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Reflection by Brian Tate

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The Unanswered Question

Readings

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

In the world of computers, the latest thing is “apps”, or applications. These are such handy items as digital keyboards, metronomes, videogames, cookbooks, and such. There are thousands of them, all cheap, many of them free, and can be downloaded very quickly. There was an article in the newspaper a couple of weeks ago:

*Publishers of Christian material have begun producing iphone applications that can cough up quick comebacks and rhetorical strategies for believers who want to **fight back** against what they view as a new strain of strident atheism. And a competing crop of apps is arming nonbelievers for battle. For religious skeptics, the “Biblethumper” iPhone app boasts that it “allows the atheist to keep the most funny and irrational Bible verses right in their pocket” to be “always ready to **confront** fundamentalist Christians or have a little fun among friends.”*

I was struck by the terms “fight back” and “confront”.

All this technology, yet we seem to use it more to be righteous than open-minded. Picasso once said, “**computers are useless, they can only give answers**”.

This article was the beginning of the idea for this reflection. The battle to be right; the war over a point of view. This led to thinking about contradictions and paradox, and finally, the idea of mystery.

A paradox is “a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true.”

The key words here are “investigated and explained”. In other words, you have to take the time to examine it. You have to ruminate, live in ambiguity for a while.

The more I thought about this, the more paradoxes emerged:

- The more fervently we believe - in anything - the less we are available to learn.
- The more we argue our position, the less we can discover.
- The more we assert ourselves, the less we listen.
- The more we think we know, the less we really know.
- And in my own life, there was a point where the harder I pushed to find my way as a musician, the more I got nowhere. Even today, I know that when I am looking for the next creative challenge, I need to be still, trusting that it will emerge.

A few more paradoxes:

- Joni Mitchell: You don't know what you've got till its gone.
- you can't be fully alive without the knowledge of your own death
- truth held on to becomes a lie
- the only constant is change
- the deeper you can experience grief, the more you can experience joy.
- faith gives many people strength, yet the nature of faith is not knowing.

I have never been sold on the idea of the essay, or thesis, as a way of demonstrating learning. You take a strong position, offer proof for it, and refute all other positions. Why not have a format where you argue for many points of view? Or where you end up with more questions than answers?

Literalists claim the bible has no contradictions. As though it is a collection of absolute answers. Atheists claim the Bible is full of contradictions. As though that negates it as a work of any value.

It's no secret that there are many biblical contradictions. So what? There is an assumption that there is something wrong with contradiction, or paradox. In fact many would say that an easy answer does not provide for much wisdom or learning. A provocative question or statement can often open up our minds and hearts to deeper wisdom. For example, Julian Barnes' book "*Nothing to be Frightened of*", a dry and witty reflection of death and religion, opens with the sentence: "**I don't believe in God, but I miss Him**".

Ever notice that the last section of a good movie or play or novel can sometimes be a bit of a let-down? I think that is because the first 3/4 is the opening up of story, questions, conflict, uncertainty; and the last part usually wraps everything up, closes things down. The fun is in the unwrapping: taking part in the character's journey, not knowing what, why, when, or who. When everything is nicely explained, the mystery is over.

There are many biblical points of view. Jesus is divine. Jesus is human. Jesus is a myth. Which of these is true? Why not all three? To opt for a "right answer" doesn't give us what we need - a question that will keep us alive and engaged. Joseph Cambell said "**People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have**

resonance within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what it's all finally about."

So rather than asking, what is "the truth", we might instead ask what questions have substance, energy, and aliveness.

In physics, all matter was thought to be either particles or waves. In quantum physics, when you get deep enough, matter shows up as having both properties. Paradox is like that - something that on the surface appears contradictory can reveal deeper truths.

I sometimes lead a theatre exercise called "Singing the world into existence": a group of people create a scene where they use vocal sound and movement to create mountains, oceans, forests, and so on. As they perform it, I am perfectly aware that they are people acting out a scene; but at the same time I can see the mountains forming. It is all the more magical for being both things at once.

There is often an assumption that paradoxes are *problems* to be *solved*, like life is a problem to be solved. A paradox can exist quite happily as it is - the question is, can we?

Have a look at the visual paradox on your order of service - sometimes called a blivet, an impossible object, also the devil's pitchfork (interesting how that which is unsettling gets associated with the devil!) It represents two different realities in constant flux. Each end makes sense on its own, its in the middle that things get very strange. The secret to embracing paradox is developing a tolerance for living in this middle place. This is where we eventually find Campbell's idea of rapture.

Mystery:

This lead us to the idea of mystery - something that is difficult or impossible to explain. The value is in *not knowing*. There is nothing here to be gained from an answer. All answers are suspicious. Beware those who try to give you answers! Hang out with those who enjoy the question.

In Buddhism, the invitation is not to believe or take at face value anything that is taught. You have to try it out for yourself and draw your own conclusions. There is nothing based on faith, but rather on experience.

There is an expression, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him". It means, whatever your preconceived idea is, that's not it. However you imagine it to be, that keeps you from the experience. From chapter one of the Tao te Ching: "The Tao (the way, the path) that can be named is not the eternal Tao". The truth that is declared is not really the truth.

The Zen tradition uses paradox as a way of jolting you out of your usual mindset, with questions such as "what is the sound of one hand clapping?", or with stories: There was a leak in the monastery roof and water was pouring through the ceiling. One monk fetched a pail. Another brought a colander. The monk with the pail was reprimanded, the one with the colander praised.

The point is to invite and live in questions rather than to declare answers. To my knowledge, there has not yet been a computer “app” invented for this, but who knows?

Back to Joseph Campbell: **“I think it's important to live life with a knowledge of its mystery, and of your own mystery.”**

So let us go into the world with a deep sense and appreciation of its mystery, and into our own lives with a deep sense and appreciation of our own mystery.

And like TS Eliot, we'll end at our beginning:

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