

Watching for the Signs

My Spiritual Journey So Far

Why is a spiritual journey even necessary? Many traditions talk of being reborn, of awakening. Awakening from what?

Jack Kornfield, in "The Wise Heart," tells this story. "In a large temple north of Thailand's ancient capital, Sukotai, there once stood an enormous and ancient clay Buddha. Though not the most handsome or refined work of Thai Buddhist art, it had been cared for over a period of five hundred years and become revered for its sheer longevity. Violent storms, changes of government, and invading armies had come and gone, but the Buddha endured. At one point, however, the monks who tended the temple noticed that the statue had begun to crack and would soon be in need of repair and repainting. After a stretch of particularly hot, dry weather, one of the cracks became so wide that a curious monk took his flashlight and peered inside. What shone back at him was a flash of brilliant gold! Inside this plain old statue, the temple residents discovered one of the largest and most luminous gold images of Buddha ever created in Southeast Asia. Now uncovered, the golden Buddha draws throngs of devoted pilgrims from all over Thailand. The monks believe that this shining work of art had been covered in plaster and clay to protect it during times of conflict and unrest. In much the same way, each of us has encountered threatening situations that lead us to cover our innate nobility. Just as the people of Sukotai had forgotten about the golden Buddha, we too have forgotten our essential nature. Much of the time we operate from the protective layer. The primary aim of Buddhist

psychology is to help us see beneath this armouring and bring out our original goodness, called our Buddha nature."

As Tara Brach says in "Radical Acceptance," "We forget about the breath that is nourishing us, the love that unites us, the enormous beauty and fragility that is our shared experience in being alive. Most basically, we forget the pure awareness, the radiant wakefulness that is our Buddha nature."

So how do we awaken from our protective layer, our armouring? How do we remember our Buddha nature, our Christ nature, our essential nature? How can we be reborn? If we are sufficiently aware that some kind of response is required of us we may intentionally take steps towards awakening by retreating to an ashram, seeking out a master for instruction, etc. But how many of us take any kind of purposeful steps towards escaping our protective layer? Or even realize that it is necessary? Fortunately for us it would seem that the universe is looking out for us, supporting us by sending us signs. Granted they may not always seem that positive on the surface, but if we can stop resisting what is long enough to trust that the universe is always supporting us then we can use our energy to pay attention to the signs and use the signs to reclaim our lives. I feel that I have been very fortunate in the signs the universe has sent me.

One of the first signs, back in the 60s, concerned feelings. I was sitting under a tree, believe it or not, on the U of T campus enjoying my lunch. My boss walked by, stopped, looked at me, and said: "you have a hard time making up your mind, don't you." As this was said in a caring manner, I did not take offence or resist the message. In fact, it struck me like a thunderbolt. I suddenly realized that my decision-making, consisting entirely of listing pros and cons as it did, often left me waffling because

there was no energy behind either list. My feelings were not involved. From that moment forward, I went from not being sure I had any feelings at all to gradually learning how to talk about my feelings and how to let them help me make decisions.

The next sign which appeared around 1970 did not fare so well at first. I remember sitting alone in a classroom at library school writing furiously about something which seemed to be about the idea that things were not a question of 'either/or', but 'both/and.' It was as if the ideas were coming from outside of me and I was just scribbling them down. I remember a couple of fellow students walking by the open door, peering in, and shaking their heads, incredulous at this vision of manic behaviour. I probably just kept writing variations on the same basic idea, but I will never know because afterwards I couldn't read a word of it. The basic notion of 'both/and' stuck however, at least long enough for me to share it in a philosophy class I was taking at the time. The professor, and one student in particular, made fun of this idea - "You mean someone can be your niece and nephew at the same time?" My grasp of the concept was too fragile to allow me to mount a defence and I lost track of the idea for some time.

The idea of 'both/and' made another appearance later on in the 70's in the form of a book - "Polarity Management" by Barry Johnson. Johnson argues that some issues in life are not problems to be solved, but polarities to be managed. For example, it is not a question of either working alone or working in a team, but rather of reaping the benefits of both by being mindful that both working alone and working in teams have their downside and being wise enough to switch in a timely fashion. It is not a question of focusing either on material needs or spiritual needs, but of being awake to the possibility of switching gears as the situation demands so that both our material needs and our

spiritual needs can be satisfied. Johnson's book served to solidify the concept of 'both/and' for me and it has been a useful framework ever since.

My discovery of the Awareness Wheel, sometime in the 80's, was a huge leap forward in terms of deepening my awareness and reclaiming myself. The Awareness Wheel is a tool which was featured in the 'Couples Communication' program out of the University of Minnesota. Again, I cannot remember how I became aware of this program. I have always been a sporadic journal keeper. In any case, I took the certification training and taught the course for awhile. Later I used the Awareness Wheel when developing courses for the Self-Esteem Network of Hamilton, which you just might have heard me mention. The premise of the Awareness Wheel is that every experience consists of five parts whether we are aware of it or not - and frequently we are not. The five parts are: sensations (as in the five senses), interpretations (the stories we tell ourselves about what we see and hear), feelings, intentions (as in wishes, hopes, needs, purpose) and actions. The Awareness Wheel has many lessons to teach us (and I find that they just keep unfolding), but one of the most important ones is that, as Epictetus said 2,000 years ago, "We are disturbed not by what happens to us, but by our thoughts about what happens." Moreover, we do not have to believe the stories we tell ourselves. They are just stories. This is a mighty weapon against the forces within us that tend to keep the protective layer in place. By using the Awareness Wheel we gain in-depth, first hand insight into our own experience and behaviour. We can take control of our own lives, we can be response-able. I have used the Awareness Wheel extensively for 30 years. It continues to generate insights. It is either a very powerful tool or I am a slow learner. Or maybe it is both/and?

Before I move on to the more recent signs along my path I have to pause and mention bird-watching. More than anything else bird-watching has contributed to my bond with nature and my faith in serendipity. One story in particular illustrates the latter. Margaret and I had spent a whole morning searching for the Palm warbler to no avail. So we repaired to the local harbour to have lunch. It was raining so we were having lunch in the car when guess what landed on the hood of the car? Not only was it a Palm warbler (our first sighting ever), but it was a Palm warbler who stayed for several minutes, treating us first to his left profile and then to his right profile. He seemed to be saying: "Here I am, your very own Palm warbler. I am for you." For us, there is no better way of being in the now than to be bird-watching.

The stage was set for the next major sign along my path when I was working in the Education Dept. of a multi-site Toronto hospital in the 90's. I conducted workshops on various non-medical topics for staff. I was the only staff educator (as opposed to nurse educator) at my site. I must confess to having taken a certain number of mental health days in past occupations. There was always other staff to cover while I stayed home to indulge my latest episode of depressive behaviour. I was a great believer, without really knowing it, in the idea that if I was upset I couldn't function until I stopped being upset. At the hospital I was denied this luxury. I was it. If I didn't show, the workshop didn't happen. Lo and behold, I discovered that I could be both upset and function. I could put the negative thoughts in my back pocket as it were, walk and talk, and conduct a successful workshop. I had just learned that I didn't need to fix myself before I could function. This was a huge turn around for me. I have not missed a workshop since. This reframing of negative thoughts put power in my hands I never knew I had. Moreover it

grew out of a rather negative event. I was in the hospital - a career change, in fact - because my previous job had ended badly. I would never have guessed that this seemingly downward turn in my career was putting me on track for a life changing event.

I retired in 1997 and began teaching courses and workshops for the Self-Esteem Network. Apart from the Awareness Wheel, the tool available then for dealing with negative thoughts was Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. CBT teaches us to identify our negative thoughts and challenge them. This worked fine if you had a major negative thought that was causing you trouble; for example, the belief that you should never make a mistake. You could debate it and replace it with something more reasonable such as, "We all make mistakes and learn from them." The problem was that there are so many negative thoughts there didn't seem to be enough time or energy to debate them all. Not to mention that CBT, being a rather intellectual approach is not necessarily easy to implement when you are depressed. Enter serendipity again. I was teaching a course in about 2006 at a local support group when one of the participants asked me if I knew about the mindfulness course being offered at St. Joseph Hospital. Well, no I didn't. It turns out that a psychologist was running, free of charge, an eight week, experimental course called "Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Depression." This course was being run as an alternative or complement to CBT. The course emphasized mindfulness meditation as a way of accepting your negative thoughts and then letting them go. This seemed to me like a much more efficient way of dealing with the majority of negative thoughts. I loved it. In fact it provided a framework for what I had experienced at the hospital and embedded acceptance as a strategy for responding to experience.

Mindfulness and meditation made me more aware of the spiritual and sacred side to life. I began to wonder about spiritual growth as opposed to psychological growth. I took courses on "Body, Mind & Spirit" with the Kumars. I initiated, with Karen Fraser-Gitlitz and John Stares, the Spiritual Practices Support Group. I started including mindfulness and meditation in the Network courses - as a holistic approach to self-esteem. I included polarity management as a way of illustrating the interdependence of mind and spirit, of doing and being. The most gratifying aspect of this was how receptive the participants were. It turns out that people are hungry for this kind of approach. They find it frees them from their preoccupation with their judgments and stories and opens up new perspectives on life.

All of these new developments were expanded and strengthened when I stumbled across a book called "Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life." This book is based on Acceptance & Commitment Therapy, which is an outgrowth of CBT. In ACT the emphasis is on being open to all your experience, on accepting and letting go of negative thoughts and feelings, and on making the commitment to get on with your life. All the threads were coming together. The importance of remaining open to experience no matter what, the importance of restraining runaway interpretations, the importance of not believing everything you think, the importance of feelings, the importance of actions being inspired by conscious purpose rather than automatic reflexes.

And yet, there is still more. In the fall of 2009 I was introduced to Nonviolent Communication when we had our leadership day here at the church. NVC emphasizes feelings and needs, as the basis of compassionate communication, and is a

perfect match-up with the *Awareness Wheel*. When NVC talks about needs it is talking about core human needs such as, the need to belong, to be appreciated, to exercise competence, etc. A sharp distinction is made between the core need and specific behaviours which might be taken to satisfy them. This conveys a sense of expansion because we realize there are many actions which might satisfy the core need. We do not have to be constrained by attachment to one strategy. And so, once again, a new spin is given to the *Awareness Wheel*. Our actions no longer need to be governed totally by conventional expectations, but can also be informed by basic core needs, by principles which we all share.

And so, at last, the signs came thick and fast. On June 6th of this year, Margaret and I were staffing the Network display at a wellness day event. As I visited the other tables, I discovered The Centre for Compassion and Wisdom, a Buddhist educational centre, and thereby discovered the "16 Guidelines for Life." The "16 Guidelines are a distillation of Buddhist wisdom expressed in contemporary, accessible language. More recently still I happened upon *Everyday Holiness* by Alan Morinis. This book outlines The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar which has much in common with the "16 Guidelines." The universe just keeps unfolding.

In closing I quote once again from Tara Brach. Although we do tend to forget, we can remember that "the way out of our cage begins with *accepting absolutely everything* about ourselves and our lives, by embracing with wakefulness and care our moment-to-moment experience." For my part, although my search has become more intentional, I will still watch for the signs.

So may it be!

Sources

Brach, Tara. *Radical Acceptance: Embracing your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*. Bantam Books, 2003

Kornfield, Jack. *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*. Bantam Books, 2008.

Morinis, Alan. *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*. Trumpeter, 2008.

Murdoch, Alison. *16 Guidelines for Life*. Essential Education, 2009.