

Opening Words

The opening words are from T.S. Eliot's Little Gidding,
one of the Four Quartets.

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.

Reflection: Today I Joined

MUFF and Me

Back in May, I attended a Fellowship service on commitment, after which a number of us went downstairs to talk about the future of the Fellowship. Normally, I don't attend such things because I don't attend Fellowship regularly, except when my name comes up on the list as a feeder or greeter. This fact came up in the discussion, causing me to turn the shade of a ripe tomato. But as my dear auntie pointed out, I was there then and I'm here today, because there is something about this Fellowship that continues to tug at me. Today I want to explore what that tug is, and isn't, plus share with you some of my other spiritual pursuits and the occasional understanding I have gained along the path.

I started coming to Fellowship the Sunday after Sept 11, 2001 when my uncle Roland Barth was scheduled to speak. Given the turn of events, he abandoned his talk, we moved the benches into a circle, and everyone got up and spoke their mind about what had just happened. It was a moving experience, and I decided to come again the next week, and the next, and the next. I remember crying a lot, usually during the hymns. I think it had something to do with being in a place where the primary focus was The Spiritual and my recognition that somehow this had been lacking in my life, from a very young age. True, I had been practicing meditation for some years, off and on, and had done a lot of reading of The Dharma, which for those who don't know, is the Buddhist teachings. But there was something about being with a group of people, singing hymns that sometimes stuck in your throat, that tore me up. I also think the tears had something to do with the connection I felt with my grandfather, Joe Barth, who had always been such a warm, positive presence in my life, yet I knew nothing of his larger world, namely Unitarian Universalism. I think I would now call it a longing for a spirituality that was somehow bigger than myself and somehow connected with my grandfather.

A year later, and almost exactly seven years ago today, without much thought, I became a member. That day I wrote this poem:

October 5, 2002

Today I joined.
Thinking or not thinking
I stood up, faced the members,
and was welcomed.
I received a pin and handshakes
and signed the book.

So does that make me one?
Is that what I can now say
I am?
Am I a part of
instead of apart from,
a joiner instead of
an observer?

I don't know or can't say.
I just let go of my need
for certainty and clarity
and followed a calling
for commitment,
not yet proven,
to them or least of all
to myself,
to something, to anything,
that provides a vehicle
for traveling the path
to the next place.

Almost immediately, I was asked to be on the Board, which I readily accepted, again without much thought. For me, it was dreadful! I am not a meeting kind of person, but I stuck it out for a year. During this time, I was dealing with a lot of turmoil in my marriage, and coming to Fellowship was

an important respite for me. I attended Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, and again, the solidarity of women was a haven.

In 2004, I separated from my husband and began throwing myself into theater. Through theater, I met a man who helped me in so many ways, through my separation and the subsequent onslaught of other major transitions in my life: divorce, my oldest son going to college, his death almost three years ago, my youngest son going to college, moving three times, losing my job of 13 years, finding a new job, buying a house, and so on. Over the course of these many life changes, the tug of Fellowship was replaced by a different sort of tug in my heart. I wrestled with guilt about not coming for about a year, when I finally let that go and accepted that my fellowship was elsewhere.

I am a deeply loyal person, yet I struggle with commitment. I am not a joiner, yet I rely on being a part of something. I am a seeker, yet sometimes I lose track of the path I'm on. I am outwardly focused, yet I tend to be too self-involved. To quote my grandmother Ramona, "I am a mass of ambiguities."

So why do I stay away? My life has changed significantly, and to some extent, I feel I have "moved on." The Fellowship doesn't tug at me the way it used to. This obviously has a lot to do with me, but I think it also has something to do with the Fellowship. When I do come, I always feel welcomed by people I feel a connection with, I am sometimes inspired by what I hear, and I am almost always moved by the music. But there is something lacking and sometimes even off-putting for me. Is it the overlay or underpinning of liberal politics, which I feel has no place in this setting? Is it because I feel like I am going to a lecture series instead of a service? Is it because of the lack of consistency in the tone and delivery? Is it because I sometimes feel emotionally disconnected to the content, which often strikes me as self-evident? Is it because I feel awkward playing the part of a greeter where I feel I am a guest?

So why do I keep coming back? Is it because I see the commitment of others, which I long for in my own life? Is it because I truly believe in the seven principles and long to be reminded of them? Is it because I long for inspiration that moves me outside of myself? Is it because I long for a home

where I can settle, despite my experience that “being settled” is a fantasy? Is it because I long for an ongoing, consistent, spiritual message delivered by someone like my grandfather?

So you see, for me, Fellowship has something to do with longing and fulfillment. And yet, from my Buddhist perspective, I know that longing and fulfillment are both illusions that are narrowly focused on the ego, so I continue to seek, here, there, and elsewhere.

Which reminds me of a line I once delivered as Faye in a musical called *To Whom It May Concern*, which was essentially a church service in which individuals, including the priest, got up and delivered monologues and sang songs about their lives and their thoughts about god. One of my favorite songs is called “Miracles,” which talks about the need for miracles, despite the moments of happiness that you sometimes experience in life while watching a morning sunrise, smelling bread baking, or being held in someone’s arms. At one point, a homeless man wanders in and delivers one of the best songs in the show called “Ain’t Nobody Got a Bed of Roses.” But I digress. It was Faye I identified with most, who had young children and flitted like a butterfly from one thing to the next, all with great enthusiasm:

“I’ve tried group therapy, yoga, EST, Sufi dancing, vegetarianism, flotation tanks, marijuana, and the church. And I’d have to say honestly, the best spiritual results so far have come from going off caffeine.”

Well, here’s my version:

“I’ve tried group therapy, individual therapy, yoga, meditation, ecstatic dance, African drumming, vegetarianism, alcohol, and Unitarian Universalism. And I’d have to say honestly, the best spiritual results so far have come from letting it all go.”

The Spiritual

When we talk about The Spiritual, some people conjure up an image of god, though I prefer not to use this term because it has so many connotations. When I refer to god, I refer to her with a lower case “g.” (That was for my grandmother .)

I recently heard an interview on Fresh Air on NPR with Karen Armstrong, a religious scholar and former nun, who had a lot to say about god and religion. She talked about the Hindu understanding of god, which she called "the god beyond god." In the 10th century BCE, the Hindu priests had a ritual whereby each in turn would try to define the Brahman or what Karen Armstrong describes as "the ultimate reality, something that lies way beyond the gods, that is way beyond anything we can know and yet is within us all. And the winner was the priest who reduced everybody to silence. And in that silence, the Brahman was present. The Brahman was not present in the wordy definitions of the divine. It was present in the stunning realization of the absolute powerlessness of language and speech to describe this. And that, I think, is an authentic model of religious discourse. A theology should be like poetry, which takes us to the end of what words and thoughts can do."

This description by Karen Armstrong comes close to my understanding of The Spiritual, which is, at best, our uniquely human attempt at understanding the amorphous, the unknowable, the inexplicable, what T. S. Eliot refers to as "the sudden illumination."

Science does a pretty good job at explaining how things are, but only up to a point. That point, if you read Stephen Hawking's book, A Brief History of Time, is the point at which the theories of the universe all have a basic assumption or mathematical constant built into the equation. $e=mc^2$ and all that. Well, the "c" is a constant. And then there's the Uncertainty Principle, which is at the core of our understanding of the universe. From Wikipedia:

Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that certain pairs of physical properties, like position and momentum, cannot both be known to arbitrary precision. That is, the more precisely one property is known, the less precisely the other can be known. This is not a statement about the limitations of a researcher's ability to measure particular quantities of a system, it is a statement about the nature of the system itself as described by the equations of quantum mechanics.

I love it. The foundation of everything we know about the universe is uncertainty. Which, it turns out, is very similar to the ancient Buddhist and Taoists understanding of the universe. From the Tao Te Ching:

Without going out of doors
one may know all under heaven;
Without peering through windows,
one may know the way of heaven.
The farther one goes,
The less one knows.

The more scientists seek a Unified Theory of the universe, the more acutely aware we are our limitations at gaining precisely the knowledge we seek. Similarly, the more we as spiritual seekers attempt to understand The Truth, the more we realize that nothing is universal, and everything is universal, at the same time.

The Tao Te Ching offers varying descriptions of The Spiritual in what it calls "mysterious integrity," "the forefather of the myriad creatures," "the predecessor of God," "the root of heaven and earth," "the space where there is nothing," "the doctrine without words." It talks about "following the constant," "nonbeing" penetrating "nonspace." The Tao also has a lot to say about "nonaction," or to use Karen Armstrong's words, "being itself." Similarly, the Buddhist philosophy talks about "emptiness," which Stephen Batchelor describes as "empty of form." I have come to understand emptiness to mean total acceptance of what is.

Rumi, the 12th century Sufi mystic, exemplifies my understanding of The Spiritual with his poetry of mystery and love.

Praise to the emptiness that blanks out existence.
Existence:
this place made from our love for that emptiness!
Yet somehow comes emptiness,
this existence goes.
Praise for this happening, over and over!

For years I pulled my own existence out of emptiness.
Then one swoop, one swing of the arm,
that work is over.
Free of who I was, free of presence, free of
dangerous fear, hope, free of mountainous wanting.

Like any good spiritual philosophy, Taoism and Buddhism and Sufism bring these lofty concepts of The Spiritual down to earth, where in my opinion is where they belong. For example, the Tao Te Ching stresses the importance of recognizing contentment where it exists:

Contentment that derives from knowing
when to be content
is eternal contentment.

Similar to the Buddhist notion of “the middle way,” the Tao Te Ching recommends maintaining balance in life, which I have found to be key:

Know masculinity,
Maintain femininity,
and be a ravine for all under heaven.

Know whiteness,
Maintain blackness,
and be a model for all under heaven.

Like any good philosophy, it does not escape the issue of morality:

No guilt is greater than giving into desire,
No disaster is greater than discontent,
No crime is more grievous than the desire for gain.

And heaven help you if you have any of these qualities:

Who is puffed up cannot stand,
Who is self-absorbed has no distinction,
Who is self-revealing does not shine,
Who is self-assertive has no merit,
Who is self-praising does not last long.

The Tao also has a lot to say about war and peace:

When the Way prevails under heaven,
 swift horses are relegated to fertilizing fields.
When the Way does not prevail under heaven,
 war-horses breed in the suburbs.

And here is the poem I am often tempted to send to our military leaders:

Let there be a small state with few people,
 where military devices find no use;
Let the people look solemnly upon death,
 and banish the thought of moving elsewhere.

They may have carts and boats,
 but there is no reason to ride them;
They may have armor and weapons,
 but they have no reason to display them.

And, of course, it has a lot to say about compassion and goodness:

Treat well those who are good,
Also treat well those who are not good;
 thus is goodness attained.

Karen Armstrong was recently given an award at which she introduced the idea of a “Charter for Compassion that would restore compassion to the center of religious life.” I believe compassion is really at the heart of everything. The Buddhist term for it is loving-kindness.

First, we must practice loving-kindness toward ourselves to overcome our own worst enemy. In Touching Peace, Thich Nhat Hanh describes loving-kindness as the mother that holds us in her embrace when we are at our lowest moment. We must learn to be kind to ourselves when we fail to live up to our lofty ideals, when we make mistakes, or when we fail. We must learn to give ourselves a break when we are paralyzed by confusion. And we must learn to love and accept ourselves, as we are, today. Pema

Chödrön, a popular Buddhist nun, has a book entitled Start Where You Are, which is exactly what I'm talking about.

Next, we must practice compassion toward the people we love, who paradoxically are often the ones to whom we show most of our anger and resentment. Having experienced it one way and then the other, I can now say I firmly believe there is no place in a loving relationship for harsh words. Thich Nhat Hanh talks about marriage being a spiritual practice to encourage "the happiness of one person" by "encouraging her floweriness." I am happy to say that I have experienced happiness as both the encourager and the encouragee, both of which, by the way, take practice.

We must also practice loving-kindness toward people in general, which, of course, is easy when it comes to people you care about, are easy going, or are fun to be around. But it becomes more challenging when faced with people who rub you the wrong way or whose opinions you disagree with. My uncle Ben, who has been "born again," recently wrote me a 12-page letter, complete with numerous Biblical references, in response to my thoughts on the Fellowship, which I shared with him. As I suspected, he sees me as lost soul in need of his God. I responded with a gracious letter thanking him for his thoughts and sharing some of my philosophy of life. Unfortunately, I lost the letter, which is maybe for the best.

But the hardest of all is to practice compassion toward people whom you deem to be your enemies or whose actions are so heinous that some part of you want to do them harm. We all know there are plenty of examples of that in the world. One of my favorite stories, which I read in one of Pema Chödrön's books, is about a Buddhist nun who was raped, and instead of anger and resentment toward her perpetrators, after she was attacked, she acknowledged the pain they must have been feeling to have acted so aggressively toward her, and subsequently they became her students. Thich Nhat Hanh in his book Touching Peace said he "understood that President Bush is a bodhisattva trying in his way to serve his people." He also talks the same way about Saddam Hussein. Now that's some kind of compassion!

The Practice

I speak about compassion as a practice, because on the Buddhist path, practice is everything and everything is practice. You practice meditation, you practice mindfulness, you practice loving-kindness, you practice being in the present moment. In The Power of Now, Eckhart Tolle makes a powerful philosophical case for the present moment being all there is. But strangely enough, being in the present moment takes practice. We're so used to spinning off into other worlds with our thoughts and habits and mindlessness. Because I've practiced, I sometimes catch myself doing this, and when I do, I am able to bring myself back to the present, focusing only on the now. It's a very helpful practice to remember.

I also truly believe in what the Buddhists call "right thought" or "the power of positive thinking," which again is a practice. I have an ongoing debate with a friend about listening to the news in the morning. He says you need to listen to stay informed. I say who wants to wake up in the morning and hear news about bombings and killings and financial chaos. Well, the other morning I risked it and was treated to a good news story about an Indian doctor, who prescribes Charlie Chaplin movies to his patients, because he believes in the power of laughter. Apparently, Laughing Clubs are all the rage in India. Well, inspired by that news story, I finally did something I've been talking about doing for years. I started a BLOG called The Good News Times, which reports only good news. So I hereby make it my practice to look for and report on good news, and if I can't find it, I must create it.

One of the most helpful techniques I've learned to follow during meditation is to "label your thoughts thinking." This is a technique introduced to students in the West in the 1970's by Chögyam Trungpa Rimpoche, who was the holder of one of the four lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. It's very simple and applies nicely to meditation, as well as to life. Everything is "just thinking," which means we can choose to think A or B or nothing. If A causes suffering, realize that it's just thinking, and let it go. Of course, that's easier said than done, but it's worth remembering and practicing. If B causes happiness, realize that that also is just thinking, and practice letting it go as well.

The goal of meditation, if you can call it that, is to acknowledge your thoughts without judgement, whatever they are, let them go, and come back to the present moment. (Of course, if you're a Buddhist monk, you skip steps one and two.) This translates into mindful living in everyday life, which means not projecting your hopes and fears onto this moment. Of course, we must think about the past and the future, but we shouldn't dwell there. And remember that, thankfully, nothing is permanent, neither pain nor happiness.

In My Stroke of Insight, Jill Bolte Taylor, a neuroscientist who suffered from a stroke, describes her insights at having lost the function of her left brain, which allowed her to dwell in the eternal now of her right brain. One fascinating neurological insight she revealed is that when sadness overtakes us, the natural physiology of the brain dictates that the experience will last somewhere between sixty and ninety seconds. Any longer than that and you are causing your own suffering, simply by thinking. Which is exactly what the Buddha taught. I can tell you from my own experience that practicing acceptance of what is and being in the present moment has really helped me to let go of a lot of suffering. I used to cry and wallow in my misery for hours, days, or even weeks. Now, when I experience sadness, even over the death of my son, I cry for about a minute or two, and then it ends. I consider this to be a very healthy sign.

Life After Death

For many, The Spiritual serves the purpose of providing an explanation of what happens after death. For me, this is the weakest part of any religious philosophy. After my son's death, several people gave me books to read about death. Although they were all well-meaning, none of them really touched my experience. The Year of Magical Thinking? Ha! I find no solace in the fantasy that the dead are living in some kind of afterlife or communicating with us in some mystical way. No, I have not communicated with Julian on the other side. I believe that he and our loved ones who have died live on in our memories, but that's all. He's dead, and with great sadness, I accept that.

The only book I found somewhat helpful was Thich Nhat Hanh's book, No Death, No Fear in which he talks about the Buddhist concepts of no birth,

no death, and contingency. Everything depends on something else. Nothing is solid or fixed or permanent. He writes:

“When we look deeply, we see that when all the conditions are sufficient, something will manifest. What manifests does not come from anywhere. And when a manifestation ceases, it does not go anywhere...Nothing is born and nothing dies. There is only manifestation...A flower has to rely on non-flower elements in order to manifest. “

I guess it's helped me a little to think of Julian as a manifestation of non-Julian elements whose conditions are no longer sufficient for him to manifest. But honestly, it doesn't help much. What has helped me the most to accept Julian's death is letting go. After he died, I told every parent I know to go be with their children, then to start practicing letting them go. What other choice do you have? The same is true of everything in life, whether it's pain, joy, sadness, regret, ecstasy, anger, resentment, guilt, confusion, embarrassment, jealousy, longing, or fulfillment. The tighter you hold on to whatever it is, the harder is it to let it go. The more you can let it go, whatever it is, the easier it is to be here now and travel on the path to the next place, where ever it is.

Closing Words

The closing words are also from T.S. Eliot's Little Gidding:

And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfilment.

Buddhist Chant

Grant your blessings that I may be one with the Dharma.
Grant your blessings that Dharma may progress along the path.
Grant your blessings that the Path may clarify confusion.
Grant your blessings that confusion may dawn as wisdom.

Tasha's Favorite Spiritual Books and Authors

Tao Te Ching

The third most translated book in the world and the basis of the Taoist philosophy of ancient China, which consists of 81 short chapters or poems. Victor Mair's translation is by far the best and is worth seeking out over others.

Stephen Batchelor

Buddhism Without Beliefs is a wonderful basic book on Buddhism, without all the trappings.

Verses from the Center is a book of translations of the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, whose poetry exemplifies the paradoxical nature of the universe.

Pema Chödrön

A popular Buddhist nun who studied under Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and wrote many down-to-earth and simple Dharma books including The Wisdom of No Escape, Start Where You Are, When Things Fall Apart.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

The former holder of the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, one of the four major schools. He brought Tibetan Buddhism to the West after fleeing Tibet in the 1960s. He introduced Shambhala Training to the West, which is Buddhism without any of the ritual and is described in The Sacred Path of the Warrior, one of his many excellent books on the Dharma.

Thich Nhat Hahn

A Vietnamese Zen monk who writes simply and beautifully in The Sun My Hearth, Touching Peace, No Death, No Fear.

Eckhard Tolle

The Power of Now convinces you that now is all there is.

Rumi

12th century Sufi mystic who wrote many wonderful poems of love and the mystery of the universe.

T.S. Eliot

The Four Quartets are four magnificent poems that are teeming with Buddhist references that are sometimes dark but always reflect some truth.

Jill Bolte Taylor

My Stroke of Insight is a fascinating book about a neuroscientist's personal account of being totally right brained due to a stroke and insights she gained about the power of now.

Karen Armstrong

The Case for God is a new book highlighted on Fresh Air on NPR by a former nun who has started the "Charter for Compassion."