



Passing It On:
Lay Practitioners Share Dharma Wisdom
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The Insight Meditation Center

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Lay Practitioners Share Dharma Wisdom

Passing It On: Background

The growth of Western Buddhist practice has come largely through the initiative of teachers who often carry credentials based on having been a monastic and received "dharma transmission" from venerable sages. In recent years, many sanghas have developed an additional leadership resource based on long-term experienced lay practitioners whose practices have matured and strengthened through everyday kinds of experiences, for example; having families, making a living, managing organizations, pursuing professional careers, in a variety of ways developing their gifts and talents and sharing them with their communities. These practitioners may be invited to take the dharma seat from time to time, not because of their credentials, but because of the wisdom they have to pass on.

The Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, Ca, has many such mature Lay Practitioners. Some participate and volunteer regularly at the center while others, though attending irregularly, are closely connected to our practice. Some of the lay practitioners have started small sitting groups of their own. Others have actively provided services to the IMC community, including; talks, classes, chaplaincy services, conducting weddings, memorials, serving on the board, attend interfaith meetings, offering mindfulness teachings for local businesses, school, and jails, etc.

To bring together the practice insights and dharma teachings of seasoned lay practitioners, we launched this project in 2009 and are continuing it in 2011 to publish art and writings about the many facets of Dharma practice in the many dimensions of lay life.

"As he was sitting there, Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, 'This is half of the holy life, lord: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie.'

'Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life.'"

- Samyutta Nikaya 45.2



In Gratitude

- to Gil Fronsdal for his steady and inspiring leadership
- to Susan Ezequelle, Jim Bronson, Dave Barnett, and Gerry Sarnat for their advice and editorial expertise
- to Rob Hammond for his able assistance in production
- to Linda Filling for making her father's illuminations available to Carla Brooke and Buddhanet.net for appropriate line art
- to the Board of Insight Meditation Center for their support
- to lay practitioners everywhere applying the teachings of 2500 years in their lives and to all of our contributors who communicate artfully about their practice.



Our Publication

Passing It On is an independent, ad-free collection of writing and art by lay practitioners connected with the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, California. The collection celebrates the every-day lives of dharma practitioners, but not in a way that ignores its complexity. The personal essays, short stories, poetry, and art explore the challenges we face and the moments when we rise to meet those challenges.

Passing It On publishes the work of emerging and established artists who are striving to be thoughtful and awake. The collection invites readers to consider an array of ideas and then to join the conversation by submitting work for future editions. The collection is offered freely in the 2500 year-old tradition of *dana*, "generosity", and intends to show that helpful teaching can be found in the ordinary lives of lay practitioners.

Passing It On is a publication of the Insight Meditation Center which is a tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Publication of *Passing It On* is supported primarily by contributor and reader donations through the Insight Meditation Center. Cash donations to IMC are tax-deductible.



Kari Prager died at his home unexpectedly on November 14, 2010, after suffering from respiratory problems. He contributed the poem *In The Pines* to the first edition of *Passing It On: Lay Practitioners Share Dharma Wisdom*, a publication of the Insight Meditation Center (IMC) of Redwood City, California. Four of Kari's poems are included in the 2011 edition of *Passing It On*.

In addition to publishing his poetry, IMC, and the Coastside Vipassana Sangha of Montara, CA, featured Kari at authors speaking events to introduce the publication of *Passing It On*. At these authors events Kari spoke about his unique meditation practice, which involved, for example, bringing full attention to his long-time activities of motorcycle riding and rifle target shooting. "In addition to being fun and compelling, both activities," Kari said, "have the advantage of giving immediate and clear feedback when mindfulness is diminished."

The physical manifestation of Kari's mindfulness (and the lack of it) was demonstrated by the two targets he showed the audience: one had widely scattered holes and the other had a tight cluster of holes centered at the bullseye. Pointing to the target with the tight cluster, Kari said, "Just as someone meditating on the cushion can find a peaceful focus in the midst of distractions, here I was able to settle, get out of my thinking mind, and shoot at my best."

Kari was born in a ski resort in Sun Valley, Idaho where his father, Walter Prager, coached the US Olympic downhill ski team. Kari was Vermont's cross country ski champion when he was a junior and senior in High School. He is

survived by his wife, Gail, their two daughters, Kristin Prager and Maya Nolan and her husband Seamus Nolan.

He will be fondly remembered by many, including his family, those who have known him through his accessible and image-rich poetry, colleagues and customers from the last 29 years of owning and operating his award-winning BMW dealership, many motorcycle riders who knew him as the guy who gave the safety talk, and his Thursday Night Men's Group, with whom Kari was a beloved and inspiring participant since its beginnings in 1987.

The editors of *Passing It On* are privileged to dedicate *Passing It On 2011* to Kari Prager and to reprint here Kari's poem from last year's edition.

In the Pines

by Kari Prager

The trees are always green here.
My glance dances from branch to branch.
Sunlight's broken shards lay a mosaic
on forest floor. I came here to be alone
but I am not. The understory
rumbles with the munching of beetles,
the millipede's tiny feet prance
over pine needles slowly turning
to mulch, smelling of tomorrow.
Deeper, earthworms tunnel blindly
through the podsol, turning the
earth with earnest diligence,

This place is a comfort. I lean against
the scratchy trunk of a lodgepole pine.
The melancholy that brought me here
sloughs off, nibbled away by busy
legions of ants, trudging back with

countless morsels for their queen.

I don't fear death here. If it
came to me, strangely comforting,
no regret would outlast it. I can play
with such musings while I know
for now the pulse of blood is strong.

Perhaps will come a time when,
undiscovered, I'd be but a bag
of skin covering whitening bones
that once held me up against the pull
of the earth. I can't say why,
but it comforts me that the forest
would turn me into something
written in a language scratched by
foraging partridges under the deadfall.

Nothing can harm me once
this beautiful life joins something
common to every creature in this place.

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KAVERI PATEL

Kaveri Patel has been practicing insight meditation since 2007. She also enjoys mothering, writing, yoga, singing, nature, and family medicine.

RETURNING

You do not have to be perfect.

You do not have to believe every judgment
as if it was God's directions to Eden.

You must love this soft and supple body
hardened by abuse or neglect.

You must find every part of you that is dying,
and revive it with your tears of compassion.

This aching back, these stiff joints,
these graying hairs and wrinkles of age
are inevitable.

Why do you hate them so?

Let your heart be full of forgiveness, pumping
it to every part of you that needs pardon
from the Great Mother for your ignorance.

The trees wave their leafy branches in warm greeting;
the meadows roll out their green carpets to you;
the sunlight offers diamonds on water-
all asking you to breathe, to gently
place your hands on your heart
and whisper, "I care about this body.
I care about this human life."

You smile at this simple yet profound discovery.
You were always here, inside the Garden of Eden.
You only left when you stopped caring.

OPEN

Up in the clearing, a young fawn is grazing. I see her mother further up the hill behind a clump of trees. Suddenly, a gust of wind rustles the leaves and grasses of summer. The fawn looks up. I don't see the mother anymore.

She is alone in the clearing, grazing for hours as the sun warms her back and the breeze continues to caress her fur with each flight. Or... is there a predator lurking behind the shadows, waiting to pounce any second? With a mixture of fear and gratitude, I reflect on my childhood. Whether the mother is near or far, the fawn is open to all possibilities- the potential dangers and the sweetness of life. I am inspired to do the same.

I look into her soft brown eyes, so much like my very own.

I am open, little one.

I am open.



DAVE BARNETT

Dave Barnett is a practitioner at Coastside Vipassana at the Montara Lighthouse, and the editor of this publication. Dave is a computer security consultant, looking for serenity.

"We all have stories. All of us have tragedies, pain and loss in our lives. Suffering exists - it's what you do about it that's important.

Try this: Write your stories about your tragedies and pain. Take your time. See what you learn about yourself. Share them or not, as you wish.

With metta,

Dave

THE INVISIBLE CHILD

Dad owned all the anger at home. No one else could have any unless he gave permission-- and he never gave permission. He would take his anger out and exercise it, like it was a big fearsome dog. No one was safe. One time at a neighborhood party, Dad got mad at a woman who was seven months pregnant, and knocked her to the ground. None of the neighbors ever spoke to us again.

I remember one time we were vacationing at a beach, and I was having a great time. I was maybe 9 or 10, and full of youth. I made a sandball (kind of like a snowball, but not as coherent). I yelled "Hey, Dad! Catch!" Of course he couldn't catch it since it fell apart in mid-air, and sprayed his chest with sand. To cover his disappointment at missing the "ball", he picked me up by the ankles, and walked into the ocean, where he held me upside down under water, letting me come up for air every so often, and then putting me back under. I couldn't breathe, and I thought I was going to drown. Mom was upset, but he explained

to her that I had been disrespectful and needed to be taught a lesson. I did learn an important lesson: there's no one to protect you from the person who should be your protector, but isn't.

I decided to give up having any anger of my own. Dad would not permit me to get angry or to cry. If I did, he would get angry and take out the day's frustrations on me, and he was much better at anger than I was. It was safer to be invisible. Instead of showing my anger, I hid it in a secret place so no one could see it. That was okay, though – anger was an ugly, ugly thing, and I didn't really need it anyway. I decided that I would never get angry when I grew up.

The family dinner at our house was always quiet. We didn't speak or look at each other while we ate—we had no eye contact. With no interruptions, Dad was able to finish his dinner and martinis quickly, and retire to the television. My brother and I ate as fast as we could, so we wouldn't delay the conclusion of dinner. It was safer to be invisible. (Little did I know the trouble that the habit of eating fast and not talking at would cause me in later years, when having dinner with a date or a spouse. To my great surprise, I discovered that many people actually expected me to *talk* during dinner.)

Sometimes at night, when I didn't want to be in the house, I would walk out into the woods until I couldn't see any signs of people. I didn't take a flashlight, since I didn't want anyone to see me. Starlight or moonlight was good enough. I could get away, go out in the woods all by myself, alone in the dark, and be safe. I just knew the woods at night was a refuge, where it was quiet and safe, and I could be invisible.

I knew it was safe to be invisible, and not attract attention. Despite my best efforts, and my vows to never lose my temper, that buried anger just jumped out sometimes – when it did, I was as surprised as anyone.

My little brother had a piggy bank. He was about 7, and had been saving his dimes and quarters for about a year, and the bank was getting full. He was excited about it, because there was some toy (I forget what it was) he really wanted, and he'd be able to buy with his very own money.

We were playing in our room, when Dad came in. He needed some cash, so he picked up the piggy bank and walked out with it. As the Man of the House, everything in it belonged to him. There was no reason to ask permission or give an explanation for taking the piggy bank – it was his in the first place. Since the

money was Dad's anyway, there would be no point in paying it back. I knew that my brother would not see his piggy bank or money again.

I snapped, and that anger I had been burying came out all at once. I was around 10 or 11 yrs, and Dad outweighed me by at least 150 pounds, but that didn't matter. I ran across the room at him, yelling "You can't do that! That's his money!" knocked him down, and started hitting him. The outcome was not that good for me, but I didn't care.

By the time I was in high school, I had most emotions locked away in a safe place where they could not be seen. I read a lot of science fiction, and dreamed of being a robot. Emotions were illogical, and just caused trouble. I didn't make a very good robot, though. I just couldn't fully conquer that human side. Luckily, High School gave me opportunities to grow and explore new coping strategies, such as underage drinking.

We tend to carry our childhood influences far into adulthood. Many years later, as an adult, I was sitting in my cheap apartment in Oakland in a bad neighborhood. I looked out the window, and saw a pimp beating one of his women. In a flash, I was outside and confronted him, shoving him away from the woman. "What do you think you're doing?" I yelled, and pushed him off the sidewalk and down the street. He tried to justify what he was doing by saying "This is my wife!" (That wasn't a good argument for me.) Anyway, he stopped and they went away.

In retrospect, this was a dangerous thing to do. Oakland pimps, like those in other cities, are often armed. I knew on some level that he may have had a gun or knife, but it didn't matter. I didn't care what happened to me, as long as I protected the woman.

Looking back, I recognize that my intentions were good, but my actions were very unskillful. The anger took over. The end result may not have positive, because for all I know he just finished the beating somewhere else, and maybe made it worse because I humiliated him in front of the woman. So, what should I have done? For years, I struggled with this question.

Dealing with an abusive parent and the aftereffects is a complicated subject.

I went to New Orleans once and heard some street musicians playing “I’ll be glad when you’re dead, you rascal, you”. Ever since that day, whenever I saw Dad, that song would play in my head.

Eventually, Dad became too old to take care of himself, and I put him in a nursing home. He never did mellow out. One time the nursing home called me because Dad, even though he was 83 and no longer able to walk unaided, got mad at another patient and started beating him with his cane. As they so diplomatically put it, he was “one of their more difficult patients. “

Dad continued to decline, and became less in touch with his surroundings. I moved him to a hospice, and after a great deal of soul-searching, signed a “Do Not Resuscitate” order. He was tired, and didn’t want to be around anymore. One day the hospice called, and told me that if anyone had any unfinished business with him, or wanted a last visit, it should be done soon. They could tell that he was going to die soon, and probably wouldn’t last more than two weeks. A last visit is hard. I held him, and kissed the forehead of this horrible, horrible old man, who despite everything was still my Dad. He died not long afterwards.

About two years ago, I got a call from my first wife, who I hadn’t spoken to in over twenty years. Her father had just died, and she was trying to sort out her feelings. Her father had sexually abused her for years, and she had deep resentments towards him. She knew that my Dad had just died, and wanted to talk about the complicated feelings that come up when an abuser parent dies, and both grief and relief intermingle at their passing. There was a great sense of “At last! I don’t have to deal with him anymore!” At the same time, there is sadness at the loss of a parent. “He may be bad, but he’s my Dad.” My first wife and I acknowledged that just because our fathers were dead, doesn’t mean they are out of our lives. There is a legacy of emotion that we carry with us.

Most people who know me think I never get angry. I can deal with the everyday angers, and just note them and let them go before they become visible – that is no problem. But there is a special anger that comes up when I run into bullies, or see a woman or child abused. There is a terrible irony in that things that remind me of my Dad, turn me into him. These situations don’t come up very often so I’m not sure if I’m making progress with learning compassion and loving-kindness.

This subject of child abuse came up in our sangha recently during a Dhamma talk by Ajahn Metta. One of the women spoke of seeing a child being

slapped and beaten in the grocery store, and she wanted to say something to the man, but was afraid. Now she regrets that she didn't do something. Another member spoke of seeing a man hitting his child in a restaurant, and told him it was not okay to do that. He became angry and started toward her, so she ran away.

Someone else told us of a friend who was an abused child. The friend said that once when her father was hitting her, a woman came up and asked him to stop. Her father switched his anger to the woman, and started yelling at her instead. She just stood there, and accepted his anger. The friend said she would never forget this -- it made her feel like somebody did care, and made her think she was not so bad after all. This woman was a hero to her for her entire life.

What should I do if I see a public display of abuse? This question bothered me for years. It is not okay to just ignore this bad behavior. It is also not okay to fly into a rage or get angry over it. It would be easy to think that this was righteous indignation, and therefore justifiable. But I know that when anger starts to arise in me, I *always* think it's justifiable. I always believe I am in the right at the beginning of anger – otherwise, I wouldn't be getting angry, would I?

I asked Ajahn Metta what to do in these situations, and she gave us this advice:

What comes up for me are three topics... courage, compassion and empathy, wisdom ... the courage to step in and help somebody when it is needed, the compassion to support somebody who is losing the thread and the empathy to relate with kindness, and the wisdom to know what needs to be applied here.

How to relate to violence without doing the same? Very good question.

When I see a parent just losing it with a child there is immediately empathy for the child being violated... but also to the parent...being lost in their anger and the kind of helplessness of being lost in this.

I think in a situation like this it is best to relate also with empathy at the father or mother... in that way we also take care of the child... so turning towards the parent and saying something like ... it's hard sometimes to keep it all together or are you okay, or: can I do anything that would be helpful for you right now, I see you are in a very difficult situation?

So relating with compassion towards the parent would maybe ease up the anger... and in this way help the child and protecting it from being the receiver of this outburst.

This beautiful and skilful advice helped resolve the issue in my mind. Compassion towards an abusing parent is very hard. What they are doing is not okay, but that is not a reason to withhold compassion. This is what I tell myself: I should recognize that abusers are typically abuse victims themselves. I don't know what kind of pressures they are under. Maybe they were just fired or laid off and are in danger of losing the house or getting evicted, and life has become more than they can handle. Regardless of whether or not the abuse is a one-time occurrence, or a life-long practice, I should think of the karmic burden on the abuser:

Whoever takes a rod
to harm living beings desiring ease,
when he himself is looking for ease,
will meet with no ease after death.

— [Dhp 129-134](#)

One thing for certain – meeting anger with anger adds fuel to the fire. Even if the anger seems to be justified, further anger will not help. The Buddha spoke of this.

Hostilities aren't stilled
through hostility,
regardless.
Hostilities are stilled
through non-hostility:
this, an unending truth.

— [Dhp 5-6](#)

You make things worse
when you flare up
at someone who's angry.
Whoever doesn't flare up
at someone who's angry
wins a battle
hard to win.

— [SN 7.2](#)

My anger towards abusers is a reaction; there is no thought involved. Abuse towards women and children is not okay, but if I am going to help, my actions must come out of a skillful response, not a reaction conditioned by my past. Although it is difficult for me, if I see this situation again, my intention is to be compassionate to both child and parent, and not face anger with anger. I don't need to be invisible and hide from the angry parent anymore.

THE LOST CHILD

I love children. I tickle and tease them, make them giggle and laugh. I am usually the one who gets the kids all wound up just before bedtime, making them run laughing and screaming through the house. To me, children's laughter is a happy sound.

I had a child once.

After I graduated from both the 60's and college, I moved to Southern California from the East Coast. With a Bachelor's degree in Sociology, I was qualified to flip burgers and make pancakes, and pursued my new vocation with all the enthusiasm I felt it merited.

After a while I met and became involved with Patricia. She was going through a divorce, and didn't have an established residence at the time. We saw each other a lot, and eventually we started living together, on and off. My unemployment rate was self-inflicted higher than average, and my income was not steady. We got evicted a few times. Sometimes we were able to get a new place right away, while other times we stayed with friends, splitting up or being a couple as circumstances permitted. I suppose we were technically homeless – we always had a place to stay, it just wasn't ours.

Patricia became pregnant. Over the months I watched her belly swell, although the full impact of the situation hadn't really registered with me. She was my girlfriend, and she was pregnant, and that's about all the thought I put into it at the time. Then she gave birth to a beautiful girl child; suddenly it hit me; I was a Dad.

We called her Julie Ann. Julie Ann's birth perhaps wasn't as momentous to Patricia as it was to me – she already had two daughters and two sons from her previous marriage, and saw them regularly. But for me, everything was suddenly different – the center of the universe had shifted, and I was holding her

in my arms. I changed Julie Ann's diapers, and held her and rocked her. She smiled at me and melted my heart. I would just enter the room, and she would look at me and smile. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for her.

After a few months, Patricia started bringing up the subject of having Julie Ann adopted. She felt our financial situation was too unstable to raise a child. (In retrospect, she was probably right, but the idea of giving up my daughter was incomprehensible to me at the time.) Julie Ann was my first child, and I would make it work. I would do anything to protect her and care for her. Over the next few weeks, Patricia got more insistent. I thought she was being unfair – she had four other children from her marriage, and I just had Julie Ann. She finally gave me an ultimatum, her or Julie Ann. I said if I had to choose, I'd take Julie Ann. There was no way I was going to give her up. That seemed to end the discussion, and she didn't bring it up again. I thought it was over.

One day I came home from work to find that Julie Ann and all her things were gone.

Patricia told me the adoption agency had come and had taken Julie Ann away. She had arranged for the adoption without involving me. Because Julie Ann was born within 200 days of Patricia's divorce, her ex-husband could legally sign the adoption papers – and that's what they did.

Losing a child is a special pain, not like other things. I had only enjoyed my precious beautiful daughter for eight months, and then she was gone.

In those days, adoption information was very confidential. It was practically impossible for birth parents to locate an adopted child once the papers had been signed. The same was true in the other direction, too. Children were blocked from information about their birth parents. The names were even changed on the birth certificate to match the names used by adoptive parents.

Julie Ann was gone. I never got to say goodbye, and I would never see her grow up. Later in life, whenever anyone asked if I had children, I would just say "no" and change the subject. I never had any other children. There was an empty spot in me—buried deep, but always there.

Thirty years later...

Recently, my younger sister wanted to talk about Julie Ann. For me, it was one of those old and scarred over hurts, and I would never voluntarily bring the subject up. When I lost Julie Ann, I hadn't known of compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. I was not able to accept things as they were. I was never able to accept the loss of my first and only child, but I had become resigned to it. This was apathy, one of the near enemies of equanimity. Although the near enemies may quiet things down, they do not give us peace.

My sister pointed out that things have changed a lot since those days. Adopted children are now given access to information to help find their birth parents, should they so desire. And we now had the Internet. She felt the chances were good. She had some ideas, and wanted to see if she could locate Julie Ann, if it was okay with me. I told her, "Sure. Give it a try." Whatever. .. I had no hope of success.

My sister searched county records and the Internet, and after a lot of clever detective work, found her. It turned out that Julie Ann had been looking for her birth parents for a long time; she was able to get in touch with her Mom, and Patricia told her about me, but didn't know where I was.

I sent Julie Ann an email telling her that I was her biological father, I loved her, I had always loved her, and that she had been taken from me against my wishes. She called me immediately. I couldn't believe I was actually talking to my daughter. This was a dream come true for both of us, and we were very happy.

I wanted to fly out to see her, but she said she wanted to do one more thing. She asked if I would mind taking a paternity test. Patricia had told her that I wasn't the only man she had been with, and Julie Ann wanted to be certain. I was okay with taking the test, and agreed.

We took the DNA swabs and sent them off for testing. It would take a couple of weeks to get the DNA test back. While we were waiting for the results, we talked on the phone, emailed and IM'd each other. She had gotten married, and had two too-cute-for-words daughters (I'm a Grandpa!). She was just about to graduate from nursing school. I was sad I missed watching her grow up, didn't walk her down the aisle, and all those other father moments – but at least we were finally together! We were joking back and forth, getting to know each other, and really having a great time. Once, she told me I had made her laugh so hard

she peed her pants. This may sound weird, but that was one of the highlights of my life. I was able to make my daughter laugh so hard, she peed her pants.

I was thinking that finding her was such a great story; we'd probably end on Oprah or something. If ever there was a feel-good miracle, this was it. We were in constant contact, and talked on the phone frequently and emailed each other daily. This was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

A few weeks later, the DNA results came back. ...We were not related.

Julie Ann called me. She said, "You saw the results?" "Yeah..." Julie Ann said she was not going to look any further. She was not interested in tracking down guys her Mom had affairs with thirty years ago. She was done.

I told Julie Ann that as far as I was concerned, she was still my daughter. The DNA results did not change how I felt. I would always love her as my daughter, and would always be there for her. She thanked me, and hung up.

Shortly after that, I sent her a gift certificate for her birthday. She returned it, saying she wasn't comfortable accepting anything from me. I was a nice guy and everything, but I wasn't her Dad. I was just someone who had been with her Mom for a while.

I had been on such a high thinking I had found my daughter after all these years, and then had the rug pulled out from underneath. Yes, I know everything is impermanent, but after becoming resigned to her loss, and then finding her, and losing her again... I was having a very difficult time with this. It was bad enough losing my daughter once, but now I had lost her twice.

I was devastated (again) over the loss. But this was not all just about me. How did Julie Ann feel? With compassion, I put myself in her position. She had been looking for her biological father for years. She wanted to find her real Dad, and to know that he was someone who loved her and cared about her. She thought she had finally found him; someone who had always loved her, and could make her laugh so hard she peed her pants.

The great thing about a feel-good story is that it's a happy ending for everyone. The sad thing about them is that they don't happen that often.

This one didn't happen. Her biological father is someone who either didn't know or didn't care he had a daughter. Whoever he was, she was nothing to him. She couldn't be feeling good about this outcome either.

Compassion for Julie Ann freed me from feeling sorry for myself, and I was able to reflect on my own feelings. I realized that I had become attached to the tragedy and drama of “The Lost Child” and had been thinking of myself as a victim for over thirty years.

It would have been nice if things had turned out differently, and that we really had gotten the Hollywood ending. But we didn't. The tearful reunion and appearances on Oprah didn't happen. This had the makings a great story, a wonderful fantasy. My fantasy didn't come true – but, on the other hand, I didn't win the lottery last week either.

Embracing compassion gave me enough emotional equanimity to open the door and take another look. I realized that the drama and tragedy were just things I had been creating. My fantasy didn't happen, but neither did hundreds of other fantasies I could have had. A fantasy that doesn't come true is just that. It was something that could have happened, but didn't-- that's all. The real tragedy was that it was my expectations that made me suffer, and nothing else. The way out was to accept things the way they are.

The Lost Child is a great story, but I let it go, and the empty space with it.



CARLA BROOKE

Carla Brooke, community artist and teacher, has been practicing vipassana meditation since 1995. She teaches mindfulness education to children, teachers and parents.

WHAT REMAINS

My eleven year old student becomes my teacher
The moment he sees his crumbled artwork
A model of an Egyptian tomb sculpted from raw clay
Fired at two thousand degrees, exploding in my kiln

Shaggy blond hair frames innocence now broken
He becomes the great pharaoh he truly is
Eyes grown wise from tears allowed to fall
Together we examine the hole inside
Uncovered beneath dusty white shards

With long fingers that reach past boyhood
he sorts through each piece, one at a time,
an Archeological dig inside a broken heart
Until the moment he finds his own name
Written on a chiseled fragment of hieroglyphics

“I can salvage it,” he says with a wide smile
And the tomb where the bottom fell out
Becomes a way to protect an eternity of gifts
A peek hole where timeless creation remains.

ANGELO

I watch under ground where earthworms
leave room for one seed.

Roots spread into the turned earth
planted long ago by my friend, Angelo,
who taught me to look right here.

Vision blurred, hearing near gone,
Angelo fills his home with Buddha statues.
Ripe lemon trees and Freesias in his backyard,
Angelo lays his hands on the most frail plant
given up for dead, watered once more, revived.

I am given a second chance to trust
the power of kindness.

Once I saw a snake in our yard
and crossed the street to ask for help
Our elderly neighbor, our garden guru, Angelo
didn't let on he was terrified of snakes.
His floppy garden hat protecting his weathered face
Angelo tells me, “it's not poisonous, just sun bathing.”

His time near, I am close to his side.

“I have a sweet potato plant to give you.”

With worn out finger prints he hands me vines
dancing with heart shaped leaves.

Roots float, touching the water below

All held by a green, tear shaped vase .

“Keep it watered well. it will grow tall.”

As it feeds the sprouting leaves

I watch the potato wither, insides hollow out.

A quiet vigil on a red velvet couch,

looking past the worn crack in our window pane.

As Angelo lay dying, perennial buds awaken
from underground stems, winding their way up
the lamp post in our living room.

And today, through the window
a hummingbird nests, the size of a baby's palm
held empty and waiting.



ANNE EMERSON

Anne Emerson, a member of IMC's support group for people with life-threatening illnesses, supported the dying, until she herself died.

EASTER

The troops aren't coming home
anytime soon and Christ still
hangs on the walls of their tents,
bayoneted and tintured with gall.

Let's not go there anymore,
to Iraq, Jerusalem, Mecca
or Rome, but to the bodhi tree
in the countryside, each leaf
a vellum palm. Let us go
back twenty-five centuries to where
a conscientious objector could be
pardoned for abandoning his post,
lay beneath leaves falling
like poems, when text
was just rain and the buddha
one membrane letting him in.

CANCER

The best thing about it
is the view, your glass face
admitting light and trees
swaying like dancers and
the room moving forward
like a train with everyone
on it just as brave as you,
the destination someplace
where illness can't spread.

For you are the grassy field
where the steel tracks end,
the depot where God waits in
the corner booth over coffee
with dog-eared photos of kids:
you in the front row smiling
like the secret he's kept
from even his wife. You now
in the doorway, backlit by sun
and his arms winging open
to sweep you up and away.

HOW TO BE A GREAT COMMUNICATOR

Limit your audience to one leaf
heart-shaped, still attached

to mother birch and listen first
to all it has to say. The sound

its slender veins make turning light
to chlorophyll, the sipping of water

through the straw of one branch
up from the black packed well of roots.

How it and its sisters communicate
with birds and how it sympathizes with

your eyes searching for the
right thing to say and when.

The cue will be obvious when
it's your turn to speak: its palm

will fall upon yours face-down,
the lines sentences touching,

the breath of your hand then whispering
the language that green understands.



DANIEL WOO

Daniel practices mindfulness, meditation and contemplative practices learned from a number of Buddhist traditions. His practice is a daily effort for all his relationships and activities, including informing how he presently practices law in Seattle, Washington. He is trying to maintain a 'beginner's mind.'

FORGIVE AND RUN AWAY

More than seven years ago, a friend and I were introduced to a woman who had just returned to Seattle from India after a volunteering stint with Mother Teresa's organization. She also went to Dharamsala where she had an interview with The Dalai Lama. This is part of what she told us:

"I asked The Dalai Lama about forgiveness. I asked him what was I to do with someone who had truly abused me. The Dalai Lama moved his face inches from mine, squinted his eyes and in spacious silence, looked into my heart. After the passage of some indeterminate time, The Dalai Lama said that I must turn to my abuser and say 'I forgive you' and then turn around and run away as fast as I could."

Forgiveness is not an invitation to be abused or to continue to be abused or to condone harming actions. Forgiveness is ultimately one of the steps to freedom and to live presently not snared by the past. It is an opening of the heart and movement into the Heart of Perfect Wisdom.



JOHN JAMES RUARK, MD

IMPERMANENCE

Cherry blossoms sow brown earth with splendor,
extravagant in their fragility,
scant hours from bud to drab senility,
inspiring sages to embrace surrender
and emulate such bold humility:
to seize each fleeting moment with a tender
fierceness, letting cleansing sadness render
a myriad deaths into tranquility.

But what a task, to welcome joy and weeping
with equal gratitude, to grasp the nettle
of universal loss with grace in keeping
with last dignity: to show our mettle
by summoning the fortitude to bloom
enthusiastically until our doom.



GERRY SARNAT

EQUINOX (FOR EUGENE CASH)

Summer gone, autumn first rain,
again I oil doors that squeak.

Creaky knobs burn coal
as the cobra queen coils to swallow me.

With my lush thornbush and your clover lily,
why must we drift apart?

Will an old oak's cock grow cold this winter?
Is there still spring out here in the rocks?

RUMINATIONS

Ahah! This is the seventh day of retreat in noble silence.

An early Dalai Lama favored the feeblest of horses. While nay-sayers thought steeds could barely saunter could never be taught to soar, not worth the ATP; the Bodhisattva of Compassion bet the opposite. After all, wouldn't the swiftest glean little from training? My hack mindfulness is quenched only at breakfast. There and there alone am I nimble, no unicorn shadow wrangling. no need to be shown the whip.

Unkarmic to make eye contact with other renunciants, I gaze at my bowl of delights, steamy millet with treasure sprinkled on top. One sun-ripened raspberry crown -- kingly generosity so others might feast. A single queenly raisin. Two stately almonds, so subtle, so smooth, as my incisors tease each into divine halves. A spoonful of granola cascades from the castle into a moat of milk. A dollop of honey sweetens my domain, a smattering of orange rind compote seeps through the whiteness to unite the realm.

Bring on more heavenly fruits! A finely honed knife cuts bits of flawless pear, ripe apple. "What flair!" I muse again on my internist's hobbyhorse -- until opposite at the table, a real blade wizard pathologist performs amputory miracles carving mango. Old enough to no longer inhabit a low maintenance body, there's added benefit to this fare: the far reaches of my network of tubes and holes will soon be prune-lubricated. My flesh machine mashes grapefruit eighths into its fuel pipe on the way to the furnace on the way to becoming me.

I do not crave as much now, am better gauging my appetite. Lesson learned by sixth breakfast: less is more. Every meal I want less, rare second helpings, hardly anything left in my dish. But the banana I've been eyeing turns out to be wooden, flavorless, desiccating. What to do? Accept the offering with open heart, untainted taste buds? Reach beyond pleasure to sustenance? Ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows? Take the gracious green crescent booty as is -- or judge, put it aside? Some days eaten, today not. "What will the others think?" asks my comparing brain of the rest of my poorly camouflaged waste? "Can I slip it into the compost bucket on the sly?"

I am royally grateful for attendant windfalls, that green tea may ward off cardiovascular disease. Throughout this gastronomic procession, my fingertips linger on the mug's warmth, my cheeks bath in its fragrance -- which almost

allows me to forget yesterday's guilt-ridden nightmare. A horseless knight traipses in, swinging a stinking incense-burner, it's miasma enveloping him, a plague victim punished by God at his job building character again.

Not to complain, but such overwhelming sensations given free rein -- then sneaking a pen to scrawl it all down on napkins -- get confusing. Didn't I take vows not to write this week? I am the last person in the dining hall. The dishwashers wait on my utensils to finish up, just as I will theirs during my work meditation. Something inside shouts out tomorrow's *Inquiring Mind* headline: **IGNOBLE YOGI EXPOSED COMPOSING!** I could just as well be a randy one-trick pony mounting in public.

Imperial gong signaling next sitting, blinders on, bit back in, this bad actor (screenplay stuffed in pants) jockeys to the starting gate, hopes not to lag down the homestretch. Our thoroughbred dharma teacher quoting Rumi seems to horse-whisper directly in my ear: "Words no matter how humble seeming, are really a kind of bragging. Let silence be the art of your practice."

THE FOUR CORNERS, 2003

"Human kind cannot bear too much reality."

Four Quartets, T.S. Eliot

1. *BURNT BABIES*

Sitbreathewalk sitbreathewalk out-and-in,
a day of no-talk jangles my wits,
wakes me from spasms of jejune indifference.

Last Thursday of June, I revisit old friends.

Catty corner from our *sangha*, a flushed man camps out,
mumbles to the Virgin, sipping more than coffee from his thermos.
Below photos of *Agnus Dei* and mangled fetuses,
a Madonna figurine pleads through placards,
"OBEY GOD'S WILL OR BURN IN HELL!" "DEATH IS YOUR CHOICE!"
Mother Mary, harsher than I imagine her son, hectors bad science,
"INFANTICIDE CAUSES BREAST CANCER!"
Eighteen last-Thursday-of-the-months have past since we met.
He engaged at first but now's quit,
just scowls behind sunglasses and ball cap.

Cameras trained 'cross the asphalt
shoot each gothic doe
loping the gauntlet to *El Centro del Libertad*.

Another sixtyish faun, blighted under mangy whiskers,
a bandanaed mosaic of Don Quixote and Prometheus,
"SECURITY" on fluorescent vest,
tracks undisguised by matted elbow tattoos,
mutters unholy trash to his ex-Mekong Express chopper crew,
"I knew Mary before she was a virgin;
the Pope'd excommunicate her but she hauls in the megabucks,"
while ushering another to safety.

The fawn pauses to plead with her buck,
Please stay away from the hecklers, which he doesn't.
Eighteen months ago this guardian sometime-angel suspected me.
Palms forward signaling no harm, I passed by;
today he grins.

I scrutinize this diptych of two opposing pale dudes,
both well past siring, as they duel over a black teen.
One hedgehog protects, the other protests her right to choose
- here in the light, not sabotaged by back-alley coat hangers.

I'm glad to be a physician not the coroner.

The bell tolls.

Heel to toe, I'm called back to the center.

2. *NORTHEAST CORNER*

Diagonal from Planned Parenthood looms *La Selva*,
The Jungle, a stark frankly named halfway house,
a bizarre menagerie strangled by slanted wild vine canopies.

Piranhas and howlers, boas and sloths of all sorts and age,
untended mindbodies angular to the universe,
mostly shrouded in grays and blacks, droop in morose lagoons,
swoon under monsoon thickets, doze daymares on the stoop.

A few seek asylum from the asylum.

Their Haldolized emptiness resonates with us slow walkers,
breeds a strange acceptance; I feel kinship.

When they don't take pills an insane three times a day,
these endangered creatures end up in my homeless clinic.

Against protocol, once in a while I approach at my peril:

some bite and strike out like aroused sleeping animals.

Today I contemplate speaking but don't;
attempt eye contact, fail.

A foxy skirt sashays by -- a split second of genital recognition.
Yet to her we're all cuckoo, pitiable and wretched,
or invisible, off the grid.
Though sure I'm unseen,
she scurries to the opposite sidewalk.

A gimp ibis hunched over walker hobbles toward Eldercare.
Will that hyena lurks near the entry snatch her purse?

The bell tolls.
Toe to heel, I'm called back to the center.

3. *LITTLE SITTINGS*

Inside, rejoining circled pallid faces of the upper middle path
-- fanatics for love, extremists for peace --
I exhale womb and tomb, work to let go original people.

Outside seeps in.
Seeps from Planned Parenthood.
Seeps from mower whir struggling to bring order to *La Selva*.
Seeps from paramedic, maybe police sirens.
Seeps from motorcycle grind, bird twitter, Pro-Lifer guffaws.
Seeps as low-riders vibrate stained glass left over from a church.
Though the congregation tired and died,

the building sold to us,
their souls still rattle in the high beams, occasionally seep down.

We lotused tripods rejoice in this spanking new place.
I giggle at us practitioners of impermanence, mostly atheists
who worship Monet cathedrals as much as Vipassana nowhere.
Yes, bricks and mortar appear quite enduring here
- a sutra of non-abdication, our edifice complex?

Is this cushion a cocoon to dodge life,
an opiate to bypass the pain, my user's manual to decode emotion?
Am I a cross-legged 'droid running on canny batteries,
programmed with devotion
-- avoidant, deluded, more humane than human?

The bell tolls metaphysics away.
Deep breath, I'm called back to the center.

4. SALVAGES

At day's end, *zafu* in hand,
intimate yet detached,
some moments seized --
bursts of Nirvana transparent as the windowpane
-- others not,
preparing to leave,
I'm uneasy anticipating what's out there;
the anesthetized stares, fogged-in schizophrenics,
odalisque blossoms already lost spring's bloom,
shells of opaque seniors doing time down the block.

A boyfriend turned family planning mediator and meditator
peeks in the hall, greets me with a smile
that kindles beatitudes of someone else's remembering.

On the street, setting statues on grills while packing up,
two feckless evangelicals joke, "Just Say No's a lot like sex
- it's good when it's good, it's good when it's not!"
then screech off in a flash, burning rubber,
their complex nomadic geometry onto a next wayward stop,
tomorrow's last-Friday-of-the-month disgrace.

Our four corner gang will convene again in July.

Out the door, lampshine comes on mothy,
squinty ghost dogs drawn to spectral sensibility dim edge of town.

The car radio blares an eerie bulletin: Eric Rudolph,
The New Woman Clinic and Atlanta Olympics bomber,
a werewolf wrapped as a Lamb of God, has been captured.

I grit my teeth, inhale,
stop for flowers on my way home to family and dinner.



KIM ALLEN

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

More than the other steps on the path, Right Livelihood seems to imply something outside of ourselves. While it is obvious that Right View, Right Effort, and Right Speech come from the practitioner, somehow it is easy to think of Right Livelihood as being something external – for example, getting the right job. The Buddha meant much more than this.

Two years ago, I left my job of seven years with a stable company and a friendly, competent boss to attend a school that teaches Sustainable Business. I felt that my work had become repetitive, and more seriously, that it was not contributing to the economy and society in a helpful way. I sought a career path that was more beneficial to the world and to my own well-being. Because I engaged in this process mindfully, the last two years have been an exploration of Right Livelihood. It's an ongoing process, but I would like to share some of what I've learned up to this time.

At a very gross level, Right Livelihood *is* about getting the right job. The Buddha defined several professions as “Wrong Livelihood”: dealing in weapons, animals, humans, intoxicants, and poisons (and the list is much longer for monastics). The starting point is to make sure we are not supporting ourselves through these unskillful means.

But there is more. Other considerations show that “get the right job” isn’t the whole point.

- First, recall that in the Buddha’s time, a career was not something a person chose. Most people simply did the work their families had done for a long time. So Right Livelihood cannot solely be concerned with making the right choice about the spectrum of careers we may have access to here in the privileged West. Of course, for us, this is indeed a component of Right Livelihood, but it cannot be the totality of it.
- Right Livelihood is for everyone on the path. Hence, it applies equally to people who are healthy, working-age adults as to people who are physically disabled or well into their elder years. What is Right Livelihood for someone with a health condition that confines them to bed?
- And of course, some are able to live entirely through *dana*, the generosity of others. Monks, nuns, various teachers and elders and many others. Is this somehow the “best” form of livelihood?

If it’s not just about our career search, what other elements are important for Right Livelihood?

It is more about *how* the work is done—how we are going through the tasks of each day. Zen teacher Misha Merrill said it this way: We should do our work *honestly* and *with care*.

“*Honestly*” means truthfully of course, but also “with authenticity” – with our whole heart, not concealing parts of ourselves, not harming ourselves or others. In other words, it is about working ethically. Gil tells of a lawyer who came to him once, explaining that he is expected to lie in his job. He wanted to know how to do this in a way consistent with his Buddhist practice. I’m not sure of Gil’s exact response, but the essence was, “You can’t.”

“*With care*” means “in a caring way” – bringing compassion to our work. Compassion is the opposite of cruelty, which is about exploiting the weaknesses of others. Working with compassion is about remembering that we are all doing

the best we can, and that we all want to live an untroubled life. Even our company's competitors. "*With care*" also means carefully, or mindfully – not cutting corners, taking care to handle materials and communications respectfully, and proceeding at an appropriate pace. The frantic pace of work favored in Silicon Valley does not often encourage us to work "with care."

Even if we are a lawyer representing battered spouses or abused children, if we are lying in order to do our work, it is not in line with the precepts. Even if we work for a non-profit doing social service, if we are constantly rushed and sloppy because the amount of work is overwhelming, we are not acting with care. The results may not be as beneficial as we hope.

Our livelihood is not just about our employment. It is how we sustain our *life*, which comes from much more than money. Some key elements include our food and water, our residence, our clothing, our means of keeping our bodies and communities healthy. We can easily be seduced into thinking that these things only come after we have secured sufficient money from our job. But as we practice with the way we live, it becomes clear that a more integrated approach is necessary.

We may begin to sense how our lives are part of a larger picture. When we buy an apple, we support the store that sold it to us, and also the distributor, the farmer, the picker, etc. If it is organic, we are adding a small amount of support to that type of agriculture. We make choices every day about how we use water, electricity, plastic, paper, oil – as well as our time and attention. How would we behave if we understood how far-reaching the effects of our choices are?

I know people who have moved to farms or cooperative living situations, sold their cars, or gone "off the grid" in order to live more harmoniously. One friend is teaching himself candle- and soap-making. Another friend committed to buying nothing besides food and basic toiletries for a year. I've made changes around the house to use less energy, and have found many ways to reuse and recycle the materials in my life.

It's worth bringing a lot of awareness to these practices. We may find that practicing with the physical aspects of life becomes complex. It is easy to get entangled in worrying about whether plastic or paper bags are less harmful to the environment. (I recall a cartoon where a grocery shopper is asked by the bagger, "Deforestating paper or landfill-burdening plastic?"). Now we have cloth bags, of course, but what if they are made out of cotton, one of the most pesticide-intensive crops we grow? (Cotton alone accounts for 25% of global pesticide use).

So it is important also to include the mental component. If you buy organic produce, but do so with a resentful mind about the high prices, perhaps the less expensive option actually does more good in your life. If you purchase a hybrid car only to find that it fuels feelings of ecological superiority, watch out. Also, experiencing paralyzing guilt about the inevitably large carbon footprint one has as an American is unlikely to lead to happiness.

Some of the folks who alter their behavior to live more lightly do so with mixed motivations. There is likely to be compassion and wisdom, but perhaps there is also fear, resistance, or anger. Sometimes people try to convert others, or place guilt trips on them, contributing to conflict.

Living as a responsible member of the ecosystem is thus less straightforward than focusing solely on the physical resources we use. I find myself inspired by a simple teaching from Shaila: "Work at the deepest level you can." To me, this means taking into consideration both the physical components, like the use of precious resources, and the more spiritual components like intention, appreciation, compassion, and wisdom. It is often an intuitive choice, and can look different in different situations.

I recall a woman sharing her experience at a daylong. She worked in the coffee industry as an advocate for fair labor practices, trying to reduce the incidence of child labor on the farms, which comes about under pressure to produce high volumes for large multinational corporations. After an especially exhausting week of negotiation, she found herself at the airport—in line at

Starbucks. Part of her mind said, “You can’t have this coffee! It goes against everything you stand for.” And at that moment, another part spoke up to say, “I still care about fair labor practices. But I will get back to them at another time, because right now I really just need a cup of coffee.”

In my own life, I work to do things around the house, to drive less, etc. And yet, the program through which I studied sustainable business required a monthly air trip to Seattle. Is that sustainable? The irony was not lost on me.

When we begin to live and work closer to Right Livelihood, the feeling is one of “alignment” – less struggle, less stress, less fatigue. This happens even if the work becomes physically harder, lower paying, or more emotionally challenging. This is a reliable gauge we can use to sense our development on this step of the path. The feeling of alignment is very real, and makes sense on the path: The *sila* steps (Speech, Action, and Livelihood) support the development of the *samadhi* steps (Effort, Mindfulness, and Concentration). As we settle into work or livelihood that creates less inner conflict, we gain greater ability to settle the mind in meditation. Or, viewed another way, alignment in our work is an outward expression of the alignment that is present in our mind.

So even in a deeper sense, Right Livelihood could perhaps be said to be about “finding the right job.” But not in an abstract way, based on an idea of what we *ought* to do. Instead, the task is to look into our heart and discover our way of manifesting in the world that is most authentic and most aligned. Like the other steps on the path, Right Livelihood comes from *within*, flowing from our purest intentions. It takes great courage and great faith to exist in this way. Doing so is a supreme act of service.

The form that Right Livelihood takes in our life may surprise us. Misha Merrill once likened us to a collection of ingredients for a recipe. As we allow the practice to shape us, we may find ourselves coming out as a chocolate cake. Or we may in fact be a steak! Who knows? We can’t know ahead of time. As we see ourselves evolving, we develop kindness for ourselves, and perhaps astonishment—as well as learn to take ourselves less seriously.

For me, this has involved coming to peace with some aspects of my abilities and training. I am educated as a scientist and have worked with quantitative analysis in my business jobs. As I practice and study Buddhism, I find new interests and qualities of heart unfolding, and have experienced aversion to the more analytically oriented portions of my mind. Luckily the practice is self-correcting and does not allow us to reject large parts of ourselves for long, so I have slowly begun to see ways to use thinking and analysis for good in the world, while also including my newer interests and abilities. It is a great relief. And the process is ongoing.

As we explore the myriad ways to be in the world, we also come to see that the livelihoods for different people may differ greatly. For one person, it may really be necessary to stop doing some type of work because that work does not support their development, whereas for another person, that work might be fine—or even helpful. Sometimes we may think that becoming a monastic is the only true way to live rightly, and for some people, it is. However, I would not say that this livelihood is the best choice for everyone. Seeing how Right Livelihood is different for different people lessens the tendency to judge how others live, and contributes to the development of compassion.

Investigating Right Livelihood may bring about many results; here are a few from my experience:

- Wisdom in the form of learning how to bring all of myself to my work. I've gained some very intimate knowledge about what inner alignment feels like to me, which I can carry as a guide in choosing how to use my energy in the world.
- Wisdom in the form of a more spacious heart, seeing my life as part of a larger whole, one stream in a vast flow. This is essentially an insight into *anatta*, not self. In the end, our work is not really about us (personally).

- And also compassion. The work of discovering Right Livelihood is deep, challenging, and long-term. It soon becomes obvious why the world of jobs, the economy, and society are so chaotic and painful. We begin to tune into the incredible amount of suffering that drives our life activities and our quest for survival. We see that everyone is just doing the best they can. Sylvia Boorstein says, “Life is so difficult. How could we be anything but kind?”

I had an interesting conversation with some of my sustainable business classmates recently. We talked about how we had arrived at school with some sense of certainty about the problems with business and how they might be addressed. But after two years of immersive learning about business’ connection to the environment, communities, the world economy, and people’s personal lives, we feel much less certain about the particulars. We have traded our small certainties for a larger perception of the interdependence of the system we are all part of.

Right Livelihood cannot be arrived at abstractly. It emerges from mindful attention to the details of our actions and how they relate to the world around us. It may very well require large shifts in our lifestyle. But Right Livelihood is not a fantasy job or life situation that we will find in the future when we have more time, more flexibility, more money, or a degree. It happens in each moment that we are conscious of how our energy, attention, and body are being used to support ourselves and all beings. We can choose to use these resources for peace, service, and liberation.

CLEANING HOUSE

I am preparing for a three-month retreat. Amid the packing, shopping, arranging, and communicating, it occurs to me to straighten up the house before my house sitter arrives. Thus begins a voyage from the past to the present.

On the bottom shelf of a bookcase, I find my stash of physics stuff. Some notes and papers, my thesis work – an endeavor that spanned much of the 1990s. I have saved the old 3.5-inch floppy disks containing my key data files, the text of my dissertation, and the programs I used to run my equipment and analyze data. I feel an odd wave of possessiveness for these disks, although I no longer have any device capable of reading them – and perhaps the files themselves are long since corrupted anyway, the disks being twelve years old and not especially protected from heat and dust. And what of the ideas? Like all ideas, insubstantial, simply effects of prior ideas, and causes for subsequent ones. I leave these things on the shelf, along with the hard-bound copy of my dissertation, which contains mathematics I would now be hard-pressed to follow. Somehow the opaqueness of these unreadable media gives them an air of neutrality; they seem fine just where they are.

My eyes shift to a padded package preserving one of the silicon devices I used to measure samples. In twelve years, I have not opened this package, concerned about breaking the fragile silicon nitride membrane less than 2,000 atoms thick that forms the sensitive portion of the device. A prime skill I developed in grad school was to treat these devices gently; I eventually learned to reliably pick them up, wash and dry them, solder wires to them, and mount them in a vacuum chamber in a tender and smooth way. In return, they would yield secrets about the thermal lifestyles of exotic materials. I begin to tug at the packaging.

The device is intact. And still striking in its beauty. The perfectly etched zigzag thermometers, the deep mauve of the silicon nitride (an optical effect because the layer is thinner than a wavelength of light), the untarnished gold conduction layer floating in the center of the drumhead. A memory emerges of the joy I felt each time I successfully created a batch of these in the cleanroom.

But now a different item on the bookshelf catches my eye, one from a few years later.

I have left science, having discovered that the truths of the material Universe did not fulfill my spiritual longing – though I did not have language for this at the time. Confused and hurt, I turned instead to the world of career for satisfaction, but soon afterward, my body fell apart. The pain was relentless and medically unidentifiable. Perhaps it was a message telling me I had taken a wrong turn – at any rate, it was a Heavenly Messenger. Eventually I was sent to pain counselor.

Now I finger a dingy cassette tape that was tucked behind the padded package with the silicon device. (The past is like this, yes? A tape.) It is labeled simply, “5/15/03.” David used to record our sessions in case I wanted to listen again at my leisure. I dig out my dented cassette player, purchased over 20 years ago – cassette tapes are media not quite out of reach, not quite lost to time. Apparently I have saved only this one tape, and as I play the last few minutes of it (it is nearly wound to the end), I realize that this is the session in which David pointed me toward the path, although I did not know it at the time.

My voice... no, not “my” at all. Who is she? His kind voice offering timeless wisdom, sounding uncannily like Joseph Goldstein, given his East-Coast Jewish accent. He tells me of the “sports announcer” in my head that comments on everything (‘good psychological practice in connecting with the client, for in a previous session I had mentioned my passion for soccer,’ interjects my present sports announcer!). He notes how I might learn to stand free of this voice, knowing that its ramblings are merely thoughts, not reality, not “me.” Stay in the moment! And then, with directness, he tells me to try a process called mindfulness meditation. “In this practice, a person becomes focused –

just as other people might do with chanting or staring at a candle. But in our practice, we focus on the breath. We choose a place in the body where we can feel the breath, perhaps the belly, and...”

Click! The tape runs out just before he gives me the very first instructions I received for meditation. Fortunately, I remembered them on my own.

But what to do with this tape? Keeping it feels like stagnation. Burning it seems overly dramatic. Throwing it in the trash seems disrespectful.

I recall that my original motivation to practice was to overcome the pain that had overcome my body. To be free of suffering from the mysteriously impaired nerve function in my left leg, from the psychological ordeal of the modern medical system, from the general malaise that wracked my body and sapped its resilience. Standing before the bookshelf, I understand fully: In seven years of practice, this has come true. Intention has become reality. This illness was spiritual, the healing coming from the inside out.

Without thought, I kneel and take the refuges. I commit to Awakening. Although I have done this many times, this time there is the understanding that as my first intention came to fruition, so this one can too. May it be so.

But the story doesn't end there, does it? I take the tape and walk. Down the familiar path to the edge of the creek. Standing amid the sound of the bubbling, jostling water, I begin to pull the tape from its reels. I am surprised by how long these tapes are – out and out it comes, yet the thickness on the reel is hardly diminished. Holding an unruly pile that could feed a family of four were it pasta, I stop. It seems no longer necessary. The tangled handful of my past is nothing but a shiny strip of polymer coated with a thin magnetic film not unlike

the films I deposited on my silicon devices. It can be read, or not; or rewritten, or not.

My attention shifts to the creek. It keeps flowing by.



LYNN SUNDAY

Lynn Sunday is an artist turned writer living in Half Moon Bay. Her essays have appeared in Common Ground Magazine, the Noe Valley Voice, Tiny Lights Online, and Passing It On 2011. Lynn practices yoga and meditation, and does well when she remembers to breathe.

JURY DUTY

I like to think I'm as patriotic as the next American—but the truth is I wasn't pleased about being summoned to Jury Duty on August 15, 2008. In fact, I eyed the summons irritably; resenting its intrusion into my comfortable life, and thinking—*I hope they don't pick me.*

Stalling for time I filed for a six month postponement, thus advancing the specter of jury-duty-as-my-duty to January 15, 2009—as far in the future as allowed by law. But all too soon a thick envelope containing a new summons arrived in my mailbox complete with parking permit, badge number, group number, and pages of pre-reporting instructions. On the evening of January 14, I was to phone, or go online to learn if my assigned group #3001 was scheduled to appear in court at 9 the next morning.

As my summons date drew near, I was on edge about my upcoming inconvenience. What if, I fretted, I'm selected as a juror and it turns out to be a long drawn out trial—a bank robbery or even murder, with gory descriptions of

violent crime. This could mean many tedious hour-long drives, in morning and evening rush-hour traffic, from my home in Half Moon Bay to the Courthouse in Redwood City. Or, God forbid, I could be sequestered, leaving my retired husband, Lee, to try, gamely, to explain to our little dog Hootie why I don't live with them any more.

And in the process of all this, my tenuous income—as a self employed artist working at home weekdays, and selling at art fairs on weekends—would grind to a screeching halt.

*

As though my life wasn't disrupted enough, my prescription sunglasses disappeared January 12th and weren't found. This added to my stress about jury duty, since without my glasses, my light-sensitive eyes can barely see to drive in bright sunlight; even with my eyes squinted to slits. The situation resulted in a noon appointment with my optometrist in San Francisco—the day before my summons—for an eye exam and a rush job on new sunglasses. Because the required eye exam would involve drops to dilate my pupils, temporarily impairing my vision, Lee offered to be my driver, and our little dog Hootie came along for the ride.

Hootie loves the car and curled up in my lap the whole way. I sat in the passenger seat with my eyes half closed, shielding them from the sun. The day was warm and mild, the air smelled fresh and clean as we drove along the coastal highway to the city. In spite of my concerns about jury duty the next day, I found the half-hour ride soothing.

We arrived at the optometrists' where I chose ultra-lightweight frames, and had an eye exam. The pupils of my eyes became huge when the drops went in them. I looked like a nocturnal animal in the mirror. Even indoors, the light blinded me; I could hardly see.

I left the office wearing strange looking, wrap-around glasses made of thick, dark orangey-brown cellophane. They were big and awkward with uncomfortable, question-mark shaped, white cardboard ear pieces to hold them

on. They reminded me of 3D glasses handed out at movies, and enabled me to see in daylight until the drops wore off. “Wear them until sundown.” my optometrist said. “By then your eyes will return to normal.”

*

On the way home, Lee suggested a walk in the park along Lake Merritt. “Hootie will love it. Might cheer you up too,” he said.

Hootie joyfully lifted his leg and marked new territory as we walked along the waters edge. The glasses cast a surrealistic, orange glow on the world, turning the blue of the lake and sky a gentle green, while the colors of the plants and trees became intensified shades of green, and brown, and blue.

The glasses were so dark I could hardly see my feet in front of me, which forced me to walk slowly, paying attention to each step. I felt like a sleepwalker holding Lee’s hand and letting myself be led like a child along the banks of the lake. And with each step through my strange new environment, I felt myself releasing my resistance to jury duty the next day— and focused, instead, on being exactly where I was.

We returned home in the late afternoon. I was still wearing the glasses at sunset, breathing deeply, doing standing Yoga poses in our sheltered back yard. Facing the woods beyond the yard, I was soothed by the sound of the wind in the trees, while Lee went online for me, to check my juror status. *This day was peculiar, but perfect* I told myself assuming the warrior pose. *I’d still prefer not to serve on a jury, but whatever happens tomorrow I’ll accept it, not suffer over it.*

Just then, in my moment of acceptance, Lee joined me in the yard, smiling broadly. “Group #3001 is not on the list for tomorrow morning,” he said. “You are hereby granted a reprieve for the next year.”



KARI PRAGER

"I was filling my emptiness with ski racing, mountaineering, shooting guns, motorcycles (and girls). If life became too confusing I just sped up the pace and it became clear again. I read Alan Watts' "The Way of Zen", thought it made sense, and later, when I started shooting in competition, read and reread Eugen Herrigel's "Zen in the Art of Archery", plus some Suzuki. I finally realized that the attraction of these sports was their common sense of losing of oneself in the act of doing. I read and reread a number of books on martial arts in conjunction with pistol competition, and realized I was actually practicing Zen, although I hadn't really thought of it that way. So here I am, slowing down some, keeping the focus on poetry now, meditating as best I know how."

A CONVERSATION WITH THE DEAD

Here's a song to dead words!

The reticent words that were never spoken,
that never survived the soul's great mask of shame.

Let me honor their memory.

Sometimes I see my words rise up and sink again like mayflies,
in myriads, clouds of speech without shape or borders,
(What would the dead think of this extravagance?)
till I can say no more, my words in windrows,
drifted like the snow.

The words float up and cover the moon. The black mood devours me.

The liquid riddle of reminiscence dries to a wordless trickle,
My breath floats like dust. I strangle to speak.
The dead words are silent.

Must I speak only the roles the mask allows? So much is forbidden.
This squandering of speech, dying words linger in the forebrain.
let me unmask! As we daily recreate our language,
I must speak freely!

Now I write the words as I think them! How else to deliver
them from the dark living humus of the mind
as they move blindly toward the light.
Speak all anew, for the dead in truth
are resurrected here.

THE QUESTIONS I HAD NOT LEARNED TO ASK

All the world's a story, an endless enigma.
My goals diminish in the fading eyes of age,
and now my youthful questions, sidetracked
for decades, appear like Orion in the autumn sky.

Why am I here? What good have I done?
What does it mean? Where will I be next?
Where have I gone that I was ordained to go?
Who has felt my love and cherished it?

When I look back for answers on my life,
I remember the happiest times, the times
wandering aimlessly with my .22 rifle,

exploring the woods and meadows
around our farmhouse, the world's limits
set only by my willingness to dare
the darkness of the distant treeline.

My parents loved me at this age,
and they had time to share their love
for me and for each other. When their
love had dwindled like the water in the spring,
the home became a place to be avoided,
a place of rage, and tears, and sad recriminations
that I barely will allow myself remembrance.

But the days of my youth stay with me,
and I count myself lucky to have shared
the country with the animals and sky,
the love of my parents when their hearts
were full, and that I held the wordless answers
to the questions I had not yet learned to ask.

SOLITUDE

My father's joy was solitude, the quiet fire in the living room
when all the house was still, my mother's shrill voice silent,
my own quests gone inward. I loved to share this twilight time,
his cigarette smoke spiraling upward in infinite blue italics,
his book in his big hands, in the chair beside the fireplace,
always the same, the evening paper on the floor,
rumpled in sections every night.

I sat and read and watched him over the pages, listening,
waiting, still, for that chance that never quite arrived.

I wanted, but he was content to let the evening
reveal itself in peace, in front of the fire,
a word or two might pass between us,
nothing more, nor ever enough.

I longed to hear his conversation, climbing tales, stories of
the war, skiing, love, and all the young adventures
that might lie before my life to come.

But in spite of his love,
this was not to be.

My father grew older, and the stories faded. Even to my boyish eyes
he grew smaller, sadder and greyer, and lame in his essence.
The gods were not his friends, and drink drove him deeper
into a dark world, beloved companions dying,
and past greatness dwindling to death,
into forgetfulness.

Now, my late father's son, I treasure evening's solitude as well,
the quiet at the fire, when all troubles fly up the flue
and the sweet rising of the flames makes a
fable of color before my aging eyes.

Smoke rises as before.

But I am blessed with his love and words to share it.

THE SPACES BETWEEN

The spaces between the maples
were wider when I was a boy.

Lines in the road were further apart,
a mile stretched to the horizon,
almost too far to see.

All space opened endlessly before me,
in a world of incomparable scale.
A trip to the town beyond ours
was like a polar expedition,
full of marvels and new sights.

Every car was different from every other,
and each person had strangeness and character.
Roadsigns carried abstruse messages of great interest
and the shapes of houses were as varied as
the pictures in the fairy tales.

And in the spaces between the maples
lived a priceless menagerie
of beetles, moths and crawlers, creatures
as wild as any in my books, under bark,
in the rocks of the stone wall,
or running wild through the jungle-high grass.

How I miss that compression of scale
when nothing was too common to be significant.
At night I ran out to see the northern lights
curtain proudly before my eyes across the stars.

Now my car speeds past the trees,
I barely notice them in my headlong passage.

The animals beneath the rocks live peacefully,
undisturbed by my curiosity.

And my life, rich and complex as it may be,
has lost the magic of the ordinary.



ROBERT DIXON

HAIKU

Left on a journey
to leave my troubles behind
my baggage came too

Heaven and Hell's gates
open and close on the hinge
of duality

Yogis leap for joy
when realizing there is
no true happiness

My deepest desire
blossoms with appetite
for want of nothing

Suffering is bliss
when freedom from all desire
is worth longing for

Nothing stays the same
But you can count on one thing
Change is for certain

The carnations died
I put them in the compost
reincarnation

I give up all hope
of having a better past
This is forgiveness

THE END OF THE TUNNEL

In fear and humiliation
I slunk away to my cave
but I couldn't go all the way in.
Over and over again
I kept turning around to see what others were doing
and what I was missing.
I only found refuge when I went all the way
into the deepest and darkest recesses
and only there did I see the glimmer of light
sparkling in the depths
illuminating the wholeness of what was missing.



Policies for Passing It On Submissions:

- Material will be peer reviewed and lightly edited
- Fiction or non-fiction should be 1,000 to 3,000 words
- Poetry, photographs and art will mostly remain within a page
- The over-all focus is on exploring mindfulness practice (not just Buddhist)
- References to mindfulness and contemplative practice are encouraged.

IMC's Mission

The Insight Meditation Center (IMC) is dedicated to the study and practice of Buddhist ideals - mindfulness, ethics, compassion, loving-kindness, and liberation. At the heart of all IMC activities is the practice of Insight Meditation, sometimes called mindfulness or Vipassana meditation. Based on a 2500-year-old Buddhist teaching, this practice helps us to see more deeply and clearly into our lives. With insight, we develop ways of living more peacefully, compassionately, and wisely.

Daily practice forms the foundation of Insight Meditation practice: daily meditation practice, and the practice of mindfulness and compassion as we go about our daily lives. Buddhist tradition also emphasizes the value of intensive meditation retreats. IMC's mission is to stay firmly rooted in the practices of meditation and retreats. From this foundation in meditation and mindfulness, we actively seek to find ways to support practitioners in integrating and applying the

spiritual life in all areas of life.

IMC's Vision

Our vision for the Insight Meditation Center is to be a community-based meditation center where the practices and teachings of Insight Meditation are made available to those living urban lifestyles. IMC has six intertwining functions:

1. To provide a simple and quiet environment where the contemplative life can be developed and protected amidst the complexities of city living.
2. To offer teachings and practice opportunities that complement Insight Meditation in supporting a balanced spiritual life from a Buddhist perspective.
3. To be a place where people can come together to cultivate and express their practice in and through their family, social, and community lives.
4. To bring in a variety of visiting Buddhist teachers who offer a wide range of Buddhist practices and viewpoints to our IMC community and the interested public.
5. To establish an urban retreat center offering a variety of residential retreat programs.
6. To offer all activities, including residential retreats, free of charge.

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