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Man Finds Four-Fold Path to Personal Transformation in the Gospels

By Polly Summar

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From a picturesque adobe on Apodaca Hill, Alexander Shaia ministers to people of all faiths, bringing them a kind of personal transformation through Matthew, Mark, John and Luke.

While there's definitely a religious base to Shaia's mission, he would like to see people break out of rigid definitions of spirituality and move into a greater meaning of the four Gospels, a meaning that could heal not only their personal lives but their communities as well.

"The religious right wants to follow the exact words of whatever translation of the Bible they're reading," said Shaia, 54. "The left wants to get back to the original Jesus through scientific research and archaeology. Both have forgotten that this is about a spiritual practice."

Shaia said Christianity did not start out as a religion just looking at Jesus: "It started out as a religion based on the process of spiritual transformation." Shaia believes that "Jesus fully reveals the Christ, but that Christianity did not begin when Jesus was born.

"St. Paul gave us the definition for the word Christ: the pre-existing pattern from before the beginning of time through which all has been created."

Born to a Lebanese family in Birmingham, Ala., Shaia followed behind nine Catholic priests in 13 generations. His career path is steeped in both Roman Catholic seminary study and psychology. He has degrees in cultural anthropology, counseling education, religious education, pastoral psychotherapy and a doctorate in clinical psychology, specializing in Jungian sandplay as developed by Swiss Jungian analyst and Christian-Buddhist practitioner Dora M. Kalff.

But it was the family emphasis on becoming a priest that would eventually lead him to choose his own path.



"In every generation of my family, the son named Alexander became a priest," said Shaia, who felt destined to follow that tradition.

But in seminary, Shaia began having nightmares for the first time in his life, dreaming about being in a magnificent cathedral during an earthquake as the roof begins to fall in. "I'm trapped and I can't breathe," he remembered. "I woke up screaming."

Ignored tradition

Shaia knew that his interests in both religion and psychology were genuine, but it wasn't the life of a priest he was after. When he left the seminary, at age 25, he describes it as a time of utter chaos. "I was afraid to come home," he said, instead traveling all over the country to visit friends. "I was bucking hundreds of years of tradition."

In reflection, he now sees that his leaving the seminary and the sense of loss it brought was simply the first stage of what he came to call the journey of "Quadratos." It's a word he uses to describe the four-fold paths expressed by the four Gospels in sequence—the map of a "never-ending spiritual journey."

Its discovery was a gradual process throughout Shaia's study. His studies in cultural anthropology had taught him that almost every indigenous culture has a four-step ritual for adult initiation.

To add to that, "in seminary, I learned that the Catholics had reinstated the four-step initiation process for baptism." Suddenly, the four-step nature of life began making sense.

The four steps

The first step, which corresponds to the book of Matthew, is the new beginning. It always comes after a sense of loss, he said. For Shaia, it came in disappointing his family. Not knowing exactly what to do next, he entered the second path, a time of chaos when nothing makes sense, and spent a year traveling.

The third path, or Epiphany, came as he began to follow his interests. He finished a master's degree in counseling education at the



University of Alabama in Birmingham, then another master's degree in religious education from Seattle University and began working as a layperson for the Catholic church.

"In the mid-1970s, the Roman Catholic church had just done the document on the rites of initiation," said Shaia, "and I was on the national team explaining it to the dioceses."

After studying the four-stage initiation rite, Shaia kept pondering its significance, feeling there had to be a deeper meaning for why such a ritual existed within the church.

An Epiphany

In the fall of 2000, he was on a retreat at Ghost Ranch. "I still remember the date, Nov. 1, 2000," said Shaia, recalling the Epiphany he had there as he was studying and reading about the Gospels.

Suddenly, the traditional way that the Gospels are read in many churches in a three-year cycle made sense to him. "I was up the rest of the night," said Shaia, reading and thinking about it.

"I spent another year researching it," said Shaia. "Everything correlated." The number four appeared everywhere: Even his clients in sandplay therapy went through the four-fold process.

"In the four Gospels, you see four different crucifixion scenes, four different resurrection scenes. The Gospels were not chosen as biographies. They were chosen as text for prayer and meditation for spiritual transformation."

Writing a book explaining it all was the next logical step. And perhaps not surprisingly, it took him four years to write.

Called "Beyond the Biography of Jesus: The Journey of Quadratos, Book I," it chronicles the first two paths of the sequence, which correlate to the first two Gospels of the Bible, Matthew and Mark. The next book, out in September, will go into the last two paths, which correlate to John and Luke.

"My publisher convinced me that it's not a tease, that the American public doesn't like to hold a book in its hands that's longer than 200 pages," Shaia said.



The four paths

The four-path process, which Alexander Shaia has named the "Journey of Quadratos," corresponds to the four Gospels in the Bible and to the seasons. Shaia uses the analogy of paths, instead of steps, because he sees the process as a circle or spiral.

"You may be finishing up the fourth path in one area of your life," he says, "only to be starting the first path in another area." Shaia says Quadratos can apply to any process a person is going through and, below, shows how it could be used to help a couple having problems in their marriage.

Matthew/Fall: The first path is about a new beginning, and usually starts as the result of a feeling of loss. "If a couple is saying their marriage is bad, they're already experiencing loss," says Shaia, adding that what they then need to do is reframe the loss into a new beginning, a new possibility.

Mark/Winter: The second path brings with it a sense of utter chaos. "Things feel worse at this time," says Shaia, "because you begin to take the blinders off— you've been protecting yourself from seeing things."

John/Spring: In the third path, an Epiphany or new way presents itself. "As you work with things, it's trial and error between you and your partner," says Shaia. "There will be a moment— unexplained and by surprise— where there will be a new coming together. The challenge is that we never know what the new coming together means. There's an enormous sense of relief, as in, 'We've done it,' and they haven't. What they have is a real possibility to work it out. But most people stop at the moment of relief." The key, Shaia says, comes in the next path.

Luke/Summer: The fourth path is a patient "working out" of the Epiphany so that it becomes "ordinary," or integrated into one's life and community. "This path is a long patient process of listening and negotiating with each other for a new life," says Shaia. "It's each person saying, 'I speak my truth and hear my partner's truth and find



a way that fills us both up.' What's different in this path from the second path is that in the second path, there's a lot of bitterness while listening to each other."

If you go

Alexander Shaia will be talking about his book, "Beyond the Biography of Jesus: The Journey of Quadratos, Book I" (Cold Tree Press, \$14.95 paper, \$22.95 hardback), and signing copies at 7 p.m. Aug. 17 at Santa Maria de la Paz Catholic Community, 11 College Ave., and at 7 p.m. Sept. 28 at the Basilica of St. Francis, just off the Plaza. Books can be purchased at the Awakening Museum bookshop, 125 N. Guadalupe St., ordered through local bookstores, or through the Web site, www.quadratos.com.

For a taste of Shaia's Blue Door Retreat, join a small contemplative group of likeminded souls— including Methodists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, American Baptists and Episcopalians— at 7 p.m. Wednesday nights, 4121/2 Apodaca Hill, off of Upper Canyon Road. The group reads the Gospel for the coming Sunday three times and then quietly sits with it. Call 986-8100 for more information and to confirm, as the group will be taking some time off in August. For more information on the retreat, visit www.bluedoorretreat.com

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