

## “Speed Dating with the Buddha” (Gary)

Living in Vermont, I expect to be behind the times, two or three fashion steps behind the rest of the country. Mention “blackberries” here and folks still imagine you’re talking about a pie filling. And being a minister I probably lag a little behind everyone else. You don’t always catch the latest trends reading *Theology Today*. So it was only recently that I heard about the new phenomenon that’s become the rage among young urban professionals in many big cities -- speed dating.

I vaguely remember how embarrassing and scary it could be, asking someone out. The fears of rejection or of hurting someone’s feelings. The tentative mating dance at high school and college mixers. Blind dates were probably the worst. But all that’s changed now. Speed dating is an answer to the perennial problem that single men and women face of how to meet someone attractive and nice.

Those who are eligible and willing gather in a rented hall or restaurant. But unlike bars, speed dating sessions don’t require alcohol, and unlike clubs there’s no loud music that makes conversation difficult. Speed dating is based on the premise that you really don’t need to spend an entire evening with someone in order to tell if you’d like to see them again. You can usually determine in just a few minutes whether you find someone interesting and attractive or totally unsuitable. And so speed dating, like boxing, has three minute rounds. Contenders go to their corners and come out courting, each round with a different potential paramour. After, you just check off a box whether you want to exchange email addresses, and if the feeling is mutual, take it from there. In the course of a typical evening, you might be able to meet a couple dozen singles in search of that special someone, without the awkwardness or expense or spending an entire evening with somebody who turns out to be a bozo rather than a dream date.

What applies to dating also applies to churches, I suspect. In fact, I’ve heard experts say that most Sunday morning visitors form their critical first impressions of a congregation in the first six minutes after they walk inside the door. That’s not enough time to hard boil an egg, but it is apparently enough to get a feel for spiritual ambience. Those of you who are here church-shopping probably just had time to hear the prelude and opening words before you’d formed some judgment about this place. Whether the people seemed likeable or distant, whether the atmosphere felt warm or cold. It may not be anything you can put your finger on, just a hint of discomfort or delight. And if the experts are right, many of you have already made a decision about whether you might come back for a second visit based solely on those initial reactions.

What this means is that everything I say from this point on is probably just wasted effort, but of course, that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop my sermon right now. That would be letting you off too easy. What I am going to suggest is that these first impressions are important and ought to be trusted. Whether you call them gut instincts, or intuitions, or hunches, or leaps of faith, they contain a good deal of wisdom and shouldn’t be discounted. In fact, after reading a recent book called *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell, I’ve started to believe that sometimes snap judgments may be the very best kind.

The world requires us to make snap judgments all the time, based on the most incomplete information. A parent decides whether or not to let a ten year old spend the night at Mandy's after a five minute phone chat with Mandy's mom or dad, whom they've never met. A family in the emergency room has to decide whether ninety-three year old grandpa should be put on a ventilator *right now* or allowed to quietly slip away. A driver on a routine commute sees the car ahead swerving wildly and has to react without thinking. Because we live in a world where there's never enough time or enough data to assess all the options, we become pretty adept at steering by the seat of our pants. In fact, too much thinking or over-analyzing a situation often gets us into trouble.

*Blink* has a host of examples where that's been the case, like a museum that spent ten million dollars to buy an ancient Greek statue after months of exhaustive chemical testing to authenticate the age and origin of the marble. The way the surface was calcified could supposedly only happen over the course of hundreds of years. Then connoisseurs took one brief look at the carving and could tell that it was fake. And the interesting thing is that the art buffs couldn't usually say why they knew the statute was a phoney. One of them said vaguely it was "something about the fingernails." Others just had a sense the piece didn't look right. But in the space of an instant, they knew more about the history and origins of the artwork than a team of mineralogists had learned in months.

Or take gambling as an example. Give a poker player two different decks of cards. One of the decks is clean, but the other has been stacked in favor of the house. Eventually, after say twelve or fifteen hands, the poker player will figure out that one of the decks has been tampered with. But long before he suspects anything's amiss on a conscious level, after just three or four games, the player's palms will begin to sweat and his heart rate will climb each time he draws a card from the stacked deck. His subconscious knows something is wrong well before he can begin to articulate those misgivings.

Gladwell calls this kind of knowing "thin-slicing," when we learn all we need to know about a situation from a very quick glance. Thin-slicing is why high-speed dating works, because in order to decide whether we're attracted to another person, we don't necessarily need to know their astrological sign or views on the Middle East or favorite brand of toothpaste. Indeed, having that much irrelevant information about a potential date may overload the mental circuits. Instead of trusting our initial reaction, which may be based on something about the fingernails, or how this person makes eye contact or smiles too often or not enough, we get confused. The inner radar, or baloney detector, or still small voice--whatever you wish to call it--is drowned out by the noise of the old gray matter cranking away.

The Buddhists have an appropriate saying I've always liked: first thought, best thought. It means that our initial reactions to a situation tend to be the most trustworthy, freshest, most uncluttered, because the closest to our immediate experience. And anyone who's ever tried sitting on a cushion for even a few minutes knows how hard it is to merely be

aware. Thoughts begin to chatter: fears, fantasies, daydreams like a pack of monkeys intent on disrupting our composure. When I was taught to meditate, I was told to simply notice these dancing distractions without getting sucked into them, to label them “thinking” and go back to watching my breath--the aim simply to be present, to be attentive to what’s happening here and now.

But paying attention to the wrong things can get us into trouble. And first impressions can lead us terribly astray just as often as they lead to some kind of insight or enlightenment. A woman who’s speed dating, for example, might think that she’s looking for a guy who’s sensitive, funny and well-read but consistently wind up with men who are tall and flashy dressers instead. Consciously, she’s searching for Mr. Right. Unconsciously, she keeps drawing cards from the deck stacked with Mr. Wrong because playing with that deck makes her palms sweat and heart rate go up. And the irony is that she can’t give any rational explanation for why she winds up with the Joker so often instead of the King of Hearts, because she’s thin-slicing and making bad choices at a pre-conscious level.

Now I know I’m treading on dangerous territory here. I’m starting to stereotype women and also generalize about romantic relationships in a way that assumes an overall heterosexual orientation. But the point is that all of us stereotype all the time. Like it or not, tall men do have a decided advantage in this world, not just in romance but in business and politics and yes, even in the pulpit ... just as white people are advantaged ... and straight people. All are linked together in our culture with qualities of normality, leadership, virtue and responsibility, and that link is so strong that it operates on the mind automatically, even against our will.

One of the disquieting things I learned from Gladwell’s book is how hard it is to escape these biases. We may sincerely want to be color blind and condemn prejudice in every form but remain under the spell of hidden persuaders that like subliminal advertising sell us on the notion that some people are superior to others based on height or sex or equally silly criteria. Remember those old drive-in movies, where images from the snack bar were spliced into the film? They flashed by so quickly you weren’t even aware they were there. They effected you imperceptibly. You just developed a sudden gnawing hunger for a giant bucket of hot buttered popcorn. Instant heart attack. Enough salt to send your blood pressure soaring. And no one could talk you out of that appetite, or reason with you that you’d just had dinner an hour ago and weren’t really hungry. You’d been programmed to respond.

Biases are like that. They operate under the table. But while we can’t get rid of stereotypes rationally or just by wishing them away, we can be re-programmed. If instead of popcorn, we’re exposed to images of yummy carrots, for instance, we get an overpowering craving for health food. And if instead of images of powerful, high achieving white males we’re fed a steady diet of Nelson Mandela and Olympic athletes through our news channels, we slowly begin to build up a whole new set of positive associations about what it means to be black. If we see and hear women in our pulpit week by week, Roddy and Marta and Elz, we start to de-program the childish notion

that God is the Big Daddy--an image so archetypal that we remain under its spell whether we believe in God or not--and we begin to experience the feminine as a source of wholeness and grace.

I think this is one important role for religious institutions like this one. It's a place where we come under the enchantment of what's healthy and humanizing in our culture. That's why we tell stories of Jesus and Francis and the Buddha and other sensitive males, who weren't flashy dressers, to let those images seep into our unconscious minds and remind us that there really are other models of what it means to be a success. It's why we have religious symbols on our walls. For while CNN tells us that the world is a great battlefield and Wall Street Week contends that it's one global market, these ancient icons help us to visualize the world in quite different terms. It's a dance, says the Shiva. It's an act of love, according to the Cross. And the Menorah tells us that the universe is a holy miracle that burns without ceasing.

The Unitarian minister Jack Mendelsohn once defined "spirituality" as knowing the difference between what's essential and what's peripheral in life. And to know what's essential, we need to know where to look. At their best, congregations like ours can help us to correctly thin-slice the world, understand where we need to direct our attention to quickly find the information we need to make intelligent decisions and not get suckered in by clever forgeries or stacked decks. In a culture where 18,000 advertisements each day are trying to sell us products, we need to take at least one hour each week to remember values that can't be bought or sold. In a world that operates at increasingly high velocity, where even dating puts a premium on speed, we need to pause, to keep our own gyroscopes in balance and stay in touch with our inner source of knowing.

It's a fast paced environment we live in. Sitting in your car driving, changing lanes at seventy miles an hour, you need to pay attention to be ready to respond, in the quick of the moment. Sitting in your car fighting traffic, stuck behind the slow-moving vehicle and late for your appointment, you also need to pay attention not to be sucked into the heat of that moment. And the odds of us staying calm and centered sitting *there* increase if you've spent some time sitting *here*, in a pew or on a cushion, practicing compassion, cultivating serenity, contemplating peace, paying attention to the beauty in the world and the good in human nature.

With enough practice, I guess, we could all become masters of speed dating. We could walk into a room full of strangers--black or white, gay or straight, female or male--and within just a few minutes, find something in everyone to love.

