

Mr. Jefferson Comes to Spiritual Direction

The Enlightenment Stage of Spiritual Growth

Spiritual Director (SD): Mr. Jefferson, please come on in. Have a seat. I am glad to see you.
[pause, Jefferson seats himself]

SD: I must say I am surprised to see you. Tell me what brings you to spiritual direction.

Mr. Jefferson (J): Thank you, thank you very much for agreeing to see me and doing it so discreetly. I was told by my friend Mr. Scott who runs the ferry over the James River at the southern end of the county that you were a reliable person. I thought it would be helpful for me to talk to someone who might assist me to sort certain things out a bit. I must admit that I was put off by his saying you were a spiritual director, but he said you would be open and helpful for whatever I wanted to discuss of a personal nature.

SD: Well, I am glad you came. Never easy to admit to ourselves that there is something missing or off center in our lives, and that the process of addressing that pull for greater understanding and meaning need not be done alone. I assure you I will keep our discussion and our time together in confidence.

J: Again, thank you for your discretion. As you might imagine a person like me who has had a long public life and been scourged by vile handbills and pilloried in the press by my opponents can never be too careful when it comes to working through matters of great personal mental and philosophical consequence. And I must say I come not so much to address spiritual issues as philosophical ones. My view is that the term spiritual is a loose term that often conveys many kinds of misperceptions and superstition.

SD: Yes, language is in and of itself loaded with various meanings for different individuals and in that sense can be a barrier to understanding and communication. My view is that when we choose a specific meaning of a term such as faith, love, hope, spiritual, or the granddaddy word of many meanings God, we reveal a particular perspective we have about how we process reality. So important clues to understanding ourselves come from the meaning we give certain words and how we know those meanings.

J: Ah! You want to start with epistemology — how we know what we know. Wonderful, that has often been the starting place of my own efforts to understand phenomenon.

SD: Is that why you created the Jefferson Bible, or as you have entitled the book — “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth?”

J: Absolutely, I think the Bible is a wonderful book of philosophical guidance but it has been so cluttered with superstition and irrelevances that I thought certain deletions were warranted in order to increase its accessibility. People need to be able to read it from a modern, scientific perspective, clear of the mythical imaginings of ancient storytellers.

SD: You have done a wonderful job Mr. Jefferson of describing what is called the Enlightenment perspective from which reality is viewed. Indeed, I believe you probably as much as any one of our time embody that perspective. Your perspective of rational understanding, as important as it is and has been to acquisition of knowledge about our world and how many mechanical things work, is still simply one perspective, and accordingly has the limitations of a limited view. That is all any of us ever have is a limited view and so it is important to understand what our

perspective is, and how its limitations define how we process the information we receive about the world. What we might call the lens through which we perceive reality and who we are in the world.

J: Call me Tom. I can tell this discussion will be a longer than I had considered, but you raise an interesting point about the limitations of any perspective. However, I must argue vigorously for a scientific perspective as a needed bulwark against all the flotsam and jettison of people's imaginations about the nature of the world. Why it was not that many years ago that the good people of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were burning people as witches because of superstitious, religious lunacy.

SD: I understand your concern to correct what seems to be irrelevant to a scientific mind. I am sure the need to do that is what energized you to spend all the time to create the Jefferson Bible. But in order to truly appreciate the limits of our own perspective it is often helpful to try to understand the perspective of those with different perspectives, such as the Salem witch burners, who lived in what is often now called a mythic perspective.

However, what is important for you in the context of spiritual direction is not how to correct the misguided perceptions of others out in the world, but how to further enlarge your own perspective in a way that gives greater meaning to your life. And, I would venture a guess here: that somehow a greater perspective may be needed to help you address whatever the issues are that weigh on your heart and brought you here.

J: You are certainly right that a lot weighs on me. I am not sure whether on my mind or my heart. I try to focus on solving things with my mind, and that is why I am here, but as an enlightened person I want to be open to what else I should consider, but my dear friend please don't try to lead me down the path of religion's imaginings about angels and virgin births.

SD: I am not here to persuade you about the merits of a particular perspective or give answers about religious doctrines, but to help you on your journey to your answers; or maybe to better questions as the case may be.

J: Fair enough. I believe you are saying—how I know what I know is determined by a certain perspective, or world view, and that understanding that perspective and its limitations is important to one's continuing growth as a human being.

SD: Yes, exactly. And so if it's okay, let's get back to the question of what brought you here to start with. Are you having second thoughts about the Jefferson Bible and whether you should have produced it?

J: Quite natural of you to focus on the Jefferson Bible. It is what proceeds me when I get in a philosophical, or if you prefer, a spiritual discussion with anyone. No, I am content about the needed service provided by the Jefferson Bible. Simply condensing the gospels into one chronological narrative of Jesus' life is a help for anyone in understanding this man and his impact on civilization. For whatever your views about his philosophy, one cannot dismiss the impact he has had on human civilization. Greater than any other person before or since. No, I am at peace with the Jefferson Bible. I came to see you about something else.

SD: Oh! And what would that be?

J:Sally!

SD: Who would that.....yes, of course, Sally Hemings. Well, I suspect that this is a matter for some extended discussion and we are right near the end of our time. Shall we arrange to meet again in the near future?

J: Yes, by all means.

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One's Idealized Self-image as Sin

SD: Welcome Tom, good to see you again. Please sit.

J: Thank you.

SD: Tell me about Sally Hemings, her impact on your life and the questions that arise for you from your relationship with her.

J: Well, this is not something I can talk about with just anyone, so I am glad we can have this discussion in confidence. Let's see where to start.

SD: Start at the beginning.

J: Yes, of course. Sally came to Monticello as a very young girl, when she came with her siblings as a part of my wife Martha's inheritance from her father, John Wayles. Sally was the child of John Wayles, my father-in-law and a Negro slave Betty Hemings of mixed race who lived on the Wayles plantation. So Sally was three-fourths white European in her heritage and like her siblings treated properly the way house slaves should be treated.

When the first phase of Monticello was completed I moved there in 1770. In 1772 I married Martha, who was a widow at that time. Martha's father John Wayles died in 1773 and that, as I said, is when Sally came. As you may know, Martha died in 1782 shortly after the death of our last child. I was in a deep depression after her death. I loved her dearly and still do.

In 1784, two years after Martha's death, thinking it would help get me out of my grieving doldrums, I was sent to London and Paris by my colleagues in government as a diplomat for our young country. Sally's brother, James, went with me as part of a staff of two I took to support me personally on this diplomatic mission.

Well, my friends were right. Paris changes you. In 1786 I met Maria Cosway. She turned my life upside down. I fell for her—head over heels, as they say. And I believe she felt similarly about me. We still correspond, but as you know she was married and I never spent more time with her than that initial six weeks of our meeting in Paris and I conducted myself properly given her marital status.

SD: Sorry to interrupt your narrative, but for a man committed to rationality your love of Martha and grief at her loss, and then the mutual infatuation you and Maria shared perhaps portray a significant emotional aspect of your make-up.

J: Hmmmm. Interesting thought my friend. Yes, it is true I have been blown hard in my life by the winds of emotion and as you will see that is what has brought me here.

After Maria left Paris for London I was immediately consumed again by a huge depression. Yes, as you point out my life has been full of great emotional ups and downs. I see you may be suggesting that I am more controlled by my emotions than by a rational intellect. Fair observation. Maybe we all are. But let me proceed.

Then in 1787 Sally arrives in Paris. Up to this time I had not particularly taken notice of Sally. She was one of many young house slaves around Monticello I never really knew. But I had sent for my youngest surviving child to come to Paris—I wanted to have a chance to get to know Polly before she was grown and while she was alive; I had lost so many of my children at very young ages—and Sally accompanied Polly on the voyage. When Sally arrived in Paris in 1787 she was sixteen and a strikingly beautiful and well-spoken young woman. I was 44 at the time and as you point out—between the loss of my wife, Martha, and the loss of so many of our children—somewhat of an emotional wreck.

Two of our children died in the 1770s and then the first Lucy Elizabeth died in 1781 and the second Lucy Elizabeth died in 1785, the year before Sally arrived. Stir in Maria Cosway to that swirling emotional cauldron and, yes, I was a mess when Sally set foot in Paris. So it was not long before desire for Sally became a balm for my grief. My affection for her became and continues to be one of the most meaningful emotional bonds in my life. (Jefferson begins to tear up.)

Could we pause a minute. I could use a drink of water.

SD: Certainly here you are. (handing Jefferson a glass of water)

J: So after Sally arrived in Paris, it was not long before she was in my bed almost every night. When we returned to America in 1789, the year of the French Revolution, she was pregnant with our first child. While she was in Paris I paid her wages as if she were free, though admittedly the sums were paltry. She could have remained in France as a free person, but Sally, like her half sister Martha, my deceased wife, was very family oriented and being pregnant with our child she never considered not returning to Monticello with me. Plus, she knew I wanted her to be with me. (Jefferson pauses.)

(After a few long moments.)

SD: What you are telling is a common enough story for our times, Tom. Most white plantation owners have pretty young black slave girls as mistresses. What is it about this story that brings you here?

J: I cannot rationalize keeping Sally and her children slaves, nor can I free them. (long pause)

SD: Do you believe the immortal words that you penned in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal?” I assume you used the male term as generic for all human beings.

J: Yes, I did and I deeply and truly believe in the equality of every person. I was ready to die for that principle.

SD: Isn't your answer clear: you should free your mistress Sally and your children by her.

J: It would be easy for me to free her and our children simply based on my love and affection for her. But if I were to free them based on the line you just quoted, that I indeed did write, then rationally I would have to free all my slaves.

SD: Why not do that?

J: If I did that my whole material way of life would be swept away. I abhor slavery, I really do. But without slaves I would no longer be able to think and reflect and do my part to advance civilization in this young country. I would not have the means to work to advance my University. I could no longer have visitors from abroad as I would have no means to entertain them properly. I would simply not be able to be who and what I am.

SD: So if I am hearing you right—you are saying that you have an idealized image of yourself as a civilized, cultured man and that without slavery propping up the means to sustain that image your life would be meaningless?

J: (pauses) That states it very jarringly, but in essence that is correct.

SD: Again, let me be sure I understand— you are saying that the economic interests that sustain your self image trumps your ideals, which you believe in and which are the ideals fashioned by you on which this country is so recently founded?

J. (lowers his head and shakes it slowly) Sadly, that is true.

SD: So it would feel like death to you if you were no longer a man of means? If you were no longer able to sustain the image you have of yourself of who you are?

J: Yes. But it is worse than that. I am already hugely in debt—I would be insolvent if pushed by my creditors—so the perceived economic privilege I have is in fact an illusion.

SD: Let me be sure I understand—so even though your economic privilege is an illusion that illusion is so important to you that you put it first before your bedrock beliefs and principles?

J: You are a harsh man. But, yes, you have gotten to the numb of it. Even though my white privilege is an illusion— an illusion in that it actually is not bringing me any economic benefit—I will not give it up.

SD: Is that because holding onto the illusion allows you to believe that others see you in a certain way, as a gifted, decent civilized human being?

J: (long pause) Tragically, your deduction is correction. My conception of how I want to be perceived over-rides even my most fervently held ideal that in my younger years I swore I would die for.

SD: It's extraordinarily hard to recognize and admit how our unconscious image of who we are controls our actions—congratulations. You have taken the first, vital step of a spiritual journey. You have begun to see clearly the reality created by your unconscious thoughts and feelings. We are past our time today, but next session we can explore how you might move forward from this place of insight and clarity.

J: Very well, until then.

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Our time with Mr. Jefferson could end here and as you might guess after looking at the Postscript, perhaps it does. The next session with Mr. Jefferson will explore the possibility of how Jefferson in spiritual direction might have come to see another ending.

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The Path of Transformation Out of the Illusions of the False Self

SD: Welcome, Tom.

J: Not at all sure I was going to come back, but anyway here I am.

SD: Honestly, I didn't expect you to be back. If I can state where we were—you came to the conclusion that despite your avowed belief in the equality of all human beings and the immorality of slavery that you are unwilling to free your slaves, most especially the slave who is your common law wife and your children by her, because such action would undermine the illusion in the minds of others, even though you know in your own mind it is an illusion, of your white privilege and entitlement.

J: Ahem, you are not trying to sugar coat this are you. I must say you are correct.

SD: My own observation is that the illusion of entitlement is often stronger and harder to give up when it is experienced, not in reality, but abstractly in the mind where there is no obstacle to it reinforcing our idealized self image. The abstraction loses its power once it is replaced by what is actually real—in this case a woman and children you love and a country that would love you even if you were penniless.

J: Easy for you to say, my friend. But obviously not something I have been able to find a way to embrace, since my underlying fear, I now realize, is that if I give up white privilege I will not only be penniless I will no longer exist as I conceive of myself. You are asking me to give up my own life in order to give my slaves theirs. I understand that to be the classic Christian challenge Jesus modeled and taught. But that doesn't make this easier for me.

I am afraid over the past few weeks, since we last met, that each time I get to the brink of a decision to free Sally and our children I stop unable to execute a choice that seemingly would take my own life.

SD: Even when you see that your white privilege is not only immoral, and is an illusion that doesn't really exist—that you are penniless either way?

J: As you suggest, I see even more clearly than ever how because it is an illusion I cling even harder to it.

SD: There is a way out, Tom, of this dilemma, which admittedly has been created not by you personally but by the culture and times of which you are a part—which of course is the way all moral dilemmas arise.

J: Go on.

SD: First, one must experience the underlying reality that both white privilege and the illusion of white privilege are false self trappings that support an ego experience of who we are. We are never able to let go of any significant aspect of our false self unless we can begin to experience that there is something else there that is truly us, some essential nature and that it is grounded and supported in something larger than us—otherwise this fear of being nothing is too overwhelming to allow us to move forward to a place of our own liberation.

J: So you are saying that I am in fact enslaved to my own ego, and that is what allows me to keep others in bondage?

SD: (smiling) No one ever accused you of being slow. Yes, that is what I am saying.

J: How then do I get this experience of my essential nature that allows me to let go of my false self illusions of white privilege that seem so essential to my existence?

SD: Well, the time honored path for allowing the false self to begin to melt away involves contemplative practices. They began with the Buddha who, while in contemplation, recognized that all our suffering is tied to our experiencing our lives through our ego false self. He taught contemplative practices like meditation to allow the mind to gradually see the illusion of our false self reality—“maya” he called it. Then Jesus came along and encouraged us to be in the world but not of the world—a similar approach as the Buddha taught and added to that, for the first time in human history, the idea of a God who was not vengeful and harsh but loves unconditionally. The acceptance and experiencing of that love makes it possible for one to let go of the ego false self. In other words if we experience being held by a dimension of love greater than ourselves, we can gradually learn to let go of ego aggrandizements like white privilege that otherwise, caught up as they are in our self image, seem impossible to release.

J: So from the Christian perspective the way out of my conundrum is love. Not to try really hard to love the underprivileged, which would be an ego false self assertion, but to experience God’s love of one’s self sufficiently so that the false self’s need for false self support withers away.

SD: Yes. This gets us back to the limitations of a purely rational scientific perspective. You perhaps have Blaise Pascal in your extensive library, and you may recall his famous line, “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.” Love—and you have experienced its wonder—is not rational, but it may be that the opening of the heart to a deeper experience of love is only possible from a larger perspective than simply a scientific one. It is not that the scientific perspective is untrue. Rather it is that there may also be another larger, encompassing perspective that, as Pascal suggests, sees even greater truth.

J: I assume that this perspective is what the Gospels call seeing with the mind of Christ. You are suggesting that seeing this issue in that way might allow me to move to a new perspective where I can free Sally without losing my whole sense of identity. So how do I develop this love relation with a God I am unfamiliar with, this God of the heart?

SD: The same way you fall in love with anything or anyone. You fall in love with the reality that reflects what you would call God—the beauty that blooms every spring at Monticello that is the gift of creation’s annual renewal. You fall in love with those around you whose relation to you helps give meaning and support to your life. You as a philosopher fall in love with the truth of reality as you are able to discern and understand it but in a new way. In the way that allows the reasons of the heart to become known to the mind. In this kind of insight the kindling of the heart leads to a new mental clarity. From this heart perspective we don’t see reality as something to be managed or controlled or even understood as much as reality is a partner in a love relationship, and our task is to stay in it and be a part of that flow of love. Within that flow then

we begin to experience that we are held and if we are able to let go sufficiently into that flow, then we begin to be able to abide in it and let go of our ego false self. Our path becomes one of love rather than unconscious fear. A love that even overrides fear of the loss of our ego sense of identity.

J: You are saying the answer to my dilemma is to see reality from a larger perspective than just a mental one, and that it is possible to access this larger perspective by experiencing the beauty and goodness of the world.

SD: Yes, you could say that this larger perspective of love is a higher level of consciousness through which you experience reality.

J: You might be losing me there.

SD: Growth in consciousness has always been the true goal of the religious path, which I know you have eschewed. Partly for very valid reasons. For example, speaking just of Christianity, we see that for most of its adherents Christianity has simply become a belonging system that offers ways to reinforce the false self ego structure. In this way a religious tradition gets used not as a path of transformation, which destroys the ego false self, but as a way to maintain belief conformity and the status quo.

Used as a path of transformation religion provides contemplative practices and a supportive emotional community which allows this process of reality acceptance and opening of the heart to love to occur. The false self can begin to melt and one can begin to start to live from one's essential self's connection to Being itself. In this way our ground of being becomes experienced as being connected to and a part of the Ground of Being that supports and nurtures us and all of life. In this sense learning to love in a deep way, the kind of way that allows us to love our enemy, is synonymous with a shift in consciousness to a more expanded level.

J: So, your conclusion is that I am stuck about how to make a decision regarding Sally's freedom because my consciousness is too limited.

SD: The difficulty you are having in experiencing what I am saying about the truth of the heart and your own deep allegiance to the Enlightenment perspective might suggest this. Don't get me wrong the Enlightenment perspective is a wonderful perspective. It has and will continue for at least another couple hundred years to provide us with much scientific and material progress. But there are other levels that transcend and include this level. Fortunately there are several intrepid souls who are cartographers of the stages of spiritual growth. Fowler and Wilber are two who will offer much wisdom and understanding of these stages in the future. The next level up from Enlightenment is the Egalitarian level and as you can imagine by its name at some point in the future, as more and more people access this level, all barriers based on race or gender or sexual orientation will gradually be eliminated in our culture.

The shadow aspect of the Enlightenment level is that because a rational understanding cuts through so much superstition and distortion it seems like enlightenment itself, and therefore offers the potential for an ego inflation that makes one feel this perspective is the one and only and final perspective.

J. So you are saying I am stuck at too low a level of consciousness to love Sally enough to free her and that my ego is so inflated about the rightness of how I see things that I will not change. So you are telling me that you can't really help me. Is that correct?

SD: I am saying that the key to humankind's salvation—saving humanity from itself—is ultimately for us all to grow spiritually; that without such growth we are probably stuck at a level

of fighting each other based on the illusion of perceived differences. The falsely perceived differences assure an economic competition for resources that prop up the illusion of our self image and in your case has you in turmoil about what should be a no-brainer—freeing your lovely common law wife and her children from slavery.

J. Tell me how I can begin to change my unconscious perception which gives me this ego inflated view I am stuck in.

SD: You are in the midst of the first two steps of a step by step process of liberation. Step One: become aware of the unconscious bias produced by your learned perspective of how you view reality. Step Two: accept your awareness deeply and emotionally. This is a hard step—to own how our own ego self image has made us prejudiced. Steps Three and Four can be done together. Step Three: Begin contemplative practices in a trusted community which will allow you to begin to see more clearly the limited nature of your perspective and strengthen your ability to let go of your limiting beliefs and ideas. Step Four: fall in love with whatever in this reality is to you beautiful, true and good. Step Five: find a teacher to help guide you as you repeat steps three and four over and over again.

J: (long pause) I understand John Adams is not that well these days and I am certainly not getting any younger so I guess I better begin.

SD: Wonderful. The good news about the contemplative path is that we can begin it any time anywhere. There are two basic patterns of meditation or contemplation as Christians call it: practicing single-pointed attention or practicing emptiness. Both lead us to the same goal that of experiencing loving union with life, or the Ground of Being, or however else, either theistically or non-theistically, one might describe the experience of aware relatedness and presence. So sit with your posture erect and close your eyes. Have the intention to be in a loving relationship with something greater than yourself. Then gently bring your attention to your breath, continue to follow your breath and if thoughts, feelings or sensations arise gently let them go..... and when they arise again gently let them go.....

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Postscript

Jefferson died bankrupt. He only formally freed two slaves while he was living, both by letting them earn their freedom. These were his brother-in-laws, Robert Hemings and James Hemings. He freed five slaves in his will. These were all from the extended Hemings family, including three living children by Sally: Madison and Eston and Harriet. Sally continued to live at Monticello for the rest of Jefferson's life. He never freed her. After he died Jefferson's daughter, Martha Randolph, who was, of course, her niece, allowed her to live in Charlottesville as a free woman, though she was never manumitted. She died in 1835, nine years after Jefferson, the father of her children, had died in 1826.

Of the six children Tom and Sally had, two died very early, the others were:
a son Beverley b. 1798
a daughter Harriet b. 1801
a son Madison b. 1805
a son Eston b. 1808

At the age of 14, each of the three boys were trained in skilled carpentry and like Jefferson learned to play the violin. In 1822, Beverley "ran away" from Monticello and was not pursued. His sister Harriet followed in the same year, she was 21 years old. Jefferson's overseer [Edmund Bacon](#) said that Jefferson gave Harriet \$50 (US\$1,021 in 2017 dollars) and put her on a stagecoach to the North, presumably to join her brother. In his memoir, published posthumously, Bacon said Harriet was "near white and very beautiful," and that people said Jefferson freed her because she was his daughter. Madison Hemings said his brother Beverley and sister Harriet each passed into white society in [Washington, DC](#), and each married well.