



the empty bell

Daybreak

© Robert A. Jonas, 2006
(reprint by written permission only)

Revised from an essay in
The Journey of the Lay Contemplative.
Mary Frolich and Virginia Manss eds.,
St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1999.

Once saw a movie about small-village life in Eastern Europe during the Middle Ages. A peasant family of about ten people is seated around a large oak table, eating dinner in a dark one-room house. A woman nurses an infant with one arm, and with the other arm, reaches over to spoon food onto the plates of three children. An old man bends toward his plate, tearing a slice of bread with his long, blackened, knotty fingers. In the midst of silence, one hears only an occasional outcry from the baby, a murmuring of voices, the bumping together of wooden chairs and table, or the clink of tin on tin.

Suddenly there is a thumping sound against wood. Everyone looks to the dark, far corner of the room where the door opens. There stands a big disheveled man in rags. The family falls silent, the older folks cross themselves. They all draw away from the table, holding their hands together in prayer as the mother fixes a large plate of the best food and makes a place for the man. His face is misshapen, and one eye is partially closed. He limps to the table, sits down and eats while everyone watches. No one says a word. The strange man never speaks. When he finishes and leaves, everyone returns to the table, and continues eating as before.

At first, I viewed this scene with mild interest, as if it were only a quaint story about some distant, primitive land. But in the next moment, I felt stricken with a subterranean string of emotions--fear, guilt, sorrow, yearning, and hope. As the scene unfolded in memory, it came deeper inside, and soon I was empathizing with the different characters. By turns, I was the poor, devout family, and the wandering, homeless man. Then I realized that this was a universal, human story, a story about what it means to be a family, about social inequity, about generosity and forsakenness, about hopelessness and holiness. Several years later, my shakuhachi and I would visit a priest-friend in a community of the handicapped. I did not anticipate the ways in which this simple, primitive music would open up new doorways of friendship, and fresh understandings of empathy and compassion.

In my Wisconsin childhood, during the 1950's and 60's, handicapped and emotionally disabled people were rarely seen. We had one psychiatric hospital, which, among my friends and family, was referred to as "the nuthouse," that is, the place that you would go if you were "strange" or didn't shape up. Being crazy was either an act of God, or a secret moral failing. It was probably your own fault if you couldn't pull yourself together. Later in life, I would unpack these stereotypes a bit. For one thing, the adjective "strange" covered a complex mix of very different psychological, emotional and biological conditions: everything from depression to psychosis and schizophrenia, to muscular dystrophy.

Sometimes, the strangeness touched me. I had an uncle, Les Baken, who worked for the railroad. I was horrified and fascinated by the story of how his arm was ripped off at the shoulder one day when he got caught between a standing and a moving train. (Recently, I asked my father about Les. In his memory, Les lost his arm when it was caught and mangled in a wood-processing machine). I was amazed at what Les could do with one arm. And then there was Billy, my grandfather's deaf nephew. His loving parents used to bring him to family gatherings where, in the midst of the usual drinking, smoking and clamor, I would watch his searching eyes, and his grotesque, word-shaping lips. When I think of Billy, I think of that phrase, "bring him." It was as if he didn't have a separate self, his own power.

As a child, I was unconsciously aware of a “normal range” of people, and I had a vague sense of how one might step beyond it: If your face looked different, say, or if you didn’t work a 40-hour week; if you didn’t cut your lawn regularly; if you didn’t say thank you when appropriate; if you didn’t drink milk and beer; if you didn’t kill deer; if you didn’t know last Sunday’s Green Bay Packer score; if your clothes weren’t clean; if your hair wasn’t cut short. The standards of appearance and conduct shaped our culture, as firmly and invisibly as the glass sides of an aquarium. Without knowing it, I swam within the normal range of things, avoiding those who were disabled and handicapped, but feeling an attraction to them too, as if some great, dark secret, something really “other” lived in them. In my adolescence, seeing someone in a wheelchair evoked feelings of dread, guilt, and pity. What if that were me? Why am I OK, and he is not? Should I drop everything I am doing, and help this poor person? Twenty years later I would have to ponder these questions more deeply when, as a psychology intern at Children’s Hospital in Boston, I worked at a large institution for the handicapped.

In 1984, while at Children’s Hospital, I went to a lecture given by Fr. Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest and writer with a professorship at the Harvard Divinity School. I learned later that Henri had already given up his tenure at Yale in order to minister more directly to people in need. And now, within a year, he would also leave his teaching position at Harvard prematurely for similar reasons. In 1985, his restlessness and his love of Jesus would lead him to live with handicapped people in a community called L’Arche in Trosly, France. And soon, Henri would take up permanent residence as pastor at a L’Arche community outside Toronto, called Daybreak.

Feeling deeply moved by Henri’s description of L’Arche’s vision for the handicapped, I asked him if we could meet for lunch. We did, and soon became fast friends. In the next few years I visited several L’Arche communities in France, Canada and the United States.

Now, in November, 1992, I made my third retreat at Daybreak. In a way, I limped to Toronto as one who was handicapped by grief. It had been only three months since Margaret and I had lost our daughter Rebecca to a premature birth and death. She had lived only four hours, and died in our arms. Now, I would go to Daybreak, to be among my own kind, the broken, and the marginalized.

I had visited Daybreak four years before, when it was out in the flat countryside north of Toronto, surrounded by farms, hay fields and old, gnarled apple trees. The setting seemed exactly right: broken people, living outside of town in the neglected wilderness of abandoned farms and fields. But now there were new suburban developments all around. Hundreds of condominiums had been erected on three sides of the Daybreak property, one of them just 20 feet from Henri’s back door. Four years before, when I looked out the windows, there had been only nature, spreading out in every direction to the horizon. Now I saw suburban streets, tall, freshly painted lamp-posts, and expensive, pretentious houses, differentiated only slightly from one another by variations in their pastel colors. Up and down the fresh, black asphalt streets, contemporary houses shimmered perfectly beside the new concrete sidewalks as if they were merely holographic projections of some architect’s dream.

In spite of all these flawlessly designed houses, there was, all around Daybreak, the eerie

feeling of absence. In one week, I saw no one walking on the sidewalks. Cars, but almost no one in the driveways. I wondered if the developer had figured out some way of getting people directly from their cars into their houses, so that they would never have to step outside. This was no longer a human, life-giving landscape. The contrast between then and now left me feeling helpless and angry. A desperate voice in me screamed, “How dare you?” Most of the Daybreak buildings, including the barn in the middle, were old and in need of repair. A field of timothy, wheatgrass and thistles still welcomed a few birds--canaries, red-winged blackbirds and chickadees--and a small, dark woods of cedar luckily hid one row of homogenous homes. But Nature had been cut away from Daybreak on all sides, leaving only a rectangular strip of land on which the old farm buildings stood, a small strip of wilderness, overgrown with weeds, traversed by one long mud driveway full of potholes.

One day, as I carried the shakuhachi down the patch of country road that wound through Daybreak, I looked over at the row houses, and pondered these two worlds: The first was bright, repetitious, orderly, speedy, and efficient. The other was messy, dark, unpredictable, and broken. Like a dousing rod, the bamboo flute seemed to point me toward the field, the barn, the old residence for the handicapped, and the cedar grove, as if the bamboo and its music could find no sustenance over there, in the architecturally domesticated paradise. The suburban development evoked an image of music that is predictably melodic, conscious and of human proportion, while Daybreak beckoned me into the Japanese honkyoku, something dark, mournful and erratic, where order cannot be imposed by the conscious mind, but must be discovered as one listens and watches in silence to the sudden swoops, dips, and jumps of birds and land, dragonflies and crickets, streams, mud tracks, and gusts of Canadian northwest wind. I would learn later that this wilder, darker aesthetic has a name in Japan. It is called Wabi, Sabi, or Wabi-Sabi. Honkyoku is Wabi-Sabi.

Henri and I had often talked about the world of the severely handicapped. For those of us who pass for “normal”, the handicapped can represent a threat. Our consumer culture and its symbiotic educational system creates an abstract model person who is bright, slim and savvy. Anyone who is “somebody” has power, wealth, pleasure, beauty and eternal youth, attains infinite speed, completes fantastic numbers of projects, and receives everlasting praise from inexhaustible sources. Trying to emulate these models of personhood often drives us so insistently that we become addicted to the fast life. We generally don’t have time for those who are moving much more slowly on the muddy roads, in the shadows of modern life.

At L’Arche, popular models of personhood are turned on their heads. Here, people emphasize the gifts that come through suffering, and through living with the wounded. Time, woven into the minutiae of dressing, eating, moving, brushing teeth, and “signing,” slows down. From the fast lane, things here may look merely disfigured, crippled, and useless. From the slow lane, one is encouraged to take another look, to seek out the details, delicacy, and even beauty of what we thought was ugly.

One day, Henri took me along to have dinner at a L’Arche house in downtown Toronto. The one-story wooden house, with small front yard and surrounding chain link fence, was nestled within a residential neighborhood. Here, six handicapped residents (called “core mem-

bers”) lived with their helpers(called “assistants”). About 25 people gathered in the basement for an informal meal to watch a slide presentation about another L’Arche house in Australia. Two visitors, one smiling, talkative core member with Down’s Syndrome named Mary, and her assistant, Janet, greeted everyone. The celebratory spirit of the gathering did not surprise me. Over the years, I had learned that, at all L’Arche communities, birthdays, welcomes for visitors and new members, goodbye parties and liturgical holidays dot the weekly landscape. Tonight, everyone seemed eager to hear about the Australian community.

Before the presentation, Henri was to lead the group in a Catholic Mass. He asked if I knew a shakuhachi piece that would be a good lead-in to the worship. As I brought the flute out of its leather case, two or three people asked what kind of instrument this was. Suddenly the shakuhachi was the center of attention. I told everyone about how this flute was hand-made by my teacher, David Duncavage, who dug up the bamboo near Kyoto, Japan. I also spoke about the Buddhist and Christian practice of contemplative listening. One did not listen “outwardly,” for a melody but rather “inwardly,” as if from the heart.

“I’m learning to play what is called honkyoku, or ‘origin music,’ I said. “As far as we know, this flute music was brought to Japan from China in the 8th century. Sometimes, in Buddhist monasteries, it was practiced as a spiritual discipline, a kind of prayer. In listening, we pay attention to the silence between the notes, as much as to the notes themselves.” Everyone listened with great interest.

Then I brought the bamboo to my lips and played Kyo-rei, “Empty Bell.” Two severely handicapped men slouched in their chairs, swinging their heads and eyes from side to side, unable to focus, and several others seemed uneasy in their afflicted bodies, squirming, pounding, rubbing and scraping their bodies against chairs and neighbors. Some, like Mary sat very still, listening intently. When I blew Kyo-rei, I was struck by the immediate, comfortable silence in the room.

How strange this music must have sounded! But I sensed that Kyo-rei was being received. As I drew in each breath, and blew each successive note, I saw within me, countless scenes from institutions and homes for the handicapped where I had visited and worked, including L’Arche residences--scenes of silent waiting for, sitting alongside of, and simply being with, the profoundly handicapped. I wondered if the severely wounded understand more deeply than others, the speechless atmosphere of the shakuhachi. Sometimes, as they lie in bed, waiting for someone to approach, they have nothing to do but listen in the lonely silence for their next breath.

On this night, many residents, both handicapped and their assistants, came up to me afterward to share how much they had appreciated the offering of music. I felt touched to be welcomed in such a warm manner. I remembered that warmth from my first visit to L’Arche in France several years before. The L’Arche spirit opens one’s heart. Under its influence the distinction between handicapped and non-handicapped people melts away. On this night I felt as if I had a foot in both worlds. Here were just plain people living together. Quite ordinary. But it was a very lovely sort of ordinary.

One woman, a local therapist, told me that she came to Daybreak household meetings like

this for support. She said that her teenage daughter, who was profoundly retarded and manic depressive, lived at home. “The worst thing,” she offered, “is getting isolated. My ex-husband couldn’t handle the demands. Eventually, his anger got the best of him. I’ve learned that you just have to take a break occasionally, and stay connected to others. Here, I feel safe and understood”.

The week before, her daughter had angrily thrust her hand through a window. A quick, desperate, bloody ride to the neighborhood hospital saved her daughter’s life. “This way of living in community is hard work. It can be stressful. But I really feel that the Holy Spirit is at work here. That makes it easier.” I listened carefully, in awe of this woman’s faith and her ability to live with such suffering. And I felt both admiration and guilt, because I didn’t think that I could do it.

Another man, Vic, told me that he came occasionally to help out. I liked Vic immediately. Though there was nothing distinctive about his looks or dress, he was a beautiful man, from the inside out. He radiated compassion and good humor. I asked him about his spiritual life. He replied that the trick in life was to “get it” that we are the Beloved of God and to help others get it that they are too. Simple as that. He expressed surprise and disappointment about how many people in the world were bitter and had no clue that they were lovable. I thought of the many tired and vacant faces I had seen in the airport. So many people in our culture are too harried, hurt or broken to feel much joy. Real love may only be a memory, or an infinitely receding hope.

Vic told me how much he loved his three kids. “I like to sit down beside each of them in turn to talk about their day and to consider what the future may bring. . . . I think it is so important that our kids understand that the father wants to be with them and understand them. Of course it’s good for them to see Dad doing things out there in the world too, but that close personal contact will be a resource for them for a lifetime.”

I told Vic about my three-year old son Sam coming into my office in the early morning when his mommy is still asleep, to read or play drums while I play the flute.

“That’s wonderful for him, and for you!” he replied. We hugged affectionately at the end of the evening, and said that we would pray for each other.

Vic’s words surprised me with both pain and inspiration. On the one hand I felt an emptiness in the region of my heart and belly. He reminded me of what I had not received from my father. After my parents were divorced, when I was 12, Dad immediately moved from our home in Wisconsin all the way out to California. He never came back. On the other hand, I could share Vic’s joy because I had glimpsed that depth of father-love in my relationships with several male mentors, as a mentor to others, and as a daddy to Christy, Sam, and Rebecca. During the prayer time that followed, I found myself praying that Vic’s inner light and enthusiasm for good parenting would rub off on me, and blossom in the hearts of the world’s fathers.

During the Mass, everyone--both the able-bodied assistants and the handicapped residents--offered prayers. I couldn’t understand the words of some handicapped people, and I doubted whether anyone else could either. But everyone listened reverently, and some people nodded as if to join in their prayers.

One man prayed, “Lord, we thank you for the gift of Jonas and his flute. Inspire us to give each other the loving, personal attention that Jonas is able to give to each note of honkyoku.”

Then we all sang a couple of spiritual songs. The evening was uplifting. When I played another honkyoku after the communion, I felt as if my, and everyone’s, suffering was passing into the shakuhachi, and then out into some vast, safe, and merciful arms. After saying good-bye, Henri and I drove north out of Toronto, back to Daybreak, hidden among the spreading suburbs on the plains of Richmond Hill.

At the far end of the Daybreak rectangle, a ranch house sits on a rise of land overlooking a small marsh and a grove of pine trees. My room was here, in this retreat house for assistants and visitors, called Dayspring. Dayspring includes a library, three guest bedrooms, Henri’s room, and a basement chapel. During my stays at Dayspring, I go to the chapel, a few steps away from my room, to play the shakuhachi and to pray each morning and evening. Throughout the day, others come and go, using it for private meditation, evening Eucharists, and occasionally for community meetings or celebrations. One morning I attended the daily Eucharist in the chapel. The chapel is a large, recently renovated, carpeted room with a low, wooden altar in the center. About 30 pine chairs are arrayed around the circumference of the space. When no events are scheduled in the room, the altar is bare except for a vase of flowers in the center.

On this morning a three-foot high, Russian icon of Jesus leaned against the front of the altar. One light shone down from the ceiling on to the flowers and the icon. Two white candles sitting within clear glass cylinders burned at either end of the table. Three rectangular, concrete and glass windows at the top of the ceiling in the back conveyed a gentle, outdoor light. A low oak table stood in the shadows at the far corner of the room. A reddish-brown cedar box lay atop it. The door on the front of the box was closed. I knew that inside the door, sitting on the bottom of the box, was a round glass saucer on which rested wafers of unleavened bread, the “Host,” the Body of Christ. On either side of the box stood a white candle sending out its wavering light from within a glass tube. These candles are always lit, even when no one is there.

On the wall to the right of the wooden box is a large, woolen wall hanging, perhaps nine feet by six feet. It was woven by a woman in Germany who gave it to Dayspring, especially for this chapel. Its surface is alive with vibrant colors and forms which, at first glance, seem abstract. But when, on the previous day, I had listened to Henri tell visitors how this tapestry came to be, its story and characters seemed magically to emerge. The glowing figure in the center is a resurrected Christ, with rainbows of light coming out from his upper body. A crowd, bathed in this light, surrounds Christ. Some of those in the crowd have their arms in the air and some figures are bowed down reverently in the radiating light.

On this particular morning, twenty people gathered for the Eucharist. We were a mix of core members, assistants, and two siblings of a disabled resident. A few big, vinyl-covered, bean-bag chairs were plopped among the wooden chairs for the most seriously disabled core members. One such person, a woman in her 20’s, lay down across a bright red bean bag next to me. Rosey had Down’s Syndrome, and other serious problems that left her with little control over her arms and legs. She rolled her body back and forth over the soft vinyl, and occasionally let out a powerful cry that sounded almost like a braying cow. She seemed to be more attentive

during quiet parts of the service, especially during the prayers and the Eucharist. I couldn't tell if this behavior was intentional. Periodically Rosey turned to look at me with a blank stare. I wondered if she might be curious about me. But when I smiled at her, her face remained blank.

Ted, an assistant in one of the Daybreak houses, was sitting on my left. A tall man in his late 20's, he wore blue jeans and a blue cotton work shirt, and carried his 20-month-old daughter, Jane. When it came time for the homily, Ted spoke to the group. He talked about the anger that came up when he got Jane all ready for bed and then she pooped again. He asked God for mercy and patience. The Gospel lesson for the day was about a servant who works hard for his Master all morning. Then at noon, when the servant desires some time for himself, the Master tells him to skip lunch, and to feed the Master's family instead. This kind of sacrifice felt all too familiar to Ted, and he spoke simply and eloquently about how hard it is to be faithful. Ted won me over with his sense of humor and his commitment to know himself, and to be a good father.

After the communion bread and wine had been passed around, everyone sat down, and I played a honkyoku piece. As I blew through the bamboo, I suddenly noticed that Rosey was making her "moo" sound at random intervals. At first I was annoyed, thinking that she was distracting people from the contemplative character of the music. A string of thoughts passed through my mind. "I hope someone will tell her to be quiet," I thought, and "The beauty of this music will be wasted unless someone takes her from the room."

I had wanted to offer everyone a special gift of music and silence, but it was not working. During the length of one prolonged note I decided that I would never have the patience of L'Arche's assistants and leaders. I could never survive the constant neediness of the handicapped. But then, about half-way through the honkyoku, Rosey's "moo" seemed to fit in with the shakuhachi notes.

There was no way of telling whether Rosey intended to time her "moo" in relation to the honkyoku.. And yet I began to feel her presence in "my" music. Suddenly, I and the shakuhachi were no longer the center of things. The center had moved into the middle of the group. Suddenly, both Rosey and the shakuhachi were sculpting the silence with their cries. The pitch of Rosey's "moo" resonated with a certain mournful note that occurs periodically throughout the honkyoku. Suddenly I felt that we were crying out together for mercy. With a slight bend of my neck, a slight shading of the third hole on the flute, Rosey's note and mine found a pleasing and heartfelt resonance. Tears formed in my eyes. "Oh, how I wish my daughter Rebecca had lived," I thought. In my body, I felt a bond between Rosey and me, two wounded people suddenly transparent to Jesus' suffering on the cross. "Why have you forsaken me?" We were both living Jesus in us.

After the Mass, I watched Rosey's assistants talk to her, and move her body into a more comfortable position. It seemed that Rosey could communicate to them in subtle ways. So I went over to Rosey, to introduce myself. I touched her arm and said, "Hi Rosey." Our eyes met for a split second. She looked down at my hand as if she were totally uninterested, and then let her eyes drift dispassionately about the room. I didn't know if she felt any kind of connection to me. I waited a minute, watching her face, but her eyes never returned to mine. Had

I been mistaken about our musical duet? Had I merely wished for, and projected, a connection that was never there? I realized that I might never know. But could the connection, and the empathy, have been “true” nonetheless? Somehow, I was convinced that beneath the conscious intellect, we had wandered into the same dark, soul territory, and had met for a common lament, and a song.

Later, as I reflected on my meeting with Rosey, I thought of that haunting moment when our eyes met. I had either seen or imagined a depth of awareness in her face that reminded me of actor’s faces in Japanese kabuki theater. Kabuki is a 300-year old form of Japanese theater that is highly stylized, performed with orchestras of drums, flutes, bells and various stringed instruments. The actors wear multi-colored, silk robes, and their faces are painted with a white base. Once, in Tokyo, I attended an afternoon of Kabuki theater, and I was completely dazzled by its visual power. In the West, we prize the individuality of our actors and actresses, but in Kabuki, individuality is deliberately hid beneath an archetypal mask. It is as if the actors are not there to represent themselves, or even a particular character, but rather to express, and even to become, a mythic character, a being that descends from a transcendent world of Forms, both good and evil.

In Kabuki, one sees archetypal human forms appearing out of the inscrutable, Eastern Nothingness of Zen and Taoism. In a subtle interplay of silence and stylized, physical poses, Kabuki gives one an eerie sense that a world behind this one is appearing, about to swallow up our personal stories into something grander, larger and more powerful. At the end of each scene, the actors stand still, and look dispassionately at the audience in a classic pose called mie. Locked for a moment in Rosey’s gaze, I felt that same clammy fear and sense of awesome presence that came to me when a commanding Kabuki actor, whose own face had completely disappeared into his archetypal role, gazed out at the audience. Rosey’s personal face had disappeared, and I saw only this inscrutable window into wordless silence.

It was becoming clear to me that the wisdom of L’Arche, and the wisdom of the shakuhachi’s honkyoku, have something in common. Both point toward the ultimate, unknowable origin and destination of everything. Both are comfortable in the unmelodic messiness, brokenness, and suffering of real life, and in the waiting that goes nowhere but where we already are. But where the Christian tradition points to the Word of love and forgiveness that arises out of Mystery, Zen highlights the sheer is-ness, the sudden, immediate, suchness of each moment as it arises out of Nothing. In each tradition, our astonishment that the world is, is the beginning of spiritual wisdom.

Certainly, different dimensions of reality are emphasized in each tradition. Christianity has a richly developed vision of how human relations can actually become an image of the unseen God. And Zen has an equally rich vision of how our awareness can become a crystal clear mirror of Nature and the Absolute. Both are grounded in silence, and both have faith that when we wait in silence together, a deep, connecting beauty arises. For Christians, everything is an ultimate interrelatedness called “the communion of saints,” or “the Body of Christ,” and for Buddhists it is something impersonal, called “dependent co-arising,” or “Indra’s Net.” In both traditions, “otherness” is both affirmed and transcended by a profound relatedness. Both

consider it a spiritual virtue when someone discovers, and then explores “otherness” in oneself. At L’Arche, one soon finds the handicapped and the broken within oneself, and in that finding, both a suffering, and a joyful resurrection. Daybreak’s story is Jesus’s story, and Jesus’s story is God’s.

As I prepared to leave Daybreak, I pondered the meaning of Rebecca’s brief appearance. She too presented an expressionless, inscrutable face, bearing a look that was somehow more than she was. It was all the more striking because I could see in her face, a striking, unsettling resemblance to the other faces in our family--Margaret’s, Sam’s, and mine. It was as if, in looking into her dying face, I looked into a mirror, seeing there the beyondness, the edge of Nothing in my own identity. Rebecca had come from Marg’s body out of nowhere and disappeared into nature again, into the clouds, the ashes, the earth and the music. The sui-zen tradition of the shakuhachi was an earth music, testifying to a phenomenal, awesome flow of appearance and disappearance into nature and the Nothing that underlies it.

In Zen and other Japanese arts, the personal and interpersonal dimensions of reality are meant to disappear, so I sometimes felt as if I betrayed the sui-zen tradition when my blowing expressed grief for Rebecca. Wasn’t the point of the shakuhachi to express peace and emptiness, rather than protest and passion? Still, in the context of a contemplative Roman Catholic Eucharist, it felt appropriate that my music be a prayer for, and an expectation of, mercy.

On my last evening at Daybreak, a strong cool wind had come up out of the Arctic north. We could barely hear its whispered movements at the basement windows. Into the silence after communion, I played a Shirabe (panting breath) piece of honkyoku. Shirabe notes are blown in rhythmic, breathy gusts, echoing the weather in some northern, mountains in Japanese sui-zen monasteries. For one moment during the piece my thinking slipped over the horizon and “I” disappeared into the silence between the notes.

I only noticed this transformation later, as I was about to leave Daybreak. What had happened in that Shirabe at the evening Eucharist? It seemed that in the moment of “no-mind” there was only a long, winding, forested valley, untouched by human purposes, with only the wind rushing down the slopes of the surrounding mountains and over the tree tops and marsh grasses. But then, in the midst of that valley, a person appeared in my heart’s eye, singing something I could not understand. Something haunting and exquisite. Who appeared? There was no distinct image, but I sensed that it was someone wise and humble, someone who stands in the original doorway where everything that is appears out of Nothing. Perhaps it was Christ, or Buddha singing with the wind in the valley.

That night it began to rain. Before going to bed, I walked into the darkened chapel to play one final honkyoku in thankfulness to the Daybreak community, and the sui-zen tradition. Letting my face and lips relax, many of the notes came from somewhere deep within. For an instant, the lowest note that the shakuhachi can play became a sacred plow, turning all my thoughts into the muddy earth.

