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A Theology of Faith in Pastoral Care

It is a daring endeavor to put words on paper in the topic of my theology of faith, particularly from a Buddhist perspective: in Buddhism "theos" is not formally examined, neither affirmed or denied - how to say anything about "my" theology then, when in our teachings we quickly conclude that none of the things, physical or spiritual, are actually mine! Thoughts - after being thanked and appreciated for what they are - to be methodologically set aside in favor of meeting what is not in the realm of thoughts, to go beyond thinking and not assuming that the purpose is to safely dwell in the head in the company of some tried and true beliefs. So in the spirit of playing gently with paradox I will offer several excerpts, poems, teachings and personal reflection - not with the purpose to come to a conclusion and state clearly "This Is My theology of faith and here is why it works", rather with the intent to bring up meaningful questions in the examination.

"The Great Road has no gate,

It begins in your own mind.

The sky has no marked trails,
yet it finds its way to your nostrils
and becomes your breath.

Somehow we meet like tricksters
or bandits of dharma.

Ah! The great house comes tumbling down.

Astonished, maple leaves fly and scatter.”

Could have not started with a more apt introduction than Venerable Juching’s poem, quoted from a 2012 Wind Bell, that was published on Zen Center’s 50th anniversary. The dharma is rooted in the West now, where this Eastern European student meets her Californian Zen teacher, himself ordained by the Japanese Suzuki Roshi who brought Dogen’s Zen to San Francisco. Dogen received his dharma transmission from Juching in China in the 1200s. How come, that without any marked trails I arrived home within this ancient tradition, that has been handed from warm hand to warm hand, warm heart to warm heart?

William Stafford says:

“There’s a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn’t change.

People wonder about what you are pursuing.

You have to explain about the thread.

But it is hard for others to see.

While you hold it you can't get lost.

Tragedies happen; people get hurt

or die; and you suffer and get old.

Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.

You don't ever let go of the thread."

The thread feels true - even when I am unable to explain it to others. Don't you see? I am following my way home - no, it is not my parents' home, not even my husband's. But how could I get lost, you tell me I am wrong to leave my old life behind? When I landed in California to start my first year of monastic training my teacher gave me -- instead of the sixteen Buddhist precepts to rule my life -- the book "ten poems to change your life" by Roger Housden. And in the very first place, The Journey:

"One day you finally knew

what you had to do, and began,

though the voices around you

kept shouting

their bad advice--

though the whole house

began to tremble

and you felt the old tug

at your ankles.

"Mend my life!"

each voice cried.

But you didn't stop.

You knew what you had to do,

though the wind pried

with its stiff fingers

at the very foundations,

though their melancholy

was terrible.

It was already late

enough, and a wild night,

and the road full of fallen

branches and stones.

But little by little,

as you left their voices behind,

the stars began to burn

through the sheets of clouds,

and there was a new voice

which you slowly

recognized as your own,

that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save."

My teacher knew how I dreamt of an earthquake, he sensed this determination to live through the coming shakes and tribulations and wade through the ruins - amidst the tragedies, as parents get ill and die and we are all growing old - nothing I can do to stop time's unfolding. The quakes I dreamt of were unstoppable, and there was more than just a tug at my ankles, still I had to go on.

So he read me Rilke. And Rumi, and Hafiz. Many he knew by heart. As I arrived home to my heart the year of tears washed away much of the fallen branches and stones. In the mess of the floods I arrived to the choice to live an imperfect life. My teacher quoted Catherine MacCoun's book, *On Becoming an Alchemist*: I not only notice that there is ease in acknowledging the messy kitchen (I don't "have it all together"), but there is even greater freedom in choosing to live with a kitchen (with a body, with a mind) where things are not all lined up, not all pretty, there is a lot of messiness and it is actually a choice. This is how I noticed that there are many many languages to the subtle, and that I am figuring out my own.

After the autobiographic introduction to this paper I will turn towards classic Buddhist teachings, first acknowledging that in the language of the original teachings there was no word for the English "faith" in the sense of "unquestioning belief" or a "system of religious beliefs" as the Webster

dictionary puts it. The Middle Length Discourses used the Pali words pasada and saddha, they are rendered either as confidence or a trusting heart for pasada, where saddha is sometimes used as inclines or resolves: the Buddha's teachings are there to inspire action. Saddha is a psychological faculty or a power. In the instructions given for discovering the truth: rather than simply believing what the teacher says it is sufficient to have enough confidence to want to hear the Dharma from the teacher.

Centuries later the Zen lineage asks "Will you put another head on top of the one you have"? Buddhism is not there to be followed blindly "If you meet the Buddha - kill it!" The appropriate response to the situation is not "What would the Buddha do" -- I am here to figure out my own. And I am well suited to do just that (as we all are), I am capable of realizing my unborn Buddha mind (as we all are), letting stories of self and others drop away and breathe into the unknown. What stands in the place of "unquestioning belief" is that I am willing to leave questions open, remain curious, remain determinedly, doggedly investigative of this human life.

Suzuki roshi taught it this way: "When you empty your mind, when you give up everything and just practice zazen with an open mind, then whatever you see you meet yourself." This I carry into my patient visits, there is a depth to my visits that some patients comment on "You did not want me to be different - thank you!"

The four Bodhisattva Vows start with: "Beings are numberless, I vow to save them. Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them..." this is not the kind of vow where I get to evaluate if I ever did a good job or not: the vow (since in Buddhism time is not linear) has an impact on the present, the "future", and the "past". The intention extends beyond the known limits of time and space and linearity. I do not need to know its limitations and no need to check its productivity. It is enough to state the intention clearly. Vowing to save all beings almost sounds like an exercise in futility, but it actually is not, only if we were to assume that "all those numberless beings" are outside of me. That is not so. They (you) are all in my heart. As I am in theirs (yours) - whether they (you) noticed this already or not. Showing up as a chaplain to hospital patients is an active fulfillment of the Bodhisattva Vow.

The three Dharma seals that characterize all conditioned phenomena are impermanence, no self and suffering (or: our experience is unsatisfactory). My presence in the patient's room is an invitation, for me, for her, to rest all prior

thoughts and go beyond thoughts. Seeing the person (as if) for the first time (even: meeting myself anew!) was and is at the core: all what she knew about herself (and what I have known about me) has already changed, nothing stays the same, we are new, moment after moment a new person is meeting a new person - the identity of a "self" is an illusion (however practical in everyday matters) - we are vast and the best is to not to know who we are so we could meet who we are! This is the magic of being seen, being seen in our vastness that words cannot describe. "To find complete composure when you don't know who you are or where you are that is to accept things as it is. Even though you don't know who you are, you accept yourself. That is "you" in its true sense" taught Suzuki roshi.

Being seen by my teacher changed my life just as being fully seen by Suzuki roshi changed my teacher's life. In this sense the teachings were handed down to me without words - classically the first Dharma transmission happened without words when the Buddha transmitted the eye of the true Dharma to Mahakasyapa in the Flower Sermon. And this is how it goes on. In Dogen's words:

"Enlightenment is like the moon reflected in the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in dewdrops on the grass, or even in one drop of water. ... Each reflection, however long or short its duration, manifests the vastness of the dewdrop, and realizes the limitlessness of the moonlight in the sky."