

“When Burdens Become Gifts”

Rev. Annie Holmes

“We are the clay on the potter’s floor. Dreaming, molding, guiding, holding loving and letting go.”

I want to take a moment today and bless the Tibetan Buddhists who have come to this country. In many ways I believe they have saved the United States from itself. Before their presence here, as a nation we were floundering, lost and afraid. With the presence of these calm, displaced but nonplussed Tibetans among us, has meant so many of us have learned of courage, audacity and for many of us a whole new way to look at life. Meditation which was once scorned at and misunderstood by the general public has now become an integral part of millions of people’s lives.

For many of us who are seeking creative ways of being spiritual and religious we have been able to redefine prayer in a new and powerful way. I don’t get down on my knees any longer, but I do pray, and my prayer is now in the form of going deeper, acknowledging the still, small voice within. I have been encouraged to do this great thing for myself. The Tibetans have taught us true humility, and that perfect peace is possible. Something that has been of great importance to me and that is, the power of the Bardo.

Bardos are junctures in life when the possibilities of liberation or enlightenment are heightened. Through Bardo experiences we able to see more clearly, more distinctly, and positively. The question is - how do we find a way to allow the scales to fall from our eyes? Bardos are gifts, treasures and yet they often come to us in very unlikely packages!

“We are the tears in the potter’s hand. Dreaming, molding, guiding holding, loving and letting go.”

Most of the adult teachers/mentors in our lives have taught us to lower our heads through the storms of divorce, depression, unjustified violence, grief, sorrow, heartbreak, illness and just stick it out like brave little soldiers until the deluge is over. What I am proposing, is that there is another way, a deeper more complete way of living our lives and that way is, to begin to walk down the road where you begin to see your burdens as gifts.

Richard Bach, the author of the book “Illusions” writes, “The mark of our ignorance is the depth of our belief in injustice and tragedy. What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly.” This attitude has more to living in a new way than simply saying, “Boy, I’m glad I made it through that bad time and hope I don’t have any more bad times for a long, long while.” Rather, we learn to believe that to embrace, clasp, accept, own and even love the supposed burden as a mentor and a friend, is a new doorway to a deeper

way of living. This process is called transformation, conversion, metamorphosis, metanoia, which is Greek for a complete and utter change of heart. To have a metanoia experience means you may have actually been headed in one direction and have been spun around to face a new direction.

This process is best described as the irritation that makes a perfect pearl in the oyster, the fire that burns a simple metal into pure gold, or the pressure that creates diamonds out of carbon. In this process you are not only grateful for the outcome; the pearl, the gold, the diamond, but, as you walk your life's journey, you find you're equally grateful for the pressure, the irritation, the fire. Could that mean that we would go willingly into our dark nights of the soul? Finding ourselves being at one with and identifying with Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Mary Magdalene, Susan B. Anthony, and Nelson Mandela as they faithfully and willingly stepped into the desert, the trials, the call, the ordeals that may seem daunting but isn't that what true holiness is all about?

Karma means the ability to create and change. How does someone do this, begin to embrace their burdens? I found it takes practice. We have to start with the small things and work our way to those situations in life that may have completely devastated us. Begin to see the burden you are carrying or suffering through with new eyes. Whether it is a person, place, illness or situation, step back and look at it objectively, outside the terrific pain you are feeling at the moment.

Try to see the burden as part of the ongoing lessons in life, an experience of all people of all time. We may feel like we suffer alone, but we are truly a strand of the timeless web of intense emotion and feeling and learning. Begin to accept the burden in all its manifestations, knowing it may be the beginning of deep lasting wisdom.

Not in spite of - but through the burden you can learn valuable lessons. These lessons help you move from the place of feeling like a victim to a place of strength and peace.

The greatest fears of all living beings, we are told by the experts are three-fold, to be unwillingly integrated/ unwillingly isolated/ and the terror of being mutilated. And yet each of those fears may have happened to many of us and those we love; divorce, death, surgery, illness, step-family situations, accidents. As I look back on the people I have known and admired, or read about and have loved and respected, each of them was able to do this great thing for themselves and those around them. Each of them was able to more than simply accept the sorrow and challenges that came their way, they were actually able to convert the pain and challenges and open themselves and others up to a new understandings and new possibilities for living. A new depth of sympathy, compassion and understanding not only for themselves, but for others, that could have not been achieved if they had not learned the lesson of the pain. The

pain changed their lives, in a positive and healthy way.

“We are the hands on the potter’s wheel, dreaming, molding, guiding holding, loving and letting go.”

-What made Jesus march into Jerusalem, when he knew they were waiting there to kill him?

-What made Martin Luther King go to Memphis when he had been told there were death threats made against his life?

-What made Father Damian stay on the leper island of Molokai long after the authorities told him the disease was indeed contagious?

-What made Michael Servetus go back to Spain when he knew John Calvin was waiting there for him to burn him at the stake?

-What made John Huss continue to give communion to those outside of the organized church when he knew the Catholic officials were waiting for a reason to hang him?

-What made Olympia Brown continue to ask the Universalists to ordain her as the first woman with full denominational authority, when seeking that ordination meant she would spend the rest of her life in the midst of controversy, ridicule and abuse?

In each of these cases, was it only a matter of courage, fearlessness, resolution and valor? I believe those traits are part of the message, but it had to do with something far greater, it had to do with being transformed by a spirit that takes on, loves and accepts the good as well as the challenging.

Hear the words of Ralph Ellison, “Life is to be lived, not controlled and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat.” Henry Ward Beecher, “Storms purify the atmosphere.” Madeleine L’Engle, “I do not believe that true optimism can come about except through tragedy.” What we are being told is that there is a power in opposites, but only when they are embraced and accepted. Remember, the pearl is not the sand only, the gold is not the rock only, the diamond is so much more than carbon only.

“We are the bowl on the potter’s wheel. Dreaming, molding, guiding, holding, loving and letting go.”

The Tao te Ching, Chapter 16. “Empty your mind of all thoughts.” Yea, right I thought when I first read that, and how does a person do that? Slipping away, slip sliding away of the monkey mind, that’s how you do it and it takes practice. I want to tell you something now I think is very important in this way of living, so many of us are fortunate enough to be a part of, and the important piece of information is -that you cannot work at this inner knowing, or growing or a spiritual life. It is not work that will bring you peace or contentment or love or honor. It is, laughably, something we may only have glimpsed in the past, and that is – loving and letting go. Being your deeper, better, wiser, more authentic

self is a gift. And loving and letting go is a way to open your life up to this gift.

Tai chi has many movements that mimic the letting go action. It is thought maybe if we do it physically we will get the notion spiritually. Do not work at your spiritual lives my friends, because you will only get frustrated and give up the quest. The pure being of your soul understands only one thing, loving and letting go. The Tao continues, "Let your heart be at peace. Watch the turmoil of beings, and contemplate their return." This requires openness. You become like a mirror, able to reflect all things beautiful and ugly, but you needn't absorb them. The beautiful flower will soon turn to mush in the freezing rain, so you can't hold on to that beauty for very long, and the utter insanity of our world too is only fleeting.

The Tao again, "Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source." Well, now here we go, the common source, the common source, what could that mean? Of course, we are all connected. The movement of a butterfly's wings in Mexico is felt in Canada. Whether it was the big bang, the creation of the world in 7 days, evolution or creationism, it is...wait for it, it is love that is the common source. Love as we have or may never have been able to look at it before. Selfless love, bloody love, scary love, tough love, righteous love, but love all the same. You will need new eyes, new reference points to know this is true. Maybe a new vocabulary because living a spiritual life, not a righteous religious life will do that for you. Ah, but it takes courage, back to that courage and do we have it? Sell all you have and give it to the poor. Turn the other cheek. Give up your cloak as well as your jacket, as well as your life. What does it profit a person if they gain the whole world but suffer the loss of their soul? What shape is your soul in these days? Do you know? Do you care? Learning to live by the spirit of your better, your best nature is not safe religion. I would be careful, if I were you, one voice says. Oh, what the heck, dive in and see where you come out could be another voice. Take a chance, delve deep and see what you see, and know you can always come here and share what you have found. The question for all our choices, when we take on a way of living our lives that has its foundation in the holy, prompts us to only put into ourselves that of which we would like to share with others. In other words eating foods that support health, books that uplift and challenge us to being the best we could be, movies and entertainment that will support us as we try to carve out an authentic way of living.

Living a new way, a spiritual way, a way of the inner life reflected in our outer actions, means making choices that fosters the world we wish to create for our children, our grandchildren, ourselves. Has freedom of speech and complete freedom of license taken us down a road we will at some point wish we had never taken? Is everything in life equally supportive of the kind of life we wish to live? What about the language we use, the phrases we decide to describe to one thing or another. How do we describe life when we are talking to others? Is our language positive and hopeful, or is it raw and cutting, abusive and

careless? Do people feel better, uplifted and more in touch with themselves because they have been in our presence? Or are they wounded, anxious to get away? Are we the authentic people we wish to be? If not, why not. And what are we willing to let go of in order to be that authentic person who has the ability to turn burdens into gifts?

We have all made mistakes. We all have reasons to hang our heads in shame and take the blame that others or ourselves may heap upon us. But what do we do with all of that, is the big question. Holding the blame, anger, rage tightly to our chests will only hurt us more. We learn to change, heal, renew what we can, and let go of the rest.

The Tao again, “If you don’t realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kindhearted as a grandmother, dignified as king.

Immersed in the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you, and when death comes, you are ready.” And when death comes, you are ready. To truly feel you were ready for death, now that would truly be a Bardo experience. I am constantly on the lookout in my life as to when will be my time to be so transformed that I too will be truly open to my Bardo experiences.

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I have learned from the Buddhists to look at people in a new way and that way is to see everyone, friends, and enemies as if they had a Buddha nature. In my estimation, that could mean that anyone, or any situation could be the means of a Bardo experience for us. One way to look at life and people who are challenges is that they are all a part of our waking up, our getting it. I personally would rather look at people and life in this way, rather than seeing them as only enemies or situations in life that must be simply endured.

There have been many documentaries lately on how people who are in extreme physical pain all day and night can cope with that pain without taking large amounts of medications. One of the ways found to help these people through this pain, was to meditate on the pain so completely that those people became one with their pain. They learned to breathe into it, sigh into it, move through it and not around it or trying to avoid it. Embracing the pain, seeing the pain as an ally, actually became the road to healing. Oh, the power in embracing the opposites!!

The issues that you find you are most distressed about in your life, are your growing edges. The things that you find yourself complaining about the most, are the places where you have not learned life’s lessons. And life will continually ask you to learn those lessons in different ways, until you do.

The Tibetan Monks will work on a single mandala for 6-8 months. Mandala is the Sanskrit word for circle. Often the mandalas are made of sand. On their knees, noses to the floor, grain by grain, piece by piece, they place the colored sand in a very elaborate pattern. Westerners at one point were allowed into a temple to see the mandala, the sacred symbol of life come alive. One woman very loudly remarked how intricate it was. Thousands of colors and shapes and Tibetan gods and goddess were portrayed there. And yet for the life of her, the woman announced, how were they going to keep it or move it for heaven's sake! Why didn't they just glue it down or some such thing. At that very moment an entourage of monks came into the hall. They knelt around the mandala and in one sweep of their hands they wiped it clean, and blew the mandala away. The woman fainted, the monks stood and smiled. One monk came forward and said these words; **"All of life is a riddle. The three-fold magic circle thus unfolded; grows with the depth of our heart's vibration, grows with the strength of inner penetration, grows with wisdom that knows life, and death and sorrow and joy. Our lives are riddles with the answers contained deep within our knowing. Know well, nothing lasts but the living center, a combination of all life's pieces."**

We are the irritated oyster creating a pearl. We are the metal in the flame being purified by the heat. We are the carbon pressed at times it seems beyond our endurance. Ah, but then our eyes are truly opened. We are given a gift, often we know not from whence it comes. We see clearly, we understand, the burden is indeed a gift-lavishing us with renewal and a new way to live our lives.