

Life on This Side of the Stargate

“How a young minister rejected Fundamentalism and took a Leap of Faith into the Great Mystery of Life -- and how it has turned out”

OR

“A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Heaven” (with apologies to Sid Caesar).

Stargate SG-1 – The TV Show

I got the idea for this lesson from a recent episode of the SCI-FI Channel TV series "Stargate SG-1". Each week on "Stargate SG-1," the main characters jump thru the Stargate onto forbidden and distant planets, carrying all the ammo they can; they shoot anything that moves on these planets, then come running back thru the gate, shouting, "SHUT THE GATE!!! SHUT THE GATE!!!" as incoming explosions reverberate on the other side of the barely-closed gate. Then the General stands them at attention and tells them, "Good job!!! Stock up, and be ready to go back out at 0600 tomorrow morning!!!"

In the episode which prompted this lesson, the team had jumped to a distant planet, had been taken captive and been brainwashed of their memories. Yet somehow they were able to reform as a team, though they still had no memories of each other. Perhaps a “deeper wisdom” (the unconscious???) had brought them back together. There was a particularly deep sadness, a "pathos," that struck me about this episode -- more on this later.

The Stargate as a Symbol of Transformation

In thinking about the "Stargate," I have come to realize that it is, to use a Jungian term, a "symbol of transformation." Carl Jung, while studying schizophrenics in early 20th century Europe, noticed that almost all of them manifested certain symbols in their drawings, paintings, sketchings, etc: namely, triangles, circles, geometric shapes. Jung hypothesized that schizophrenics do not make the normal transitions of life as easily as do non-schizophrenics, and that they manifest these "signs" in their lives as they struggle to make significant transitions. It has always interested me that the symbol of the 1939 New York World's Fair was the "triangle and circle," symbolizing (perhaps) that the entire world was about to go thru one hell of a transition (namely, World War II).

Modern Western culture contains many such symbols of transformation. The "Stargate," for instance, is round, symbolizing eternity; cryptographic markings cover its outer surface, and can be read in either a clockwise or counter-clockwise direction (counter-clockwise symbolizes the descent into the unconscious).

Neo's Red or Blue Pills

The "red or blue pills" in the movie "The Matrix" is another symbol of transformation. Take the red pill, and you begin to see life as it really is; take the blue pill, and you sink back into blissful ignorance.

The Adventure of the Movie "The Poseidon Adventure"

Yet another symbol of transformation is the adventure demonstrated by the movie "The Poseidon Adventure." Stay where you are comfortable, and tell yourself that things aren't as bad as they seem (and eventually die), or move out (and upwards) into the Great Unknown.

Mr. Spock of the TV Show "Star Trek"

And, finally, there is the symbol of transformation personified by Mr. Spock of the TV show "Star Trek." Mr. Spock abandons years of effort spent in obtaining the religious discipline of "Kolinahr" because he senses "a consciousness of perfect logic" somewhere out there.

We will discuss all of these different symbols in a moment, but first I disclose some autobiographical information in order to show how this lesson applies to me as well as to you.

My Own Personal "Jump Through the Stargate"

Coasting at Flour Bluff High School

At 18, I was a senior at Flour Bluff High School, warming the bench of the varsity basketball team, playing on the golf team, and studying not at all, because I knew somehow that, despite my lack of playing time for the local high-school, I'd end up playing basketball in the NBA. This was 1972; the Vietnam War was winding down, and the UIL (University Interscholastic League) required high-school athletes to maintain a "C-" average in order to maintain their eligibility. They demanded a "C-" average, so I gave it to them: C-, right on the mark.

But I had a lot of fun taking the various aptitude and scholastic tests given to students in their senior year; it was fun because I enjoyed watching the faces of my teachers when they saw my scores. I made a 29.97 on the ACT test and received an "Honorable Mention" for my performance on the "National Merit Scholarship Test" (and the rumor was that I would have received one of those National Merit Scholarships, except they just couldn't bring themselves to give it to a guy with a "C-" average).

Accepting a Partial Academic Scholarship to a Fundamentalist College

The upshot of all this testing hoopla was that I was offered and accepted a partial academic scholarship to Freed-Hardeman College in Henderson, Tennessee.

Henderson, Tennessee is roughly 100 miles northeast of Memphis (coincidentally, this is the college attended by the young minister's wife who recently shot her husband to death in nearby Selmer, Tennessee). At this time (age 18), I was determined to become a history teacher and a basketball coach. I remember one of my basketball coaches laughing and telling me, "They'll make a Church of Christ minister out of you." And I remember laughing and responding "Not me." At age 18, if ignorance is bliss, I was very, very happy!!!

I Find Myself to be a Fundamentalist Minister With a Church in Appalachia

Well, at age 22, I found myself to be a Church of Christ minister with a church in Harlan County, Kentucky, deep in the heart of Appalachia. And just like the members of the Stargate SG-1 team who had been brainwashed and didn't remember who they were, I, too, knew that something had gone terribly wrong with my life, but wasn't at all sure as to how to fix it.

How did this happen to me??? Like most young people, I wanted to do what was right, and I was fed a line of goods from my fundamentalist teachers as to what was right. My professors said to me, "We can explain to you the meaning of life and your place in God's universe," to which I responded, "Well, I was kinda looking for something like that anyway!!!" So we were a happy match for a while, my fundamentalist professors and I. Yet, eventually, I concluded that Christian fundamentalism just doesn't make sense.

The Logical Flaws of Christian Fundamentalism – The Good News and the Bad News

Christian fundamentalism basically teaches that God is going to judge the world based on miracles which nobody living today has ever seen, and which can't be reproduced for purposes of verification. You either take their word for it, or you don't. If you don't believe in these miracles, God will burn your soul in hell forever.

This irrationality is brought to you by a God who loves you so much that He sent his only Son to die for you. The good news is that if you believe in his Son, God will give you eternal life; the bad news is that if you just can't believe that God is going to judge people's eternal souls based on miracles that nobody living today has ever seen, God will burn your soul forever in the lakes of hell. So much for God's love...

Which Unproveable Religion Will God Save???

Christian fundamentalists act like the Judgement Day is going to be one huge dice tournament, where God lines up all the devotees of the various unproveable religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, etc) into different groups, and then casts lots to see which group and its unproveable religion will be "saved" (thereby condemning all the rest to burn in hell forever). Interestingly enough, every time you talk to Christians about Judgement Day, they think that they'll be the ones who will win the "cosmic dice throw."

The Christians Need to Quit Wasting Our Time and Start Healing People

You may have noticed that I have a tendency to harp about unseen, unproveable miracles. I have a sister a year younger than myself who was born with a middling case of cerebral palsy due to difficulties during birth. A couple of years ago, I got into an argument with a fundamentalist Christian friend who was berating me because I didn't believe in Jesus or miracles. Long story short, I told her I'd give her a million bucks if she healed my sister who has cerebral palsy. Last time I checked, my sister still had cerebral palsy, and I still haven't had to pay out the million bucks. Christian churches are full of people who are desperate for the miracles that they hear so much about, but who receive none at all.

Memories of Appalachia

But back to Appalachia... I have so many memories of the year and a half that I spent there. I remember, for instance, standing on the hilltop where the church was located, listening to church bells, voices and the sound of dogs barking coming from 15, 20, 25 miles away down the "hollers". Sound travels down the hollers; it is both contained and preserved by the sides of the mountains, limited and yet propelled by them, washing down the lengths of the mountains like waves thru a narrow channel.

I also remember walking into a business meeting at the church on Sunday evening and being asked what I thought about working in the coal mines, thinking that it was an abstract question like "What do you think about dancing???" or some such, and not realizing the true intent of the question until a year and a half later, safely ensconced in my study in Memphis.

I Work on a Master's Degree in Theology in Memphis

In my continuing search for the truth of things, I left that church in Appalachia and moved to Memphis, Tennessee at the end of July, 1977 to further my education. Two weeks later, Elvis Presley was dead, and I've never felt so let down; "Elvis, Elvis, Elvis" was all my ex-wife and I heard when we moved in. I did, however, pick up a pretty good Elvis impersonation in the deal.

Four years later (May, 1981), I had the M. Th. degree, but also still had my killing doubts about Christianity. I thought about going on to work on a Doctorate, but I was finally concluding that no one but myself was going to be able to answer my questions. I was also beginning to realize that I had, in fact, already answered them, and that's why I was such a conflicted person.

What Do You Do When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough??? – St. Louis, Missouri

However, faced with the necessity of making a living, I took a church in St. Louis, Missouri (my father's home-town), tried to minister there in a conflicted, faithless condition, and proved once and for all to myself that I could never be a successful Christian minister. What I

found out in St. Louis was that, when you don't believe in what you're doing, they can't pay you enough.

I even had a minister's pass to get in free to the St. Louis Cardinal baseball games, but I was still desperately unhappy. The men of the church told me that I was the first minister they'd ever had where they could go to church, take their families home afterwards, change clothes, run over to Busch Memorial Stadium to the football game and sit down in their seats in time for the kickoff!!! I could have stayed there forever.

I Finally Jump Through The Stargate

But my health, my life and my sanity were falling to pieces. I didn't believe in what I was doing, and I was getting paid good money to say things from the pulpit that I knew weren't so. So at the age of 28, having studied to the point of having a Master's degree in Theology, having worked to the point of having acquired a church in St. Louis, Missouri, and being terminally unhappy, I took a huge leap of faith, and walked out the front door of the church, never to return. All that I took with me was a faith that God is not irrational, that he won't burn people's souls in hell forever based on miracles nobody living today has ever seen, and that he means for me to use my life for good purposes rather than to propagate irrationality.

You've all heard the sayings: "Every ending is a new beginning"; "Today is the first day of the rest of your life". Fact is, that day is not necessarily a good one. I had just quit one job and now needed to find another. I needed a way to make a living. I knew some people that I didn't think too highly of who were programming computers, and figured that, if they could make a living programming computers, I could, too.

Running BankOne's \$250-Billion-a-Day Wire-Transfer Systems

Long story short, twenty years after I left the ministry (1983 - 2003), I found myself part of a three-man team running BankOne's Domestic and International wire-transfer systems out of Columbus, Ohio to the tune of \$250-billion-a-day. I got there because I had previously run wire-transfer systems for First Union National Bank of Florida, Jacksonville, Florida; ABN/AMRO Bank, Chicago, Illinois; SunTrust Bank, Atlanta, Georgia, and others.

I must have been a pretty good computer programmer after all. There is much to tell from these years, but I will leave that for another time. However, I will share two great lines that come from running wire-transfer systems for major banks. The first refers to the vast sums of money that bankers and Federal Reserve Board governors deal with on a daily basis; I actually heard one of my bosses say one day, "A billion here and a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking about real money". The second is a truth that not many people learn: namely, that when you lose a billion dollars, people will get upset!!!

What Truths Have I Brought Down From The Mountaintop???

I suppose you could say that I've been to the mountaintop, both spiritually and professionally. What truths have I brought back???

I recall with laughter the hilarious scene from Mel Brooks' movie, "History of the World: Part I," where, as Moses, he stands on the mountaintop holding three tablets totaling fifteen commandments, and, as he begins to speak to the Israelites assembled below, accidentally drops one of the tablets and has to say "Ten, that's ten commandments!!!"

I also remember a cartoon which appeared in one of the first issues of the newspaper "USA Today." In the first pane of the cartoon, a man is walking up the mountainside toward Truth; in the second pane, having found Truth, the man is running like hell down the mountainside to get away from it. What truths have I brought back with me???

I am a Theist Who Believes in a Personal God

One of the things I have brought back down from the mountaintop is a belief in a personal God. I am a "theist," a person who believes in a personal God who is the Father of all the peoples of the world. Some of my faith can be proved, and some of it I believe because it comforts me to believe it. For instance, I think that the existence of God can be proved, but I probably can't prove that He/She hears my prayers or answers them. I'm actually a "Theistic Humanist," because not believing in any of the unproveable holy books of the world (The Bible, The New Testament, The Koran, The Vedas & Upanishads, etc), in my search for authority I then have to fall back on what's good for human beings, and I become by definition a humanist. There are some wonderful people in this church who do not agree with me about God's existence, people who have sustained and even saved this church on occasion, people who have concluded for (for instance) Atheism, Agnosticism, Deism, Paganism, etc.

I Believe That We Should be Careful With Our Truth

Another item that I have brought back down from the mountaintop is the realization that not everyone in the world is ready for the truth, whatever the truth may be. For instance, a huge proportion of the Roman Catholics in the world are very simple people who scratch a living out of the top six inches of the world's dirt. It is all they can do to survive day after day of backbreaking manual labor, and it is their simple, trusting Roman Catholic faith, with all of its frailties and absurdities, which gives them the strength to keep going. We would only hurt them by revealing the absurdity of their religion, for we would remove the last vestige of hope from their lives. Truly, a false hope is better than no hope at all.

I Know That I Can Make Mistakes

Still another item that I have brought down from the mountaintop is the knowledge that I am a flawed, imperfect person. My divorce showed me that I can make as big a mistake as anyone else. Three years after I so bravely left the fundamentalist ministry, in the middle of my second computer-programming job, I fell deeply in love with a coworker, left a perfectly good

wife and ended up getting divorced (even though I never touched the other woman physically). There is a Hindu tradition that states that if a holy man gets to feeling too proud of himself, the gods will send a temptress to seduce him, so that he might be humbled. Perhaps this is what Brahma, the head of the Hindu pantheon, decided to do to me. One of the lessons that we must learn as we travel the road of life is how to forgive ourselves when we mess up.

The First Main Point is: I Jumped Thru the Stargate and Made it!!!

But the main point of everything that I have been telling you over the last several minutes is that I JUMPED THRU THE STARGATE AND MADE IT!!! The life that I lead now is much better than the one I would have led had I stayed timidly on the other side.

The Second Main Point is: This Morning, Which Side of the Stargate are You on???

So the question is: This morning, which side of the Stargate are you on??? Some of us, like myself, have made jumps and have come out the better for them. Some of us are standing in front of the Stargate undecided, having not yet worked up the courage to jump. Jumping can be dangerous; nothing in life is guaranteed. Life brings us to some terrible decisions, decisions about careers, marriages, homes, even our faiths (or lack thereof). Yet I can truthfully tell you that the odds are that you can jump to a new and better life, because I've done it myself. Jumping is far better than continuing to live in a conflicted state in which you'll only continue to deteriorate.

The Third Main Point is: This Morning, This Entire Church is Standing in Front of the Stargate!!!

And you may not have realized it, but this morning this entire church stands in front of the Stargate -- we stand at the edge of the future. We've lost our good minister, Dr. David Owen, who has decided to return to Chicago to be a co-minister along with his fiancée. I didn't always agree with David's theology, but the things that impressed me about him were his friendliness, his acceptance, and his caring.

I don't know that I've ever appreciated a minister as quickly as I did David; he was a good minister, and I will miss him. But he has decided to move on, and we have been, to borrow the words of the fundamentalist author Tim LaHaye, LEFT BEHIND!!! We need to realize that David is gone and is not coming back, and that we need to keep moving forward into the future. I stand before you this morning as someone who has jumped thru the Stargate into the future and has found a better life on the other side. I have a high degree of confidence that this entire church can make the great leap of faith into the future, also.

Neo Tells Us: "I Can't Tell You That I Know the Future"...

Remember the "symbols of transformation" that we talked about at the beginning of the lesson??? Remember Neo (from the film "The Matrix")??? As we stand in front of the Stargate this morning, Neo says to us: "I can't tell you that I know the future. I'm not going to tell you that I know how this is going to end. But I can tell you how this is going to begin; right here, right now."

Gene Hackman Tells Us: We Have to Keep Moving Upward, Into the Future!!!

Remember Gene Hackman in the movie, "The Poseidon Adventure"??? As we stand in front of the Stargate this morning, Gene Hackman says to us: "We can't stay here in the comfort of the memory of David Owen. If we stay here, we die!!! We have to keep moving forward, upward!!!"

We Can't Stay Here in the Comfortable Past; We Have to Jump into the Unknown Future!!!

Gene Hackman was right. We can't stay here in the memory of the past; if we stay here, we'll die. We have to keep moving upward, away from the past, away from our memories, upward toward the future, upward toward the unknown. So this morning, as the lesson comes to an end, we're all going to jump thru the Stargate together. Take the hand of the person next to you (if you can't jump, grab someone's hand, and we'll pull you along). On the count of three, as a group we'll jump into the future, into the unknown, knowing that we can't stay here in the past, for if we stay here, we die...

SO ONE, TWO, THREE, JUMP!!!