

ON THE EDGE OF THE INSIDE: THE PROPHETIC POSITION

4th Core Principle: Practical truth is more likely found at the bottom and the edges than at the top or the center of most groups, institutions, and cultures. (perspective)

One is struck in the study of saints, angels, and gods by a pattern that seems quaint and harmless, yet it is so common that I know there must be a deeper meaning. There always seem to be guardians and spirits of doors, bridges, crossovers, exits, and entranceways. I saw it all over Asia, read about in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and am familiar with it in Greek mythology, with guardian angels, and with Catholic saints like St. John Nepomuk (Why do we need a patron of bridges?), St. Christopher (ferry drivers), and even St. Peter with his keys. What is going on here?

Ancients knew that you need guidance, patronage, and protection as you move from one place or state to another, whenever you cross a bridge, as it were. You had better know what you are doing when you leave one group or place to join another. There are boundary issues that must be dealt with, dues and respects that must be paid, and you better not enter or leave anything until you know what you are doing. They seem to be saying, “Don’t move your boundary markers before you know the price and you have the right inspiration.” Even Charon who ferried the dead Greeks across the River Styx into Hades, would not do it unless the dead had been properly buried and they carried his payment in their mouths.

The edge of things is a liminal space—a very sacred place where guardian angels are especially available and needed. The edge is a holy place or, as the Celts called it, “a thin place” and you have to be taught how to live there. To take your position on the spiritual edge of things is to learn how to move safely in and out, back and forth, across and return. It is a prophetic position, not a rebellious or antisocial one. *When you live on the edge of anything, with respect and honor (and this is crucial!), you are in a very auspicious and advantageous position.* You are free from its central seductions, but also free to hear its core message in very new and creative ways. When you are at the center of something, you usually confuse the essentials with the non-essentials, and get tied down by trivia, loyalty tests, and job security. Not much truth can happen there.

To live *on the edge of the inside* is different than being an insider, a “company man,” or a dues paying member. Yes, you have learned the rules and you understand and honor the system as far as it goes, but you do not need to protect it, defend it, or promote it. It has served its initial and helpful function. You have learned the rules well enough to know how to “break the rules properly” which is not really to break them at all, but to find their true purpose: “not to abolish the law but to complete it” as Jesus rightly puts it (Matthew 5:17). A doorkeeper must love both the inside and the outside of his or her group, and know how to move between these two loves.

I am convinced that when Jesus sent his first disciples on the road to preach to “all the nations” (Matthew 28:19 and Luke 24:47) and to “all creation” (Mark 16:15), he was also training them to risk leaving their own security systems and yet to be gatekeepers for them. He told them to leave the home office and connect with other worlds. This becomes even clearer in his instruction for them “not to take any baggage” (Mark 6:8) and to submit to the hospitality and even the hostility of others (Mark 6:10-11). Jesus says the same of himself in John’s Gospel (10:7) where he calls himself “the gate” where people “will go freely in and out, and be sure of finding pasture” (10:9). What an amazing permission! He sees himself more as a place of entrance and exit than a place of settlement. Funny that we always noticed the “in” but never the “out”! *There is a place and time for being outside, or you never really understand or appreciate the inside.* A gatekeeper stewards the doorway in both directions, and knows the right motivation and timing for both. Like a good shepherd, s/he leads to the best pasture at the best time.

I remember when a former bishop of Colorado Springs told me: “Many of the best Catholics in my diocese left the church for a while—and then came back for adult and right reasons.” One does not hear that kind of wisdom much anymore. Today it is all about being a consummate insider, which now is called “orthodoxy.” Jesus clearly was much more concerned with journey, integrity, and what we would call “ortho-praxy” (our 8th principle of practice over theory) more than mere correct ideas or belonging to the correct group.

Jesus was not teaching or maintaining any purity system (which is to say a “belonging system”); but Jesus used everything, even people’s mistakes/“impurity,” to bring them to God! That’s good news for everybody, if

they are honest. He was into a process of transformation more than a belonging system. For example, he says lovingly to an inquisitive scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34)—affirming his particular stage on the journey, without telling him that he must travel all the way. He wanted searchers more than settlers, prophets more than priests, honest journeyers more than gatherings of the so called healthy. He had been taught well by his own Jewish exodus and exile.

All of these situations are describing the unique and rare position of a Biblical prophet—he or she is always on the edge of the inside. Not an outsider throwing rocks, not a comfortable insider who defends the status quo, but one who lives precariously with two perspectives held tightly together—the faithful insider and the critical outsider at the same time. Not ensconced safely inside, but not so far outside as to lose compassion or understanding. Like a carpenter’s level, the prophet has to balance the small bubble in the glass between here and there, between yes and no, between loyalty and critique. The prophet must hold these perspectives in a loving and necessary creative tension. It is a unique kind of seeing and living, which will largely leave the prophet with “nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58) while easily meriting the “hatred of all”—who have invariably taken sides in opposing groups (Luke 21:16-17). The prophet speaks for God, and almost no one else, it seems.

People hiding inside of belonging systems are very threatened by those who are not within that group. They are threatened by anyone who has found their citizenship in places they cannot control. Matthew’s Gospel refers to this larger place as “the kingdom of heaven.” When one has found their treasure elsewhere, and is utterly grounded in the “passion” and “pathos” (to use Walter Brueggemann’s magnificent words) of a transcendent God, they are both indestructible and uncontrollable by worldly systems. Without it, they will seek their treasure and payoffs inside of each and every passing kingdom. We have let self-centered opportunism pass for love of God for too many centuries. Seeking a permanent reward is not the same as the search for God.

If you look at some who have served the prophetic role in modern times, like Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, John XXIII, Simone Weil, and Oscar Romero, you will notice that they all hold this exact position on the edge of the inside. They tend to be, each in their own way, orthodox, conservative, traditional clergy, intellectuals, believers, but that very authentic inner experience and membership allows them to utterly critique the systems that they are a part of. You might say that their enlightened actions clarified what our mere belief systems really mean. These prophets critiqued Christianity by the very values that they learned from Christianity. Every one of these men and women was marginalized, fought, excluded, persecuted, or even killed by the illusions that they exposed and the systems they tried to reform. It is the structural fate of a prophet (Matthew 23:29-36). You can only truly unlock systems from inside, but then you are invariably locked out.

When you live on the edge of the inside, you will almost wish you were outside. Then you are merely an enemy, a pagan, a persona non grata, and can largely be ignored, written-off, or even consider yourself martyred and special. But if you are both inside and outside, you are an ultimate threat, a possible reformer, and a lasting invitation to a much larger world.