

CHAPTER 8

Bob Dylan's Ten Commandments – a Method for Personal Transformation

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Abstract: Over the years, Bob Dylan has been able to go through many changes as an artist and as a person – always flexible, always in touch with his life, his aging, always true to himself, but not to his audience. While so many of us seem to stick to our old ways, Dylan has had this rare ability to keep on moving on, like a rolling stone. How has this been possible? In this chapter I present what I call Bob Dylan's method for personal transformation. I have found ten commandments, or ten rules, that Dylan seems to be following. To show the importance of the commandments I assess Dylan's method for personal transformation in relation to Philip Salim Francis's research among 82 Evangelicals who underwent a sea-change of religious identity through the intervention of arts, published in the book *When Art Disrupts Religion*. Bob Dylan's ten commandments are not only 10 great tools for a creative life, they are also a great roadmap for a flexible religious life and good medicine against all sorts of fundamentalism.

Keywords: Dylan, transformation, art, religion, creativity

Sammendrag: Gjennom hele sin lange karriere har Bob Dylan hatt en sjelden evne til å forandre seg – alltid i nær kontakt med livets mange faser, alltid tro mot kunsten, men ikke mot fansen. Mens de fleste av oss nøyer oss med å gå i gamle spor, har Bob Dylan brutt opp, forlatt dem som hyller ham, dem som mener de trenger ham, dem som til og med tilber ham, og søkt nye veier. Hvordan har dette vært mulig? I dette kapitlet vil jeg presentere det jeg kaller Bob Dylans metode for forandring. Jeg har funnet ti bud, eller ti regler, som Bob Dylan har forholdt seg til gjennom livet og karrieren. For å vise betydningen av disse budene, holder jeg dem opp mot Philip Salim Francis forskning blant 82 evangelikale kristne, som alle har fått sin religiøse identitet forvandlet etter å ha blitt eksponert for kunst. Dette skriver Francis om i boka *When Art Disrupts Religion*. Bob Dylans

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ti bud er ikke bare ti gode verktøy for et kreativt liv, det er også en medisin mot alle former for fundamentalisme og samtidig en god hjelp for den som ønsker å leve et fleksibelt religiøst liv.

Nøkkelord: Dylan, forvandling, kunst, religion, kreativitet

The claim ... is that *the arts possess a unique capacity to unsettle* our entrenched ways of thinking and believing; that the arts, like nothing else, can open our minds to fresh ideas and alternate perspectives.

—Francis (2017, p. 5)

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind...

—Romans (12:2)

Introduction

Bob Dylan is like Jesus in some ways. Dylan and Jesus are both Jews, they are both considered to be prophets, they both have a lot of followers – but, much more essentially, they are both complex, revolutionary and contradictory personalities to such a degree that you cannot pin them down. They do not add up to one character. In the same way that you can always find your own Jesus – usually the Jesus that is a mirror of your own values and conception of the world – you can always find your own Dylan.

In the early years of Dylan's career many people connected to his political finger-pointing songs, while others connected to *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, with more poetic and personal songs. These were two different fan groups, with different interests. Later some people connected to the provocative rock artist, while others connected to the *Nashville Skyline* country singer. Both these groups disliked each other for being, respectively, radical and conservative. Even later, a completely different group of people connected to the born again Christian Dylan, although many of the old fan groups hated this transformation. Some of them stopped following their prophet, their rock god, their super hero, their most important *mediator* (to use a term from René Girard, the philosopher of mimetic desire).

While Joan Baez stayed behind in the folk movement, while The Rolling Stones stayed behind in the rock movement, Bob Dylan kept on moving, always flexible, always in touch with his life, his aging, always true to himself, but not to his audience. The followers – they are still legion, but they are diverse; most of them are still hanging on to their flock, their own familiar music congregation.

Is it possible that none of these groups *get* Bob Dylan? Maybe they only relate to a small part of him, the part that they fell in love with in their youth. Instead of learning from Dylan's example, to keep on moving on, like a rolling stone, they stay behind with what they found so many years ago. Instead of being alert, instead of seeing reality in the present moment, instead of searching for new experiences, new feelings and reflections, they are satisfied with recycling old feelings, fading memories, from when they listened to Bob Dylan's music in another lifetime, when their world was young.

I believe this. I believe that most people have failed to understand the essence of Bob Dylan's artistic project, and I think that Dylan himself is painfully aware of this, when he says: "I don't think I'm gonna be really understood until maybe 100 years from now. Because what I've done and what I'm doing, nobody else does or has done" (*The Sunday Times*, July 1, 1984).

Music, literature, art – no matter how great – together make up a force that can be used to achieve two opposite things. On the one hand, you can use it to preserve and protect your identity, your notion about yourself and the world. On the other hand, you can use it to *widen your world* (to use a slogan from Turkish Airlines). The ultimate goal for all great art should be to transform or widen our limited world view – or to put it even more strongly, as Dylan once stated: "Art should not reflect culture; art should subvert culture" (Sloman, 2002, *vii*).

When the 19-year-old Bob Dylan came to New York in 1961, he had no interest in the daytime show at Café Wha?, because it was "nothing that would change your view of the world" (Dylan, 2004, p. 12). Later, Dylan expressed the artist's obligation by quoting Henry Miller, who once said: "The role of an artist is to inoculate the world with disillusionment" (Cott, 2006, p. 224).

How do you do that? It can be done in many ways, of course, but you can learn a lot about this by studying Bob Dylan's method through his

long career. I have found ten rules, or ten commandments, that Dylan seems to be following. Those commandments are not only ten great rules for a creative life; they are also a great roadmap for a flexible religious life and good medicine against all sorts of fundamentalism.

When art disrupts religion

There are always some people who need to systemize and categorize the world and people's lives. Some of them are in positions of power with lots of education. They name things; they make dichotomies; they make clean borders, so that they are able to control power and keep things pure. This is a constant temptation for all of us – namely, to seek and to worship the pure. We do this not only in religion, but in art, in music, in business, in relationships. It's a pity, because everything that is unable to change, dies.

Philip Salim Francis, who is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Manhattan College and Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania Humanities Forum, has explored the shifting interrelationship of religion, art, and sexuality in the modern West. In his book, *When Art Disrupts Religion*, Francis presents the narrative of 82 Evangelicals who underwent a sea-change of religious identity through the intervention of the arts. Likewise, in the book's afterword the author tells us his personal story from when he was fourteen years old. While rummaging through a storage compartment in the family's house, Francis found a bundle of old records: "When I brought the records into the light, and wiped away the dust ... the album covers spoke to me immediately, ushered me into a different world, especially a record entitled *Bringing It All Back Home*" (Francis, 2017, p. 147).

He started to reflect upon why these Dylan records from the '60s and early '70s had survived his parents' conversion to evangelical Christianity in the 1980s. He will never know the answer, but the records made their impact: "Because these Dylan records were saved, a glimpse of that disruptive beauty, staggering authenticity, and defamiliarizing poetry came to my life – and into the lives of my brothers, as we gathered around the record player for secret listening sessions when my parents weren't

around. To this day, we remain Dylan devotees – with an evangelical fervor, if not an evangelical faith” (Francis, 2017, p. 148).

Philip Salim Francis’s book, *When Art Disrupts Religion*, shows how the evangelical mind uses different *methods of identity preservation*. For instance, he writes that “fundamentalist thinking is often characterized as a need for absolute certainty about the ultimate meaning of life, a tendency to draw hard lines of division between insiders and outsiders, a proneness toward black-and-white thinking, and a penchant for idealizing a past, golden age of the community” (Francis, 2017, p. 9). This need for absolute certainty makes for a general suspicion towards ambivalence, which is so essential to modern art, and also to innovation and change. It takes a lot of practice to achieve absolute certainty. For evangelicals, this practice includes child evangelism, the immorality of doubt, and fear of hell. To keep your sense of certainty, you are inclined to cultivate a suspicion toward regular workings of the mind, like questioning and doubting.

What art can offer – in contradiction to this – is *practices of uncertainty*. The arts unsettle certainty, while comforting the uncertain. Or, as David Foster Wallace once observed: “Good fiction’s job is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable” (Francis, 2017, p. 68). Art can give form to the formless; it can give meaning where there is no meaning to be found, because it can give a truthful expression of the lack of meaning. Rosanne Cash, who grew up with a very Catholic mother and a famous Baptist father, says in her memoirs: “We all need art and music like we need blood and oxygen. The more exploitative, numbing, and assaulting popular culture becomes, the more we need truth of a beautifully phrased song, dredged from a real person’s depth of experience, delivered in an honest voice; the more we need the simplicity of paint on canvas, or the arc of a lonely body in the air, or the photographer’s unflinching eye. Art, in the larger sense, is the lifeline to which I cling in a confusing, unfair, sometimes dehumanizing world. In my childhood, the nuns and the priests insisted, sometimes in a shrill and punitive tone, that religion was where God resided and where I might find transcendence. I was afraid they were correct for so many years, and that I was the one at fault for not being able to navigate the circuitry of dogma and ritual” (Cash, 2010, p. 235).

Art has the capacity to disrupt religion: it may destroy your faith and it may save your faith. We know that our brain is wired to be conservative, since the synapses have the inclination to take well known routes. But art can help to change this; it can inspire us to take the route less travelled by, and, as you know very well, that will make all the difference.

At the same time, it is important to understand that what is true for former evangelicals is also true for all human beings. There are so many congregations in society; you have all the religious congregations; you also have the political congregations; you have the business congregations; you have the science congregations and you definitely have the art congregations, even specific Bob Dylan congregations. What Philip Salim Francis learned during his study is: “If this is true for us former evangelicals, it may well be true for other fellow human beings. In completing this study, I feel that I have only just begun to appreciate the many ways the arts can save us — and our society at large — from the temptation of the ‘fundamentalist mindset’: religious, political, or otherwise” (*Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 2, 2017).

I, myself, grew up in a conservative religious family, with many of the same methods of identity preservation that Francis describes in his book. My parents were both Christian fundamentalists, but they were also the most loving, caring and tolerant people I have ever known. It is important to acknowledge that this is very possible, in the same way that it is possible to experience liberals that are genuinely intolerant. As the philosopher John Gray points out in his book, *Seven Types of Atheism*: “It is not by accident that neither he nor any of the new atheists promote tolerance as a central value. If ethics can be a science, there is no need for toleration” (Gray, 2018, p. 21).

Consequently, we not only need art to disrupt religion, we also need art to disrupt science and politics as well as our everyday lives – not to mention art. Obviously, we need art to disrupt art, and, to me, this seems to have been Bob Dylan’s main project during his long career. He is an “iconic iconoclast, a figure at once revered and reviled who consistently tests the very culture that idolizes and demonizes him at turns” (*Baltimore Sun*, May 23, 2011). And during this lifelong process of transformation, Bob Dylan has even been willing to let art be disrupted by religion.

The Born Again Dylan

Although he had been seriously reflecting upon God since his time in Woodstock in the mid '60s, Dylan had a life changing physical experience with Jesus in a hotel room in Tucson, Arizona, in November 1978: "There was a presence in the room that couldn't have been anybody but Jesus ... Jesus put his hand on me. It was a physical thing. I felt it. I felt it all over me. I felt my whole body tremble" (Cott, 2006, p. 276). And when Bob Dylan changes his mind, he does it in a radical way: "When I believe in something, I don't care what anybody else thinks" (Cott, 2006, p. 283). He even went to The Vinyard School of Discipleship for three months, where he learned to practice fundamentalistic certainty. He adopted the schism between the insiders and the outsiders and, as a consequence of this, he stopped singing his secular songs. Instead he wrote hard, condemning songs – some of them very strong and beautiful – filled with references to the Bible. In "Gonna Change My Way of Thinking" from the album *Slow Train Coming* (1979), he warns: "Jesus said, 'Be ready / For you know not the hour in which I come ... He who is not for Me, is against Me'" (Luke 11:23). There is no middle ground; you gotta serve somebody. Bob Dylan also began to preach at the concerts, talking about the end of the world: "The world as we know it now is being destroyed. Sorry, but it's the truth" (Dylan, 1990, p. 35). In the practice of convincing others, you convince yourself; as Philip Salim Francis points out, "you get a performative relationship to certainty" (Francis, 2017, p. 39).

It is interesting that an artist who had been extremely open to all kinds of influences, an artist that had practiced uncertainty seemingly more than anyone else, converted to become a full scale evangelical fundamentalist. But it is not surprising to anyone who has followed Dylan's career that it was impossible for him to remain a fundamentalist for very long. Already one year after he had premiered his religious repertoire at Warfield Theatre in San Francisco in November, 1979, Dylan started to mix his religious songs with his old secular songs. The schism between the sacred and the secular, between the insiders and the outsiders, which is so important to evangelical fundamentalists, was already breaking down. He already found the pressure from the Vinyard Fellowship confining.

The background singer Helena Springs said in an interview: “I remember a lot of them pressuring him about a lot of things. They were not allowing him to live. I remember one time he said to me: ‘God, it’s awfully tight. It’s so tight, you know.’ He found a lot of hypocrisy in those Jesus people that he had gotten involved with” (*The Telegraph*, No. 34).

“The transition out of any religious community – and notably evangelicalism – is rarely smooth” (Francis, 2017, p. 5). The whole rigid belief system may tumble down and leave you in a serious crisis. Many people lose their faith altogether. Bob Dylan moved on, but managed to keep his faith. Many of the songs he has written since his evangelical period are very existential and explicitly religious, although many people miss this fact. Both Dylan’s lyrics and his comments in interviews show that he has remained a true believer in God, but he is very vague about what kind of faith he is practising. It seems to be an open, mystical faith. In 1997 he said to Jon Pareles (“A Wiser Voice,” *New York Times* archives, 1997) that he at that time subscribed to no organized religion. *Rolling Stone* magazine asked him directly about his faith in 2007, and Dylan responded:

Faith doesn’t have a name. It doesn’t have a category [...]. We degrade faith by talking about religion. (Cott, 2017, p. 488)

Some may think that there’s nothing wrong with being born again, but I would argue that it’s even better to be born again and again and again. It is obvious that Dylan had the tools to move on from evangelical fundamentalism and still keep his faith. Might it have been Dylan’s method for transformation that eventually saved his faith? Whatever the truth may be, here it is, my take on Bob Dylan’s ten commandments – ten rules that he may not know about himself.

1. Be like a sponge

So many of the people that knew the young Bob Dylan in Greenwich Village in the early ’60s have been asked the same question: “How was he, Bob Dylan, what was he like?” A lot of them give the very same answer: “He was like a sponge.” The blues musician Tony Glover is one of them: “He was like a sponge, picking up people’s mannerisms, accents” (*No Direction Home*,

2005). Even Dylan's biographer, Robert Shelton, used this phrase in the very first newspaper article about the young folk singer: "Bob Dylan's highly personalized approach toward folk song is still evolving. He has been sopping up influences like a sponge" (*New York Times*, September 29, 1961).

This is the opposite of what the evangelical Christian leaders would recommend. They want to keep the hard lines of division between the insiders and the outsiders as strong as possible. Go to Christian schools; stay with Christian friends; listen to Christian music; read Christian literature. "Many evangelicals ... have a built-in-suspicion of the arts, especially 'secular' artistic forms such as popular music and theatre, that goes back as long as there have been evangelicals" (Francis, 2017, p. 27). One of Philip Salim Francis's informants says: "...I imagined little devils trying to steal me away from God. I tried to censor my thoughts, thinking that they were controlled by devils, that they were temptations, leading me away from God" (Francis, 2017, p. 47). Instead Bob Dylan urges us to *keep our eyes wide*, "cause the chance won't come again, for the times they are a-changin'" (Dylan, 1964).

When I was young, a Christian friend of mine saw me reading a book about "Jesus's false worldview as the basis for his untenable dualism and the illusion of his resurrection" (*Dogmet om Jesus*, 1965) and asked me: "Do you dare to read this book?" And I answered: "Yes, why not? What should I be afraid of?" If what I believe is true, it won't be changed by a book. If what I believe is wrong, I'd better change my belief. And my belief has been continually changing, or I would rather say, it has been continually growing, very much inspired by Bob Dylan's method for transformation.

2. Keep the zeitgeist at arm's length

There are four types of knowns, although Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush at the time, claimed that there were only three. You have the known knowns. That is what you know that you know. Then you have the known unknowns, which is what we know that we don't know. And thirdly, we have the unknown unknowns, that is what we don't know that we don't know. The Secretary of Defense was very worried about the third type, but he forgot the crucial fourth one, as

the philosopher Slavoj Žižek reminds us: “the unknown knows” (Žižek, 2004) are the things that we don’t know that we know. In our context of keeping the zeitgeist at arm’s length, we can call the unknown knows the zeitgeist, the things that are so obvious that we do not see them. And Žižek emphasizes: “The main danger lies in the unknown knows.”

This is exactly why we should try to keep the zeitgeist at arm’s length. Many people are soaked up in the spirit of the times. They go with the flow, if it is the 1960s, the 1980s or the 2000s – they change with the wind, without reflecting upon the values and the view of the world that they embody. Bob Dylan was different, as he confirms in his memoirs: “The madly complicated modern world was something I took little interest in. It had no relevancy, no weight. I wasn’t seduced by it” (Dylan, 2004, p. 20).

Actually, this is one of the rules or commandments to which evangelical Christians may also want to subscribe. These fundamentalists also try to keep the zeitgeist at arm’s length, because what they believe is often not in tune with the everyday life of most people. They want to keep their faith unchanged; and many Christians believe that their faith has remained unchanged, although it may in fact have changed a lot over the years. The truth is that religious practice changes as much as other practices, but you will never reflect upon this fact if you do not keep the zeitgeist at arm’s length.

Bob Dylan has spoken about how important it is to be detached from society to write certain songs: “That is why a lot of people, myself included, write songs when one form or another of society has rejected you. So you can truly write about it from the outside ... outside of the situation you find yourself in” (*American Songwriter*, January 9, 2012). To be conscious and critical of the zeitgeist is not only important for artists; it is important for all of us, but we are often too eager to melt into the spirit of the times. Dylan has said: “I don’t feel obliged to keep up with the times. I’m not going to be here that long anyway ... Jesus, who’s got time to keep up with the times?” (*Sunday Times*, 1st July 1984).

3. Know tradition thoroughly

Evangelical Christians may also fancy this commandment, at least initially, because they spend so much time delving into and keeping their

own tradition alive. But the third commandment does not say that you shall know *the* tradition thoroughly; it says *tradition*, which means all traditions, including diverse Christian and other religious beliefs and practices, along with all other kinds of traditions. In other words you must know history and seek out different views, especially those that have a different take on things than prevailing mainstream opinions.

Bob Dylan has soaked up different traditions to an extreme degree. He has had the curiosity, the inner drive and the courage to explore everything. He began with different music traditions. Instead of being satisfied with the popular music of the time, he listened to radio stations from the South that played obscure blues, jazz, gospel and folk records. He also searched for information about these songs and the singers who performed them, wherever he could find it. Later he got into literature and philosophy: "I'd read that stuff. Voltaire, Rousseau, John Locke, Montesquieu, Martin Luther – visionaries, revolutionaries ... it was like I knew those guys, like they'd been living in my backyard" (Dylan, 2004, p. 30).

When he came to New York in the early '60s, he went to the public library to study microfilms from the Civil War and other crucial events from American history. It is interesting that the greatest artist of our time is an autodidact. Dylan stayed at the University of Minnesota for just a few months, but he has had a life-long education that is very eclectic and not determined by academia's standard curriculums: "There is truth in all books. In some kind of way. Confucius, Sun Tzu, Marcus Aurelius, the Koran, the Torah, the New Testament, the Buddhist sutras, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and many thousands more" (Gilmore, 2012, p. 51).

And if you dare to read books that go against your own faith, against your own preconception of the world, you may be able to widen your world.

4. Use tradition to make something new

Know tradition thoroughly, but why? To be able to keep the tradition alive and unchanged? No, not according to Bob Dylan. He has always used tradition to create something new. The old spiritual, "No More Auction

Block,” became “Blowin’ In the Wind.” The old English folk song, “Scarborough Fair,” became “Girl From the North Country.” Dylan’s “Like A Rolling Stone” was made on the chords Richie Valens put together for “La Bamba.” The title was inspired from Muddy Water’s song “Rolling Stone.” And Dylan’s creative use of references has been even broader in his later albums, where “*Love and Theft*” is very much inspired by the novel, *Confessions of a Yakuza* (1991), an obscure book by the Japanese writer Junichi Saga. The title of the album, “*Love and Theft*”, is taken from a book by social historian Eric Lott about the blackface minstrelsy and the American working class, hence the quotation marks on the album cover in the album title.

Many people are concerned about tradition in our times. Immigration has made our Western societies pluralistic, also when it comes to cultural heritage and religion. Many people are afraid of Islam, and the right wing populists cash in on this. They want Muslims to leave our countries or at least to stop more immigration. Others – who are more positive towards other religions, and many of those are practicing Christians – say that we need to be confident and assured in our own religious tradition to meet people with different faiths. But the fourth commandment tells us something else: tradition is always changing and you should contribute to this change with your own ideas and experiences. We do not need to be assured in our own belief systems to meet people with other views, that is not dialogue and that is not a way to change, to expand, to grow. We can be open-minded, flexible and willing to be changed when we meet people. I believe that this is one of the main reasons to meet other people, to be influenced by them, to learn from their experiences, to be challenged by their traditions and ideas – and if they are good, adopt them, use them to create something new that will eventually contribute to the vitality of your own tradition.

5. Accept chaos

Bob Dylan wrote: “I accept chaos. I am not sure whether it accepts me.” (*Bringing It All Back Home*, liner notes). Later, he expanded on this idea in an interview and said: “Chaos is a friend of mine ... truth is chaos, maybe beauty is chaos” (Cott, 2017, p. 54).

In his *Chronicles*, Dylan writes about when he began to think about writing his own songs, which was a big step for him: “It dawned on me that I might have to change my inner thought patterns ... that I had been closing my creativity down to a very narrow, controllable scale ... that things had become too familiar and I might have to disorientate myself” (Dylan, 2004, p. 71).

This is what the fifth commandment tells us. At certain times in our lives we need to disorientate ourselves to change our inner thought patterns. The informants in the book *When Arts Disrupts Religion* express a very different attitude to chaos or uncertainty: “If there was one message that was driven home to me again and again it was that Christians should abstain from many things, especially *doubt*, because God doesn’t like that... (Francis, 2017, p. 19). Another informant says: “I have come to see the ways that *being certain* is – at least in many evangelical communities – more than a state of mind. It is an identity. ‘We were to be non-doubters’ ... and this was nonnegotiable” (Francis, 2017, p. 33). What these informants learned by being exposed to art was “that confusion is ok, is actually a somewhat natural state of being” (Francis, 2017, p. 54). An informant says: “The not-knowing needed *form* of some kind. This ... is the realm of the arts. Poetry, visual art, literature, and silence speak the language of not-knowing better than logic or creed” (Francis, 2017, p. 67f). This is especially true of art that is so complex and existential as Bob Dylan’s oeuvre.

We can never control reality, and you will lose your freedom if you try. Instead we should accept chaos and embrace uncertainty. We should not look upon chaos as an enemy, as an anomaly, rather we should see chaos as a friend, even as a beautiful friend.

6. Find your own vocation

Life is chaos, but it is not pure chance, according to Bob Dylan, who has always had a strong sense of destiny. When he arrived in New York for the first time in January 1961, he experienced that there were a lot of better singers and musicians around, but in spite of that he had a strong feeling that “destiny was about to manifest itself. I felt like it was looking at me

and nobody else” (Dylan, 2004, p. 22). In an interview with Christopher John Farley in *Time*, Dylan says it even more emphatically: “I’ve had a God-given sense of destiny. This is what I was put on earth to do. Just like Shakespeare was gonna write plays, the Wright Brothers were gonna invent an airplane, like Edison was gonna invent a telephone. I was put here to do this. I knew I was gonna do it better than anybody ever did it” (*Time*, September 17, 2001).

We are all tangled up in the foggy web of destiny, but our fate is not completely predetermined, according to Dylan, if only our will power is strong enough: “With strength of will you can do anything. With will power you can determine your destiny” (*Rolling Stone*, January 26, 1978).

To have a will power like that, you need a purpose, a calling, a vocation. Dylan has been fortunate to have this sense of vocation since he was a child, but one day you may lose it, one day you may feel an emptiness inside, to which you cannot relate, brought on by a simple twist of fate. Dylan lost it completely during a concert at the Piazza Grande in Locarno, Switzerland. Everything fell apart, he could not make a sound. Then something strange happened: “It’s almost like I heard it as a voice. It wasn’t like it was even me thinking it. *I’m determined to stand, whether God will deliver me or not.* And all of a sudden everything exploded” (*Newsweek*, 1997). What he got back was a purpose, a new vocation: “If I ever wanted a different purpose, I had one. It was like I’d become a new performer, an unknown one in the true sense of the word” (Dylan, 2004, p. 153).

Many of us have big dreams. We want to contribute, we want to make a difference, in some sense we want to save the world, at least to do our part, but depth psychologist Bill Plotkin advises us not to put this burden on our shoulders: “The gift you carry for others is not an attempt to save the world but to fully *belong* to it. It’s not possible to save the world by trying to save it. You need to find *what is genuinely yours* to offer the world before you can make it a better place. Discovering your unique gift to bring to your community is your greatest opportunity and challenge. The offering of that gift—your true self—is the most you can do to love and serve the world. And it is all the world needs” (Plotkin, 2003, p. 13).

The most common regret that people have at the end of their lives, according to the Australian nurse and writer Bronnie Ware, is: “I wish

I'd had the courage to live life true to myself, not the life others expected of me" (*The Guardian*, February 1, 2012).

7. Leave the ones who hold you back

It is hard to imagine how the young Bob Dylan was able to leave the folk music movement. Only 20 years old, he wrote "Blowin' In The Wind" and was immediately proclaimed a prophet. 21 years old he wrote "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," 22 years old he wrote "Times They Are A-Changin'". To make such an amazing impact at such a young age, and still have the courage to leave the people that love you is almost unfathomable. Who else would have done that? If you are in with your crowd, if you are appreciated, even worshiped, why leave, why move on? But he did.

"You must leave now, take what you need, you think will last", Bob Dylan sings in "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue", one of so many songs about break up: "Leave your stepping stone behind, something calls for you". Bob Dylan left the folk movement, because he had to be true to his artistic vocation. The folk movement fought a very righteous cause together with the Civil Rights Movement, but their views became increasingly limited. All congregations face this danger – whatever good cause they fight for – you narrow your scope, you lose your ability to see outside the box. Therefore, if you cannot change it, you will have to leave it.

It's usually hard to leave any congregation. The student Thomas at the Oregon Extension, who is one of Francis's informants, knows all about this: "They looked at me in disbelief when I told them I was leaving the church and that I was no longer certain about the who or what or if of God. And I looked back at them in disbelief. How had it come to this? Some of them wiped the dust off their shoes, others wept, and others told me I was under the sway of Satan. How could I protest? They had trusted me before, why should I expect them to trust me again?" (Francis, 2017, p. 36).

Maybe it was also difficult for Bob Dylan to leave the folk music movement? The audiences booed, a man yelled – infamously – "Judas" at the Manchester Free Trade Hall. Many of the people in the movement, some of them close friends, looked upon him as a traitor – the most gifted person in the movement sold out for personal glory, instead of fighting the

good cause – at least that was what they thought, but they were wrong, as the gatekeepers of the pure, untainted faith usually are.

Many of us have experienced this: what was freedom, becomes a prison. What was truth, becomes a lie. The group, or the congregation you are a part of begins to confuse cultural expressions with real values. A polka dot shirt *means* that you set the individual values before the collective. An electric guitar *means* that you have sold out to commercial interests. Then someone must be brave enough to stand up and say, “This guitar doesn’t mean anything; it’s an instrument for God’s sake.” Sometimes it doesn’t take more than this to become a traitor. You can change the polka dot shirt or the electric guitar with any other object that becomes a symbol for something. When the congregation agrees about this symbol, you know it is time to leave the ones who say they love you, to save yourself and whatever you believe in.

8. Add. Don’t subtract

Bob Dylan has gone through many changes during his life, but in spite of all this, I cannot recall one single time that Dylan has dissociated himself from any of his earlier phases. They all seem to be an integral part of his personality; and I believe this is a conscious strategy. It is also a wise strategy for a person of faith. Because none of us have a direct access to God, or to reality, which, for me at least, is the one and the same thing. It is true what Paul said: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13:11–12). Our knowledge about reality will always be partial. This is why it is wise to add to our faith, and not to subtract from it.

Somewhere in my more than 60-year-old body, there is a child, who feels like a child, who believes like a child. Somewhere in my aging body there is still a youthful voice, too sure about his opinions. All my experiences, and all your experiences, are contained somewhere in our bodies, and if we want, we can choose to embrace everything, all our phases, all our knowledge, all our beliefs. Add. Don’t subtract. We should not make ourselves smaller than we are. We may even contain opposites. It is perfectly possible to believe and not believe in God at the same time.

One of the students at Oregon said: “If anything, the Oregon Extension taught me to desire to live my life in widening circles of embrace, even of my evangelical background. There were echoes of Walt Whitman up there on the mountain: I am large, I contain multitudes, they said, I even *contain* evangelicalism. The Oregon Extension is about the embrace of multiplicities and liminal spaces” (Francis, 2017, p. 18).

9. Find religiosity in the music

What does Bob Dylan believe in? We got a good answer to this question from Dylan himself, in connection with the release of one of his most important albums, *Time Out of Mind* (1997), when he confessed: “Here’s the thing with me and the religious thing. This is the flat-out truth: I find the religiosity and philosophy in the music. I don’t find it anywhere else. Songs like ‘Let Me Rest on a Peaceful Mountain’ or ‘I Saw the Light’ – that’s my religion. I don’t adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists, all of that. I’ve learned more from the songs than I’ve learned from any of this kind of entity. The songs are my lexicon. I believe the songs” (*Newsweek*, October 5, 1997).

In a different interview around the same time, he adds to this reflection: “I believe in a God of time and space, but if people ask me about that, my impulse is to point them back toward those old songs. I believe in Hank Williams singing ‘I Saw the Light.’ I’ve seen the light, too” (*The New York Times*, 28th September, 2017).

By the old songs, Dylan obviously means the old folk songs, religious ones, like the songs mentioned above, but also secular ones, strange songs with the ability to transport you to a different world far from your well known social reality: “It is a mythical world, speaking of deep truths about life, death, God and the mystery of life. You have to believe. Folk music, if anything, it makes a believer out of you” (Dylan, 2004, p. 256).

The last Christmas my father was alive, he celebrated the holiday in our house with me and my wife and our three children. We stayed up late several nights, singing songs, old folk songs with English lyrics, a language my father never learned, but I took time to translate the lyrics for him. There were songs like “I Am Weary (Let Me Rest)” and “Will the Circle

Be Unbroken”. Our children added newer songs by Gillian Welch, that sounded as old as the other ones, and my father immediately understood and recognized that these songs are similar to the songs that we sang in the chapel when I was a child. Since then, I had rarely been able to practice faith together with my father, because the common faith we shared had taken different directions and had moved into different modes of expression, but at this last Christmas celebration, we were able to share a real religious experience together: the circle was unbroken, thanks to the songs.

When we went to bed on the last night of the Christmas holiday, my father exclaimed: “Three nights in a row, I have been able to enjoy the music and the warm togetherness. Three nights, I am so grateful.” Early the next morning I had to drive him to the hospital with severe chest pains. Three weeks later, he died, almost 90 years old.

Like Bob Dylan, I believe in the old songs, but I also believe in the new songs. I believe in all songs that sing truths about our complex and often contradictory lives. In the same way I also believe in literature, in theatre, in dance, and in visual arts; and I will definitely not make a distinction between sacred art and secular art. I got rid of this false dichotomy a long time ago. All art that speaks truthfully about life is sacred. Not all art that claims to be sacred speaks truthfully about life.

Rosanne Cash compared art to religion and concluded: “Art and music have proven to be more expansive, more forgiving, and more immediately alive. For me, art is a more trustworthy expression of God than religion” (Cash, 2010, p. 235).

10. He not busy being born, is busy dying

This 10th commandment may be seen as the summary of all the commandments I have found, but it is also a problematic commandment that can be understood in at least two different ways. This well known expression appears in one of Bob Dylan’s greatest songs of all time, the desperate “It’s All Right, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)”, from the album *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965). It is a song about “the demands, expectations and manipulations of a world in which ‘not much is really sacred’”

(Dylan, 2018, p. 103). The young protagonist is living in a chaotic world; everything is going on at the same time, in all directions: “While preachers preach of evil fates / Teachers teach that knowledge waits / Can lead to hundred-dollar plates...” But he is already disillusioned: “there is no sense in trying.”

Everything is false, “The hollow horn plays empty words,” and it is actually these hollow horns that seem to warn that, “He not busy being born, is busy dying”.

I believe in the 10th commandment; I think it is true that “he not busy being born, is busy dying,” but in this song the expression comes from outside, from the others, from society, from the authorities. Understood in this way, I would not recommend this 10th commandment at all, but there is a different way to understand this expression, which I learned from the movie *Lady Bird* (2018). The main character, Christine, is graduating from high school and she calls herself Lady Bird, because she is ready to fly. After finishing high school, she wants to go to college in New York, where she can delve into art and culture and meet interesting people. She’s from Sacramento, from the wrong side of the tracks, the poor side. Her mother doesn’t want her to leave for the big city and says something like: You will never be accepted to a college in New York, your grades are too bad; and besides you have all the violence and terrorism in the big city. You are gonna go to a college here in Sacramento.

There is an important scene in the movie, when Lady Bird is trying on a new dress for her graduation party. From the inside of the fitting room she asks her mother who is standing outside: “Mom, do you like me?” And the mother answers: “I love you, Christine” – which is not a good answer, because it is the default answer for parents. Parents are supposed to love their children. This was not what Lady Bird was asking about, however, so she repeats her question: “But do you like me?” And her mother takes a deep breath – but It’s All right, Ma (You’re Only Sighing) – before she says, “I just want you to be the best version of yourself, Christine.” Then, Christine, or Lady Bird, gives this very good response: “What if this is the best version of myself?”

The 10th commandment, “He not busy being born, is busy dying,” is not about fighting to be the best version of yourself – especially not what

other people think is the best version of yourself. The 10th commandment is about being open to new possibilities, new acquaintances, new ideas, new concepts, that will give you different views and experiences, and, most important, it will give you more alternatives when you yourself have to choose which version of your life you want to live. Whether you decide to go to New York to experience art and culture or you choose to remain in your home town, or anything and everything in between: the crucial thing is to realize that you have alternatives – and the more, the better, because without alternatives there is no real choice.

This is the reason why we should try to be like a sponge, but keep the zeitgeist at arm's length; know the tradition thoroughly, but use it to create something new; accept chaos, but find our own vocation; leave those who hold us back, but add to all our experiences; and find religiosity in music, or other arts, so that we can stay busy being born, until death comes to us all.

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