

“Lessons from a Fox”
Text: Matthew 22:34-40; I John 4:19

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I want to tell you about a fox today. It’s not a fox as you might imagine – sly, red and furry creatures of the woods. No, it’s about a man named Fox, Matthew Fox. He’s a Dominican priest, a theologian, an educator, and a considerable rabble-rouser to the Roman Catholic authorities. In fact, he has been silenced by the Vatican, forbidden to teach and preach because of the perceived danger in his thoughts. That makes me all the more eager to tell you about him!

Among my reading these summer evenings has been his latest book, “The Hidden Spirituality of Men”. I found it so inviting that I simply want to pass some of his wisdom on to you. These lessons from a fox, as I will call them, are about spiritual wholeness. They are about well-being and about soul. And though he wrote it for men it is just as applicable to women. Among other things, he offers four commandments for those who seek to be fully alive.¹

First. **Thou shall fall in love at least three times a day!** Please, don’t hear that on the shallow end, because he is speaking of love here as the primal and God-given energy of life. Love of which we are all capable if we so choose.

The Bible speaks with familiar cadence: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.” And, of course, Paul famously reminds us that “faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.”

I have a confession to make. I am falling in love again. Pam is aware and she understands. I’ve talked to her directly about it. But increasingly along our walks or on my journey’s way I am falling in love with the sky. Each one of us needs to find a portal of invitation into the expanse of the eternal. And a racing sky with clouds, puffy, white and mixed with patches of blue does it for me. I am finding it so mystical, and magical, and mysterious, and infinite. I was fascinated to discover that for Aristotle, it was the order, beauty and elegance of the sky that moved him to believe in God!² And I am also interested to discover that the sky in all of its light and shadow is an ancient archetype of the spiritual life and the abode of God.

“Spirituality”, Dr. Fox tells us, “has everything to do with falling in love.” And I am in love with the sky!³

Second: **Thou shall dare the dark.** We step deeper into the realities of life and the challenges of a mature spirituality now. Any real run at life knows that it’s never all sweetness and light. That shadows do abound. That darkness does exist. And a part of a healthy spirituality is learning to face that and to dare the darkness and to trust in God.

The scriptures say it so well: “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow I will fear no evil.” Why? “For thou art with me!” Those words are among the most beloved in all the world. And these, too: “Even my darkness is not dark to thee.”

A parable helps me to speak. A young man had been shooting the rapids somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. He went over a waterfall, and the force of the rapids threw him down into the water. When he came up he was trapped inside a small rock cave. The only light he could see was the tiny entrance through which he had been thrust. He tried to swim out of the opening, but the force was too great for him. After a number of futile attempts it occurred to him that the only way out was to risk diving deeper into the water – literally daring the darkness. And so he did. Again he was carried in torrents of turbulence. When he finally surfaced, he had prevailed. He was out in the sunlight and could see the blue sky.

Call that a metaphor of the spirit, because as we grow in spirit we must learn dare the dark.

Third: **Thou shall not be reluctant to give birth.** The New Testament tells us, expressed best in the words of Jesus, that the kingdom of God is within us. Discovering that is a form of giving birth. In fact, that's part of what it means to have an incarnational theology as our Christian faith is – the belief that the gifts of God are accessible to us in our very human lives.

T.S. Elliott once put it like this: “God exults when a person comes through with a wish of his own.” Or a dream. Or a hope. I believe that absolutely! Psychologist Erik Erikson calls this “generatively” – the human desire to give as much of ourselves as we can to those who come after us. Again: thou shall not be reluctant to give birth!

I have a friend who recently left the ministry. He was pretty good at it and by all appearances seemed quite content. I was puzzled at his resignation and so I asked what caused him to want to move on. He spoke with confidence, “I wanted to enlarge my life. The parish is wonderful but I wanted a bigger world.” As I listened I had a sense that something in him was struggling to be born. And another friend on mine just retired last month after a life-time of teaching. I asked what she was going to do in retirement. She responded that she wasn't planning to be retired. That she was expecting to be refired! That is, she was looking for new places to fire up the passions of her life.

Thou shall not be reluctant to give birth!

And then last: **Thou shall be compassionate as your Creator is compassionate.** This is so integral to faithful life and a fresh understanding of God. “Summing up the best of the spiritual traditions, east to west, north to south, Meister Eckhart said, ‘Compassion is the fist outburst of everything that God does.’”⁴

More: Jesus Scholar Marcus Borg tells us that compassion is the primary ethic of a life centered in God. And, of course, for Jesus compassion was not sentimental wooing or saccharine caring, but the character of being authentic in feeling with and for other human beings. Authentic not only in making that a personal goal, but a social reality.

I have been overwhelmed with compassion as I have listened and read and watched our national debate on healthcare play out. Of course, it's a very complex matter; and of course it involves gazillions of dollars. But I hear so many stories of people who were doing seemingly fine; and then they got lost in the economic downturn; and then they find out that their COBRA healthcare

protection plan is three times what they had available; and then an illness comes home to them. Real names, real people. Point of fact: the majority of cases of personal bankruptcy are not around sub-prim mortgages, but around healthcare. Or I listen to some of our own elders whose prescription care outpaces their resources. Real people. Real stories.

Please, I am not speaking in a partisan way here. But there are a myriad of important needs that should rightly call up our compassion, not just as a sentiment or well-intended feeling, but as a prelude to action.

Thou shall be compassion as your creator is compassionate.

Let me bundle it up now so you can take it home with you, these lessons from a pretty faithful fox. **You shall fall in love at least three times a day. You shall dare the dark. You shall not be reluctant to give birth. You shall be compassionate as your Creator is compassionate.**

May such wisdom ride to sleep with you these summer nights and may they wake to the day to guide you in the ways of life abundant. Amen.

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¹ Matthew Fox. [The Hidden Spirituality of Men](#). New World Library, 2008, pp. 91-92. See also: Matthew Fox. [Creation Spirituality](#). Harper/San Francisco, 1991, pp. 17-26.

² Matthew Fox. [The Hidden Spirituality of Men](#). New World Library, 2008. p. 7.

³ Matthew Fox. [Creation Spirituality](#). Harper/San Francisco, 1991, p. 19.

⁴ Ibid. p. 35.