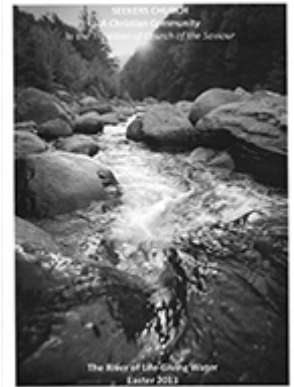


“Dying Into New Life” by David Novello

April 14, 2013



The Third Sunday of Easter

In his sermon on Palm Sunday, Kevin Barwick quoted Richard Rohr, on the need to “die before you die.” That’s where my mind started to drift because, as I told Kevin afterward, I began obsessively thinking, “Damn, I was going to preach about that in a few weeks.” And to some extent, I will. But so as not to bore you I at least hope to take a somewhat different tack, and also to take a look at new life following this death – so I will call my sermon “Dying Before Dying II.”

Why do we need to die before we die? Because, as the last line of the Prayer of Saint Francis states, “It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” And death and resurrection – being born to a new life – is of course what we celebrate in the Easter season.

As many of you know, I have practiced Zen for many years. Since I tiptoed back into a Christian church about 15 years ago, I have been struck by how some newer views of Christianity – what Marcus Borg calls “the new paradigm” in his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, which my mission group recently read together – are strikingly similar to Zen in

certain respects. There are important differences, of course, but I remain struck by the similar threads. (Besides, when it comes to spirituality and religion, I find I am more interested in universals than differences.) One of these similarities is the need to die before you die. In the Christian tradition, we say that this is needed before one can be born again from above, or experience conversion. In Zen, and Buddhism generally, death of the self is necessary to wake up and be one with all that is. A Buddha, after all, is anyone who has awakened.

As many of you probably know, in Zen, koans – certain types of riddles or stories – are often used to help one practice. The koan that many people know asks, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The Mumonkan, or Gateless Gate, is one of the most well-known collections of koans. Its fifth koan is titled “Kyogen’s Man Up a Tree,” and it goes like this:

Master Kyogen said, “It is like a man up a tree who hangs from a branch by his mouth; his hands cannot grasp a bough, his feet cannot touch the tree. Another man comes under the tree and asks him the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West. If he does not answer, he does not meet the questioner’s need. If he answers he will lose his life. At such a time, how should he answer?”

That is the koan. By the way, if you are wondering who Bodhidharma is, in reality or legend he brought Buddhism from India to China. And as for how the man should answer, there are no set answers to koans. But Ta Hui, a 12th century Chinese Zen master, offered this commentary on the koan: Hanging from a cliff, let go – and agree to accept the experience. After annihilation, come back to life.

In other words, it is in letting go and dying to the self that we can experience new life.

Which brings me to today's lectionary reading from chapter 9 of Acts. It is the familiar story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. There is a flash of light, Paul falls to the ground, and then hears the voice of Jesus, asking why Paul is persecuting him. He gets up, but is blind. His sight is restored (and he is filled with the Holy Spirit) only when Ananias, at the direction Jesus, lays his hands on Paul. Paul was blind, but now he sees.

Although we call this occurrence the conversion of Paul, some theologians say that in this story he was truly called, not converted. After all, he has not changed from one religion to another – he had been and remained a devout Jew, although one who now embodied, and was called, to spread the good news. And he had not previously practiced his religion with mere formality; in his letter to the Galatians, he described the zealotry of his faith. But Paul was called by God to bring the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles; as we read elsewhere in Acts, especially “to open the eyes of the Gentiles so they may turn from darkness to light” (Acts 26: 17-18). And of course he followed that call in his long and arduous travels and his preaching. Still, one might say he was converted because he is now awake, he sees, and he is filled with the Holy Spirit. His old self has died, and he has been made new; born again from above, as Jesus instructed Nicodemus on what must take place before one can see the kingdom of God. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:8: “It was though I was born when no one expected it.” And in my favorite lines from his epistles – from Galatians 2: 19-20 – “For through the law I died to the law, so that now I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me.” One might say that Paul has emptied himself as, in his letter to the church at Philippi, he said Jesus had. By letting go of his old self, by emptying himself, Paul now embodied Christ nature. (In Buddhism, when the old ways die away, one is said to embody Buddha nature.)

Thus, in important ways, you can think about Paul's experience as both a call and a conversion. Despite having taken Marjory's call class two times now, I am sure that many people here know much more about call than I do. So I'll continue with some thoughts about conversion, or being born again from above – an awakening to what one might describe as, depending upon his or her orientation, God, or a higher power, or the absolute.

As I said, I am more interested in the universals than the particulars of religion. I also find myself more interested in the experiential nature of our encounters with God than in theology. Naturally, therefore, I returned to William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* – a collection of lectures that James gave over 100 years ago, but which I find to be remarkably insightful and relevant today. James, probably the greatest American psychologist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and also a leading philosopher of that time, said religion "as a whole is mankind's most important function." He devoted two of his twenty lectures that make up *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to conversion, and several others to related subjects. James offered several formulations for conversion, including "to be regenerated," "to receive grace," "to experience religion," and "to gain assurance." And he spent a fair amount of time on a question I have always wondered about – is anyone ever truly converted or enlightened suddenly, as the ninth chapter of Acts suggests was the case with Paul? Or is it really a more gradual process? Zen literature is also replete with stories of sudden enlightenment, such as the Zen student who, after many years of study and practice, was sweeping the yard. The broom threw a stone against a piece of bamboo, making a sound – and the future Zen master instantly attained enlightenment. And after sitting under the Bodhi tree all night, resisting the temptations of Mara (the evil one), the historical Buddha also is said to have suddenly attained enlightenment upon seeing the morning star.

In his lectures, James recounted almost exclusively examples of sudden conversion, pointing out that they really do make for better stories. But he also drew on the research of Professor Edwin Starbuck, who studied religious conversion, in describing the more gradual process. James said gradual regenerative change builds, piece by piece, a new set of moral and spiritual beliefs. But even here, James clarified, there are always critical points where the movement forward seems much more rapid. And even here there must be self-surrender at the end. You must cease to resist or, as Starbuck put it, the personal will must be given up. One must let go of the branch, you might say.

I understand that some theologians believe that, despite the narrative in Acts, Paul's conversion may have been gradual. In other words, the events on the road to Damascus may have been the culmination of a process which began some time earlier – perhaps with increasing guilt for his persecution of Christians, including Saint Stephen (whose execution he witnessed). I have found myself wondering about what was going on in the mind and soul of Paul in the months and years leading up to his journey to Damascus. What might he have been working on, and how might God have been working on him? Even if there were no evidence of his being reborn or regenerated prior to the flash of light, was something taking place inside that could not easily be observed by others?

Maybe I wonder this because I cannot quite imagine such a sudden conversion for myself, despite the encouragement in my Zen practice to cultivate what is known as “Don't know mind.” I think I can point to a few spiritual leaps forward in my life, but there have been no blinding flashes. Changes usually come slowly for me. Perhaps it is my resistance to change, to letting go, and perhaps it is my temperament. In his lectures, James explored how it might be differences in temperament that lead to sudden conversion for some types, and gradual

conversion for others. He also said that it probably does not matter anyway, approvingly quoting another psychologist who maintained that “the ultimate test of religious values is nothing psychological, nothing definable in terms of how it happens, but something ethical, definable only in terms of what is attained.”

I imagine that for me the road ahead likely will continue to be a slow, gradual one, with fits and starts. Sometimes I picture myself as a stone being slowly eroded and smoothed by the currents of God’s waters. Yet I must confess that I continue to resist the letting go, the self-surrender that Jesus showed us, the dying before dying – even though I know they are necessary for awakening and rebirth. In our recent call class in the School of Christian Living, Marjory urged us to identify what we need to say no to. In his sermon a few weeks ago, Kevin did the same. I can name a number of things. Craving security; wishing for comfort; living in my mind (and forgetting about my body); living in the past and future, rather than right here and now; worrying too much; allowing fear to run my life; spending too much time on the ultimately unimportant things in life; and blowing off helpful disciplines are principal ones for me. You have your own, although we probably share several. Over the years it has become easier for me to identify these obstacles; I guess this is the result of the slow erosion. But it is one thing to identify the impediments and another to say no to them. The latter is far more difficult for me, and I suspect for many of you too.

Still, I am encouraged not to be on the journey alone. My five years at Seekers have been a godsend, as I have found a Christianity and a Christian community that are increasingly meaningful to me. I feel supported here by my mission group and the larger church community. My Zen practice has also been extremely helpful, as has my Zen sangha – even though it is a different type of spiritual community than Seekers. All that

support has not led to any bright flashes or clear words from God, and maybe it never will. I have to say that in some ways I feel envious of Paul. But I'll take the dimmer illuminations and the murkier messages – that may be as good as it gets for me. As Marjory preached in her Easter sermon, according to the Killian Noe remembrance in the Callings issue on the life of Gordon Cosby, even Gordon said that the guidance from God became more clear and specific only when he was on his death bed, with his body failing. So I am very grateful for the fainter lights and the more muddled words, even though the pyrotechnics are lacking. The scales may not have been lifted from my eyes, but at least I sense I am seeing a bit better.