

I did some research this past week. Turns out that after the 3 wise men left, 3 wiser women arrived. They also brought 3 gifts -- fresh diapers, casseroles for the week, and wine!

In the mid-1960s, a Roman Catholic cardinal and a priest Scripture scholar found themselves seated at the same table at a dinner party. The cardinal immediately put forth his grievance. "You know, Father, there are some of your kind these days who are saying we don't know how many Magi there were."

"I am not one of them," replied the scholar. "I'm glad to hear that..." The cardinal did not have a chance to finish. "There were 6," stated the scholar. "6?" blustered the cardinal. "How do you figure six?" "Well, in the reliquary at the Cologne Cathedral there are the heads of 3 wise men, and in the reliquary at the Milan Cathedral, there are the heads of 3 more wise men. 3 plus 3 equals 6!" At one time there were 5 heads of John the Baptist in the city of Rome alone! I know that's been cleared up, not sure about all those magi in Cologne & Milan!

But let's dig into the text a bit. Matthew's story of the Magi is built on a massive, many-layered irony. The Magi are Gentiles, and through their own calculations, know about the birth of the king of the Jews. The Jewish leaders, who have the prophecy of the birth in their Scriptures -- are ignorant of it. As Matthew's gospel unfolds, it's mostly about these 2 groups -- and, as this story indicates, these 2 groups need one another. The Jews need the Gentiles to alert them to the truth in their midst. The Gentiles need the Jews to show them the path to the truth they have discerned in the stars. This story also tells us that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises for ALL the people. So Jesus comes from the people of the Jews, a child of the covenant, and He is a universal savior -- born of a particular people.

However, this major message of the story is the background for darker and more complex realities. The strangers come to Herod with an outrageous request. They want him, the *present* king of the Jews, to help them find and pay homage to the *newborn* king of the Jews. They want Herod to provide them with directions to his replacement! They have no gifts for Herod, a major breach of ancient etiquette. They want Herod to show them the new king for whom their reverence and gifts are reserved. Is it any wonder that Herod and 'with him all of Jerusalem' are troubled?

But these foreigners know the truth -- that all earthly power is derived from heavenly power. The earthly king must not try to reject or thwart the plan of the heavenly king. The role of the earthly king is homage, prostration, and the offering of gifts to this divine king. King Herod must yield to the child of the star. Oddly enough, Herod knows this is his role. So he plays it -- on the outside. But inside he is filled with murderous schemes. This resistance and hypocrisy, profiled so effectively in Herod, are still happening today in our own country -- when strangers arrive in our country offering us their own truth, a truth that threatens the way we are currently living, we still often reject them. (adapted from STARLIGHT, John Shea, p. 145-146)

Second, back to the question of how many magi there were. Matthew doesn't give us a number. In Christian imagination they have ranged from 2 to 12. But in most of Nativity art, from earliest times to the present, there are 3. It seems natural that 3 gifts should have 3 carriers. Can all those nativity sets be wrong?!

This question of numbers may seem to be a bit of trivia reserved for dining with scripture scholars, but the conversation definitely heats up when someone suggests that the number was zero. Some contend that the story of the Magi is only legendary. In other words, some say it has theological importance but no basis in history. The question of the historicity of the Magi story in all its aspects may always be debated. Where

exactly in the East did they come from? How could Herod have assembled the chief priests and the scribes? Why did Herod ever let them go? What type of star was it? What happened to the gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Our concern here is not with the scarcity of historical data but with the abundance of poetry and story – and most significantly for our purposes here – theological and spiritual truth. If the Magi reduce historical reason to silence, they thrill the artistic imagination to song. Where the historian legitimately equivocates, the poet and storyteller legitimately expound. The historian adjusts his glasses and notes the Magi have no names. The storyteller takes another tack.

“Names! Names! Of course, no names are given by Matthew,” the storyteller throws up her hands in exasperation. “If Matthew gave their names, the vicious descendants of Herod would know who they were and be able to trace and slaughter their children and their children’s children. No, their names were kept secret for centuries until it was safe. I can tell you now that they are called Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. It is time for all to be known. The truth, as Jesus said, is at home on the rooftops. So my story begins with the truth of the Magi’s own births so that you will see how it was that they came to search and sacrifice for the birth of Christ....”

But remember that Matthew wrote for a JEWISH audience. This story tells us that these Gentiles too have hearts fit for worship. Part of this is just plain fun for the storyteller and, hopefully, entertainment for the storylistener. But, depending upon the storyteller and the ambition of the story, part of it is a faith-inspired enterprise. The Magi become symbolic carriers of Christian perceptions, vehicles of Christian insights. This may not be the mainline way of expressing and communicating Christian faith. More sober and direct catechetics is always needed and, at least on some occasions, is definitely preferable. But what this story lacks in directness, it makes up in invention and expansion. The Magi may be dubious as historical facts, but in the Christian tradition they have been wonderful bearers of rich insights into the strange ways of faith.

And so my third point. The story of Matthew is the touchstone text. It is laden with symbols, and rich in theological associations. But popular Christian tradition never felt unduly tied to Matthew’s text. It has become the springboard for much reflection on the Christian life. And here I’d like to focus on just one possible insight. (all adapted from Shea, OP CIT.)

Epiphany tells us that life is one great and endless journey. Life is a puzzle and a mystery. We need to wind our way through it, often from one unknown to the other. All of our lives are a bit of a maze and all of us are mysteries.

We are all on our way to somewhere, however undefined, however unconscious. Without really knowing it, perhaps, we spend our days looking for the way through – through the indecision, the discomfort, the unfinishedness that can so easily become our soul’s permanent residence. We struggle for the way to an exit that is not always there. We live looking for the something that beckons but is not clear. Why? Because we can feel it within us, that’s why. It never quiets; it never sleeps. It just keeps urging us on, like those Magi. But to where? To nowhere we know, to do nothing we can see right at the present. Sometimes closer than others, always tantalizing, always just out of reach; the feeling of being in the wrong place can get so strong it can be painful.

The problem is that without clear intention, without ever stopping long enough to determine where we will end up if we stay on the road we’re on now, our true purpose in life can sink into the routine of routine -- and little more. We simply go along, turning with the turns in the road but never plotting a course of our own. Never facing the single greatest question of life: Why was I born? Meaning, what am I meant to be?

What was I made to do? What am I supposed to offer the world with my life? If we do not spend some time in our life's journey answering these questions, then we may be breathing but we are not fully alive.

How do we find our way to the end of our journey? By trial and failure, of course. In fact, the journey itself is both the lesson and the end. And often it is only by pursuing what does not fit that we can ever appreciate what does. If we are ever to reach our particular call to completeness, to wholeness, to the true self in life, we must bring to the darkness of the journey 3 major characteristics.

We must come to understand that a certain residual dissatisfaction with life as we have shaped it for ourselves is the very essence of what we name 'call' or 'vocation.' Clearly, it is at the moments of dissatisfaction with life as we know it now that the door to the future swings open for us. There is something missing in the making of who we are meant to be that we are being goaded to pursue.

Openness of heart and abandonment of soul are portals to the future. Unless we are capable of letting go of the security level to which we have become accustomed, unless we are ready to begin again, the lack of a sense of meaning in the here and now that plagues us with the grace of doubt will die in the wind. And with it will go all the unfinished parts of ourselves, left to shrivel in the face of opportunities not taken. These are the kinds of moments people look back on years later and sigh, "if only..." while the heart beats slower and the present loses another layer of glow.

But openness and letting go are not enough. There is a parallel project that comes with the call to begin our lives again and that is the task of learning what we do and do not now know. Everything we have ever done has taught us something about our skills and taught us about ourselves, as well – our personality, our soul style, our dreams deferred. Simply put, there are things we may feel we are called to that we are not emotionally equipped to handle.

To really understand what it is in life that we're looking for, we have to come to understand ourselves. Otherwise, we run the risk of making the same mistaken choices over and over and over again. Then what happens to the pursuit of happiness is the stuff of tragedy. Then what happens to the wholeness for which the human being is destined is at most a feeling of life deferred. Most of all, what happens to becoming what we were born to be goes to dust when we go on ignoring what we do or do not have to bring to it.

No authentic call is a call to more of ourselves than we have to offer.

Finally, following the call within to the world outside ourselves takes courage. It demands, too, a deep faith in the fact that there is nothing that can happen to us in the process that will do anything other than teach us more or bring us closer to our true selves. What can possibly be bad about either of these things? Clearly, failure is not failure unless we make it so. The reality is that there are 2 faces of failure – one of them deadly, the other one life-giving. I'm sure we have all seen them both.

I knew an older man with great musical talent who, as a young man, became discouraged by the difficulty of his studies, and dropped out of music school. He never studied another thing in his life. I did his funeral. He died disgruntled, underdeveloped, angry, and trapped within the boundaries of his never developed self.

I also knew a grad student in Chapel Hill who struggled terribly with her thesis -- and abandoned her doctoral studies; she did not graduate. I thought she would be devastated. But she spoke about the loss of those years and that degree with a laugh and a toss of her head: "Best thing that ever happened to me," she said. "Otherwise, I'd be in a small college someplace teaching writing. As it is, I'm doing just what I'm

supposed to be doing – writing and researching – and I love it!” Here was a woman who knew the place of failure in our eternal spiritual quest to become the best of ourselves.

Clearly, failure may, in the long run, be the only real key to success, the real test of what it takes to follow our true call -- the only way to at last, find the star that guides us to our true, full identity in Christ. Happy traveling! Love the journey! Reach for the stars! HAPPY EPIPHANY! Amen. (last section adapted from FOLLOWING THE PATH, Joan Chittister, p. 61-67)

FOR PERSONAL USE ONLY