd guidelines. But they are all words I’m more than happy to stand behind. I was there. I have the receipts.

In any case, I read the new guidelines carefully, realizing very quickly that all of that gobbledygook could be reduced to one sentence: If you have two of the right kinds of books, you’re in; if you don’t you’re out. So I wrote a second “scholarly monograph.” I may well have written it in any case, but, basically, I was just

pissed and was not going to walk away without a fight. I had extraordinary credentials on the teaching side, so I decided to open that section in my personal statement this way: “I understand that teaching is irrelevant to this process, but I’m going to talk about my record in that area anyway because I care deeply about it.” I had extraordinary credentials on the service side, too, and wrote a similar sentence to introduce that work. I did that for a very specific reason: I wanted to know if anyone in the chain of command—full professors, chair, dean, provost, chancellor—would raise an eyebrow about that assertion. Not one of them did. In other words, they all knew what I said was true and had no problem with it, which is what I wanted to find out. I did get promoted. Soon after that, I resigned my administrative positions and went back to full-time teaching. And I rejected every subsequent attempt to get me back into the administrative mainstream. I enjoyed the final years of my career immensely.

You might be wondering what this could possibly have to do with my final installment on the Gospel of Mary of Magdala. Here is that section

Andrew responded, addressing the brothers and sisters, “Say what you will about the things she has said, but I do not believe that the S[a]vior said these things, [for] indeed these teachings are strange ideas.”

Peter responded, bringing up similar concerns. He questioned them about the Savior: “Did he, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?”

Then [M]ary wept and said to Peter, “My brother Peter, what are you imagining? Do you think that I have thought up these things by myself in my heart or that I am telling lies about the Savior?”

Levi answered, speaking to Peter, “Peter, you have always been a wrathful person. Now I see you contending against the woman like the Adversaries. For if the Savior made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her? Assuredly the Savior’s knowledge of her is completely reliable. That is why he loved her more than us. Rather we should be ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and announce the good news, not laying down any other rule or law that differs from what the Savior said.”

After [he had said these] things, they started going out [to] teach and to preach.

I had to laugh reading this series of exchanges. It sounded so much like the way the pecking order was established and maintained in the academy. It’s quite telling that Andrew and Peter, the brothers who were Jesus’ first recruits, are the ones who attempt to sandbag Mary’s rendition of the “secret” Jesus told her. In effect, they are the “full professors” in that room. This is a crucial moment in the formation of the power dynamic that will shape the early church. If you look at how that process unfolded going forward, women were ultimately precluded from their ranks. The nitty-gritty fight for preeminence in the early church was between Paul and Peter, both of whom worked hard to sideline women as voices to reckon with. By the time this gospel was most likely written, that work was pretty much done, which adds a poignance to reading it now, two millennia later.

The ways in which Andrew and Peter dispute Mary’s account here have a creepy *ad hominem* aspect to them, a stereotypical power move any academic would be proud of: If you can call into question the integrity or legitimacy of someone you disagree with, you can avoid having an actual debate about the matters at hand. Andrew is first to discount Mary’s report, saying basically that her

“strange ideas” don’t sound like what Jesus would say, so the others should just dismiss them, the equivalent of my colleagues dismissing as illegitimate any writing that didn’t sound like theirs, so much easier, than actually engaging in a conversation, or even a critique, of a position. In this case, for example, Andrew could have asked Mary how she thought this jibed with what Jesus had just told them all a few minutes beforehand, the stuff that left these now-tough-talking-guys “weeping.”

Peter’s dismissal goes in another direction, presuming that Jesus would never have chosen a woman (god forbid!) over him and his bros to share his deepest secrets with. And to do it “in private?” That’s a Mike Pence-type scandal in the making! Especially in the lost gospels, but also in the canonical gospels, Peter is often unabashedly misogynistic. He seems to assume that because he and Jesus share the same (patriarchal) cultural tradition, he must also share his anti-female bias. When Jesus doesn’t, he gets pretty prickly.

Mary is deeply hurt by these reactions. Having stanchd the weeping of the men earlier, she is now weeping herself, an interesting bookend in this gospel. At the outset, all the men are coming unglued at the thought they may actually have to take a risk to do the work they have been called, and have chosen, to do. Here, they make themselves feel better by making Mary cry, too, a move that probably counters the unconscious shame they feel by demonstrating that the one who has acted more responsibly and courageously, as Mary did earlier, is, in reality, just as pathetic as they are, a stereotypical male response to any exposure of their own personal weakness.

I started this series with I.A. Richards’ assertion that “rhetoric should be the study of misunderstanding and its remedies.” There are clearly differences of opinion at stake in this section of the gospel. But they are not, in my view, based on misunderstandings. I think both Andrew and Peter know exactly what they are doing

and why. They simply want to win without having to engage in an actual debate about the issues. The moves they make—slick enough to warrant promotion to full professor—incline me to think that “rhetoric should be the study of stupidity and its remedies.”

Mary is lucky. Levi (AKA Matthew), the former tax collector, is a good man and comes to her defense quite eloquently, essentially repeating Jesus’ charge to the group while he was still with them. His critique of Peter is stunning in this context. He says he is “wrathful,” the final and worst of the Powers in the secret Jesus shared with Mary, and that he is “contending against the woman like the Adversaries,” the demonic Archon-equivalents in their cosmology. Interestingly, we never hear anything more from Peter and Andrew, neither a defense nor some conciliatory remark, if not (god forbid) an apology. Just that “they started going out [to] teach and to preach.” I can only assume that Andrew and Peter are still fuming as they leave, already plotting their revenge.

The primary leadership struggle in the first century church was between Peter and Paul. They were both Jewish and shared the same patriarchal values endemic to their culture, so neither one of them had much tolerance for the idea that Mary of Magdala was a special confidant of Jesus, or even a legitimate apostle, a role they set aside exclusively for men. It took a while for her reputation as a repentant sex worker to become the universal standard, but they both did what they could to get that ball rolling. That’s where their similarities end, though.

Theirs was, in my opinion, a contest about power. The tension between them is palpable, evident mostly from asides in Paul’s letters, and it had many aspects. First of all, they had much different relationships with Jesus, Peter during his ministry before the crucifixion, Paul only after the resurrection. Peter believed that his role as the first among the original disciples gave him greater legitimacy as a leader of the movement. Paul, who never met Jesus, countered with his claim that, after his famous encounter

with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he had visions in which Jesus guided him on the preferred path forward. Secondly, Peter and Paul had different notions of the proper relationship between Christian and Jewish ideologies. Peter's timeline was rooted in the Hebraic tradition, where Jesus was the promised Messiah, in effect the last chapter of the Jewish Bible, not the first chapter of a new one. Paul's aspirations were toward a much more cosmopolitan church, which meant spreading the Jesus movement into Gentile communities in the broader Mediterranean marketplace, thus his many missions, especially to Greece and Rome. Thirdly, there were significant class-based differences between them. Peter had been a fisherman, uneducated (though he was most likely literate.) Paul came from the Pharisee class, better-educated, obviously highly literate as his many letters attest (though there is ongoing argument about which among them are actually his.) This gave Peter a rhetorical advantage in the local Jewish communities, where his impact would have been primarily oral, based on presence. Paul had the advantage in the Gentile world where his medium was the written word, often proffered in his absence. Fourthly, there were significant temperamental differences between them that created problems of their own. Peter was volatile, prone to aggressive outbursts, as Levi points out here. Paul was fervid, an ardent oppressor of Christians before his conversion, a zealous proponent for a "universal" religion afterwards, a change of focus but not a change of temperament. Both intense but in contrary ways.

In my experience (I've been male for a long time, I try to avoid fight-mode, and I'm a studious observer of inane human behaviors), these two types of alpha male personalities—volatile and fervid—don't get along well. Each believes the other is wrong for exactly the reasons they are right. And they "fight" in quite different ways. Volatile men (in my non-professional opinion) are animated by a primal fear rooted in a potential loss of safety, which they find intolerable, a fear they work hard to remain unconscious of. They accomplish that by instilling fear (via

projection) into others. When they see it reflected back, they feel relief, believing they're not afraid after all, everyone else is, a delusion founded on the idea that "If I can produce it out there, it can't be in here."

Fervid men are also animated by fear, but (again in my non-professional opinion) one more attuned to status than to safety. From this position, competition is seen more as a battle of wits than fists. The fervid are more calculative, often Machiavellian, in their approach, rarely using or threatening violence. They tend to specialize in passive aggressive moves and are especially adept communicators. Paul is ace at all of that. Clearly he won out in the long run, overriding not just Peter and the original apostles but even Jesus himself to lay the foundation for what became the Roman (imperial) Catholic (universal) Church.

Carl Jung talks about defensive mechanisms of this sort via his concept of "the shadow." You can Google it if you're interested in a professional matrix for understanding how we use self-deception to keep intolerable aspects of "the self" out of sight, out of mind. I am not a psychologist of any stripe, including Jungian. My assessments, as I said, are based simply on long-term observations of male-template fighting in patriarchal contexts, including in the academy where those templates are omni-gendered.

And that's where Mary's gospel ends, the whole contingent plodding off to "teach and preach." This is pretty much the last time we hear directly from Mary of Magdala as a font of wisdom and voice of authority, a true disciple, until this text found the light of day in 1955, when she finally submitted her portfolio for promotion to full professor in the apostolic pantheon. She only has one book, though. Might take someone digging in the sands of Egypt finding another before all those elite guys are willing to vote her in.

Ignorance Is Not Bliss

Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one; . . . then will you enter the kingdom.”

the Gospel of Thomas

I have a feeling this series is coming to a close, like I’m driving at night toward a halo of light just over the next hill, a small town maybe. I’ve enjoyed the trip, but I’ve been on this road for nearly three months now and wouldn’t mind stopping over there for a while.

In the lost Gospel of Thomas Jesus explains to both Mary Magdalene and the other disciples that getting into the kingdom of heaven was a matter of turning twos into ones, thus my epigraph. I’ve written recently here about trying to weave together the two seemingly incompatible threads I started with: that ongoing conversation with my daughter and son about their careers in education, and the Gospel of Mary, another landmark on my quest to understand what Gnosticism really was. The first of those threads seeks itself to unify two things our culture tends to separate unjustifiably: teaching and leadership. The second seeks to explore the two primary structural elements of gnostic ideology—self-fledged knowledge (*gnosis*) and the radical mind/body dualism stereotypical to its cosmology. Lots of twos trying to find oneness.

In any case, I just decided to write two more posts. In this penultimate piece, I’ll begin with *gnosis*, the “half” of the gnostic enterprise I heartily endorse; and then use it to say some things about teaching. In the closing piece, I’ll begin with the dualism “half” of the gnostic enterprise, which I not only

disagree with but believe is a fundamental misunderstanding of how Jesus says we should be trying to live here; and then use it to say some things about leadership. If it all works out, all of those twos will come together as one. If it doesn't at least I will have had fun trying to unravel that backlash so I can start fishing again somewhere down the line!

...

I was reading an article today that documented a steep decline in the number of Americans who consider a college education “very important.” According to Gallup, in 2013 it was 70%; in 2025 35%. Among Republicans the drop was even more precipitous, from 68% to 20%. Even those with college degrees have followed a downward trajectory. For the author, this indexed a sharp turn toward “ignorance” in our culture. Just by coincidence I ended “Cramming for the Exam” by highlighting that term as the one that most differentiates the gnostic seven Powers of Wrath from the orthodox seven Deadly Sins. I’m going to quote that section because it says exactly what I want to say at the outset here about the relationship between “ignorance” and “the good” in the world:

Greek wisdom traditions understood that ignorance was a greater threat to the common good than evil because it was so much more prevalent, in that those hordes of the ignorant make ideal pawns for the few genuinely evil leaders that arise among them. You can see evidence of this in Stoic philosophers, in Plato, even in the mode of historical analysis practiced by Thucydides, all of whom call attention to the devastation caused by believing with certitude all manner of things that are obviously, even demonstrably untrue.

Dietrich Boenhoffer, who died in a German concentration camp, provides an illuminating modern critique of the insidious role of this kind of ignorance (he

calls it stupidity) in the rise of Nazism in Germany. He says in "After Ten Years:"

Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind in human beings at least a sense of unease.

I call attention to this to highlight the power of the most distinctive feature of gnosis-based thinking: its aversion to authoritarian assertions of what is true and what is not . . . Th[at] aura of certitude creates an ideal cauldron for cooking up cults.

The most appealing feature of the gnostic ideology, to me at least, is its emphasis on knowledge—which is what *gnosis* literally means in Greek—and especially the primacy of self-originated knowledge in pursuing whatever sort of “salvation” you aspire toward. I want here to distinguish two related kinds of self-originated knowledge that, when they work together, are effective antidotes for “ignorance.”

One arises from “direct experience,” of which there are two types: (1) what in the Gospel of Mary is called “recognition,” the instant, inside-out insight that arises authoritatively, full of truth, via the instruments for perception and reception that come as standard equipment with any conscious being. Every wisdom tradition I’m familiar with begins with this extra-linguistic way of knowing at its foundation. While it seems to have an other-worldly quality to it, it is neither esoteric nor mysterious. It is a fully natural way for living beings to engage with the world they live in. And (2) what Michael Polanyi, a mid-20th-century philosopher-scientist, calls “the tacit dimension,” the reservoir of extra-linguistic knowledge that subtends both everyday experience and scientific enterprise

paradigmatically, makes it possible in a way. As he said famously pertinent to this: “We can know more than we can tell.”

These largely autonomic ways of knowing resolve the conundrum that Socrates explores in his very unpleasant argument with Meno, a real dick of a guy wandering by with one of his slaves. Amartya Sen explains it this way in the introduction to Polanyi’s book *The Tacit Dimension*:

Meno’s paradox . . . deals with the view that the search for knowledge is an absurdity, since either you know it already, in which case no search is needed or you do not know what you are looking for, in which case you cannot expect to find it. In contrast, Polanyi argues that if tacit knowledge is a central part of knowledge in general, then we can (1) both know what to look for, and (2) have some idea of what else we may want to know. (xi)

Authoritarian systems (which are, more or less, any systems—nations, churches, schools, etc.—in hierarchical cultures) strive to undermine our instinctive confidence in direct experience. You can’t control people if they believe they can “know” the most important true things about here and eternity by their own lights. One way (among many) to restore confidence in these innate capacities is to follow Jesus’ prescription to become childlike. Which is to say again that this is not some specialized ability you have to meditate for years to acquire. You used to know how to do it. You were just forced, or enticed, to forget it. You can remember it, and wake up, any time you want.

But waking up is not, in itself, sufficient to establish self-autonomy in a complex society like ours, where power is being exercised routinely and rarely benignly. That requires another kind of knowledge, one that is equally subversive to external authority, one that must be pursued consciously and intentionally, one we can *both* know *and* tell, one our current culture is aggressively at

war with: the kind that arises from critical thinking. One path we have for this pursuit is via education, whose roots mean, literally, “to lead out of.” In a healthy society this “leading out” has both a personal and institutional aspect to it. Critical thinking is the guides that leads us out. We are born with an instinct for it, practice it in school, and then continue to do it on our own forever.

We happen to be living at an historical moment and in a cultural context that understands exactly how dangerous this inbuilt capacity of consciousness is, and the powers that be are working mightily to stamp it out. The offending term in that phrase is, of course, critical, thus the ongoing assaults on pretty much any educational initiative that includes it as part of its agenda. Again, it’s a matter of control. A critical sensibility has the capacity to stand apart from the messaging it receives, to evaluate it by comparison to other messaging, to critique it, and on the basis of all that work, and it is work, to make an informed decision about where it wants to stand.

There is no greater threat to an authoritarian system—including direct experience—than this capacity to think critically. There are a host of standard methods authoritarians use to undermine it. Some are designed to create self-distrust; some are designed to foster dependence; some are designed to disorient; some are designed to palliate; some are designed to rewrite history; some are designed to intimidate; all are designed to induce a somnambulant pliability. You live in the same culture I do, so can, if you want, come up with endless examples of all of them simply by scrolling through your favorite media sites or preferred news feeds. The logic is pristine: First induce a fear-steeped confusion, then proffer lies, repeat them *ad infinitum* to create a false sense of certitude, then build the cult. Despotism has followed that recipe since the dawn of history. It is the one now being deployed against us every day in our off-the-rails culture. Critical thinking, which promotes autonomy, is its enemy. Ignorance, which prefers autocracy, is its friend.

Which gets me to what I want to focus on today: public education, the institutional side of the pursuit of knowledge. Every complex society has its preferred set of educative practices to prepare young people to become functional in its context. Part of that process is indoctrinational, a way to instill the shared values, stories and agreed upon facts—what we called in our Declaration of Independence “self-evident truths”—that promote an attitude of service to the community. Part of that process is liberatory, a way to instill the shared values, stories and intellectual skills that promote individual autonomy, what we called in that same document “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” So two things: propaganda and critical thinking. Authoritarian systems prioritize the former and try to extirpate the latter; democratic systems, if they are genuine, prioritize the latter while they ameliorate the most deleterious effects of the former.

In representative democracies like ours, one of the primary arguments to warrant the enormous investment that a public education system requires is it that it creates “an informed electorate,” i.e., endows the citizenry with the ability consider a range of options and make wise decisions about whom to trust as their leaders, those most likely to steward their vulnerable form of government going forward. In other words, democracy and critical thinking have, historically, gone hand in hand. Between the mid-19th century and the late-20th century, what that meant in practice varied. But promoting a critical sensibility was always a factor in the public education system we funded. Critical minds are resistant to external control, particularly of the authoritarian sort, exactly what democracies need to survive as democracies. They are “gnostic” in that respect. One of the best ways, then, to eliminate that resistance and install an authoritarian regime is to undermine the public education system, which is precisely what has been going on in our country for at least the last quarter century. NCLB was one portal onto the path toward state-controlled education. Project 2025 is its fulfillment.

The gradual dismantling of public education as a shared democratic enterprise in our society, available equitably to all classes and kinds of people, was, then, intentional and well-planned. The trick is to execute a plan of that magnitude without it being perceived as pernicious. That requires a lot of “false flag” distractions, which has pretty much been the order of the day in the 21st century political arena. Some of them are pertinent to money, the illusory promise of lower taxes, say. It’s stunning to me that so many got in such a lather about “defunding the police” (while, in fact, we were pouring more and more of our control-related-capital into those functions) and do not seem to care at all that we are *actually* “defunding education,” the foundation for our vaunted intellectual-capital. And their own children’s futures! Some of them tap into divisive ideological issues, like the ongoing culture-war attacks on equity, diversity, inclusion, all of which, I might point out, are defining features of genuinely democratic systems; or on race, gender and sexuality in public school curricula, even when the materials at issue are matters of historical or medical fact. Some of them traffic in oversimplified fundamentalisms, nationalistic or religious, for example; or, worst of all, both conflated, church and state, once constitutionally “separated” in our democracy, coalescing into one auto-theo-cratic tsunami. Others focus on promised structural improvements, like alternative schools or vouchers for private schooling. These options are, first of all, expensive in their own right, often more so than what’s already there; and they are generally either unavailable to or out of reach for most working-class families. Which is to say they further accentuate the wealth gap that created them. All of this instantiates what I consider to be our currently preferred mode of “ignorance:” not an absence of information (we have plenty of that!), but the suppression of any critical capacity to curate what is being proffered to us to discern what is legitimate knowledge and what is not.

Yes, I do remember that the survey I started with pertained to college not K-12 education. I’m inclined to think that the

percentages in the survey would be different, as in somewhat higher, if that question were posed relative the latter. What I wanted to demonstrate was the “don’t look at what they say, look at what they do” mantra. I happen to know quite a lot about the public schools because I worked with hundreds of K-12 teachers during my career, my daughter and son have devoted their professional lives to education (and I talk to them all the time about what their generation has to deal with), and I follow education-related news quite closely. You might say that public education is “very important,” but if you support its defunding in any or all of those ways, you’ve revealed the lie (or delusion) that subverts your endorsement.

The differences between the K-12 and college arenas are many, of course. But typically, when one suffers, so does the other. The only question is where the accountability for that suffering properly lies. I’ll say again what I’ve said before in this series: K-12 education has been vitiated through no fault of its own, at least at the school-level. College education sowed the seeds of its own demise. I spent most of my adult life as a student, graduate student or professor in a wide array of colleges. Which is to say I was “there,” so I have a wealth of first-hand experience to draw from. The concept I want to apply to the college side of the equation is *hubris*, another Greek word, one we associate now with excessive pride, often preceding a fall. Its original meaning, though, included connotations like “insolence” and “outrage” that I want keep in play along the way here.

Where I was growing up back in the 50s and 60s, a small working class quasi-rural town where my classmates were predominately of second or third generation immigrant heritage, education was the paragon, the beacon, the path toward economic security. If you asked parents in the community whether a college education was very important, most of them would have said yes, and they were willing to sacrifice to support it. The higher education system I entered in the late 60s was in crisis, no question, a cauldron of

political and social activism, a change machine. Learning was something that happened everywhere, as much outside the classroom as in it. Universities were vibrant aspirational communities much in the American tradition of “higher” education. Tuition was relatively affordable. State scholarship support, at least in Pennsylvania, was generous. Living conditions, whether in dorms or off campus, were spartan, so ancillary expenses were minimal. Which is to say that even someone like me could get a degree without taking on onerous debt. The 70s, the first decade of my professorial career, were even more exciting. The students I met then were under enormous cultural stresses, drugs and religious cults rampant as palliatives, but for the most part they were searching for real meaning in their lives. And other modes of accessible higher education flourished as well: small, affordable experimental colleges, low-tuition (even free in some states) community colleges, free college courses for adults and continuing students. Higher education was clearly a “very important” cultural commodity available to and affordable for almost anyone who wanted it. There was both a grandeur and a humility to the enterprise.

The 80s and 90s changed all of that, the excesses of the general culture translating directly into higher education. Grandeur became grandiose, *hubris* replaced humility, both inside and outside the academy. The university tailored its image to match the dominant cultural context of the moment, upward mobility and expansionism the order of the day. I know the political right rants about the intolerant leftist bent of the academy. There was a degree to which the intellectual trends of that moment, informed by a very specific kind of “critical theory,” had that aspect. But critical theory is not the same thing as critical thinking. I’ve written previously about the ways in which this particular iteration of intellectual ideology, once it got translated into the popular culture through misshapen lenses of ignorance, actually helped to create the ground for the rabbit-hole-and-conspiracy-theory-laced chaos we endure now. The fallacious logic was impeccable: If truth is relative, then

nothing is true, therefore anything I say can be made to appear true if I say it loud and often enough. And here we are. The article I quoted above attributed the decline in the importance of higher education to the rise of the internet and social media. I see it the other way around. Those potential tools for learning got hijacked by a culture that had lost its critical compass, and higher education lost its bearings trying to emulate it.

One specific example of this hubris was in the certification process for K-12 teachers. Traditionally (i.e., before 1990) a K-12 teacher certification program required an undergraduate major in your teaching discipline, an array of education-specific courses equivalent to a minor in that field, and a term of supervised student-teaching. It was a normal four-year degree, one quite attractive to students in my field, English studies. Over the course of my career, I would routinely ask early each semester how many of the students in my classes were thinking about becoming teachers, so I could help them in specific ways, if they wanted. In the 1970s and 80s, it was roughly, and routinely, around 25%.

During the 1990s Education departments, including at my institution, altered their requirements for certification by adding what was called “the fifth year,” a whole new set of praxis-based requirements. So, you completed your degree, then were required to spend an additional year to become certified. The purported purpose of this shift was to enhance the professional status of teachers. In practice, it became an economic windfall, one extra year of tuition from every potential candidate. This amounted to about half of the work required for a masters degree, so there was a coincident proliferation of Master in Teaching programs, including where I worked. Since entry-level pay for teachers (essentially poverty wages in many states) was somewhat better with an advanced degree, many candidates opted to spend an additional year to acquire that credential. Ch-ching again, both for the university and for the banking industry.

The hubris at play here was the belief that the university could in fact impact the professional status of teachers on a cultural level. As you know if you have been conscious over the last generation or so, our culture went in exactly the opposite direction. The status of teachers was not enhanced. Public school budgets contracted, in some cases collapsed, class sizes ballooned into the 30s, teacher pay stagnated in relation to inflation. And it took 5-6 years of higher education to get those jobs? Huh? Within a few years, the number of hands that got raised when I asked my question started to decline until by the early 2000s it was typically one or two. And understandably so.

Then, with the rise of MAGA and various modes of fundamentalism, public schools became culture-war frontlines: book-bannings; curricular restrictions on any content that addressed race or gender, or anything remotely controversial, in factual ways; firings for posting what had previously been free-speech-protected content on personal social media; so many third rails emerging so rapidly it became impossible to predict or avoid them, as the recent Charlie Kirk-related firings demonstrate. Toward the end of my career, the number of hands raised was typically zero. Again, understandably.

During my last semester before retirement, one student in one of my classes raised his hand when I asked my question. He was a formidable ethical and intellectual presence, and I offered to help him toward that end. About halfway through the term he came up to me after class and apologized, actually apologized, for having changed his mind about that. He thought he was letting me down. We didn't have a long conversation about this. He gave me a few of the most obvious reasons for his change of heart; and I told him I understood completely and approved of his decision. If you think all of the ongoing hubbub that riles our public schools is a good thing, well, I'll counter with that one young man who is now in the midst of another career altogether because he wants to live a normal life. There are, I'm certain, many thousands of other good

young men and women who made the same decision during this interim. And, as a “culture,” if such a venerable word is even appropriate any longer, we are much the worse for it.

For one thing, there is a dire teacher shortage. Some districts are so desperate to fill their positions, they no longer require any sort of certification, let alone a 5-6-year preparatory program. At the outset of this series I challenged anyone who might question my teacher-as-leader premise to try teaching for a few years. A decade ago, of course, you couldn’t do that without a lot of expensive training. Now, in many places, you could do it tomorrow, join the team as a walk-on, no matter your credentials. So, if you think I’m wrong about anything I’ve said here, give it a try.

What, then, are my takeaways from all of this? I’ve already declared one of them: Public education did not deserve the perverse fate it has suffered in perpetual, survival-level, skirmishes on the front lines of our warring cultures. Universities are now suffering a similar fate—federal funding withheld for political reasons; declining enrollments; culture-war crises in relation to curricula, formerly non-controversial material presented in class now fireable offenses; third-rail terminations; stagnating salaries for all but the most elite research faculty, the ones who rarely teach; congressional witch hunts; boards of trustees with corporate connections and ways of thinking cutting backroom deals to restore illegally withheld research funding; etc., etc., etc. You know all of it if you pay even cursory attention to the news. I’m far less sympathetic to that culture. I was there to witness the *hubris* that led to this fall, the “insolence” that led to and followed my “outrage.” Any warnings about it, or resistance to it, and I proffered some, were dismissed as laughably jeremiadical. What could possibly be wrong, or go wrong, with such a juggernaut? Well, we have the answer to that question, and it’s not a pleasant one.

My other takeaway may surprise you: I am actually confident that in your lifetime if not mine all of this madness will end and we can then rebuild the foundation upon which any credible democracy must construct its future: public education. It would consume way too many pages to document my full argument for why I believe that. All I'll say here is that when enough people wake up, and they will, to the horrific cost of building ignorance into the system structurally, which is what a minority of our electorate have been persuaded to do on behalf of the few mega-wealthy at the tippy top of the pyramid, the ice (and ICE!) will break up and flush out in a rush, the way it does every spring on arctic rivers. As the Birds of Chicago say: "Do not fear the winter blowing in the hearts of men. I have seen American flowers and they will bloom again."

Those rime-riddled "winter . . . hearts," the ones hoarding billions and building liner-sized yachts? Well, as their clockwork orange talking head is wont to say, "a day of reckoning is on the way." Theirs will arrive when enough of the rest of us realize we are not, never will be, and, most importantly, don't ever want to be among the gilded and decide to set ourselves free again. The antidote to winter is spring. The antidote to ignorance is a public education system that fosters rather than throttles our innate capacity, and desire, to think critically, one that includes college for anyone who thinks it's "very important." The break-up will begin relatively quickly down the line a bit. I hope I'm around long enough to feel the thaw and see that river flow freely again.

The Body Is Not the Problem

Things between men and women are very important.

Jim Fahey

There's a line in "Blowing in the Wind," a song Peter, Paul, and Mary made famous back in the 60s, that the Gospel of Mary brought to mind for me: "How many ears must one man have . . ." Apparently, according to Jesus, it's two, at least if you want to use that part of your body to understand the things he's trying to get across. If you know that trio, I think you'd agree that the player most difficult to replace is Mary Travers, her voice so distinctive, her look so iconic. I'm not even sure I could tell the difference between Peter and Paul if they were strumming right in front of me. The same dynamic applies to the Gospel of Mary of Magdala. Mary is the equivalent of the lead singer here, yet the male apostles, Peter and Andrew, do their best to steal the spotlight from her.

Paul replaces Andrew in my version of "the band's" name because it was he and Peter who competed for primacy in the leadership struggle during the early years of the church, both going to great lengths to get Mary offstage as quickly as possible. They went on to perform as a duo, surprisingly successfully, fans now in the billions. But I am absolutely convinced that their worldwide tour would have led to much better results if they had kept their female vocalist. And I am just as convinced now, after years of thinking about this, that Jesus would feel the same way, her voice so crucial to the music, once you open both of your ears: one male, one female.

My epigraph was something my wife Carol's first husband, a good friend of mine, told me in a dream about 40 years ago. He died

suddenly when he was 29, a shock to Carol's system she never got over. As time went on, I got more and more vexed about how to cope with his ongoing presence in our company. In that dream he told me exactly that: "Things between men and women are very important." "Huh? and Duh!" is what I thought. "Who doesn't know that? And how does that help me?" But that was all he said. It has perplexed and haunted me ever since. I've made some progress unpacking it in stages over the years, mostly in poems, a process that is now, I hope, about to take another step forward as I close out this series on teaching and the Gospel of Mary. I am apprehensive as I start this piece. I feel in my heart as if I finally understand at a primal level what Jim meant; what Jesus meant by hearing with two ears, male and female; and what I need to do on the basis of that understanding going forward. But I'm not confident my writing skills are up to the task of making it clear, all those threads spiraling wildly just above my keyboard waiting for my fingertips to touch down.

My title is pretty upfront about my focal point in this post. If, like me, you've spent your life enduring Western culture's oppressive regime in relation to embodiment, you know the price you pay day to day trying to toe that line. I can see now the ways in which I am seriously damaged goods because of it. I wish I could go back and live my life over knowing what I know now. Unfortunately, that's not how time works. But at least knowing it will help me to minimize the additional damage I might do to myself and others via some of the lies that our culture traffics in addictively. That's a lot to get from a lived life. I say Western culture rather than specifically Christianity, whether in the gnostic or orthodox mode, because I believe they simply borrowed the hierarchical relationship of mind to body (as well as the patriarchal relationship of male to female, unfortunately) that was dominant in the general culture for millennia before Jesus came along. You can find it, if you look, full-bloom, in the Hebraic and Greco-Roman traditions, the dual incubator that spawned Christianity in its current form(s).

There are legitimate and powerful alternatives to that paradigm. I laid out a few of them in my “In the Spirit” series last summer: a host of ancient wisdom traditions, mostly Eastern; a Christian ethic founded directly on what Jesus actually said, not what was made of all that to serve control-related institutional functions; and, if you prefer a more “natural” approach, quantum mechanics, on the basis of which you can derive all of the same values from the foundational elements of the universe we happen to live in, body and mind mutually expressive.

As to embodiment: I’ve said many times, you can read the operational dynamic of Jesus’ spiritual system one of two ways; it is designed to turn ones into twos, the stereotypical this-is-not-that and that-is-not-this habit of mind in Western cultures; or to synthesize ones from twos, the stereotypical this-is-also-that and that-is-also-this habit of mind in Eastern cultures and quantum mechanics. I’ve also said many times that I believe Jesus’ “way” was the latter. Both the gnostic and orthodox churches chose the former and, because of that, their ways of managing “things between men and women” got very complicated, often pretty icky.

One gospel that got it right (in my opinion) was the lost Gospel of Thomas, a compendium of Jesus’ sayings, *sans* narrative, *sans* authorial commentary. Here is what Jesus says there about that “twos into one” business:

Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples, “These infants being suckled are like those who enter the kingdom.”

They said to him, “Shall we then, as children, enter the kingdom?”

Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and

when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom.”

Here Jesus gives a perfectly clear explanation of what it takes to become childlike, the key to his kingdom’s front door. You must resolve those binaries: inside/outside, above/below, male/female. In my book *Waking Up* (2023) I give a detailed analysis of all these twos-into-oneness, and, on that basis, how to re-“fashion” embodiment. The pertinent one here is the last, male/female. Here’s part of what I say about it in that book:

Jesus’ respect for Mary [Magdalene], even his privileging her among his disciples, leads to some tension [as it does in the Gospel of Mary], particularly with Peter, the most hot-headed among them. Here is the final entry in Thomas’ gospel:

Simon Peter said to them, “Mary should leave us, because women aren’t worthy of life.” Jesus said, “Look, am I to make her a man? So that she may become a living spirt too, she’s equal to you men, because every woman who makes herself manly will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus is having none of Simon Peter’s misogynistic bluster, rebuffing it immediately and forcefully, in what may look initially like a self-contradictory manner, by saying “every woman” should “make herself manly.” It seems absolutely clear to me, though, that Jesus is . . . talking here . . . about a form of androgyny, one he recommends to the men among them as well, the merger

of male and female identity features, such that neither dominates, both resonate companionably, leading to a transcendence of the oppressive gender binary that makes it impossible to “enter the kingdom of heaven.”
(176-7)

A good modern rendition of what I think Jesus is getting at is this passage from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*:

But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female. . . . The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties.

In other words, we are born whole—both male and female “united” in the “soul”—and need to find our way back there “to get complete satisfaction and happiness,” not to mention to “enter the kingdom,” which requires turning that two into one. The connection to the Gospel of Mary is what Levi insists on in his defense of Mary:

We should clothe our selves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and announce the good news . . .

Levi and Mary understand that the “perfect Human” Jesus says we should aspire, and work, to become is whole, one thing, equitably balanced, inside/outside, above/below, male/female. Peter and Andrew don’t.

The famous “secret of life scene” in *City Slickers* captures this insight succinctly:

Curly (Jack Palance): Do you know what the secret of life is?

Mitch (Billy Crystal): No, what?

Curly: [holds up one finger]

Mitch: A finger?

Curly: One thing, just one thing.

Mitch: Great, but what’s the one thing.

Curly: That’s what you gotta figure out.

Okay, Jack Palance is not Jesus (though he’s pretty high up in my pantheon). My general point is that the only way to get to one thing is by collapsing twos, and the gender binary is one of those twos. As I said, in my opinion, both the gnostic and orthodox modes of Christianity get it wrong because they can’t find their way out of any twonesses, let alone that one. So they struggle mightily to figure out how to manage embodiment in general and “things between men and women” in particular. I’ll spend most of my time here documenting the bizarre ways gnostic systems seek (and fail) to resolve this conundrum, assuming, as products of Western culture and, quite likely, orthodox Christian ideology, you already understand the deleterious effects of those systems on your body down to your bones!

Gnosticism, as I've said repeatedly, operates on a stereotypically Western mind/matter dualism, each half of which has its own separate root. So fully resolving the two into one is off the table. This creates an assortment of problems pertinent to the practical aspects of human embodiment, like marriage and sexuality, for example. The dominant gnostic system of the 2nd and 3rd century, Valentinianism, the one most likely subtending the Gospel of Mary, came up with an arcane ceremony called the "bridal chamber" to deal with these matters. This was an event so secret that even to this day no one knows exactly what transpired there. A critique of it appears in the writing of Irenaeus, one of the early Church fathers who set his heresy-sights on gnostic ideology. Basically he says that those sessions were so revoltingly carnal you wouldn't want to write about it, hear about it, or even think about it. So he doesn't. Much. What he does write is clearly propaganda. But since so much of the gnostic library was destroyed, and since this specific ceremony was so guardedly secret, it was, and to some extent still is, hard to counter Irenaeus' disgust with actual facts.

The Gospel of Philip, most likely written in the 3rd century (given its references to the canonical gospels and to the Gospel of Mary) offers one take on how this bridal chamber was supposed to function. I picked this one to focus on (instead of, for example, The Gospel of Truth, which may have been written by Valentinus himself) mostly because it is so cryptic and weird, both of which appeal to me. I'm relying entirely on my own lights to "read" it, so what I say comes with no warranty. Make of it what you will.

My initial close reading of the Gospel of Philip was quite a bit longer than what follows here. But it ended up being a lot more blah, blah, blah than I needed to answer my question: Is gnostic Christianity a better deal than orthodox Christianity when it comes to the body/spirit problem? No, it's not. In some ways it might seem better—Jesus says "there is no such thing as sin," which puts the kibosh on things like guilt and shame, the standard Catholic control mechanisms. In some ways it's worse—the body is

anywhere from a temporary nuisance housing the “spark,” to an ignoble “tattered coat upon a stick,” to quote Yeats’ great line about himself as an “aged man,” a chunk of meat that is literally, if you buy the idea of the Demiurge, a god-damned mess. So, no, it does not get five stars from me. I’ll give it one, for effort, just like its historical competitor. In my “In the Spirit” series last summer I offer, as I said, an assortment of much better options, some founded in Eastern Wisdom traditions, one founded in the actual, exact words of Jesus, one founded in quantum mechanics. Every one of those collapses twos into one in convincing and creative ways, body and spirit, inside and outside, above and below, male and female, not just reconciled (which is what gnostic systems try to do via the tortuously complex concept of the “bridal chamber”) but resolved. I mean, really. One thing. Just wake up and you’re there, no sweat, no worries.

Here’s how Philip introduces the bridal chamber:

[T]he Father of everything united with the virgin who came down, and a fire enlightened him on that day. He revealed the great bridal chamber, so his body came into being on that day. He came out of the bridal chamber like the one who came into being from the groom and the bride. That’s the way Jesus established everything within himself. It’s also necessary for each of the disciples to enter into his rest through these things.

Jesus, I think he is saying, came out of his bridal chamber whole. The “rest” (as in the traditional Jewish “rest” on the sabbath, whose literal translation is more like “completeness”) the disciples need to find via the bridal chamber available to humans is *gnosis*, which establishes a spiritual union with Christ, roughly equivalent in its salvatory effects to faith in the Pauline system.

Philip goes on:

Great is the mystery of marriage! For without it, the world would not exist. . .

The forms of evil spirit include male ones and female ones. The males are they which unite with the souls which inhabit a female form, but the females are they which are mingled with those in a male form, though one who was disobedient. And none shall be able to escape them, since they detain him if he does not receive a male power or a female power, the bridegroom and the bride. When the wanton women see a male sitting alone, they leap down on him and play with him and defile him. So also the lecherous men, when they see a beautiful woman sitting alone, they persuade her and compel her, wishing to defile her. But if they see the man and his wife sitting beside one another, the female cannot come into the man, nor can the male come into the woman. One receives them from the mirrored bridal chamber. . . . So if the image and the angel are united with one another, neither can any venture to go into the man or the woman.

Unraveling this one is like unraveling those backlash fishing lines I wrote about a few essays ago. As best I can tell here, there are four players: two forms (male and female) that exist in an ideal, Platonic, realm; and two kinds of evil spirits (male and female) on the “matter” side, which unite with, and corrupt, their opposite formal partners as they transition to embodiment in this world. The evil spirits seem to be the source of inappropriate erotic energy—turning us into “wanton women” or “lecherous men”—which is defused by the mystery of the couple seated side by side, “married,” as it were. So, apparently, “marriage,” either literally or figuratively, is a way to “recognize” sexual “desire” (the second Power we allegedly encounter on the slippery slope toward the Pleroma) for what it is. The “image,” a term that appears over and over in this gospel, refers to the perfect archetype that earthly

rituals, like marriage, point towards, especially the divine union experienced in the “bridal chamber,” the “place” where some sort of gender-mending seems to be effected.

But if the body is merely a costume draped around our spirit while we’re here, real unification is simply not possible. And what we do with and for that body while we have it becomes vexatious. Some gnostics argued that celibacy was the answer; some that pre-marital chastity and then fidelity was; some that you could indulge in any excess, including everything sexual, because, in effect, the body was irrelevant to salvation; some went so far as to argue that, in order to pass the post-death test with the Archons, you needed to have experienced (i.e., come to “recognize”) every physical temptation that earthly presence made available—so indulging in every possible manner of sexual gratification was mandatory!

The orthodox church struggled similarly with human sexuality. Paul’s program for managing this aspect of our nature, which became the orthodox template, is similar to Valentinus’ in some of its elements (not the orgy-till-you-drop part, of course!), no surprise since Valentinus’ project was to meld Pauline Christianity with Platonism. You live in the same culture as I do, so you know how toxic and dysfunctional this perversely contradictory attitude toward embodiment can be, expressly inciting culture-war-type proscriptions against “aberrant” identities, behaviors or inclinations, while it unconsciously fosters far more destructive aberrant practices, like, for example, human trafficking and the sexual abuse of children (including by priests for godssake!)

The typical Sunday sermon insists on a weird sort of disembodied purity; the rest of the week is a flood of sexualized messaging, from everyday ads to porn, designed to incite prurience without providing genuine satisfaction: In other words, hypo- and hyper-sexuality supplant natural sexuality as the norms in the human universe, the worst of both worlds at the expense of the best. No wonder Jesus kept insisting on those two ears: “You folks just

aren't hearing what I'm saying. The body is not the problem. The fact that you disjoint it so completely from the spirit is. If you resolve the inside/out, above/below and male/female binaries, the body/soul binary resolves, too. You actually get to be alive, a full-fledged natural being, in this world, while you're here. And by that means you will learn naturally and instinctively what you need to know to migrate smoothly to whatever comes next."

Maybe the most famous passage in the Gospel of Philip is this one, made tantalizingly enigmatic by the bit that is missing:

And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [...] loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [...]. The rest of [the disciples...] They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in the darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness.

What Jesus kissed Mary "on" has been a matter of debate ever since this gospel surfaced, the difference between forehead or cheek and mouth, for example, carrying the stereotypically sexual connotations customary in a one-into-two gender economy like ours. So it became paramount to "prove" that Jesus didn't love Mary "in that way," that she was really just a reformed sex worker, as Peter and Paul insist, could never have been Jesus' most intimate partner and friend. She was a woman after all!

Jesus short-circuits all of this nonsense by saying, in effect, that we all share the potential to become perfectly human, which comes before and has nothing to do with gender in its conventional binary form. Once we "see the light," what we do with our bodies is no longer the source of our sinfulness. In fact, the more naturally we

live in our bodies here, the more likely we are to live fully “in the spirit.” Western culture and Christian ideology construct gender via something akin to the standard microprocessor binary: one is never zero, and zero is never one. The alternative is something akin to quantum entanglement, wherein the pair is literally one continuous function, both of its elements in constant, instantaneous communication with one another.

Here’s what I think Jesus is trying to tell us about living a fully embodied life, if we just open both of our ears, the male and the female: What culture says you are not, is always already in you. When you learn how to recover and love that other in yourself, you will know how to love the otherness of others. None of this has anything to do with physiology or identity. Love is love. Or it’s not. When you love your other, you will love all those others equally. And if you are lucky enough to be with an-other in partnership, you will know how to love them, too. Neither the gnostic nor the orthodox version of Christianity ever understood this. And we have a seriously messed-up society because of that.

I started this series with the problem of misunderstanding. I have for some time had the sense that the Christianity I was indoctrinated into simply misunderstood what Jesus meant by love. Those two ears of ours? One is male one female; what they hear together reconciles mind with body. The body is not perverse, a gateway to evil, which is the subtext of so much of the Catholic ideology I was indoctrinated into back in the 1950s. It is a means of becoming whole with others and with the universe we live in here. But even more importantly, it is a means of becoming whole within oneself.

Light and Darkness, life and death, right and left, are brothers of one another. They are inseparable. Because of this neither are the good good, nor evil evil, nor is life life, nor death death. For this reason each one will

dissolve into its earliest origin. But those who are exalted above the world are indissoluble, eternal.

That's from the Gospel of Philip. I think it's close to what Jesus was getting at. The point it misses, as do both gnostic and orthodox systems, is that you don't need to "dissolve" to become "exalted above the world . . . , eternal." You can do that while you're here. Then, if there is in fact a there to get to, you'll already know everything you need to know to get there.

Jesus was a wonderful teacher/leader. Among all of his students, I think Mary comes closest to understanding why "things between men and women are very important." Peter didn't. And if you want to understand why, too, you need to begin with the man and woman trying to find a way to get along in yourself. Listen to them. Teach them how to listen to one another. Show them how to love one another. Until the two become one. Then you won't have to worry about the ridiculous Archons. You won't have to worry about those devils, about temptations of the flesh, about hell, about any of that "garbage of this nature" the various churches that claim to represent Jesus try to teach you to promote the abnegation of embodiment. In some ways, having now come this far with this series, I'm inclined to think that embodiment in this world is the very means by which we learn how to live and love mindfully. The two are one. And that's where I'll leave it.

...

I've enjoyed writing this series, learned so much from thinking about these things. If you take nothing else away from it, I hope you will take this: Make the two one. Then you will enter the kingdom, which is not the bridal chamber of the gnostics nor the heaven of orthodoxy. It is right here, right now, all day, every day, with whomever you choose to partner with, could be someone you've known forever, could be someone you pass on the street and stop to help or just greet. Could be just yourself. It's all the

same: Wherever you are, with others or alone, everything is always already there, within you.

So how does this pertain to what I started with in this series, the teacher/leader conundrum? Simple: As you learn how to teach and lead yourself, you will become a good teacher and leader of others. The indeterminate variable in that equation is, of course, “good,” which is not so easy to define. In John 10:1-21 Jesus narrates his “good shepherd” parable to an audience of Pharisees. When I was growing up, listening to that parable in church, I thought that “good” had an exclusively moral aspect. As in, its contrary would be corrupt, even evil. But over time I came to realize that, while moral goodness may be a prerequisite for what you want to be good at, it was not enough to make you good in the sense Jesus was using it here. You also need to be really good at your job. As he says: “I know my sheep and my sheep know me,” unlike the “hired hand” who cares more about himself than his flock and “runs away” under threat.

When he finishes his story, the reviews are mixed:

The Jews who heard these words were again divided. Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?”

But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

I had to laugh at this one. Socrates got the same mixed reviews for his preferred mode of love a half a millennium earlier. I personally think both he and Jesus are saying the same thing: that becoming good takes a highly specialized kind of love, one that manifests as “madness,” and that it starts in here, resolving those twos into ones. Whether you think it’s a demonic (to be avoided) or a godly (to be embraced) madness is up to you. The former is, in keeping

with my overall theme in this series, a fundamental misunderstanding of what we're here for. The latter is true. The choice you make will determine what kind of teacher, leader, and lover you will become. As The Cookies say in their 1950s classic "Don't Say Nothin' Bad About My Baby:" "Everybody says he's crazy. Sure he's crazy, crazy about me." Whether it pertains to teaching, leadership or those "very important things between men and women," I'm with Jesus, Socrates and The Cookies: Crazy is good.

Here's a poem I wrote when I started dating Carol 45 years ago that declares my long-term intentions in that regard. I think it's a fitting way to close this series:

*Crazy as the wind he was and wanted
for himself, nothing, but for her:
the most glorious chrysanthemums,
armloads of yellow held loose, huge
blooms oozing dollops of sunlight;
behind them his smile, so wide
no one, not even her, could ever hope
to resist; then he'd run toward her
through the tall grass, in slow-mo
maybe, his dozens of chrysanthemums
bobbing every which way, crazy*

as the wind he was, and wanted.

*Or so he told his florist in the morning,
who recommended roses, or a nosegay,
anything but crazy, but chrysanthemums,
but what he wanted, was: the wind.*

The world is full of “florists” offering prudent advice. You can take theirs. Or you can take mine, and Jesus,’ and Socrates,’ and The Cookies.’ Up to you.

Paul is the author of numerous books available (in paperback at cost of production) on Amazon.com and (for free in PDF form) at paulkameen.com

Poetry:

the other side of the light (2024)
Insta-Poems (2023)
slights: my new tiny poems from here not there (2021)
September Threnody (2021)
In the Dark (2016)
Harvest Moon (2016)
Li Po-ems (2016)
Mornings After: Poems 1975-95 (extended 2025)
Beginning Was (1980)

Personal Essays:

Substacking in the Spirit (2025)
Willing Spirit (2025)
Reading/Writing Outside the Lines (2024)
The New Not-Normal (2024)
Writing Myself In (2024)
In Dreams . . . (2022)
Living Hidden (2021)
Harvest (2020)
Spring Forward (2019)
The Imagination (2019)
A Mind of Winter (2019)
First, Summer (2018)
Last Spring (2018)
This Fall (2016)

Scholarship:

Re-reading Poets: The Life of the Author (2011)
Writing/Teaching: Essays toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy
(2001)

