



How to Empty Your Head

For years now I have been telling audiences about my alternative to higher education. I call it lower education. You come to my school and on the first day we give you a Ph.D. You study for four years, and we take it away. We give you a master's degree and in two years take that away. Eventually, you work your way down to kindergarten. Complete that, and you become a teacher.

Have you noticed how much of education is about filling your head with facts? You fill and fill and get top-heavy and stuffed and over-packed. The weight becomes unbearable. Eventually, it's time to empty out, unlearn, and lower your sights.

Of course, this is not my original idea. It is the main theme in many spiritual writings. Consider the wonderful story from the Gospel of Thomas. A woman goes to the village market and buys a sack of grain. There's a hole in the sack, and on the way home the grain spills out, bit by bit, so that when she arrives, the sack is empty. Jesus tells the story, saying that this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. The kind of world Jesus is teaching is empty in some mysterious way.

I realized that the divine that I had been seeking in some mysterious ether off the earth or in a book of spiritual facts was glowing in everything close at hand.

The *Tao Te Ching* says, "The Way that can be spoken of is not the real Way." What? Does that mean that the real Tao is something you can't put into words? Then what do you do? How do you know it? How do you talk about it? The *Tao Te Ching* goes on to say, "He who speaks doesn't know, and he who knows doesn't speak." I presume that means there has never been a teacher or a public speaker who knew what he was talking about.

Many people, especially spiritual leaders, try hard not to show any leaks. They

talk as if every word they say is dependable and complete. Airtight. And they want you to accept every letter of every word and repeat it after them. Yet the sure sign of spiritual insight is a leaky source.

A Zen master says, "Life is like a river." His students respond, "We don't get that. How can life be like a river?" "Okay," the master says, "life is not like a river."

The real spiritual teacher comes home from a lecture or class and finds that there is a hole in what he has been saying. Of this hole, Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas, that this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. What we're looking for is not a system of belief but the leaking out of beliefs — an empty-

ing of self that the New Testament calls *kenosis*. Odysseus uses the same word when he talks about other warriors returning from war with plundered riches, while he and his men come home full of experiences but with their hands empty.

I began my spiritual journey knowing everything with certainty. In a Catholic school I was taught the catechism, questions and answers that were simple and pat. As time went on, and as I read spiritual masters from history and around the world, my belief began to leak. At

first I was worried. I shouldn't be leaky. But the hole in my vessel only grew larger. More of my understanding and belief trickled out. My certainty became weaker. For the first time, I developed a capacity for wonder.

Then, a truly unexpected development came along. I discovered that I was more secure with a large hole in my religious vessel than when it wasn't there. A new kind of certainty settled in me. I became more interested in holiness than in a creed, more concerned about being responsive to the people around me than in doing good and avoiding evil. My guilt trickled out of the sack. My anxiety about being right — gone.

Then I began to see a halo around the most ordinary things — food, books, trees, other people. I realized that the divine that I had been seeking in some mysterious ether off the earth or in a book of spiritual facts was glowing in everything close at hand. I even saw the incandescence in myself.

The secret is an empty head. Paradoxically, you may need to read a lot of books to achieve that emptiness, or

talk to a lot of people, or meditate for many hours. Emptiness is a significant achievement. It's easier to be full of ideas, beliefs, plans, and agendas than to be empty. And you have nothing to show for all your effort.

But eventually, you may learn the paradox of paradoxes: unconsciousness is full; awareness is empty.

Thomas Moore has a new book, *Writing in the Sand: Jesus and the Soul of the Gospels* (Hay House, May 2009). See careofthesoul.net.