

Elisabeth Dearborn: Lamp Transmission / Plum Village Poems

A Sermon for Seekers Church

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Matthew 5: When a lamp is lit, it is not put under the meal-tub, but on the lamp-stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. And you, like the lamp, must shed light among your fellows.

Most of you know that our family traveled to Plum Village Monastery in December for a lamp transmission ceremony. Was there really a lamp? Jackie asked me. What was the ceremony like? What is it like to support a partner who is in another faith tradition?

The bell is at the center of life in the Vietnamese Zen tradition. It is the voice of the Buddha calling us to wholeness. It sounds in many ways at Plum Village, not only when the bell master invites it to awaken. When the chimes tinkle in the wind, when the phone rings, when someone accidentally hits a big pot with a spoon, when Shoshanna sings: each of these is a bell. When a bell sounds, the whole community falls into silence, breathes three times and says a little poem. Little poems or gathas are also a part of the

tradition. The gatha when you **hear** a bell is:

Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true self.

Shall we try it now?

[Ring bell]

The person inviting the bell to sound also has a little poem to say:

Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness, I send my heart along with the sound of the bell. May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness and transcend all anxiety and sorrow.

We will use the bell today as I talk, also during the offertory, and next week as Richard talks.

I invite you to use the gatha as well.

Many of you know of the founder of Plum Village, the 76-year old Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Thầy, or Teacher, as he is called, is known world wide for his writings and teachings, for being the founder of Engaged Buddhism. He is both scholar and poet and part of a lineage that has been handed down 42 generations since the 9th century through the lamp transmission.

Part of Richard's preparation for his Lamp Transmission Ceremony was to write a little poem that recognized some part of the dharma, the teachings that live in his own heart. Here it is:

This freedom – not freedom from,
From childhood hurts,
From childhood fears;
Not freedom to,
To open to the love enfolding me,
To know and live my truth.

This freedom – freedom with,
With habits, with fears,
With heart protected
Truth hidden deep inside.

This freedom – freedom with this moment,
Just as it is.

This is the poem that traveled in Richard's pocket and which he gave to Thây during the Lamp Transmission.

I, too, wrote poems as part of my practice at Plum Village and I am going to share them with you today. The first poem came after we had been there two days and I had begun to settle into the monastery rhythms, enjoying being present.

This practice with my brothers and sisters

Slows me down so that I inhabit

Each moment.

Oh! What full flavor!

The next poem comes after I dream that I am living in a big old house on a hill in Takoma Park, getting ready for a party. I am putting canned fruit into three big bowls and covering them with saran wrap. Tiffany bounces into the kitchen and says, "Hey, wait!" I will be right back. I have something in my car for this party." I'd like to say she went out and got the ribbon you all gave me before I left, but it did feel like a party and that there you were in a nutshell, going with me.

The morning of Richard's transmission: We get up at 5:30 to get the vans to go to another hamlet. We live in the monks' hamlet; the day's ceremonies will take place in one of the nun's hamlets. It is still quite dark and cold; the coldest week Plum Village has had in 25 years. We wait outside the dharma hall where a new addition for the ancestors is being built.

Many stars overhead

Remind me of the million treasures

In my heart

When I open to the night

I take into my arms the embrace

Of the ancestors.

Oh, thank you for putting your hands into mine.

That day Thầy receives the poem Richard has written; and Thầy gives Richard a poem that he has written just for him. I have asked Peter to read it to us in Vietnamese so you can hear the sound of it, then I will give you the English translation.

Mưa pha'p thâ'm nhuâ'n co~i đấ't tâm

Đa.i kiê`u mong nô'i la.i ti`nh tâm

Mô.t sân ho`e quê' nga`y chăm bo'n

Sa.ch hê't bao nhiêu lơ'p ca't lâ'm

In English, it means:

A dharma rain penetrates the realm of the Heart

A great Bridge helps reestablish deep love

Tending the garden of precious flowers everyday

Helps purify all layers of society.

Thầy knows that Richard is a high school teacher so he tells us that the garden of precious flowers is his students. He also knows the Dharma name Richard carries: True Dharma Bridge, and uses this name in the line: a great Bridge helps reestablish deep love.

At Plum Village there is deep love and people from many countries living together. Listening to the music of all these languages – English, Australian, German, French, Dutch, the melodic Vietnamese is like being at a jazz concert, everyone improvising on their own instrument, but together sounding

very beautiful, sometimes wacky and full of joy. Here is another poem:

Today the fat snow swirls in the sky

And lands softly at my feet.

I look out and see a neighbor

Opening his window.

On our last day at Plum Village, we help to prepare for Christmas Eve. Shoshanna and her friend Julianna make paper cranes to hang in the dharma hall. Richard writes a postcard to Marjory and Peter: We have concluded a week of transmissions ... a very powerful and awesome ceremony. Thank you so very much for your support and Peter, thank you for your gift that will always mark this important transition in my life. During my ceremony, Elisabeth and Shoshanna were my attendants, carrying the poem and the lamp Thây gave me and sitting at my side as I gave my (first) Dharma talk to the community. ... Richard is now part of the 43rd generation of dharma teachers in this lineage. I spend our last day cleaning the dharma hall with the brothers. I sweep, mop and arrange the lights on the Christmas tree and around Thây's little teaching platform where he sits.

Here is the last poem:

Mothering my child is a walk in the garden.

Sometimes-prickly weeds, sometimes dazzling flowers.