

## “Rescuing Jesus from Christianity”

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In my heart and soul, I believe we *have* to rescue Jesus Christ from Christianity. Isn't it amusingly and painfully ironic that the messiah might need rescuing from the grips of the people who so fervently hold Him dear?

But one only needs to look at their favorite Christian war or bloody conflict to understand that Christians have it all wrong. I think Jesus Christ, if He were to return in the flesh, would say this very same thing: “*You got it all wrong!*”

As the character Frederick said in Woody Allen's 1986 movie, “Hannah and Her Sisters”: “If Jesus came back and saw what's going on in *His* name, He'd never stop throwing up.”

How many crusades have been launched in the Buddha's name? How many bloodbaths have Buddha's followers committed? I don't think the Buddha needs rescuing.

Jesus needs rescuing. And beyond the cutesie, ironic idea inherent in rescuing Jesus from the very people who tout his teachings, is this: It's true, and it desperately needs to happen. We desperately need to rescue Jesus from Christianity.

If my talking about Jesus is uncomfortable for you, then you've hit upon my point. Or your body, your physical and feeling self, has hit upon my point. Why should talking about Jesus leave us so unsettled?

Isn't it amazing that Jesus still holds a grip on us, these thousands of years later? It's because his message was *SO SOUND that it RESOUNDS*.

So, *WHY* does Jesus need rescuing?

I don't need to answer that. I *COULD* give a litany of complaints, but you know what they are.

Instead, bear with me, and let me share with you how I've managed to recover from this painful Christian history and belief system.

Before I had children, I was a newspaper copy editor for many years, and a magazine editor after that. I wrote lots of newspaper and magazine articles during the 1990s, before settling into my current position as mother to two very lovable creatures, my daughters Hope and Grace. (And right now, I have to confess that it's *noooo* accident that you'll hear my daughters' names, Hope and Grace, mentioned again ... *a-n-d a-g-a-i-n* ... today.)

So it seems natural for me to go this route: To take the Christian words – these very power-packed, traditional and *STINGING* words – and reinterpret them in a more loving and liberal fashion. As a words woman, I came to this very naturally. I love words. I love the way words sound. But for many years, I didn't like the way certain Christian words sounded. They hurt my ears ... made me flinch.

Today, I'm here to rescue Jesus Christ from the traditional and oftentimes judgmental Christianity that holds Him hostage. To help all of us to learn to embrace Jesus' teachings and not be afraid of His Light. I think Jesus was the ultimate Liberal, so it makes sense that today's liberals -- and moderate Christians for that matter -- be able to embrace Jesus.

(PAUSE: water break?)

I actually left Christianity in my early 20s because of Christianity's inflaming language. The way these words -- *Jesus Christ, the Son of God, hell, salvation, sin, born again* – sounded. The jam-packed, horribly negative meaning that resonated in my ears.

I left Christianity, and I turned to the Buddha. I *loved* the Buddha, and I *loved* meditating. I enjoyed meditating in my sangha, my meditation group, when I lived in Anchorage, Alaskas.

But there was this itch inside of me, and it took me several years to reach it (extend arm over shoulder to try to reach a tough "itch"): Even while studying Buddhism and meditating my heart out, I itched for my Christian roots.

This “*itch*” came to a head while listening to Thich Nhat Hanh. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Buddhist monk who’s written more than 100 beautiful books of poetry and philosophy -- “Being Peace,” “The Miracle of Mindfulness” and “Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers.” Those are only three examples.

Many times Thich Nhat Hanh has very pointedly said that we should work on our spiritual paths within the bounds of our “birth religions.” He simply means that our karma, the law of moral cause and effect, has led us to our “*birth religion*” and we need to work down our spiritual paths within the boundaries of that religion.

Here’s Thich Nhat Hanh, speaking during a 1997 talk at his Plum Village hermitage in France:

“We have blood ancestors but we have also spiritual ancestors. Jesus is one of the many spiritual ancestors of Europeans. You may not consider yourself a Christian, but that *does not* prevent Jesus from being one of your spiritual ancestors. Because your great-grandfather might have been a good Christian. He has transmitted to you the seed, the energy, the love, and the insight of Jesus. If you do well, you will be able to help *this energy* to manifest within yourself.

There are those who think that they don't have anything to do with Christianity. *They hate Christianity.* They want to leave Christianity behind, but in the body and spirit of these people Jesus may be very present, very real. The energy, the insight and the love of Jesus may be very true, very existential.” (end quote)

I love that Thich Nhat Hanh quote. It helps me understand that *OF COURSE* we have strong feelings about Jesus – he’s our ancestor! He’s our relative! (whisper:) So it’s a family thing! And don’t our family members provoke our strongest feelings?

Thus contemplating my ancestry, I decided to gingerly tip-toe back *TOWARD* Christianity. Not to *EMBRACE* Christianity. Just give it a look-see. And to be open to no longer hating my Christian roots. So I attended various Anchorage churches, and even attended Catholic Mass in a lovely mountainside chapel. I joined a prayer group led by a Catholic priest but which welcomed all religious people.

I did not slough off my newly acquired Buddhist sentiments. Just those that didn't "fit" (including the 16 or so Tibetan hell realms).

In the ensuing years, I learned that while the Buddha could help me rearrange my *internal* terrain, I needed Jesus to help me work the *outer* domain. I needed both Jesus and the Buddha to help mold me into a more loving, happier person.

Following the Buddha, that was easy. But to return to my Christian roots, I had to follow Jesus too. Whoa, that's a lot tougher.

So I rewrote Jesus Christ, in my mind and in my heart. And doing so is **THE ONLY WAY** I can still call myself a Christian ... on the days I feel I might actually be one.

I rewrote Jesus Christ for myself, so let me share that with you. (And if you don't like how I've rewritten Jesus, you can rewrite Him all over again, in whichever way you think is right.)

Here's how I did it. The first thing I did, to become a Christian, is I put the *historical* Jesus to bed.

Because, you know, it doesn't really matter **WHO** the historical Jesus was. Historically, we know he probably was a carpenter, he probably lived into his 30s, and he most likely died nailed to a cross. But was he really as pale-skinned as he's represented in so many Christian circles, and with that Northern European straight nose? Was he born of a "virgin"? Was he really chaste? Why would **THAT** be so, historically? Did he **REALLY** rise to heaven and then return, to chat up his disciples?

So for me to understand Jesus Christ, I had to put all of these questions to bed. These questions, which to my mind only serve to distract us from Jesus Christ's message. These questions needed a rest. My ability to be a good person, a good Christian, do not rest on whether Jesus was born of a virgin, or whether he was married to Mary Magdelene.

These are interesting historical threads, worthy of critical analysis, but knowing the outcome to any of these historical *queries DOES NOT HELP*

***ME BECOME A BETTER PERSON. ONLY*** following Jesus' teachings helps me become a better person.

To avoid getting lost in the Bible and in the hullabaloo surrounding Jesus, the man, I put the historical Jesus to bed.

(Get out visual aids: the wooden baby bed, dolly and blanket. Kiss the doll tenderly and "put her to bed" for all to see, away from the podium. Return to podium.)

"Nighty-night, Jesus. I love you."

The historical Jesus, the Jesus of body and flesh. I've put him to rest. Let's move on!

And what do we have left?

Only ... the Son of God.

(Pause)

***OH ...*** did I say that? A Unitarian Universalist in a UU fellowship said ***THAT?***

Yes, I believe that Jesus was the Son of God.

(Pause!)

***The Son of God???*** But what does that *mean*? In traditional Christian circles, I suppose that means he's the Father's special kid, the favored child, the Chosen One.

But how else may we interpret this Christ, this Son of God?

(Pause)

(Disappear behind podium and raise, above head, slowly, a giant-sized picture of a SUN. Hang this over podium for all to see.)

How about this: That the Christ is the SUN of God?

That while he was in the body of Jesus, the Christ “illuminated” the world?

Picture a sun (point to the picture). Now picture Jesus, during his time on the earth, and picture how he must have illuminated the world around him. Think of his energy, how powerful it must’ve been. He emanated love and peace, goodness and light, hope and grace. He emanated these things.

The people around him, those huddled masses who hung on his every word, his every gesture, they must’ve been able to **FEEL** the goodness ooze out of this man Jesus. He gave them uplifting messages of hope. He spoke authoritatively of God’s good graces.

Haven’t you been around someone who oozed love? Who oozed goodness? And didn’t you enjoy being in that person’s presence? Didn’t that person *illuminate* you, cheer you up? I think Jesus did this in his day.

Jump forward to today. And while we recently put Jesus to bed (“ssshhhhh” ...finger to mouth) we still have the Christ.

He still illuminates the world. **HOW?**

Because the Christ, that’s just a fancy-pants, Christian way of saying “the love” or “the energy.” The Christ is “the spark” that Jesus was endowed with, that all of us, sitting here today, also have inside of us, somewhere, I don’t quite know how or where.

And now, some words by William Law, an 18<sup>th</sup> century writer and theologian. I share this with you to help explain what I mean when I speak of “the love” in today’s sermon:

“By love I do not mean any natural tenderness, which is more or less in people according to their constitution; but I mean a larger principle of the soul, founded in reason and piety, which makes us tender, kind and gentle to all our fellow creatures as creatures of God, and for his sake.”

The Christ in Jesus is the Christ in us is the Christ that theologian and writer Mathew Fox speaks of when he talks of the Cosmic Christ, "the pattern that connects." The Cosmic Christ connects "heaven and earth, past and future, divinity and humanity, all of creation."

The Christ is your Godliness. It's the aspect of The Source, from whence we all came, that remains with us and which, upon death, I sincerely hope returns *TO* the Source.

The Christ is my *SUN*. The Christ is your SUN. It's what made Jesus the SUN of God and it's what makes each of us ... **IT'S WHAT MAKES ALL OF US THE SUNS OF GOD.**

(SHOUT IT OUT):

Hallelujah! Now that *IS* the Good Word.

As Hindu meditation master Eknath Easwaran said earlier in our opening words:

“Loving the Lord means loving the innermost Self in all those around us. We need only somehow to increase our capacity to love -- because we do not live in what we think; we live in what we love.”

If you don't like the names I'm giving to God-- it/him/her--just change them in your head. **CHANGE THE WORDS.** It's no big deal! Change the words so they mean something to you!

Just like the *SON* (point to doll) turns into the *SUN* (point to picture). And then we, at least I, can relate.

The *SUN OF GOD* illuminates the world. The *SUN OF GOD* emanates love and peace, goodness and light, hope and grace. Jesus, *the SUN OF GOD*, did this in his day. And *YOU and I, SUNS OF GOD*, do it today. We love each other, we offer peace. We're full of goodness and light. We offer hope and we supply grace, or blessings, to each other.

We're not all good, because we're also human, with human foibles. With big fat *EGOS*, and all of its trappings. And that's OK, too.

Jesus had a strong Christ in him. He had a lot of The Source in him. And so do we. We can cultivate our own Christ, our own SUNship (point to sun picture), our own best selves. Either by “following the Christ” as traditional Christians do, or by other means.

We simply need to cultivate our own Christ – love and light -- in ourselves. We need to remember *to BE THE SUN* (point to sun picture). *EMANATE!* Emanate love. Emanate life. Emanate joy. Emanate peace. Emanate your “bestest” selves.

We can have our bad moods and our foul tempers and we can still be safe in knowing that we *ARE* the *SUN*, we *ARE* the Christ.

And that, my friends, is the magic and the mystery and the beauty of it all. And that is how, when a traditionally “Christian” friend asks me if *I am* a Christian, I can answer emphatically, sometimes tearfully, “Oh yes. I love Jesus Christ. He is my Light.”

Jesus the man? He brought us the teachings. He reminded people about what was important—quite simply--to be excellent to one another. The Christ is the Light. The Christ is in each of us. I love that part of Jesus, of myself, of all of us. I love that connection that we all have.

And I am a recovering Christian. Still a Christian, in my own Christ—which is light—centered way. In the only way I can understand and follow the teachings of Christ.

Thanks be to God. To the Source. To the Oneness of all there is.

We’re human. We’re only human. But ... we’re ... so ... much ... more. And Jesus Christ is ... so ... much ... more.

(LONG SIP OF WATER!)

OK, so that’s my original sermon. But we’re not finished. That’s only the beginning. We still need to discuss *HOW* to RESCUE JESUS from CHRISTIANITY.

And this is how I propose we start:

#1. It starts with bravery. We have to be true to ourselves, and unflinching in our respective faiths.

#2. We need to reclaim Jesus Christ in our own words, and then be willing to talk about that.

As my mother, Susie Forker, told me a few months back: “I’ve lived my whole life being quiet because I’m afraid of conflict.”

We need to have faith in our faith! Have faith in ourselves! We need to be the vocal majority! We need to give ourselves *permission* to talk about Jesus Christ.

Because guess what happens when we *don’t* do this, when we remain silent? You’re seeing it every day: Someone else does the talking for us.

That’s how we get a self-proclaimed Christian president launching a Middle Eastern war, a war that kills tens of thousands of people, and no one cries out, “How Christian is *THAT*?”

Those of us -- liberals, moderates and conservatives who *don’t* damn the universe – all of us together, need to vocalize our faiths. We need to do what my mother has long been afraid of: to make ourselves vulnerable to a barrage of verbal abuse. That’s what we’re afraid of, isn’t it, in the extreme? That someone will tell *us* “*You’re wrong!*”? That our faith is all wrong.

That’s what some who profess to be Christians would tell us, isn’t it? Those who think they have a “*lock*” on Jesus Christ, who believe it’s their way or a one-way ticket to hell and damnation. Funny, isn’t it, that such Christians are married to “their” way, not Christ’s way. If extremist Christians would take apart their belief systems, thread by thread, they’d see that the Christ has gone missing.

Christ is found in love, not hate. Christ is found in light, not judgment. Christ is found in joy and peace, not anger and war.

I found my own Christ-centered light years ago. I’m now to the point where I’ve become an oddity to the extremist Christians in my life. They know I’m Christ-centered, they just can’t figure out how I could be so *darn* liberal-leaning, too. I have to admit I enjoy confounding them.

This is my most important point of today: What makes me so powerful, is I have Jesus Christ’s message *here* (head) *AND here* (heart), and there’s no stopping that. *No amount* of Bible quoting or Jesus ramming can compete with knowing and living the Christ.

So my goal is to get Christians and other religious people unafraid of talking about their faiths. We all think, believe and feel differently. ***And that's OK.*** We just need to be brave enough to talk about what we think, believe and feel. ***We need to take back our Christian voices, stand up to the schoolyard bullies, and revel in our own beautiful, powerful faiths.***

Blessed be.