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Decolonizing: Physician of the Mind (Interview with Jason Martez Massey)

Jason was born in St. Louis, MO. He was raised as a lone child by a single mom. At 30 years old, he's a junior in philosophy at SIUC, having transferred from College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, IL, with a certificate in photography. He was raised a Baptist and has explored many Christian denominations and religions from around the world (he is currently Catholic). He's leaving Carbondale to study at North Eastern University, Chicago.

Michael (M): So, Jason, maybe we could start with you telling me about how you got to be a deep thinker? But actually let's start by how you identify yourself?

Jason (J): I'm an explorer. I'm a physician of the mind.

M: Why physician as a metaphor?

J: Basically you know doctors are interested in how the body works. I'm interested in ideas and how they are related to the mind. And the human condition.

M: So you're a philosopher it sounds like. I know you are a student in philosophy.

J: Yes. But there is a difference between a student of philosophy and someone who is engaged in a life of the mind.

M: I'd like to come back to that fascinating distinction you're making. I'd like to go further with your identity in terms of culture.

J: I'm a male biologically. I guess I see myself as a person who seeks the truth. It just so happens I came from an African American background. But that does not define who I am. More than my genes and cultural background, I'm a spirit inside a body. And that transcends any sociological and ethnological label that this earthly realm gives me.

M: So Jason does anyone in your life recognize you are a spirit first and a cultural being second?

J: I would say my friend Nate, and Maurine. I know another girl named Sarah.

M: So, it is pretty rare to find people who see through and beyond your cultural identity and biological identity to a spiritual view?

J: Yes.

M: Why is it so rare?

J: I think people are caught in labeling and it is easy. People are caught up in appearances. We know that appearances can be deceiving. So people don't want to do too much thinking beyond the tangible.

M: Beyond the material reality.

J: Yeah. I mean in a society where basically we're caught up in the everyday world, and the mundane, people are not really engaged.

M: You mean engaged in a life of the mind?

J: Life of the mind and with the world, their self, and I would say there's no inner life. What I mean by inner life is searching deep inside yourself and being like productive in the cultivation of the mind, and soul. Most people are reactionary.

M: What do you mean reactionary?

J: Basically they're just not really examining things, they are basically just being animalistic-like. No intellectual reflection and interrogation of the mind going on inside their minds.

M: And the human condition.

J: Yeah.

M: So what is the human condition?

J: The human condition is basically recognizing our finitude, our suffering, our inadequacies, our need to transcend, and to be authentic.

M: Wow. That's a conversation that's a real party stopper, especially for someone your age with other young people, isn't it?

J: Yes.

M: How do you get along with people your age and younger in university communities?

J: I would say not too well. Most young people are just culture constructions. They're not being individuals. Just following the herd. Settling for less. And basically, they're not really existing as a human being, they are just vegetating.

M: Jason, so did you learn about the fundamentals of the human condition and how people are mostly ignoring those questions and thinking on your own?

J: It was always there even as a boy. But back then I didn't have the faculties to go into it. But I had a certain sense of it.

M: What sense do you remember?

J: I knew it was like an intuition. There was something 'wrong with the world' [Morpheus-Neo conversation from *The Matrix* film] and it had to be a higher level than what was presented to me from society and adults and authority figures.

M: Right. But you were raised Christian, and don't they say pretty much the same thing, that this worldly life isn't all there is so don't get too attached to it because there is a greater reality in the sacred?

J: Yes. But I would say that even the Christian thing has been contaminated by worldly things. So basically Christianity has become another kind of social club. And basically, as far as like to be a Christian is to be something you do all by yourself inwardly. What forms as Christianity is largely fellowship; but the core thing is recognizing a relationship to the transcendent. And that's the Divine. Outside that, you're just an individual but this Divine is universal. The particular transcends the universal but the paradox is the universal transcends the particular too. But when the particular meets in a relationship with the transcendent, the self becomes a complete being.

M: So are most Christians you meet not complete?

J: I would say they worship a book and not God itself. They are interested in just following instructions, like people follow like laws but not actually engage with the mystical realm.

M: I noticed you used "God itself" not God Himself, the latter which most Christians would. Is that your mystical understanding that there is no gender in the transcendent Divine relationship?

J: I would say gender in a sense in the spirit realm it doesn't really exist. But in the earthly realm gender is appropriate. But in the spirit realm that transcends it. Most people use Father because in a sense it is the seed-giver. People think of God as a Source. It has nothing to do with gender. It's easier for people to associate with the Divine in earthly concrete metaphors like male Father figure. But in contrast, the Holy Spirit is known as a feminine way. The Son represents being vulnerable and being in the midst of the world.

M: And thus, the Son suffers most?

J: Yeah.

M: So what mystical experience have you had that informs your understanding of the spiritual realm and reality?

J: The Virgin Mary. She showed herself to me when I was like 10 years old. She was illuminated. I knew I wasn't schizophrenic or with a mental illness, this was like a true mystical experience. It came at a time when I felt some dark energy in the place I was living in. The next day when I woke up she appeared to me and looked at me and warm and in a warm and loving way and said "It will be alright." You think that is crazy don't you, Michael?

M: Not at all. I am aware of many people, who are not crazy, who have these experiences. I believe they are valid for what they are to people and are real to people. I also know there is lots of evidence that they help people on the spiritual path [and struggle].

J: Have you ever heard of the book *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*? Basically, what they are saying is that the spiritual experience is just as real as touching a rock. Basically, by using neurology, these things are justified from brain research that these experiences are a real reality. Changes take place in the brain when these experiences happen. People want to argue these are just hallucinations. And these [researchers] folks write there is a difference between a hallucination and a mystical experience. Different types of mystical experiences also exist, intellectual, visionary and such.

M: Do you have other religions and mystical teachings that inform your ideas?

J: Chinese philosophy and a little Buddhism. The Gnostic Gospels and a hint of Hinduism, neo-Confucianism, neo-Platonism, and Native American.

M: And so with that mixed bag you seem to ground your spiritual thought in existential and the psychology of the existential domain?

J: And the human predicament.

M: So, do philosophers today, let's say in your Philosophy Department at SIUC, do they respect your spiritual existentialism?

J: They know I'm real when it comes to philosophy. My presence is felt.

M: Right. But do they regard your philosophical thinking as real philosophy?

J: That's hard to say.

M: So they have encouraged you, or have they tried to correct you?

J: One person who does encourage me, because I haven't really talked about my views with the instructors. The only one I have talked more personally about this is with a doctoral student, Steve Stegman. He told me I am not like a philosophical laborer but someone who actually thinks on my own. He says I was being real.

M: And that's abnormal.

J: When I was in high school, I was 16 years old and a teacher said well, "I can say one thing about you Jason, you are real."

M: So, how did public school go for you?

J: I feel like it was a penal system. Waking up early, the bus, and the militaristic order and basically it was like the bus came to take you to this prison and recess was like the courtyard. The principal was like the warden. The teachers were like the prison guards. There was no real learning going on. It wasn't about ideas just fact and information.

M: Okay, so in this penal system of schooling, how were you labeled?

J: I was labeled with a learning disability in pre-school and in elementary with ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder].

M: How did that impact your growth?

J: The learning disability impacted me negatively more than the ADHD label. I guess because basically, it is saying this guy can't learn, he has a problem with learning, and I was called "slow" and "retarded." Feeling like, you are inadequate. Like you are not going to be anything but a bum for the rest of your life.

M: So, how did you overcome that?

J: Because inside me somewhere I knew some of it was nonsense.

M: Like intuition.

J: Yeah. I was a rebel. I rebelled against the authority and system.

M: And that rebel kept you sane and able to develop on your own without authority's approval.

J: School didn't teach me how to learn. I taught myself. Because for one thing I had an inquisitive mind.

M: You also told me that being pulled out of regular classrooms often, that it gave you a lot of time away from normal social conditioning and that helped you develop other strengths.

J: Yes, because I was looking from the outside-in. So, basically, I was isolated from that and I became more an individual. A different focus. You are not around the regular stuff. And I didn't associate with the other people in Special Ed either. I knew I was different from them. I spent a lot of time alone. Sometimes I'd go and encounter people from the regular classes in high school. And I carried myself in a way that "I mean business, you don't want to mess with this guy." So in away, even labeled, I reversed that to some people in the class. They knew they would have to deal with me like a regular person. That's how I survived high school without committing suicide.

M: I remember you telling me you don't generally do well on memorization examinations in university but you do well on papers. Why is that?

J: Because it is more personal. It deals with subjects not objects. And so basically when something deals with subjects it is more meaningful. It is something that touches the inner part of the human being. I would say the facts are easy. A fact doesn't cause transformation though. It doesn't go anywhere that's because it is a fact. It stays there. It's stagnant. I would quote Plato: "Ideas are transparent." There is more reality in ideas than a tangible world [of facts] and it is more real. A tangible world is really the illusion.

M: We are separated from the real by illusion, and isn't the illusion based on a fear of the real?

J: Yeah. I would say it is based on a fear because people don't want to go deep because it exposes Being.

M: What is Being?

J: Being is like the inner most spirit of the self. It is a recognition of human beings that wants to be connected to love and wisdom. But most people are afraid of that because it would tear down some of the cultural illusions. People want to live in a box.

M: A box of the pre-given, rather than the emergent.

J: Yeah.

M: It is like the cultural illusion keeps us out of the process of Creation itself.

J: Yes. People, and the kind of society we live in wants control. If people thought for themselves the whole superficial materialistic prison that humans have created would just fall apart.

M: So how does one practice getting out of the box? What have you learned? Here's your chance to be a preacher.

J: Recognize the existential reality that we all must face and cannot escape. We try to escape. But this escape is an escape from ourselves. I would say, we fill our head with external things that don't go anywhere. It doesn't touch the soul.

M: So you could be accused of being a rationalist-transcendent thinker and not someone who respects the body, say like in feminist theorizing.

J: What is the body?

M: Well, sounds like the body is against the mind, in your thinking. That's on the surface anyways. It sounds like Gnosticism.

J: On the surface it appears that way. But I say recognize that the body is a part of the human being but does not represent the human being fully. You are more than your body.

M: Is that like they say in the new age, you are more than your emotions?

J: To a certain extent. The human being is made more than just to eat and sleep and engage in animalistic things. The body is a tool.

M: Okay, you've expressed the human being is more than these animalistic forces, and even more than ideas?

J: What I mean is that ideas come from a higher source. Ideas are intuition that is an inner knowing. That's hard to describe by language. This inner knowing is connected with the Source. The Divine. And we all are children of the Divine.

M: But isn't that just a metaphysical belief?

J: What is belief? I'm not talking about belief systems. I'm talking about actually an experience. But the way things are expressed [limited by language], it appears to be a belief. Inner knowing is

higher than belief. It is not something you just accept and say I believe this and that. There is something different there than having a mystical experience. And that can be just as real as any data and calculation and probably more real than any empirical evidence. You can't experience a mathematical problem. That problem exists in the mind. A quote from the New Testament: "I don't walk by what is visible but what is invisible." Because the invisible deals with subjects and hits the inner most part of the human being. The visible is not going to transform you. It only gives you information.

M: But not knowledge.

J: Or wisdom.

M: So you sound like you mix together Christianity, other religions, existentialism, but who is your favorite philosopher? And why?

J: There's a lot. I could give you a list. First, I'd go with ancient: Heraclitus, Parmenides, Socrates, Plato, Lao Tse and then later Meister Eckhart, Wong Yang Meng, Arthur Schopenhauer, Soren Kierkegaard, Miguel de Unamuno, William James, Paul Tillich and Martin Heidegger, and Thomas Merton.

M: Did you read all of them in college or some in high school?

J: Mostly on my own.

M: So, do you have a sex life?

J: Currently celibate.

M: Do you ever think of becoming a contemplative monk?

J: At one time I did.

M: What about now, why not?

J: I think I have been too socialized in society to a certain extent. But I will be a monk 'in the world not of the world.'

M: Got it. I can relate. So to end, what would you say to young people in the 20s-30s today if you had a chance to say anything?

J: I would say that you are a child of God, even if you deny it. Think for yourself. Search inside yourself. Remember we all are beings thrown into the world, we all suffer, we all want love. And to remember recognizing things that go beyond the superficial.

M: What would you say to politicians in the USA today?

J: Stop being caught up in rhetoric and word games. Really try to address the problems of human relations and be truthful and have compassion.

M: Well, then aren't you asking them to deal with their fear better?

J: Yes.

M. Thanks Jason.
