

Letting Go – Lazarus and Kisa Gotami

Given 1/23/2011 by Robin Mitchell

A recent poll asked people why they prayed, and the most common answer was “because it brings me comfort and hope” – that beat out “because I need guidance and direction” by over 15%. One of the good things that religion does is to offer us comfort in a world that often seems harsh and meaningless, and if it’s done right that is a very good thing. But there are different ways to offer comfort, some more lasting than others.

One of the most famous comfort stories in the Bible is the story of Lazarus, the man Jesus raised from the dead. Lazarus was deathly ill and his relatives begged Jesus to come and heal him, but by the time Jesus arrived at his house he had already died. The family was distraught with grief, but Jesus calmed them, went to the tomb, and brought Lazarus out alive.

Now I personally love this story – it reminds us that our spirits can be reborn when we think there’s no hope, that there can be possibilities beyond our imagining. And it captures a merciful act of compassion – any of you who have ever lost a loved one knows how much you would have given to have them back for even one more year, and how much it would have eased your heart. In many ways this story illustrates the core of Jesus’ ministry – like healing people on the Sabbath or eating with prostitutes and tax collectors, it’s an act of compassion in the moment with no other concern, an example that we can all take to heart.

But I mostly hear this story used as permission to cling – if God is going to restore our losses, then we never really have to learn to let go. And for a while, it can work – the Bible loses sight of Lazarus after his resurrection, but tradition says that he went on to live a long and productive life, becoming a bishop in the early Church, and eventually died in Cyprus.

And there’s the problem – “eventually died in Cyprus.” Whatever the actual story of Lazarus’s second life, we know that he eventually died - again. His family had to mourn him - again. And this time Jesus wasn’t there to make it all better; they had to deal with it on their own. I hope they had pondered all the lessons of this story,

because if the only thing Jesus taught them was that it was all right to cling, then they must have been devastated all over again.

But there's another story in the Buddhist tradition, the story of Kisa Gotami and the mustard seed, that teaches a different lesson. Kisa Gotami was a young woman whose firstborn child, a baby boy, was the light of her life and the joy of her heart.

But when he was six months old he died of cholera and her heart was broken. And not only her heart; she became unhinged with grief, carrying the dead child in her arms and asking everyone she met for medicine to bring him back to life.

Some kind person sent her to the Buddha, who was teaching nearby, and when she showed him the child he said "I can make a medicine to bring him back to life. But to make it I need you to bring me a handful of mustard seeds from a house in the village where no one has died." She was overjoyed to hear this and eagerly ran off to the village to get them.

But when she got to the first house and told the careworn woman who answered the door what she needed, the woman looked as if the weight of the world had suddenly fallen on her shoulders. She told Kisa Gotami "I'm sorry; I can't help you - my husband died ten years ago and I am the only support for my family now. So even if I could afford mustard seed, they wouldn't help you."

Kisa Gotami thanked her and went to the next house. There the door was answered by a man and his hauntingly beautiful young daughter who clung to his leg. When she told him what she needed his eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry; I can't help you" he said, and as he reached down to his daughter a tear fell on top of her head. "My wife died in childbirth four years ago."

At the third house, a young couple answered the door. Kisa Gotami again explained what she needed and watched as the couple clutched each other in pain. "We're sorry - we'd give anything in the world to be able to help you but we can't. Our only child died last month."

The story says that after enough of this, Kisa Gotami realized that death was a universal loss and was no longer attached to the body of her dead son. She had a

priest perform a burial service for him, went back to the Buddha and asked to join his company as a nun, and achieved enlightenment soon afterwards.

Which is a lovely story, but perhaps a little too tidy – having seen actual parents who have lost children, I can't believe that it was really that simple. Any of us who have suffered a great loss know that the attachment and the longing don't go away just like that. What I think this story tells us is that even in the heart of tragedy when we can't free ourselves from our pain, we can at least let go of the feeling that our suffering is the whole of our story and that we are the whole of the world's story.

By having her see the actual faces of people who shared her pain, the Buddha made her let go of her vision of herself at the center of a universe of pain and opened her heart to compassion for all the other people – everyone on earth, ultimately – who shared the same pain of loss. And this first step, within her reach even as a grieving parent, was what allowed her to eventually let go of more and more of her attachments until she became entirely free.

Clinging brings short-term comfort, but as Lazarus's relatives eventually found out, that comfort never lasts. Letting go is much harder, but it ultimately leads to liberation. It's a path we can all take, and as Kisa Gotami discovered, we can begin by looking with compassion at our loved ones, our friends, our neighbors, even our enemies, seeing that they share the same joys and sorrows that we do, and realizing that we're all in this together.

And we are all in this together, in many ways – the same poll that said people prayed because it comforted them also said the thing they prayed for most was the well-being of others. Compassionately letting go – it's not just for Buddhists any more!