



“Ten Thousand Words” by the Avett Brothers Bringing it All Back Home

From the message series *Songs of the Spirit*

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So this beautiful spring day, finally spring is here. Let's say later today, you go out, you take a walk with friends. You're enjoying the countryside. Just glorious. Having a good talk, a good walk. Everything is just wonderful. All of a sudden out of nowhere an arrow flies through the air and lands right in the middle of your thigh! Ouch. And as you go down to the ground you recognize it's actually worse than just the arrow flying through the air. It appears that the tip of the arrow, which is firmly embedded in your thigh has also been poisoned so you are really in jeopardy. And as your friends are all prepared to run away and ask – *[Laughter]* No, no. It's because they're concerned about you, not because they're running away. (Although maybe it says something about your friends if that was your first interpretation.) They're running away 'cause they want to go get medical help.

And you say, “No, no, no. Before we can treat this wound to get the poison out of me, I want to know who shot this arrow. I want to know their gender. I want to know where they grew up. I want to know how old they are. I want to know how young they are. I want to know all of these things.”

And before you can figure any of these things out, you die.

[Laughter]

Now this is a retelling of a very old story. It's from one of the Buddha's sermons in which he is answering a disgruntled follower; someone who is unhappy that the Buddha not enough specific answers about the deep metaphysical questions. What's the exact relationship between body and soul? Does the world go on forever? Is this world infinite? Are other worlds infinite?

The Buddha story was this. It is just like that person who gets shot from an arrow. Doesn't know where it comes from, and spends all their time wanting to identify “from where, who, why,” instead of doing the thing that should be done, which is actually taking out the freaking arrow.

He said in all our lives, and particular this is what this answer was in our spiritual and religious lives. There's a tendency to get lost sometimes in esoteric knowledge. The hidden knowledge, the metaphysical knowledge, none of which, if all traditions are honest, can be ever exactly known, and instead of getting lost in that search for that esoteric knowledge, to instead attend to real human life – real suffering, real difficulty, real capacity to awaken and to flourish. Whatever has come before and whatever will come after? Right here, right now, is what we can know most fully.

So today's song that begins this new series, it is about recognizing our human tendency to get lost in what we don't know. In the many, many, many words in our heads, under our beds, all around us, instead of turning to the people that might need us most. Sometimes especially when those people are ourselves.

This is the refrain all throughout the song:

*Ain't it like most people? I'm no different.
We love to talk on things we don't know about.*

Now I got to believe the Avett Brothers, the ones who sang this song originally, chose an intentional title. The ten thousand words. That ten thousand is a significant word about Taoism and Buddhism, ten thousand things that are just ancient shorthand for the whole variety of phenomenon throughout the entire universe. Everything that exists. The ten thousand things, they say.

That word "myriad," which means basically just "a lot," comes from the ancient Greek for ten thousand. Lost in the myriad, the cost of being lost in the myriad. The costs are immense. This song spells them out.

But we can learn to come home. We can learn to come right back home to our lives and pay attention. The Avett Brothers, in this song, describe a seeker and a traveler. Seeking and traveling are wonderful things. Many of us have come to WellSprings because we are seekers and travelers looking for a place where we really belong.

At this point, it's really important to listen to some of the wisdom of our spiritual ancestor Henry David Thoreau. He said, "We should come home from adventures and perils and discoveries every day with new experience and new character."

That last word is really important. We can accumulate through this life all kinds of wild experiences, and experience upon experience upon experience. But that last phrase, "and new character..."

Nothing is wrong with our travels and our seeking. There's so much right with our travels and our thinking. But the goal is not just to arrive or travel in style. The goal is to arrive and develop within ourselves deeper character so that whatever we are working on, on vacation, or parenting, or taking a break, whatever it is, we are knowing that our character is deepening, not lost in the worlds of words.

We hear that in the first verse in the song: “So many words.” Paralysis by analysis. I can’t tell you the number of people I’ve talked to over the years that say, “I really want a spiritual practice, but I keep reading until I find the right one.” That’s just not the way to do it. No information will ever give you a spiritual practice: “Ah ha! This is yours.” We live in an information-saturated age. There is so much wonderful about that. But the risk, the shadow side, is that we can just keep accumulating knowledge and accumulating knowledge, and just stay as unhappy as we always are.

The songwriter has so much knowledge, and yet he cannot describe even how to hold his hands. Like this? Is it like this? Is it like this? All these different ways. How do I do it? Pretty soon we’re giving hand signals for ourselves, and we don’t know which direction we’re going.

Keeping ourselves from simple presence. That’s the challenge with all the choices that we face. The cost even deepens in the song. He says,

I know you need me in the next room over, but I’m stuck in here all paralyzed.

All within himself. All not able to acknowledge the other lives that around him, and one life in particular that sounds like it’s in pain. In our inner and outward journeys, it is really all about how we are shaping our character, how we are growing those first and fine fruits of our lives.

This really hit home for me. I think I shared this with you before, but it just absolutely fits, so I had to share it again today.

It’s a story of about 11 months of ago, when I was coming off an eight-day silent retreat, just absolutely gorgeous and beautiful, deepening and challenging. The first four days of the retreat, I just wanted to flee, and in the final four days I didn’t ever want to go anywhere else. But finally, I had to come home. I *wanted* to come home. But I knew I wasn’t going to get six hours of meditation and two hours of yoga and three hours of walking meditation, and people weren’t going to serve me my meals in absolute silence at home anymore. That wasn’t going to be the way it was going to be.

The last thing we studied on the retreat from one of the teachers was about equanimity. Equanimity, which is the ability to be in the midst of our lives with a kind of coolness. It isn’t indifference. Just the ability to witness our lives. And I was born with about this much equanimity. [*Motions a tiny amount.*]

But I said, “I’m going to reenter my life from the non-anxious place.” I came back home. And my wife had had a miserable week. A difficult week at work. And for the second time in a row while I was gone, she had to put down one of our beloved pet bunnies. She had to do this on her own. Then to make it worse, something was going wrong with her car. So the first thing we had to do when I arrived home was to drive her car over.

I could see immediately that she really had a struggle that week. I was thinking, oh! The “why” is here! Eight days of silence! All my words will just be gold and flow from me!

I was trying to fix it. I was trying to solve it. I was trying to solve *her*. I was trying to come up with “the solution,” all of which was making the situation worse. Finally we just decided to leave home. She’ll drive her car over to the service station. I’ll drive my car, I’ll pick her up.

On the way I figured out, you know what? No. This is not equanimity. This is not the ability to be in the presence of another person’s struggling and suffering and *not* find the exact right thing so it all goes away, just so I can feel less anxious, and, of course, she can be in less pain.

She dropped her car off. She got into my car. I turned to her and said, “Listen, I know I was trying to give you the right thing before as I saw it. I was trying to come up with the right words. But the more I try and do that, the more it makes a bad situation worse for you and just increases the gulf between us. So I’m going to shut up and I’m going to be here, and I’m sorry you’re suffering.” And with that, those words? Tears on her side of the car. And we went on, and we had a good night. We reconnected.

Enlightenment has nothing to do with how much we know or how much we can control. Enlightenment is about our true, deep behavior of connecting to ourselves and to other lives in this life. There’s an old saying that, “If you really want to judge a saint as a saint, see how the saint treats their dog.” See how they treat the vulnerable life around them. There’s a version of this in just about every spiritual tradition that there is in the Christian scriptures – 1 Corinthians 13 – I’ve done it more than I care to acknowledge at so many weddings because it turned into saccharine love poetry, and that’s now really what Paul was talking about here. You know, love is patient; love is kind. Just wait a few years, folks... *[Laughter]* You know, don’t write a check your ass can’t cash there in a marriage.

But that’s the thing. Mature love is what Paul is really talking about. He said you can solve all mysteries and you can have all gifts of prophecy. You can see what’s coming up or what should come up. You can have all faith, but also he says, “If you don’t have love, none of that is worth anything at all.” None of it is worth anything at all. “It is worthless,” he says.

This past week, many of us became familiar with this man again even if we hadn’t seen him in a while – Roger Ebert, who grew up and grew mature.

This quote has been shared a lot. I’m going to share it right now, but it’s the same thing that I’ve been saying before. It’s all about how we treat ourselves and each other:

“Kindness covers all my political beliefs. No need to spell them out. I believe that if, at the end, according to our abilities, we have done

something to make others a little happier, and something to make ourselves a little happier, that is about the best we can do. To make others less happy is a crime. To make ourselves unhappy is where all crime starts. We must try to contribute joy to the world. That is true no matter what our problems, our health, our circumstances. We must try. I didn't always know this and am happy I lived long enough to find it out."

I didn't always know this, and I'm happy I lived long enough to find it out. So thank you, Mr. Ebert. You taught me how to watch movies, and you also taught us all a lot more than just that.

We hear the echoes in this song. It's kind of a young person's song; someone who's about achievement and making their way in the world, and they still have to come back home. They recognize that sometimes being out there with that public face, it doesn't match the face of those people who really know us. So this awareness dawns on the singer in this song. It talks about those good times: *those good times come with prices*. And sometimes people only want those good times, and they tell jokes at others' expense:

*At anyone's expense except their own
Would they laugh if they knew who paid?*

Years ago, I remember having an argument with a guy who was kind of a friend. We were watching a late-night show, and they made a joke about a politician who I couldn't stand, and I laughed. And he got mortally offended, like really indignant, and his big thing was, he didn't think I was respecting this person's authority. This person had authority. This person deserved respect, and when I think, actually, of my friend's argument right now I think it is like Cartman on his Big Wheel: "You will respect my authoritah!" Cartman playing the bigoted Southern lawman, "You will respect my authoritah!" That's kind of what my friend's argument came down to.

Here's the irony. This friend grew up and is now this amazing progressive spiritual activist. So, we all grow.

I think about this when I'm telling a joke. I think it's good guidance for all of us who tell jokes or like humor. If we're telling a joke about someone or some people who may have less power than us, who are vulnerable, we are likely turning them into an image of our own minds rather than accepting the reality of their lives by turning them into a punchline. For those of us who have power and construe in whatever way you understand it for your own life, sometimes it means taking a stand against those who are treating other people as punchlines.

A Facebook friend of mine, someone I really do respect, this past week wrote this: "When I pointed out to the men at the next table that they sounded like a couple of misogynistic pigs, I hadn't calculated how uncomfortable the awkward silence afterward would feel. I hope they're flying on the other airline."

To do this takes courage. But even more than courage, it takes humility. It means that we have to be concerned about how other people feel about us, more than just how our ego feels about us. We have to be willing to be uncomfortable. I've done this at times in my life, probably not nearly as much as I should have done, but I have. I have ended conversations, very often in the company of another white man, saying, "Nuh-uh. Uncool." I'm a redhead. I turn beet red when I get embarrassed. I mean, it *shows*. But that's the one way that I can say, "Do you know at whose expense you are making this joke? The words you use matter. The words we use matter."

This kind of humility? That is actual real strength that goes beyond our egos, our false face. Recognize it's not weakness, even if it makes us feel weak. It's part of what he's saying in the third stanza, the third verse in the song – being strong enough to question the false face:

The clothes I wore out there, I will not wear around you.

Maybe that's the clothes of the rock star. Or the clothes of the minister, or whatever your image is of yourself that you think you have to maintain. "The clothes I wore out there I cannot wear around you." That's wisdom coming home, saying, There's got to be something deeper than just our image, our persona of what we want to project or protect in this life.

And yet here – I love this in the song – yet the ego is starting up. Self-justifying.

Imagine yourself in this: You come home after a long day or a long trip. Or someone comes home to you, and it's been a long day for you, and you rush right into almost the kind of sounds that the songwriter makes. "They were questioning me."

*They'll be quick to point out all our shortcomings
and all the experts have had their doubts*

You can hear the self-justification in that. You can hear you saying to yourself. I can at least hear *myself* say that to my spouse or to a friend. Then it stops and goes right back into that chorus: "Ain't it like most people? I'm no different. We love to talk on things we don't know about," instead of launching into, "Oh, this is how I have to protect my ego."

We can ask a different question of ourselves and other people. How is it with you? How is it with your heart? What's going on? Treat others and treat life itself as a blessing inquiry and a blessed interest.

It's said that St. Francis of Assisi, his prayer, for hours he would say at night, these questions: "Who are you, God, and who am I?"

Who are you, God, and who am I? Now you might think this sounds like narcissism, but this is St. Francis of Assisi. His life was about service to the least of us, to the vulnerable, in seeing the “holy now” absolutely everywhere. This is what John Shelby Spong, the very progressive former Episcopal bishop of New York/New Jersey said: Prayer is preparation to lead a deep and connected life.

This is the connection between two of our core values: encouraging everyday spiritual practice, and living with integrity. Having the humility and vulnerability necessary so that we are able to make positive change. That’s what it is to cultivate the field of our own hearts, to take time to do that, and to know very often it does not happen simply by accident. It doesn’t happen by accident for me. I know that.

I think of St. Francis’ namesake, the Pope. I think of what appears to be his humility and my own. I love the symbolism of the actions he’s taken so far, but I don’t know the substance. A lot of my Facebook friends seem to really know the substance. “He is this.” Or “He is that.” I do know that when he washed the feet of female prisoners, he irked a lot of people. And I got a little bit of pleasure out of that.

[Laughter]

But it’s still just a symbol. I’ll judge him in time by his behavior to see if this foot-washing really changes the hostility we’ve seen from the Vatican to the American nuns who do the work in our country with, for, and on behalf of the least of these. Will the church start to soften its teaching and its harshness on the status of women and LGBT people?

I’m going to reserve judgment, because for a Unitarian Universalist minister to critique the Pope? *[Laughter]* Fish in a barrel. You all expect it out of me. Right?

For all of us, whatever our political disposition, whatever our spiritual aspirations, to learn to twist around, turn around that humility and train it on ourselves, and to know that as we move through this life, yes, we will make judgments, but to know that we all have that tendency to speak about things we do not truly know about, and to recognize there are costs to doing that ...

If we can commit to this path of humility, we can find that soul, that sense of soul that is bigger than any role. Bigger than any symbolism. Bigger than any outward sign of what we think our lives are, or what other people’s lives are or should be. We can get to that place. We can cultivate that place, which is really not a place that we reach. It’s a way of being each and every day.

It probably speaks to what drew many of you here into a congregation like WellSprings. So many of us our searching for an honest life. An authentic life. The life in which we’re not just putting up a false face that we’re projecting or protecting. That authentic life often comes in the form of an honest vulnerability about what we know and don’t know. We can live this way. We could recognize that the limits of our knowledge can become the very beginning of our loving, of our deep connecting with ourselves and with this life.

Enlightenment and awakening is not about how much we know. It's about how much we show and share our willingness to connect and to love.

Walt Whitman was the guy who wrote – or at least we stole it from him – the words of our mission, “Charged full with the charge of the soul.” He asked a question that I think is the question that's really what the song is all about:

Will the whole come back then?

Will the whole come back home?

Does all sit there with you, with the mystic unseen soul?

Can it come home?

We know so much. May we affirm here today that the goal of all our knowing is to connect ever more truly, more deeply and more lovingly with this life – our own lives and the lives of people around us. Amen, and may you live in blessing.

Let's pray together:

God of awakening hearts, may we be wise enough to recognize the necessary distinction between image and reality. Even if we are fearful, may we have that courage and humility necessary to go deeper into the very heart of our lives.

This is what courage means – to take, to give and to have heart. If we need heart, may we take it when we have hearts and we give it. May we be heart-full and wakening people.

Amen.