

# Mythical Reading of Sacred Texts

## 18-19 November 2017

### A) THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF MYTHS

#### 01) 09.30 - Introduction

#### 02) 10.00 – Paintings and their “invisible” meaning made visible (30’)

How paintings may just represent appearances (like a photo) or express sthg deeper that is not visible. Vision beyond appearances.

**01a) Landscape – realist:** Canaletto (mid 18<sup>th</sup> cent.) is so precise (like a photograph) that his paintings were used to rebuild Warsaw after the war. Objective vision.

**01b) Symbolic:** Martini Annunciation (15<sup>th</sup> cent.) expresses a very special movement that represents an inner attitude. The painter proposes his own interpretation.

**01c) Conceptual-abstract:** Aboriginal water hole. The map as a representation of the links between people and the land and the spirits. A map of life.

**01d) Mythical:** Sheryl Davison. Toonku & Ngyardi. What does it represent for you?

Q: Open discussion – What are the differences between these paintings? See which ones express more, especially invisible truth. Try to express it with words.

#### 03) 10.30 – Hidden meaning: fairy tales, parables and Aboriginal stories (30’)

Most texts we read have a meaning that goes much beyond a direct rational understanding. We need to learn how to read them on different levels, not only as practical instructions. Most of the time, their meaning escapes our understanding because they try to describe a Reality that cannot be described. They take a mythical form. A myth is a story which may look very simple and factual but which tries to describe this Reality beyond meaning that one cannot define: the unfathomable Mystery of life. We need then to learn how to be receptive to this deeper meaning and not remain trapped in the very factual development of the story.

#### 03a) The ethical or pedagogical power of fairy tales by Bruno Bettelheim.

Grimm fairy tale: Hansel and Grethel as a representation of the path of natural growth (maturity). The home, the forest, the witch in this fairy tale represent symbolically courrant aspects of life children have to confront on the path of their natural growth (how to become grown up).

Q: Using this fairy tale, try to illustrate how much it is a guide for children’s experience.

**03b) Myths, parables in the Bible, Zen stories, etc.** Any spiritual teaching is full of stories that are much more than just about facts. They try to make us aware of a deeper meaning of life that is not evident when one just lives a very practical life. We need to learn how to see deeper and further than just appearances. We will look at this later through many examples.

**03c) Symbolic meaning of dreams.** When you look attentively at your own dreams you can identify their symbolical meaning and learn how to decipher them. In dreams there are like codes. For instance often the car represents our ego, the horse our energy, the bird our spirit, or sthg similar. This symbolism varies from one person to the next, from one dream to the other, but it reveals also some constant trends.

Q: Do you have an experience of meaningful dream that you wish to share now?

### **03d) How Aboriginal stories describe sthg one can observe geologically.**

The Southern Flood, that happened some 18'000 to 6'0000 years ago, has been registered in Aboriginal memory and is told as the Wardininji Dreaming; this is the story of what happened at that time and which has been passed down generations to describe a deep transformation of the land that truly happened. Read transcript from the DVD (First Footprints).

The map in Aboriginal paintings is much more than just a map, although it provides also vital information about the land, like for instance where one can find a waterhole. The link with the land tells us about our origin: the Dreaming is a myth that says the truth about who we are. Walking the path – along the song lines – is a spiritual experience about our own true nature.

## **11.00 - MORNING TEA**

### **04) 11.30 – The Blind heart / the Night of the Soul (60')**

True Intelligence is not an intelligence of the mind but of the heart; this means a deeper understanding and a perception of what is not directly visible. Our general state of blockage is powerful because we remain stuck in our beliefs in conventional wisdom. Our resistance to listen to the deeper meaning of things is a form of blind defence against the unknown: we prefer to be struggling and suffering in well-known mundane conditions than to risk discovering the truth about what is life; because it would then challenge the way we live, we think, we act. We prefer the certainty of suffering to the risk of happiness.

#### **04a) The Bhagavad Gita as the description of the spiritual struggle.**

The Bhagavad Gita is an epic song out of the Hindu tradition. It is a part of the long epic story of the Mahabharata (composed in the period from 4 BC to 4 AD). This great tale tells about the fight of two rival clans. It is in a way, if we compare it with our own tradition, a bit similar to the Iliad but the content has much more explicit spiritual significance.

Let's read an introduction by Fr Bede Griffiths who describes here the true sense of this war which is in fact a metaphor for the spiritual life and the meaningful transformation of our being on this path. We will read later an extract of the Bhagavad Gita. What Fr Bede describes here is precisely the topic of our workshop: the battle of the spiritual life.

Read Fr Bede.

#### **04b) Quran: the heart that is blind.**

Read the 3 texts. Compare the Jewish, the Christian and the Islamic texts.

It is important here to understand that the form of expression in Isaiah is a Hebraism that does not describe the lack of understanding as the direct consequence of having a blind heart but as if it were the purpose of God to block our hearts so that we are unable to understand what he tells us. But it is only a way to show how the former, the blockage, generates the latter, the lack of vision. The expression "lest", although it is expressed as an aim, describes how the lack of understanding is indeed the consequence (and not the aim) of the blockage of our heart. The two versions of Isaiah and Matthew differ in their expression because the first is marked by this Hebraism and the second is directly Greek: it says clearly that the lack of understanding is the consequence of the callousness of the heart.

Q: Do you see clearly this blindness of heart as sthg we experience all the time?

#### **04c) Doctrine or Mystery: The night of the soul.**

Read Sri Nisargadatta.

If I may try to translate in more mundane words, what Nisargadatta says is the following:

I live beyond beliefs or convictions. My life is pure experience of the Mystery of Life. I do not need to think about the Divine as separate from me, or of myself and who I am. I can accept to be nothing, it does not matter because I know I'm not the body or the mind; I'm pure perception and experience; therefore I am in constant bliss (a discrete joy). My life is driven by courage which is

provided to me by my fascination for life as a pure experience of being beyond all concepts and convictions.

These strong words mean that we have to leave behind everything we know (our beliefs, our representations, our identification with our body-mind-memory, etc.) and we have to plunge into the unknown, into the Mystery which looks like a dark night because we are like blind and can't hold to anything we know. Courage (or trust or faith) is therefore the energy that leads us to dare to delve into the unknown or into this dark night. The tradition has called this night the "deep night of the soul". It is where we are meant to go, all of us. This experience is not reserved to a few. It is accessible for all. It is our vocation to find our true nature, our true Self.

To be able to go there, we need to know two things:

- 1) first everybody has it already (the diamond in your pocket) and
- 2) we just need to learn how to recognise God, because our union with God is not as spectacular as we believe. It happens all the time but we generally do not recognise it as such.

It is why, for these two reasons, we have to learn from the teaching and the texts we read how to get to the deeper meaning and not be stopped by the literal understanding.

The 2 steps of our journey into the deep night of the soul are:

- 1) Detach from representations (about God and yourself).
- 2) Go into the night (the unknown – by faith – courage – where only life happens) and learn to recognise what you see: the discrete union with God which is not spectacular.

This "night of the soul" is indeed the leading thread of our workshop. We try to learn how to go beyond all concepts. We will come back to this "night of the soul" at the end of our workshop in more detail.

Q: How do you perceive these two steps in your life (detaching from representations and learning how to recognise the Ground of Being)? Are they known to you or not?

## **13.00 – LUNCH**

### **B) DEFINITIONS / DIFFERENCES**

#### **05) 14.30 – General guide: seven ways of reading or types of contents (50')**

Symbol, metaphor, myth: "Hidden" meaning beyond appearances or explainable. Mystery is unfathomable. First quick overview of these 7 ways or types.

##### **05a) Walking the way.**

**05b) Literal or historical:** instruction manual, historical story (interpretation). **Skip it!**

##### **05c) Ethical and spiritual instructions:**

1) The 10 Commands. 7 Don'ts and 3 Dos. The ethical approach is only a tiny part of the path; it can be a form of control by the institution as a reduction of the spiritual path to a few rules of conduct to be obeyed without intelligence. Q: How may we learn to go from a restrictive to a more creative attitude? 5 commands concerning our relationship with God and 5 with human beings. Q: And from strict ethics to contemplation?

2) Quran. The People of the Book are the Jews and the Christians.

3) Krishnamurti's comment. Q: What does this comment mean?

**05d) Symbolic (elements):** ox, ladder, forest, water, moon, etc. Q: What does each one of these elements represent symbolically? Add your own interpretation to the description given.

**05e) Metaphor-allegory:** parable, the sower. Q: Why does Jesus speak in parables? How do you receive this form of expression?

**05f) Mythical:** Oedipus and Prometheus. The myth tells the truth about life that can't be described by words. Q: Try to say what we learn about ourselves or other human beings or about a special quality of life that could not be well described with words? Try to see what opposes the different protagonists.

**05g) Poetic:** psalm. Q: What do these psalms evoke in you? What role does the poetic form play?

**05h) Teaching:** Chandogya Upanishad 8.1. Q: Compare with: "Our Father who art in Heaven".

**05i) Walking the path.**

### **06) 15.20 - One same text – many levels – a Jewish story (40')**

Ex.: Jacob's dream and his wrestle with the Angel. Q: Do the following types of reading of this text: 1) Historic (Bethel). 2) Ethical and spiritual instructions (relation to God, adoration, celebration). 3) Symbolic (ladder, heaven, earth, dawn, struggle, angel, hip, etc.). 4) Metaphor or parable (wrestle). 5) Myth (Self, dark night). 6) Poetic (speaks to the heart). 7) Teaching (conclusion). And finally: Walking the way (practice). In groups of 3, for 20'. Then 10' sharing.

## **16.00 – AFTERNOON TEA**

### **C) A FEW TEXTS FROM DIVERSE TRADITIONS**

#### **07) 16.30 – Simple words for a complex truth – An Amerindian teaching (15')**

Chief Seattle's talk to the US President Pierce. The words draw the picture. The meaning is beyond.

#### **08) 16.45 - Song Lines (60')**

Song lines are the veins of the earth.

Q: Look for a place on this land. Bring back a piece that expresses your inner state.

How do you experiment, while living here, this link with the Australian continent? In Australia the land is still powerful enough to be able to talk to us; it has not been tamed, especially in wild areas.

#### **09) 17.45 - Historical truth - A Christian story (45')**

A) Birth of Christ: symbols and their meaning in the message.

Q: What does the text say? Who are the shepherds? Notice the importance of words such as "see" and "hear". Describe the nature of God which is revealed in this text. Why is this a revelation?

B) Historic reality or not. Does it matter? Ex.: Hansel and Grethel, Oedipus, Jesus' birth.

Q: Compare: Events and change of consciousness. Has God changed? What changes through this event?

Is not Christmas' night another version of the night of the soul? When light breaks through.

Christmas is the Reality here and now, the diamond in our pocket. Union with God is now.

#### **10) 18.30 - Quran and Bible: same story – different messages (30')**

Joseph: compare Quran and Bible tales. Mary: ditto.

Q: What is the main difference between these two versions of the same story?

## 19.00 – DINNER

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## SUNDAY MORNING

### 07.30 – MEDITATION

### 08.00 – BREAKFAST

#### 11) 09.30 - Mystic and Poetry (30')

Rabindranath Tagore.

Contemplation is the field where we forge a true and personal relationship with God.

Q: How is poetry the support for this relationship? Does it enter the night?

#### 12) 10.00 - Many faces of God - A Hindu approach (60')

**A) Introduction** by Fr Bede Griffiths about the Upanishads and the Ground of Being in Hinduisim. Brahman, Atman, Purusha form the basic triad or threefold Reality. Yet there are many expressions of Brahman. The avatars or incarnation are Shiva and Vishnu or Krishna. And the many gods and goddesses of Hinduism are like the angels in Christianity: they are energies of God. The most primitive interpretation of this mythology has created many gods as the Egyptians, Greeks or Romans did in antiquity. Any religion is threatened by simplification. It becomes then idolatry. See this book as a popular presentation of Hinduism. People do the same in Christianity when they worship statues or saints as if they were gods.

**B) Hanuman** is the servant of Brahman (Ram).

Fr Le Saux used to say that the idolater is not the one who worships Hanuman (the monkey servant) or Ganesh (the god with the elephant's head) but the one who says: God does not look like a monkey or an elephant, because he is the one who has a preconceived image of God, i.e. a frozen representation of how God looks like.

Q: How do you react to this song? Can you see how it is a celebration of God, or is the image of the monkey too powerful? Of course it depends how it is done.

**C) Chandogya Upanishad** - 8.1 – as seen before – deepening.

Q: How can the infinite great universe fit into the smallest part, the small shrine in the form of a lotus flower.

**D) Bhagavad Gita** - chap. 10:1-11.

Q: How far is this teaching a guide to lead us into the night of the soul? Remember the battle is about the reconquest of being by the true Self, the chariot is the body, Arjuna is the Soul and the charioteer (Krishna) is the Spirit who drives the chariot.

In groups of 2. For 20'.

## 11.00 – MORNING TEA

#### 13) 11.30 - Breaking rationality - A Zen story, a Zen tale, a koan (60')

13a) **Zen story:** No water, no moon. Q: Can you explain what happens in this story?

**13b) The 10 Ox herding Pictures:** The search for the true Self. The path to and after enlightenment. Q: What is the meaning of this story? Try to make sense of these ten stages. How do they echo in your own life? In groups of 2, for 20’.

**13c) A koan:** Mu. To be processed individually. Follow the instructions given by Mumon.

#### **14) 12.30 – Transfiguration – Easter Morning (30’)**

This is about transformation of the person: what is the image of God in us? About Death and Resurrection. It happens here and now. Not in a future life.

I love this text because it shows the important role of women de facto in our society. Mary becomes the apostle to the apostles. Probably the pope should be indeed a woman if theologians had read the Gospel carefully!! And I love it also because it brings us much beyond any rational understanding. What happens truly? This is a mystery. Visibly resurrection does not consist in coming back into our old body (like into old trousers)! One gets reborn on another level. It is rather an inner transformation. Do you believe that we live in a form of double world with, on one hand, some material laws and, on the other hand, a dynamic of the Spirit that is free from material constraints? Two very different and probably antagonistic logics that yet combine without limits.

Q: What do you understand of this text? What do we learn here about our path? What do we perceive of what it is?

### **13.00 – LUNCH**

#### **15) 14.30 - The Dark Night of the Soul – St John of the Cross (45’)**

**15a) St John of the Cross** – Ascent to Mt Carmel, book1, chapter 2.

The 3 Nights of the soul. Let’s try to define these 3 nights in other words:

**1) Night of the senses:** become free of the “what do I get?” in order to be available for the “what is the meaning / mystery of life?” The night illustrates our resistance to be seduced by what has no value (illusion) as if we would not see it (night).

**2) Night of faith:** this is the night of the understanding, when we do not know where we go because we walk in an unknown world. We need faith / courage. We are guided day by day by our intuitions / listening to the Spirit. Faith is the trust that we are guided through a transformation of our being that brings accomplishment. Faith rises out of experience that tells us what is although we do not grasp clearly what it is. We leave behind all our preconceived ideas (night of the senses).

**3) Night of union:** As we do not know who God is (eternal mystery), we do not know anything about what is union with him. It has to be discovered day by day. Every experience is new. There is yet a certainty: it is here and now and we know that we experience it as soon as we learn to identify / recognise it. It is not sthg striking but sthg gentle, hardly perceivable.

Remember the quotation of Nisargadatta (04c). Just being as consciousness – no fear of being “nothing”. Courage to delve into life. This is the true union with God. Listening to what he is offering us all the time.

**Blindfold experience: Metaphor.** 1) Sitting as blind: the focus of attention is on what happens inside. 2) Walking: trust to be guided (spiritually and not through space). 3) Standing: touch of a light object. Learning to identify a discrete presence.

**15b) Wisdom.** The union with God is rather a quality than sthg that happens to us. A form of clear-sightedness as it is expressed in this text of Wisdom..

**15c) Faith and mystery.** The Ascension as the restoration of the Night after Revelation. Jesus present among human beings is a revelation of a presence, of immediacy, but he is also too visible. His visibility hides the mystery. “What you see is not what you get”. Therefore he has to disappear. He has to withdraw. This is the condition for us to be able to go into the dark night which is true revelation.

Q: How do you understand these three nights? Do they make sense in your life? Is this image of the night a help on your spiritual path? What is faith for you? Groups of 2. For 20’.

## **D) PRACTICE**

### **16) 15.15 - Write your own text: a story / a myth (60’)**

Write a text to describe a truth that can’t be explained in direct ways. Different themes:

- A) Our link to the Earth or Universe,
- B) Humility,
- C) Grace,
- D) Gratitude,
- E) Sign of contradiction.

### **16.15 AFTERNOON TEA**

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