

Commentary on Sin by Cynthia Bourgeault

You'll frequently hear it explained by theologians that the word "sin" in Greek is hamartia, which means "missing the mark." It's an archery metaphor, of course, suggesting that either your aim is off or your force is incorrect, leading you to overshoot or undershoot the target.

The Gospel of Thomas suggests a different controlling metaphor, in line with this idea of "original fullness" we've been exploring over the past couple of emails. Adam does come forth out of the arche -- his authentic Origin -- like a shooting star blazing across the night sky. But something causes him to wobble in his orbit and lose momentum. He falls into the gravitational field of the earth, and there is consumed. The problem is not so much "missing the mark" as it is losing alignment with his arche -- that original "great power and richness" that would have allowed him to remain on trajectory.

It's a slight shift of meaning, but it has major reverberations for how you understand your spiritual task in this life. If you see yourself as an archer, standing there before the target in full possession of an independent will and force, then your task is to improve your aim and be responsible for any damages caused by your misdirected arrows. If you see yourself as flowing out from an original wholeness that is at the source of both your integrity and your power, the task before you is simple: to stay in alignment.

I say "simple," but it's not really simple. It's a matter of a continuous attunement to that mysterious deeper wisdom flowing through your being -- deeper than your ego, deeper than your wounds and unconscious impulses, deeper even than any pictures or scenarios of what you think your True Self might be -- all the way down to that wellspring at the very center of your being which Thomas Merton once described as the point vierge ("virgin point"): "a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives."

The archer can quickly enlist the ego to help make amends and pick up those stray arrows. But this point vierge -- this innermost center of the heart -- can never be accessed by the ego. Only as the witnessing presence grows strong in us -- and then itself falls silent -- can we enter this Holy of Holies.

"The real freedom," Merton remarked, "is to be able to come and go from that center and to do without anything that is not immediately connected to that center." For in point of fact, it is your interior compass, the needle of your heart pointing to the magnetic north of God. When the inner alignment is strong and steady, you find that you are able to follow the course of your own authentic unfolding with a kind of effortless grace. When the signal gets dim or you forget to listen, it's a pretty safe bet that you've wandered off-course.

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