

The Heyoka Going Against the Grain

By
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I chose today's message because I think it's a good way to introduce myself, and, I think, touches upon something most of us here probably share in common. As for me, I have to begin by admitting that I often do things, to be polite, "bass backwards." Several years ago, for instance, while taking a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, CPE for short, as part of my ministerial training, I ended up gravely offending just about everyone else in the class, including its facilitators, with what were practically the first words of substance out of my mouth. Each week during our group seminars together, a different student was assigned to present a verbatim—that is, an actual conversation we'd had during a pastoral encounter with a hospital patient or church member. The very first verbatim was given by a student-chaplain who received a phone call from a woman concerned about her brother who had suffered a heart attack. But she was mostly worried he might die and go to Hell because he had not been saved. She couldn't visit him herself because he was under heavy guard. For it turns out he was a felon, convicted of taking out a contract to have his ex-wife murdered.

During her conversation with him, the student chaplain explained, "I'm here because there's someone out there who cares an awful lot about you. Do you know who it is?"

"Yes," he replied, "My sister. She thinks I'm not saved, but I am. I believe Jesus is Lord, so I am saved. I know what the right the thing to do is, I just have trouble doing it."

After asking a few questions to make certain he had, indeed, accepted Jesus into his heart at some point during his life, the student said a prayer and departed.

Upon hearing this conversation, I was left dumbstruck, to say the least! I could not believe a man imprisoned for attempting to have his spouse murdered considered himself saved just because he held a certain belief; nor that anyone would miss the opportunity to discuss with him the necessary connection between faith and action, that genuine faith must be exemplified through our behavior, that faith is not something we hold, it's something we demonstrate. So I asked the presenter what I thought was a most obvious and appropriate question, "Who did this conversation help, and how?"

Perhaps my question should have been more calculated, given that I was the only non-Christian in the group, but, still, I could not have possibly expected the hostility and chaos that ensued. The student's mouth dropped open, as if she could not believe anyone would even ask such a question. When she finally managed to speak, rather than answering it, she asked one of her own, "Well, what would you have done?"

I was surprised and now sensitive that my question had shaken her, and tried to soften it a little by replying, "I'm just curious as to why you chose to present this particular conversation as an example of pastoral care, and how you think it was helpful?"

But this time all the other students in the room rushed to her defense by telling me just how inappropriate I was behaving. One, who was normally rather quiet and shy, erupted by confessing she had immediately experienced me as someone who is rude and arrogant. Before long the hospital's head chaplain and director of the CPE program chimed in by saying, "I don't know why you're even here. I think you should consider leaving."

And believe you me, at that point it took every fiber of my being not to get up and just run away! But instead, I replied, "I'm here because this is a necessary part of my ministerial training. I need to be here and choose to be here. I do not, however, wish my presence to be a hindrance to the group. So if you want me to leave, I will. But you're going to have to ask me to." I felt everyone in the room wanted me to go, but no one wanted to take responsibility for compelling me to do so. So I stayed, and ended up making it through the entire semester, despite the initial ruckus I had unintentionally provoked.

By the end of the course, however, things had turned around. My classmates had genuinely warmed up to me, so much so that the woman who had called me rude and arrogant, apologized before the entire group, saying, "I now realize you are one of the kindest and most compassionate men I've ever known." This was also when the assistant director of the CPE program, an American, with a Filipino mother and a Native American father, who was amazingly proficient in all three cultures, complimented me by saying, "Todd, you're a Heyoka, someone who, in Native American lore, lives life backwards by doing the opposite of everyone else."

This turned out to be much more than just a passing comment for me. It was a moment of clarity. It gave me a context for understanding my life and my ways. It explained why I have often felt so out of place and like I rarely fit in anywhere. He may have meant it only in reference to the fact that I ask questions when I'm not supposed to, or because I might sometimes appear rude and arrogant even though I'm really kind and compassionate. But I realized in that moment that I have been a Heyoka my entire backward life! This explains why I did so poorly during grade school yet love learning more than just about anything else. It explains how I can be a high school drop out, and yet have graduated from college with honors, going on to have earned a Masters and Doctorate. It explains why I had to leave seminary, renounce my faith, and stop pursuing the ministry, in order to become the minister I was meant to be. It explains why I always try to consider how the opposite of whatever I hear might also be true. It may even explain why, though I rarely eat breakfast in the morning, I always have a bowl of cereal before going to bed at night.

According to Lakota legend, the first Heyoka was a named *Eya*, after the West Wind, son of Tate, the Breath of Life. His people were suffering from plagues and starvation, and he knew the only being powerful enough to help turn things around was the great and terrifying Thunderbird. But none had ever encountered this creature and lived to tell the tale. It comes from a counterclockwise dimension, in which everything is the opposite of our own, and cannot be understood by ordinary people because it even speaks backwards. Those who merely catch a glimpse of it from a distance go mad and begin speaking backwards too. It is a being so horrifying that it almost defies description. Its formless body constantly billows and changes like passing clouds. It has claws, but no feet, wings, but no shoulders, and a loud thundering voice, but no throat. It shoots deadly thunderbolts from its eyes and has been known to swallow entire whales and ships in a single gulp.

But Eya was as desperate as he was brave, so he set out in search of the terrifying Thunderbird. And when he finally encounters it, after a long a perilous journey, he does not cower in fear, as we might expect, or even attempt to raise his useless weapons against it. Instead, he begins laughing and standing on his head and walking on his hands. “You pitiful thing,” he taunts, “your small voice frightens no one. Your weak eye can hurt nothing. Your beak and your teeth are useless. Your wings look like tattered rags. Your talons are like flimsy blades of grass. I’m embarrassed to be in your company. I am not afraid of you in the least!”

In our clockwise dimension we might expect Thunderbird to be so enraged by these insults that he squashes Eya like a bug, or zaps him dead with a lightning gaze. But because it comes from a backward Bizarro world, Thunderbird responds, “Your words have greatly pleased me, for I prefer always being addressed in terms opposite the intentions of those before me.” It then invites Eya to place his tipi next to its own lodge on Thunderbird Mountain. “Together with you, I will purify the world from all filthy things. We will sweep it and wash it and water the ground. We will cause all that grows from the ground to flourish and bear leaves, flowers and fruits. We will give nourishment to all that breathes and cause their growth. We will combat the *Unktehi* the monsters that defile the waters; the *Mini Watu* that cause things to stink; and *Gnaski* the demon who delights in filth. This has been my province from the beginning and now you will aid me and all that breathes will be grateful to us.”¹ From that point on, Eya became a Heyoka, and he begins talking backwards, walking backwards, cross-dressing, and even starts growing younger.

On the immediate surface this profound myth has a very poignant environmental message for us today—if we want to clean our water, and air, and soil, we must begin to do the opposite of what we have been doing. If we want Thunderbird to help us “sweep and wash and water the ground,” and, “cause all that grows from the ground to flourish and bear leaves, flowers and fruits,” we have to turn things around. Instead of continuing to use energy sources that fowl our nest, we must begin doing the opposite by using clean and renewable sources. But there

¹ Walker, James R., *Lakota Myth*, University of Nebraska Press, U.S., 1983, p. 320f.

are many other things that need turning around too. Instead of basing the success of our economy on how much we can earn, for instance, perhaps we should try basing it on how much we can save. Instead of accepting that ten percent of the world's population should own 85 percent of its wealth, while 4.5 billion people live on less than \$1500 a year, we should try the opposite. Instead of reducing the rights and wages of our public schoolteachers, while giving enormous tax breaks to the wealthiest Americans, not to mention multi-billion dollar corporations like GE, let's try raising teachers' salaries and hiring more of them, and let's require those who can most afford it, to pay their fair share too. Instead of legally calling corporations "persons," at the same time we're passing laws that dehumanize Latinos, Muslims, Gays and Lesbians, and so many others, let's try considering people persons, and passing laws to regulate corporations. Instead of spending trillions of dollars on endless and often unnecessary wars in distant lands, let's try investing just a few billion dollars right here at home to rebuild our failing infrastructure, and to invest in education and modern technologies. Instead of continuing to lock away more of our citizens than any country on Earth, let's try giving true freedom to everyone, no matter what their race, religion, or sexual orientation. Instead of basing our society on competing with our neighbors, let's try cooperating with them. Instead of waging war, let's wage peace. Instead burdening our children with red ink, let's give them a green future.

If insanity is, as Einstein said, doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, perhaps sanity is doing the opposite of what we've been doing. Perhaps sanity means becoming a Heyoka and doing things backwards for a change. Indeed, the most revolutionary figures in history have been Heyoka's because they did the opposite of what was expected. Gandhi was a Heyoka because he made salt and walked on the sidewalk, even though it was illegal for an Indian to do so. Rosa Parks was a Heyoka because she would not give up her seat to a white man, even though she was expected to. Martin Luther King was a Heyoka in countering immoral laws with civil disobedience, confronting threats with courage, and ultimately, facing death with nonviolence. These are real people who, in their own way, each bravely encountered the terrifying Thunderbird, befriended it, and helped us turn the world around.

Some of you may remember my favorite *Seinfeld* episode in which George, in a fit of frustration, admits, "that every decision I've ever made, in my entire life, has been wrong. My life is the complete opposite of everything I want it to be. Every instinct I have, in every aspect of life, be it something to wear, something to eat ... It's all been wrong."

Just then a waitress arrives to take his order. At first he asks for his usual, tuna on toast, coleslaw and a cup of coffee. But then, in a moment of inspiration and awakening, he changes his mind. "Wait a minute," he says, "I always have tuna on toast. Nothing's ever worked out for me with tuna on toast. I want the complete opposite of tuna on toast. Chicken salad, on rye, untoasted... and a cup of tea." Although Jerry argues that salmon is actually the opposite of tuna since salmon swims against the current

and tuna swims with it, George's new lunch choice marks a bold step toward transforming his entire life.

A few moments later he sees an attractive woman at a table across the room. His friends encourage him to go talk to her, but he argues that she's way out of his league. "Well here's your chance to try the opposite," Jerry argues, "Instead of tuna salad and being intimidated by women, chicken salad and going right up to them."

"Yes, I will do the opposite." George responds, "I used to sit here and do nothing, and regret it for the rest of the day, so now I will do the opposite, and I will do something!" He approaches the woman and says, "Excuse me, I couldn't help but notice that you were looking in my direction."

"Oh, yes I was," she replies, "you just ordered the same lunch as me."

George takes a deep breath and continues with the opposite of his usual approach, "My name is George. I'm unemployed and live with my parents."

The beautiful woman smiles, "I'm Victoria. Hi." Before long, Victoria's uncle helps George land a job with the New York Yankees. "This has been the dream of my life ever since I was a child," he says, "and it's all happening because I'm completely ignoring every urge towards common sense and good judgment I've ever had. This is no longer just some crazy notion... this is my religion!"

I know the feeling. Doing the opposite is my religion too. In fact, though, as I said earlier, I've often felt out of place and like I rarely fit in, the one place I have always felt at home is among other Unitarian Universalists. I think this is because all of us are Heyokas in our own way. For us, faith isn't about believing, but about doing. It's not about finding answers, but about asking questions. It's not about certainty, but mystery. It's not about conformity, but authenticity. It's not about worshipping one God, but about celebrating our own diversity. It's not about going to Heaven, but about creating Heaven here on Earth. It's not about requiring people to fit in, but encourage them to stand out, and, more importantly, to stand up against the injustices of this world. Throughout history, when others have vilified us as sympathizers, bleeding hearts, tree-huggers, nature lovers, N-lovers, queer lovers, and the like, we have continued to stand firmly on the side of love, without shame and without wavering. The world needs its Heyokas. It needs a little opposition, a little counterculture, to help turn things around, to turn them right-side-up by first making them upside down. The world needs Unitarian Universalism. It needs us, which is why I've chosen to pitch my tipi on Thunderbird Mountain ...right next to yours.