

FOREWORD to HEART and MIND

+ Marc Andrus

Alexander Shaia has produced, over a number of years, a body of work that provides Christians and seekers alike, a spiritual practice of transformation with great promise and power. As I consider the scope of his work, I am reminded of another contemporary spiritual practice that I witness daily — walking the labyrinth.

Grace Cathedral, in San Francisco, was the birthplace of the modern labyrinth movement. When the Rev. Lauren Artress, an Episcopal priest and canon of the Cathedral, began this work in the early '90s, there were really only a few medieval labyrinths left in Christendom, remnants of a vigorous spiritual practice of a millennium ago. Now there are labyrinths in thousands of churches worldwide.

My office in Diocesan House, next to the Cathedral, looks out on one of our two labyrinths. Any time of day, through my windows, I see people walking. Actually, “walking” doesn’t really convey how people use the labyrinth; some skip, walk backwards, run. Some carry bells, which they sound as they walk slowly, meditatively. Although there are numerous guides on how to walk, none of these people seem to be following any guidelines whatsoever.

Around the side of the Cathedral, on California Street, there is a small entrance. Inside, there are several icons—John Donne, Martin Luther King and Mary Magdalene among others. As with the labyrinth, people come in all day to pray, light a candle, or just to be quiet before one or more of these sacred images. This informal use of icons is another spiritual practice, placed directly into the hands of people, and available for all, including those who won’t show up in any church, mosque or synagogue on a day of community worship.

As with the renewal of walking meditations and praying with icons, Dr. Shaia has mined Christian tradition to bring forward a spiritual practice of transformation and make it fresh and alive for today. Known as The Four-Gospel Journey, its potential is already becoming manifest, as individuals, groups and entire communities are using it all over the world, and the word is spreading.

I live in one of the most secularized areas on Earth, but it should not be concluded from that fact that the San Francisco Bay Area is spiritually arid, quite the contrary. Instead there is a palpable spiritual hunger here, and it is exciting that this hunger for transformation might be fed in such a foundational, substantial way—by reconnecting with the gospels of the New Testament.

Dr. Shaia reveals how the traditional four gospels constitute a progressive practice of spiritual transformation, for individual seekers and whole communities. In this way of understanding, our sacred texts are given back to the Church and to all as living guides,

re-centering human life on compassion and service, and rooted in a mystical relationship with Christ—the center of a person, the center of a community, the center of the universe. And what is the nature of the spiritual transformation found at the heart of this process? It is the restoration of our Unity in God, who pervades, infuses and contains the Universe and all within it. And this Four-Gospel Journey is a large step on the way to restoring Unity, and anything that helps us to move further along is a significant step in the right direction.

I use the phrase “given back” with respect to the four gospels because we, in the western Church and culture, have been on a century-long “quest for the historical Jesus.” That is, our scholars have been assiduously sifting through the canonical gospels, and the many non-canonical gospels, attempting to determine what sayings can be attributed with some confidence to the person, Jesus of Nazareth. This quest has paid off in spectacular ways, and has also led to some unfortunate assumptions that have left us impoverished in our religious culture and practices.

Primarily, an over-emphasis on the historical Jesus blinds the Church to the progressive nature of Christ—moving *with* the Church and *with* the world through time. Re-connecting to this dynamic living Christ will help us find meaning in today’s dilemmas and respond compassionately *here* and *now*. This Four-Gospel Journey offers a vital step toward such integration.

By rediscovering early Christianity’s pattern and sequence of four, Dr. Shaia shows how their most important practices—Sunday worship, preparation for Baptism, and the Feast of Easter—were founded on a dynamic process of transformation — understood to be an embodied experience of the living Christ. Seen in this way, the selection of precisely four gospels, rather than fewer or more is apt; four—like the seasons —expresses a turning, cyclical dynamism.

In this work is a new understanding of an ancient truth. Dr. Shaia believes that those who selected the Canon (the approved list of the books comprising the New Testament) had a divinely inspired search. But that search was far more than only choosing the most theologically sound gospels. They were also looking for something practical and effective—four gospels that when placed together serve as a seamless text of transformation, a present moment practice of living with Christ.

So with *The Four-Gospel Journey*, Dr. Shaia has given us back our central sacred text, not as a conflicted or faulty historical record but as a vibrant, luminous path of transformation. And living this truth of Christ, ever present in the eternal now, we understand that this practice of transformation asks to be enacted anew today.

Dr. Shaia writes that he is hearing from people using this practice and how they are adapting it to their own needs. The creative appropriation is already underway! I expect that all of us, Dr. Shaia included, will be delighted by the surprises that await as Christians and seekers alike open themselves to the reshaping and re-centering of their lives by walking this path.

Already in the Diocese of California, a group of us, clergy and lay, are beginning to imagine how this return of The Four-Gospel Journey might be incorporated into our life and spiritual practice, and become the significant piece of religious renewal it promises. As with the labyrinth and the icons in Grace Cathedral, I believe we will see seekers and Christians and all who have God-shaped holes in their hearts, make this path their own, in their own surprising ways. I shall hope, and pray.

I invite you to enter a patient time of reading, a deep listening, so that you, too, might receive this gift of the four traditional gospels—a vibrant, deeply satisfying practice, filled with luminous joy and peace, speaking to your life today, wherever you live, whatever you believe, and offering a wise way to meet the dilemmas you face. Such is the good news!

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