



the empty bell

Loving Someone You Can't See

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In 1954 I am seven years old. One winter night I lie on a feather bed in the two-story house that my grandfather built in 1920 at the edge of a cow field in Wausau, Wisconsin. My grandmother, Leona Radenz, sits beside me on a rocking chair. As she turns out the bedside lamp, yellow light from the hall streams across the dark oak woodwork and chest of drawers. I watch the light glint in the large oval mirror that hangs above the bureau. I can just make out the ceramic Jesus who hangs crucified on the small wooden cross beside the mirror. His face is looking down. Maybe he can see the two black-and-white photographs framed in tin that stand on the bureau. In one, Grandpa is smiling in his WWI khakis, just back from two years ducking German bullets in the trenches of France. In the other, Grandpa is standing with his two sons, my uncles, Eugene and Earl, who are safely back from the next world war.

Grandma reaches forward to pull her homemade quilt to my chin. After she settles herself again, she begins to whisper, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Taking my cue, I join her in prayer. After we reach “forever and ever, Amen,” we breathe together in the silence. Then Grandma begins the prayer that she learned from her German parents, *Ich bin klein, mein Herz ist rein, soll niemand drin wohnen, als Jesus allein*. I know what it means: “I am small, my heart is pure. No one lives in my heart, but Jesus alone.” Some nights, Grandma offers a different prayer: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Tonight it is *Jesus allein* who takes shape in my heart as Grandma gets up from the chair, strokes my forehead, and says, “Goodnight, Bobby.”

Jesus allein. I know what he looks like. I’ve gazed at the small painting that hangs at the foot of Grandma and Grandpa’s basement stairs. Jesus is a gentle, long-haired young man who holds a stray lamb. My parents may move me and my younger brother and sister from house to house and neighborhood to neighborhood. Mom and Dad may get along sometimes or they may have a string of bad days in which they stumble into the house and shout at each other late into the night. They may drink so much that their speech seems to spill out of a mouth full of marbles. They may not know where I am. I may stay at Grandma and Grandpa’s house some nights and at my parent’s house other nights. But Jesus is everywhere. And he’ll come find me if I ever get lost. Even if someone dies (as the friendly old man next door did last year), Jesus will never die. He is like the other adults I know except that he never gets mad at me and he’ll be with me even if I die tonight. Knowing Jesus helps me sleep, especially when I’m afraid or confused.

When my mind is full of bad thoughts, I repeat the prayers that Grandma taught me. Grandma can get angry with me, pinch my ears, and wash my mouth out with Dial soap. But I know that since she loves Jesus, at heart she must be as good as he is. Grandpa has a good heart, too. A few days ago he saw me playing with my steel toy soldiers, lining up the opposing sides. Without looking at me, he said, “Two hundred of us Wausau boys went to the trenches. Only twenty-eight came back. Christmas night we made a truce with the Germans and sang Christmas carols together.” Anytime I want, I can go down those basement stairs and look at the picture of what holds us up. It’s Jesus who stops the fighting and who takes care of everyone, no matter what side you’re on. Jesus is how I know that God is love,

forever.

Twelve years later, in 1965, after having some “born again” experiences of Christ’s joy, I enter Luther College, thinking I’ll be a Lutheran minister. But the Vietnam War is heating up and I lose faith in America and in the church. I transfer to Dartmouth College, major in Government, and join a karate class. It’s my first taste of Asian spirituality.

The teacher, Donny Miller, teaches us Chan (Chinese Zen) and Taoist meditation as the spiritual context of karate. I’m hooked. I come every weekday for my junior and senior years. We break pine boards and old New England bricks with the striking edge of our hands and feet. In the winter we walk barefoot in the New Hampshire fields, bringing awareness to the exact place where the soles of our feet touch the snow. We warm our frozen feet by directing the body’s *qi*, its earth energies, to that point of contact.

I’ve stopped going to church, not out of anger but because these new spiritual frontiers excite me. My Lutheran religious training said almost nothing about the body or nature. So I am fascinated to hear that my body is a hologram of the cosmos and of the trees, rivers, and oceans. In my spare time and over the summers, I pore over Laozi (Lao-tzu) and Thomas Merton’s *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.

Nature, I am discovering, is not something “out there” to be dominated and subdued, but a part of me. A wise part of me. Moral and spiritual lessons can be learned not only from the Gospels, but even more immediately from the body, the seasons, and the trees. Earth-centered meditation and eastern philosophy fit with the part of me that wanders aimlessly in Wisconsin hayfields listening to bob-o-links and meadowlarks and that enjoys the blood rush that comes when a partridge or deer suddenly explodes out of a thicket in the woods. Having grown up as a Missouri Synod Lutheran, I know a lot about how human beings ought to treat each other. We should be Good Samaritans, respecting each person as a child of God, forgiving our neighbors and loving our enemies. But no one ever told me that there is a spiritual dimension in the expectant silence of waiting for a cedar waxwing to come back for more berries. I thought that when I sat silently on a log, waiting to hear Canada geese pass overhead, I was doing something I should be ashamed of: doing nothing. I was a good Lutheran, and doing nothing was just being lazy, practically a sin. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve left Christianity behind, once and for all. God is dead, but a new spirituality is opening in the east.

After I graduate from Dartmouth in 1969, I work as a VISTA volunteer in the inner city of Kansas City, Missouri. I teach black and Italian kids karate, introducing them to meditation and methods of peaceful conflict resolution that come from cultivating inner peace. Since most of my students are Christian, I investigate the work of writers such as Alan Watts, D.T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton, looking for metaphors and stories that connect our meditation to the ministry of Jesus. I learn how Japanese Zen evolved from Taoism and Chinese Buddhism (Chan), and that Zen koans are questions that open the mind but have no final answer. I notice that some of Jesus’ questions—such as “Who do you say that I am?”—sound like Christian koans.

But I’m learning new things about Christianity as well. Merton discusses the Desert Fathers, Evagrius, Cassian, and Gregory of Nyssa, medieval saints such as Bonaventure, Bernard, and Eckhart,

and the sixteenth century Spanish mystics, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. All new to me. My Lutheran upbringing and my religion courses at Luther College skipped these people, as if nothing significant happened in Christian theology in the eleven centuries between St. Augustine and Martin Luther. I am fascinated with this Roman Catholic world that dances with the east.

In 1973, while managing an organic vegetable farm in southern New Hampshire, I fall into a mild depression. Neither meditation nor reading seem to help; I need someone to talk to. I turn for advice to a fellow organic gardener I met at a recent conference. It turns out that Brother David is a Roman Catholic Carmelite monk who lives at The Common, a hilltop monastery near Peterborough, New Hampshire. David introduces me to St. John of the Cross and his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

One morning in late March, after we've walked the site of the monastery gardens, David and I sit down before a fire in the small library. I trust David. He's small and rotund, and he doesn't say much. But when I talk with him, he seems completely present, and interested in my questions. There's so much I want to talk over with him. I feel as if St. John of the Cross is speaking directly to my heart and that he may be a crucial link between east and west.

"I want to know if David sees any connection between Asian meditation and John of the Cross. I say to him, "I love the way that St. John weaves together his love for Christ with the *Song of Songs* and the deep contemplation he calls the *Dark Night*. St. John seems to bring together romantic love, God's Love, and a kind of Buddhist self-emptying. But then John says that the top of the spiritual mountain is *nada* or nothing. Is *nada* the same *nothing* or *emptiness* that the Buddhists talk about?"

"Well, Merton thought so. We don't know if St. John had any contact with the east. But the emptiness theme is central to the mystical Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Among academics, it's called 'negative' theology because it's about what God is *not*. God is beyond all *this or that*. It's also called *apophatic* spirituality, that is, 'without images.' God is beyond all our concepts of God, beyond all our images of God. Jews show respect for God's transcendence by writing the word without a vowel, as G-d. Probably all Christians know about the I-Thou relation, but not so many have learned the *nada* tradition. I'm not sure why. Certainly, it's there in Hebrew scripture, and in the *kenosis*, the self-emptying of Christ."

"But then it's a paradox for Christians, isn't it? I mean, we say that God is beyond this world, but also that God shows up in this world, in the flesh. It seems as if *kenosis* contradicts the Incarnation."

"Yes," David says, as the housekeeper comes in with some tea for us. David thanks her and pours me a cup of steaming English Breakfast. "In the contemplative tradition we honor the paradox of the Trinity. God is *beyond* us, Jesus is *with* us, and the Holy Spirit is *among* us. One God, but three ways of being. Mystics such as St. Bernard and St. John saw scripture as a mystical guidebook to Christian transformation. Just as God has three ways of being, we have three ways of encountering God. We come close to the first Person of the Trinity (the Father, the one whom Jesus called *Abba*) in silent contemplation, when we let all our thoughts and images go. We come close to Christ as we experience the intimacy of the I-Thou relationship in solitary prayer. And we feel the loving unity of the Spirit as we share in rituals, worship, singing, and shared prayer."

David and I have many more conversations over the next two years before his Carmelite Provincial transfers him, along with three other monks, to another monastery. But this relationship has been healing for me and has opened up the exciting world of Christian contemplation. I decide to become a Third Order Carmelite, a lay person associated with the monastery, committed to certain daily, weekly, and monthly spiritual disciplines of prayer and liturgy. Of course, to become a Carmelite I must first become Roman Catholic. This is no easy thing.

When my parents began dating in the middle 1940's, Grandma Radenz was upset that my father was Methodist, not Lutheran. You might sing Christmas carols with your worst enemy, but never with a Methodist or a Catholic. Not being Lutheran was a sin. Prior to their wedding in 1946, Grandma experienced a fit of moral righteousness and dis-invited some of Dad's Methodist relatives. A few years later, my uncle Earl and his Roman Catholic girlfriend, Beatrice, broke up several times because of Grandma's anger toward Catholics. (They eventually married anyway and sent Grandma a telegram after the wedding). The rule about Lutherans and Catholics not marrying could have been the Eleventh Commandment. Lutherans had their feet on the ground. Catholics were lost in clouds of liturgical magic and had abdicated their moral powers to the Pope.

Even though at the age of 27 I still feel the resonance of Grandma's biases within me, I cross the line and become a Catholic. While I do see value in the fierce "Here I stand" individualism and personal piety of Lutheranism, eastern meditation has warmed me to the notion of self-surrender. St. John of the Cross validates two important aspects of my spiritual life: he affirms both my devotion to Jesus and my willingness to let Jesus go. John of the Cross shows me that a tender, even passionate, I-Thou relationship with Jesus lies hidden within our love for specific people. Certainly, one of the gifts of Christianity is that it perceives the ultimate value of I-Thou relationships because they disclose God. On the other hand, St. John also relativizes personal relationships, including our relationship with Jesus, by inviting us to enter the "Dark Night" of God's mystery. St. John's Jesus is more elusive and less predictable than the gentle shepherd, the Lutheran Jesus who saved my life when I was a child. But somehow I trust that they are still one and the same Jesus.

Until 1978 when I move to Cambridge and begin doctoral work in psychology and education at Harvard, I am active in the Third Order of Carmelites at The Common, enjoying St. John's artful integration of love mysticism and "empty" contemplation. Another monk, Father Paul, becomes my tutor on the contemplative way. He takes me through the Hebrew *Song of Songs* because, he says, "in the early centuries after Jesus' death, Christian mystical theologians considered it their foundational text."

I gradually appreciate the astonishing spiritual vision of *The Song*. It depicts the loving dance of God's presence and absence, a pattern that I have repeatedly experienced in my own relationship with Jesus.

In one of our last conversations, I ask Father Paul the same question that I posed to Brother David: Is Christ's self-emptying the same as Buddhist emptiness?

"Maybe," Paul says, "but it's not emptying for its own sake. It's emptying in love, for the other. Contemplatives seek union with God's Love. But St. John of the Cross saw how we can make idols of anything, even religious things, even spiritual images and practices. Even the image of I-Thou love can

get in the way of actually experiencing it. So there's a radical Night in John, a letting go of love for the sake of love, a letting go of God for the sake of God. John writes in the *Ascent* that the soul must empty itself of *all* earthly and heavenly things."

"Even heavenly things."

"Yes. Sometimes they're the hardest to relinquish. The ego sticks to them like Velcro."

"So, when the ego empties itself, we experience what Jesus did—we are unified with Love."

"Yes. John calls it a marriage."

"Do some people actually live in that state all the time? It seems impossible."

We walk along in silence for a moment, and then Paul says, "Several times in *The Song*, the soul seems to reach union. She says, 'My beloved is mine and I am his.' That's the unity.

"But then she laments, 'I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and was gone. I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer.' That's the absence. And both are true. On the one hand, we are made in the image of God and we are one with Christ. We are the apple of God's eye. Like Jesus, we are God's Beloved. But on the other hand, we feel incomplete. Our hearts long for all of God, not just a glimpse. But then God is gone and gives no answer."

"So, God is here and God is not here."

"Yes. As we say in Catholic theology, 'already and not-yet.'"

"This is helpful!" I exclaim. "My childhood faith left me open to a lot of guilt. Sometimes I'd feel so close to Jesus that I'd cry with joy. But then I'd pray and pray, and nothing would happen. So I'd feel guilty. Like, there must be something wrong with me. Or maybe I'm too much of a sinner and God is disgusted with me."

"St. John of the Cross would say that it is very human, very normal, to experience the absence of God. It doesn't necessarily mean that you've done something wrong. God is glimpsed but never grasped. Sometimes God communicates God's self to us most directly in the experience of God's apparent absence."

"That reminds me of the Zen saying, 'If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him.'"

"Exactly. We have to let go our ideas *about* God. St. John encouraged his novices to cultivate a steady awareness, so that they could be at peace with the alternating feelings of presence and absence, of consolation and desolation, knowing that they take place within the ongoing context of God's love. St. John of the Cross spoke of the 'living flame of love' that burns away everything that separates us from God. Thoughts and emotions come and go, but God's love is forever."

Ten years later, in 1988, I am four years into post-doctorate work as a psychotherapist and newly married to a Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, an Episcopal priest who shares with me a devotional prayer life. After many conversations sparked by her recent seminary experience, I remember my own flickering desire to study theology and I enter the Weston Jesuit School of Theology. Most of my papers focus on the relationship between Buddhist meditation and Christian contemplation, Buddhist *shunyata* (emptiness) and Christian *kenosis* (emptying).

Throughout the 1980's I have been studying with several Vipassana and Zen Buddhist teachers. With their help, I've seen directly the moment-to-moment soap opera in my mind. I've seen what they call

“monkey mind,” as well as the suffering that comes when I mistake my conditioned thoughts for reality. At each step along the way, I’ve also sensed the elusive presence of Jesus, my teacher. When I sit in Buddhist monasteries, Christ is sitting there, too. I have faith that for Christ, Zen is another way to be with *Abba*. In Zazen, Christ is listening for the voice that calls him and each one of us “my Beloved.”

In my theology readings, I also discover that Christians have been meditating since the early centuries after Christ. In the fourth century, Evagrius of Ponticus teaches *hesychia*, peaceful repose that comes from being recollected in silence in God. Evagrius’ student Cassian asks his monks to notice how the undisciplined mind “is assailed by storms of thoughts” but, at the summit, is still. I am attracted to Cassian’s “passion for the unseen.” These Christian mystics sound like Zen teachers, except that all their metaphors are rooted in the Gospel stories that permeated their daily liturgies.

At Weston, I read how successive generations of Christian contemplatives swim upstream toward God in the currents of two distinct streams of spiritual knowledge, the *kataphatic* and the *apophatic*. The *kataphatic* stream (Greek: “affirmative speech,” that is, with images) stresses God’s similarity to creation. It values certain thoughts, images, feelings, and so on as revealing God, as being doorways to God. The *kataphatic* tradition trusts that God is encountered in and through the created world.

By contrast, the *apophatic* stream (Greek, “negative speech,” that is, taking away images) stresses that God is radically *different* from creation. No thought, image, or concept can ultimately contain or express the mystery of God. *Apophatic* or contemplative prayer is experienced as a blind, silent love that transcends all images, thoughts, feelings.

As I read more, I begin to feel accompanied. Many Christians have noticed the alternations of presence and absence that I find in my meditations and prayers. They confirm the inward dance of my own prayer—sometimes rejoicing in music, reading scripture, and participating in liturgies, and sometimes craving the total silence and emptiness where words can’t go.

In studying the Christian mystics I learn—no surprise!—that those who are drawn to the *apophatic* are the favorites of Buddhist writers such as D.T. Suzuki, who compares Zazen to the insights of Evagrius, Eckhart, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and St. John of the Cross. When both *apophatic* and *kataphatic* are understood to be simultaneously true—that is, that images, music, thoughts, and liturgies can bring us close to God but can also separate us or distract us from God—I hear an echo of Mahayana Buddhism’s *Heart Sutra*, in which “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” One cannot collapse the spiritual life in either direction without losing the whole.

Throughout my seminary years, I continue my morning meditation practice. I struggle to simply be present to God in the midst of the flickering flame and my over-active imagination. I know that I’m not supposed to be thinking, but I can’t help it. I’m thinking about what makes Christian meditation distinctive, and I conclude that while Christian contemplation is about “self-emptying,” it is also, essentially, relational. Just as God is a oneness of intersubjective Love, so, too, are we, in our deepest being. Often, as I sit in silence, I glimpse the loving presence of Grandma Radenz, Margaret and other family members, along with Brother David, Father Paul, St. John of the Cross, Thomas Merton, and Jesus—all of them circulating in my heart. Sometimes I think it’s not me who is praying but all of them. I’m simply making space for them, for that council of holy ones who are coming and going from the cavern of prayer in my heart.

My last class at Weston Seminary in 1991 is a seminar on Thomas Merton that focuses especially on his responses to Buddhism. The teaching assistant is David Duncavage, who was once, like Merton, a Trappist monk. As a farewell to the class he offers to play his Japanese bamboo flute, the shakuhachi. David says, “This musical tradition is an ancient Buddhist practice called *Sui-Zen*, which means ‘blowing Zen.’ The goal of the Sui-Zen monk was to bring complete attention to each breath and to be so present that all ego attachments fall away in the duration of one prolonged note. They called it *ichion jobutsu*, to become Buddha in one sound. After I left the Trappists, I lived in Japan and learned to play shakuhachi. I’ll play a piece that’s about three hundred years old. It’s called *Kyorei* (‘Empty Bell’).”

Then David picks up a dark piece of bamboo and brings it to his lips. After ten seconds he blows down its length, producing the most beautiful, organic tones I have ever heard. For several minutes he blows, one breath at a time, leaving a silent space between each breath. I feel that I’ve been inside a cage all my life and that someone has just let me out.

After class I ask David for lessons, and soon I am sitting across from him once or twice a week, alternately blowing down the bamboo and talking about the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Almost immediately, the shakuhachi becomes the center of my daily prayer. Each morning, before my psychotherapy clients arrive, I sit with a candle, read a Psalm or a Gospel story, and then play one of the Sui-Zen pieces called *honkyoku* (Origin Music). The shakuhachi has become my way to be close to the earth, listening to Buddha and breathing with Jesus.

In 1993, I establish the Empty Bell, a small retreat center near Boston. Its mission is to study and practice the Christian contemplative path and to join in dialogue with Buddhists. Once or twice a week, a community meets for one-and-a-half hour sittings. We ring the temple bell, sit in silent meditation, read the Christian scripture for the day, reflect together on the contemplative dimension of the scripture, and then pray out loud. Throughout the 1990s, we host Zen, Sui-Zen, and Tibetan Buddhists from many different schools. And, like a traveling priest who carries a satchel with communion bread and wine, I take the shakuhachi with me wherever I go. When I preach at Christian services, I blow the shakuhachi and invite people to listen to the silence between the notes and consider the simple beauty of natural things such as wind through bamboo. In this quiet listening, I say, is the secret of Christ’s self-emptying love and prophetic vision.

Can one be both a Buddhist and a Christian? In the late 1990s I participate in three Buddhist-Christian retreats with a Benedictine monk, Fr. Laurence Freeman, and the Dalai Lama. We share many days and evenings of meditation, prayer, and dialogue in Bodh Gaya, India; Florence, Italy; and Belfast, Northern Ireland. Each time His Holiness suggests that people not practice two religions at once. He says being a Buddhist-Christian is like being a sheep with a yak’s head. Better to be deeply rooted in one’s own tradition, even as one learns about and makes friends in other traditions.

But as a participant in scores of other Buddhist-Christian dialogues and retreats over the last twenty years, I have heard different opinions. Some people seem happy to be “Buddhist-Christian,” because, they say, Zen is not a religion, it’s simply a way to be present. One friend says that a “Zen-Christian” might train her mind to be so free of distraction that she is always present to Christ. But then, is she Zen

or Christian? Does it matter?

Each day when I pick up my “Buddhist” shakuhachi, I pick up my desire to be close to Jesus. But who is he? My childhood images of Jesus as shepherd, Mother Hen, friend, protector, and savior, are still meaningful for me, but the Risen Jesus has also disappeared over the horizon of my thoughts and imagination. Perhaps he has gone into that Cloud that Moses entered when he took off his shoes and ascended the holy mountain.

Buddhist meditation and my soul friendship with St. John of the Cross and other Christian mystics have introduced me to a Jesus who is continually appearing and disappearing in my most private thoughts and emotions, in other people, and in the water, trees, and rocks. He is free of any particular form, and the detachment I’ve learned through meditation has helped me to recognize his formless form. He is my *Heart Sutra* and, as Grandma taught me, the only one who lives in my heart.

In a time of worldwide uncertainty and suffering, we need to root ourselves in the deepest wisdom of our religious traditions. On September 12, 2001, in response to the previous day’s events, I wrote the following letter to my shakuhachi community. It expresses a hope that is informed by both Buddhist and Christian insight.

This is a holy time for the shakuhachi. What does it mean to play shakuhachi? Yes, it is only wind in the trees, only breath through bamboo. But a holiness circulates in that simplicity, a holiness that brings to light everything in our hearts.

Honkyoku is not merely music, a flat horizon of notes strung together to produce an effect in the listener. It is not played merely for the sake of technical proficiency. Today it is clear to me that the stakes are much higher than that.

For those who can perceive it, shakuhachi music is the voice of the earth come to full awareness of itself. With each breath, we glimpse a love that transcends our usual mind-states of self-concern and image-management. When we blow with this larger intention, we know that the music is for others, not just for our own enjoyment.

I hope we will strive for a certain purity in our music, a prayerful quality of mercy, love, and truth. Playing shakuhachi at this time of mourning can convey a universal longing that all beings be joyful, humble, healed, and fulfilled.

