

The Love That Will Not Die

Given 6/28/15 by Robin Mitchell

When I took Rev. David's sermon-writing course a few years ago one of the things he taught us was that a good sermon should have a "take-home" message, some central insight or inspiration that would stay with you after you'd forgotten all the verbiage. And I thought that was great advice, so I'm just going to start with mine today – if you get nothing else from this sermon, remember this one point: Never annoy anyone who is serving your food or cutting your hair. Nothing good will ever come of it!

I'm sharing this because it saved me some grief a few years ago when I was having my hair done. My hairdresser was trying to sell her house and wasn't getting any offers, and so being Catholic she had buried a statue of St. Joseph in her yard. St. Joseph is the patron saint of householders, and there's apparently this belief that burying his statue will bring you crowds of eager buyers with pre-approved mortgages and good FICO scores. And so she was telling me with a mixture of bafflement and annoyance that she had done this and she still wasn't getting any offers!

Now this just combines a lot of the things that annoy me about the way many people practice religion: the superstition, the idea that God is basically a vending machine who exists to dispense the goodies you want, and perhaps most of all the misdirected energy. I mean, if you're having trouble selling your house, I'd think you'd be better off re-thinking your pricing or your marketing than spending your time burying magical statues in the yard.

But fortunately I remembered my own advice and didn't say any of those things, and so I probably saved myself from several months of wearing a hat while my hair grew back. I certainly thought them, though, and still do; a lot of what passes for popular religion seems pretty stupid to me.

But maybe not the business about saints, at least not completely. I still think that burying a statue in your yard is silly on several levels, but I've been thinking more about saints since that hairdo and they seem to solve a problem that has bothered me about Christianity. In its healthy forms it tells us that our highest calling is to love all of God's children absolutely and unconditionally. And when we die, after lives of loving service, we will go to heaven, to joyfully live in God's presence completely free of any pain or sorrow.

But how, I wonder, can you enjoy your own personal escape from the world of suffering knowing that it continues for everyone else? It seems like the more you loved, the more you deserved heaven, the less happy you could be in it.

And this is where the saints come in. All good people go to heaven, the church says, but the great souls – the ones we call saints – still have so much love and so much compassion for the world they have escaped from that they still work to take away its suffering even though they wouldn't have to let it touch them if they didn't want to.

It may be silly to bury a statue of Saint Joseph, but I think it's wise to admire him, or Saint Christopher, or any of the other saints, for the model of unending compassion they represent and to aspire to be like them ourselves.

Except that of course we really can't. The Church has a lot of surprisingly bureaucratic rules about who can be a saint, but the first rule is that you have to be Catholic, which lets all of us out right there. (No, recovering Catholics don't count!) No matter how much I might want to take away the suffering of everyone who has forgotten to back up their hard drive, I'm not even going to make the first cut when the men in funny hats sit down to examine my case.

But it's still a lovely ideal, this notion of not withdrawing into our own personal escape from a suffering world, and fortunately we don't have to give up on it just because we're not Catholic. The Buddhists have a vision of a similar path that is both higher and more accessible than the Christian, a path that I think many of us, Buddhist and otherwise, are already on. It's called the Bodhisattva path - a Sanskrit word meaning "awakened being" - and at its heart is something very much like the Catholic idea of sainthood.

I'll probably get kicked out of the Buddhist groups for oversimplifying things so much, but the original Buddhist worldview wasn't all that different from the Christian: we live lifetimes of suffering - in the case of the Buddhists, many lifetimes - until we attain Enlightenment and enter the heavenly bliss of Nirvana, forever free from the cycle of rebirth and suffering. And so for the early schools of Buddhism, the motive in spiritual practice was your own liberation - you study and meditate so that you can become enlightened and free yourself from suffering.

But as with Christianity, you have to ask yourself who could actually do that? If Enlightenment is perfect awareness and perfect un-self-centeredness, who could look with that kind of clarity at all the suffering beings in the world and say "well, you're on your own now - I'm outta here!" And so a later school of Buddhism came up with the idea of the Bodhisattva, an awakened being who even after achieving Enlightenment still voluntarily continues to take rebirth to help all the other beings who are still stuck in suffering.

This is a formal vow that practitioners can take, that you will forego the bliss of Nirvana until every last being, every person and animal in the world, has themselves attained Enlightenment and is free of suffering. We heard a form of it in our meditation reading, and the shortest version I know says

And now as long as space endures,
As long as there are beings to be found,
May I continue likewise to remain
To drive away the sorrows of the world.

That is the essence of the path, and you don't have to be a Bible-believing Buddhist to be on it. When I was preparing to take my Bodhisattva vow, I talked to the teacher who was giving it because I was worried that perhaps I wasn't really a candidate for it. I said that I was agnostic about the literal truth of reincarnation and Nirvana and so I couldn't literally pledge to spend countless lifetimes shepherding all sentient beings to Nirvana. But what I did believe, wholeheartedly, was that if they were true then taking the Bodhisattva vow was the only possible response because how could it possibly be right to leave suffering beings behind? And she said that

was a good motivation for taking the vow, and so I did. And years later I'm still not sure about reincarnation or Nirvana, but I am still just as sure about being on the Bodhisattva path. You don't have to be certain of all the rules to know which team you're on.

And if this still sounds a little outlandish, the motivation behind it is lovely. Buddhists call it "bodhichitta", or "awakened heart", and to again over-simplify things it is the aspiration that everything we do, including spiritual growth, be done not just for our own good but with the intent that it help all beings free themselves from suffering. It is a miracle that this pure, unselfish motivation can arise at all in such a broken and deluded world; as a longer version of the Bodhisattva vow says

Just as with a blind man finding a jewel in a heap of dust
Thus, somehow, bodhichitta has been born in me.

If you heard President Obama give the eulogy for the murdered Charleston minister this week you heard him talk about the Christian notion of grace, about how it is God's love that arrives unearned, but that once it is bestowed upon us we have the responsibility to use it to bless the world. And this is how Buddhists see bodhichitta, as a precious jewel that we have discovered against all odds and whose virtues we need to keep alive in our hearts and to share with the world.

Here is how the writer Pema Chodron describes bodhichitta and the motivation of being on the Bodhisattva path:

Spiritual awakening is frequently described as a journey to the top of a mountain. We leave our attachments and our worldliness behind and slowly make our way to the top. At the peak we have transcended all pain. The only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all the others behind – our drunken brother, our sister with schizophrenia, our tormented animals and friends. Their suffering continues, unrelieved by our personal escape.

In the process of discovering bodhichitta, the journey goes down, not up. It's as if the mountain pointed toward the center of the earth instead of reaching into the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward the turbulence and doubt. We jump into it. We slide into it. We tiptoe into it. We move toward it however we can. We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down. With us move millions of others, our companions in awakening from fear. At the bottom we discover water, the healing water of bodhichitta. Right down there in the thick of things, we discover the love that will not die.

I love her description of moving toward the suffering of the world rather than trying to escape from it – if there is an outward manifestation of people who are on the Bodhisattva path, I think this is it.

I once watched a documentary about life on submarines, and they showed sailors in a simulator training to deal with leaks. Now a major leak in a submarine is a violent, terrifying thing, or at least it was in that simulator – imagine a rogue fire hydrant exploding in the middle of your kitchen; anyone's first instinct would be to run away! But if everyone does that in a submarine, it will sink and they'll all die. And so the

sailors train until their first instinct is to run toward the leak, toward the danger and the violence, to fix it and save their boat and everyone on it.

And I think this is a perfect metaphor for people on the Bodhisattva path. I know that when I'm confronted with suffering my first instinct is to move away; to not meet the eye of the panhandler on the street or really feel the pain of all the suffering people and animals I read about in the news every day.

But to be on the Bodhisattva path is to realize that you can't do that; that you can't look at the people of Charleston or Ferguson or Iraq, or the animals crammed into feedlots or dying from climate change, and say "bummer for you – your side of the submarine is sinking!" To see them with the heart of bodhichitta is to realize, to paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King, that no one, including yourself, can be free of suffering until all are free. You can say this is true because of the Buddhist idea that we're all one, or you can say it's true because the effort of pushing yourself away from others will break your own heart, but either way it's true.

And perhaps the most difficult part of not turning away from suffering is not turning away from the people who cause it. When I took my Bodhisattva vow I promised to forego the bliss of Nirvana until everyone else had attained Enlightenment – including the torturers at Abu Ghraib, the Charleston gunman, and the terrorists in ISIS who are reveling in atrocities that shock my heart. My human instinct is to want them to feel pain in proportion to the pain they have caused, and if their own remorse doesn't provide it then I'm happy to jump in and make up the difference! But remembering my vow, I have to ask myself how brutalizing them will help them attain Enlightenment and release me from my obligation. My destiny is tied to theirs as much as it is to their victims', and while we sometimes have to use force to restrain people who would hurt themselves and others we damage our own souls when we use it vindictively.

This all sounds very stern and very demanding, this business of not turning away from suffering, but remember how Pema said to approach it – we move at our own pace, she said. "We jump into it. We slide into it. We tiptoe into it. We move toward it however we can." All of us will find our limits, and there will be times when we can perhaps jump but other times when we can only tiptoe. And there will be times when, because of our own pain and brokenness, we can't even do that, when we need to turn away for our own protection. And that's OK; no genuine spiritual path is about guilting ourselves into things we're not ready for. But on the Bodhisattva path we always have the aspiration to be of help, to not turn away, and that's what guides our spiritual practice. We turn to meditation, or prayer, or reading scripture, or whatever practice sustains us, with the aspiration that it strengthen and heal us so that next time we will be able to be of help.

And this linking spiritual practice to being of help in a suffering world is one of the reasons why I love our Fellowship so much. There are so many people here, Buddhist or otherwise, who are clearly on the Bodhisattva path. Some of them are visible – just look at our newsletter, our website, the bulletin board and the Happenings Table on the patio, and the weekly order of service announcements. You will see people turning toward the suffering of the world in so many ways, whether it be gun violence, labor injustice, families broken across the border, or poverty and hunger in our community. And others are working more quietly, on their own inner obstacles, or with their families, or with our Fellowship community. But all of them

are on the Bodhisattva path if they are turning toward suffering rather than away; if their motivation is to heal the pain of all beings, not just their own.

I think this is part of what Rev. David was trying to do with this Fellowship; to make us a community that instinctively moves toward the pain of a broken world. To have us take shelter in our beloved community, to take strength and sustenance and hope from our spiritual tradition, but to do it always with the aim of turning outward again to a world that needs our love and compassion so much.

May we be that community. May we jump toward that vision; may we slide toward it; may we tiptoe toward it; but may we always keep moving toward it. And along the way may we always be kind to our waiters and hairdressers and everyone else we meet, because they are our brothers and sisters in all this, our companions in awakening, and we will not reach our goals until they have reached theirs.

Amen, and may that be so.