

A Thousand Arms of Love

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It is getting pretty hard these days just to read the newspaper. Commentator Sarah Vowell wrote that in the days following the 9/11 attacks just reading the newspapers in New York was a patriotic act. To be able to endure such bad news all the time and still love one's country speaks to our collective fortitude. Well I am not sure things have reached that level yet, but this past week came close. The frustration at seeing the executives at AIG receive bonuses after committing the very acts that caused this cascade in our economy, has been palpable. \$165 million given to people who did exactly the wrong thing. Granted, \$165 million is pocket change next to the billions and billions that have been pumped into AIG to keep it afloat. So in a real sense, you and I own this company with our taxes. Just to place it in perspective for you, if AIG were an actual part of the government we would be spending three times the budget of the Department of Homeland Security on it. Now maybe it is true that it is a company so big that if it were to fail, the consequences would be worse. But needless to say, one would like to see even a little bit of justice being done here.

When we hear about gross injustices like this, it is natural to be angry. We want to believe, if even subconsciously, that the world is a just place where the wicked are punished and the good receive their reward. Obviously things don't work that way in real life, but I think we all have within us a kernel of that expectation regardless of how many times you have read the book of Job. Justice is a noble virtue. Anger over injustice motivated spiritual leaders like Martin Luther King and Mohandas Gandhi. It may be a righteous anger, but anger it is none the less. What do we do with our anger? How do we cope with frustration? How do we find peace in our souls if not in our society?

The Buddhist writer Pamela Bloom shares this story:

“I live in New York City, and I am the kind of person who doesn't like to make too much contact with people on the street. One day, crazy with deadlines, I was rushing to pack for an overseas trip, make a doctor's appointment, and get my taxes to my accountant on time. With eight minutes to get to FedEx, I hurried out of the coffee shop where I'd eaten. Halfway down the block, I realized I was going in the wrong direction and turned around abruptly—at which point, a pedestrian right behind me ran into me. To my mind, it was so slight a bump it could have gone unnoticed. But this other man who ran into me started yelling: ‘How can you be so stupid?! You haven't been aware since the moment you left that coffee shop. You just can't go around bumping into people right and left.’” His tone was really derisive. For some reason he had been nipping at my heels for over a block.

I was outraged. My knee jerk reaction was to say, “You ***, it’s a free sidewalk. If you hadn’t been walking so close to me, this never would have happened.’ In fact I did say a little of that (without the cursing), which of course made him even madder. But as I watched him become apoplectic, something happened. All the teachings I had been studying about compassion came back to me and it was as if something in me shifted. In that moment, I genuinely felt that this man was suffering much, if not more, than me. I didn’t want his day or mine ruined. So I yelled out, ‘Excuse me,’ hoping to say something nice, but he started walking away. At which point I did something I could never have imagined myself doing. I ran to catch up with him, put my hand very gently but firmly on his arm, and waited until we had made complete eye contact. Then I said very, very slowly, with utter genuineness, ‘I’m sorry. I’m *really* sorry.’

He was speechless. I don’t think he had ever received a response to his anger like that and I had never been so intimate with a stranger. Time stopped for both of us and for a split second I think both of us saw the other as a real person. Then he sputtered ‘Well...uh...I guess you had a lot on your mind.’ He whipped around and walked away.

I watched the figure recede in the distance, and my heart filled with what...dare I say love? At the very least, gratitude. Here was a perfect stranger pointing out the chaos of my mind, showing me how even a moment of mindlessness can cause suffering, and then inspiring me to make a leap over years of self-imposed limitations.”

That is what I call forgiveness. You see forgiveness is not about letting someone else off the hook. It is not the proposition that the

wicked should roam the land free from the consequences of their actions. To forgive someone is not a loop hole in justice. Rather forgiveness is at least as much for the person giving it as it is for the person receiving it. It is about our soul work. Forgiveness is letting go of hatred and anger when I really don't want to let go of my hatred and anger. How easy it would have been for Bloom to fall back into her usual pattern of ignoring people or telling them off when they get in your face. You might even say she was justified in doing so. But what would have happen if she had done that? She would have spent the rest of the day brooding; replaying the event over and over in her mind. She could have come up with some really new and creative ways of using curse words at this fellow. You know, something that would have made George Carlin proud. But instead she sought him out, connected with him, and apologized to this man before he left her life forever. She healed this very brief relationship right then and there by letting go of her anger, her suffering, and offered this man compassion in the form of forgiveness.

Bernard Glassman, in our modern reading this morning, talks about Kuan Yin, the Buddhist Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion. Compassion and forgiveness go hand and hand. It was Bloom's experience of compassion for this man, that she truly felt his suffering as if it were her own, that gave rise to her act of forgiving. That impulse in the human psyche is symbolized in Buddhism as the female goddess

Kuan Yin. You have perhaps seen pictures of what Glassman is talking about. Kuan Yin has a thousand arms each one of which holds a thousand tools or instruments. In China one thousand is usually shorthand for “infinite” rather than what we understand to be the actual number of one thousand. So Kuan Yin has an infinite number of possible ways to intervene in the world and relieve the suffering of all living beings. It is not uncommon for devotees of Kuan Yin to call out to her for help in times of distress; not unlike Catholic Christians who pray to the Virgin Mary.

I understand that this may seem strange to many of you. It is all too easy to roll our eyes in disbelief at the religious symbols of another tradition. However do remember that symbols are just that. They are objects that point to a reality deeper than themselves. You see Buddhism, like all of the great religions of the world, can be a very difficult religion to understand. Its concepts can be quite philosophical and not everyone is interested in philosophy. So one needs symbols to convey these ideas like “Compassion”. This makes Buddhism more accessible to more people, but it also takes things deeper. Compassion is not merely a philosophical concept, it is a gut experience. It is soul work, and thus our religious symbols need to speak to us at that deeper level. If you are not from China, Japan, or Korea these symbols may have a hard time speaking to you. But that is OK, so long as we look to

that deeper idea or notion that the symbol Kuan Yin is trying to get across: compassion for everyone everywhere.

You see there are levels to Kuan Yin. Yes at the most overt level she is a goddess that people pray to for favors and even for advice. Martin Palmer and Jay Ramsey, in their book “The Kuan Yin Chronicles” describe this process of turning to Kuan Yin for divination. People ask the Goddess to help them when they are making a major life decision. But as it turns out, Kuan Yin does not tell you your future. She simply gives hints, options, as to what you should think about before you proceed. She does not make up your mind for you—she leaves the decision up to you.

You see Kuan Yin is simply the acknowledgement of human limitation; what Paul Tillich would call our finitude. The divine here is not coercive but persuasive. She is that inner tug of the conscience that calls us to greater understanding and empathy. She is that insight arising as you take your shower that finally clicks, and the solution you have been searching for solves the problem. These experiences are not magic. There is no hocus pocus going on here. She is just a different way of symbolizing those experiences.

What if God were not omnipotent? What if God’s only involvement in the world was appealing to human compassion, wisdom, and effort? Kind of like a combination of the Holy Spirit and Jiminy

Cricket. Many of us may be from a different culture, but the symbol of Kuan Yin is speaking to us at a very familiar level: how do we find peace in our soul? Or if you want to frame it in Universalist terms: how do we generate compassion for everyone? How do we get to a place, like Pam Bloom, where we can in the moment forgive someone yelling at us on the streets of New York City?

Well I have never had an experience like Bloom's but I did have a time in my life when it was hard to forgive someone. When I was in school I was a pretty good student. I kept quiet in class, mostly paid attention, and mostly did my homework. I didn't rock the boat in the classroom. As a result I got along pretty well with most of my teachers throughout Middle School and High School. Of course there were some I liked and some I didn't, but if I got a good grade from them, who cares what I thought of them as a person? This attitude got me far.

That is until my junior year of High School. I, like all of you I am sure, took American lit and read all of the things you read in American lit: Huckleberry Finn, the Great Gatsby, Hemingway, and the Catcher in the Rye. Somewhere toward the end of the year we got to the J.D. Salinger classic. Only, for that particular unit, we had a student teacher lead the class for about six weeks. For some reason, this woman did not like me. My "live and let live" approach was not going to work this time. She would call on me when I didn't know the answers to her questions. She was overly critical, quick to point the finger at me when

disruptions in class broke out. Somehow I had offended this person. I must have killed her cat in a previous life. Whatever it was, I was on her list to humiliate in front of my peers.

This was a disconcerting thing for me at the time. I had never been faced with that situation before. Further, there was really not much I could think to do about it. She was clearly in a position of authority, and I was clearly in a position of vulnerability. I had no appeal; no wonder people turn to Kuan Yin for some compassion! I believe it is fair to say that I truly felt hatred toward this person. She had pretty well shot my self esteem.

Of course time was on my side. While it may have been the longest six weeks of my life, only six weeks it was. She must have gone back to wherever it was she came from; graduate school or perhaps Hades. But the anger I felt toward her never left for the rest of that year. It all came back again on the final exam in American lit: I had not finished reading the *Catcher in the Rye*. It is so hard to let go of that pain. Even when you get sick of it, it comes up again. And again. And again. This woman had power over me long after I ceased to see her every day. It seemed like I could never get her out of my head.

What reaches that level of suffering? What might be the appropriate tool or instrument to heal that particular kind of brokenness? Only Kuan Yin's tool box would be deep enough to find the one to fit

the situation. What “fixed” me? To be honest I don’t really remember. It just sort of faded in time. Perhaps I realized that the opinion of a grad student in the late eighties doesn’t define who I am. It may be easy to see that now, but I had to go through emotional hell in order to get there.

I don’t really remember when exactly I let go of that pain. I like to think that it was a few years later when I began my Buddhist practice. That is my story and I am sticking to it. Buddhism is all about letting go; letting go of a small version of yourself for a larger, more inclusive and open version of yourself. Anger, you see, is a response. It is the natural response human beings have developed over eons of evolution that protects us. Anger is our response when some aspect of our identity feels threatened. This may mean a physical threat of course, but it might also mean some cherished notion we have of who we are as a human being. So that when that sense of self comes under fire, the natural reaction is fear. Fear that we may not be who we think we are—as was my experience with my ex-teacher. I understood myself as a good student who got along with my teachers, and she threatened the narrative I had created about who I was. Anger masks this fear, this threat to self-identity. The next time you are angry, ask yourself, “What am I afraid of?”

Dogen’s famous saying is true: to study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by everything. You no longer have any limitations and are

open to life just as it is without any of those inner narratives to worry about. Let go of these small notions you have of who you are “I am smart, or not”; “I am an athlete, or not”; “I am beautiful, or not”. These are all ego’s game and are not real. Let go of them, and you let go of the fear that gives rise to anger.

Fear gives way to a quiet trust that there is at the heart of the universe a benevolent force. A process that calls to us, asking us to open our hearts just a little bit more than we think we are capable of doing. This voice of love is present in every moment we are alive. But it cannot force you to do things. It is only persuasive; you bear the praise and blame for your own actions. In some cultures this persuasive voice is symbolized by the notion of the Tao, the Way. Buddhists put a feminine spin on it in the form of Kuan Yin. The Unitarian theologian Charles Hartshorne called it the “Divine Relativity.” Take the symbol you like best or none at all. The point isn’t which symbol you prefer. The point is in the listening. Listen. Listen to that voice that says, “Love that man who is yelling at you on the New York City sidewalk.” “Forgive that teacher who hurt your pride so many years ago.” “Let go of that turmoil in your church, in your family, in your heart.” “Breathe when you see the CEO of AIG on CNN in the morning. Remember that your fear and hatred have no effect on him, and only serve to destroy your peace of mind.” Listen.

My friends the moon is not sullied by its reflection in a muddy pond. Be like that moon. Be like Kuan Yin—make yourself one of those thousand arms of love to everyone you encounter in your life. For in offering others your forgiveness, love, and compassion, you will find it in your heart for yourself. Amen Blessed Be.