

Conspiracies

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

FALL 2014 VOL. 3 No. 1

Conspiracies

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THE FEAST OF RENUNCIATION

NANCY CHU
MDiv '15



This article is excerpted from a longer essay, "The Space Between Us: On Love and Renunciation in Monastic Life," written for the 2014 J-Term course on Comparative Monasticisms, offered through the HDS Office of Religious and Spiritual Life. During this course,

students live and study with a Theravadan Sri Lankan Buddhist community, a Cistercian Christian monastic community, and the director of a Buddhist-Christian contemplative dialogue center. Nancy is a Buddhist Ministry student, planning a vocation in chaplaincy and writing.

The space between us reaches out, translates each thing.
For the essence of a tree to be real for you,
Cast inner space around it, out of the space
That exists in you. Encircle it with restraint.
It has no borders. Only in the realm
Of your renouncing can it, as tree, be known.
--Ranier Maria Rilke, *Uncollected Poems*, trans. by
Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows

To truly know something is to be in touch with its absence. By knowing its absence we come to know the fullness of its existence. Renunciation is the willingness to know something through its absence. For Rilke, it is only when you renounce something that you truly come to know it. Which means that there is a richer dynamic between having and not-having, knowing and not-knowing than we usually see.

This is, I think, because knowing something means being able to see it clearly and fully for perhaps the first time. Clouded by our usual biases, judgments, preferences, desires, hopes, and fears, we are unable to see things as they are. Patrick Henry and Donald Swearer say, "The monastic renunciation of wealth is an absolute prerequisite for the shattering of illusion, for making real the monastic perception that things are seldom what they seem...Monks and nuns know that possession, clinging, attachment is the first distorter of reality" (223). I know this is true for me. It is all too rare for me to see someone without a tremendous amount of accompanying mental and emotional

commentary; sometimes subconscious, sometimes not. Often I am so lost in my self-narrative that I do not even notice as it is happening. But the few times I have been able to hear the inner cacophony, I have been saddened and horrified. Anger, judgment, manipulation, greed, self-benefit, delusion. These are not qualities I like to ascribe to myself, but there they were, as clear as if I were looking at a mirror. How little we see of ourselves, most of the time.

Both love and renunciation are alchemical processes through which the present self is changed. In that sense, they are both forms of self-sacrifice. This is where the need of an other (God, Buddha, the ideal of religious life) comes in. The self on its own only seeks to become more of itself. It needs an other to draw out the wish to become something other than what it is. Outside of the context of monasticism, this tells us that all love requires some kind of sacrifice, all love involves some kind of loss, all love asks for some form of renunciation. The religious life is one in which all other kinds of love are subsumed into the great flaming love for God or the ground of reality or Buddha-nature (language gets loose here, but it is the divine love that powers people into monastic life and sustains them there).

So love is a kind of renunciation, and renunciation is a kind of love. Monasticism is a way of living that brings together the strengths of both in a powerful way. Within monasticism, however, and I think particularly within Buddhist monasticism, there is the essential and unavoidable fact of sensual disengagement.

Monastic renunciation as a practice and discipline *is* about withdrawing attachment to sense objects, which according to the Buddhist tradition are: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, and – importantly – discursive or conceptual thought. This is done to change the quality of attention we give to others and the world. Which may be what finally separates monasticism from other ways of being in the world. Monastics, particularly in structured communities, often have little say in what they eat, what they wear, what they do, or where they go. There are largely determined by the community or by conditions outside of their control: a superior's choice, or the rule of accepting what

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is given, or through the governance of existing traditions. This may sound horrific to modern sensibilities, and perhaps it is. It runs completely counter to many of our regular habits, desires, and sources of pleasure. Brother Lawrence says in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, "Please notice that to arrive at this state [of gazing simply and lovingly at God, finding His presence everywhere], we have to mortify our senses, since it is impossible for a soul that still has some creature satisfaction, to fully enjoy this divine presence. To be with God, one must absolutely leave all created things behind." (108)

This is a strong monastic statement. To me, the path of renunciation has some great and profound virtues. This must be said because I have felt my own internal resistance and because I have seen resistance to it in others. This feeling of resistance is worth examining, because I think it is both wise and unwise. My sense is that this resistance often comes from the thought that turning away from the world or away from sense pleasures is negative and world-denying. Undoubtedly it is, sometimes. But I also think of friends and monastics who have devoted themselves to a spiritual calling or are living with extreme simplicity, and at times I have seen a warm and gentle light in their eyes. There is a quietness to their presence that I think comes from deep and cultivated stillness. Father James, whom we met at St. Joseph's Abbey during our visit this past winter, was an example of this for me.¹ When he talked to our group of students about his reliance on "Uncle Jesus" and his experience of emptiness and seeing his "mean old self," I was moved by the sense of genuine goodness and complete lack of pretense in his way of speaking with us.

These are the fruits of renunciation that we are often not able to see at first. Father James, for example, has been a monk at the abbey for 51 years. If we see Brother Lawrence's statement that "one must absolutely leave all created things behind" only in its negative sense, we are neglecting to see the other side of it, which is that he is speaking from a place of incredible joy and faith.

This is my understanding of it: renunciation is not renunciation if it is only renunciation. If it is only seen in terms of what is lost or

given up, it is sorrowful, repulsed, pushes away, refuses. The other side of renunciation is joyful, free, willing, a going towards, an attraction to something greater. In order to make sense of statements such as that of Brother Lawrence, we have to be able to see renunciation not just in terms of what is lost but in terms of what is gained. To withdraw from full sensual engagement with particular material things or even other people is not just to mortify our senses but to see the shimmering vein of the absolute running through all things. But it does not undo the fact that to renounce is to mortify our senses.

Monasticism tells us that love and renunciation are complex, challenging, multifaceted things. They come in many degrees and with many valences. Because desires and attachments lead to suffering, which is one of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. But they are also deeply human qualities that can take on just about any form and are nearly inevitable in anything we do. We can be attached to God or the religious life unskillfully as well. Attachment leads directly and unavoidably to suffering, which is where Theravada Buddhism is especially and most firm. Which is not to say attachment is bad or negative. It is simply to say that it causes suffering. Monasticism can be a kind of attachment too; we can be attached to even non-attachment as an ideal.

A popular Zen koan— two monks traveling together come to a river and prepare to cross. A young woman waiting on the side comes by and asks for help to cross the river. Without a word the older monk picks her up, wades to the other side of the river, and sets her down. The two monks keep walking. The younger monk, pensive for a long time, finally cannot contain himself and asks, "Dharma brother, the *vinaya* (monastic code) says we aren't supposed to touch women. Why then did you carry her?" The older monk says, "Dharma brother, I set her down a long time ago. Why are you still carrying her?"

To my mind, these do not represent two types of monastic approaches so much as they do two stages of the monastic path. In 1997, Spirit Rock Meditation Center hosted a retreat co-led by Ajahn Amaro, a Theravadan monk, and Tsoknyi Rinpoche, a lay Vajrayana teacher. Tsoknyi Rinpoche's comments on Ajahn Amaro at the end of the retreat, reported by Guy Armstrong,

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provide insight into the dynamic between “looseness” and “tightness” in monastic renunciation. He said, “I’ve never met anyone like him before. His Vinaya [monastic discipline] is very strict. Usually when the Vinaya is strict, inside, the monk is very tight. But he is very loose inside and always happy.” (xvi)

In my experience, there is often a real misunderstanding about monastic attitudes toward the world. The sense of a rigid “right and wrong” mentality we might think is found in more observant or disciplined monastic orders is not a function so much of their rigorous observance as it is merely a stage in the long, slow path of monasticism. I say this because the older monastics in even the most renunciate orders that I have met often have an open, untroubled, and deeply accepting quality to their presences. By this I mean that the enthusiastic dismissal of the worldly life and sensual engagement may be just a part of the monastic “process.” Because there is a re-engagement, but one’s way of relating to the world has been transformed through the alchemical process of monastic life.

It does not mean a return to pursuing sense pleasures but the eventual emergence of something that is untroubled by both, that is neither attached to sensuality nor preoccupied with harsh asceticism. By that I mean the great sense of ease and calm of one who has climbed to the top of a mountain or the joyful flow of a winding river that has found its way to the sea. Which I have not found in myself but have been able to glimpse in others for a few moments in my life. They have sustained in me a faith that there is a beyond or more, that we are able to change, and that we contain within ourselves possibilities for a deep and profound goodness greater than what we can see.

Footnote

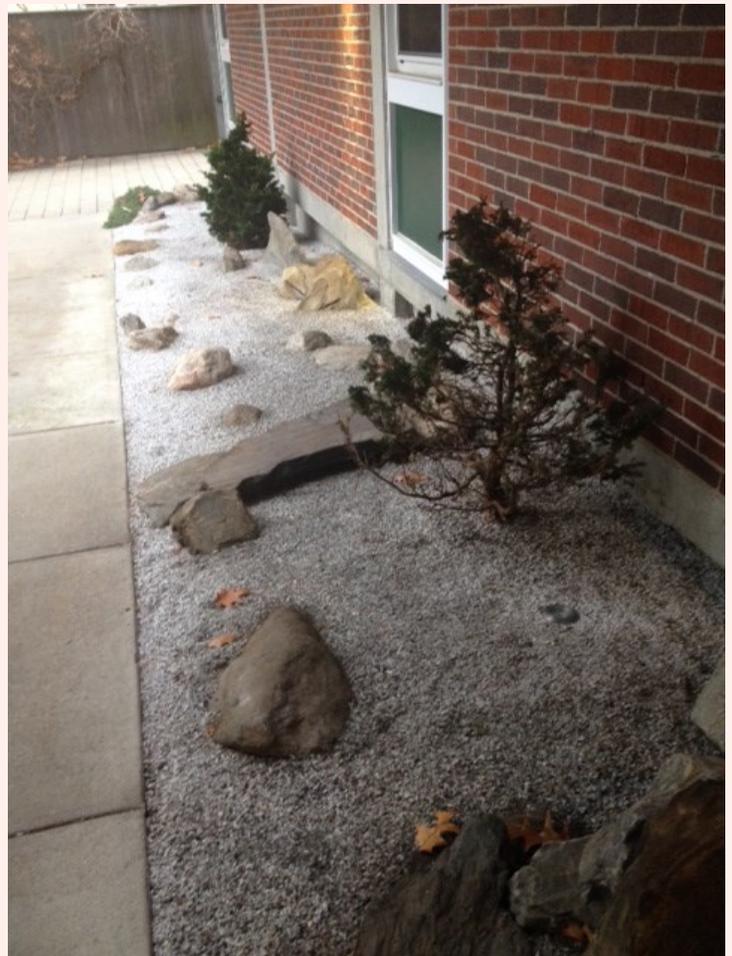
Name changed to protect privacy.

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HOLY GUARDIAN ANGELS

MATTHEW L. POTTS

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF MINISTRY STUDIES



Professor Potts, a priest in the Episcopal Church, preached this sermon at the weekly Thursday Ecumenical Eucharist on October 2, 2014, the feast of the Holy Guardian Angels.

I have some ambivalence around this feast, the memorial of the Holy Guardian Angels. For one thing, this feast is not one we celebrate in the Anglican Communion, and so I didn't know what color stole to wear. We celebrate St. Michael and Angels, so I went with their color, white, which I believe is right. But such are the dilemmas of ministry: why don't we teach this in Introduction to Ministry Studies?

By my real and deeper ambivalence has to do with the day as such. What are we to make of guardian angels? Another Anglo-Catholic, the theologian John Milbank (who's known for saying interesting and compelling, but sometimes highly uncharitable, things) once said that any Christian minister who could not give a coherent account of the role of Angels in God's plan of salvation should be summarily removed from ministry and have his Holy Orders revoked. So I'm going to disappoint Professor Milbank a bit today.

The other problem with this feast is that I don't have any of the usual crutches that we preachers use to shore us up when we haven't a clue what to say. My parish is full of retirees, and one sure fire thing I can usually use when I'm homiletically lost is to

mention my kids, and stir thoughts of grandchildren in all those grey heads. Immediately my sermon proves a success to my congregation. But that won't work here, or not as well. I could turn to the text, but our gospel lesson from Matthew is little help, included – it seems – only because it's the one scant reference in all Christian scripture that we have to the possibility of anything like a personal guardian angel. If it were a saint's day, of course, I could spend time talking about his or her life. But who knows about the lives of angels?

I'll just have to delve into these words—Holy, Guardian, Angels—and explore them one at a time, try to determine where my ambivalence lies.

So, the first word, Angel. Those of you in Greek know that this just means messenger, but scripturally we find angels to be so much more, don't we? We have a few biblical depictions of angels. We hear about Gabriel and Michael. If you read closely or widely in scripture, you might have encountered Raphael or Uriel. Perhaps the most incredible—in the old sense of that word, that is, unbelievable—angelic accounts are of the cherubim, these creatures with four faces (that of a man, a lion, an ox, an eagle), and four wings, with human hands hiding underneath each wing, and calves feet, and with a million eyes on each week so that they can see all. This is incredible, unbelievable. It's just plain hard for me to believe such a thing exists. But in one of my favorite novels, there's a character

who says, 'Even in this world more things exist without your knowledge than with it,' and I'm sure that's true. As strange and unbelievable as the cherubim are, I have no doubt that stranger and more incredible creatures exist in our world, in places unseen, in the dark nooks and crannies of the deep ocean or dark caves. So I guess I don't doubt the strangely prolific and mysterious weirdness of God's power as creator, I don't doubt that such things could exist. My ambivalence around angels must lie elsewhere.

And I think it lies in that second word, 'Guardian.' What would it mean for each of us to have a personal guardian? What could it mean that I, that you, have a personal angel, a personal emissary and protector who reports directly on my or your behalf to *God*? I'm a Christian theologian, and it's so easy for me to think about the love of God in the abstract. God is love, unspecified and unspecific, fine, fair enough. But it's harder to believe that God loves each of us, me, you, each of us, personally, protectively, individually, in our everyday lives. And even if I did believe it, a few years in ministry might convince me otherwise.

I remember my first night on-call in CPE, about an hour in I was called up the the neonatal intensive care unit to baptize a dying baby. And I remember how silently the mother wept, and I remember her tears falling on the expiring body of that poor child as I dribbled water over its tiny head, and I remember how loud and awkward the sacramental words sounded

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ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF MINISTRY STUDIES

in all that awful silence. Where was that child's guardian?

I remember a man and a woman from my parish who'd been married almost fifty years, and I remember how he went to the hospital for a routine procedure one day and died of a heart attack on the table. And I remember sitting in the emergency room, and watching this poor woman – I don't even know if she realized what she was doing – I remember her kissing each of his hands, his feet, his eyes, his nose, his lips, in this spontaneous and terrible ritual and her wailing, 'What am I going to do without you?' again and again and again. Where was his guardian? Where was hers?

Or more personally now, I remember my friend John Darby, a professor at the University of Ulster who worked in the Northern Ireland peace process and peace processes in Sri Lanka and the Philippines and east Africa. He was one of the wittiest and most eloquent people I've ever met, but in his mid-60s he was diagnosed with a particularly cruel form of ALS which

attacked his throat and vocal chords first, so that this man of such wonderful speech could not speak in his dying days. The last time he visited my family before he died, he could only babble and drool, this witty, eloquent man. And I remember my daughter, then a year old, bouncing on his knee, and them babbling and drooling to each other, because she was the only one who didn't understand how sad it all was. Where was his guardian? Or the guardian of all those people in peace processes who depended on his expertise?

But here's the thing: as I think about these terrible scenes, there are several words I might use to describe them, but one word I cannot but use is this one: *holy*. As I recall that grieving mother's tears christening her dying child, I cannot but call it holy. I want to take off my shoes and bow. When I recall that woman kissing her dead husband's eyes, I cannot but call it holy. I want to drop to my knees and pray. When I think of John Darby and my daughter babbling and drooling to each other in my living room, I cannot but call that moment

holy. I want to rope off the space and make a shrine. And if all holiness comes from God, then despite all my doubts and ambivalences around angels, then I have to reckon with the real and really terrifying possibility that all God's strange, creative power might actually, terribly be present even in these awful moments. If all holiness comes from God, then I have to reckon with the real and really terrifying possibility that all God's loving protection might actually, terribly be present even in these tragedies. If all holiness comes from God, then I have to reckon with the real and really terrifying fact that holiness doesn't usually look anything like what I want it to look like. And as we approach the cross of Christ this and every day, perhaps I shouldn't be so surprised.

This account of guardian angels surely would not satisfy John Milbank. But it's the best I can do this morning, as my faith seeks understanding. Amen.



INDIA'S FINAL DESTINATION

ABHISHEK RAMAN

MDiv '17



Abhishek is a Master of Divinity degree candidate at Harvard Divinity School focusing on South Asian Religions. In particular, Abhishek is interested in business ethics and the economic impact of social cohesion. Immediately prior to coming to HDS, Abhishek served as the Campus Engagements Manager at Interfaith Youth Core where he executed strategy consulting engagements with colleges and universities to make interfaith cooperation an institutional priority. Before his non-profit consulting role, Abhishek worked with the U.S. Department of State to implement federally-funded grants to promote interfaith youth service projects globally.

Abhishek holds a B.A. in Government and Sociology from Clark University where he was the student body president. In 2013, Abhishek was selected by the World Economic Forum as a Global Shaper, a group of leaders under the age of 30 charged with catalyzing positive social change in their respective communities. He is a leadership team member of the Faith and Values Caucus of the Democratic Party, serves as a Young Professional Ambassador of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and regularly consults with political organizations and candidates on developing faith-based partnerships.

There is a savage irony to the fact that the horror which unfolded in Mumbai on July 13, 2011 began with a bomb blast in Zaveri Bazar, the city's glittering jewelry market which has also witnessed similar blasts in 1993 and 2003. The bomb was supposedly planted in a motorcycle which exploded between two jewelry stores – one owned by a Gujarati Bori Muslim and the other by a Gujarati Hindu. Both stores were burnt to ground by the intensity of the blasts.

There were three bomb blasts in total, occurring in a span of eleven minutes, killing 17 people and injuring over 141. This time the blast sites were not five-star hotels frequented by the rich and wealthy but neighborhoods like Dadar and Opera House populated by the working and middle classes. As I watched the horror unfold on live television, I saw bodies and limbs strewn everywhere on the streets. People were crying and screaming. The blood flowing on the streets was that of Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Dalits and Brahmins alike. It was a chilling realization of the fact that no matter which social class or religion one belongs to, extremism strikes everyone.

But *Mumbaikars* came out in large numbers to help their fellow city men and women. They picked up blood-soaked victims and transported them to the hospitals. They tweeted and retweeted government helpline numbers, created a "Google Doc" with information about those offering assistance, helped police officers diffuse a fourth bomb planted in the city, and secured their streets and neighborhoods from rioting.

Mumbai stands for profane dreams, indiscriminate openness and a strong sense of resilience. Mumbai is indeed a final destination – a symbol of opportunity for scores of Indians who migrate to the city every day in search of a better life. I was born in India when Mumbai was still Bombay. A city defined by the magnificent arch called the Gateway of India built in 1911 to welcome King George V and Queen Mary to the country. It has since then stood as a symbol of openness of the city, welcoming scores of new immigrants.

During my visit to the city in 2012, I stood on the sacred space between the Gateway and the Taj Mahal Hotel where in 2008; extremists had held the city hostage for three days. I saw crowds flocking around *chai* (tea) stalls and *nimbu pani* (lemonade) stalls, touts hawking their wares, boats bobbing in the water with their owners waiting to offer customers cruises out to the open

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ABHISHEK RAMAN

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sea. But in this space, I also got a glimpse of India's plurality— Parsi (Zoroastrian) gentlemen out for their evening walk, Muslim women in burkas taking the sea air, Goan Catholic waiters enjoying a break from their duties at the stately Taj Mahal Hotel, Hindus from every corner of the country chatting in a multitude of tongues.

Attacks such as these cannot break India's soul which has learned over arduous millennia to cope with tragedy. The above example is a testament of India's resilience and the strength of its pluralistic fabric. However, what will break India is if Indians move away from the spirit of pluralism and start pitting one group of people against the other. The extremists not only wanted to sow seeds of hatred within India but also across its borders with Pakistan. As the two countries continue to engage in bi-lateral talks to build confidence-building measures, they should use these incidents to strengthen collective security rather than treat them as barriers to conversations between them.

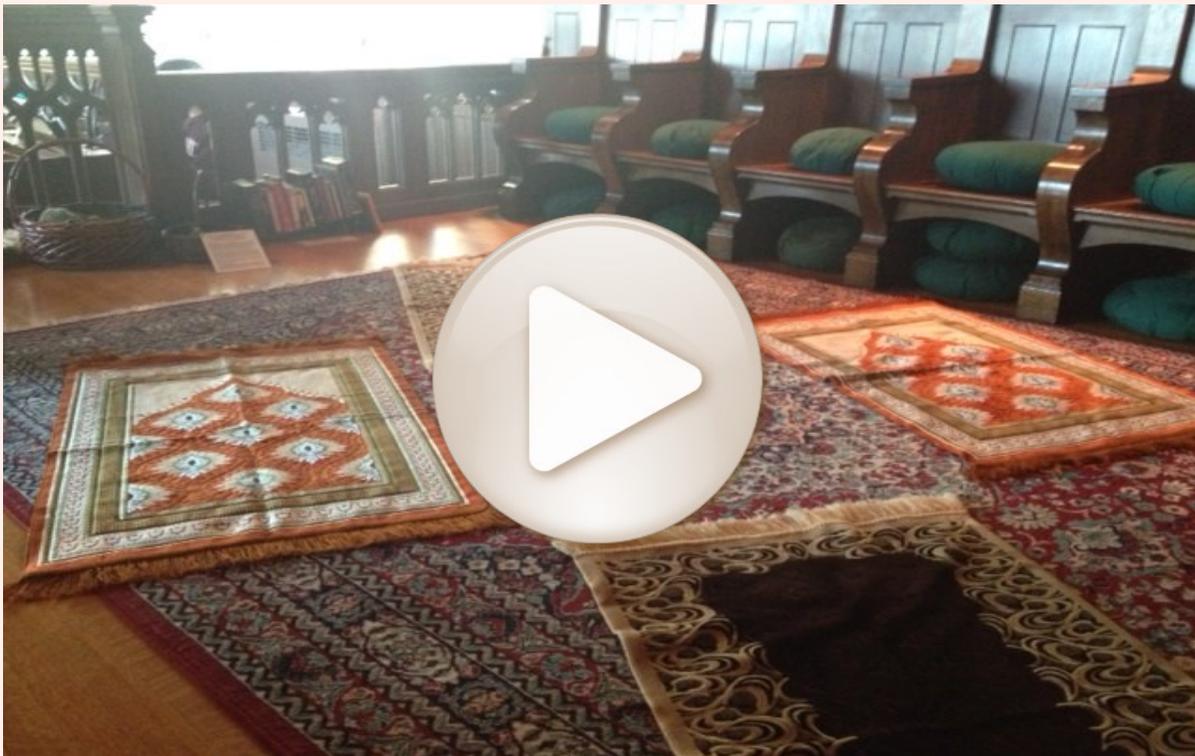
As I went home on that dreadful day in July 2011, I picked up Suketu Mehta's book, *Maximum City* and read the "hands on the train" passage which deftly captures the soul of Mumbai:

"If you are late for work in the morning in Bombay, and you reach the station just as the train is leaving the platform, you can run up to the packed compartments and find many hands stretching out to grab you on board, unfolding outward from the train like petals... And at the moment of contact, they do not know if the hand that is reaching for theirs belongs to a Hindu or Muslim or Christian or Brahmin or untouchable or whether you were born in this city or arrived only this morning or whether you live in Malabar Hill or New York or Jogeshwari; whether you're from Bombay or Mumbai or New York. All they know is that you're trying to get to the city of gold, and that's enough. Come on board, they say. We'll adjust."

Adapted from the article published on IFYC.org on July 22, 2011

DHIKR AT HDS

On Thursday evenings, HDS Muslims gather in the meditation corner of Andover Chapel for Dhikr, the devotional remembrance and recitation of the holy names of the Divine, and for recitation of the Qur'an. Led by Rushain Abbasi, MTS '15, these weekly gatherings are open to all in the HDS community, as are the meetings of all religious and spiritual organizations that meet on our campus. This audio excerpt comes from October 2014. It contains brief portions of the Whispered Prayers of Iman 'Ali.



A MANIFESTO FOR FALL

HILARY LAKE
MDiv '11

Hilary wrote this prayer for one of the weekly Friday services of the Harvard Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Students (HUUMS) during her years of study at HDS.

Be open to change, as the wind shifts direction.
Embrace the possibilities for whatever might fly by.
Be the fruit offered as nourishment for all who arrive.
Be the tree that grows up only about as much as it grown down.
Be the leaves sharing their true colors as their green life drains away.
Be the moss that spreads new grown in the dark bare patches.
Be the seeds covered by the earth. Maybe part of you will sprout,
Offering your losses as enrichment for the next layer underfoot.
Remember, you might need to use it later,
or at least something will.
Nothing is wasted.
All is noticed.
Be.

-
October 1, 2010 (HUUMS service)



ON SIMCHAT TORAH

KAREN TERRY
MTS '15



Karen Terry is a second year Master of Theological Studies candidate with a concentration in Religion and the Social Sciences. She is a member of the HDS Jewish Student Association and the 2014-15 field education intern in the HDS Office of Religious and Spiritual Life.

MOBIUS (V'ZOT HA-BRAKHA)

by Rachel Barenblat

I want to write the Torah
on a mobius strip of parchment
so that the very last lines
(never again will there arise,
arpeggio of signs and wonders
stout strength and subtle teaching)
would lead seamlessly to
the beginning of heavens
and earth, the waters
all wild and waste, and God
hovering over the face of creation
like a mother bird.
This is the strong sinew
that stitches our years together:
that we never have to bear
the heartbreak of the story ending
each year the words are the same
but something in us is different

I always find the Jewish High Holiday season to be a whirlwind of emotion. The whole month of Elul is spent building up to the gravity of Yom Kippur—the sound of the shofar and the prayers of *selichot* calling us to *teshuva*, to repentance, to return—reminding us that we cannot afford to wait another year to make change in our lives. Time is too precious not to walk in holiness as often as we can. Then, suddenly, just when I've gotten it in my head to be solemn and contemplative, life is filled with sweetness again, with honey and apples and round challah loaves, with joyful gatherings of friends and family at Rosh Hashanah and a reminder that time is cyclical, at least from the calendrical perspective. Fast on its heels, though, comes Yom Kippur, a day wholly devoted to atonement and the setting of new intentions; a day when we remind ourselves of our humility and our mortality by fasting, devoting ourselves to prayer and repentance, and donning the white *kittel* in which we will someday be buried. Our solemnity lasts only a day, however, before it is time to prepare for Sukkot. The day after Yom Kippur, tradition tells us, we should begin building our sukkah; we cannot wallow too long in the misdeeds of our past before turning forward to bountiful joy, both in the harvest that Sukkot celebrates and in the companionship of friends and family we invite into our sukkahs. And yet, even Sukkot maintains a balance between a love for life and the gravity of mortality (it is a temporary dwelling, after all), at least until Simchat Torah. On Simchat Torah we unabashedly celebrate the gift of Torah with hours of song and dance (and yes, often alcohol) as we complete a cycle of Torah readings in Deuteronomy and turn immediately to Genesis to begin again. If that cycle of ups and downs doesn't leave one a little dizzy, I don't know what would.

It was not until this year, however, that I began to think of this holiday roller coaster as a blessing, rather than a burden. With one holiday flowing immediately into another, Jewish time leaves no clean break between the old and the new. The new year for the Jewish calendar may begin at Rosh Hashanah, but what is the new year for a Jewish soul? When the gates to heaven open on Rosh Hashanah or when they close eight days later on Yom Kippur?

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KAREN TERRY
MTS '15

When tradition tells us our fates are sealed on Yom Kippur or when we return to the birth of the world in Genesis on Simchat Torah? the celebration of Sukkot. It is disorienting, confusing, and beautiful all at the same time—kind of like a Mobius strip. Or life. Halfway through the first semester of my last year at HDS, I have been thinking a lot about beginnings and endings lately. It is the start of a new semester, with new classes, a new job, and a whole new incoming class. For me, also, a new sense of direction. This year, I started an internship in the HDS Office of Religious and Spiritual Life as a way of exploring a vocation in chaplaincy or counseling. I think I began sensing a call to this kind of work last fall as I struggled to find meaning in my paper-writing but found it instead in moments of connection with colleagues *outside* the classroom. Or was it back in high school, before I converted to Judaism, when I interned at my family's Presbyterian Church? Or as a child, when I asked my mom one night if the fact that God came before people and dinosaurs meant S/He also came before death? When did I set aside my high-school goal of becoming a professor? Was it last year at HDS or was it never really my goal to begin with?

Clearly, it can be hard to pinpoint beginnings.

It can be equally hard to pinpoint endings. This spring I will graduate from HDS—a thought which both excites and terrifies me—and my time here will come to a close. I have only just begun to figure out what I am doing here and already I must look forward to what I will do when I leave: perhaps a CPE program; perhaps a job at a non-profit; perhaps, eventually, a move back to New York. But when will my life at HDS really end? On the last day of classes next semester or when I walk across the stage at Memorial Church? When I turn in my last final, or when I lose my Harvard Health Insurance, or when I say goodbye to the last friend leaving the Boston area? Although our calendars claim plenty of “first days” and “last days” and “new years” our lives are indeed linked by strong bonds that muddle those beginnings and endings.

The tumult of the Jewish High Holiday season, and Simchat Torah in particular, is in this way a wonderful reminder of the

way our lives and experiences are woven together across the years. In turning back to Genesis after mourning the death of Moses, we remind ourselves that our story and this great prophet's story begin in the same way: as partners with God in the ongoing miracle of creation. This, then, is indeed the strong sinew that binds our years together. For it is not that one story begins where another one ends, but that the new story has always *already* begun and we are living in the midst of it.

May we each hold tight to those strong sinews and fill all our beginnings and endings with complexity and wonder.

EVERYONE IN THE WORLD IS HERE

LAUREN TAYLOR
MDiv '15



Lauren A. Taylor, MPH, is a third-year Master of Divinity Candidate at HDS, where she studies science, religion and ethics with a focus on health care delivery. She is the author with Elizabeth H. Bradley of the American Health Care Paradox: Why Spending More is Getting Us Less (Public Affairs, 2013). Lauren delivered these remarks at the HDS Noon Service, hosted by the Office of Ministry Studies honoring field education, on October 15, 2014.

When I was invited to provide a homily at today's Noon Service, I was reminded of the time I had to ask his eminence, Jonathan Walton to define homiletics for me while seated in the basement of Memorial Church. Truth be told, even in the short time between that embarrassing instance and when Laura Tuach in the Office of Ministry Studies asked me about today, whatever working definition Professor Walton provided had vanished from my brain. I had to Google it this time around. And when I couldn't find an example I trusted, I had to ask Laura whether the readings ordinarily come at the front or back. Clearly, I didn't accept the standard formulation here. Also clear by now, I'm sure, is that the depth of my religious understanding—in either the theoretical or practical sense—remains pretty limited after two years.

I came into HDS with eyes wide open to my own ignorance. I knew I had not really been raised in a church and had never taken a religious studies course. But I desperately wanted to be here, and before I arrived, I received great, practical advice for entering a new disciplinary space. A mentor said, "The worst thing you can do is pretend you know something when you don't. Come clean and ask—early and often." I've aimed to take his counsel seriously.

Now, HDS being what it is, this strategy has worked out beautifully. I've asked so early and so often by this point that just yesterday, my dear friend Noah, who knows I am barely keeping my head above water in a church history class, scribbled a Greek translation for *logos* on the top of his loose-

leaf paper. I did not prompt him, but as a minister-in-the-making, he can and does anticipate the things I don't know. And I, in return, am infinitely and genuinely grateful.

But the real world—where field education takes you—can be less forgiving. I've done two field ed placements at local hospitals in my first two years. Last year, in the Office of Ethics at Boston Children's Hospital, and my first, at Mass General as an oncology chaplain. And while these are two fine institutions with many generous souls like Noah, much of my time working as a chaplain was spent figuring out what to say to someone when you are wearing the mantle of ministry and you feel like an absolute fraud. For me, this was based largely on the fact that I knew next to nothing about religion. But if we're really being honest with ourselves here, particularly as first year student from out of town interning at a major medical center, it's not like I knew much of anything else of relevance either.

In a reflection paper on chaplaincy from two years ago, I recalled:

I felt I was supposed to know where the bathroom was but had to wander looking lost. I felt I was supposed to be able to give directions to patients, but the hospital was just too big to ever master. I felt I was supposed to know how to page people but ultimately relied on the operator all year.

More egregiously, I felt I was supposed to know what denomination allowed women to wear white collars. I was supposed to know what it meant to be a UU. I felt I was supposed to be able to offer mental detours for the dead ends my patients hit in their own theological reflections. Even after I mastered the idea that I could not literally solve problems, it still felt like I was missing a whole

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brain bank of relevant information on these strangers, their relationships, their cancer, and their faith.

This was the enduring challenge of my time in field ed--getting over the not-knowing. Slowly, I began to master enough of the vernacular to ask clear and appropriate questions about my new world. And I have to say, this was a challenge unto itself. Contrary to popular belief, you don't just wake up one day with the requisite resources to ask good questions.

Then one day, I ran headlong into a client of whom I could ask little. And, ironically, the not-knowing that had plagued me all year was revealed to be a gift.

Easha was a 60-year old woman from Morocco receiving chemotherapy. I discovered her, alone and bored, in her room while rounding, so I stopped and introduced myself with the usual song and dance accompaniment. She looked at me, puzzled, and responded with "Bonjour". She spoke little English but was fluent in both Arabic and French, thereby qualifying her, in my book, as a linguistic genius. She asked me if I spoke any languages other than English, and I cringed. "Un peu de francais." With everything but my words, I begged her forgiveness for what I knew would be the roughshod implementation of her native tongue. Nonetheless, I sat with her for nearly twenty-five minutes as we discussed her family, her Islamic faith, and her experience in the hospital. I admitted that my only exposure to Morocco had been the movie *Casablanca*, so we used the film as a starting point. In describing her illness, she found herself at a loss for medical terms and resorted to facial expressions of dizziness and nausea. We laughed at my incompetence and she strove to accommodate me with bits of Franglais here and there, including, most memorably a full-throated: "Viva L'Obama!" Our experience called up memories of an idea first presented to me by HDS Professor

Cheryl Giles: Every being is (1) like all others, (2) like some others, and (3) like no other. That day, even without being able to communicate with Easha in her own language, I knew enough. Or perhaps Easha and I had just found a certain beauty in the not knowing.

I'd like to close with a reading from a book that, in many ways, led me to divinity school. The book is titled *Here If You Need Me* and it's written by a *real* chaplain, Kate Baestrup, who works with the Maine Warden [read: forests and lakes, not prisons] Service. In the final chapter, she offers her own reflection on how, in that not-knowing space, people can show up—and shock and delight you—planting seeds of faith in something altogether different from what it is you wish you knew, even in the direst of circumstances.

So I arrived, not so long ago, in a small northern Maine community. An elderly woman, an Alzheimers patient, let's call her Connie – had wandered off and the "PLS" (or, place last seen) was near the woods.

The wardens established a command post at the fire station and by the time I got there, it was swarming. Some of the volunteers could lay claim to a certain level of applicable expertise. There were emergency service providers of various kinds, local firefighters, off-duty sheriff's deputies and woods-savvy members of the local rod and gun club. The volunteer Maine search and rescue dog teams, those middle aged hobbyists with their fine, trained dogs, had arrived in force. Then there were the less obviously skilled. A half dozen elderly backwoods guys in flannel shirts, a gaggle of college students with unfortunate piercings, some overweight Elks and a Shriner or two. .. Connie's son, Jim, able-bodied and fifty-ish, announced that searching for his mom would be less stressful than just sitting

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around waiting. So Jim was put on a team as well. Those members of the community too old or obviously out of shape to search set up shop in the firehouse and commenced to cooking.

Perhaps you would like to fast-forward to the end of the story. Was Connie, the white haired woman, found, and found alive?

Well, usually there is a find. The wardens work hard to get one and generally they succeed. But I'm not going to tell you if it happened in this case, for in the end it is not a story about success, however richly deserved and deeply desired.

In a true story, the end is never tidy. So I can only give you untidy searchers returning to the firehouse for their lunch. They are tired, cold and very hungry. They are greeted with platters of lasagna, bowls of coleslaw, tottering piles of oatmeal cookies and jewel colored Jell-O. The odor of damp boots and wet dogs mingles with the scents of fish chowder and fresh biscuits.

Jim comes back to the firehouse with a heavy heart. He has scratches on his cheek, twigs in his hair, pine needles down his pants and his

mother is still nowhere to be found. Yet he takes in the scene before him, mops the rain from his face, and smiles.

"Look at this," he says. "Look at this! This is incredible."

The firehouse is filled with people. The old coots in flannel shifts, the middle aged dog handlers, and the college students with piercings are sharing chop suey with the state senator and his teenage daughter. The US Marines are comparing blisters with high school soccer players, the sheriff's deputies are breaking bread with convicts, and the stained-glass artist offers a retired state trooper an oatmeal cookie.

In a little while, they will go back out and search some more. They will try and find a body, living or dead. For now, they are here in community, bent on the common purpose of love.

"Everyone in the world is here," the lost woman's son exclaims. "It's a miracle!" Amen.

Amen.



REFLECTIONS ON FERGUSON

CHAVIS JONES
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Chavis was one of a dozen students who traveled from Cambridge to Ferguson, Missouri in late August to stand in solidarity with those

protesting the shooting of Michael Brown by a Ferguson police officer. Upon their return to HDS, the group held a forum for the campus and has continued to lead the community's effort to offer religious, theological, ethical, and politic responses to systemic racism in our society. Jonathan Walton, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in Memorial Church, has also written and preached about racialized police violence in the fall of 2014. You can [read](#) his November 26, 2014 op ed in the New York Times and [listen](#) to his December 7, 2014 sermon at Memorial Church.

In mid-August, a friend told me that there would be a motley crew of Harvard graduate students (primarily from HDS but also from Harvard Graduate School of Education and Harvard Medical School as well) taking a trip to Ferguson, MO in response to the fatal shooting of Michael Brown. I instantly decided that I had to go. I informed no family members, packed enough clothes for a weekend, and boarded a twelve-passenger van with twelve people and plenty of luggage on what would be a long and uncomfortable twenty hour ride to Ferguson from Cambridge. The discomfort might have come from the lack of adequate leg space but it was mostly from the balance of mystery and excitement that pervaded the van. We honestly had no clue what we

were getting ourselves into but we were committed to the journey.

When we arrived on Saturday afternoon at Eden Theological Seminary, which hosted us, we knew that we had a limited amount of time in Missouri, as some of us had to be back to start school-related activities on the following Monday. Once we had unpacked, we met with Professor Jonathan Walton, Pusey Minister of Memorial Church and Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard, who commissioned the group to come together. Following some instruction from him about how we could assist with existing service projects in the area, we used the remaining bit of time we had to be engaged in Ferguson. That evening we went into the extremely small city of Ferguson where we saw the huge, military-like encampment of police officers from across Missouri, along with actual military personnel, at a local grocery store. Then we went to the protest site, a narrow strip of highway in Ferguson, where we met a relatively small but vibrant group of protestors and onlookers canvassing the area. We had conversations with many of the protestors and citizens and met the now-famed officer Ron Johnson along with several other high-ranking police officers.

The following day, we began the morning at a local Baptist church in St. Louis where Professor Walton was preaching. His sermon focused on the issues unfolding in Ferguson and how we are to be engaged in fighting systems of injustice writ large. After the service, we ventured to the

Dellwood Recreation Center in Ferguson, a place that had been used by the United Way to house hundreds of Ferguson's citizens during the weeks of protest to provide food, toiletries, and basic necessities that were not available because due to store closings in the wake of mass looting and the fear of looting. At Dellwood, we met young students who couldn't go to school, but found solace at the Recreation Center, where they played games, received counseling, and got their fill of fruit snacks and other foods. We also met volunteers who told us that similar crisis centers were typically reserved for natural disasters.

The most impactful part of the trip followed our visit to Dellwood when we went to the actual site of Michael Brown's death, an extremely small apartment complex, where flowers and other items were laid in honor of Brown. I'll forever have that scene sketched in my mind. I remember meeting friends of Michael Brown, and it was apparent how much that they took refuge in each other following his death. I also remember seeing a young boy, no more than 4 years old, placing a teddy bear bearing the inscription, "Take me home." I watched and listened as his grandmother told him, "No one had a right to take Michael home." I'll never forget the sadness that was shown in that child's face. The place where he laid his bear has since been burned down in a supposed act of hatred. We stayed at the site of the murder for hours, where we met citizens, who were excited about having Harvard students there, saying that we represented

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“the future,” a refrain we’d heard from several citizens at the protest site, officer Ron Johnson, and many others. The irony that we represented hope for the future for some of the people of Ferguson was that they had no clue how much this weekend had changed the trajectory of my future, along with many of those that I traveled with. We ended our trip by

attending a prayer vigil at the old courthouse in St. Louis (the site of the Dred Scott decision in the mid-1800s), where we held silence for four minutes, allotting one minute for each hour that Michael Brown laid on the street uncovered after his death. Then we left, taking the twenty-hour trip back to Cambridge, listening to the live stream of

Michael Brown’s funeral, and discussing our experiences. I’ll remember this experience for as long as I live, all twenty-seven hours in Missouri, and each minute of the forty-hour trip we took there and back.



Protestors on the steps of the MA State House
December 4, 2014



HDS was represented at the Boston protest
December 4, 2014

TIBETAN MONKS IN FERGUSON

JOSHUA EATON
MDiv '11



Joshua is an independent journalist who covers religion and society, human rights, and national security. He was among the first students in HDS's Buddhist Ministry Studies concentration. This article is reprinted from Tricycle.com blog, August 21, 2014.

Tensions continued to escalate in Ferguson, Missouri over the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager shot and killed by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, on August 9. His death set off days of protests and a heavy-handed, militarized police response that has sparked national outrage.

But Ferguson residents got a pleasant surprise on Sunday August 20: A visit from a group of Tibetan Buddhist monks.

"Ferguson was a very heated issue in our backyard," explained Patty Maher, who is hosting the monks during their stay in St. Louis. "Sunday was their day off. . . . We didn't know what to expect, but they gladly went. And as you saw, their presence was profound." The six monks, from Drepung Gomang Monastery in southwest India, arrived in St. Louis on Saturday as part of the Sacred Tibetan Arts tour, which their monastery puts on every year. They will spend the next ten months traveling cross-country to give lectures, create Tibetan sand paintings (mandalas) and perform traditional ceremonies.

According to the monastery's website, the tour aims to increase awareness of Tibetan culture, raise funds for the monastery's upkeep, and "make a contribution to world healing and peace." This is the tour's third year visiting St. Louis, though Maher says different monks come each time.

Geshe Tsewang Thinley is one of the monks visiting the US for the first time with this year's tour. He grew up in a Tibetan refugee community in India, where many Tibetans fled after the Chinese invasion in 1950 and a failed uprising against Chinese rule in 1959.

"In Tibet, you know, many times it happens like this. Everywhere, every month, they have the problem in Tibet, same, the police shooting like this," Geshe Thinley explained, speaking of Chinese forces' frequent use of live rounds against nonviolent protesters.

Just four days after Michael Brown's death, Radio Free Asia reported that Chinese police wounded almost a dozen Tibetans when they opened fire on a protest in Kardze. Since then, five of the protesters have reportedly died of their injuries.

Geshe Thinley, the other monks, and their assistant Tseltem Gyatso went with Maher to Ferguson for a couple of hours on Sunday. In front of the Quick Trip gas station destroyed the week before, they shook hands and posed for pictures during a festive daytime



Six Tibetan monks join Ferguson demonstrators to support justice for Mike Brown.

TIBETAN MONKS IN FERGUSON

JOSHUA EATON
MDiv '11

According to Amy K. Nelson, a contributing editor at Animal New York who was at the scene, a local woman made the monks a sign that read “From Tibet Justice for Mike Brown.” Others showed the monks the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture that has become a hallmark of protests in Ferguson and beyond.



“People said that Michael Brown had, before the shooting there, hands up, but police also shoot him. This is wrong. So all people said, like this,” Geshe Thinley explained, placing his hands up, “and [we did the] same.”

Pictures of the monks quickly spread across social media, not least because of several tweets from St. Louis’s now-famous alderman Antonio French.

Twice since the monks’ visit to Ferguson, members of St. Louis’s African American community have recognized them from social media and asked to take pictures with them. “How do you recognize them?” Maher asked one woman. The answer? Facebook.

This kind of engagement with the African American community is new for Tibetan Buddhists in the US. There are no hard statistics on

American converts to Tibetan Buddhism, but many experts agree that they tend to be white and middle- or upper-middle class. And while the Tibetan exile-government’s office in New York estimates that some 9,000 Americans have Tibetan ancestry, the Tibetan community and the convert community are often separate. That is especially true in cities like St. Louis that lack a significant Tibetan-American population.

“Tibetan Buddhist centers—and most Buddhist centers in the US—are not terribly diverse,” said Lama Rod Owens [MDiv ‘17], one of the few African-American teachers in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. “Unfortunately we face a serious issue of segregation that, from my experience, is not based on any ill will or conscious attempts to segregate or remain separate, but a staunch unwillingness . . . to examine how whiteness and class privilege prevent meaningful inclusion and invitation to occur in Buddhist communities.”

Before the trip, Geshe Thinley was unaware of the Michael Brown case or of America’s problems with racial inequality. Visiting Ferguson was a crash course—one he was unlikely to get at a meditation center or university performance.

“Normally, people are really, really nice here,” said Geshe Thinley. “But why it happened, I don’t know. . . . It’s normally very peaceful everywhere in the United States, I think. . . . It’s a little bit changing for my feeling.”

A grand jury will meet on Wednesday August 23 to consider charges against Daren Wilson as many across the nation call for broad changes in how police operate. Meanwhile, Geshe Thinley said he and the other monks say daily prayers for everyone who is suffering—in Ferguson, Gaza, Iraq, and everywhere else.

“I cannot do anything,” said Geshe Thinley, “but I can pray.”

THINGS IMPERFECT

CORA MCCOLD
MDiv '17



Cora McCold, a Unitarian Universalist MDiv student, offered this as one of several blessings before the annual HDS Thanksgiving Dinner on Tuesday November 25, the day after a grand jury in Ferguson, MO handed down its decision not to indict police officer Darren Wilson in Michael Brown's death.

Today we give thanks for things imperfect
Things not yet polished smooth.
We give thanks for the fallen leaves and naked trees
so we can rest and remember that vulnerability is beautiful, too.
We give thanks for our bruised and broken bodies
because with them we can embrace one another.
We give thanks for our fears and frustrations
for they illuminate what really matters.
We give thanks for infuriating injustices, large and small
because they fuel our vision of a just world.
We give thanks for our heavy and hurting hearts
knowing we will one day lift them in love.
We give thanks for imperfections of mind, body, and community
so we can travel this road together a little longer.
One day we'll give thanks for the flow time
for those waters that slowly round all our rough edges,
But today we give thanks for things imperfect
Things not yet polished smooth.



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