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Thinking Mindfully

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In January 2011, mall surveillance cameras captured video of Cathy Cruz Marrero falling into the mall's main water fountain as she was walking and texting. It was a funny video, people laughed, and it brought to our attention the dangers of walking and texting. Ms. Marrero's accident could have happened to anyone, and even though her embarrassment led her to contemplate a lawsuit against the person responsible for posting the video online, she admitted she had learned a lesson when interviewed by NBC's George Stephanopoulos on *Good Morning America*.¹

Stephanopoulos: And, Cathy, I know that you—as embarrassed as you are from all this, you did learn a big lesson, huh?

Marrero: Absolutely. Absolutely, George. Do not text and walk, especially to the younger generation. The fountain could have been

1. "Fountain Lady Fights Back," *Good Morning America*, <http://lybio.net/cathy-cruz-marrero-good-morning-america-fountain-lady-fights-back-lawsuit/people/.html>.

empty. I could have been in the hospital. I could have walked into a bus. You know, gotten hit by a car. It can happen anywhere. Anywhere.

And it is happening. Statistics show that walking and texting accidents are rising quickly in the United States. In fact, some towns like Fort Lee, New Jersey, are passing legislation that imposes fines of eighty-five dollars for residents caught walking and texting. There are numerous words to describe people as they walk and text: distracted, unaware, engrossed, oblivious. And if you are distracted, unaware, engrossed, or oblivious in an unfamiliar place and you are looking down, your next experience may be looking up from your phone in the middle of a mall water fountain.

But in Ms. Marrero's case, this was not just a matter of being unfamiliar with the landscape. She works in that mall. She was not in a new place. She was very familiar with her surroundings. She had navigated that same mall corridor for years. But this time, while walking and texting, she encountered the unexpected.

Stephanopoulos: Cathy, let me say, right at the start, I get it. When I saw this video, I said this could be me, but can you just take us back to that moment? What happened? What were you thinking? And what made you realize that you had a terrible fall?

Marrero: I realized I was falling when I was in the water already. Unfortunately, I didn't have anything to grab on to and hold my balance.

Stephanopoulos: From looking at the video, you look pretty composed for someone who just fell in a fountain in the middle of a mall. You got out, picked yourself up. What happened next?

Marrero: I was probably more dumbfounded. I was like, well, I'm hoping nobody saw me. So, let me just walk away. A kind lady of a store there, manager at the mall, was kind enough. I walked up to her. And all I kept saying was, "I fell. I fell. I fell in the fountain. I fell in the fountain. I fell in the fountain."

Marrero lost her situational awareness and fell in a place where she felt comfortable and confident. The jarring realization of what had happened—that she had fallen—was compounded by the truth of where it had happened, in a familiar setting. This is what left her shaken, disoriented, in disbelief, and, in her own words, dumbfounded.

Inherited Faith and the Moment You Look Up

At some point, every person will experience a moment when he will “look up” from his inherited faith tradition. It is unavoidable in this postmodern North American culture. It is disorienting in its unexpectedness. It is isolating in its uniqueness for each individual. You look up as if hearing something for the very first time: “What did you just say?? You look up with furrowed eyebrows in concern: “Do you really mean that?” You look up because you want to protest: “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Encountering the unexpected in a seminary classroom is an unavoidable hazard for students. It may not be as dramatic as falling into a fountain, but it will happen. It is unavoidable because in seminary, as in life and ministry, students become aware of their partial perspectives, are asked to reflect upon the influence of their religious traditions, and are challenged to consider the various interpretive options for belief that may and do exist. In these moments, the bodies of knowledge about God, which have been handed down to you, no longer seem secure. Something is always lost when you look up. Stability. Confidence. Naiveté. But much more is waiting to be gained when you can learn to think mindfully about your inherited faith traditions and the development of your personal beliefs.

When I refer to inherited faith traditions or bodies of knowledge about God, I am referring to the work of Ninian Smart and the six-part definition or scheme of study he established as the dimensions of religion: the experiential, the narrative, the ritual, the doctrinal, the ethical, and the institutional.² Knowing these six religious bodies of knowledge and what they establish as foundational for belief can be very insightful in the moments you look up; they can help you understand the range of theological beliefs you will encounter in seminary and active ministry. These categories can help because your religious community has appealed to one of the six bodies of knowledge, in varying degrees, and has influenced what you believe and the evidence you accept as reliable.³

2. Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), 15–25. Ninian Smart, the world-renowned expert in the study of religion as a nonconfessional, methodologically agnostic discipline, what most universities offer as Religious Studies, proposed that whatever else religions may or may not be, whether theistic or nontheistic, they possess certain recognizable elements, which can and should be studied. The study takes its place in the secular academy, where it draws heavily on anthropology, sociology, archeology, psychology, and other disciplines.
3. *Experiential bodies of knowledge* emphasize making a personal connection with God and accept feelings, emotions, and personal experiences as foundational for theological belief. You may look up if someone explains that they believe something about God because they have felt it or experienced it. *Narrative bodies of knowledge* emphasize how profoundly true, understandable, relatable stories, regardless of whether they are provable through the scientific method or defy common sense or logic, are foundational because testimonies reveal and explain theological belief. You may look up if someone explains that they believe something about God because that's just what the Bible says. *Ritual bodies of knowledge* emphasize the successful expression of belief found in repetition, standardization, and performance as foundational for belief so that participants benefit. You may look up if someone explains that they believe something about God because that's what God requires. *Doctrinal bodies of knowledge* emphasize certainty found in intellectual reasoning, systematic thinking, and prepackaged truths as foundational for belief. You may look up if someone explains that they believe something about God because it's the truth. *Ethical bodies of knowledge* emphasize relational behavior found in obligations, responsibilities, rules, and punishments as foundational for belief. You are expected to act in certain ways toward others. You may look up if someone explains that they believe something about God or are doing something because God watches and will judge our actions as good or bad. *Institutional bodies of knowledge* emphasize the role the religious group play in and the influences they exert upon society as foundational for belief. People may identify as defenders or adherents of the faith (church), as volunteer or individual participators in faith (denomination), as reformers of faith (sect), or as inventors of faith (cult). You may look up if someone is defending Christianity against change or advocating that we investigate new ways

In seminary, most students are only just becoming aware of their inherited traditions when they encounter the unexpected in the form of a different body of knowledge. It need not be the end of faith if you question or reject the bodies of knowledge of your inherited faith, since one body of knowledge is not the whole of the Christian message. However, the experience of looking up from your inherited faith can be just as dramatic as Marrero's, not just because of *what* is happening but also because of *where* it is happening. Such an experience is disorienting in its unexpectedness. You think that you are in a familiar, safe place—a seminary—doing a familiar, safe thing—studying the Bible—and *bam!* You fall and you look up as if hearing something for the first time. *Did your professor just provide experiential knowledge for discussions on healing in the New Testament when you expected logical, doctrinal answers?* You fall and you look up with furrowed eyebrows. *Do you look around the room wondering how other students find ethical standards in Leviticus that they want to apply today when you just find a story from an ancient culture?* You fall and you look up because you want to protest. *That doesn't make sense to me! Why are you trying to fix what isn't broken?* You don't see anything coming. You don't realize that you are falling until you fall. When you finally do get up, you may appear composed, but your confidence has been severely shaken, leaving you disoriented, confused, and dumbfounded. Such an experience is isolating in its uniqueness for each individual because our beliefs about God are deeply held and very personal. When Marrero fell into the water fountain, she was disoriented, embarrassed, and defensive. In the same way, the range of initial emotions that will arise in a seminary classroom—shock, sheepishness, fear, aggravation, irritation,

to do church. You may look up if someone is asking questions and calling for reform within Christianity or claiming that an entirely new vision is now required.

astonishment, embarrassment, concern, confusion, delight, even humor—can highlight the realization that most of us aren't prepared to explain or defend our beliefs beyond how we *feel* about them.

Thinking mindfully about theology and faith allows you to embrace this moment of being shaken, disoriented, and in disbelief as real and important and potentially educational. When you can acknowledge your emotions and reactions and allow those reactions to highlight the truth that the story you tell about God has been influenced by certain evidence, you are prepared to begin to think critically about theology and faith. You can come to understand why someone else thinks differently, engage those other views in healthy dialogue, evaluate your faith traditions, and add your voice to the discussion. You do not need to stay in a shaken, disoriented, disbelieving, and dumbfounded state nor do your feelings, which are powerful and real, necessarily have to lead to the death of belief. Rather, thinking mindfully can begin a process that can and should enable a person to look up, back, and again at her inherited faith so that its strengths, weaknesses, influences, and tendencies might be acknowledged. Richard Kearney has suggested that this process be labeled “anatheism,” for the word denotes “repetition and return.”⁴ When you learn to look up, back, and again at your beliefs, you have a way to return to belief after the unavoidable, unexpected, and isolating experience of not knowing or, as I have explained it, falling.

4. See Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). This process begins with what is secure (theism), passes through the loss of that security or a death-of-God moment (atheism) or the not-knowing moment (agnosticism), but does not have to lead to the death of belief. I appreciate Kearney's emphasis that people today need a way to return to belief in God after having a dreadful and disorienting moment of “not knowing.”

Learning to Think Mindfully When You Look Up

Whatever issue, topic, theory, or interpretation has caused you to look up, this is the starting point for mindful thinking. The experience of discomfort and strong emotions as you struggle to understand how someone else does not see things the same way you do will begin to highlight the influence of your inherited faith traditions and explain why you feel passionate about something that someone else considers to be a minor detail. The practice of being mindful is an important concept in most spiritual traditions, ranging from practices that meditatively empty the mind to practices that focus introspectively on the mind.⁵ Mindfulness is a third way of knowing (awareness) that complements rational and sensory knowledge with subjective experience.⁶

Let me share two quotes that can help you understand the mindfulness I am advocating. The first anonymous inspirational quote is this: “Don’t shush your inner voice. It’s who you really are.” When you are mindful, you are aware of feelings that are occurring in the moment, and you take them seriously for the information they provide without trying to alter or manipulate the experience. Pleasant reactions are enjoyable, making you feel agreeable. You will naturally desire to discuss issues that make you feel agreeable. Unpleasant reactions are displeasing and offensive, making you feel disagreeable. You will naturally desire to shut down discussions of issues that make you feel disagreeable. Neutral reactions are disinteresting and

5. The term *mindfulness* and many current mindfulness practices generally associate with the meditative traditions of Eastern religions. Thinking mindfully is not primarily concentration meditation (the practice of focusing, quieting, or emptying the mind of judgment), and it is not primarily introspection (the process of reflectively looking inward at one’s own thoughts and emotions). It is a combination of intentional focus and awareness of emotions.
6. Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein, *A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook* (Oakland: New Harbinger, 2010). The two forms of meditation are insight and concentration. Mindfulness meditation is considered insight meditation.

disengaging, making you feel dispassionate. You will naturally tune out or ignore discussion of the issues you consider unimportant.

Practicing mindfulness in a seminary classroom is essential, because too often students regurgitate answers for marks or in support of denominational positions just to keep the peace. Holding your inner voice lightly, even if for a moment, does not change your inner voice or its influence but allows you to acknowledge that you have questions, doctrinal hang-ups, theological preferences, or alternative interpretive approaches.

The second quote, from Thich Nhat Hanh, is this: “Mindfulness is the capacity to shine the light of awareness onto what’s going on here and now.”⁷ Remember, thinking mindfully *complements* rational and sensory thinking skills. When you are aware, you understand and have access to knowledge that you can use and apply to a situation. When you admit that you are experiencing a strong emotion, mindfulness allows you to take the next step and to investigate why you are feeling that emotion.

Why do you feel compelled to correct the teacher? Why do you feel the need to admonish another student to move on from a topic that you think is such a minor issue? Emotions are signals to pay attention to what needs attending to and are meant to alert us to what is going on. We must learn to respond accordingly to these emotions and do something about them. An important distinction should be noted here between *acknowledgement* of emotions and *acceptance* of emotions. To acknowledge is simply to see things as they are, whether you like it or not. Acceptance, on the other hand, is being at peace with things as they are.⁸ I am not advocating that seminary students learn to accept all expressions of theology or suggesting

7. From Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Breath: A Practice for Our Busy Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

8. Stahl and Goldstein, *A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook*, 71.

that students suspend judgment on certain faith positions or refuse to evaluate their inherited faith traditions. Thinking mindfully is primarily a critical thinking skill that equips a student to acknowledge the strong feelings and emotions that are part of belief systems in a way that can simultaneously validate the student's personal faith journey choices and challenge her to consider the validity of the paths she has left untraveled on her faith journey. Thinking mindfully can work to develop confidence in your faith positions when you know you haven't allowed your emotions to dismiss or invalidate other options.

Learning to Think Mindfully When You Look Back and Look Again

I discovered the importance of learning to think mindfully about inherited faith traditions from my own experience and from the many conversations I have had with students over my twelve years of teaching. It was very early in my seminary training when I looked up from my inherited faith traditions. I had fallen, but I didn't know it until I was in the water. I didn't know where I was or how I got there. I was embarrassed, confused, apologetic, and angry. I finally looked back and again three years later and learned that I didn't have to apologize for or look back with suspicion on the religious traditions that had shaped my beliefs. But looking up plunged me into three years of struggle that destroyed two key ideas that had previously been firm and stable elements of my personal belief.

It happened in the second semester of my graduate studies in a class studying the book of Exodus. "What a fantastic book," my professor exclaimed, "with excellent examples of the early pattern of biblical storytelling: take a common and influential story that is already current in your culture (in this case the Mesopotamian hero

myth and the law codes of the Mesopotamians and Hittites) and tell your unique story using the same format.” On the first day of class, this all sat well with me because the part I heard most clearly was that the Israelites were telling their unique story using the common formats of the day. But by the third class, I began reacting, although I would not fully understand the root of my reactions for another three years. The class made me very aware of the book of Exodus as a story. I had always loved the fact that the Bible was full of stories and that we were reading the testimonies of people’s experiences with God. But when all the possibilities for reading and comparing the book of Exodus were presented, I reacted to all the new ways people were telling the story and how they were finding meanings that I didn’t think were there. I actually did throw up my hands in the air and exclaim, “Well, anyone can read anything they want from this text. How can anyone know for sure what the Bible is actually saying?”

Looking back and again at my inherited religious tradition three years later revealed that I was expecting a single, correct interpretation of the Bible. I assumed that with careful, diligent study you could and should eliminate all other interpretive options as illegitimate. In addition, I had been taught to be suspicious of human involvement in the writing, copying, and editing of the Bible and carried with me the idea that it must be endowed with some supernatural element for us to trust it as God’s revelation. When it became clear to me that my particular tradition was as thoroughly human as other traditions and that one particular method had been chosen (from among many) to read and interpret the Bible, I experienced a feeling of being set adrift, no longer being anchored, and I had very little confidence in any tradition’s ability to answer religious questions with certainty.

When you experience moments like these, remember, *don’t shush your inner voice*. I did shush my inner voice, which led me to stop

giving my take on interpretive issues, since it was just an opinion and mine was no better than anyone else's. I was teaching during these years, and many times I told my students that when I would say, "I don't know," it was not that I didn't care about their questions. I really didn't know what the answer should be! I began to focus on possibilities and learned to provide information, lots of information, without venturing a conclusion. It was such a frustrating time because my intellectual world was growing and expanding, but I had no confidence to express my evaluations and was constantly reacting to what I was learning. I became certain of the uncertainty, and without any sense of confidence, I was miserable.

Remember my reference to atheism? What had been secure (theism) was stripped away, and for three years I had passed through the loss of that security or a death-of-God moment (atheism). But in 2001, I was about to embrace a more tentative and chastened belief so that if I wanted to return to God, I could return to God. When I sat down with my doctoral advisor for the first time, he asked me if I felt prepared for this new phase of study. Knowing that my research skills were strong, I told him yes. And then I said, "I should tell you that my background is quite charismatic, but I can be very critical in my thinking." Without hesitation, he responded, "That's good, but you don't have to apologize for your background. It has made you who you are. You are going to see things in this text that others miss or have difficulty seeing. Your insights will be important to the discussion. But you may also miss what other people see. Just make sure you know why you tend to see things the way you do. That is always the challenge." In that moment, I felt that I finally had a place to stand again. In that moment, I learned three things that I incorporate into all my teaching and every conversation I have with people.

Don't apologize for your background. It has made you who you are. This is a liberating truth, even if you have chosen to distance yourself from certain parts of your inherited faith.⁹ There is no need to be embarrassed, for all of us bring the influence of our background to our reading of the Bible, our theologies, our ethics, and our spirituality. My inherited faith had emphasized narrative knowledge and influenced me to accept Bible stories as true without questioning the logic or scientific possibility of the events. As a result, I fought against the suggestion that parts of the story from Exodus were not unique or supernatural. Maybe it will take you longer than your classmates to look up, but you are you and your moment will not be the same as their moment. Do not be embarrassed that you did or still do believe what you believe.

You will see things others miss or have difficulty seeing. But you may also miss what other people see. Embrace that you have looked up because someone has failed to see what you see, and admit that you, in turn, might not see what he or she sees. My inherited faith did not see great value in encouraging new understandings of spiritual truth but sought to defend status quo interpretations. As a result, I missed seeing other interpretive possibilities in the Exodus text. What is clear and obvious to you is not a given to everyone else. What is pleasant to you may be offensive to someone else. What so obviously caused you to look up may never be obvious to someone else. There is no eagle-eye view available to anyone.¹⁰

9. There is no need to apologize that you have looked up, for everyone shares the same reality: “understanding the nature of subjectivity, that our responses are created out of who we are, allows us to see that others read and respond according to the same logic; we deduce from what we bring with us: the baggage, light or heavy, of our lives.” Laurence Musgrove, “What Happens When We Read: Picturing a Reader’s Responsibilities,” *JAEPL* 11 (Winter 2005–2006): 52–63, esp. 56.

10. “Everyone stands (mostly subconsciously) within a particular tradition and historical context that influences their personal horizons. Understanding is a product of our language, our history, and our traditions. These ‘prejudices’—these prejudgments—offer us our lens on the world. We do not have available the eagle eye, the Enlightenment’s dream of detached reason that

Make sure you know why you tend to see things the way you do. Why did I tend to see things the way I did?¹¹ My reactions began to make sense. I tended to think about things in terms of “correct” and “incorrect” categories. Plus, my confidence was linked directly to my ability to identify which arguments and reading belonged in which category. Whenever I learned about or evaluated other interpretations, I was focused on eliminating those interpretations in favor of one correct interpretation. I reacted to other reading approaches because I was beginning to wonder about the necessity of, even the existence of, a single “correct” meaning. Once I realized that all the different readings and interpretations I encountered in my studies were not random or merely wrong but flowed out of another person’s tendency to see things in a certain way, I began to understand how to evaluate another interpretation with more generosity and curiosity.

Mindfulness is the capacity to shine the light of awareness onto what is going on here and now. Acquiring this knowledge of myself (what I was seeking, what I was reacting to, why I was struggling) was the only way I could renew and review the beliefs I held so dearly and return to God. I was not going to outrun my interpretive tendencies. I like to have the facts and be confident when I speak. It was not going away. I tend to eliminate options to arrive at a solid conclusion. I would always be restless until I was able to understand why I needed to be confident about my interpretation.

Looking up from inherited faith can be a devastating experience for students and teachers alike, but a mindful approach acknowledges

is independent in perspective. Understanding is always located within the situated and partial perspectives of our prejudices. Our understanding is shaped by the way we belong to the world.” Francis, J. Mootz III and George H. Taylor, eds., *Gadamer and Ricoeur: Critical Horizons for Contemporary Hermeneutics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 1.

11. “How each of us reads the Bible is partly the result of family, neighbors and friends (a socialization process), and partly the God-given accident of long-term development in faith.” Walter Breuggemann, “Biblical Authority,” *The Christian Century*, January 3–10, 2001, 14–20.

that all reactions, even unpleasant ones, are signs of life reflecting the foundations of personal faith and belief. Looking back and again can energize you with a new appreciation for the religious tradition in which you were reared, a recognition of the positive and negative influences that your tradition brought to your personal faith, and the skills and ability to embrace and understand the influence the tradition has exerted in your life.

Thinking Mindfully Develops Confident and Conversational Seminarians

A seminary student who learns to think mindfully about beliefs learns to acknowledge his own reactions and emotions as important influences on his beliefs. A seminarian who learns to think mindfully can admit that she has an internal monologue and a bias that allows her to be more patient as she listens to someone, to be less apologetic as she puts forth her own beliefs, and to be genuine in her expression of empathy. Consider that the experience of looking up highlights the level of passion and the insights you will bring to discussions of belief and faith. But acknowledging presuppositions does not mean that you cannot believe in something with confidence or that all faith is illusory. Looking up, back, and again alerts you to comfort zones and natural preferences. Knowing your limitations actually works to create confidence in your views and openness to the positions of others.¹²

12. "Sometimes it is thought that, once the existence of presuppositions has been recognized, presuppositions should be abandoned altogether, as far as possible, and that our approach to the text should be that of an 'open' (or empty) mind. Not only is such a goal unlikely to be achieved, but also it is doubtful whether an attempt to shed presuppositions or preconceptions is always the best way of achieving openness to the text." David J. A. Clines, "Biblical Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice," *Christian Brethren Review* 31, 32 (1982): 65–76, esp. 70.

Only you will know the circumstances that lead to that profound, exhilarating, dreadful, liberating, or startling moment when you look up from the religious beliefs of your inherited faith system. Embrace the moment you look up, knowing that emotions are vital elements of belief. You can relate to the one-third of the population that is struggling to work through some theological or emotional issue of Christian faith.¹³ You can help these people think mindfully about their faith by reminding them that God is not repulsed by our negative feelings. But it is also true that God wants us to process those emotions and choose how to respond so that we can be in relationship with God and neighbor alike.

Evaluate the moment you looked up knowing that your expectations lead you to walk away from certain beliefs and to walk toward other beliefs. In this way, you can relate to the 80 percent of the population who desires to be known as “spiritual” as opposed to “religious” and reject denominational certainty in favor of a spiritual journey. You can help them think mindfully about the paths and traditions they are embracing, rejecting, or merging. You can relate to the majority of Americans who “have a gnawing sense that there is more to the spiritual life than they are experiencing” and are open to discussing, debating, and questioning theology and faith.¹⁴ You can help them think mindfully about their quest to discover for themselves just what truth is and how to apply it to their lives.

What options are then available for us when we reach this moment of discovery? I am challenging you to consider more than the usual options: theism, atheism, or agnosticism. Your moment of discovery is a chance to learn about yourself: who you are, what evidence persuades you, and why you react. In the process, our attempts

13. George Barna, *Futurecast: What Today's Trends Mean for Tomorrow's World* (Austin, TX: Tyndale, 2011), 125.

14. *Ibid.*

to understand the deep values of others may affect our own understanding of truth and right in subtle and significant ways.¹⁵ We can begin to recognize our individual preferences knowing that the better we understand our point of view and expectations, the better we will be able to articulate our position and still allow for dialogue on other points of view.

15. Richard Moon, ed., *Law and Religious Pluralism in Canada* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2008), 6, www.ubcpres.ca/books/pdf/.../LawandReligiousPluralismInCanada.pdf. Our understanding of the values and concerns of others (religious or otherwise) will always be approximate or partial, but we may have the capacity to give practical meaning to them and to reach some form of agreement or understanding.