The following meditation was written by Dr. Hood’s son, Nathanael Hood, MA, New York University

Diet Religion

READ: John 6:66 (Common English Bible)

“At this, many of his disciples turned away and no longer accompanied him.”

REFLECT:

When I was a grad student in New York City, I lived down in the Bowery in lower Manhattan. Walking back from class I’d frequently find myself strolling through Greenwich Village, that perennial home to New York’s strange, artistic, and eccentric. On warm muggy nights amateur psychics would seemingly sprout up from the pavement, setting up shop outside cafes and trendy restaurants with signs offering fortune tellings for a meager $15. Some offered palm readings, other astrology charts, but the most popular service of these armchair clairvoyants were tarot card readings. For the price of a good pastrami sandwich a few blocks over at Katz’s Deli, they claimed they could use their cards to predict your fate. Heavy with the weight of an ancient esotericism, they would sigh and moan with the flick of a wrist, this card predicting a successful career change, this one the failure of a promising relationship.

Ask these psychics how they learned their craft and they would twinkle an eye and say that it takes years of study and practice. What they probably won’t tell you is that you can google “learn tarot” right now on your phone and get links to countless sites and YouTube videos promising to teach initiates how to read them in just a few hours. It turns out reading tarot cards is much easier and less mystical than originally advertised. And while many will claim that tarot cards originated in the courts of ancient Egyptians, in reality the first tarot card decks appeared in 15th century Europe, not as divining tools but as playing cards. It would take around two more centuries for them to gain widespread use among fortunetellers, and even then mostly only in French and English-speaking areas. Go to other parts of Northern, Central, or Southern Europe and you’ll find people still using them as they were originally intended: as simple playing cards.

But have you ever tried telling anyone who believes in the power of tarot card that they’re pure charlatanism? That their art is only a few centuries old and would be laughed at by the people that created them? The polite ones will hem and haw excuses. The impolite ones will scream at you for “violating their beliefs.” Tarot cards and other forms of New Age quackery have weeded their way into the lives of millions and the emotional dependence they engender is tantamount to brainwashing. It makes sense why: they provide the benefits of religion with none of religion’s demands. They give the customer a sense of cosmic purpose, personal direction, and even community, but without the insistence of moral improvement, personal reflection, and acts of charity towards the poor and disenfranchised. Have you ever heard of a palm reader telling customers to seek counseling for anger management? A salesperson for essential oils to volunteer at a soup kitchen? The answer is no. And the reason is that all of these things are, quite literally, diet religion.
We see the perils of diet religion even in the time of Jesus. Think of the rich man in Mark who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life and left after being told to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. Perhaps this man was hoping for a dose of diet religion. Or what of the lawyer in Luke who asked Jesus who was his neighbor and was told his bitter enemy the Samaritans. Was this man seeking a diet religion answer full of reassurance? And then there’s the sixth chapter of John where Jesus chastised and offended the multitudes who sought him for his miracles of loaves and fish and not the Bread of Life. The scriptures literally record his disciples complaining that the message of his ministry was “too harsh” before abandoning him. They too were seeking diet religion. Real religion—the true Gospel of Christ—is demanding and difficult. It requires the complete transformation of one’s life. It takes a lifetime to learn with no guarantee of mastery. We come to church, we come to Jesus, for something greater than fortune cookie platitudes. We come for rebirth. But if that’s not what you want, then I know several people in Manhattan who for a modest fee would be happy to help.

**RESPOND:**

1. How has this scripture or meditation spoken to you? **Pray:** “What would you have me hear, O Lord?”

2. What one specific act do you intend to take, an attitude to change, a person to see, or prayer to pray? **Pray:** “What would you have me do, O Lord?”

**PRAY:**

Gracious God, I give you control of my life today. Forgive me for my half-hearted discipleship and make me a worthy instrument for your redemptive work in this community. Amen.