

## The Rebel Jesus and Trauma Therapy with the Divine Child Within

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I was put in mind of the timeless universality of Jesus' birth story as I listened to Jackson Browne's song "The Rebel Jesus."<sup>1</sup> I was struck again by the penetrating impact of the Christmas story, yes; but I was astonished to notice that this familiar story captures the complex internal spiritual dynamics of the work that I do as a psychotherapist—working with people whose traumatized inner child is troubling their world with birth contractions indicating the child's desire and readiness to be born! Browne's title "The Rebel Jesus" calls our attention to the fact that Jesus' birth and life have a rebellious aspect. Browne sings, "In a life of hardship and of earthly toil / There's a need for anything that frees us / So I bid you pleasure, and I bid you cheer." But then comes the twist: "From a heathen and a pagan / On the side of the rebel Jesus." He suddenly lets us know that he has stepped outside sentimental Christian beliefs and hypocritical behavior and that he is taking a rebellious stand with what he knows about Jesus.

In the last three lines of the previous stanza, he prepares the listener for his break with Christmas sentimentality and the comfortable safety of accepting the predominant political, social, and religious structures. He sings, "But if anyone of us should interfere / In the business of why there are poor / They get the same as the rebel Jesus." I think immediately—in addition to Jesus—of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., who rebelled and paid the earthly price.

Browne sings about the rituals and holidays that bring joy and fellowship amidst life's hardships, but he implies that we can also use those same rituals and holidays to blunt or tame the impact of the free-flowing Spirit that won't be bound or contained by human efforts to be comfortable and in control. As the divine child grows up, he rebels against such strictures while also having compassion for human hardship and suffering.

Browne's lyrics have a bite to them, even as they are carried by sweet, lilting music. The phrase "the rebel Jesus" appears at the very end of each of the last two stanzas of the song. The two words of the title sum up what he's singing about: the sentimental celebration of Jesus' birth, on the one hand, yet also the fact that in the political, social, and religious context of Jesus' day his birth and life were rebellious. Jesus' mother got pregnant out of wedlock, his parents had to become refugees, he was born in poverty, and the reigning king was planning to massacre all boys under two

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years of age in order to kill Jesus. Jesus' very existence was a scandal, and his survival was due to his parents' openness to informants who revealed to them the deadly duplicity of Herod, the king. They escaped because they trusted something deeper than the seemingly protective political structure of the day.

Soon after listening to the song, I had a flash of insight—both thrilling and humbling, born of the Spirit, I would say—about the connection between Jesus' birth story and the work that I do. It was something like a spiritual synapse between soul and mind, or between self and Self. As a therapist, I work with people whose inner child has not been allowed to be safely born nor to healthily develop. But they seek therapy because the inner child within is rebelling.

In the context of her unmarried relationship with Joseph, Mary has a spiritual vision that the child she is pregnant with is a divine child—that her pregnancy is a spiritual experience, that she has a divine child within her, that a child of divinity will be born and have a unique human journey. But she and Joseph will have a wild ride because of this rebel child.

The people who come to me for healing have not been born into a safe world or a safe environment either. Beginning in infancy, they have had to adapt to threatening external circumstances—neglect, insensitivity, lack of attunement, or inadequate attachment—which felt to them at a deep inner level like a threat to their very life. These children have been born in less than ideal circumstances, represented in Jesus' story by his being born in a stable amongst animals, and have had to find circuitous ways to survive, like Mary and Joseph finding an alternate route to escape King Herod's treachery.

Some people I work with were born into an environment that was so extremely unsafe and unsupportive of their normal healthy development that they not only had to hide their core self and live by adapting to their environment in order to survive but they also were so afraid of expressing themselves that they actually internalized and harbored their own King Herod, who terrorized that inner refugee child-self to keep it from emerging into the open. This at times can even take the form of an autoimmune disease in which, tragically, one's protective system attacks oneself to keep the inner child imprisoned. They fear the child's rebellious energy.

Profoundly sadly, yet remarkably creatively, these people have kept in hiding their core spiritual uniqueness, even imprisoning it, for fear that its emergence and expressiveness would be retaliated against from the outside or that the adaptive self they've constructed and lived in would, even by self-attacks, be taken down like a house of cards. They sense and fear that their inner repressed child with all its feelings is a rebel, like the "rebel Jesus."

It is scary to acknowledge and embrace that rejected inner child, with all its intense energy and emotions.

The repressed inner child can be rebellious in either subtle or more dramatic ways, causing its adult host pain, anxiety, and even physical illness until the adult person seeks help. In such circumstances, the adult does need help, a guide who helps them realize that the inner child is there, get to know that inner child part of themselves, help it feel safe in the (transferential) relationship with the guide/pastor/therapist, and over time be able to integrate its rebellious energy and emotions into a new, more authentic adult self.

What also fascinates and thrills me in Jesus' birth story is the wise men from the East who come to pay homage to the child. They're attuned to a realm beyond our normal reality. Their visitation breaks in from beyond, signaling that there's a mystical, transcendent dimension to this child, that he's special, has a spiritual dimension—as all children do. All children arrive as a miracle!

The recognition of this transcendent Source of the divine child is of course narrated at the very beginning of Jesus' birth story in the announcement to his mother Mary that she will be impregnated by the Holy Spirit. I believe that the story of the virgin birth is meant to grab our attention, to remind us that there's something spiritual or transcendent going on that gives life and birth to an infant. This virgin-birth part of the story makes it more difficult for us to focus only on the literal, visible, practical aspects of the birth of a child. We're scandalized into looking beyond the ordinary and invited to remember that every birth is a miracle, that every mother is impregnated by the Holy Spirit, whether it uses sperm or not!

The visitation of the wise men from a whole other world—they are responding to a sign in the heavens, an unusual star—seems to me to be an external validation for Mary of her inner annunciation experience, a validation for her, Joseph, and anyone else present that there is transcendence, divinity, in this child. We all need external validation by even just one person of an inner vision or spiritual experience.

This visitation part of Jesus' birth story resonates for me in my work in that it's often some "visitation" from outside their normal daily lives that leads clients to value themselves enough to seek healing—even though they don't initially view their search for help as a valuing of themselves. It can take a long time for a client to realize that their symptoms—pain, anxiety, misfortune, or breakdown—are a spiritual gift, a rebellion by the inner child, their inner rebel, longing to be born, to come alive! That inner child is wanting to emerge, be attended to, come alive, and be supported in its desire to define itself and be supported to live in either unconventional ways or even in freely chosen conventional ways.

The spiritual dimension of a person leads the person to seek wholeness, which essentially means that the person will acknowledge that they have a spiritual connection, that the Spirit lives within them and keeps trying in various ways to invite the person to honor the Spirit's creative vitality, its aliveness, its rebelliousness, its refusal to be constrained within any oppressive or abusive structures or relationships.

If the sacredness of a person is not acknowledged or is mistreated, the child or Spirit within will go into hiding until it may be safe again to emerge, to be healed, and to become whole/holy. Or, if the person dies or is killed, the Spirit in the person, I believe, will return to the sacred Source of all life and live in a way that the Source/God determines.

Divine-Spirit-Source loves human life and wants to live fully in every human being, not only in Jesus. But Jesus certainly showed how the Spirit wants humans to live—with love, compassion, and rebelliousness against any oppressive or exploitative structures or relationships. “I came that they may have life,” Jesus says, “and have it abundantly.”<sup>2</sup>

The Christmas story is a universal external narrative of an internal process of a loving Divine Spirit becoming human, along with the resulting threats, hopes, traumas, and possibilities for healing and growth that that incarnation brings for every child. Every child is both human and divine by virtue of its body’s breathing the Holy Spirit, its breath of life existing in a transient body.

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<sup>1</sup> The Chieftains with Jackson Browne, “The Rebel Jesus,” by Jackson Browne, recorded October 8, 1991, Windmill Lane Studio, on *The Bells of Dublin*. Also available on YouTube.

<sup>2</sup> John 10:10, NRSV.