

For the Time Being

Isaiah 43:18-21; Psalm 16:5-11; Romans 12:1-2
By Christina Reimer (January 31st, 2016 – TUMC)

From 2013-2015, I taught in the Religion Department at Bishop's University in Quebec's beautiful Eastern Townships. The Religion Department consisted of only 3 full-time faculty members, so we were sometimes asked to teach courses outside of our primary fields – for me these courses included Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. This morning, I'd like to share with you some insights that this thoroughly Western girl gained from teaching Buddhism.

I didn't convert to Buddhism as a belief system or anything, but I learned some spiritual practices and ways of thinking that have enriched my life as a Christian.

I'll start by telling one of the Buddha's parables.

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling with fear, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.

The man noticed that two mice, little by little, had started to gnaw away at the vine. Then the man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

The man in the parable appears to be experiencing a moment of crisis, an extraordinary moment outside of ordinary life and ordinary time. But, what if we understand this parable to be about ordinary time? How often do we feel that time is our enemy? That we are caught between two tigers? That the tiger of our past is stalking us and the tiger of our future demise grows closer and closer as we get older? How often do we miss the luscious strawberry that is our present moment between these two tigers?

We know that Jesus, like the Buddha, also used parables in his teaching. Consider this familiar parable from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus told a crowd of listeners: "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches".

We could think of the mustard seed as containing the promise of the *future* kingdom of God – a perfect world to come that will replace the broken world we live in now. But, a Buddhist reading of this Christian parable might say that each moment is a mustard seed, and if we live each moment deeply, then the mustard seed expands into an entire kingdom in the here and now. It is all a matter of perception.

If each mustard seed contains the kingdom of God and each moment contains eternity, then every mundane, exhausting, messy, beautiful, boring, irritating moment of our lives is the time when God is fully present to us. Our reading from Psalm 16 says: “You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy”.

The mustard seed is a perfect parable for a child dedication. This dedication is an affirmation that God is present in each moment of your lives, Doug and Alison, and that your child, Hamish, is both a tiny mustard seed, bursting with potential, and also a part of the broader kingdom of God. It is part of our responsibility, as the church, to nurture Hamish’s sense of belonging in God’s kingdom and to help him to experience God’s presence through all the moments of his life.

The Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a very short and simple book called *The Miracle of Mindfulness* that has had a profound impact on me. His work challenges me to think of every moment as the time when I am standing on holy ground.

Let me give you a few everyday examples of how an ordinary moment can become a holy moment; how a mustard seed can become a kingdom of God.

Consider the act of washing the dishes (Thich Nhat Hanh’s example). When we see a pile of dishes, we can be filled with dread and then we want to wash them as quickly as possible so that we can be done with this chore and watch the latest episode of *Downton Abbey*.

Instead of sitting in a lotus position for hours on end, some Zen practitioners wash dishes as a meditation practice. Through this ordinary practice, they focus on washing the dishes for the sake of washing dishes, not on washing the dishes to finish the dishes. This meditation allows them to focus on the task at hand fully, without departing into the future.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that every act, no matter how mundane, is a holy rite. Each step we take is an arrival at the Bodhi tree – the place where the Buddha reached

enlightenment. He says that the miracle is not to walk on water, but to walk on the earth – to truly walk each step of our lives with full presence arriving at home in our own lives.

I often ponder this when drinking my morning coffee. 1Corinthians 10:31 says: “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.”

Am I actually capable of taking a single sip of coffee for the glory of God? Do I depart from this sip by projecting my thoughts to the next sip and the next? Do I find my cup empty without having taken a single real sip? Greed, it seems to me, is this projection into the future, this departure from the present moment – the inability to cherish this sip of coffee that is the only sip to be had.

Buddhists talk about greed as characterizing one of the many realms of hell called the “realm of the hungry ghosts”. In this realm, the more the ghosts consume, the hungrier they are. In Chinese art they are pictured as having bloated, empty bellies and thin necks that don’t allow nourishment to pass through.

Buddhists say that life is *dukkha*. Or life is suffering.

Another translation of *dukkha* is that life is pervasive dissatisfaction. This is a more ordinary kind of suffering – a state of everyday being. We are not happy with what we have, so we thirst for what the future holds and therefore depart from our present lives. In this way, we can all become hungry ghosts who are perpetually preoccupied with the next thing in our minds, never being nourished by God’s manna that is apportioned to us for this moment; longing only for the kingdom to come, not our present reality.

Nhat Hanh recounts a conversation he once had with his friend Allen, a man with two young children. Allen said to him:

I’ve discovered a way to have a lot more time. In the past, I used to look at my time as if it were divided into several parts. One part I reserved for my son Joey, another part was for my wife Sue, another part was for Ana the baby, and another part for housework. The leftover time I considered my own time. I could read, write, do research, go for walks. But now I try not to divide time into parts anymore. I consider my time with Joey and Sue and Ana as my own time. The time for them became my time. And I find that I have much more time.

There is no moment that is not holy.

I remember the feeling of utter exhaustion when Mike and I would go for months without sufficient sleep, getting up many times in the middle of the night with one of our babies. It felt like we were waiting and waiting for that time to be over so that we could just get to the next stage. I suspect that Doug and Alison sometimes feel like this with their baby. No offense little buddy.

But if we wait for the future, we lose time. We depart from our lives, from the only time we have. I started to meditate when I would be up at night nursing or rocking one of our children. I would breathe in and breathe out, focusing on arriving at home in my own life.

Anyone who has a child with a disability understands what it means to wait for a future that may never come. Our son Bastian is developmentally delayed. As a parent, I used to dread conversations with other parents about whether or not children were “hitting their milestones”, because Bastian always seemed to be a moment behind. And this future normality became more and more elusive.

We worked with him and waited and celebrated with what felt like extra joy when he would master each new skill, like learning to sit up or walk on his own. Now we are focusing on helping him to learn to speak fluently. Life with him is a balancing act between challenging him to develop to his full potential and simply loving who he is right now. If I project my love onto a future child too much, my love for my real child departs.

But doesn't love work like this in all relationships? Nhat Hanh says that the greatest gift you can give anyone is your full presence and to recognize the presence of the one you're with. One of his mantras is very simple: “Darling I am here for you; darling I love you; darling I know that you are here.” This takes practice – not to depart from the moments we share with others. Departing can happen in many ways. One common way is through mental dispersion – by being preoccupied with things other than the person you are with or the task at hand.

Many people boast these days about being great multi-taskers. I used to pride myself on being able to juggle many things at once. In one of my Buddhism lectures, I did an exercise with my students about mental dispersion and multi-tasking. I projected an image of my facebook page onto the screen, then I opened another tab with my email, then poured myself a cup of coffee, turned on the radio, sent my friend a text and made a show of going over my lecture notes for class that day. My students recognized the scene from their own lives. Then slowly I put my

notes away, turned off the music, turned off my phone, exited my webpages and simply took a sip of coffee.

A recent study came out of Stanford University that tested the efficacy of multi-tasking. This study found that people who are regularly bombarded with several streams of electronic information do not pay attention, control their memory or switch from one job to another as well as those who prefer to complete one task at a time.

This kind of mental dispersion keeps us from experiencing the fullness of our present reality. How could I focus on writing a decent email while really listening to music or really drinking coffee or really concentrating on my lecture notes? How can I be fully present to the person I am with if my phone is on or I'm getting notification beeps from facebook?

We can fall into mental dispersion by attempting to multi-task, or we can depart from our lives through worry about the future or the need to escape our present reality, but if we can manage to simply breathe in and breathe out and arrive at home in our lives, then we can stand on holy ground.

I'll end with this passage from Ecclesiastes (5:18-19):

This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot...we shall scarcely brood over the days of our lives, because God keeps us occupied with the joys of our hearts.