

“Black and White Thinking in a World of Many Colors” by John Hochella

The image on the cover of this morning’s order of service is from the 1939 film, The Wizard of Oz. Growing up in the 1960’s and 70’s, I looked forward to watching the annual television broadcast of the classic movie. The beginning of the movie, set on a Kansas farm, is shot in sepia tones. After the tornado whisks away Dorothy and her farmhouse, Dorothy opens the door to the magical Land of Oz, shot in full-blown Technicolor. It’s a striking transition, from the dark browns of Kansas to the vivid color of Oz. As a child, though, I missed the transformation because my family had a black-and-white television. I couldn’t see the Technicolor. I didn’t even know it was there.

What else is there in life that we don’t see or don’t understand? I think plenty! It’s part of the uncertainty that Rev. Jim VanderWeele talked about here last week. It’s the uncertainty that makes life both exhilarating and sometimes downright terrifying. But, if we, as humans, limited in time and space, could see All that Was, All that Is, and All that Will Be, we’d be overwhelmed and we’d have to hide our faces, like Moses. As written by James Weldon Johnson in God’s Trombones, Moses “saw no man” in the burning bush. It’s powerful, inspirational imagery.

Last year, in a lifespan faith development class led by our co-minister, Rev. Jennifer Ryu, we considered the theological question, “How do we know what we know?”. The big word for this branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge (the big word that I have trouble pronouncing!) is “epistemology.” The classical definition of *knowledge* since Plato is *justified true belief*. In other words, a piece of knowledge is a subjective personal belief that is also objectively true and can be explained, defined, or justified.

Here is a simple example of why justification matters: Let’s say a person has a disease and believes that he or she will recover. If the person actually recovers from the illness, then the belief turns out to be objectively true. But, if the person was not trained in medicine and did not have reasons A, B, and C that recovery from the disease would occur, then the belief of recovery would not technically be “knowledge.”

I’m intrigued by the concept of what we know and what we don’t know. Another story comes to mind. I once worked for a Japanese company, Canon. My Japanese director, Mr. Okabe (we called him Okabe-san), would usually start his weekly staff meetings with a thought-provoking introduction. One day Okabe-san took a balloon. He asked us to think about the volume of the balloon as representing what we know. He said the space around the balloon represented what we don’t know. As our knowledge grows, the balloon’s volume grows. Notice that as our knowledge grows, so does the surface area of the balloon, the portion exposed to the unknown. The lesson for me was that the more we learn, the more we realize what we don’t know.

As I mentioned before, the increasing awareness of the unknown can be awe-inspiring or scary, depending on your outlook. Some people feel more comfortable with knowing. Knowing reduces fear of uncertainty. Knowing (really, *believing* that you know) can provide “sheltering walls” and a feeling of safety.

Reducing incredible complexity toward simplicity is something that all of us do to function. Listening to the trombone or trumpet is an example. When the trombone plays a middle C, do we hear a sound, or do we think about the 6×10^{22} gas molecules vibrating and moving along the 125” inches of brass tubing? (Yes, that’s a six with twenty-two zeroes after it!) My point is that all of us have to simplify or *filter*, if you will. The filter reminds me of the veil worn by Moses mentioned in the reading from Second Corinthians. The veil was a reference to an Old Testament story where Moses wore a veil to cover his shining face after talking to God. But the writer of Second Corinthians also used “veil” as a symbol for misunderstanding.

Now I think that all of us humans are wearing some kind of veil. It’s either a filter or a misunderstanding device, or perhaps both, because we can’t see the “big picture” (and I mean the really big picture, like all the workings of the universe). But, I think religious fundamentalists find some security and less fear in “knowing” that the answers are in one place. Rules can reduce anxiety. *Fundamentalism* is belief in and strict adherence to a set of basic principles. Fundamentalism arose in the United States, starting among conservative Presbyterian academics and theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary in the early 1900’s. The movement’s purpose was to reaffirm orthodox Protestant Christianity and zealously defend it against the challenges of liberal theology and Darwinism. One of the tenets of the movement was the inerrancy of the Bible.

In *American Fascists, The Christian Right and the War on America*, author Chris Hedges argues that fundamentalists are “selective literalists.” Either the Bible is literally true and all its edicts must be obeyed, or it must be read in another way. He also states that the Christian Right is hijacking religious and political terminology. Those in the movement speak of “liberty,” but they do not mean the liberty to express divergent opinions, to respect other ways of believing and being, the liberty of individuals to seek and pursue their own goals and forms of happiness. Here is a passage from *America’s Providential History*, a standard textbook on American history used in many Christian schools:

The Bible reveals that “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Corinthians 3:17) ... When the Spirit of the Lord comes into a nation, that nation is liberated. The degree to which the Spirit of the Lord is infused into a society (through its people, laws and institutions) is the degree to which that society will experience liberty in every realm.

As a religious liberal, what kind of tolerance do I have for these beliefs? I could choose an indifferent kind of tolerance in which I separate myself from those with different views. But, it’s hard to separate myself from my next-door neighbor and some of the people I work with. More importantly, if my way of life or the rights of others are threatened, I think it’s time to speak up and engage. To engage the religious right, it

would be very helpful to know more about the Bible, not to mention I might find some timeless wisdom and means for spiritual growth.

In his book Understanding the Bible, An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals, John Buehrens, past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, writes that oppressive interpretations of the Bible do kill, literally. Today, many otherwise well-informed, intelligent people often speak as though the Bible says and means only what fundamentalists say that it says and means. He argues that we should not leave interpretations of the Bible solely to religious conservatives, and that we should not deprive ourselves of a rich source of spiritual sustenance. For those reasons, I'm eager to participate in the upcoming lifespan faith development course offered here called "Saving Jesus."

It's easy to see things in others, but not in ourselves. We, as religious liberals, have some fundamentalist tendencies too. Sometimes I think we carry the "black and white" thinking too far. Examples in my mind range from: should we clap or not clap during the worship services?, and should we *always* sound the gong before or after the prelude ?, *to* is it OK or not to have communal prayer during the worship service?, and is it OK or not to use the word "God" in our worship services?

It's the "all one way or another" that gets to me, polarities such as Republican / Democrat, liberal / conservative, infidel / blessed, and body / spirit. I think the key is to look for the colors in the spectrum, to try to see life in its wholeness. Sure, there is black and white in our world, but there is also a spectrum, infinitely rich in color. Let's open the door and see the Technicolor, and let's have a dialogue about what we see that includes listening.

May we hear our inner wisdom, continue our outward search for Truth, and engage our neighbors in a loving dialogue about the beautiful spectrum of life.

Blessed be and Amen.

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