

## Métis Teaching by Cynthia Bourgeault

I wanted in this last teaching just to share some thoughts about a quality that's almost never talked about.

Either on the contemplation side of the spectrum or the action side of the spectrum.

It sort of slips right in between the cracks and nobody talks about it.

And yet it may be the solution to the puzzle.

And I'm gonna use the word that I first learned it by when I was introduced to it as a concept by Peter Kingsley.

Have any of you heard of Peter Kingsley?

A few of you have.

He's a designer special.

He's a brilliant British born scholar who worked very, very closely over the years with Madame Irina Tweedy and then in the Naqshbandi Sufi lineage that she held.

So that Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee, who some of you have heard of, was one of his teachers.

So Peter is a classic scholar, a classic Greek.

He wrote a great book on Parmenides.

And so he wrote a book called Reality.

And in Reality, he introduces us to this concept called Métis.

M-E-T-I-S.

And the E has a little circumflex over the top of it because it's a Greek word.

And what this means, when it's used in the definitions of the classic lexicons translating ancient Greek to modern and vice versa, it's usually translated as cunning or shrewdness.

And you see a lot of it in the Greek gods as they're tricking people left and right.

And that, of course, is black magic métis when it's used in the service of your own aggressive, selfish aims.

But there is a different kind of cunning which you might call imaginal cunning.

And when you take *métis* and move it from the base of bettering my own self to compassionate, skillful action that actually creates the desired results, you have what I call, that's what I call imaginal *métis*.

And *métis* is the capacity to take skillful, decisive, appropriate action in a moment based on three-centered awareness, okay?

So I'll go back over all of these.

It's the capacity to take skillful, I mean, effective, well-timed, well-seen, not clumsy, but efficacious, decisive action, means you don't waffle.

The moment for doing comes and you do.

Appropriate action, that goes again with skillful.

That this is action that is not just trying to be outrageous for outrageous' sake, but which really has, supports the desired end.

In a moment, which means that you don't come in with, it's never premeditated.

It's prepared, but it's not planned, okay?

You all know the difference between them, okay?

Based on three-centered awareness.

In other words, based on the information you're picking up in the moment from all three centers.

Which means it is an exercise, this imaginal *métis* I'm talking about, is the function of the three centers all working and your capacity to hold yourself in a place that's open and empty enough that you have access to all of them.

Because you know that any kind of agitated motion or any sudden domination of any one center is going to knock you out of this capacity.

So you have to place yourself sort of like the absolute unmovable eye of the needle in the midst of the thing swirling around.

Take in information from all of them without reaction, without dominating by one or another center.

And allow in a nanosecond for it to come together and flow out as a course of action.

So this is, what I thought I'd do is to give you three stories that two of them I know will be completely familiar to you.

The third will only be familiar to the person, the people who have followed me around for a while and are tired of hearing my same boring stories.

But I don't think that's more than 10% of the group at this point, so, and they've learned the skill of patience.

>> [LAUGH] >> You know?

Don't judge, support.

>> [LAUGH] >> So the first story, you all know from the Bible, that the Pharisees are apparently out to trap Jesus any way they can.

And so they got a bit of good one now.

They say, well, to whom should we pay, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?

You know, and it's 360 degree death.

Either way he turns, he's going to rain coals down on his head.

If he says it's not legal to pay taxes to Caesar, he's guilty of insurrection.

And it opens, all they have to do is go through them, and the Roman leagues come in and arrest him because he's in insurrection against the state of Rome.

If he says it is legal to pay taxes to Caesar, he's just invalidated his whole teaching and shows up as another mealy mouthed fraud that will teach when he's not causing any problems, thank you.

So they've put him on a crisis of integrity versus practicality from which there's no obvious way out.

That's the classic situation in which métis is called on when you're basically, from all the world, you're in checkmate.

And they're just waiting for you to make the move so they can, you know.

So I think of myself in that thing.

What would I have done?

Well, being me, I would have said, well, it depends on how you define legal.

And let me tell you that although I have great respect for Caesar, that in this, you know what I would have done.

I would have done the same thing that 99% of us in this room did, try to control it with language, off and forth in these kind of accompanying tones.

That's the way we work.

That's the way we roll on this planet when we're trying to be reasonable and reconcile things with our head.

So what does Jesus do?

He looks around, sees a coin, give me this coin.

Ooh, whose picture is on it?

Caesar.

Well, obviously it's his.

>> [LAUGH] >> He just walked out of the checkmate.

Because he completely circumvents the question by changing the basis on which it's offered.

Okay, if this pretty coin has his picture on it, it's his.

So I'm not paying taxes.

It's, you know, give it back to him.

It's his.

Perfect.

But you see, he had to be alert to everything that was there, to see the potential way to walk through.

And if he'd gotten trapped into a sermon, God knows he would be dead by now.

Well, he's dead by now, but he's risen again.

So what the hell?

[LAUGH] So the second story is much more intimate, and it actually happened to me.

And it happened to me in Halifax, in the midst of a work intensive period there.

And it basically quietly changed the direction of my life.

That they have a very, very active arm of the work in Halifax, they still do.

And Halifax is in a gang with Toronto and New York.

They're all sort of foundation, Toronto and Halifax are both Canadian satellite groups under the guidance of New York.

So once a year we would have gather for a ten day work intensive.

And very often these were at Halifax, because everybody liked to come to Halifax.

The ocean, the sea, the boats, they were right on the arm, the northwest arm, so everybody wanted to come.

So all of a sudden, like 150 people descended on a tiny little house.

It's no bigger than a Canadian bungalow that had been slightly upgraded over the years, but we had a room that was probably half of the size of this room.

In which we had to do meals and movements.

All gathering, all teaching went on in this hall.

So people were on teams to keep reorchestrating it.

So I found myself that day on a dish washing team.

I was on the putting away team after the dishes had been dried.

And I had to bring all the dried plates, cups, etc.

Back into this room, which was being deconstructed from being a dining hall and being prepared to be the movements hall.

For the movements class, it was just going to go on.

So, and the cupboard where these cups have to be stored is directly above and behind the piano, where the movements teacher is getting herself prepared and collected to lead the movements for 150 of the best people in the work.

Not counting me, of course.

So I am all in a breathless dither about the importance of this.

I've gotta hurry, I've gotta move, we've gotta get this done.

Because, and look, Elsa's already in the room, the movements teacher, the senior, beautiful Maltese woman, 75 or so, whose hands were about half the size of mine, who played the piano as if her hands were 12 feet long.

And known to be strict and stern, so she's here.

We haven't finished yet, you know, all my, so I'm moving around, running, rushing in with my trays clattering.

Only to bump into Jackie, who is practicing mindful attention by slowly placing each cup on the shelf, sensing her two fingers against the beautiful ceramic porcelain, as she gently grasps it and feels the upward flow of gravity to receive it.

>> [LAUGH] >> I go, aah!

>> [LAUGH] >> Elsa, sitting in the middle of it, quickly appraises the situation.

And we would have thought, I would have thought that, again, the normal thing she would either do is to look at me and say, slow down!

Where are you?

Where are your feet?

Or to say to Jackie, for God's sake, can't you see anything else but your own spiritual progress?

There's 150 people out there waiting to get into this room.

Instead, what she does, she looks at the situation.

Moving with a speed that matches mine, but minus the rush.

She picks up cups, three handles at a time, picks them up off my tray in mid-air, slows down so they land on Jackie's tray, somewhat modifying her pace.

I'm out of the room in a whirlwind, and I'm halfway back to get another set before I realize I've just witnessed a miracle.

And that what Elsa did from the years of her wisdom and seniority and three-centered awareness, was she demonstrated complete compassion for both of us.

Rather than judging and shaming us both, she honored my work at the skill that I was at and found a way to make herself a bridge to harmonize what Jackie was doing.

Nothing needed to be said, that she had completely resolved.

And this is where compassion comes in, in Métis, the capacity to see what's needed so that you resolve it not by judgment, but by restoring wholeness where wholeness is at risk of being broken.

Beautiful skill.

It grows on a skill that I've actually been talking about for the past couple of days, but I haven't named it in the Gurdjieffian language.

I've kind of waltzed all around it, but it's called external considering.

And it's the ability to see beyond your own event horizon.

There's internal considering, where you're always seeing things by strategizing and planning and saying, well, how do I feel about this?

You're measuring it according to the standard of view.

How do I feel?

What does this look like?

Is it a safe space?

Is it that kind of rumination that we all do all the time?

Do I like this?

Is this comfortable?

External considering looks directly at the other and at the situation and says, what's needed?

It says basically the bottom line is how can I serve?

And yeah, it can get co-opted into a series of false and obsequious behaviors, and frequently is.

But that doesn't destroy the validity of the possibility of the other, that you really can see from the place where the other is seeing.

You really can exchange places.

You really can see from the position of the whole what is needed and harmonize both pieces.

You can do this.

It's the common and deep in this skill of courtesy.

And when it comes from real inside and not these kind of etiquette simulacrums, it's a capacity, it's a three-centered capacity.

And what Elsa was capable of in that moment was external considering.

She saw the whole, she saw the moving pieces.

It's because she wasn't preoccupied in her own little agenda, which is how soon can both of these idiots get out of my way so I can play the piano?

She never seemed to go there.

It was like, well, here we are now.

You either work or you lose it.

So that's my other story, and it changed my life.

Cause idiot that I was, I could still catch from it the complete, skillful compassion that had just been rained down on me.

And it just erased 15 or 20 years of judging and shaming and being told I wasn't good enough and having my best efforts laughed at.

Boom, gone, in that one act of grace bestowed by a conscious person with a pure heart.

So the third story is once again a familiar biblical story.

And I wanna call attention to it because it exemplifies yet another characteristic of Métis.

And that's the famous story of Solomon and the baby.



Remember that Solomon was known for his wisdom, and two women come to him hotly contesting, each claiming to be the mother of the baby.

And so what Solomon does is to say, well, okay, well, there's obvious solution.

Let's cut the baby in half and give each mother a half.

I remember reading that story, or hearing that story when I was a kid in Sunday school, and just.

[LAUGH] How could he?

But you all know what happens next.

That one of them immediately says, no, give it to the other.

And he says, we found the real mother.

Because he realized, he knew that despite the almost equal and opposite drama that was on the field of these two contestants making the claim, that the real mother would never allow her baby to be killed for the sake of justice.

Would gladly confer a living baby to an alien source, rather than taking home half a dead baby in vindictive triumph.

So what Solomon did there was white knuckle.

Because if one of the women hadn't stepped out to reveal herself, he might have had to, out of his own integrity, cut the baby in half.

So he was taking an extreme risk to create a teaching situation.

In other words, that you would expose the person not by having them say something, but by their actions.

And he took a calculated risk that the real mother would behave in exactly the way that the real mother did.

But what if he'd been wrong?

So I put this out there because it's very frequent in the work that the teaching is done by creating these teaching situations.

So that once again, you don't say.

You set up a situation in which a person walks into something.

And they learn by bumping into it.

And a lot of the work we do in a leadership team, when things get really, really good in a group, and you know your people well, is from time to time, leaders of a team or a section working together, will set up a situation in which a person they've got their eye on, because they're either from repeated behaviors they can't move with, or because they're right on the edge of seeing something, will set up a situation where a person has the possibility of breaking through if they go in a certain way.

And you see Buddhist teachers do that.

You see the, it's all over.

It's almost the characteristic signature of wisdom teachers.

Cause you can only learn from your own experience, finally, not from what people say to you.

So, but this took this kind of *métis*, which is the capacity to see beyond, to visualize the next move, and to own it in your heart.

So, these are three capacities that equip one to really begin to work, to mediate imaginal causality in this realm.

To demonstrate, to bring into effect the laws of another universe, of a higher order of coherence, to mediate them into this realm through action.

But they require training and preparation.

And most of us are simply not willing to take risks.

We don't know how to take risks.

We would rather control a situation with our language, just like I would before if somebody says, well, who does this coin belong to, in that one?

Well, I don't know, let me think.

If we said to Caesar this, if we did, it's like using your great mind to try and dig yourself deeper.

But to step forward and learn what, you know, mindfulness in action, when the chips are down, it's a brilliant skill.

How do you develop this capacity?

Well, first of all, I would say very, very profoundly, that it's a three-centered awareness capacity.

Being shrewd, having a calculating mind that can win chess matches by always anticipating the next move, that kind of thing can give you an initial advantage, and cunning does exist just as a feature of the intellectual center, but it doesn't grow into a magical *métis* there.

That sooner or later, it requires a threshold level, at least, of performance in all three centers and a coordination.

So the head needs to work in the direction of impartiality or clarity.

And that is the constant, continued effort to see beyond internal consideration.

I'm absolutely 100% convinced that you cannot have *métis* and internal consideration as your usual mode of thinking.

Introspection, rumination, always measuring back how you're feeling about things.

That kind of great introspection, which is still highly prized on the contemplative path.

You can't have it, because not only does it move way too slow to bounce the external situation back against your feelings of it and then back out again, it's thinking within a code.

You will only see from within your own subjectivity, your own values, most of them invisible, so you miss.

You cannot, I believe, succeed, be a skillful mediator of *métis* without an entrenched, well-habituated capacity for external consideration.

Which is to be able to keep track, I'll put it this way, keep track of everything that's going on around and about you, in beyond your atmosphere.

Just measure it, know where your feet are, know where reality is, know not only the movements of others as they scurry and bustle like me, but where they're coming from as they do it.

If you widen, if you get out of the space that's taken up in your brain and your energy cells by constantly telling and retelling your own story, you've just freed up a huge, like a 60% leap, increase in your brain capacity to be intelligently present to what's actually going on around you, okay?

So the movement into trying to shift into external considering as a major mode of orienting yourself in the world.

Not what do I need, what am I getting out of this, but what's going on?

And how can I help serve the more harmonious flow of what's happening right now?

That quality will in and of itself radically strengthen your *métis*.

Provided that you can keep track of you, those of you that are enneagrammed twos and do this all the time anyway, don't do it from the place you do two-ness from.

You know, not because I'm only trying to help, I'm trying to be appreciated.

Watch your own stuff.

But simply because there's this objective seeing that we're all in a great flow.

Giving and taking and receiving and that anything you can do to see more, to see more widely, to take in more of what's actually occupying the same now as you are, is going to help you see the elements that can be used.

We mostly are not clear in our minds, simply because our minds are tunneled in on ourselves.

You're telling your story, you're acting out your agenda, you're expressing what you need to say, and you miss what's actually happening.

You don't have enough brain space to take it in, because you're the actor.

So the heart has its own purification it has to go to.

The heart has to learn to move in the direction of sobriety, prudence, and that good old word, chastity.

Because the heart, the feeling center, as we'll call it, is always getting pulled by emotions, by this siren call to bring it back and to collapse it into either sentimentality on one end, over empathy, over identification, over feelingfulness, or else the whole range of retributive wrathful emotions, violence, anger, a sense of injustice, and to rise up out of that to act.

And as I said earlier, anger may be a motivator for action, but never for skillful action.

Because when the emotional center gets co-opted, it can no longer function to provide the prudence or the compassion that keeps it present.

And this is one of the hardest lessons to learn, particularly for people who have what they think is a head start here, because they're empaths.

You've got about the same head start as the moving people or the intellectual center people have with cutting.

Empathy goes a little way to get you into the ball game, but it will very, very quickly run off the rails.

If you say that your emotions are your most valid measure of truth, and if you start acting out of emotions, that if you check in with your atmosphere, you find your atmosphere is going like this.

When your atmosphere is going like this, even in service of the most just and worthy cause in the planet, you're gonna make it more turbid.

You're gonna be part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Because that kind of incoherent but forceful, disordered energy, whether it's clinging, empathy so very, very quickly turns to that.

Nurses in hospitals can't let go of their patients.

And it moves from that to a stuck emotion, where you victimize your victim even more because you need them to mirror yourself.

You know how it gets, it gets enmeshed and entangled.

We do it with our kids all the time.

And the emotional center has to come with a freedom around it, which is its chastity.

And then you can operate out of that.

You can begin to see without it going into these kind of reactive overdrives.

So that's the work in that center.

The moving center has got an interesting chore behind it.

As usual, the moving center will often turn out to be the undisclosed, you know, have the secret key to everything.

And this is possible with the moving center, but it needs to be freed of two things that will throw it off track.

One is impulsivity.

And this is really, really hard, good, spiritual work.

Notice the number of times you're going in one direction, and all of a sudden something goes, and you quickly turn in another direction.

And very often those loops are triggered by programs you can't even see.

I remember one time that I was in a work group and I was carefully sweeping the floor.

And all of a sudden I saw that this old senior person in the work needed, you know, might have been used by assistants to get through a door.

And I impulsively jerked and turned to go and work in that direction, to try and quickly be there to do this job.

And the back of my broom handle hit the cake that was on the table waiting to cool off that the other people had knocked at Galley West across the, okay, a little life lesson here.

When you are on one course of action and something in you prompts you to go, you are likely to see jerky action as a result of it.

And this is really, really, really hard training for people because we like to, we claim it, well, this is insight, this is intuition.

It usually isn't.

It's usually an old conditioned habit of wanting to be seen, wanting to be some kind of pre-programmed behavior that jerks you out of a smooth flow you're in and immediately sets you into a separate, new course that you haven't prepared for.

And so it interrupts.

And we do it all the time.

I have to thank Kabir Helminski, that Sufi, now Mevlevi leader, for opening to me the practice.

He says, work with impulsivity in his book about being, I forgot what it's called, Living Presence.

Work with impulsivity.

Set that up for an inner task.

Watch the number of times you think you're doing something and suddenly get jerked in the other direction.

Study that moment of jerking and what happens next.

Because there is intuition, there is insight.

But the difference between that, the difference between what Jesus knew in that moment when he picked up the coin.

And that moment when I turned and flipped and knocked over the cake by the back of the broom handle.

Although they may look like the same from the outside, they come from fundamentally different arrangements inside.

And it's super important to know the difference between the two in yourself.

And you're only gonna find that out in yourself by the honest work of watching yourself.

Nobody can tell you that from the outside.

Even the most sublime spiritual teachers probably can't go inside you and tell when an action is coming from that kind of decisive *métis* and when it's coming from your attempt to simulate that.

And you will only learn that in the school of hard knocks.

But I would say absolutely strongly that this is completely different in nature from insight and inspiration.

And you'll be able to taste the distance between the two of them.

Insight and inspiration always come with a certain spaciousness built right into them.

And while it's as implacable as the lawnmower out there, see?

>> [LAUGH] >> While it is as inexorable and hungry and won't let you get off the hook, it never has this element of urgency.

Never has it.

If there's something that's making you say, agitation, I've gotta do it, I've gotta do it now, it's coming from impulse.

Real insight is just there.

Morris Nicoll once said, it's like seeing that two and two are four.

And once you've seen it, you will act out of it, but it won't create this sort of feeling inside that whose backside is self-importance.

It won't do that.

So this, dear friends, is white knuckle self-surrender, self-inquiry.

Because nobody can solve those puzzles except you from the outside.

But you have to know when you're faking, when you're kidding yourself, when you're deluding yourself.

You have to know from the inner scent of it.

Because anything that's unclear is going to thwart or distort or divert your capacity to act with *métis*.

You have to be absolutely still, you have to be absolutely silent inside, and you have to be, in general, the master of your instrument.

So that something can essentially reach an empty, unified slate and move it in alignment with third force.

So to come back with that, there's an interesting line of bearing on this that comes out of those classic vows.

You know what monks swear across the way?

Poverty, obedience, chastity.

There's a very interesting correlation here that I think that you can see those three vows can easily be interpreted as the work of each center, as it works in the direction of *métis*.

The head needs to learn obedience.

Ab-audere, listening deeply.

The head likes to think it's in command.

It likes to think it's the control post.



And remember that in our culture right here at the very tail end of the dying mental structure of consciousness, we're already relying on that mode of perception that pulls us out of ourselves.

Puts us out there as the artist painting the canvas.

So we already have a tendency to prejudice the head, to pull it out of the picture, and to make it sort of the guide that regulates the rest of the body.

It needs to learn to obey the signals that are coming from the other two centers, that are coming from the outside world.

It needs to learn to pay attention and not keep on imposing its maps of reality, its expectations of reality on reality.

Because guess what, reality is never going to conform to the map you have to make of it.

And all these attempts to try and make a situation fit what I expect it to be, using the head to dominate, is not going to lead anywhere.

It just is, so that the head has to learn to relinquish its entitled position to take information.

You may think you're saving the world, but if you listen to your voice tone and hear what it's doing, you're dominating.

The other centers have checks and balances.

They show you, they mirror to you, they open where you are, and they contain the head so that it's working in a consortium, not as the CEO of your selfhood, okay?

So that's the work.

So you can see then how the discipline of purifying the head corresponds in some ways to the monastic vow of obedience.

The purifying of the emotional center, the feeling, corresponds directly with a monastic vow of chastity.

It's not letting this sacred center whose genius is empathy, get itself promiscuously entangled with everything.

So that it runs the show.

To allow your feeling center to remain in a deep way, virgin.

It's a hard lesson to learn in this culture which has just dethroned all forms of thinking in favor of sheer, rabid, what they call passion, without knowing that what this means is stuck emotion.

So we have to really elect to become spiritual virgins.

If we're going to work in the world of métis.

It doesn't mean turning off and getting stony and cold.

It means not letting yourself be enmeshed.

Not using these tentacles that we all come with to pull us into reality.

To pull us into action.

These places where we get hooked.

These places where we know we can make an impact as we work out of our.

To try and never do anything just following the path of least resistance in your own being, cause they all lead straight to the garbage can.

And finally, with the moving center, I find, I had to work with this a little way, but I think it really corresponds to the vow of poverty.

Because we load up the moving center with so much junk.

Our old, automated, our conditioned behaviors.

And sometimes our, we have an attitude because the moving center gets there first.

We think something's gonna be tough, we brace, or we brace and then we think it's gonna be tough.

We have a set of self postures that are just, that are reflected, the gestures of our selfhood, how we carry our selfhood.

Will take us down whole kinds of paths of personas acting.

It's like a gesture of me will call forth very quickly the person I am when I'm in this gesture.

And so our moving centers are overloaded.

We all know, I mean, any good practitioner of, from Reiki on, will tell you that our moving center carries all the stuff we haven't been able to process and integrate with our other centers.

So our moving centers are basically, and all of us, heavily laden and co-opted.

And when we get to the point where they can be bare and empty, where they're not going to prop up one persona after another, but are in some sort of quiet balance, like a kitchen in readiness before the work begins.

When they're in that kind of a format, then they're ready, quivering like a bead of mercury as Carla brought to us last night from the Rumi poem, to be able to act at the service of this action.

So I think that's the discipline and the drill.

And I wanted to bring in those old vows because most of us can remember humility, or can remember poverty, chastity, and obedience.

And if you can kind of use those to kind of reconstruct for you the direction in which the work in centers happens.

This creates an instrument.

And the instrument, when we finally talk about skillful action, another way of speaking about this is to say that we become at the disposal of third force.

We become third force receptive.

And I think this is where the third force being the holy or the reconciling principle that can flow through and harmonize a situation.

What really happens is we become consciously, quietly, still.

Alert, doing our part, holding the container and the now in all three centers.

And something moves in from a higher intelligence that provides the solution, the resolution.

And then we act.

But it has this kind of inevitability of a leaf falling off a tree, that it's ready, it goes.

And so many times, Jesus said to his disciples, in some of his final examples, you will be called before tribunals, you will be called before judges.

Do not be afraid of how you are to speak.

I am with you.

The words will be given.

Don't plan, prepare.

This is the most thrilling thing.

The real solutions in life always come out of third field, through left field, that every real signature work of wisdom I've ever seen has a sort of surprising element to it.

You didn't think it was gonna go that way.

But alert the moment you find the missing piece that coincides with your inner preparation and planning.

The seed falls into the prepared soil and springs forth in the moment.

That's how it works.

So the action becomes decisive, it becomes clear, it has force.

But it wasn't planned, an event.

Sometimes it goes off 45 degrees from what you thought you were gonna do.

But it has a completely different taste from that kind of nervous impulse that mocks it, but is still coming out of a small center.

So over and over again, we have to kind of believe that and trust it.

That if we do our part to be quiet, to be still, to be prepared, to have our eyes focused on something beyond our own needs and wants to take in the situation.

Third force can enter such a vessel and create resolutions which are surprising to us.

But in retrospect, say, Grace was working through that.

That's right, good, fascinating.

So that's about all I would say on the subject of that.