

Jimmy Carter Comes to Spiritual Direction

God as the revelation of Truth

SD: Welcome. It is wonderful to see you. Thank you for coming. What brings you to spiritual direction today?

JC: Let me jump in feet first. My issue may not at first seem like a spiritual problem, but at its core I believe it is. The core of the problem that bothers me is that most decent-hearted Americans have come to believe in a concept that I am beginning to think may have become untrue in practice.

SD: What concept are you talking about?

JC: The concept of free speech. We believe in it because in the past it has won—won in the sense of revealing truth that has emerged to exemplify goodness and justice served. Or, if not served at the time at least served retrospectively by history's condemnation of the injustice. Not only do we believe in this concept we have enshrined it with supernatural powers. We have in fact reified it, made it an idea God. But here is the problem that keeps me from sleeping at night, what if truth has won in the past, not because, of free speech, but because of the technology available to disseminate speech?

SD: You know something I believe about the impact of technology for good or evil I believe. Didn't you study nuclear engineering?

JC: Yes I did. And I know this sounds complicated for a peanut farmer to be talking about it. But what if the technology of speech, of our discourse — the technology of the internet and the smart device — now favors not truth, but the alternative facts of whoever is the biggest bully with the most internet bucks to bully with. [sighs deeply] In other words what if the sacrosanct idea of free speech has now become a euphemism for just the opposite — not free speech, or free thought — but an enshrined idea that legitimates the power of a few through fear and uncertainty to control and manipulate discourse and thought.

SD: You are right the idea of free speech is sacrosanct in American culture. Do you think other people in the world see the idea of free speech differently.

JC: Yes. The Germans don't believe in free speech. They believe in the good part of free speech, the spreading of ideas and the personal sense of security that being able to speak your mind brings, but they also have seen up close the dark side of free speech. They have tried to thread the needle by outlawing hate speech. In the abstract we all love the idea of free speech, but the Germans emotional experience of Nazism taught them what it could unleash. They saw how truth being the outcome of free speech is not guaranteed. They experienced liberal democracy as too thin a structure to sustain truth. The freedom of their system of liberal democracy in the late 1920s gave birth and nurtured the worst kind of hatred and genocide all based on untruth. Germany banned hate speech after the second World War long before the possibility of technology undercutting the truth goal of free speech ever began to emerge.

SD: Are there other relevant examples?

JC: The most obvious contemporary example is that of the Communist Chinese, who believe in the public virtue of controlling speech, by controlling the technology of discourse. They have cleaned up internet. It disallows pornography, which is to say it supports the truth of seeking to

prevent the gender abuse of misogyny. The controlled internet prevents the spread of ethnic and racial slurs and commentary that would stoke ethnic fears and hate. What is not to be liked about that? But the cost of this is the perpetuation of a ruling elite's power which means avoiding the truths of their own corruption, though in true Confucian style the Communist Chinese are cognizant of this vulnerable spot and try periodically, semi-successfully to self police their abuse of power. But every system has its elite and they don't see their elite as much different from the elites of Western democracies.

SD: What has caused you to wrestle with this not as an intellectual problem but as an emotional and spiritual issue?

JC: Well we all know by now that the Russians prevented an American election from coming out truthfully. And whether or not you believe that the candidate elected was a part of the hacking and manipulation of voters that led to a fraudulent election outcome, the fact is we have an object lesson right in front of us, that the current means of discourse does not bring truth. Truth in this internet media age did not win out. In fact it loss in a dramatic way, leaving us with a huge ripple of unleashed ethnic hatred that seems to have taken us backwards half a century. I am as effected as anyone. What I am telling you right here is that I don't trust our democracy any more. I don't know if democracy has the right technology to see that truth wins out. And without truth as an outcome of democracy, then that system has itself failed. And without truth our religions, which have always been about ways to understand truth, have no meaning.

SD: Do you see ways that the dark side of free speech, hate speech and "the alternative facts," that internet technology has engendered, could be lessened?

JC: I don't think that there would be that much division among our citizenry if people simply could agree on the reality of the facts about an issue. Much of the contention and anger in our culture arises from the fact that the internet always gives the most extreme view a place to find some kind of credibility and legitimacy. Commentators talk about us living in a post-truth world. Well, that simply reminds me of the old 'God is dead' talk. If the mechanism of discourse perpetuates rather than reduces obstacles to coming to a common understanding of the truth of what is, then we lose truth, we lose God.

SD: Tell me how this relates to your faith.

JC: I realize I have grown up with an implicit faith in God, because I believed in truth, goodness and justice. Take away the possibility of goodness and justice and I now realize I doubt the existence of God. For me at least there is a sense that what we believe in is in fact God. If we believe in truth, goodness, justice and mercy, then there is a God of truth, goodness, justice and mercy. If we do not believe in the possibility of truth and justice, then there is no God of truth and justice and whatever God that leaves—maybe a God of vengeance or punishment. Well, I am an atheist as to that God.

SD: Maybe there is an important distinction to make here between a truthful message and the vehicle by which that message is delivered. Perhaps it is necessary to separate truth from the vehicle that conveys truth. In a way it is like recognizing that the Spirit or God is the water in the pipes, and religion is the pipes. The pipes may be helpful to convey the Spirit, but they can also become worn out and rusty and contaminate the water. The Internet, the idea of unrestricted free speech may not be a trustworthy conduit of truth.

JC: Yes, that analysis does help give me more clarity on what has troubled me.

SD: I can see how the truth about racism must weigh very heavily on your heart. Especially having grown up in the South with its history of racism and racial injustices, you must know that

it can take a long time for truth to win out. Yet, you and many other black and white Southerners never gave up. Is there a difference now about what sustains those loyal to this truth of racial equality?

JC: Back then the technology of racism was not to try control saying the truth, but to simply make life unbearable for anyone speaking the truth, to anyone describing the social and economic injustice of racism. But you are right there was also a control of the print media in the South by those who wished to keep the status quo of racism and that meant that speech which spoke the truth of lynchings and unfair educational and economic opportunity spoke it largely into an empty room. The print media, which was supported by advertisers, participated in an unspoken pact to assure the ugly truths of racism were hidden to the public at large and newspapers never strayed far in offending the status quo outlook of those pulling their economic strings. But somehow the control of discourse by the internet's lowest common denominator seems totally subversive of our ideal of free speech and free press providing truth.

SD: If God is truth then how do you understand that what we know as truth evolves and unfolds?

JC: Interesting question. How do we know what we know; and also more nuanced—how does truth change as our way of knowing changes? And also what is the process by which an idea that is true in one moment takes on accretions by which the truth over time becomes so burdened by ego baggage that the baggage undermines the truth itself. Your inquiry is very helpful. Let me try to think it through with this idea of racism so recently vitalized by the fake news generated by the internet. Being from the South as you note, I am intimately familiar with racism and the truth that it is evil. And over time the way this truth is seen has changed.

SD: You know truths about racism, not just as ideas, but because you have lived through them?

JC: Yes, in the 1960s we witnessed the civil rights movement led by Rev. Martin Luther King and we saw through his truth telling the brutal reality of systemic racism in the South. Racism was clear in segregated schools and public facilities and legalized disenfranchisement at the polls. This changed with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights legislation in the 1960s. Legalized racism was banished. But racism, always having been a powerful political force, continued in a new more subtle form first developed by George Wallace and then Richard Nixon playing the race card over and over again through the coded language of states rights and opposition to the courts telling people what to do. As attempts to level the economic disadvantages of racism were put in place, by the war on poverty and fair housing legislation, then racism changed to caricaturing welfare mothers, describing needed help as government handouts and restrictive zoning. As the efforts to ameliorate the evil of racism continued, the form of reactions to these efforts became more and more subtle; and simultaneously the efforts at amelioration also caused real new problems.

SD: Can you give me an example.

JC: Sure, the crying need to provide housing, provided government built segregated housing and also created the loss of family and extended family social networks that had been the glue that held life together in the ghetto. Such housing initiatives could easily be criticized based either upon good will to make the solution better or on racism. To try to address needed policy changes there was a shift to realizing that government subsidized scattered site, non-segregated housing was a better solution. On the one hand some simply suggested no housing be built. On the other the need for a better housing solution became more difficult to effect. The increasing complexity of housing truth made it harder and harder to tell the motive for criticism and harder and harder to retain the underlying political good will and consensus necessary to eliminate racism and also meet the dire need for affordable housing.

SD: So what is the big picture answer you draw from your housing example?

JC: First it seems that any moral truth such as that racism must be eliminated and there needs to be affordable housing for all, becomes increasingly sophisticated. There is an ever increasing complexity to understanding the truth and what is necessary to address this truth.

SD: So does this mean that an understanding of God needs to also become similarly complex?

JC: I had not considered this, but maybe so.

SD: I think you are correct. In addition, as something becomes increasingly complex to understand it can lose the power that compels it emotionally. In the same era you are talking about when our culture was increasingly trying to understand how to eliminate racism there emerged, as you mentioned, the 'God is dead' movement.

JC: Yes, as someone who teaches Sunday School most Sundays, I understand the beauty of Jesus' message that no matter how complex the problem is the answer is love. But you are right to discern what love requires in a given situation becomes extraordinarily complex at times.

SD: You have illuminated a truth about truth. A given truth about a particular problem becomes increasingly complex over time. Maybe the next question is: How do we understand the evolution of that truth? For example we can see that when the internet came along it brought great opportunity for good to connect people with each other and knowledge. And it also turns out it became a great vehicle for extreme racism and hatred to blossom. Does the evolution of every idea bring with it something in it that can cause its own destruction? Does complexity overtime become an over-ripeness that destroys what was initially true and good in an idea or movement?

JC: [laughs]I think you could draw that conclusion and you would at least have a partial truth.

SD: But maybe what is most helpful here is to look at the process of the evolution of an idea like racism on the internet and see if we can discover how that evolution occurs. We are about at the end of our time. Perhaps we could look deeper at this next time we meet.

JC: Great idea. I look forward to our next session.

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The Trinitarian Process of Unfolding

SD: Welcome. It is good to see you again. Let's take a moment to center and then pick up where we left off.

[Pause for centering practice]

JC: When we were last together we were talking about how an idea or social progress or any process of change unfolds. This is an extremely important issue to Christianity, I believe, because Christianity is profoundly a religion of hope. So understanding the process of change is key in many ways to faith. I think emerging Christian ideas around the Trinity are helpful. I

must admit I didn't understand this stream of thought for a while, but I am beginning to think that this is the way we will need to move forward by understanding how we are shaped in the most positive way by emergent ideas.

SD: Yes, this is a place where writers like Cynthia Bourgeault have had a positive impact. She helps give us a perspective, even when we might not know what the next right thing to do is to find a way through what ever seems to be blocking the way. Sophisticated roadblocks have emerged blocking efforts to continue eliminating racism. There is a renewed political interest in continuing to stir up racism. These two roadblocks themselves are perhaps a good way to describe systemic sin.

JC: What do you mean by systemic sin?

SD: Good question. Racial difference is a made up idea. There is no truth to it. Blue eyes, brown eyes, brown skin, white skin do not reflect any difference at all in a human being. Except for these colors those with either characteristic are genetically the same. Systemic sin is the social construct of discrimination in jobs, housing, employment built on top of this untruth that keeps racism alive. Is there a method for understanding how to work toward resolving systemic sin? Is there a method to open the possibility of the positive energy of love which change things for the better to break down the far flung consequences of racism?

JC: Yes, that is the question. What is the Christian answer to a deep rooted social evil?

SD: Cynthia Bourgeault suggests we approach finding the answer to this question by understanding how the Christian idea of the Trinity might help us evolve a method of knowing and realizing greater truth. What are your thoughts?

JC: To get to her ideas about the Trinity as a way of reality unfolding, I have to start with my understanding of the philosophy of change as described by Hegel. A cause, the elimination of racism arises and then there is a reaction to it, a counter-movement of more subtle racism as we have seen so dynamically used by the Republican party to manage to hold to political control through numerous elections by manipulating racist fear in the country even when they do not represent the majority of citizens. We have been caught in this gridlock of these two forces. Hegel suggests that there should be some kind of synthesis, but this has not occurred; and, in fact, how do you have a synthesis with an idea that is evil? Instead we allow systemic sin to be perpetuated, and this prevents the flow of the Spirit of more love into the world.

SD: So the traditional Hegelian way of understanding changes keeps us stuck. Talk about the Trinitarian way to understand this process, which is not dialectical but trilectical, that the block of sin dissolution, or stasis, is always only overcome by the introduction of a third force or new dynamic. Third force most often comes from the margin of the culture, from some source that does not have the power of the initial force and counter-force. At least I think I am articulating the theory correctly. Is there an example of this that you remember in recent history?

JC: In the 60's I think the third force, the thing that moved forward the whole process of dismantling legalized racism against the forces that opposed it was the energy of a shift in music taste. This new music which arose from blues and the legacy of African American spirituals provided a third force culture shift that changed the way young people saw the world. This occurred primarily through the music of Motown and black musicians and also white musicians who enshrined this tradition at the same time as they became cultural icons—musicians like Elvis and the Beatles and the Vietnam war protest music of Dylan and others. Somehow this new music opened up a sense of hope and goodwill and the possibility of change. The possibility of change became less a threat because of the emotional resonance provided by rock and roll. I can remember how this music enliven both black and white kids back in the 50s

and 60s. Somehow race became less of a barrier because something in common was shared—the love of this same music.

SD: Your illustration seems right on. So what are the most urgent problems today and what are possible third forces that will break through the stalemate of systemic sin?

JC: Perhaps the greatest problem in the world is climate change. I don't know what the third force will be that allows humans to face it directly, but I see the problem as so overwhelming that it will focus humankind to either grow together in cooperation or it will create scarcity that allows fear to grow so humans will destroy each other. But what is the third force that is going to allow humans to come to terms with the problem in a way which causes a breakthrough? I don't know. What I do feel is true is that technology itself while it will be the tool that is part of the answer, will not be the answer itself, but the answer will be love in some form, just as the music of the 60's was a form of love, an expression of our collective soul seeking solace and meaning, that allowed a positive forward movement to occur.

SD: Where does a new third force come from?

JC: There are a lot of margins where it might come from: indigenous groups who naturally hold the land sacred, youth caught in the violence of school shootings, a groundswell of followers of the mystical love wisdom of classic Islamic poets like Rumi. I just don't know.

SD: So we are in a place where the third force, the movement of the Holy Spirit, or love, if you will, that might break the current block of sin in our culture about climate change or racism is not clear. Maybe that is the reason you are here. Tell me where does this reality leave you spiritually?

JC: It leads me back in the Old Testament—to exile. I believe that is where a lot of people are now. Somehow we need to find the security of faith, or maybe from a 60s perspective the security of the emotional feeling of the rightness of the music, that something new is possible. I do think your example of the music of the 60's as third force is helpful. The third force of the 2020s may use the tools of technology but it must be based in some emotional quality that allows people to feel secure enough to rise above a limited consciousness of self-centeredness. I am thinking that the block you describe as sin is always about a self-centered perspective. Somehow the new third force that is going to change our global warming deadlock or American racism or the violence of American culture has to have a quality of emotional security or emotional resonance that allows us to rise above the blocks caused by our insatiable, self-centered demands for the security of status, power, property or simply our own limited self-centered ideas.

SD: So what is your calling at this stage of your life? How are you called to help set the stage for the emergence of a Holy Spirited third force that is going to allow the blocks of cultural stasis to be breached?

JC: I think it is my lack of an answer that has brought me here. But I must say that our conversation has been helpful. Maybe it has increased my faith in not knowing, in the belief that at some point the third force yeast for the next change will arise. I recognize now that it is important to distinguish between the yeast in the third force and the cultural baggage a third force can so quickly but perhaps inevitably acquire. By that I mean I now see that despite my apprehensions then about the music of the 60's and hippies and peaceniks that before they were overtaken by the baggage of drugs and egos, the yeast of that third force was about love and righteous change and that this yeast did allow for a movement toward God, albeit without any institutional window-dressing.

SD: So this history gives you some reassurance?

JC: Yes, I realize the lack of clarity I now have about the form of the yeast of the next third force. But I now believe I might be able to welcome it, knowing all along it will have some baggage that it will be easy to be critical of.

SD: I guess you could say the same of Jesus. He brought a lot of third force yeast, but his movement has sure acquired plenty of baggage.

JC: [laughs] That is for sure.

SD: Are you getting any clarity on the uneasiness that brought you here?

JC: Yes, I see more clearly than ever the truth that God is love and love's daughter justice abhors racism. This raises the question of how humans deal with a carrier of racism like the Internet. Free expression is necessary for love. Love is by definition unconditional. There is a giving of self as Jesus' life demonstrated. But the vehicles by which free expression is disseminated whether they be a papyrus scroll, a large national newspaper or the internet are fragile human constructs that can be manipulated and create untruth. Free expression is not the problem, the problem is how the vehicles of expression get used in the wrong way. At one time we Americans thought education was the bulwark against the misuse of free expression. Now I see clearly it is only the bulwark intellectually and rationally; it does not deal with the unconscious emotions that often are the source of our dark energies. The only sure fire vehicle to deal with and resolve afflictive human emotions is love and here we are back to God again.

SD: Wonderful. You have clarity now that for truth and the vehicles expressing truth to prevail love must prevail. Yes, the vehicles of expression like the Internet may be great places for graven images to be made, but in a sense that possibility is always with us. It just seems that the gravity of mischief is so great the world hangs in the balance. But maybe that is the way it always has been.

JC: Yes, you throw me right back on the reality that all hope is build upon a foundation of faith.

SD: I am sure that we live in two worlds at once. The human/material where we will hurt others trying to assure ourselves that we have enough to sustain our fragile human lives, and the divine world where we are all connected and to hurt others is to hurt ourselves. The truth of the human/material world is that we seek power and control, esteem and affection and survival and security in ways that often harm others, and when we do so excessively we always cause harm to others and close the door to our experience of connection with everyone. This interconnected web of everything is a reflection of what many call the Holy Spirit. The truth of the divine world is that we can never rely enough on our connections to others. We can never be disappointed by seeking to be love in the world. Paradoxically, if we err on the side of love we always receive more love in turn. The hard part is that being love isn't something that necessarily feeds or clothes us, but it is something that forever is solace to our souls.

JC: What I do know for sure is that the children of love are justice, goodness, beauty and faith. If I live the truth of love then I have a chance to see her children grow in my life and the life of the world.

SD: I believe this is a good place to close. Thanks so much for coming.

JC: Thank you for this opportunity to give a little free expression to what has been troubling my soul.

