

“We Reap What We Sow part I: A Closer Look At the Seeds”
Rev. Meghan Conrad Cefalu
November 2, 2008

I came across a quirky story in a newspaper a few years ago that amused me. It seems a farmer in a small town in Kansas with a history of sleepwalking planted his fields one night in his sleep.

He woke up and all the seeds were gone from his barn. He accused a rival farmer of robbing him until later that day when he realized that all his fields were planted.

At first it sounds like a great way to get a lot of work done fairly effortlessly. Imagine getting all your work done in your sleep!

The only problem was that the farmer had seeds for five different types crops and he didn't know which seeds he planted in which field. He was just going to have to wait until the plants came up.

This story illustrates something I think many of us do on a regular basis. We sleepwalk through our lives unconsciously saying and doing things that have an effect on the world around us. Then all too often we are surprised and sometimes baffled by the results.

One day a while ago I was feeling out of sorts. I was grumpy and stressed out. At Raley's another shopper was actually rude to me when my cart was in his way. Then the checker was not particularly friendly either which only made me feel worse.

After putting my bags in the trunk I sat down in my driver's seat and pulled down the mirror. As I glanced up at my image I was surprised to see how hostile I looked. My eyebrows were furrowed and my lips were pressed tight.

I decided to try an experiment. I went back into the store. I picked out another item that we could always use at home and I forced a smile on my face. I got back in the same checkout line.

When it was my turn I looked the checker right in her eyes and said “Good morning!” in a cheerful voice. She smiled and greeted me with equal cheer. We had some pleasant banter and when I reached the parking lot I realized that I was feeling a great deal happier.

In the Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, it is written,
“You are what your deep, driving desire is.
As your desire is, so is your will.
As your will is, so is your deed.

As your deed is, so is your destiny.”¹

Most people in our society are at least a little bit familiar with the concept of *karma*, but rarely do people have a full understanding of the Hindu meaning of the word.

Swami Vivekananda, the man credited with bringing Hinduism to the West, said that, “Karma is the eternal assertion of human freedom... Our thoughts, our words, and deeds are the threads of the net which we throw around ourselves.”

I especially like the image of the net. Or maybe it is like we are spiders and our thoughts, words and deeds constitute a web that we are each continually spinning.

Imagining our thoughts and words as something real and tangible may be a little unusual for us Westerners. I know I tend to think of my thoughts as fleeting, ephemeral things that do not have much consequence. Unless I’m concentrating on something they zip in and out of my mind with seemingly little effort or control on my part.

And probably like many of you I was taught as a child that if I didn’t have anything nice to say then I shouldn’t say anything at all. No harm done. I can harbor all the nasty, spiteful little thoughts I want to but as long as they remain unspoken I have done nothing wrong.

The Hindu teaching asks us to consider that once formed even our thoughts have an effect on the world. Yet Hinduism is not the only religion that maintains that a person’s internal thoughts affect their relationship with the people and circumstances around them.

Those of you raised in the Catholic Church know what I’m talking about. The tradition of confession reinforces the idea that even the act of thinking something harmful is a sin. The priest offers penance to help restore the confessor back into the fullness of grace with God.

As contemporary teacher Deepak Chopra explains, “Karma is both action and the consequence of that action; it is cause and effect simultaneously, because every action generates a force of energy that returns to us in like kind...”

He goes on to say that, “Karma implies the action of conscious choice-making.”²

Chopra teaches that everything in our lives is present as a result of choices we have made in the past. It is easy to see how we brought some things into our lives, like the clothes we are wearing, what is in our refrigerators, the friendships we’ve formed, and our jobs.

It is much more challenging to recognize how even our emotional reactions and our moods are the results of choices we make based on our interpretations.

For example, if I were to walk over and dump a cold glass of water over Gail’s head right now she might very well get angry with me. But that is just one possible reaction.

¹ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad IV.4.5

² Chopra, Deepak. The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success.

Maybe she would thank me. Perhaps she is hot and would find the cool water refreshing.

Or the experience could remind her of a time when her kids were small and one of her children poured water on her head in the back yard one lazy summer afternoon. She could become nostalgic.

You can see that *I* wouldn't actually be the cause of whatever response she has. My pouring water on her head is a stimulus. She then has her own internal process of interpretation. Her reaction is ultimately her choice.

I think that idea is really hard for most of us to comprehend. But that is because most of us feel like people and circumstances automatically trigger our responses. We forget that we are still making choices. It is just that we are making these choices unconsciously.

This is one area that is ripe for our spiritual growth work. If we can bring some awareness to our interpretations we can then begin to make conscious choices and realign our actions with our highest values.

One of my spiritual aspirations is to always strive to see the goodness, the essential Belovedness, in everyone I interact with. When I decided to walk back into Raley's that morning I recommitted myself to search out and reflect kindness.

It was true that I had not experienced much goodness on my initial shopping trip. But I had to admit to myself that I had been seeing everyone through the lens of my grumpiness and my stress.

The shift I experienced was simply incredible. It reaffirmed for me the truth of Deepak Chopra's statement that, "every action generates a force of energy that returns to us in like kind."

My smile and cheerfulness came right back to me through the woman at the check stand. By shifting my focus to kindness my experience of the whole day had changed.

One look at our fast-paced culture makes me realize why so many people today are so totally unconscious. Our media-driven society does not support much depth or facilitate self-knowledge. We are not encouraged toward awareness of where we came from or what motivates our actions.

It is all about stimulation, moving on to the next big thing, plowing forward, trying to get ahead, or these days, just stay afloat.

I wonder too, how much of this tendency is due to the fact that our country was founded by people who wanted to leave the past behind and to find a new life. The frontier mentality has permeated our culture so thoroughly that we can't even see it to get perspective. I suspect that this is part of why Americans struggle with this as much as we do.

What I'm talking about is counter-cultural; a spiritual practice of awareness. Like any endeavor to grow our spirits, bringing consciousness to our choice making takes courage. It requires us to look closely at our thoughts, beliefs and interpretations. We must be willing to see even our wounded places.

It might even hurt a little.

A psychologist friend told me once "a personality is just a collection of defense mechanisms". That seems like a fairly pessimistic view of people! But it is true that most of our habitual responses were shaped many years ago usually in reaction to some form of perceived threat.

There *are* folks who are just too wounded and feel much too vulnerable in the world as it is to take on more self-exploration. But those brave souls who venture into the depth of their beings are usually richly rewarded.

When we look inside ourselves of course we uncover all our blemishes and warts, things we've done that we are not proud of, chances we wish we had taken that have passed us by.

But in the process of acknowledging and embracing all the parts that make up the whole of who we are we find that we gain compassion for ourselves.

And then the compassion naturally expands to encompass the others around us with all the ugliness and shame they carry with them.

One technique I have found helpful for really getting to the bottom of my intentions and actions comes from the book *Crucial Conversations*. There are three questions to ask yourself: What am I acting like I want? What do I really want? And how would I behave if I really did?

The exercise points out that all too often we do not behave in accordance with our highest values. If my top priority is to see God in everyone I encounter then why is it sometimes I find myself acting like what I want more than anything is to be considered smart and competent?

My ego tries to hijack my behavior to meet its needs. That morning I went back into the grocery store I conducted myself in a manner more in alignment with what I really value. I left feeling happier and much more like my authentic self.

Authenticity is simply being who we are. There is power and beauty in that simplicity. Like the Jack Pine from the poem read earlier, ugly and gnarled sure, but standing solitary on the mountaintop like that it speaks of wholeness and integrity.

We experience our authenticity when we first make the decision to wake up, to look unflinchingly into our hearts, to confront our egos and make conscious choices with our thoughts, words and actions that align with our deepest values.

Unlike that sleepwalking farmer in Kansas, let us be awake to the seeds that we are sowing in the world around us.

For when we sow the seeds of loving kindness and generosity and compassion it is kindness and generosity and compassion that we will reap.

Amen.