

Matthew 2:12 “And being warned in a dream not to return to Herold, the wise men departed for their own country by another way.”

There's a man in my town who got religion last year and he's annoying me to no end. I've known him since we were kids and he's always been a bully, but then a minister got hold of him and now his worst qualities have been magnified. He hates with a deeper intensity, with more specificity.

Religion is unpredictable that way. I have seen it transform hard-bitten people into the most wonderful human beings, and I have seen it take kind-hearted people and make them legalistic and judgmental. Of course, religion has made each of us better people. The legalistic and judgmental people I'm referring to attend other churches. ☺

So here are the wise men, we don't know much about them, except that they had this profound spiritual experience, what the psychologist Abraham Maslow would call a “peak experience” and it opened their world. Matthew the gospel writer captures the spirit of that transformation in this one line that is beautifully metaphorical, and something we hope is true for each of us. After they saw Jesus, “they went home a different way.”

I've spoken about peak experiences before and described them as those moments when we feel deeply connected and loved. We feel as if we truly belong, not just to one another, but to God, to the entire world. It's accompanied by a feeling of euphoria, of great ecstasy. This experience is so transformative, we return home a different way, as changed people, the path of our life altered. We were headed in one direction, then the course of our life changed because of this glorious, transformative experience.

I think this is what happened to people when they met Jesus. Others make the same claim about Buddha or Mohammed or Confucius or the Dalai Lama. It isn't for us to judge their claims. We can only observe that the experience we have had with Jesus seems remarkably similar to the experiences they describe. How thoughtful of God, how gracious and welcoming of God, to use so many gifted people throughout history to transform the lives of others, to help others return home a different way.

But the question of the day, the mystery of the day, is this: How come some people, when they've had these spiritual experiences, these peak experiences, how come some people never return home a different way, never return to life as changed people? Some people go home different, others don't. They had the exact same experience, and one person took the energy and insight gained in that experience and let it inform and transform his or her life. While another person went home unmoved, indifferent, unchanged.

I was thinking about my granddaughter Madeline the other day. I do that quite a bit now. I was thinking about all the good things I want to have happen to her. I want her to be loved, I want her to be exposed to great thoughts and beauty and wonder. Then I thought of all the people I've known who've had all those tremendous things happen to them, their lives have been one gift after another, but they failed to appreciate it. So then I wished Madeline would take full advantage of every gift and grace, that she would let her life be shaped and informed by all the good that has happened, and will happen, to her.

Shouldn't this be the goal of spirituality? That we are malleable enough to be positively effected by the good we experience. The man in my town who got religion, who had what he calls a life-changing encounter with Jesus, seems remarkably unchanged by it. I don't doubt that he had the encounter. I think God is always eager to make those connections, to hang the star in the sky and give us a guide to steer by. I just think that sometimes, for any number of reasons, we don't let ourselves be transformed by these encounters and experiences.

I bought a telescope last year and took it down to our farm the 4th of July weekend. We had a family get-together, about 20 people, spending the night. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, so I got out the telescope and set it up so we could look at the stars.

I'm new at this kind of thing, but managed to dial in the Milky Way. It looked like a big gash in the sky just bleeding light. It was breathtaking. One of the family members looked through the telescope and was just amazed by it. Very excited. When he got home the next day, he started reading all he could about the Milky Way. He is prone to anxiety, and said looking at the stars and seeing the vastness of the universe made him realize how small his problems are. Which is a pretty good first step in learning to deal with your anxieties, isn't it! Perspective. There's nothing like contemplating the vastness of the universe and one's role in it to alleviate self-preoccupation.

Another family member looked through the telescope, saw this explosion of light, trillions of stars across billions of miles, and it's only one of an estimated 200 billion galaxies, and he said, "I wish you had a TV down here we could watch."

What are we like? What kind of people are we? How do we react to life? Are we unmoved, unchanged, indifferent?

Or do we go home a different way, as changed people, transformed by wonders and miracles and loveliness untold?