

Inviting Mara to Tea

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READING

To understand extremist religion and extremist politics, I mean to really understand the source, the motivation for being willing to die for a belief, we need to look to the roots of belief and the genetic foundation of tribalism. This sermon isn't just about that. I confess, I am not a fan of religion. I marvel that I was able to BE a minister of any kind. Being a hardshell agnostic, an anthropologist and a leftist, I fit right in with the Unitarian Universalists. So bear with me. What this is really about is healing. It is about facing our shadow side our inherent complicity in whatever the world is doing, just because we are inextricably caught up in the present incredibly complex moment. So here goes.

The reading comes from the apostle Paul, from Romans where he is struggling to understand his own inability to resist what he calls sin and especially sins of the flesh. He is very confused and unfortunately his writings have been institutionalized and his teachings underlie the fundamental beliefs of Christianity. And yet he is honest in his struggles to control his urges and his failings. Let us listen to his quandary. He says,

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me...24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.”

SERMON

There is a yearning, a longing to be loved that is the story of our lives, from birth to death. None of us are worthy to be loved, we are told by most religions. None can earn God's love. But is this just another mistaken story we inherited from our religious past?

Could it be that being loved unconditionally is actually our inheritance as homo sapiens, our natural condition? Could it be that we have come here in the radical freedom of our faith to find

that we already have a place reserved for us? Could it be that the love that passes understanding has room for saint and sinner alike, that “nothing can keep us from the love” as Paul also said in Romans? Come, let us question all the lies we have been told about conditional love and find the love that has been waiting for us—all this time.

When I found this faith in my thirties it was a revelation to me. This was what the world needed. Instead of dividing into tribes of true believers imagining the worst of each other, here was an invitation to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every single person, whatever their tribe, ethnicity, sexual preference, gender orientation, nationality, language...whatever their exterior mask. Here was a religion that, if adopted by the world, would not divide humanity or alienate people from each other, but that would help people see the good in each other.

And it was a religion that would accept me, a skeptic, a heretic, a free thinker. Here was a religion that was progressive, meaning it stood on the side of love and justice, a defender of the underdog and the oppressed, a religion that encouraged doubt and trusted the individual with the freedom to think for themselves. Even more, it encouraged us to think and to be self-regulating about our thoughts.

I came to Unitarian Universalism with a Buddhist practice already in place, and the two seemed to get along just fine. My Buddhist practice augmented my UU religion. And it completed my Jewish and Christian roots and corrected their shortcomings.

That brings me to poor Paul, struggling with his urges and plagued by guilt and fear of rejection. He was doing the best he could with the cultural milieu in which he dwelt. I have always thought Paul was struggling with his sexuality and I do feel compassion for his struggle. He could well have been a gay man, and have hated himself, his inclinations, who he was because of the prejudice he had internalized. It would explain a lot.

It is a shame that the essence of Jesus' teachings were entrusted to Paul and later Christian scholars who were to misunderstand his core teaching, which was the recognition of the possibility for each one of us to enter what he called the Kingdom of God. They misinterpreted that to mean escape from earthly temptations and earthly suffering. Jesus kept telling them the Kingdom was a state of being that already existed within and among them, a standing invitation to dwell together in full acceptance of and humble service to each other. Jesus favored the downtrodden. He taught us to share our wealth and to be generous and gracious to the lowest, the homeless, the refugee, the lepers and the beggars. I am filled with sadness when I hear preachers claiming to be spreading the word of God but are preaching a

conditional love, a patronizing attitude toward the poor, a defense of violence and blame when they know full well Jesus taught non-violence and forgiveness and understanding.

This brings me back to my Buddhist practice. First I have a Buddhist joke for you. It's a cartoon of two dogs sitting zazen. The one says to the other "The hardest part is learning to stay."

In the Soto school of Zen, there is a word, "shikentaza" which means "just sit." But it also means to be aware, unencumbered with thoughts and tasks. It is easier said than done. Indeed, it is a state of mind that is not easily found, because we are never alone in a way. In sitting in meditation, no one escapes the constant barrage of thoughts and desires that assail us. The normal state of our minds, without meditation, is to ignore the thoughts and desires and just go automatically through life making decisions out of habit rather than as a considered choice. Staying means that we don't drift along with our crazy beliefs and delusions. And we don't reject them out of hand as Paul did. We examine them.

Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Well I think any life is marvelous and worth staying alive no matter how difficult, but life is so much better when we are not caught in some self-destructive belief as Paul was.

Let me introduce another word to you. Sometimes an idea just won't come clear until a word is voiced. This word is "shenpa," a Tibetan Buddhist term that means roughly, "getting

hooked.” The term “shenpa” comes to us through Pema Chodron. You might recognize that name. Pema Chodron is an American/Canadian Buddhist teacher. She is in her 80s now and is revered by many people as a very wise teacher. She got the term from studying with Tibetan Buddhists. And believe it or not, this ties right in with the Apostle Paul’s struggle.

Here is a quote from her. She says,

“Here is an everyday example of *shenpa*. Somebody says a mean word to you and then something in you tightens— that’s the shenpa. Then it starts to spiral into low self-esteem, or blaming them, or anger at them, denigrating yourself. And maybe if you have strong addictions, you just go right for your addiction to cover over the bad feeling that arose when that person said that mean word to you. This is a mean word that gets you, hooks you. Another mean word may not affect you but we’re talking about where it touches that sore place— that’s a *shenpa*. Someone criticizes you—they criticize your work, they criticize your appearance, they criticize your child— and, *shenpa*: almost co-arising.”

I don’t know what the hook was for Paul. I have imagined him to be struggling with several things, but I bet it was his sexuality. And he believed indulgences of the flesh were sinful. Early Christianity was based on the belief that the end was immanent. And they had elevated Jesus from a Jewish mystic and

social revolutionary to a diety, and sins of the flesh were impediments to attaining approval from God the Father. So they became celibate, eschewing marriage, and chaste, avoiding sexual contact. If you recall, Paul had advised his followers to avoid marriage unless they were so tempted by the flesh that they would commit a sin if they didn't marry.

And because Christianity was soon taken over by the male priesthood, women became a source of temptation for them and early on Christianity took on a misogynist character. There was such fear and loathing for bodily pleasures that there arose an extremist school of flagellants and hermits who would torture their bodies to fight those urges.

Well if they had asked Pema Chodron about these urges she would have told them not to run away from them, but to befriend them, to be curious about them rather than afraid.

There is a seminal story from the Buddhist tradition about Mara and the Buddha. See Mara was known as the demon king. He was like the devil, tempting people with greed, hate and delusion so they could never become enlightened—sort of like Lucifer or Coyote, the Trickster. And of course the Buddha was Mara's prime target. He came to visit the Buddha and asked to see him. The Buddha's manager, Ananda, warned the Buddha that Mara had come to pay a visit and he should avoid him. But the Buddha said, no please invite him to tea. And the Buddha would

talk to Mara and be curious about how he was doing. Of course Mara, being himself poisoned with bad intention and duplicity, was not a happy camper. He could take pleasure in tricking people or causing chaos and unhappiness. He could delight in alienating people, but it didn't bring him or the world peace of mind. He was actually miserable in his soul.

When Mara pays us a visit with fear or disturbing emotions we experience *shenpa*. We get hooked and like Paul we run from it or we fight it and struggle with it. Or we give in and indulge the temptation. We should instead stop and take a deep breath and step back from the emotion and look at it with curiosity and kindness. Recognize the hook, the temptation to react, to fight or run. And instead, stay. Stay with Mara. Invite him or her to tea. When we treat ourselves with understanding and loving kindness instead of judgment and ridicule, when we are able to step away from the *shenpa*, the hook and talk to it, we feel a sense of compassion, even for Mara and a deeper understanding of our own motivations.

Every time we give in to Mara's temptations we separate ourselves. We disengage from the Kingdom. We become alienated from our true self. Let me say more about our true self.

There is a chant that is said at most Buddhist meditations. This is everywhere in the world in some form or another. It has some variations but goes like this. "All my ancient twisted karma, from beginningless greed, hate and delusion, born of body, speech

and mind, I now fully recognize, or atone, or avow.” We say “ancient karma,” not because it is from a past life, earned by bad behavior. No, it is simply natural, and we did inherit it—from our parents and their parents, all back through the generations, all of them struggling to survive and nurture their progeny. So Mara, our weakness, is built in.

The important thing is recognizing the existence of greed, hate and delusion in our lives. Mara or the devil comes to visit with these in hand. Now imagine a life without them. Without greed we become open handed. We don’t cling to our possessions and arm ourselves against imaginary robbers. Instead of always feeling there is not enough to go around we find that loosening our grip on material possessions loosens our heart and changes the way we see the world. When we dwell in an attitude of abundance, our blood pressure goes down and we lower our need for more, more, more.

When we live without hatred it is as if we were freed from a prison. The opposite isn’t just love. It is understanding. Mara comes with anger and threats and we are invited to hate him. But when we see him as the pathetic creature he is, and when we see how he himself has been poisoned by his own hatred, we enter into understanding.

And as for delusion, we all exist with some form of delusion. It is the nature of what we are, a creature that thinks and

symbolizes. The world is as it is, but we interpret it through our several senses and then we compartmentalize what we see. Our minds are a filter, a lens. If that filter is one of fear, we see the world as a threat. If we have been taught that men are smarter than women or that Mexicans are lazy, or that liberals are evil, we will have a distorted view of reality. In fact if we do not examine each of our assumptions, we are doomed to live through an unexamined filter. Hatred and delusion will be our filter. If we are able to step back from our cultural context and ask ourselves if we really believe what we have been told, we have begun to see the filter through which we view the world. And the less of a filter we have, the clearer we will be able to see the world.

There is danger at times. There are robbers. There are terrorists. We will die, eventually. These are facts. But to see robbers in our back yard when they aren't there, when they are a projection of our filter of fear, that is delusion. When we fear the imaginary monsters under the bed we are seeing the world through a filter of fear. Our brains are a constant source of delusion because they create a facsimile of the world outside. But when we begin to own our delusions they begin to change from these powerful attractions and aversions to just our little egos begging to be noticed, accepted and loved.

Because that is what Mara really is, our little egos, bless their little hearts, trying not to be abandoned or judged or exterminated.

In some religious renderings of Buddhism, enlightenment is supposed to bring the extinction of the ego, but in the stories of the Buddha, through his life there was always Mara, like another side of the Buddha, like his completion. We never lose our ego in life. We just learn to control it, to understand it and to love it.

We will have to wait for Death itself to reveal whether we still have awareness after death, or a cosmic consciousness or just peace. In any case I suggest you have a bust of yourself cast if you want to insure your identity to continue after you are reunited with the universe.

So, since we cannot run away from Mara and we don't want to succumb to his or her wiles, what do we do? We do as the Buddha did. We befriend Mara. We be kind to her, treat her with understanding and compassion.

Putting this back into modern therapy language, we need to stay engaged, embracing our whole selves, the shy child, the overcompensating adult, the insecure one, the angry persona that emerges at inopportune times.

Staying engaged means not running from life, but embracing it, falling in love with it, becoming one with it, recognizing our inseparableness. *Another thought: An illusion is that we are autonomous beings. We do have the ability to choose this or that, but we make choices out of our experiences and what we have been told, our beliefs. In other words, even our sense of free will is*

compromised by our unexamined life. True free will depends on freedom from delusion, and that is not easily achieved. It takes work, practice. Mindfulness. And it is easy to abandon the work, to disengage and just drift back into the dreamwalking state most people live in.

Ask yourself, “What filter am I seeing the world through? How might I be deluding myself? Am I constantly in a state of wanting? Am I ever satisfied and at peace.”

Although it may be difficult work, it is worth it. There is a place called peace of mind. May you seek it and find it in the heart of this troubled world, in the midst of loss and grief, and in the blessing of existence that we did not earn or merit, but that is astounding in its beauty and generosity. So it is.