



the empty bell

The Empty Bell: Mission and Brief History

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Mission

The Empty Bell was founded in 1994 in Watertown, Mass., and moved to Northampton, Mass., in 2005. The Empty Bell is a sanctuary for the study and practice of Christian meditation and prayer, giving special attention to the Christian-Buddhist dialogue. Our purpose is to learn the history and practice of the Christian contemplative path as it is rooted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and to explore its common ground with other faiths. We cultivate artistic expressions of spiritual insight, and seek ways to embody these insights in compassionate social, environmental and political action.

Brief History

The inspiration for The Empty Bell came to me in prayer in the late 1980's. I was a psychotherapist living in Reading, MA. Each morning I sat in silent meditation and prayer before my clients arrived. One morning my imagination was charged with a radiant image: I saw a circle of leaders from many different spiritual traditions sitting on cushions in a circle. The affection between them seemed palpable as they sat in silence and then listened to one another share stories of their families, communities and commitments. I felt blessed and inspired by the vision of friendship across such diverse spiritual communities, and I felt that the vision had something to do with me and my future.

Several years later, an opportunity emerged. In 1992 our extended family bought and renovated a house in Watertown, MA. On the property stood an old carriage house that I renovated in the style of a Japanese zendo. Around the sides of the room I set a few chairs, and in the middle I placed a circle of twelve cushions. I hung a few Christian and Buddhist icons on the walls.

With a doctorate in education and psychology from Harvard (Ed.D., 1983), I had been a workshop leader and psychotherapist for many years. A subsequent Masters degree in theological studies (M.T.S., 1991) at the Jesuit Weston School of Theology prepared me to teach foundational courses in theology and Christology. This training, along with several years of receiving spiritual direction both in the Zen Buddhist and Christian traditions, inspired me to integrate spiritual and psychological work with my clients.

I decided to name the sacred space and our particular mission "The Empty Bell" after an old musical piece from the Sui-Zen (Blowing Zen) tradition that I was beginning to learn. The Empty Bell began as a professional office with a spiritual ambiance. In addition to working one-on-one with clients in psychotherapy, I also offered workshops and retreats and invited other teachers who were interested in the healing interaction of psychotherapy, Buddhist meditation and Christian contemplative prayer.

In The Empty Bell's first three years I offered many half-day retreats on themes associated with the Christian liturgical year--Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Sometimes I invited co-leaders from non-Christian traditions, often Zen masters or Tibetan lamas, to join me in addressing such topics as "Emptiness: Buddhist and Christian," "The Birth of Christ in John's Gospel," "Evagrius of Ponticus on Christian Meditation," "Early Christian Classics," "Exploring St. Paul's 'Mind of Christ'," "Psychotherapeutic Healing: A Buddhist/Christian Dialogue," and "Christ and the Healing Tao."

These special educational retreats were often well-attended. Soon, a core group of people emerged who wanted to pursue some of these topics in greater depth. We developed a Tuesday evening course on the Christian mystics that met for eight weeks in the fall and spring. Over the three years of this course we drew on the Paulist Press series, “Classics of Western Spirituality.” Before each meeting, individuals in the group of ten read the same chapter from Christian spiritual masters from the 4th to the 16th centuries (e.g., Evagrius, Cassian, Symeon the New Theologian, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, St. Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, and St. Teresa of Avila). During the week each of us prayed with the readings, looking for those places where we felt most deeply touched by a story, metaphor, or spiritual insight. In the subsequent meeting we began with twenty minutes of silence, and then shared with the group our prayerful response to the reading. I still thought of myself primarily as the teacher of a class, but as we prayed, meditated and shared our journeys with each other, it gradually became apparent that the Holy Spirit was re-forming us into a Christian community.

One series of community retreats stands out from this period of The Empty Bell’s history. I knew that the Gospel of John was controversial for its Gnostic tendencies and its apparent anti-Semitism. Yet I also felt drawn to John as the most mystical of all the Gospels. In the mid-1990’s I led a small group that focused on the Gospel of John as a text of transformation. Over the weeks and months of our evening gatherings, we read John together prayerfully, chapter by chapter. Convinced that our Christian tradition had over-emphasized morality, belief and outward behavior while essentially ignoring Christ’s astounding teachings on consciousness, awareness and transformation, I presented John’s Gospel as a roadmap for personal transformation. What does it mean, in our experience, to be transformed in Christ? What patterns of thought and emotion seem to block us from this transformation? I asked each participant, including myself, to pray with these questions throughout the eight-week semester.

Together we discovered that some of the most common barriers to transformation are the self-limiting beliefs we have about ourselves, beliefs that make us smaller and less joyful and creative than we really are. My friend and mentor, Fr. Henri Nouwen, had often spoken about the small identities that entrap us, so that we believe that essentially we *are* what others think about us, what we own, or what we do. In Henri’s view, our deepest identity is the Beloved of God, but, as he recognized, claiming our deep identity or True Self can be difficult and requires commitment and discipline. This is the discipline that I hoped the Empty Bell could inspire.

My hope is that the Empty Bell course on the Gospel of John supported Henri’s transformational vision. By the end of our year together most participants agreed that we had experienced the potential of a small Christian community to empower its membership to discover that the Good News is something real for each person – that it is news that makes a difference. Standing in the midst of St. John’s vision, we listened to one another in love, confident that each person could step even further into the reality of being God’s beloved. By the end of our series, most participants had taken practical steps to make necessary changes in their relationships and even their jobs.

In all these workshops and retreats I felt that my leadership style was changing. Perhaps because several participants returned for many workshops, I began increasingly to trust and to rely on the wisdom of the participants and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst. As we prayed together and shared our stories of divine encounter (or abandonment), I began to see that while I might have some

valuable theological knowledge and psychological insights to offer, the real teacher was the Holy Spirit. Gradually I realized that I needed these gatherings as much as the participants did. The professional model of the Empty Bell as an educational setting was changing into a model of the Empty Bell as Christian community.

As I prepared The Empty Bell's mailing list each fall and winter, in the course of three years I watched the list grow to over five hundred people. But I also noticed that most participants in our programs came from a pool of about twenty people. A sense of community was developing among us, the reality of which was nourished most dramatically in the fall of 1995 when Fr. Henri Nouwen lived with our family for the first three months of his sabbatical year.

I had known Henri since 1982 when, as a Harvard graduate student, I attended a lecture that he gave at the Harvard Divinity School. Henri left Harvard in the mid-80's to pursue a life in the international community of handicapped people called L'Arche. In the early 90's he had asked me to accompany him and other L'Arche members as they gave retreats, so for several years I had contributed occasional talks on contemplative topics and played the shakuhachi (a bamboo flute practiced as meditation in the Japanese Zen tradition) to complement Henri's presentations.

Now, in 1995, Henri lived with my family as our guest, settling in to hide for a while from his admiring fans and to write. During his three-month visit he framed out three books--*The Inner Voice of Love, Can You Drink The Cup?* and *Bread for the Journey*. Each morning he celebrated the Eucharist in the Empty Bell or in his room. Most mornings, I joined him. On Sundays Henri presided over the Eucharist for anyone who managed to find out about the event.

In his Eucharistic gatherings as pastor for the L'Arche Daybreak community in Richmond Hill, Ontario, Henri had always used the small, monthly booklet of daily readings called *Living With Christ*. Over the months of Henri's presence with us, members of The Empty Bell liked and grew accustomed to reading this booklet. After Henri left we subscribed to *Living With Christ* and incorporated it into our ongoing Thursday and Sunday gatherings.

Through Henri's homilies, our community absorbed his emphasis that each of us, like Jesus, is the beloved son or daughter of God – eternally beloved since even before we were born. Henri's spirit and vision continued to inspire our community after his sudden death from a heart attack on September 21, 1996. Since 2000 I have served as a member of the Henri Nouwen Society Board (www.henrinouwen.org).

At first, I led all Empty Bell gatherings. But after a couple of years, when other commitments took me away, different community members stepped forward to lead. For over a year, Susan, who had come to Empty Bell offerings from the beginning, led every other Thursday. As our sense of community and mutual trust deepened, I felt comfortable handing over Sunday leadership to a few others--Caitlin, Kevin, Jody, Donna, David, Richard, Sam, Jeannie, Lisa and Joe. For years, the leadership at Thursday morning sessions was rotated among a group of four, and Sunday leadership was shared among a group of eight. After a while, I was happy to participate while others led.

To support this evolution in leadership we created a leaders' group meeting of eight people.

Fortunately, by chance, this group included equal numbers of men and women. The leaders met quarterly to discuss questions and issues such as difficult dynamics in group participation, when and how to respond to members in great distress, how to handle intense feelings that arose while leading, how to interpret difficult scripture passages, how much contact to make with other group members outside our official gatherings, what to do when the sharing time became too “heady,” whether and when to say something during the silent meditations, and so on. The leaders’ group also helped me to coordinate volunteers for special Empty Bell interfaith events and for large quarterly retreats.

In 1995 I retired as a psychotherapist and instead devoted one-half of each workday to offering spiritual direction. By the beginning of 2000, The Empty Bell had become home to three other spiritual directors who met one-on-one with directees. The four of us began meeting as a peer supervision and support group. Through all these changes I realized more and more that the Empty Bell community possessed resources of knowledge, wisdom, and healing presence that transcended me and my personal vision and resources. I realized that I needed the prayerful support of my Empty Bell friends, and that we were now co-creators of a very special contemplative experiment in community.

In 1997 one of our members, a lawyer, offered to help the Empty Bell become a non-profit, tax-exempt organization. With Jim’s astute legal counsel and friendship, that goal was achieved later that year. Four people in the community volunteered to serve on our first official Board, and in subsequent years we worked together to make the Christian contemplative vision available to more people. Our vision was ambitious: we dreamed of starting a vibrant training program for contemplative spiritual directors and of developing a retreat program that would introduce the contemplative path to more and more Christian congregations, both Protestant and Catholic.

From 1988 to 1991 I had attended Weston Jesuit School of Theology. In my last seminar at Weston I met David Duncavage, a former Trappist monk, who introduced me to the Japanese bamboo flute, the shakuhachi. David had left the Trappists in the early 1980’s in order to live in Japan and to learn the Blowing-Zen tradition. By the time he came to Weston as a teaching assistant he had become a shakuhachi master and a maker of shakuhachis. As soon as I heard him play the instrument and describe the spiritual practice that went with it, I began intensive lessons. Over the years I gradually incorporated Sui-Zen into my Christian prayer life, and eventually I played the shakuhachi at every event I led, sometimes offering contemplative concerts as a musician rather than as a retreat leader. From the mid-1990’s to the present, The Empty Bell has hosted many shakuhachi teachers and students.

In many ways, our Empty Bell community was thriving in the late 1990’s. In addition to offering regular meditation sittings and study groups, we hosted several church leadership and teen groups. The Empty Bell had become a Sui-Zen zendo (sacred teaching space) and was well-known in the Boston area as a center of contemplative learning and Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

In the first few years of the new Millennium, about fifteen people regularly attended one or another of the Empty Bell gatherings. We thought of ourselves as a small, intimate community of Christian contemplatives seeking to deepen our own lives in the Spirit and to bring that spiritual grounding to our work as teachers, lawyers, psychologists, pastors, editors, social workers, administrators and artists. By now, my ministry included trips to many churches and retreat centers to lead contemplative retreats and

to give sermons.

However, as a community we were also going through a period of struggle and discernment. By the time my family and I moved to western Massachusetts in 2004, it was clear that The Empty Bell had not achieved the larger mission and vision that we had once hoped for. During its last four years in Watertown, the Empty Bell suspended its public gatherings. Several contemplative groups continued to meet at The Empty Bell, but their membership was by invitation only. The Empty Bell leadership sensed that we needed a time to slow down and to listen to the Spirit, both individually and as a community.

During this time of reflection on our mission, I and the other co-leaders met several times to discuss our differences regarding The Empty Bell's leadership and mission. Some of these discussions were tense and difficult, but I think we did a pretty good job of telling our truths in love and of trusting in the guidance of the Spirit. One of the most difficult conversations concerned our mission statement, which affirmed that The Empty Bell was primarily a Christian contemplative center. Some of us felt that The Empty Bell should also teach other spiritual paths or offer liturgies that borrowed readings and practices from non-Christian sources, much as a Unitarian Universalist congregation might do. As a result of these meetings some of our leaders decided to leave. Those of us who remained resolved to continue on the Christian way as our primary commitment.

In 2005 my family and I moved to Northampton, Mass., in the foothills of the Berkshires. In our renovated Victorian home we built a new sanctuary for prayer and meditation. The new Empty Bell looks very much like the original one. Its peaceful atmosphere recalls that of a Japanese zendo. The room offers a circle of cushions on a bamboo floor, a variety of Christian and Buddhist icons, and large windows that let in plenty of sky and light.

We continue to incubate a new vision for The Empty Bell ministry in the Pioneer Valley. We are in the process of forming a new Board. Because parking is limited and we live in a quiet residential area, it is clear that we can invite only a few people at a time to pray with us in our small sanctuary. The mission of the new Empty Bell will now be carried out not so much at its physical location in western Massachusetts as through its Website and through a ministry of travel and service.

I am eager to share the vision of The Empty Bell, to introduce people to the riches of Christian contemplative prayer, and to explore the ways that prayerful listening and speaking can re-vitalize interfaith dialogue and deepen Christian community. I embody this commitment by traveling to congregations and retreat centers, by offering sermons, lectures and retreats, by playing the shakuhachi, and by continuing to publish writings about the contemplative vision and the importance of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Where possible, these writings are shared at The Empty Bell's Website (www.emptybell.org).

