

SERMON: *Showing Up in Our Lives*

I need to say as I begin, that of course there are distinctly different kinds of Buddhism, just as there are many ways of being Unitarians and Universalists. My personal experience of Buddhism has been with an American form of Japanese Soto Zen Buddhism, and that is the Buddhist tradition and practice that I am describing here. [This sermon comes with photos that are in your order of service.]

This past summer I was actually excited about going to the United States, because my book was receiving an award at the UUA General Assembly. But then I learned the ash from the Chilean volcano fires was going to close all the airports. “I have to fly *today*? You’re sure? Sorry. Of course you’re sure.” I packed in chaos, but managed to do the important things on my list, including making a photocopy of my passports. My two hour flight to Sydney was the last plane allowed to take off before the volcano ash closed the Melbourne Airport.

In Sydney, the same ticket agent who’d phoned me at 5am to say I’d better click into high gear, finished changing my flight across the Pacific and said, “Give me your passport, and I’ll check you in.” I pulled out a surprisingly thin wallet and knew exactly where my passports were – underneath the photocopier cover on my kitchen counter.

Everyone tells me it is impossible, but that dedicated airline employee talked the Australians into letting me leave Australia without my Australian passport, and convinced the Americans to let me enter the US without my American passport. He said, “US Immigration in San Francisco isn’t going to like this. I’ll try Honolulu.”

Because I was entering the US without any official documentation, when we landed, I was sent straight to an immigration interview. Everyone should

experience this once, to see first-hand what life is like for scared, illegal refugees. Of course, I was simply a scared undocumented US citizen.

I was cleared to enter, and thought I was “home free.” But it took another frustrating and lengthy interview with someone in Homeland Security in Washington DC checking for my name in their various computer files, and then a through search of my body and my luggage, before I was allowed to board my flight to North Carolina to receive the award. The problem was that without my passports I no longer had the two government-issued photo-IDs the US now requires of all travelers. (I know you’re wondering, “What does this have to do with Buddhism?” so we’ll jump to that and save the rest of the story of my *fight*s with Homeland Security for later.)

After General Assembly (and yet another confrontation with Homeland Security) I went to Tassajara--a Zen Buddhist Mountain Retreat in a Northern California wilderness. Tassajara’s cluster of rustic buildings are scattered along a creek in a deep, remote canyon. You drive in (or rather, you creep 14 miles up and up, and then steeply down, down, down on an extremely narrow, rutted, rock-peppered unpaved road. (That’s “road”.) Since the 1970s, the San Francisco Zen Center has been the steward of this ancient indigenous site for healing and tribal gathering.

Hanging near the door of Tassajara’s meditation hall, there is a *han* [You have a photo.]– a thick board that is struck by a wooden mallet several times a day to call the community to meditation. The words painted on it are:

Listen everyone
Birth and death is given once
This moment NOW is gone
¡Awake each one. Awake!
Don't waste this life

The word *Now* has been nearly obliterated by the striking mallet. The *han* beats: “Now...Now...Now...Now.”

The idea of “Don’t waste this life” and the urgency of “now” gained new layers of meaning three years ago when Tassajara came within a few breaths of burning, in a forest fire that started when a lightning storm ignited 2,000 wildfires from one end of drought-dry California to the other – as if the lightning too were saying, “Now...Now...Now...Now.”

That summer, if you lived anywhere in California, you smelled the smoke. It took three weeks for several of the fires to join and reach Tassajara. The guests were evacuated and eventually the resident-Buddhists -- with the road closing behind them as they left. But five of the monks went back to do what they could to save the buildings.

Now it was three years later, and there was a celebration of the publishing of Colleen Busch’s book about those five monks’ fire experiences. The book is called *Fire Monks*, and it is the source of the photos in your order of service.¹

“Wake up!” the *han* beats. Or as my retreat leader put it, “Show up in your life.”

How do you do that? The Buddhists’ answer may surprise you. They teach that to “show up in your life” you must learn to live in the present moment and then figure out how you are going to belong. You decide again and again, “What am I going to choose to do in this moment, and how am I going to relate to Others as I do it?”

The student asked the Zen teacher, “How are you and I different?” The teacher answered, “I *use* my 24 hours. You are *used by* yours.” As Steve Jobs said, “Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life.”

¹ *Fire Monks: Zen Mind Meets Wildfire at the Gates of Tassajara* by Colleen Morton Busch. New York: Pilgrim Press, 2011

1) The Buddhists say it's useless to live in the past (which we call regretting), and useless to live in the future (whether hoping, or worrying) because the present is the only time when we can actually live, the only time we have any choice about. Call it living with intention, or call it situational awareness – this mindfulness is what saves the lives of fire-fighters. (It's probably also why no monk has ever driven off the edge of the treacherous Tassajara Road.)

Living mindfully takes habitual, concentrated effort. It calls you to gear up all your senses and to take care of only what is yours to take care of. It offers a new mindset, in which you urge yourself to appreciate *every* hour you have with your children, with your parents, with your colleagues and friends. Mindfulness is what was missing when I was photocopying my passports. You need to be calm and centered to do this demanding work. That's why meditation is at the centre of Zen Buddhism.

In meditation, you learn, breath-by-breath, to *accept* whatever mental and emotional states arise in your mind and in your body, and then *let them go*. You are letting go of worries about the past, and fears for the future. You are refusing to let your life be run by whatever thoughts and feelings happen to rise up inside you. Daily meditation can be very helpful for dealing with all kinds of stress and negative thoughts. It can enable a person to overcome their addictions and delusions and is a course of treatment for unhappiness -- not treatment by pill, or cult, or grace, but treatment by serious training, deep discipline, and constant attentiveness.

When you re-focus on doing your best, moment-after-moment, “now”-after-“now”, it becomes easier and easier to live fully, responsibly, and well. As you learn to appreciate the small things that happen minute-by-minute, you receive many gifts you would not otherwise be aware of, and you get to weave

all those gifts into your world. “Why not live your *best* life?” is how Oprah Winfrey puts it. Steve Jobs said, “Change your life, so you get to *love* living it.”

2) But using meditation to rein-in your mind and emotions, is only the first half of “showing up in our lives.” You also need to choose how, and to what, you are going to belong. “Belonging” in this sense, is about who you trust, and who you join or follow.

The Buddhists and UUs have the same answer – we both say, “trust yourself -- rest your understanding and authority in your own life experience.” Remember Steve Jobs’ warning: “Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice, and don't be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people's thinking.” The Buddha said, “Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be your own confidence,” and warned his followers not to believe his teachings on his say-so. He said to try them out for yourself and see if they prove to be true.

Both UUs and Buddhists assume it is also necessary to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And we are not upset if that search leads us to cast aside our former views, as we develop new ones. So we are both optimists -- there is always hope for a better self ... an improved situation ... a more encompassing world-view.

But I don't want my highlighting who is our authority and what we believe to give the wrong impression. Because in both Buddhism and in our non-creedal UUism, what matters is not so much what we *believe*, but what we *do*. The Buddhist teacher says, “When you have great faith, make an effort. When you have great doubt, make an effort. Moment-to-moment you should say, ‘Yes, I will.’” ([Yes, we can,” is not nearly so powerful as “Yes, we will.”])

For Buddhists, all existence is essentially impermanent. Our UU view is similar -- that both we and the world we live in are evolutionary and continually progressing. This ever-changing world is also interdependent – our

interdependent web of all existence. What the Buddhists do about the upheavals caused by all this impermanence and interdependence is to become one with nature, while never seeking to conquer it or rise above it. They say, “Human life is precious, and the lives of all beings are equally precious, so we must search out how best to live as a being that is both *in* and *of* the natural world.” The monk who drove me into Tassajara last summer spoke about the seeing the mountainsides around Tassajara burned down to bare earth as a metaphor for letting go of everything that was extra in his life, so that what was truly essential would be exposed in all its beauty and defenselessness.

Quite a few of us came to Unitarian Universalism after a fire swept through our lives that cleared a way for us to begin again as religious beings. Many of the Americans who have become Buddhists have had a similar life experience. But the religious quest we are talking about here is *not* to become a Buddhist, but to be a Buddha in your own fashion. Becoming a Unitarian Universalist is not the point of a UU’s faith -- what matters is that we each decide what our principles are, and act faithfully according to them. To quote Steve Jobs: “Have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.” Or, be like the oak tree, and fully discover your own unique nature.

You could say that that is the essential challenge of both Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism -- to wake up and stay awake—awake to sorrow *and* to joy, to new truths *and* ancient wisdom, to self-fulfillment *and* universal compassion ... to be awake, awake, awake and learn from the teachings of others who are more awake than you are -- like Jesus, or Buddha, or Steve Jobs and all our other wise teachers.

Our Retreat teacher told us: “Buddhism is very simple. I can distill it down to seven words: ‘Everything changes. Everything is connected. Pay attention.’”

In *Fire Monks* Colleen Busch tells us: Tassajara's elusive summer guest – the fire – “arrived after the community had been preparing for it every hour for three weeks. But they hadn't imagined thirty-foot flames would arrive on three sides simultaneously, plowing downhill as if trying to make up for lost time. And they hadn't imagined there would be only five of them to meet the flames. One of them had the presence of mind to pick up her camera to document the moment of the fire's arrival – and the presence of mind to put the camera down and turn to the sound of fire meeting water. And all along they knew that rather than trying to control the outcome, we can hold ourselves curious about finding out what it will turn out to be.”

In trying to save Tassajara during the fire – or trying to save your own life during a hard time – you can't be sure you will. In fact you can lose everything you love in a moment. But that's not a reason to turn away. If anything, it's a reason to turn toward the fire, toward the pain, the chaos, or the disaster in your life – to recognize both its destructive and creative force, and move to take care of what is right in front of you – because there is nothing else you can do but that. That was what was happening at the Sydney airport counter. But only the ticket agent was “showing up.” I had already given up on getting to the US to receive my award when he said, “Let's see what we can do.”

We *can* keep showing up in our life -- one moment at a time. We can stop expecting our faith to *rescue* us from life's disasters and pain, and instead use it to *support* us as we re-frame our hard times in ways that help rather than hurt, that leave us at peace rather than in pieces.

Can you imagine its being one of your religious principles to meet your crucial life experiences with a sense of curiosity and adventure about where they might take you? It's hard to do, but no one ever said being a Unitarian Universalist was easy. It's an optimistic perspective that rewards you with the possibilities of all the unexpected turns in the road.

When the National Fire Service chief telephoned Steve Stücky (the head priest of the San Francisco Zen Center) to say, “The fire is nearly at Tassajara. When will *all* of you be out of there?” Abbot Steve answered, “We are leaving. Also staying.” Steve said he adopted that perspective after a local Korean Buddhist showed up at Tassajara 48 hours before the fire arrived, with a carload of visitors from Korea eager to soak in Tassajara’s famous hot springs. Steve asked incredulously, “Didn’t you see that the road was closed?” “Yes, yes,” the Korean monk smiled, with his towel hanging over his arm. “Road closed. Also open.”

At the book launch, Abbot Steve told us he thought the media was wrong in referring to the five of them as *the fire-fighting monks*, “because,” he said, “we did not *fight* the fire. And we did not touch the fire or turn away from the fire – those, too, would have been wrong. What we did was -- we *met* the fire.”

The professional fire-fighters that the Tassajara community housed and fed during the weeks up to the road-closing, understood this difference between *fighting the fire* and *meeting the fire*. The professionals were known for and proud of being *hotshot* fire-fighters, fiercely committed defeating their raging enemy. They called the Tassajara monks the *cool-shots*, because the fire was never the monks’ enemy. You don’t have to be a Buddhist to live a cool-shot life -- to realize that the painful losses, crushing disappointments, and uninvited changes that burst into and burn through our lives are *not our enemies*.

At the book launch celebration, when I asked Steve Stücky what he thought *now* about the fire, he replied, “I hardly ever think about it.” He seemed to be saying, “That was then; this is now.” I found it hard to believe that could be true, because how could his meeting with the fire not be one of the treasures of his life?

Could it honestly be that, for him, that moment when he was focused on answering my question was just as important, was calling him just as strongly,

as meeting the fire had? I believe it was. It was Zen Buddhism in practice – he was doing *one thing*, and then the next thing, and then the next one. He was giving our conversation his completely undivided full-hearted attention and mindful commitment.

I bought a signed copy of *Fire Monks* to give to my friend in Melbourne who had miraculously survived *our* more recent and more disastrous firestorm. As each of the five monks signed her gift, they took time to ask me thoughtful questions about her fire experiences and wrote inscriptions that were intensely meaningful. It was a powerful example for me, since I have gratefully -- but not nearly so intentionally -- signed hundreds of inscriptions in my own book this past year.

I came away from that afternoon a different person. When they took time to ask about my friend's fire experiences and to consider so carefully what message they wanted to send to a stranger on the other side of the world, the monks were *meeting* her. They were following the warning on the wooden *han* not to waste their life. They were using their 24 hours.

Everything *is* connected.

The Immigration officers had made clear that I could not depart the US, or enter back into Australia, unless I had my passports in hand. My husband dared not risk sending them to me at Tassajara -- where there are no landline-phones, and certainly no Fed-Ex delivery. So I still had two more planes to try to board without any government-issued photo-IDs.

But this time, as I moved through the security checkpoints, I chanted to myself, "I am not *fighting* Homeland Security. I am *meeting* Homeland Security." And it was an entirely different experience. The security officers and I *did* meet. We worked together calmly to move an undocumented person from one coast to the other. There were no enemies.

“I am not *fighting* my life. I am awake and *meeting* it.” That can be a powerful direction for living. As you show up in your life, try it. It may make a big difference.

4 CLOSING HYMN #128

Our closing hymn is number 128 “For All That Is Our Life”.

2 CLOSING WORDS **GT** [all take hands]

UU poet Mary Oliver asks: "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"
When you listen to the calling of your heart, do you plan to Pay Attention?

Listen everyone:

Birth and death is given once.

This moment NOW is gone.

¡Awake, each one. Awake!

Don't waste this life.

6 ANNOUNCEMENTS AND THANK YOU **ADD ABOUT SALE OF MY BOOK**