

I wonder what the world would be like if we didn't have the New Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the Tao de Ching, or the Koran? What if there were no sacred scriptures? What if all we had were oral histories and stories; nothing official, nothing written down where one could point to a passage in a book and say, "Here, thus it is written!"?

I was thinking about this and the old TV show *Mission Impossible*. In the original show, the impossible mission is communicated to a super secret agent via a small, state-of-the-art, 1960s reel-to-reel tape player. Each show began with the playing of the tape that would end with the following words: "This message will self-destruct in five seconds - good luck Jim." Smoke would then emanate from the tape player indicating the message's self-destruction. (That's great theatre! You can't not watch that; but I usually stopped watching immediately after that! 😊)

To complete the impossible mission, super secret agent Jim and his team had nothing written to go on. They had to make their own way.

Then I got to wondering....what if God gave Jesus his impossible mission in a similar manner. No, of course not with state-of-the-art reel-to-reel tape players because they weren't invented until the 1960s; but with some other method that God dreamed up.

Religious scholars believe that Jesus died around the year 33 of the common era (CE) and that he didn't even begin his ministry until three years prior to his death. Maybe at age 30 Jesus received his mission impossible from God via some telepathic communication. Is this that far-fetched? Something must have compelled Jesus, at age 30, to finally embark on his ministry.

So imagine, if you will, what may have been contained in this most important communique. "Jesus, this is God. First, go find some disciples to help you. You'll then need to teach people about the coming Kingdom of God. Teach in parables, it will help people better understand you. Throw out the money changers in the

Temple. Condemn the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and then make sure they crucify you...This message will self-destruct in five seconds – good luck Jesus.”

I could image Jesus nodding along until the end and then saying, “Wait, wait, wait...that last part....Cruci-what? Cruci-who?”

Ok. We laugh now...but what if it was really like that? What if God’s calling upon Jesus was crystal clear – unmistakable, the connection direct and unambiguous; but then, upon completion of the communicate – silence, nothing, void, null.

Again, is that far-fetched? If I were in Jesus’ place and was left to make my own way, I’d have doubts. I’d have fears. I’d feel abandoned. Jesus often seems to feel this. In the Garden of Gethsemane he prays, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want (Matthew 26:39).” Later, on the cross, he recites part of Psalm 22; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Matthew 27:46)?”

Today, almost casually, people say, “What would Jesus do?” yet it’s not truly a question because they already have an appropriate scriptural citation that, more often than not, suits their needs. They can point to it and say, “Here, thus it is written” and the text is usually used as a weapon in some way. This is a gross misunderstanding of New Testament scripture. St. Augustine says:

“So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine Scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not yet understood them (Augustine).”

I don’t want to dive in too deeply into historical biblical criticism but Jesus never wrote anything down. The gospels were written between thirty to seventy years after his death. We actually know very little about Jesus. Outside of Christian sources, there are only a handful of casual references to a man who was worshipped as a Messiah by various groups who called themselves Christians.

In the gospels, which are the only sources we have about his life, Jesus essentially preached about coming Kingdom of God, love of God and love of neighbor. Catholic priest and modernist theologian Alfred Loisy said that after Jesus' death, "The apostles had hoped that the Kingdom of God would come but what came was the Church."

And there you have it. The ideal, the utopian vision: the Kingdom of God, love of God, love of neighbor and then what has been constructed to bring it about: the church...and churches.

The philosophical movement of deconstruction doesn't say that constructions are necessarily bad, but simply that constructions are provisional. They can and should be re-examined, re-interpreted, de- and re-constructed when circumstances and times change. (And circumstances and times always change.)

Yet people are, more often than not, over time, prone to lose sight of the ideal, the utopian vision, the end and think that the provisional, the means, is it! They believe that the organization, the entity, the means exists for its own sake. We have people who know what Jesus would do because it's written in the book, it's what the church teaches, it's what the preacher said.

John Caputo's book "What Would Jesus Deconstruct" gets beyond and behind the existing constructions in an attempt reconstruct something new to get back to, or close the gap between, the ideal, the utopian vision and the current construction. So instead of saying "What would Jesus do?" which isn't truly a question and is generally based upon existing constructions, we might say "What would Jesus Deconstruct?" in an effort to mind the gap between the utopian vision and our provision constructions.

Anything provisional can be deconstructed.

In Jesus' parable of the great banquet, a metaphor for the Kingdom of God, many of the invited guests were too busy to come, "please accept my apologies (Luke 14:18)" they say. The king then invites to the table anyone who is willing to come – "go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame (Luke 14:21)." Jesus also says that you are particularly blessed when an invitation is extended to those who cannot possibly

repay you. He indicates that that is the true nature of hospitality – the true nature of giving.

Is that how we experience hospitality? Is that how we experience giving? Generally speaking, giving has been constructed to also include an expectation of giving in return, or at least gratitude.

We likely all know people who when they give you a gift, they expect something in return. How does it come to this? *True*, utopian giving is lost on and crazy to such people. John Caputo says, "...[giving] is made from love, and love, as [Christian mystic] Meister Eckhart said, is "without why." Love is its own why; love is for its own sake. It does not demand a further or external reason (John Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, p72)"or even a thank you. That's radical giving. That's crazy giving.

Jesus was a crazy radical. His followers were the outcasts and the dispossessed in territory occupied by the Roman Empire. When he confronted the hypocrisy of the establishment of the Pharisees, the arbiters of the written Hebrew law, he was executed. It was probably very easy to execute Jesus. Dispossessed outcasts were executed all the time and no note was made of it. The empire made no note of Jesus' execution.

Jesus threw the money changers out of the Temple. I'm sure that upset a lot of people. I'm sure that made people very uncomfortable. I'm sure the Black Lives Matter and Pride flags out front might make some people (within our walls and beyond) uncomfortable too; but I believe that when I deconstruct our interpretation of Jesus' ministry of two thousand years ago and reconstruct it with relevance to the here and now, it's one thread that I come with. Examining Jesus' ministry, again to the occupied outcasts and dispossessed people who didn't matter, I can hear him saying "Judeans Matter, Galileans Matter, God Matters!" This is at a time when Judeans and Galileans didn't truly matter to the empire; and at a time when people had lost God.

Over here, we are displaying the US flag. We rarely do this. I would imagine that some of you might take issue with this. I would imagine that some of you are not proud of some of what that flag stands for and what has been done in its name. It stands for freedom yet it also stands for slavery. It stands for the American Dream

yet it also stands for a capitalistic system rife with income inequality that will never allow the majority of our young adults a legitimate shot at that dream. It stands for democracy yet it also stands for poll taxes and poll tests. It says “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” yet it also says it will exile you from your native land on a Trail of Tears, tear your children from you at the border.

A deconstructionist however doesn't view that flag as a declarative statement; they view it as a question. The flag is a question that calls us and calls upon us to fulfill the crazy mission impossible we call the United States of America.

The flag is a question that calls us and calls upon us to abolish slavery in all its present forms so that this nation has a new birth of freedom

The flag is a question that calls us and calls upon us to stop rewarding greed in all its present forms so that our young people new hope in a new American Dream.

The flag is a question that calls us and calls upon us to eliminate disenfranchisement in all its present forms so that all people participate in the building of a new way.

The flag is a question that calls us and calls upon us to reincarnate this nation so that the tired, the poor and the huddled masses can breath free.

Now, the elephant in the room. Might not Unitarian Universalism and UUMAN be provisional constructions built to reflect a utopian ideal? I believe my answer has to be “YES” ...but you are free to disagree.

I am comforted however that we, with courage, uncertainty, anxiety, love, anxiety, patience and uncertainty (😊), are in the middle of a deconstructive and reconstructive visioning process in an effort to mind that gap, to move us a bit closer to that utopian ideal.

It's been slow going but I feel we're on the right track. I feel as if we are getting ready to answer our calling, equipping ourselves to undertake our mission impossible.

...and no, I'm not going to end this sermon by saying that this message will self-destruct in five seconds – good luck UUMAN.