

Why Not Become Fire?
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I'll admit that to go from the story of the desert fathers to Frog and Toad is, well, a leap from the sublime to the ridiculous. But I think that Abba Lot and Toad have something in common. And, speaking for myself, I also feel I have something in common with both of them: We are all trying to get to a sense of completion by ticking off the tasks on our lists.

We can all relate to our friend Toad, who wakes up anxious about the many things he must accomplish in his day. Between getting dressed, eating breakfast, going to Frog's house, playing games with Frog and taking a nap and eating dinner, who has time for anything else?

Toad is so invested in his list and his schedule that he is paralyzed when Life's actual flow calls him away from it. He can't run after his list when the wind sweeps it away because that spontaneous response is not in his plan.

Frog, on the other hand, couldn't care less about what is on the list. He simply cares about his friend. His friend is upset, and so Frog responds from love, and what love calls for in that moment is to run after that list with every bit of strength and determination he has got. And when Toad sits down despondently, not knowing how to proceed without his list, Frog simply sits with him.

And as for Abba Lot, like Toad, he was also missing the forest for the trees (if one can apply such a metaphor to someone living in the desert). Abba Lot kept all his spiritual disciplines with rigor, and yet he was not fulfilled by them. He asked, "What else should I be doing?"

Abba Joseph didn't suggest to Abba Lot that if he worked a little harder at his practices, if he got a better meditation stool or added a particular new prayer to his already long list, he would find what he was seeking.

Like Brother Lot, our lives are full with our efforts to be good, to attend to the many needs of our families and our work lives, to be healthy. Perhaps we seek fulfillment with extracurricular activities, volunteering in the community, mind-body disciplines, or getting into hobbies that bring us pleasure.

But in all of this activity we are at risk of becoming strangely dissipated rather than more integrated. For some of us, although we strive to manage complex and rich lives, there can remain a longing for a simple wholeness within that ever eludes us.

Abba Joseph would not say to us, "Why don't you take up tai chi?" Or, "You should get this book by Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh" (so you can add it to the stack of books on your bedside table that you are hoping will give some insight into the riddle of fulfillment). Brother Abbot wouldn't say, "Have you considered getting a personal trainer? It really can make all the difference."

He would say, "Become fire!"

Maybe what we can hear in this is, "Give yourself to love." In the final quest for our deepest answers, what we seek is a way of being alive to life that comes from knowing, in our core, why we are living. It is a total qualitative shift.

There is a scene in the old Billy Crystal comedy "City Slickers." The movie is about an ordinary guy, a businessman, who's going through a midlife crisis. He's overwhelmed and beleaguered trying to meet his many responsibilities, and yet the core of his problem is that he's just very confused about his fundamental reason for being—the meaning of his life.

He and two of his buddies try to get some perspective on their problems by signing up for a vacation trip to a dude ranch and highly supervised cattle drive adventure from New Mexico to Colorado. They're going to escape their problems by pretending they're cowboys for two weeks.

At one point Billy Crystal's character, Mitch, is riding his horse alongside Curly, a real cowboy, and a mean and crusty one at that. Curly suffers no fools but, we discover, he actually has a Zen-like understanding of life.

As they're riding along, Curly listens to Mitch's kvetching and confusion about his existential dilemmas. After a long silence, Curly says: "You wanna know the secret of life?" He holds up his finger. "Just one thing." he says. "Well, what is it?" "Well, son, that's for you to figure out."

I share this story because it actually made a real impression on me, this one little scene in this silly movie. I want so much from this short life, and am driven by many longings, often conflicting longings. So, I have challenged myself with this koan, "One thing."

But how can any person with many commitments, responsibilities, and passions possibly choose one thing?

Perhaps the screenwriter had read some of the teachings of Sufi saint Jalaluddin Rumi, whom I so often turn to and quote. When I came upon this passage from Rumi a few years ago, it gave me another entrance into this riddle. Rumi writes:

"There is one thing in this world that you must never forget to do. If you forget everything else but not this, there's nothing to worry about; but if you remember everything else and forget this, then it is as if you had done nothing in your life.

It's as if a king has sent you to some country to do a task, and you perform a hundred other services, but not the one that you were sent to do. So human beings come to this world to do particular work. That work is the purpose, and each is specific to the person. If you don't do it, it's as if a priceless golden bowl were being used to cook turnips, when one filing from the bowl could buy a hundred suitable pots. It's like a knife of the finest tempering nailed into a wall to hang things on.

"You say, 'But look, I'm using the dagger. It's not lying idle.' You say, 'But I spend my energies on important enterprises. I study jurisprudence and philosophy and logic and astronomy and medicine and all the rest.'"

(The teacher goes on...)

"But consider why you do those things. They are all branches of yourself. Remember the deep root of your being, the presence of God within you. If you forget, you will be like the man who takes a precious dagger and hammers it into his kitchen wall for a peg to hold his dipper gourd. You'll be wasting your valuable keenness and ignoring your dignity and your purpose."

One thing.

Here at Theodore Parker Church we lead a rather complex community life. There is an amazing amount of effort that must be constantly given to sustaining the activities of community. Just creating Sunday morning—from the religious education program, with all its volunteers, to the music and service, the creation of the leaflet, to the coffee hour and cleanup—involves much planning, energy, and organizational thought and activity.

And then there is a great deal that goes on behind the scenes to keep everything going.

After church today, we will be holding a committee fair. Those who are not so familiar with our community can get a glimpse of what is involved in being a church.

I think on a communal level we need to test ourselves with these same koans, these same riddles—all of which point to clarity but don't give an answer.

All of these activities—as consuming and compelling and important as they are—can become a kind of thicket of trees that obscures the "one thing" that should be alive at our core. We can be like Toad, so absorbed in our list of tasks to be managed and completed that we miss the point. The point is not to cross off "go for walk with Frog" but to be with Frog, my dearest friend.

For Abbot Lot, the important thing is not the fasting itself, but to empty himself of distractions so that love can come in.

It's important that we have a great coffee hour with great food and fellowship—but is a chummy coffee hour where we can connect with friends our reason for being?

We have beautiful music, but is music our reason for being?

We strive to create an excellent religious education program, but is the program our reason for being?

These are all really important things, and they call for our effort (so please sign up for something at the committee fair).

But as Rumi says, "Consider why you do these things. They are all branches of your self. Remember the deep root of your being, the God within you." If the word God gets in your way, think "soul purpose." What is our one thing, the heart that pumps blood through all of our community's limbs?

"If you forget everything else, but remember this, there's nothing to worry about, but if you remember everything else, and forget this..."

What is the core purpose that, if we knew it and kept it before us in all the things we do, could light up this community like a beacon? Could change us into fire?

I could say, "Son, that's for you to figure out."

As I mentioned before, it seems impossible and perhaps even absurd to try to bring it all down to one thing, one mission, so to speak, whether we're talking a personal life or a collective life.

Knowing for myself that I simply could not choose between certain things in my own life, I tried to think underneath the activities, underneath the branches of myself. "There is one thing that you must never forget to do..." I let Rumi's words confront me.

For me, I believe that as I am facing my death, the question will be, "Was I awake to God in the creation?" To be awake, paying attention, alive to the Divinity as it manifests through all things in the world,

This is my one thing.

This will be, for me, what makes the difference between a life full of activities and a life of love and fire. I often forget, but still, it helps to know what one is trying to remember.

I could not possibly dare to suggest what your one thing should be—not to any individual.

And to be honest, I do not think, even as your minister, that it is for me to say what this congregation's heart purpose should be—although I believe it will have something to do with love. This church belongs to you, not to me. I will help you move toward the vision that we create together, but I cannot give you your vision, your mission, your purpose.

It may be impossible to arrive at one answer. But at this time in the community's life, I do believe that we should be striving for a deeper clarity. There is so much energy here, so much talent, so much passion and joy. What is the mission to which all this vitality can be given?

Please ask yourselves this. And talk with one another about it. And talk with me. Perhaps this can be a focusing riddle for us this year.

And maybe we will not and cannot come to a consensus about what our collective "one thing" might be.

But if each of us, within our own hearts and minds, seeks an answer to the question, "What is the deepest reason that this community exists?"—if we each take this riddle into ourselves and let it work on us, we will still become a people changed to fire.