

## CAN WE TALK ABOUT TRANSCENDENCE?

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Do any of you folks know who Joan Rivers is? Nowadays she's best known for her numerous facelifts and for her gigs as the hostess of QVC, but back in the day she was a terrific comedian. She was the first woman to host the Tonight Show, and she was screamingly funny. She would stalk the stage like a woman possessed, and when she was about to say something especially outrageous, she would say, "Can we talk?"

And that's my question for you today—"Can we talk?" Specifically, can we talk about transcendence? Transcendence is something more general than salvation, as that word is used in the Christian tradition. Transcendence can be experienced in the here and now, by living people like you and me. Moreover, transcendence is not limited to any one faith tradition.

To be sure, I believe that the great Buddhist teachers who live among us such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Han experience transcendence, probably on a daily basis. I also believe that the great Catholic saints experienced transcendence. I believe that St. Francis of Assisi experienced transcendence. Actually, St. Francis probably lived in transcendence. Donna and I have seen one of his robes in Cortona, Italy, and we have visited Assisi, where the spirit of sanctity that he left behind is quite palpable. Assisi is truly a blessed place, and the experience of visiting it is very moving.

And then there's St. Catherine of Siena, another beautiful Italian town that Donna and I have visited. The story goes that when Catherine of Siena began to pray, she would levitate, and the nuns around her would hang onto her skirts so that she wouldn't float away. That must have been quite a sight, don't you think? I believe that story.

But as people say on first dates, "Enough about me. What about you?" Indeed, what do you believe about transcendence? More specifically, can we talk about what you believe about transcendence? And related to transcendence, there's a key spiritual practice that promotes it, as it did for Elizabeth Gilbert: meditation. And for that matter what about your attitude toward non-Western healing techniques such as acupuncture?

I want to emphasize that our topic this morning is not transcendence, it's not meditation, and it's not acupuncture; rather, our topic is what you can say about any or all of these topics. And let me further emphasize that I wouldn't presume to tell you what your attitude towards any or all of these topics should be. As some of you know, I believe that the word "should" is a form of verbal cocaine. Like cocaine, the word "should" is addictive, and like cocaine, it has negative effects on people's lives. So I have made it part of my spiritual practice not to use the word "should."

However, I'm intensely interested in words, and when I talk to people about topics like transcendence, meditation, and acupuncture, I often hear them use the word "just." Not "just" in the sense of "fair," but "just" in the sense of "only." As in:

- "I just can't believe anybody could ever achieve transcendence."
- "Meditation is just not right for me."
- "I just wouldn't want to try acupuncture."

In each of these sentences, “just” is a limiting word. What it says is, “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Let’s talk about something innocuous, like the weather.” In each of these cases, and in many more similar cases, the word “just” puts a limit on communication. In effect “just” is a closed door, and this morning I invite you to open that door and walk through it. As Elizabeth Gilbert would put it, I invite you to experience your infinitude. When you do, you will have new opportunities for self-exploration and self-knowledge.

If you’re someone who would say, for example, “Meditation is just not right for me,” then you can ask yourself what lies behind the closed door that “just” represents. Does meditation seem too strange, too weird? Does it seem like too much of a departure from your previous experience? If so, then you have the opportunity to explore the ways in which your previous experience determines your present-day attitudes. If you do that, you might find out that the inertia stemming from your past experiences has various negative effects that don’t serve you well.

You will notice, of course—and this is the key point--that none of this has anything whatsoever to do with meditation. Once you open the closed door that the word “just” so often represents, there’s no telling what you’ll find.

If you have a serious commitment to the personal growth that can come with self-exploration, you can ask yourself, “What’s behind it when I say ‘just’?” In asking that question, you have begun an exciting journey of self-discovery.

Although I’m not a mind reader, I’m pretty sure that I know by now what some of you are thinking. You’re thinking, “Yes, but what about scientific proof? Is there really anything besides anecdotal evidence to show that meditation brings any health benefits?” Well, as a matter of fact

there is. We now have a series of double-blind studies by well-qualified scientists at reputable institutions. These studies, all of which were published in refereed journals, show that beyond a reasonable doubt that there are significant health benefits that occur when people do daily meditation.

And what about the scientific enterprise itself, which has proved the health benefits of meditation? I want to suggest to you that the openness that is a precondition for transcendence that Elizabeth Gilbert experienced is also a precondition for scientific innovation. Here's a case in point.

As some of you know my wife Donna got her Ph. D. at Berkeley, so we get the Berkeley alumni magazine. A recent issue of that remarkable publication featured one of Berkeley's many Nobel Prize laureates on the cover. His name is Kary Mullis, and he shared the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1993. I was pretty sure that he was an unusual scientist when the picture on the cover of the magazine showed him wearing swim trunks and carrying a surf board. So I knew that this was going to be one of those "only in Berkeley" stories. Sure enough--The magazine featured an interview with him, and in the interview he said, "Back in the 1960s and early '70s I took plenty of [LSD](#). A lot of people were doing that in Berkeley back then. And I found it to be a mind-opening experience. It was certainly much more important than any courses I ever took." I want to make sure that you understand what he's saying here. He's saying that in doing the research that led to his Nobel Prize in chemistry, the LSD that he took in Berkeley was more important, more helpful, than the courses that he took. Only in Berkeley—right?

Now I'm not advocating the use of LSD for scientific or any other purpose, but I am saying that scientific innovation in the modern world often calls for letting go of pre-conceived notions about the world, and apparently LSD did that for at least one Nobel Prize laureate.

And when you think about it, letting go of pre-conceived notions sums up a great deal of the scientific innovation of the last hundred years. Think, for example, about Einstein's reputation a hundred years ago, in 1911. Six years earlier, in 1905, he had published his paper "On the Electro-Dynamics of Moving Bodies," which implied that light had mass and could be deflected. Well, you know what the physicists in 1911 were saying about this crazy idea. They used the word "just." As in: "I just can't believe that light could be deflected. Anybody can see that light moves in a straight line. Where's the proof? And what's wrong with good old Newtonian physics, anyhow?"

And indeed a hundred years ago, in 1911, there was no way to prove the deflection of light. That had to wait for eight more years until Sir Arthur Eddington's observation of the solar eclipse of May 29, 1919. During that eclipse Eddington showed that light was indeed deflected, and in doing so he provided the first empirical proof of Einstein's theory.

And what kind of thing is light, which is so important in relativity theory? When we study light that consists of many photons as in propagation, we say that light behaves as a continuum, as an electromagnetic wave. On the other hand, when we study the interaction of light, with semiconductors, we say that light consists of particles, or quanta.

So what's the answer—Is light a wave or is it particles? The only reasonable answer—the only scientific answer—is "It depends." It depends on the experiment that you're conducting. In short, the logic of modern science is not a logic of either/or, but a logic of both/and. The logic of

both/and also informs such major advances in scientific thinking as Kurt Goedel's inconsistency proofs and Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.

This is such an important point that I want to repeat it: The logic of modern science is not a logic of either/or, but a logic of both/and. As it happens, and very conveniently too for my purposes, the logic of both/and is also the logic that Buddhism uses. The logic of both/and is the logic that makes transcendence possible.

It's the logic of both/and, for example, that is used in the old joke about the Zen masters and the light bulb. Have you heard this one? "How many Zen masters does it take to change a light bulb? Two. One to change it, and one not to change it." The logic of both/and in Buddhism includes both possibilities, don't you see.

So how does the logic of both/and apply to transcendence? No matter how you define transcendence, it involves letting go of the world. This is what happens, for example, in Bob Dylan's song "Visions of Johanna," the most powerful statement on transcendence in all of American culture. The crucial four lines in the last stanza go like this:

We see this empty case now corrode

Where her cape of the stage once had flowed

The fiddler, he now steps to the road

He writes ev'rything's been returned which was owed

Incidentally, the "fiddler" is Dylan's coded reference to Einstein. In his song "Desolation Row," Dylan tells us that Einstein was famous long ago for playing electric violin. If we can say, with the fiddler in "Visions of Johanna," that "ev'rything's been returned which was owed," then we

have come to terms with the world. The world has no hold on us anymore; we don't owe it anything.

In "Visions of Johanna" the key phrase, which occurs a few lines later, is "my conscience explodes." This phrase, "my conscience explodes," is the poet's equivalent of Elizabeth Gilbert's phrase, "I got pulled through the worm hole of the Absolute." The world had no hold on Catherine of Siena when she levitated during prayer; the world had no hold in Elizabeth Gilbert when she was pulled "through the wormhole of the Absolute." In short, before we can experience transcendence we have to let go of all our concerns that tie us to the world. We have to say, "The world is perfect as it is."

And, as Hamlet once said in a very different context, there's the rub. All you have to do is to turn on NPR or CNN, and you're overwhelmed with all the problems in the world. There's global warming, which Chad Tolman will talk about later this month; there are wars in various countries; there's poverty; there's an economic crisis. How—I hear you ask—How can anybody say that the world is perfect? Some of you might even want to use the word "just" and say, "I just can't believe that the world is perfect."

Well, how about it? Is the world perfect or is it imperfect? Does light consist of waves or does it consist of particles? Science tells us that light is both. Light is both waves and particles, depending on what experiment you're conducting. That's scientific logic for you. And the same logic, *the logic of both/and*, tells us that the world is perfect when we're experiencing transcendence. And it's also true that we can make the world perfect by devoting our time and treasure to social justice projects. To believe that we have to choose between transcendence and

social activism, between saying, “The world is perfect” and “The world is full of problems” is to use the either/or logic of nineteenth-century science, not the both/and logic of modern science.

And there’s another, very problematic, aspect of my question, “Can we talk about transcendence?” First of all, we notice that the Bible talks about salvation, but rarely about transcendence. One of these rare examples is a statement by the apostle Paul, who wrote in chapter 4, verse 7 of his epistle to the Philippians, “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and mind through Christ Jesus.” When Paul says that the peace of God “passeth all understanding,” he means that it goes beyond words. Thus, according to Paul, and to many other people as well, transcendence transcends words, so to speak.

That’s why even Bob Dylan can’t talk about transcendence. I point out in my book on Dylan that writing “Visions of Johanna” posed a wrenching problem for him. This extraordinary song shows the experience of letting go of the world that leads up to transcendence, but the song can’t describe transcendence itself, because by definition transcendence goes beyond words. Language breaks down for even someone so verbal as Elizabeth Gilbert, when she says things like, “I was inside the void, but also was the void and I was looking at the void, all at the same time.”

Although on the face of it this statement makes no sense, it’s as good as anything else that anyone can say when describing an experience that goes beyond words.

You may have heard of the koan, or riddle, that Zen masters use to create openness in their student’s minds: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” That too doesn’t make any linguistic sense because the point of the koan is to show the inadequacy of language.

When you think about it, you realize that saying that transcendence goes beyond words is nothing more than common sense. After all, it’s a commonplace that our deepest feelings and

emotions go beyond words. There's no way I can put into words the feelings that I experienced when I held my daughter in my arms for the first time. And how about you? Can you put into words the feelings that you experienced when you held your firstborn child in your arms for the first time? I don't think that anybody can.

So...keeping in mind the idea that words cannot convey ultimate spiritual and emotional states, let's consider the relationship between words and spirituality. For this purpose it's convenient to note the similarities among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, to take those religions in chronological order. If we follow the principle "Act locally, think globally," that is to say, if we transcend our immediate circumstances, and apply a global consciousness to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, here's what we get: We realize that all three religions have a great deal in common.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were all created in a relatively small area in the Middle East. Did you know, for example, that it's only 747 miles from Jerusalem to Mecca? That's only 100 miles further than it is from Philadelphia to Indianapolis! Moreover, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are anomalies in world religions because they are all monotheistic. Finally, and most importantly for our purposes here, all three Mediterranean religions have a divinely inspired text. It is for this reason that in all three Mediterranean religions reading and discussing a sacred text are defined as essential spiritual exercises.

But never mind history and geography--What about you? Are reading and discussion of texts—whether they are divinely inspired or not-- essential in your concept of spirituality? After all, the crucial importance of words in spirituality is a key feature of our common Judeo-Christian--Islamic heritage. The Bible tells us, "In the beginning was the Word."

And if reading and discussing—from the latest news to the Bible and beyond—are essential in your concept of spirituality, and if transcendence goes beyond words, does that rule out the possibility of transcendence for you? Does it mean that you're sure that you can never experience mystical ecstasy? Perhaps you doubt that anybody has ever really achieved mystical ecstasy.

Or can you use the both/and logic of modern science to affirm the importance of reading and discussion on one hand, and on the other hand also affirm the importance of meditation and transcendence? I have no idea how you would answer these or similar questions, but I pose them here as food for thought.

I have a final anecdote for you. In January of 1961, just over a half-century ago, an ambitious young man named Bobby Zimmerman left Minnesota for New York. He arrived on January 21, 1961—a day whose long-term consequences ultimately changed American culture. Here is what Bob Dylan wrote about that day in his memoir, Chronicles:

“It was dead-on winter. The cold was brutal and every artery of the city was snowpacked but I'd started out from the frostbitten North Country, a little corner of the earth where the dark frozen woods and icy roads didn't faze me. I could transcend the limitations.”

Dylan writes, “I could transcend the limitations.” I would argue that Dylan's whole career has been about transcending limitations—transcending the limitations of being a Jewish kid in Hibbing, Minnesota; transcending the limitations of protest songs by taking up the electric guitar; and—ultimately—writing songs such as “Visions of Johanna” which is about transcending the limitations of human experience itself.

I want to close with a statement of what transcendence means to me. The very word excites me. Just as Bobby Zimmerman transcended the limitations of growing up in Hibbing, Minnesota, in my much more modest way I transcended the limitations of growing up in Tupelo, Mississippi. I transcended the limitations of being a professor at the University of Missouri. Donna and I live in the beautiful village of Chadds Ford, and we are so lucky, so privileged, to have the opportunity to transcend Chadds Ford by travelling and seeing the world.

So my sermon today complements Scott's sermon from a week ago. Like Scott, I am a patriot and I gladly acknowledge that I have benefitted in many ways from being an American and having an American passport. AND it is essential to my understanding of who I am to affirm America and also to transcend it. I am both a citizen of America and also a citizen of the world. I hold in my consciousness the beautiful places and wonderful experiences that I've had in Russia, in Italy, and in China, to name three countries that have made a profound impression on me. Yet I also acknowledge that my attachment to these places creates a limitation. And I also hold in my consciousness the possibility that someday my conscience may explode—as Dylan put it—and I will transcend these and all the other places in the world.

And what about you? Are there any habits or attitudes or memories that create limitations in your life? If you use the all-important word “just” and say something like, “Well, that’s just the way I am,” then you can’t transcend who you are now

As we know, the word “just” often defines and creates the limitations of what Elizabeth Gilbert called “a puny box of identity.” But if you open the closed door that the word “just” represents, you create remarkable possibilities for transcendence.

