

January 15, 2023
"Empathy, Intuition and Opacity"
Psalm 40:1-11 / John 1:29-42
Lesley Curtis

"The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything. God is the ground, the substance, the teaching, the teacher, the purpose, and the reward for which every soul labors."
- Julian of Norwich

"Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place."
- Zora Neale Hurston

"True comprehension comes from a focus on the texture of the weave rather than the nature of its parts."
- Edouard Glissant

Good morning. I'm very happy to be here today. For those of you who don't know me, I am a North Carolina native with a Ph.D. in literature and the history of abolitionist movements from Duke, where I met my husband, who studies race and the Middle Ages. Our daughter is eight.

I'm a rebellious leftie do-gooder raised by Reagan Republicans. I work today as a coach and consultant helping organizations build equity and promote antiracism. So when I write sermons for Calvary, I often rely on my intellectual or professional experience, trying to connect it to one of the Biblical passages for the day. This week, though, it wasn't a text from the Lectionary that inspired me, it was Pastor Tim's sermon from last week.

Here is one of the things he said (which I asked him to share with me):

"We know from our reading that Herod asks (the magi) to return to him after they find Jesus, so they can tell him where he is. We don't know, and THEY don't know at that point, that Herod actually intends to kill him, and so warned in a dream, a DREAM, they don't go back to Herod. They don't go back the way they came. They go by another road. The road less traveled. The road that LITERALLY changes the narrative."

I want to talk to you today about changing the narrative. About dreams and intuition. And the way that opacity – or allowing something to be condensed and not completely understood – motivates the work that I do.

I'd like to start off by saying that I do have a very intellectual, scientific training, and I also work in a more ephemeral space of interconnectedness, feelings, and intuition. When Pastor Tim mentioned that the magi knew to do something because of a dream, that they turned intuition into reality – a positive reality that ultimately protected the baby Jesus – I thought about this tension. It reminded me of a Netflix documentary on dreams that I saw a few months ago. They interviewed psychologists and neurologists about what dreams are, what they've been able to study, and how we know so much more now about them because of brain scans and other advanced technology. They spoke, condescendingly, about old ideas that the gods spoke to us in our dreams. The message is that science, so the thinking goes, has taken us a long way into understanding what is *really* going on – the blood vessels, and the neurons, REM, etc. We get so caught up in the details that there's no room for stories like that of the magi who knew what to do based on dream, on intuition, on some spiritual connection.

The story, or so it goes, is that we used to cook up answers to the way the world works, often talking about God when a true scientific answer didn't present itself. But now, we're so much more knowledgeable, so we don't do such things.

This story of eternal progress and the way we connect it to scientific discovery is so fundamental to our Western white-supremacist colonial worldview that we don't question it. And this is where having a Ph.D. in Caribbean literature is pretty useful. I started today off with a quote by Edouard Glissant, a Martinican philosopher whom I adore.

"True comprehension comes from a focus on the texture of the weave rather than the nature of its parts."

He invites us to stop trying to pull everything apart into its tiniest details. This is, he argues, almost like a European compulsion. Driven by the idea that dismantling is what it means

to understand. Glissant asks us to reverse this – to look instead at the weave, the way it all connects together, in order to understand the way the world works. It doesn't mean, at all, that there's no value in our current methods of scientific inquiry. What it does mean is not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Dreams and a trusting of intuition led the magi away from Herod. We don't need to find the neuron in their brains that made it happen in order to trust that it did.

This is where I like to talk about being an empath. What I mean by this is that I tend to get a lot of information about other people's stuff –and it comes in viscerally, often without my conscious knowledge. For a long time, I tried to fight it or never really talked about it, but in the past couple years, I've embraced it and am learning to work with it. It's my proof of interconnectedness.

With my clients, I like to describe humans as a huge forest of trees. There's a root system (Glissant calls this the rhizome) that connects all of us. As an empath, I sometimes focus my attention down in the root system and forget that I'm a tree. Thanks to methods of meditation and visualization, I feel more in control of this now. I can just take something in as information rather than feeling it in my body. And I can pick and choose what information to take in.

But, for a while, it was this kind of weird party trick that I did. One of the most common things that happens to me as an empath is that I know something about other people's physical pain. For example, my colleague a few years ago had hip surgery. I asked him which hip, but before he could answer, I felt a sensation in my right side, so I knew it was his right hip before he said it. This happened to me when my cousin talked about her ACL tear, when Cord told me about his boss's broken toe, when my aunt broke her arm. The list goes on and on.

As you might imagine, getting this amount of information about people all day long is not always pleasant, and for those who live in a world where it's not believed or shunned, some people might even feel crazy or ashamed. Now, I just work with it and I feel gratitude. There is something out there – some level of interconnectedness that is vast and amazing. What I've learned to do is accept and appreciate the connections,

taking things on as information rather than as some sensation that is about me or that requires any action on my part. For me, it's simply a reminder that we are all threads in a giant tapestry. And, I hear Glissant in my head – the real understanding is about the texture of the weave. Being an empath is to have a certain type of direct experience of intuition, of the connectedness of all human beings – and there is also absolutely no scientific means by which I could prove that any of my experience is true.

But, to get back to Pastor Tim's lovely invitation to think about the way that a dream changed the narrative. Accepting my experience as an empath – engaging with it, and working with it – has helped me validate this experience for others, and work with intuition on a whole new level. I have two stories to share about this.

The first dates back to this spring when I was visiting some friends in New Haven, Connecticut. It's a city with a lot of people experiencing homelessness, so it's pretty common to have people ask you for money. When I'm with London, I like to give her a dollar and have her hand it to the person asking. So, we pulled up in a parking lot and I just had a feeling that someone would ask. I took a bill out and put it in my pocket. We went into the store, no one asked, we bought what we needed, we returned to the car, I pulled the stuff out of the cart – and still no one asked. I thought it was weird, but kind of shrugged. Oh well, maybe my intuition was wrong, I thought.

Then, as I was backing up, I turned to see a man standing at the window of my car. If I hadn't known he was coming I might have been startled. I rolled down the window and handed him the dollar.

Now, let's think about all the "scientific" ways that I could explain this interaction. First of all, it's not unusual to run into a homeless person. It had happened before. I could have pulled out of my parking place sooner and missed the man. I could rationalize this interaction into nothing but coincidence. But, what I'd be doing is looking for the neuron in the brain of the magi. I would miss the world that Julian of Norwich is describing: "The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything."

Sometimes, the level of interconnectedness gives us information that is useful – and we might never be able to define or see what it is and where it's coming from. This is the usefulness of opacity. Opacity requires humility and it evokes gratitude. I can feel thankful for that moment and for the experience of something that is beyond me.

I have one last story to share with you about intuition, about connecting to some aspect of ourselves that is far greater than what we can measure. This summer, my husband, daughter, and I were able to travel back to France where I used to live. When I was 20 years old, I stood on a hill in southern France and had a thought – one of those moments of intuition when you just know – that if I had a child, I would name it Olivier if it was a boy, and Olivia if it was a girl. My daughter is London Olivia Grace, so it was important for me to take her back to that hill when we went this summer. I was pretty sure that the hill was in a tiny town called Les Baux de Provence, but I didn't remember exactly, so it was a journey to find it. And, the trip wasn't exactly idyllic.

to go on Wednesday but instead we did Thursday. It was really hot – like 100 degrees. London was wearing flipflops and complaining about the walk. We couldn't find the hill. But my husband persevered and took us to the top where the castle was. And yes, that was it. That was the hill. It looked down upon fields of olive trees. And I was able to take London's picture above the olive trees. It was a beautiful moment.

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But there's more. It turns out that the town was run in the 1400's by princes who considered themselves to be the descendants of Balthazar, said to be one of the magi who visited baby Jesus from Africa. He is depicted throughout medieval art as a figure with sub-Saharan African physical features, and he is a focus of my husband's research on race and the Middle Ages. This town in southern France, so deeply connected to his

research – on a topic he had chosen as a focus before he even met me – was actually the origin of his daughter's name, simply because I visited it as a 20-year-old, almost a decade before I even met him and fell in love with the trees below it.

But there's more! As we walked down the hill and passed by a carving of Balthazar on the street, Cord realized that he had seen this image in a presentation by his friend a couple years before. He took a picture and texted it to her in New York. "Hey look where I am!" She wrote back immediately saying, "Wow, I am so glad that you sent me this. My computer just crashed and I lost all my photos of this carving. Will you send me more?" So he did.

But wait, there's more! After we left the town, I checked Facebook to see a post from a dear friend. He mentioned that his father, who had just passed, was born on July 21st, the Thursday instead of the Wednesday that we visited the olive trees of Les Baux. This friend's daughter is also named Olivia.

I'll finish today by saying that, sure, I could write all of this off as a series of coincidences. I could tell you that because I can't find the neuron that created this experience that it doesn't change the narrative. Instead though, I choose opacity. I'm going to focus on the tapestry and not the threads, because when I do, I can see the beauty of what connects us.

This is how I work and move in the world, not divided between science and intuition, but hoping to build a bridge between them so that I can take the road less traveled, and truly see what connects us all.

Last week, Pastor Tim admitted that his call to action might be somewhat pollyanna, that there wasn't anything necessarily concrete about it. But we can make things concrete through this blend of intuition and opacity. We get to make the tapestry visible when we choose to see it ourselves.