

Mustard Seeds
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First Parish in Needham

Reading: “September” by Jennifer Michael Hecht

*Tonight there must be people who are getting what they want.
I let my oars fall into the water.
Good for them. Good for them, getting what they want.*

*The night is so still that I forget to breathe.
The dark air is getting colder. Birds are leaving.*

Tonight there are people getting just what they need.

*The air is so still that it seems to stop my heart.
I remember you in a black and white photograph
taken this time of some year. You were leaning against
a half-shed tree, standing in the leaves the tree had lost.*

When I finally exhale it takes forever to be over.

*Tonight, there are people who are so happy,
that they have forgotten to worry about tomorrow.*

*Somewhere, people have entirely forgotten about tomorrow.
My hand trails in the water.
I should not have dropped those oars. Such a soft wind.*

Matthew Fox, a theologian in the Christian tradition, once said that sometimes when the heart breaks, the universe or God begins to shine through. He characterizes one form of mystical experience, the *via negativa*, as a time of suffering or despair, a pain so intense that one’s world begins to collapse. At that moment, in the midst of our anguish, a new path may become clear, or we may understand a larger piece of the puzzle of our lives, or we may be told, at the deepest level of our being, that “it is OK to let go.” Unfortunately, the theologian says that there is no quick way through this experience. There is no easy solution so that we can come out of the other side of our despair with a

deeper understanding of life, of ourselves, or of God. Rather, he says, we have to “eat the dark.”

As many of you know, I am eating the dark. It is the morning of July 26th, and I awake for the first time in seven years to an empty bed. I feel in the dim hours of the morning a tangle of sheets and pillows, with no person on them, no one lying next to me. Deep inside, I feel my guts turn inside-out, I hear my breath quicken, I feel my pulse race. Stumbling to my feet, I find my cell phone on the nightstand with 19 missed calls. Message after message communicates the same urgency: my husband, Jason, is lying in the hospital after a terrible accident.

The next week is a blur. Jason is comatose, but is expected to awake during the first day. He doesn't. Twenty-four hours pass. Suddenly we are performing surgeries to save his life. His fever spikes to 106. His brain pressures are double what they should be. The doctors finally tell me that Jason is not going to come back. I hear a rushing in my ears. My vision fades. My senses numb. I feel a pain so intense that my world begins to collapse. It is time to eat the dark.

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I wish that someone had made an instruction manual, some sort of plan for what you do once you have dropped your oars. I am searching for some compass, something that has guided me in past times of uncertainty. I am wondering how to find my way to faith when all I see is the dark.

There is no instruction manual. There is no one who can answer these questions for me. As I sit with this pain, I find myself returning to my own experiences, a few moments of my life when I found my way after my oars had fallen into the water.

I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, in the midst of tremendous political turmoil. In 1993, a bloody battle ensued to pass an article onto the city charter that allowed restaurants to refuse service, landlords to evict tenants, and employers to fire people based upon their sexual orientation. Conservative groups from across the United States poured money, time, and energy into this effort. And somehow, remarkably, they were able to convince the citizens of Cincinnati that protecting gay and lesbian persons from getting fired, being evicted, and refused service was a way of promoting what they called “special rights.” In their reasoning, gay and lesbian persons could choose not to be gay or lesbian persons, and then they could be afforded the rights and protections of heterosexual men and women. In November of 1993, police had to be called in to quell the anger and resentment of gay and lesbian activists that stormed city hall. An impending sense of shock and doom closed in around many persons in Cincinnati. Our city had become the first to include in its charter this variety of legal apartheid.

The way that this translated into reality is complicated. I knew a handful of people who were refused jobs because of this article. Many more experienced this tremendous sense of not knowing, of wondering whom next this article would affect. I believe that it was less the sense of immediate danger than the constant, heavy reminder that gay and lesbian persons were not welcome here. If legalizing protections is a way that a political community extends hospitality to minority groups, article twelve contained a pervasive, nebulous reminder to “change or leave.”

A woman who lived through the bombing of Hiroshima writes: “When the bomb dropped, we all became completely separate human beings.” Similarly, it is my perception that, when this article was ratified by city council, the gay and lesbian community fragmented into completely separate human beings. This seems to me a core

component of despair, an idea that we are basically divided against one another in the deepest, most profound sense. Despair is the feeling that we are alone in the world; it is a private pain. Sure, there were a few activists who wisely knew that the article would not stay on the city charter for long. They worked tirelessly before, during, and after its passage. But there were many, many more people in Cincinnati whose efforts collapsed into their own sense of desperation. Stripped of their worth and dignity, they retreated away from each other, away from the possibility of change. It would be eleven long years until the article would become the object of national attention as it was crushed in a landslide victory.

Eleven long years. Eleven years of eating the dark for gay and lesbian persons and their progressive allies. Sharon Salzberg, an American Buddhist and author of *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, writes: “When we believe that our circumstances—inner or outer—will never change, and that there is nothing we can ever do to find love or peace again, our faith is consumed by hopelessness” (101). Coming of age in a situation of political hopelessness, I had very little faith in my community’s ability for change. I felt that the best hope for myself would be to leave when I was ready to go to college, leave and never return.

It was in this storm of political darkness that I entered my ninth-grade youth group at St. John’s Unitarian Universalist Church. Early on, I can remember an argument breaking out between a youth member and an advisor. The topic of article twelve came up in the group. I remember one of my peers saying, “This proves that the First Principle is false. Unitarian Universalists are way too optimistic to believe in inherent worth and dignity. Just look at Cincinnati. We live in a city where a lot of people don’t have it.” I remember my advisor thinking about what my friend said for a moment. And then she

replied: “You are right. Worth and dignity are not realities in Cincinnati. But that is exactly the reason that we have to fight for them.” With those words, my world shifted. Unitarian Universalism held out a light in the darkness, a compass that helped me find my way to faith. I fell deeply, passionately in love with our religion. I committed myself to its vision of justice, and began to work to change my community. I didn’t do this because I was attached to an idea of changing Cincinnati. Instead, I did this because I had found my way to a faith that said my work, even in the darkest and most hopeless of times, was the right and moral thing to do.

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Kisa Gautami was a contemporary of the Buddha. Her story is familiar to many of us now. She was the woman who came to the holy figure when her newborn son died. Insane with grief, she carried the body of the dead child to the Buddha. She begged him to restore her son to life. The Buddha’s response was simple: “Bring me a mustard seed from the house that has experienced no loss, and I will restore your child.”

Try as the mother might, she could find no house that was without loss. Slowly, she no longer felt isolated in her suffering. Recognizing her basic kinship with all of those who have experienced a terrible loss and the burden of grief, her despair lessened and she no longer felt divided from the rest of humanity. It is said that she returned to the Buddha as a nun and became fully enlightened.

I think about my friend’s experience in Cincinnati and his disbelief in Unitarian Universalism, and this story rings in my ears. My friend came to our youth group much like Kisa Gautami—he came holding the dead body of our Principles. For him, faith in the inherent worth and dignity of human beings had perished with the passage of article twelve. “Restore this to life,” he demanded, “prove to me that human beings have

inherent worth and dignity, and I will be a Unitarian Universalist.” My youth advisor could have said any number of things. She could have said, “Well, in Cincinnati people aren’t given worth or dignity, but that doesn’t matter, they still have it.” Or: “Inherent worth and dignity is similar to some people’s faith in God, you just have to believe in it blindly.”

Instead, her answer was as simple, and profound, as the Buddha’s. “You are right,” she said, “Worth and dignity are not realities in Cincinnati. That is exactly why we need to fight for them.” My advisor did not argue with my friend. She knew, like the holy figure, that there are no magic words to make suffering disappear, to restore life, worth, or dignity to all persons. But, like the figure of Kisa Gautami, this recognition did not lead to my advisor’s deeper despair. By seeing injustice and suffering in the world and in her community, her compassion and commitment grew. By grounding her theology in an understanding of the grief and turmoil of our world, her deepest convictions were not shaken by its inequity and anguish. Her lamp lit up in the darkness, showing a way back to faith when even faith blinked out.

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Jesus also has something to say about mustard seeds. In a parable from Matthew, he teaches, “For verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you” (Matt 17:20). When I was in a Lutheran grade school, I can remember my teacher interpreting this to mean that every person should try to have as much faith as Jesus did. But what I find interesting about this saying is that no one, not in the gospels (at least as far as I can remember), nor since the gospels has ever made a

mountain “remove hence to yonder place.” Despite the best pedagogical intentions of my teachers, that was something I certainly never saw in my Lutheran grade school.

I don’t think that Jesus ever did it, in fact. There are plenty of stories of his other wonderful and amazing deeds, but I do not remember the gospel story where he moves the mountain.

A colleague of mine once preached a sermon about faith in her home congregation. After the sermon, she went to the entrance of the church to greet people in a receiving line. The very last person wheeled himself to the door. He looked up at my friend and said, “I don’t know about this faith stuff. I gave up on faith a long time ago when I realized I wasn’t getting out of this wheelchair.” When we look at faith in that way, we get a really sad view of human beings. Either they are pretending that everything is OK and calling that “faith,” or they are being honest with the fact that no matter how much faith one has, the mountain cannot be moved. That man is not going to get out of his wheelchair. I am not going to get my husband back. People are not going to have inherent worth and dignity just because I have faith that it is so.

The way that I read this saying of Jesus, is that faith isn’t about quantity. Faith isn’t about believing in something just a little more, to make it real. Indeed, no human being will ever have faith in that way. As much as I want to move the mountain, that I have faith in moving the mountain, it is going to stay put. Faith isn’t about pretending something until it becomes real.

This is why Jesus tells us another parable about a mustard seed. He says, “What is the Kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches” (Luke 13:18-19). In this story, faith takes on a very different

character. It is like gardening. One sows seeds that may not survive, that may not make it. One sows mustard seeds that look too small to become anything significant. But here one leaves open a crack, a small possibility that something may emerge out of our efforts in this life. It must be something that we do not anticipate, some invisible chance that beauty will emerge when we least expect it. And maybe, just maybe, it will grow into something beyond our imaginings.

Faith isn't about pretending we have our oars when we dropped them into the water. It isn't about pretending that we have found our way, when we are lost. It is, instead, about being honest with our pain. And with the chance that our pain will pass. It is about planting the seed anyway.

That's what faith is, for me.