



## **Bob Dylan's "My Back Pages" Younger Than That Now**

From the message series *Songs of the Spirit*

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Between the ages of 6 and 14, my parents dragged me to just about every musical revival on Broadway. I didn't quite appreciate it at the time. *Oklahoma! The King and I, Carousel*, a whole bunch more. I do have to say they gave me some touchstones for cultural knowledge. Even though I do appreciate the musicals now, back then I could see a few glimmers.

Not too long ago we got the sad news that Jane Henson, who was married to Jim Henson and co-created the Muppets, died. I remember my favorite Muppets moment from *The Muppet Show*, 1980. This little creature showed up. A caterpillar in galoshes and a trench coat singing boldly, bravely, "You'll Never Walk Alone." It's from the end of *Carousel*, a stirring affirmation of hope.

I think the signature reason that a show like *South Park* is popular is not that it's crass and funny -- because sometimes it's crass and very funny, and sometimes it's crass and just offensive. I think the primary reason that it's so popular is that the two guys who are the driving force behind the show were fed (you can tell from the songs they write) a steady diet of musical theater when they were growing up. It's in their bones. As much as they can do R-rated, they also can do sweet and melodic and innocent. I think that's at the heart of so many musicals.

It's at the heart of one you might remember. I was forced to watch the movie of *Brigadoon* before I was forced to go see the play version of *Brigadoon*. *[shows photo]* This is Gene Kelly at the moment in the movie when he recognizes he has to leave the mythical land.

Just to fill you in on *Brigadoon* if you don't know too much about it. It is this town in the Scottish Highlands. To save itself from an ancient curse, everyone in that town goes to sleep. They wake up the next day and everything seems natural, but 100 years have passed.

Gene Kelly and his friend, actor Van Johnson, are traipsing through the countryside in Scotland and come upon the one day out of 100 years that Brigadoon is alive. And

because it's the way of fantastical stories, Gene falls in love and wants to stay. But him falling in love with a local creates problems. So against his better instincts, he leaves the one true love of his life.

Toward the end of the play, we see the Gene Kelly character back in the midst of an Upper East Side, New York City 1950s cocktail party. Everyone is drunk and self-important, and the ego is spread out all over the place, and he is completely miserable. And so, hoping against hope, he goes back to find the place he lost. Because this is a fantasy, true love conquers all. His true love wakes up in the middle of her 100 years sleep, Brigadoon materializes, and they all live happily ever after.

Brigadoon is in this way kind of like the Fountain of Youth, or like the Holy Grail, a number of mythological places that promise us not just limitless years but an open, full, connected heart and way to love.

Brigadoon, the Fountain of Youth, Holy Grail: The great mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote about the significance of places and quests like these in our lives. He wrote about the Grail:

"I can feel I'm in that Grail castle when I'm living with the people I love, doing what I love. I get that sense of being truly, deeply fulfilled. But by God I must tell you it doesn't take much to make me feel that I've lost the Grail, that it's gone totally away from me. One way for me to lose the Grail is to go to a cocktail party. That's my idea of not being with the Grail at all."

Now, I don't think he's saying there's any problem with parties or cocktail parties. I think what he is saying is that there are arenas in our life in which we are more likely to puff ourselves up. Encounter other people's egos and projections of self-importance. A sense that I'm conveying an image to the world. In those kinds of places, we lose connection with our heart. Recognize that we can turn toward deeper ways of connecting with our own heart's true calling -- with the Grail quest, if you will -- and in more profound ways with other people's lives as well.

That's what this song is about today, originally written by Bob Dylan in 1963, "My Back Pages." See, Bob Dylan was finding himself getting pigeonholed. He was the spokesperson. All the young folk singers looked up to him. He was the voice of a generation. Just imagine yourself, people are calling you the voice of a generation. He fled from that in terror. He didn't want to be the spokesperson. He didn't want to be one thing. He didn't want to be the new Woody Guthrie. He wanted to be himself.

This is where Bob Dylan the poet is actually a much better guy than Bob Dylan the person. Because Bob Dylan the person wrote a whole bunch of these songs. They're like a big F-U, a big kiss-off to the folk movement that wanted to claim him, even if he didn't want to be claimed by them. If you're a Dylan fan, you might know "Positively 4th Street," "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window," or "Restless Farewell." All these

songs like "My Back Pages" in which he tries to say, "Don't claim me. I want to be free." Bob Dylan the person is kind of angry, kind of embittered.

But in this song, we are invited not to angriness or bitterness but to that recurring refrain:

*Ah, but I was so much older then  
I'm younger than that now*

I'm younger than that now. Now, of course, we know that's a logical impossibility, right? I mean, we're getting older. I'm getting older as I stand here right now! But even if it's a logical impossibility in terms of our bodies, it is very much a soulful reality.

It's one that has spoken to me deeply because I was one of those kids (maybe you were as well) where people had this one phrase they told me a lot: "Ken, you're an old soul." I soaked it up! I couldn't get enough of it when people told me, "Ken, you're an old soul." I loved that! I wanted to be mature. I wanted to be older than my years. I wanted to be more knowing. I wanted to grow up as quickly as I could...

Until I realized that that was a double-edged sword of a compliment. Because it meant that outwardly I wanted to appear older. I wanted to appear more mature than I was. But inwardly, I was my own age. And protecting the mess that I was meant projecting a certain false reality of myself out into the world.

It's one of the reasons I took so early to drinking. This phrase, "Ah, but I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now," I know that more now than ever in the seven and a half years I have been sober. I am no longer questing for premature maturity, because premature maturity is not maturity. It's just putting on a false face. It's just putting a front out to the world, a superficial recognition of who we are.

This invitation to recognize that we can, in matters of hearts, in matters of the spirit, be "younger now" than we ever once were, is particularly important to those of us who are at midlife. Approaching it or already in it or maybe past this thing called midlife. This second half of life, some people like to say it starts around the age of 15. It actually starts around the age of 35 or 40 for most of us.

Of course, there are ways to have a silly midlife crisis, to recognize that we're growing older and we don't like it. Our bodies are starting to change and maybe to even decay a little bit. So we engage in all kind of things that protect the outward person. We just attend to the outward appearance of our lives. We buy things we can't afford. We have affairs that wreck our relationships. There's nothing wrong with attending to the outer person. It's just when we do it to the exclusion of the *inner* person, because that's truly what this second half of life is all about. It's recognizing that we have this deep invitation to not just pay attention to the outer presentation of the person or accomplishments --

what we know, our authority, the power we can wield -- but instead turn inward, into our lives and into our hearts.

Dr. Carl Jung, more than any other psychologist, knew the reality of the spiritual life even if you couldn't lay it on a slab, even if you couldn't lay it on the experiment table and take it apart. He said, "I have treated many hundreds of patients, among those in the second half of life." (That is to say, and you could disagree with this if you want, those that are over the age of 35.) "There has not been one whose problem in the last resort" was not that of finding a true spiritual outlook in life."

Dr. Jung said, "It is safe to say that every one of my second half of life patients that I worked with fell ill because he [or she] had lost that which all the living religions of every age have offered to their followers. And none of them have really healed who did not regain" (regain, an important word) a spiritual "outlook upon their life."

This invitation of the second half of life for those of us already in it, or for those of us approaching it, is to recognize that the true mastery of life is not the mastery of knowledge. It is not the expression of our authority. It is not the expression of our power over others. The true mastery of our lives comes in cultivating our capacity for insight, for a true, deep knowing of ourselves. That is not about finding the final truth about life. It is not about fixing, if we think we are broken. It is simply about cultivating that possibility, moment by moment, of generating an appreciative awareness of our lives.

It is about so much more than content. It is about so much more than knowing things. This is one of the classic mistakes that I see over and over again: People making the second half of life the accumulation of more and more and more knowledge. Or more possessions. Or more things! Will make them happy. That is not the invitation of the second half of life.

This is what Dylan, even at a tender age in his 20s, is talking about: the invitation to be younger than that now. *"I was so much older then, in the past, but we can be younger than that now."* We can enter this invitation to be younger now by embracing our unknowing, by embracing the things that we haven't figured out yet.

And not in a spirit of inquisition. There's a whole difference between *inquisition* (wanting to know, saying "I am owed this answer! I must know it or I will feel incomplete!") and a spirit of *inquisitiveness*.

When I think about inquisition in the presence of what we don't know, I think of this fella: Homer Simpson. After being at a chili cook-off, he eats the Mexican insanity pepper and heads off on a vision quest. He is guided, in the single best casting choice ever, by his spirit guide, a wolf with the voice of Johnny Cash.

Now Homer, not being very smart, or for that matter very wise, doesn't want to spend time on the vision quest. He wants to know where it ends. He wants to get to the destination. So he says angrily, "Look, Wolf, just give me some inner peace or I will

mop the floor with you!" It's that kind of attitude, that kind of attitude that says, "I have to know it now!" *That* is an inquisition of our lives.

The old phrase goes, "Curiosity killed the cat." That would be an inquisition as well. But there's a second half to that phrase: "Satisfaction brought him back." Satisfaction brought the cat back to life. That is inquiry as inquisitiveness, the yearning to know more about our lives simply because we yearn to be in touch. Not to, as is very often our cultural impulse, to take what we learn and ask ourselves the immediate next question: What will it get me? What can I apply this to? What can I learn from this? Who can I impress with this? But to say simply: learning and knowing and unknowing is its own reward.

I do not have this mastered. I know what it's like to start to feel the hair recede up here. That's why I wear it down here like this, to cover it up. I'm vain. The knees hurt or the skin dries out. We start to see wrinkles. Or we are so vain we won't get ourselves bifocals, so we have to look down at the page like this because we can't possibly... you know. Eventually I'll admit that my eyes are losing and get bifocals.

But in the midst of our bodily changes, knowing that yes, in some ways we are getting older, we can maintain that heart-ful capacity to be younger than we once were, to keep the quest in the middle of our questions.

I remember the moment, one of the most important ones in my life, when I told the rabbi who had Bar Mitzvahed me and Bat Mitzvahed my sister and buried my mother, that I was leaving Judaism to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. Perhaps because he had no idea what to say -- he had this big, bushy, rabbinical beard even for a reform rabbi -- he kind of stroked it and said, "Well, Kenny..." (Only person who ever called me that, or at least I know of that I liked.) "For you, Kenny, the only tragedy would be not to quest." Wow, how gracious of him.

By the way, those are the last words he ever said to me. He shunned me, literally shunned me, after that. Stopped speaking to me. I met him years later. He shook my hand. He had no recognition, or portrayed no recognition, or conveyed no recognition of who I was. It took me years to get over that.

But I have now. I recognize the gift he gave me. In the midst of our questions about ourselves, maintain the quest, the quest to be deeply in touch with our lives. Not to turn everything into learning that we can just make a means to some other end.

I like to keep my theology really simple. Theology can become so abstract. The best theology I ever read was poetry. I've read a lot of theology in my life and rarely has it fed my heart or fed my soul.

That is one of the reasons that my favorite theology, which literally means "God talk," comes from the Buddhist tradition in which they don't talk about God that much.

Thich Nhat Hanh says the concept of God can keep us from touching the God of non-fear, wisdom and love. Our ideas about ourselves, our ideas about life, our ideas about spirituality can keep us from getting to the very heart of wholeness that so many of us seek.

This is why the most important line in the song "My Back Pages" is this:

*Yes, my guard stood hard when abstract threats  
Too noble to neglect  
Deceived me into thinking  
I had something to protect  
Good and bad, I define these terms  
Quite clear, no doubt, somehow  
Ah, but I was so much older then  
I'm younger than that now*

I love that phrase: "Deceived me into thinking I had something to protect." This is the ego, wanting us to pay the Ego Protection Racket.

What are we protecting ourselves against? The feeling that the ego is threatened. And if the ego gets threatened, do you know what it wants? It wants more payment. Ego Protection Racket shows up in our life when we are afraid to show to anyone what's honestly going on with us. Ego Protection Racket shows up when we have never, or at least not for a very long time, answered honestly that question, "How are you doing?" And you just by rote say, "I'm fine," even when your heart is breaking. We don't make inquiry with other people, asking them how they are truly doing.

Joseph Campbell, the great mythologist, his favorite story in the Grail is about Parsifal. He is a young knight who is trained to be strong, as a young knight is, and goes off on that quest for a Grail, probably thinking about the riches it will get him. He comes upon this land, this ancient, old, dying land. At the center of this ancient, old, dying land is a king in the middle of the castle who just gets sicker and sicker and sicker, and yet never dies. Everything around this king is withering.

Young Parsifal, even though he wants to ask, "How is it with you?" ... he doesn't. Because that's not what knights do. Knights put up the veneer of invulnerability. So he heads off on his quest. This being a mythological story, he encounters difficulty after difficulty after difficulty. Finally he finds himself back in the castle with that king and he asks the question that he should have the first time. He asks, "King, what ails you?" And with that, that one little question, the king's color comes back into his face and he springs to life and the whole kingdom is alive once again.

This is "younger than that now." This is what happens when we refuse to pay the Ego Protection Racket, and we don't hoard or waste our lives, but rather invest ourselves fully with the people we love, doing what feeds the soul. This is what makes new life again, whether we are incredibly happy or whether we are incredibly sad. This is not

about reading someplace in which we are untroubled by the world. That is not "younger than that now." Sometimes it means delving into the problems of our own hearts and the problems of our own worlds and the sadness.

There's a Zen story from a Zen master, Shaku Soen, who is said to be a wise old man. One day Soen is walking through a village in the countryside. He hears through one of the huts in the village the sound of weeping and wailing and sadness and mourning. Shaku Soen surveys this scene, sits down in the middle of the weeping, and starts to sob himself.

Now, one of the people beholding this scene is shocked: "But Shaku Soen! You are a Zen master! You are supposed to be beyond this!" And Shaku Soen, still talking through his sobbing, said, "It is this, my tears, that puts me beyond such things."

He's willing to enter into life where life touches him. That is the only way that any of us can make any so-called "progress" or real growth in this life. And by the way, the same exact lesson goes for joy. It means recognizing when we can put down our pre-determined plans and allow life to touch us.

Not too long ago, I was in a Starbucks. There was a guy across the restaurant from me. I turned my attention on him. It wasn't an accident I trained my attention on him: He was reading Thomas Merton. If you want to get my attention, read a mystic progressive monk who is really interested in the bridges between East and West and Zen Buddhism and mystical Catholicism. Read that in public, and you will draw my attention right away.

But here's the thing. What really drew my attention was not ultimately that he was reading Thomas Merton. It was this: Trying not to stare, I recognized that he put his book down because on the table directly opposite him, over a mom's shoulder was a baby. The old Thomas Merton reader started to play peek-a-boo. He was younger than that now. We all can be younger than that now, and allow life to flow toward us and out from within us when we put our books, and more importantly our guards, down.

I want to close with this from William Ellery Channing, who's one of the brightest lights in our wonderful Unitarian Universalist tradition. Too often this is understood intellectually. I don't mean these words in an intellectual understanding; I mean them in the "younger than that now" understanding. He says, "I call that mind free, I call that mind --" and I would say and add heart -- "I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love and so wherever they are seen sympathizes with suffering and delights in virtue. I call that mind and heart free which opens itself to light from wherever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven."

So today, I hope you encounter one thing that you are unsure of. I hope you encounter an experience that you can't immediately say, "I know the meaning of this," that you can engage your unknowing with a spirit of inquisitiveness. Get in touch with what unknowing feels like to you. Open up the heart and ask yourself, "Maybe, just maybe

that this is what an angelic presence really feels like." May you be ripe for unknowing this day. And may you be younger at the end of this day, than when this day began.

Amen, and may you live in blessing. Let's pray together:

Oh divine invitation into the flow of life, into that only slightly hidden heart of wholeness that is offered for each and every one of us, may we recognize that true flourishing comes not in the mastery of power, of our ability to control, but instead the true mastery of life comes in our ability -- like seed into flower -- to open, to flourish, and to grow into the maturity that is ours that knows itself not as oldness or finished-ness, but as the ripe and full fruit of being in the presence of our lives as our lives are happening.

Amen.