



the empty bell

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# Cigarette Smoke & Incense

## *A Perfect Storm of Healing*

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*And why, after all, may not the world be so complex as to consent of many interpenetrating spheres of reality, which we can approach in alternation by using different conceptions and different attitudes. . . On this view religion and science, each verified in its own way from hour to hour and from life to life, would be co-eternal.*

--William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901).<sup>1</sup>

**B**eneath me, the moving black water flowed around the concrete pilings that had been driven deep into the clay and sedimentary rock under the Wisconsin River. From my precarious perch, I gazed downward into the dark currents, wondering what fish or other creatures might be prowling below. Each of my ten-year old hands gripped a cool one-inch steel rod that extended from the grey spray-painted beams beneath my feet up to the iron underbelly of the concrete roadway. Sparrows and pigeons swooped through the undercarriage of the bridge as I walked carefully on the I-beams from the west side of the river to the east, a full city block away.

Eventually, I wanted to get from my maternal grandparents' house to my paternal grandparents' house, and along the way I looked for pigeon nests loaded with eggs and baby birds to throw into the river. I would not have said that I wanted to kill living things. I might have said that I merely wanted to see what was inside the eggs, or merely to watch some little featherless beings sink into the deep to join whatever strange community was circulating there, where the grown-ups couldn't see. I might not have known that I was angry.

I didn't know how dangerous it was for me to be playing with life and death fifty feet above the river. Maybe I was a born adventurer, fascinated with the fragile boundary between life and death, between what I knew and what I didn't know, between me and God. Maybe I was toying with death--that peaceful and happy heaven that I was hearing about in our Lutheran church. Maybe I just wanted to escape the pain or to get back at my parents. Maybe I thought I was immortal. Strange, how often I'd head for that bridge, my secret hiding place. But how fitting that the rendezvous was beneath the road where grown-ups rushed along to destinations that apparently meant more to them than I did.

I spent a lot of time alone as a boy. Life at the edge of civilization lured me. I was mesmerized by liminal movies--*Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *The Blob*, *Boys Town*, and *Rebel Without a Cause*. They were so real to me that I found it difficult to swim, or to go down into a basement without turning on all the lights and carrying a bat. Who knows what might emerge from the shadows or arrive from outer space? I grew a duck-tail haircut, wore engineer boots like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, and got in trouble with the law, just like Mickey Rooney and James Dean. When I was eleven years old I got arrested for breaking and entering. While I waited for my mother to pick me up at the jail, I rifled through the magistrate's desk and stole a pair of sunglasses.

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1 New York: New American Library. 1958, p. 107.

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My mother and father were preoccupied at the time. Dad had been a Marine in World War II, and had been called up again during the Korean War. So he was gone a lot. In 1956 he bought a tavern on the shore of Lake Wausau, a decision he later told me was the biggest mistake of his life. He shared his regret with me on his deathbed over forty years later, after his divorces and decades of estrangement from his three children. I shared the startling truth that after our mother divorced him, I never went back to his parent's house again.

I was the oldest of three children, and because my parents were so distracted, I watched out for my brother and sister. Sometimes I felt sorry that I couldn't protect them from the noise when mom and dad came home at 2 a.m., shouting, calling each other names and pushing each other into the hallway walls. I'd cover my head with a pillow and imagine being somewhere else.

I didn't know that their divorce was imminent when I tore out and threw away the newspaper column in the District Court section of the newspaper that told the story of how dad hit mom in the face with a Coke bottle and that she was pressing charges. All she told us kids was that her eyes were black because she had fallen. The swirl of dangerous passion has obliterated many memories, but I do remember a few mornings in fifth or sixth grade when I went to the liquor cabinet and took a swig of Creme deMenthe before walking to school.

My mother's parents--Grandma and Grandpa Radenz--were the steady ones. My younger brother and sister and I stayed at Gram and Gramp Radenz's a lot, and we felt safe there. They had bought a TV, and we'd often spend the evening watching Jack Benny, *I Love Lucy* or *Leave It To Beaver*. I suppose that the goal of my most consistent fantasy--hopping a train for Florida or California--was to find Beaver's family and to be welcomed and taken in.

With the help of my mother's remarriage and our move to a nearby town, the love of a girlfriend who was a straight-A student and a devout Christian, and the fatherly compassion I received from a Lutheran pastor and a high school football coach, I found myself inside a new story during my teenage years and throughout college. I became a good student, was elected the captain of the championship football team, and the president of the Luther League. I attended Luther College, and then graduated from Dartmouth. But the new self in the new story was overlaid on the early, untold one. At the gates of the old story stood creatures as ugly and ferocious as the Fudo who stand guard at the doors of Japanese Buddhist temples.

**M**y shame would never have surfaced into consciousness if I hadn't begun therapy when I was thirty-two years old, an exploration into my childhood that continued intermittently for another twelve years. I wouldn't have remained interested in my past if I hadn't been trained in Object Relations (OR) at Harvard and then practiced as a psychotherapist for most of a decade. Without the OR story, I might ever have asked myself "Who?" Who are my significant 'self-objects'?<sup>2</sup> Who was I

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2 The psychotherapeutic tradition of Object Relations (OR) has its roots in the work of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).

hiding from or looking for under that bridge, or in that river? With whom was I so angry? Whose love did I crave? Who was the ‘you’ implicit in my silent self-talk?

During my years in the psychotherapeutic world I was also a spiritual seeker. As I studied OR and as I myself became a therapist for others, I wondered how to integrate my longing for ultimate meaning and for the ultimate “You”--my longing for God, if you will--with my psychological work as a client and as a therapist. As an undergraduate at Dartmouth in the late 1960’s I had accepted the reigning cultural story that God was dead, had left my dear Lutheran Jesus behind and settled into Chinese Ch’an meditation, Taoism and karate. Then, some years after graduation I met some wonderful Catholic Carmelite monks who taught me that long before Luther’s Reformation, Roman Catholic and Orthodox monks had taught forms of meditation that are similar to Taoist and Buddhist practices. I welcomed this knowledge, converted to Catholicism and took vows as a Third Order Carmelite.

The Carmelite tradition is gifted with the writings of two devout and brilliant 16th century Spanish writers, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. In them I found teachers who artfully integrated Christ’s *kenosis* (self-emptying love) with a mysterious, direct and devout I-Thou relationship with Christ. Going outside the boundaries of their own tradition, my Carmelite monk mentors also engaged me in conversations about the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, who was friends with the Dalai Lama and wrote skillfully about contemplative Christian prayer, Taoism, Buddhism and the peace that arises when one discovers one’s “true self.” Though Merton never went into great detail about this true I, it seemed obvious to me, with my OR training, that one’s true “I” can only be realized in relationship with a corresponding true or ultimate You. What would be the nature and reality of such an I and such a You? Where is the meeting ground between Buber’s spiritual I-Thou<sup>3</sup> and the I’s and thou’s of the real intimate relationships we were studying in OR? Was Freud correct in his analysis that every divine Thou is merely an anthropocentric projection of the psyche?<sup>4</sup>

As a doctoral student at Harvard in the early 1980’s I attended Catholic Mass on Sundays and became friends with Fr. Henri Nouwen, the remarkably charismatic and prophetic priest and writer who was then teaching at the Divinity School. Henri also envisioned a true self, emphasizing its essential quality of belovedness. For him, the summit of the spiritual quest was to realize, as Jesus did, our belovedness, our peace and our joy in God. For him, the beloved self is birthed when one establishes a

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Freud assumed a radical distrust of everyday--including religious--consciousness. For him, a person’s inner life is driven by instinctual, especially erotic, desires. Thus, he spoke of the “object” of our unconscious desires. OR therapists focus less on the biological energies of a person, and more on the dynamic relational structure of the self. Who are the “objects” of my need for mutually loving and respectful relationships? The term “self-object” refers, e.g., to any (usually unconscious) image that I might carry of myself in relation to my mother. In OR my “self” is actually a kind of underground streaming movie of myself in relation to many significant others--parents, mentors, heroes, heroines, lovers and teachers. According to OR theorists, this stream of memories of me in relation to others IS what we call our “self”, and it tends to imprint itself and its archetypes on all our current relationships.

3 Martin Buber. *I and Thou (Ich und Du)*. Ronald Gregor Smith, trans. New York: Collier Books, 1958.

4 Sigmund Freud. *Totem and Taboo*. trans. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1913, 1950; Rizzuto, Ana-Maria, M.D. *The Birth of the Living God*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979.

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relationship with his or her ultimate source in a God who is love.

Even though I had grave doubts about organized religion in general, I was drawn to the simple wisdom of Henri's teaching. Perhaps I connected with Henri so easily because his self-knowledge and his writing were so thoroughly blended with his previous psychological training at the Menninger Institute. I took his honest and straightforward descriptions of his own narcissism, despair and depressions as a rough sketch of my own suffering. His confidence in the personal, social and cosmic proportions of Jesus' message gained my trust.

In addition to my Christian path, I had maintained my interest in Asian spirituality. While at Harvard, I began Vipassana Buddhist training with Larry Rosenberg and other teachers of Insight Meditation. I wondered if I had an Asian gene, because I felt so at home on the cushion, just following my breath. I understood immediately, and valued, the Vipassana teaching that all my ideas and theories about reality are not solid, but merely temporary constructs that shimmer around a profound, clear emptiness. Very quickly I saw the truth in the Vipassana teaching that at least some of my suffering was caused by "monkey mind." my attachment to certain ideas, my pursuit of pleasure and my avoidance of pain. Somehow I was not too troubled by the apparent contradictions in the Vipassana, psychotherapeutic and Christian worldviews. They each illuminated different dimensions of my mind and heart.

Though I suffered severe bouts of anxiety and self-doubt while at Harvard, I did glimpse moments of peace, and I felt stimulated by the juxtaposition of Henri's passionate, personal and prophetic declarations about Jesus's real presence with Vipassana's clarifying, stripped-down present moments on the cushion. As a client in psychotherapy, I was just at the beginning of my journey, but I did catch a peek of a world where I might be loved even though I felt worthless. With friends and colleagues, I enjoyed wrestling with ultimate questions in the interfaith conversation. Is there a God or not? Is God a mere projection or is God projecting me? Is there a self or not? Does it matter? What's the difference between the healthy ego we speak about in psychotherapy and the true self we hypothesize in spiritual paths? Are words and concepts valuable or not? Of course, what I wanted most from the psychotherapeutic, Christian and Buddhist traditions was not to engage in theoretical debate. I desperately wanted to realize an inner peace that eluded me, a way to be healed, and a path that would offer guidance about my vocation. What would heal me, and how could I help to heal others?

I could not speak about my spiritual quest at Harvard, so I lived a divided life during graduate school and in the first few years of my vocation as a psychologist and counselor. Academic psychology was only marginally interested in religious issues. As psychologists, we were more concerned with questions of life adjustment in specific relationships than with ultimate questions. Fortunately, there were exceptions in the work of Ana-Marie Rizzuto, John McDargh, Richard Katz and James Fowler<sup>5</sup>,

<sup>5</sup> McDargh, John. *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion*. New York: University Press of America, 1983; Katz, Richard. *Boiling Energy: Community Healing Among the Kalahari Kung*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982; Fowler, James W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Mean-*

but these psychological investigations into religious experience seemed marginalized at Harvard.

Part of me reveled in the competitive intellectual atmosphere of Harvard and in the investigation of therapeutic concepts like “self-object,” “transitional object,” “projective identification,” “ideal self” and “splitting.”<sup>6</sup> But mid-way through the doctorate both my mother and my marriage died, and the suppressed tumult of my inner life cried out for attention. Having only enough money for infrequent visits to a therapist at the time, I hunkered down. I did my doctoral research, wrote my dissertation, and held down three part-time jobs. Some days I could barely function and conducting academic research did not offer any healing. What I studied and what I lived did not fully connect.

**I**n the decade after graduate school I finally entered therapy for extended periods of time, and practiced as a therapist and as a consultant in businesses and not-for-profits. I was fortunate to receive nourishing attention from some fine mentors and therapists. One of the good things about being a psychotherapist is that if you listen closely and with some empathy to your clients, you get curious about the sedimentary layers in your own life. You find yourself stuck in the muck of countertransference,<sup>7</sup> grandiosity and self-defense. You pick up resonances, smells, images and story-lines that seem familiar. Sometimes you enjoy connecting with your clients and, if you are lucky, you often grow to love them. But, occasionally you squirm uncomfortably in your chair, happy to see that the hour is about done. Several times, I felt that I was thrown overboard into the same sea in which my clients languished, and took on their fears and distress, even their mannerisms. In such times, I was glad to take the pain to my own therapist, to the meditation cushion, and to prayer.

At the forward edge of my learning I carried the same question every day: how to be empathetic and compassionate while simultaneously being mindful of the essential difference between my clients and me. Growing up in an alcoholic home, I had been schooled in co-dependency--I knew how to enter so deeply into the suffering of my clients that I could virtually *become* them. I was easily drawn to talk about spiritual oneness and non-duality, but I gradually learned that for me, oneness had a pernicious shadow side. I could too easily take my wounds and hide out in oneness. I had to learn how to keep one foot in my own world, even as I let go my boundaries sufficiently so that I could accompany my clients where they needed to go.

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ing. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981.

6 A *transitional object* (TR) is the infant’s first not-me possession, such as a doll or blanket. A TR is external to the infant, and yet he or she imbues this object with qualities shared in the mother-child fusion. *Projective identification* happens when I project part of myself onto another person and then identify with that person, thereby temporarily disowning that part. *Ideal self* refers to a fantasized best self that hides, even from myself, my true or authentic self. *Splitting* is the process whereby I unconsciously parcel out certain qualities of personhood to myself and others in such a way as to keep these qualities separate.

7 In a psychotherapeutic relationship, *transference* is the process whereby the client projects onto the therapist certain qualities of personhood whose psychic source is the client’s childhood image of his or her parent. *Countertransference* is the process whereby the therapist projects some aspect of his or her own psychic experience inappropriately onto the client.

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Having decided that Vipassana meditation was not helping me to understand myself or the problems that I was having in interpersonal relationships, I began attending Korean and Japanese Zen retreats. These forms of Mahayana Buddhist meditation seemed more relational to me, more open to the reality and importance of intimacy and generally more relevant to my everyday life. In comparison with Vipassana practice, Zen focused less on emptiness, sensations and the generic quality of thoughts, and more on the paradoxical ground of form and emptiness, and on the interdependence of all beings. “No emptiness without form, no form without emptiness,” the Heart Sutra said. I appreciated how, in Zen, the term “beings” could be used without deconstructing its wholeness into discreet *skandas* or packages of sensations that seemed to have nothing to do with the wholeness of other persons in community or of the natural world.

I did not want merely to investigate in a quasi-scientific way the emptiness of sensory experience, but also to consider every form--every image, idea, memory, sensation or feeling--as a possible doorway into the sacred dimensions of *dharmakaya*, ultimate reality and of the greatest Thou, God. Perhaps I gave up on Vipassana meditation too soon, but after many retreats it seemed that Vipassana meditation was asking me to somaticize, and to deconstruct all emotional and psychological experience into small, meaningless blips of impersonal energy passing by within the confines of my own skin, and to see others as mere objects of perception.

In the end, I could not accept a spiritual path that focuses so exclusively on one’s inner experience, by-passing the healing power of action and speech. It is powerful to experience the emptiness within which our thoughts pass by, but it is equally powerful to speak a word of understanding or love to someone who is lonely. It is indeed powerful to see one’s passions become attached to thoughts and to see directly how one’s actions flow from one’s thoughts, but it is also powerful to speak out in a political arena against injustice. For me, the Vipassana path was too dangerous, tempting me to become more solipsistic and emotionally isolated, and less politically active than I already was.

I remember one retreat with a well-known Vipassana teacher in which I had to hold tightly onto the arms of my chair so that I did not jump up and shout, “I am not a mere object of your fucking awareness!” I began to think of Vipassana meditation, as practiced in America, as a kind of cult that can undermine the importance of I-Thou relationships and obliterate the reality of other persons as subjects in their own right who should be honored in their “otherness.” It is good to face oneself on the cushion, but it is also good to connect with other people and to inquire into their experience. I resolved for myself that I would not follow a spiritual path that placed the cushion above conversation.

Of course, narcissism is a danger with any kind of meditation, but it seemed to me that Zen is more open to the power of relationship. Zen seeks to realize a larger (truer?) interdependent self that is both not separate from other people and also respectful of the subjectivity and “otherness” of others. Zen’s attention to and respect for the world of form and relationships resonated well with my training

in OR which held that our deepest selves are created and sustained in real embodied relationships. Perhaps Zen's teaching that our deep selves are holographic nodes in the cosmic Indra's Net, each one of us reflecting the whole, rang true because I had already been steeped in images of the community as "Christ's Body."<sup>8</sup> As Jesus puts it in his farewell speech in the Gospel of John,<sup>9</sup> "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you"; "Abide in me as I abide in you"; ". . . so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete"; ". . . that you love one another as I have loved you." I saw John's Jesus as an Indra's Net of God's grace, a harmonious interpenetrating mix-up of love.<sup>10</sup> For me, the doctrine of the Trinity was the deep archetype of the self, whereby the paradox of oneness and otherness is preserved and respected.

**M**y Christian life remained active during and after Harvard. As my first marriage fell apart I was fortunate to meet a woman who shared my interest in both psychology and spirituality. She was a Christian who had benefited from psychotherapy and was also interested in Buddhist meditation. Soon after we married in 1986, she became an Episcopal priest, and I began to attend Episcopal services. In 1989 I enrolled in a post-doc Masters program at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, where I studied the history of the Christian contemplative path. By now I had integrated Christian prayer and *zazen* in my morning meditations.

During these years, I gradually became aware of some painful emotional patterns that were disrupting my relationships with loved ones. I experienced eruptions of shame, anger and jealousy, and I felt profoundly alone. I began to meet weekly with three men for counseling--a psychologist, an Episcopal priest monk, and a Zen master. Fortunately, each one was less disturbed by my strong emotions than I was. I drank in their steady, non-judgmental attention. Though the three approached suffering in distinctive ways, with different vocabularies and perspectives, and offered different paths to healing, they all agreed that healing was possible. I remained hopeful.

As the three healers converged on the precise locations of my inner wounds, I sometimes felt that I was experiencing a perfect storm of bad news. Zen showed me how my mind was usually engulfed in a "monkey mind" of chaotic worrying, problem solving and imagining the worst. Silent meditation gave me a direct experience of how driven I was by habitual, repetitive thinking, and how I attached I was to certain ideas about myself. Christian liturgies, reading Scripture and prayer revealed a vision of love that illuminated my selfishness and my fear of commitment and community.

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8 1Corinthians 10:16 "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?" and 1Corinthians 12:27: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

9 Gospel of John, chapters 14 through 16, New Revised Standard Version.

10 This phrase connotes the symbiotic, unifying relationship of mother-and-infant, a healthy phase of psychic development. If this phase of personal development is not completed successfully, an adult person will have problems with boundaries in his or her intimate relationships. The phrase, "harmonious interpenetrating mix-up" is attributed to the OR therapist, Michael Balint. See, e.g., *The Basic Fault*. London: Tavistock, 1968.

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Psychotherapy exposed the long trail of pain in my past intimate relationships. Bad news from every direction.

Fortunately, my mentors trusted that good would come from the bad news. And I guess I had some faith that even though I was at sea without a map or radio, eventually I'd be able to find and accept myself if I took a fix from three stars--Christian prayer, *zazen* and psychotherapy. Each path seemed to offer a corrective balance for the other two. And after awhile, the winds of their worldviews, coming from different directions, created a perfect storm of healing.

One morning in December, 1992, before my clients arrived and my workday began, I sat on a cushion in my home office to meditate and to pray. A candle flickered inside a red glass orb and a stick of incense burned in a bowl of sand on an altar in front of me. White-orange beams of morning light slanted across the carpet. Just one breath at a time, I said to myself. As usual, I entered the silence by silently reciting Psalm 139, which I had committed to memory:

*My God, you have searched me and known me;  
you know my sitting down and my rising up;  
you discern my thoughts from deep within.  
You trace my journeys and my resting places  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
For you yourself created my inmost parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb. . .  
My body was not hidden from you,  
while I was being made in secret  
and woven in the depths of the earth.  
I thank you for I am marvelously made;  
your works are wonderful, and I know it well. . .  
How deep are your thoughts, O God!*

God's thoughts, not mine. God as the You who had created me, sustained me, knew me and understood me. God as the ultimate, invisible You that opens Himself, Herself to me through the persons of my mentors and loved ones and in my own depths. God, the ultimate Lover.

Vipassana meditation and *zazen* had revealed my thoughts to me in the most intimate way: I could see them and hear them in the silence. Very often they zipped through my mind like a cloud of bats in a cave, roused from their sleep. More and more, I was drawn to the spaces between the thoughts, and that is where I often looked for God, whose thoughts were beyond mine. I was gradually becoming able to tolerate the paradox of being in relationship to a You upon whom I was totally dependent and yet also a You who was beyond all my understanding.

Sometimes I found solace in the silence, but on this morning I was aware of irritation and anger

in my belly, neck and legs. My thoughts ran to a disagreement that I had had with a friend, and it was difficult to feel grateful or to trust in God. I felt a fullness in my chest. “You have searched me and known me,” I repeated silently, along with a simple phrase my Zen teacher had given me, “What is this?” “Is this irritation about my friend or is it about something else?” I breathed into the search and into the question.

Then I remembered that recent conversations with my three mentors had been stirring up some childhood memories. “Is that it?” I wondered to myself. “Is this about my parents again?” Maybe I feared that I’d be inundated with painful memories. But now I was able to notice the irritation and fear with a sense of acceptance and curiosity.

**A**s I sit in silence before the flame, a recent dream of Gram and Gramp Radenz opens into a dim memory. They were the ones who had so often rescued us kids from the alcoholic irresponsibilities of our parents, so I was grateful for them, but this memory is unsettling. Should I explore it? I am uncertain. Meditation is not for remembering, analyzing, problem-solving or following a story. My Vipassana teacher told me to treat all thoughts as boats going down the river. Just sit there on the riverbank and watch them float by. Another teacher compared thoughts to moving trains that should be watched and not boarded. But somehow it seems as if this memory train carries a special cargo. On an Ignatian retreat at a Jesuit retreat center, the priest emphasized the iconic power of the imagination to serve as a vehicle in our journey to God. God can work through memories, he suggested. Sitting here, at the doorway between the sunlit ordinary and the shadowed liminal ground of memory, I decide to breathe in the remembered smells that mix with the burning incense and candle wax.

In my mind’s eye, I am walking through the kitchen door of Gram and Gramp’s home in Wausau, Wisconsin. Gram and Gramp were born in the late 19th century, before the invention of cars, airplanes, movies, telephones, TV and the Internet. Gramp was a quiet man, allowing his Germanic, controlling and somewhat paranoid wife free rein to run the show at home. Gramp had built their two-story house with his own hands. He and Gram had dug out the basement by themselves and brought in landfill with a horse-drawn wagon to help dry up the wetlands.

When he was young on the farm, Gramp had played fiddle and harmonica in a polka band. Before he died in 1995, he and I would play *Amazing Grace* together in his nursing home--he on his harmonica and I on my Japanese bamboo flute--to the astonishment and joy of the nurses and residents. In some ways, I had very little in common with my grandparents, especially after my college education, but we shared a joy in Gospel and polka music, and we were ardent true-believer fans of the Green Bay Packers, who played just 80 miles away.

Sitting on the cushion as I walk through the door thirty years ago, I smell cigarette smoke, whiskey, beer, carmelized popcorn, pork chops and the tang of newly opened cans of beets and beans

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that Gram packed that fall. Gram and Gramp, my four aunts and uncles, and my mom and step-dad move back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room. My cousins run up and down the stairs to the basement and second floor, and Gram yells angrily, “Now stop that running, you shysters!”

A pall of cigarette smoke hangs over the kitchen, just above the level of the children’s heads. Through the far door, the dining room table is set up for another long evening of sheepshead, a card game that came with our ancestors from Germany. On one end of the kitchen table lie big platters and bowls of food--pork and beef, mashed potatoes, cranberries, red jello (with grated carrots suspended inside), bowls of candy and mounds of sweet home-made oat cookies. On the other end stand several jugs of Christian Brothers brandy, Beefeater’s Gin and Kesslers whiskey, large glass bottles of “wash” (ginger ale, 7-up and sour mix), and a few six-packs of Miller High Life, Schlitz and Blatz beer--all Milwaukee products and our family’s favorites.

My belly tightens with anxiety to have such an immediate sense of my childhood world. I feel lonely and cold. I have the curious, paradoxical sense of being both a young boy and also a grown man who has learned a few things. I am aware that I’ve talked about scenes like this with my therapist, but now the memory seems more vivid and real than any normal memory. I don’t feel the impulse to complain about what I’m smelling, hearing, and seeing. I don’t feel like rehearsing the same old litany of complaints: that I had a lousy, lonely childhood, that my parents were narcissistic, that they didn’t have a clue about how to raise children.

Now, the loneliness is giving way to something new: my heart is open and I am seeing everything through little Bobby’s eyes. I am seeing everything with the innocence and openness of a child. I notice that no one is making eye contact with me or anyone else. Everyone is talking quickly, anxiously, with furtive glances in each other’s direction. No one pauses to ask me, “How are you?” “What’s new?” “What have you been up to lately?” And most importantly, “Is anything bothering you?”

Here on the cushion, I see what Bobby is missing, but I’m just noticing, without judgment. I see that others aren’t receiving direct attention either, and that they aren’t even aware that eye contact, much less an intimate conversation of sharing and listening, is possible. The content of the adults’ talk is laced with complaining and blaming others for various misdeeds. There is laughter, but there’s an edge to it. As a boy, I didn’t know that anything better was possible, but now, as a boy, I do. I am Bobby, but I am also someone else who is standing beside Bobby. I am watching him and listening to him as my dearly beloved and I know that he is aware of me and receiving my love.

The adults are puffing away at their cigarettes, lifting their glasses, gesturing with their playing cards, trading a story here and there, and occasionally calling out their children’s names. My aunt Lucille, the one who always said that she wanted to be buried in a mausoleum above ground because she couldn’t bear to be eaten by worms, is drinking a martini, nervously biting her lip and smiling vacantly. Oh, they all smile at each other occasionally, and touch each other on the shoulder, but the

offered words and touches are almost thrown at the recipients, as if the giver wanted to get rid of the thing as quickly as possible. Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Earl, the Catholics in our Lutheran family, glow with a genuine love for each other, but they too seem caught up in the anxiety and nervous laughter that is in the air. As long as we kids aren't breaking anything or running up and down stairs too fast, we are ignored.

I had shared some of these images with others before, with a tinge of self-pity, but in this moment my heart is softer. It's not self-pity that I feel. It's not blame, guilt or shame. It's gratitude-gratitude for these dear family members. The tears that wet my cheeks spring from gratitude and sorrow for the wounds we shared and the love we missed.

I reach for the white leather Bible that Grandma gave me at my high school graduation. I touch the Bible with respect for this sacred love story passed on from generation to generation, a story that reaches back across the 20th century through the European Reformation, back through the Middle Ages, the Dark Ages, the early Councils of the Church and Constantine's recognition of Christianity, back across the time of the Christian persecutions and the anonymous desert monasteries, back to Jesus. My bedrock faith in Jesus, in some eternal part of him, was never fully shaken during the "God is dead" cultural shift of the late 1960's, despite my years of Buddhist sitting and the heart-crunching skepticism of a Harvard doctorate. And now here it is again, that sense of his powerful and loving presence in me.

The touch of my finger on the Bible reminds me of something. I look over at my small statue of Buddha touching the ground with his forefinger. It is the moment in which he is enlightened and embraces all truth. He touches the ground just as Jesus touched the ground while a neighborhood mob prepared to stone a woman caught in adultery. I see a flash of light radiate from Jesus's muddy fingertip, and I hear his words, "Let the one among you that is without sin cast the first stone"<sup>11</sup>

On my cushion, I see the acrid smoke, smell the whiskey, and sense the estrangement that hangs in the air, but something is different. Everything is as it was, but it is happening in an ambience of love. I see each person in Gram and Gramp's house as if bathed in the light of forgiveness. The card-playing scene looks exactly as before, but everyone is transparent to love. Their physical and emotional wounds are still there, but now it's as if the light of love shines through their wounds and everyone is being blessed. The wounds are like stained glass windows, transmitting a holy light.

It's as if all the memories of my childhood have come to this, a moment in which the former bitterness, complaint, shame, self-pity and anger have dissolved in an all-pervading love, as if Christ were overseeing the whole of it. I see all the members of my extended family, no matter how wounded, as if they are icons, transmitting an image of divinity. They are too broken to know it. Back then, they loved me and I loved them, but none of us knew how to express that love well. Now, I see that Love has been here all along, holding us safely, even in the midst of darkness. Buddha is sitting down on the floor of Grandma and Grandpa's home, breathing in the suffering of my family and with each

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11 Gospel of John, chapter 8: 1ff

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exhalation, breathing out compassion. Jesus, always ready to party with his friends, sits down at the table with us to play sheepshead.

I notice that I am smiling as the tears on my cheeks dry. I feel such love for everyone, and somehow this love seems larger than me as an individual. The love has obliterated the walls of neurotic separation with which I grew up. Not only that, it has also momentarily dissolved the passage of time. In the lovely eternity of the memory, I spoke words of blessing and forgiveness to my dear relatives. I repeated silently, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Not the sorry that comes from guilt, but the kind that comes from love: “Sorry that we didn’t see and love each other well, sorry that I made you worry, sorry that we didn’t know how wounded we were, or how much we needed each other’s forgiveness, sorry that we only had that one small chance to get it right. Sorry that we can’t be with each other now, knowing what we know after death has separated us.”

**T**his experience on a cushion changed my life. Afterward, I experienced less fear, envy, anger and self-doubt. I felt more kindly toward myself, and I approached others with less judgment and more patience and compassion. I felt a greater capacity for empathy. It was a true healing occasioned by a perfect storm of three healing paths: psychotherapeutic, Buddhist and Christian. Each one contributed particular tools for self-understanding, a measure of hope, and real live mentors who helped me to face some childhood traumas and to integrate these experiences into my adult life as a professional, a married man and a father. After this experience, I sensed an even greater love and empathy for my own son, Sam, who was a toddler at the time. I would commit myself to father him from this larger love. A perfect storm had blown in at just the right moment, and it seemed to radiate outward to both the past and the future.

I don’t understand time, how people and things can be here and then not here, not here and then here. I have blurted out the phrase so many times at home that my wife only smiles and rolls her eyes: “I don’t understand time.” It’s a mystery that is rarely reflected upon in the world of psychology. Fortunately, Buddhism and Christianity do call attention to time and do find value in wondering about its qualities. Not all spiritual teachings about time have been valuable for me. I believe that some spiritual teachers, for example, are missing a certain richness of meaning when they tell me that past and future are an illusion. They are not illusions. They are real. But their kind of existence is a mystery, and our only access to them is through the present moment.

In Mahayana Buddhism, such as Zen, one gets a glimpse of deep, timeless interdependency: everything that is, everything that was, and everything that will be, are at once emerging, transient, and already gone. In the West, Plato’s realization in *Timeaus*, that “time is the moving image of eternity,” echoes in the Judeo-Christian tradition, wherein the past and the future live in each moment in the timeless, placeless Now of God. God, who creates time, is found both beyond and within time. In

Hebrew Scripture we are told that God, who created time, has set eternity in our time-bound hearts.<sup>12</sup> And in Isaiah and Jeremiah, we read that God connects eternity and time in a relationship of love when He says, “I love you with an everlasting love”<sup>13</sup>.

This theme of a sacred eternity that touches every moment of chronological time is abundant in Christian scriptures. When Jesus is accosted by the religious leaders, he tells them,

*Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.” Then the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.”<sup>14</sup>*

Who is this “I” who endures for eternity? Perhaps my perfect storm of healing was a glimpse into this timeless consciousness of Jesus who is present, not only to his personal past and future, but to all past and future. Perhaps I had momentarily experienced what our tradition calls Christ consciousness. Since Christians are taught that we share the mind of Christ,<sup>15</sup> our deep selves share common ground with the deep “I” of Christ, for whom all those who have passed away are “alive” in God.<sup>16</sup>

I wonder about the implications for psychotherapy. How do we as therapists understand time, and how do our assumptions affect our actual sessions with clients? Does it make a difference if we love our clients? How is an everlasting love different from an ordinary love?

For me, the therapeutic goal of coming to terms with my past and of being released from its suffering was completed by tapping into a consciousness that I can only regard as spiritual. Of course, it would be a mistake to think that I was present at my grandparent’s house in the same way that I was sitting on the cushion that particular morning. I know that my parents, grandparents and many of the adults at that evening party are dead. What has passed is gone forever. And yet those moments of seemingly timeless love, including a sense that somehow the love in my heart was “actually” reaching my family “back then,” seems as real to me as the cushion that I sat upon, as real as the keyboard on which I now type.

For Jews, Christians and some Buddhists, the psychotherapeutic project is profoundly affected by our traditions’ understanding of time. If we as human persons are not bound irrevocably by the one-way directionality of time, then our “past” significant relationships continue to live within us. Of course, from the scientific and medical perspectives our past relationships may be considered to be no more than electrical reverberations in specific areas of the brain. But if we believe that our true

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12 Ecclesiastes 3:11

13 Isaiah 54:8 and Jeremiah 31:3

14 John 9:56ff

15 Philippians 2:5

16 Luke 20:37

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selves are created and constituted in interdependent relationships, and if we believe in the wholeness and integrity of human persons, then we should be mindful of the critically important “I-thou’s” that resonate in our depths and in the holy vaults of our memories.

Perhaps the healed self is a self in which all relationships, past present and future, are resolved in love. When we or our clients are in the mode of remembering, we might recognize that we have crossed a liminal boundary, not only into the generic coming and going of mere “thoughts,” but rather into the sacred temple of inner I-thou relationships that form the ground of our personhood vis-à-vis others.

For spiritual seekers who also follow the psychotherapeutic path to personal healing, our painful, abusive, unjust, violent, disgusting, shameful and evil incidents in the past exist in some real way in the present. We might say that this is not good. We would prefer that painful memories be completely erased. (At this writing there is some excitement in psychiatric circles about new drugs that apparently can erase our memories of suffering.) But because our past, painful experiences and the resonance of earlier relationships continue to live in us, they can be redeemed. In any given moment, we can become aware of, and be surprised by, other “thou’s” whose presence bubbles up from the unconscious. And we can carry the koan, “Is this remembered relationship complete and resolved in love or not.”

The techniques of disciplined, moment to moment awareness that Buddhist meditation brings to psychotherapy are of tremendous value to both therapist and client. These techniques build upon Freud’s prescriptions for the ideal analyst, as one who displays an evenly suspended awareness in relationship to the client, a kind of Buddha-like equanimity and openness to surprise. Freud envisioned the competent analyst to be so aware that he or she would actually catch new material as it emerged from his or her own unconscious. The therapist, he said, should “turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ toward the transmitting unconscious of the patient” . . . and bring full awareness to his or her perceptions as a clue to what is happening in the client.<sup>17</sup> Buddhist meditation can deepen one’s ability to “not-know” with the client, making it more likely that repressed memories, thoughts and feelings can emerge in oneself and in the therapeutic relationship. Deep within the Mahayana tradition is perhaps its most important teaching, that when one is truly detached and present to “what is,” compassion naturally arises. Out of emptiness comes compassion, a sense that our suffering is not different from that of our clients, and a spontaneous inclination to help.

One should not assume that the goal of psychotherapy for both therapist and client is only the development of detachment. Here, the Christian contemplative tradition may have something a bit different to offer. Teachings about detached awareness can be traced back to desert monks such as Evagrius and Cassian in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., and were developed further by

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17 See Tansey, Michael J. and Walter F. Burke. Understanding Counter-Transference: From Projective Identification to Empathy. Hillsdale, N.J.: The Analytic Press, 1989, p.11 Freud is quoted from a 1912 technical paper.

the Dominican friar, Meister Eckhart in the fourteenth century and St. Ignatius Loyola and St. John of the Cross in the sixteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Like their contemplative Buddhist cousins, each of these spiritual teachers values an open awareness that is unattached to pleasure or pain, but because they, as Christians, sense that the dynamic core of a person resounds in a sacred I-Thou relationship, they are drawn to balance inward detachment with the continuous affirmation and valuing of human connection and community. Both of these orientations of awareness--detachment and healthy attachment-- are essential in the quest for psychotherapeutic healing.

I wonder if the love that I felt that morning on the cushion in fact did reach my dear relatives “back then.” I have imagined that in that very moment, perhaps on a cold December night in 1957, each person’s spirit stood up straight like a prairie dog under an open sky and heard a voice from the future--my voice, but perhaps a voice that transcends my own--saying, “I see your shame, your guilt and your fear, and it’s all O.K. I love you with an everlasting love and I will welcome you home when you die.” Perhaps this voice of love is coming to me now from my own future. I honestly don’t know how to square these time-shifting experiences with our usual perception that chronological time passes along in each moment from past to future with no possibility of reversal. Yet I expect that many of my fellow Christians, steeped as they are in the language of eternity, might empathize. I can only speculate that some Buddhists and seekers in other religions may have similar experiences of time’s elasticity.

I don’t know how one tests the validity of spiritual and psychological healing. If it is by the fruits of such experiences, then I believe that there was something authentic about the perfect storm of healing that I’ve described. I had been completely infused with a love, unmistakably real, that is rooted deeper than the scientific paradigms that often govern our great universities, a love that is deeper than the cynicism and violence that can spring from suffering, deeper than the cold indifference we can see on the bloody hands of a boy who kills baby birds or in the frigid, impersonal whirling of the planets through the darkness of outer space. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*<sup>19</sup>



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18 Evagrius Ponticus. *The Praktikos & Chapters On Prayer*. trans. John Eudes Bamberger. Cistercian Studies Series: Number Four. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981. John Cassian. *Conferences*. Colm Luibheid, trans. and preface. Classics of Western Spirituality. New York. Paulist Press, 1985.

19 John 1:5