

This I Give My Heart To

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by Robin Mitchell

Opening Words

Some waves on the ocean are high and some are low. Waves appear to be born and die. But if we look more deeply, we see that the waves, although coming and going, are also water, which is always there. Notions like high and low, birth and death, can be applied to waves, but water is free of such distinctions. Enlightenment for a wave is the moment when the wave realizes that it is water.

Thich Nhat Hanh, Living Buddha, Living Christ

Meditation Reading

The wisdom of all ages and of all continents speaks about the road to our depth. It has been described in innumerable different ways. But all those who have been concerned ...with that road ... have witnessed to the same experience. They have found that they were not what they believed themselves to be, even after a deeper level had appeared to them below the vanishing surface. That deeper level itself became surface, when a still deeper level was discovered, this happening again and again, as long as their very lives, as long as they kept on the road to their depth.

The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of each of us, of all being, is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps in order to do so you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about God; s/he who knows about depth knows God.

Paul Tillich

Presentation

I'm standing up here today as a Buddhist, a Christian, and a UU, giving a talk about "This I Believe" – I hope no one has any lunch plans, because we've got a lot of material to cover here this morning! Well, OK, maybe it won't be quite that long... And besides, this isn't really about "This I Believe" anyway – in fact, the main thing I'm going to talk about this morning is how religion for me is not so much about beliefs as it is an open-ended path of transformation, a path that for me seems to be accessible only through the metaphors and imperatives of religion.

But that meant I needed another title for my talk, if it wasn't really about what I believe. At first I thought of the Paul Tillich quote we heard earlier and decided that "This I Take Seriously, Without Any Reservation" would be a better one. But that still wasn't perfect, because there's an implied passivity in 'taking' something, seriously or otherwise, that I don't think is quite right for religion. Religion to me has become an active journey, not something I sit back in the pews and 'take'. So I finally decided that my talk was going to be "This I Give My Heart To, Without Any Reservation," because that truly does describe how I approach it these days.

The first step for me in seeing religion this way came a few years ago when I started studying Christianity. I'd had the same prejudices that many people here have, and the same commitment to rational agnosticism, but I personally knew some Christians whose faith seemed to be changing them, making them more open, more loving, more calmly abiding in the face of daily life; all ways that I wasn't changing. So I started studying it, and came to think that the basic message – that nothing we do can ever separate us from God's love, that God has made sure there's always a path back – would be pretty good news if it were true. And I started to wonder how important it was that it be provably true – after all, there's a bunch of stuff in our Seven Principles that seems to be pretty faith-based. We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people, but how can you prove that all people have inherent worth and dignity? And yet who would want to live believing otherwise?

So I decided that maybe I could just put the issue of beliefs on hold for a while and see what the Christian faith was really about, what it had to offer. I started checking out the local churches, and after a few weird experiences found myself at the Methodist church in Encinitas. This was what I'd come to imagine a Christian church might be like; joyful and open, and full of people who really appeared to be devoted to learning to love justice and walk humbly with their God. So I began going every week, singing the hymns and listening to the sermons and saying the prayers, trying to open my heart to the experience and see where it led.

And then one day I read something that opened a new door for me; the claim by a Christian author that "the main challenge facing a Christian is to fashion a lifestyle suitable for someone who is going to live forever." I'd always been very dubious about the whole Christian notion of eternal life; it seemed like the kind of thing you'd make up if (1) you were really, really afraid of death and (2) you hadn't really thought about eternity very deeply. I love my life and I'm very grateful to have it, but it's not something I could do forever. I may be more attuned to this point than most people; I've suffered from depression for most of my adult life and so living is harder work for me than it is for most people, but I still don't think I'm all that unique. I think that after a few billion years just about anyone would get really tired of being themselves. So what they were seeing as heaven seemed a lot like hell to me; existence dragged out forever, world without end, amen...

But this was a more audacious and demanding claim than that – it seemed to be saying that it was possible to be so transformed that eternal life, if it existed, would be good news, which was just breathtaking. But what kind of transformation would that be? It was certainly something beyond anything I'd imagined, way past any of the incremental advice I'd seen in self-help books or heard from any pulpit, UU or Christian. And then I realized that the one thing that could make eternity – *eternity* – bearable would be to completely dissolve the boundaries between myself and God. God, in the Christian view anyway, lives in eternity; it's me and my baggage that have trouble with the concept.

(Now those of you who know a lot about religion are probably laughing at me right now, because of course all I'd done was to discover Christian mysticism through the back door. Most theistic religions have mystic offshoots that emphasize a direct experience of God rather than details of dogma or ritual. I'd certainly known about the Christian mystic tradition – I'd been reading Thomas Merton since I was in high school – but, well, sometimes I can be clueless; I needed to have a direct experience of mysticism before I could really think about having a direct experience of God.)

So this was all very interesting, but it hadn't really touched me deeply yet. That came a little later when I started thinking about what I'd have to do to start erasing the boundaries between myself and God. What was it that held me separate in the first place? It wasn't God; the whole point of Christianity is that God has gone to great pains to keep the path to him open. It had to be me; all of my incredible pride and attachment to myself; to my separate existence, my precious beliefs, my safe boundaries. Those were the things that made eternity seem so unbearable, and at the same time kept me forever separate from it. The Bible says that we're created in God's image, and so, in a way, do all of Paul Tillich's definitions, so the way back was to start uncovering that image by peeling away all the layers of self that I'd covered it over with.

It's really hard for me to describe what that moment of realization was like; it was like a bell ringing deep in my soul; my whole self just rang with the rightness of it. It seemed like it had to be the path to spiritual health – even if there was no Christian God at the end of it, no eternity to be getting ready for, still, how could breaking out of the prison of my ego be a bad thing?

I'll go back to the title of my talk for an analogy – let's do some audience participation here – how many of you have given your heart to another person; a spouse, a partner, a child, a dear friend? And how many of you did it because you had proven, logically, beyond all doubt, that it was the right thing to do; that this person was worthy; that it wouldn't all end in tears?

Anyone with your hand still up, come see me after the service; I *really* want to hear your story! The rest of you probably know the moment I'm thinking of, when you realize that if you can't give your heart to this person, in this moment, then how will you ever; how will it not grow old and wither alone? That was how I felt; if I couldn't give my heart to this path, out of my small self and into a transcendent unknown, then what would I ever give it to; how would I not grow into a spiritual old maid?

So I started looking some more at the path, to see what it would be like and how I'd start travelling it. Because I'd started from a Christian place I was imagining a Christian God, but I quickly came to see that imagining God as anything at all was a mistake. Any idea, any preconception, was a barrier to seeing what was really there, which was certainly beyond my imagination anyway. When nuns or monks enter a religious order they take a vow of poverty; to own no more possessions than they absolutely need for their life. And to start approaching God I think we need to take a vow of ego-poverty, to have as few opinions, judgements, beliefs, demands as we can, because otherwise we'll be so cluttered up with unreal things that we'll never be able to see what's real. If God is too far away to see clearly, the thing to do isn't to start imagining, it's to start reducing the distance. And the path is the same regardless of whether God exists in the Christian form, or one of the Tillich forms, or as or a pregnant, playful emptiness from which the present moment is continually arising in freshness. (Some of you can probably see the Buddhist part coming...)

But still, Christian tools were the ones I had at the moment. And fortunately, one of them was something that's come out of their contemplative tradition called Centering Prayer. It's a form of meditation where you briefly voice your intention to consent to God's presence and action within you and then quiet your mind and sit in silent contemplation, opening your heart to God and sitting peacefully in relation to Him. Someone described it as being like sitting on the porch with a dear old friend, someone you've known for so long that you don't need words to communicate; you can feel their presence just sitting next to them. So you sit, quietly and peacefully, with God. When you feel a thought intruding, or a defense against God rising in your mind, you gently reaffirm your consent to God's presence and action and return to your stillness.

This isn't a completely transparent process – it assumes a relational God – but I have found it helpful in gently opening my heart. And I *do* feel a sense of relation when I do it; it doesn't feel at all like sitting alone in a room.

But as I continued on the path I still found myself having trouble with explicitly Christian imagery. I'd agreed to set my discomfort aside for a while when I started practicing Christianity, to see where it led and what it opened me to, but after several years I was still uneasy. What I heard in church was uplifting and inspiring, and Centering Prayer was slowly moving me toward something deeply real, but the Apostle's Creed and the Virgin Birth and even the Resurrection still seemed dubious and distracting. The idea was that by sitting with God with an open heart and mind I'd gradually come to see true forms, but these weren't seeming any truer over time.

So three or four years ago, without turning away from the Christian path, I asked Christie Turner to invite me to one of the Buddhist study groups here at the Fellowship. (I didn't really need to do that; they're open to everybody, but I'm shy...) And I immediately found myself at home; what's a fringe concept in Christianity – the direct experience of transcendent reality – is at the heart of Buddhism. In Christian churches only a few people do centering prayer, but in Buddhist groups everyone meditates.

And in both places the path seems very similar. Buddhism doesn't have a concept of a God one can be in relation to, but it has a similarly transcendent idea of the essential unity and fluidity of all beings, of all experience. According to Buddhist thought, suffering arises because we delude ourselves into not seeing this, into imagining things, especially ourselves, as separate, permanent, solid. And so we're constantly feeling hurt and wronged when the illusion collapses somewhere and we lose something we valued, or get stuck with something we dislike. As long as we see ourselves as waves we're doomed to endless crashing on rocky shores, but we resist the idea that we might be fleeting patterns in the everlasting water.

Like the Christian mystics, Buddhists see our fixation on our ego-self as the main barrier to this realization. Being a separate, independent being at the center of our own personal universe is so compelling, so addictive that we have a very hard time seeing anything beyond it even when we know the trouble it leads to. And so most of Buddhist practice involves using skillful means to slowly liberate our awareness from our ego.

Mostly we sit in meditation. Unlike Centering Prayer, we're not sitting in relation to any God, but just in the immediate experience of the present moment. When thoughts arise, as they always do, we gently label them as "thinking", let go of them, and return to the present. The idea is both to begin to experience being present in the moment without constantly spinning off into thinking, and also to see the unreality of the thoughts themselves. It's a great discipline to have a thought like "those crows are really making a racket; I wish they'd shut up so I can meditate" and see it as just a thought – there's me sitting here, and there's the noise, and then there's this thought about what a problem the noise is. And when I label the thought as "thinking" and let go of it, then there's just me sitting here, and the noise; no problem. At least not for 30 seconds, until I get irritated again and go through the whole cycle again...

But every time I do this I'm gradually learning that I don't have to identify with my thoughts, that there doesn't have to be this ego here having opinions about crows and noise. Meditation is a laboratory where I can experiment with this in small ways in a controlled environment, gradually letting go of more and more thoughts and simply being present in the moment.

And I'm told that as the thoughts become less compelling and less frequent, there's more time in between to begin to see the essential nature of reality. Buddhist teachers talk about what this is, but ultimately it's something you have to see for yourself by studying, sitting and practicing. Trying to explain transcendent reality in words leads to saying things like "form is emptiness and emptiness is form", which perhaps point the way but certainly don't contain the truth. So one sits, and begins to see the truth for oneself.

And enlightenment; the moment the wave realizes that it's water; when the last bit of ego dissolves? Buddhism is kind of funny about that; even though enlightenment is a good thing, you can't pursue it directly – as long as the ego desires enlightenment, how is it going to dissolve? But when you get bored with even that desire and just inhabit the

present moment with complete unselfconsciousness and no desire to be in any other moment, then I imagine even an eternal present would be an endless stream of delight. And so I think the Christian mystic and the Buddhist practitioner are heading to the same place in the end.

And so I have these two paths, the Christian and the Buddhist. There is much that I love in both traditions and no deep conflict – both involve sitting quietly in the presence of the Ultimate, opening myself to an awareness of reality. How can you go wrong doing that? Right now I'd say I'm majoring in Buddhism and minoring in Christianity – I find the concepts and ethical ideas of Buddhism to be more helpful in my daily life – but they reinforce and explain each other. Insights I've gained in Centering Prayer have helped my Buddhist meditation, and the direct simplicity of some Buddhist concepts has helped illuminate some of the more obscure Christian symbolism. I'm grateful to have found both paths and I'm active in both; it's a true delight to lead a Buddhist meditation group on Saturday and then help serve Communion at the Methodist church on Sunday. And yes, the Methodists in my life know about the Buddhists and vice versa, and so far no one's gotten mad.

I don't even feel that I've abandoned my old agnosticism in spite of all this God talk; I've just switched from a negative to a positive form. Before, I saw religious beliefs as beyond the reach of rational thought and therefore not worth investigating; now I see them as beyond the reach of rational thought and therefore needing to be investigated through direct experimentation. There aren't any quick answers, but I have years to sit in stillness, experimenting.

But what about UU-ism? This has been kind of an odd "This I Believe"; when they're about people's spiritual journeys they're usually about leaving their old traditions and coming home to UU-ism, not about leaving UU-ism for other paths. Why do I still come here if my heart is with the Buddhists and the Christians?

Because my heart is still here, too, and always will be. I love our theological openness – even though the Methodists are definitely more politically diverse than we are, and I suspect more educationally and economically diverse as well, nobody can beat us for theological diversity. I'll probably never hear a Catholic nun address a Buddhist gathering about the meaning she finds in her vocation, as used to happen here in the old days, and as much as I love the Methodists I'm pretty sure they'll never have a Summer Solstice celebration led by a genuine Wiccan priestess as we did last summer. Moments like that inspire me, and I love us for them.

I have many dear friends here who inspire me by their lives and their spiritual insights; this place seems to attract people like that. And beyond the individuals, there's a sense of beloved community here that I love precisely because it sometimes seems so fragile. I don't know why it is, but we seem to struggle with the simplest things; the Methodists can approve a multi-million-dollar building campaign with less angst than we seem to generate over hiring a DRE or deciding how to handle Joys and Concerns. And yet it's that struggle that I value so much – our community isn't something that just happens; it's

something that we want to happen so much that we patch it together with love after each crisis. I am so touched by that fierce desire we have for each other and for our community that makes us fix it up time and time again, always the same and always new.

And finally, this will always be my spiritual home in one important sense. There's an old saying that "home is that place where when you have to go back there, they have to take you in." That sounds cynical, but it's very comforting to have a place where I'm welcome simply because I'm earnestly searching for truth and not because of the particular path I happen to be following. Five years from now, when I decide I'm a Zoroastrian Sufi and neither the Buddhists nor the Methodists want to have anything to do with me any more, it's deeply reassuring to know that I'll still be welcome here in your midst.

So on this Thanksgiving weekend I'm delighted to have the chance to stand up in front of you all and tell you how grateful I am for everyone here, for the community that you make with your love and your effort, week after week, year after year. Thank you.

Closing Words

I have learned so much from God
that I can no longer call myself
a Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Jew.
The Truth has shared so much of Itself with me
that I can no longer call myself
a man, a woman, an angel or even pure soul.
Love has befriended [me] so completely
it has turned to ash and freed me
of every concept and image my mind has ever known.

Hafiz