

“Loving the Softer Side of Life”

Rev. Annie Holmes

How do you think it happens? How does a person become the Dalai Lama? Someone who has been forcibly removed from his homeland. Someone who witnessed the brutal beatings and death of many of his country people, the destruction of the very temples built by his ancestors. A country like China, which since the Mao Tse Tung communist revolution seems to hold to no respect for any ideology except that of their own narrow view of life. Tibet was there, basically unarmed, so take it and call it their own. Throw out the Dalai Lama and say there will be no religious Buddhism held in this country ever again.

So, how do you think it happens, that not only the Dalai Lama, but so many more of the Tibetan Buddhists who came here for refuge, how did they not become bitter, angry, revengeful human beings, and instead become the teachers of the world of light, love and peace and a Buddhism that works for modern people in modern times? How does that happen? He is an ordinary man, and actually as a teenager, he was described as unruly, godless, tenderhearted and selfish as most teenagers happen to be. It is told that he had a temper and would holler and scream and throw things. His teachers worried he would turn out as the Sixth Dalai Lama who became a drunkard and womanizer, fleeing his palace to get drunk in the streets of Lhasa.

It is postulated that if the Dalai Lama had not escaped to India he would be a very different man today. Being ejected into the wider world allowed him to remake himself according to his own ideas. Which is just what he did. He became a free ordinary man. Free not only from the Chinese and from Tibetan illusions about how a Dalai Lama should act or be, but free to discover and be liberated from his own past. Escaping Tibet gave him the chance to show Buddhism in its own nature, open, joyful, empathetic. Author Stephen Talty tells us: As his own people had thrown over their own lives in an instant to protect the dharma, so he had begun to peel away everything that restricted him from pursuing it. If you ask the Dalai Lama, he will tell you that leaving Tibet forced him to think differently. He had to contend with issues and situations he would never have had to in Tibet.

And the real benefit of all this to the world is in how he practices his faith. And how he applies his beliefs was clearly affected by his experience as a refugee. He thinks like a man who is guaranteed nothing. Could the story of the Dalai Lama gone another way? Is there within this kind, thoughtful, studious, spiritual man also the potential of an Idi Amin, Hosni Mubarak, Saddam Hussien, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Pol Pot, Manuel Moriego, Joseph Stalin, or even Louis Farrakhan. How could anyone who has had to live through what he has had to experience, choose the softer side of life?

In 1993 I attended the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago. I was attending with a woman who was in wheelchair and at one point during the event we were ushered hurriedly across the street as we were trying to enter the hotel where the Parliament was taking place. Because my friend was in a wheelchair, and I was assisting her, we were given a front seat on the sidewalk as we watched this incident. The crowd got very quiet, men in black suits and sunglasses got out of huge limousines and were on high alert, hands on guns that were showing through their suit coats. The air was highly pitched in some electric energy that was unpleasant. We felt as if we were going to have to watch something awful and we had no choice. Then, the biggest

limousine of all pulled up. Four men came forward and made a human shield around the emerging figure. Hands on their guns, looking right and left they escorted a hooded figure inside the hotel. "Who was that" was whispered all over the crowd behind my friend and I. Finally someone else whispered, "Louis Farrakhan." She spoke it so softly; as if she said it louder the terrible men with guns would come again and punish her for even saying the name. "Oh," we all nodded quietly. Someone behind me said, "He is the leader of the black Muslims."

Just as the crowd was beginning to disperse and enter the hotel, there came singing from down on Michigan Ave. People with saffron robes were walking next to a cart pulled by a donkey. The people in the robes were throwing flowers into the crowd, they were smiling and singing some song in a very foreign tongue. People in the front of the crowd were given long white pieces of clothes and told to go up to the person in the cart and they would be blessed. Because I was in the front of the crowd, I too with many others was given a white cloth and went up to the cart and there a very friendly, beautiful face smiled at me and many like me. I felt so excited and I didn't know why. The person nodded slightly to me and touched my head briefly with both of his hands. Then I saw the orange robes and headdress and knew it was the Dali Lama of Tibet who had blessed me. I started to cry, I didn't know why. He looked so happy, so healthy, so peaceful and he had taken time to bless me and everyone with a white piece of cloth. As I went back to my place on the sidewalk next to my friend, I couldn't stop the tears. She laughed at me, "What are you crying about Annie?" "I really don't know, it was just so beautiful," was all I could say.

What did I learn? I learned that taking chances as the Dali Lama had done could net such wonderful surprises. He blessed the crowd so graciously; he spread joy and gladness with his very presence. Unlike Louis Farrakhan who seemed so fearful and expected something bad to happen had almost created a bad situation by being so secretive and cautious, the Dali Lama had thrown caution to the wind and knew he had a much larger vision to fulfill than to maintain his own safety, and that was to bless everyone he met. I learned too to recognize the larger mission in every action in which I am involved. Throw caution to the wind and be alive and open and present to whoever, friend or foe. My mission would also be to bless all those with whom I came into contact. I would not live so fearfully that I would forget how to be brave and courageous and present to those who would need me. Thank you Dali Lama, for the blessing. I can still feel his hands on my head, and for the reminder to be daring and audacious in learning to love those around me.

I learned early in my life that I was destined to deal with and love the softer sciences; those sciences that have to do with personalities, faith, and the history of religions and why people behave as they do and believe what they do. These softer sciences have been and continue often to be laughed at and ridiculed by those folks who believe that the only science to be trusted is the hard fact science of the "real" world. Well, maybe and for some. But for me, from a very early age I loved the mysterious place of the heart, the soul and how and why we live there or not. I am reminded of the story of such a hard scientific guy named James Lovelock who went from facts to love. Not that you can't love facts, well, maybe you can. Anyway James was a biologist who had been watching the way the earth had been turning warmer for many years. He saw the facts, but something ethereal and mysterious disturbed him. This ethereal mysterious thing was that this lump of earth we call home seemed to be compensating for the ozone changes of its own accord. How could this be he thought? As if the earth had anticipated global warming for years,

centuries, and it seemed to feel the shift and then adjust to the changes. He tried to bring these weird facts to his fellow scientist but was told to get some counseling. Well, maybe not really, but he was told to stick to the facts. He found what he needed as evidence in a very strange place, the Pagan tradition. They told him, of course the earth is alive, we have been teaching that, feeling that and honoring that for 30,000 years. So, they said if you really want proof go and walk on the earth and learn from her, study her, feel her, be on her, and see what you see. And for seven years he did just that, he walked the earth and lo and behold he came up with the theory, that was also outside of pure science, but addressed the ethereal and the mysterious, he called it the Gaia Theory.

Now, James didn't just make scientific analysis about the earth, he learned to love it. How did that happen? And his love of the earth has been the impetus of many people not only coming to a new understanding of the power of the Pagan religion, but also granted many people the permission to love the earth. James traveled from the world of hard scientific data only to a fuzzier world of the softer side, and if you read his book you will see he is a better person for it. This has been a hard, mean, cruel world for most of the time of recorded history. Or do we as humans, when we are writing history, or our own personal history, only tend to focus in on the hard, the mean, and the cruel?

But this isn't a hard, cruel, mean world only. As the movie, "Love Actually" reminds us, there were no phone calls from the planes that went down on 9-11 of hate, revenge or vengeance. As the records show they were phone calls of love and good-byes. So, why do we focus in on the tragedies in our lives giving them so much time and space in our psyches? What of the care, the awesome grace and the many gifts every one of us has received? Oh no, we want to focus in the negative. And as author Og Mandino reminds us, we can't afford even one negative thought. Why? Because negative thoughts create a pathway in our brains, a real physical groove that like water, our thoughts will follow the negative pathway. How do we get out of this? We need to create new pathways so our thoughts travel to what is good, of real importance, and of worth.

What we have and what we are able to receive are two very different things. Some of the reasons I believe we are so ready to live in the negative is because we are always asked to change in Western society. Because we are told to strive, endeavor and struggle for something better, we have gotten the message loud and clear that there is definitely something wrong with us. And the opposite is true. There is nothing wrong with us. And we don't have to change. We don't have to fix ourselves. We don't have to improve. We don't have to do it right. Life doesn't have anything to do with any of that. Imagine living in acceptance. Imagine living today saying, "I am ok. Better than ok, I am all right, I am perfect." "Impossible," you will say, "what a bunch of new age nonsense." "Because," you are saying, "if you really knew me you would see I am so flawed that a million redemptions of the cross wouldn't help me." "And besides, if I was perfect I would more like _____. "And then we put ourselves on a par with someone else who seems perfect to us, reminding us once again we are not perfect or even good.

And somehow knowing we can't be perfect or even good, or saved from our wretchedness, in a strange way makes us feel better. Why? Because, we believe all the negative stuff that has been told about us. There is so much resistance to acceptance, because in acceptance there is nothing to do. We don't need to do anything. To sit still in compassionate acceptance is all that is

required.

It is hard work to be a human being. And there is nothing in our education, ever in our whole life that has prepared us for the fact that we are already and have been and will be forever - perfect. In other words you are ideal, great and wonderful. Just what you and the people around you need. As Marianne Williamson reminds us, we are not as afraid of our failures, as we are our power. If we are flawed, and hopeless and pathetic and weak then nothing can be expected of us. We will not have to be a James Lovelock, or the Dali Lama, or our best selves. We can instead hide behind the façade of our supposed unworthiness. We hear it all the time all around us, “I am too old, I am too fat, I am too uneducated, I am too...” And all those are, are excuses for not being our pure powerful selves.

The reason we admire some people so much is because they have gone through terrible tragedies, horrible circumstances and they came out of them loving. They do not hate themselves or their abusers. They do not spend time in what ifs, why nots or who could haves. They are in the place where hate, suspicion, remorse and vengeance have no worth. They do not need to beat, punish, discipline or chastise themselves. Because they have learned that the ironic twist is that punishing themselves is what keeps them from seeing that don't need to punish themselves. That is the basis for much of the depression many people feel, the continual beating, berating and punishing of themselves for their or others supposed sins. If we can ever become aware and willing enough to break the internal battering cycle and not indulge in the beatings, we could begin to see how our perfection is so real. It takes courage, patience and faith in our inherent goodness.

Cheryl Huber, Buddhist author reminds us, painful things come up not to ruin our lives, not make us miserable, not to spoil our good time, they come up in order that they can be healed, to be embraced in compassion. Think of the different emphasis that statement could have on your life. Take any pain, any tragedy and see it as an opportunity for you to love and practice the softer side of life. In other words the situation needs to be changed, not you.

If as Unitarian Universalists we truly believe we were born good, and with that inherent worth and dignity we love to talk about, then why would self-hate be a question, and love and peace be so hard to attain? Because we really don't believe it, or we can easily give all this to others, but ourselves, hey—don't go there, we say. Riane Eisler reminds us, “You can't solve problems with or using the same thinking that created them.” A Sufi poem reads, “When the heart weeps for what it has lost, the spirit laughs for what it has found.”

May there be no news story, no event, no happening that can deter me, or you from the course that our lives as people of faith are on. May there never be an incident from which you could not recover that depth of the goodness that was given to you at your birth. A Chinese proverb reminds us, “The miracle of life is not to fly in the air, or to walk on the water, but to walk simply on the earth.” So walk already! Be brave, be bold, be sweet and kind. Be forgiving, be thoughtful, be compassionate, but most of all, be fully the perfect person you already are.