

Jesus, Buddha  
and the  
Tale of a Bracelet

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Gettysburg UU's  
July 17, 2016

Perhaps you've heard Marie Kondo, and her system of tidying your home, where you get rid of everything that doesn't "spark joy." Perhaps you've bought the book and actually done the tidying. Congratulations! Perhaps you have seen the little facebook joke that came around recently about it, from Mindy Kaling, I think, though the attribution is unclear. The writer says, Yes, I embarked on the joy of tidying, and so far, I've thrown out all my vegetables and the electric bill. She has a point. I'll never undertake that effort – Kondo enthusiasts are said to get rid of all their books and papers. That will never happen in my house, at least not until the children are clearing it out, and my historian daughter has a thing for archiving. . . .

Still, emptying our lives of excess has a great appeal, and an ancient tradition. Think of Paul's letter to the Philippians. This is a famous passage, often named for the early Christian hymn that it quotes, the so called Kenosis Hymn – Kenosis being the Greek word for Emptying, as in the English *cenotaph*, an empty tomb. Much has been made in Christian doctrine of the implied identity or relationship of Jesus and God as expressed in this passage. This morning, however, I want to look at the idea of Kenosis itself. This was startling to its hearers in its original context – Christians were exhorted to worship a humble God, one who had become a slave? We have grown up with the idea of humility as a virtue, but the ancients didn't really distinguish between humility and humiliation. My Greek dictionary has several meanings for *kenos* words: fruitless, vain, idle, destitute, bereft, deserted, to make void or of no account. (*Liddell & Scott*, p. 372) Words to make people uncomfortable, not exalted. So why apply them to God? Perhaps it is unsurprising that over the generations this passage has been so spectacularly misused – Here's a bit of an article in the *Women's Bible Commentary*:

The exhortation to suffer like Christ in expectation of future salvation was frequently used to admonish Christian women and slaves to submit to abusive husbands or masters. . . . [The expectation that the world is about to end] has been used as an excuse for failing to struggle against injustice in this world.  
P. 344

To this day, already oppressed people are urged to be meek and humble and accept abuse on the basis of this passage. Another meme: Jesus is preaching, and from the Beatitudes, he says, "Blessed are you poor." And the rich person whines, "Blessed are we *all*, Jesus." Yes, but just now we can't all be blessed until the poor and oppressed get a fair share, and Black Lives matter to those in power. Until Blue Lives are given the training and resources to ensure that a traffic stop doesn't turn into a death trap. But what I meant to say, was that using Christian teachings to reinforce the power at the top is wrong.

It's exactly backwards – using the idea of almighty God, stripping himself of power, entering the human experience at its lowest, as a slave – using that idea to further disempower

those at the bottom and give more abusive power to those at the top of the heap. It should be about solidarity with the poor and downtrodden. So it's a potentially dangerous passage.

But the idea of emptying still draws me, not least because the root that means "empty", *ken*<sup>3</sup> looks just like one that means "new," *ken*<sup>4</sup> and those ideas seem related to me, though the *American Heritage Dictionary of IndoEuropean Roots* doesn't suggest that they are. Still . . . . New and empty. We are at a decision point in this culture, a chance to rethink how we live our lives, and how we enable others to live. This is a good time to begin to empty ourselves, to shed what we do not need, to make room for the new, for what will feed the deepest part of ourselves. The reading from Thich Nhat Hahn is less entangled with doctrine – at least in the US – and harder to misapply. We all need to be less centered in our individualism, and more in our interconnections. So here at this time of opportunity, what do we need to lose?

First, **stuff**. We suffer from too much stuff, or at least I do. Have you seen that little film, *The Story of Stuff?* – You can google it. Everything we acquire has costs – natural resources, pollution, global warming, energy, packaging, transportation, final disposal – everything puts burdens on source and sink. In a CNN special on faith and money some years ago, Deepak Chopra put it this way: "We have to stop spending money we don't have on things we don't need to impress people we don't like." Facile, but there's truth in it.

And have you seen a certain scary reality TV show called *Hoarders*, about people who desperately need to actively get rid of stuff, not just acquire less. Their sense of orderly family life, even their safety and welfare are threatened by the overwhelming quantity of stuff in their homes. I think the fear of becoming a hoarder is what makes Marie Kondo so appealing. Though many hoarders have this in common with her: they both attribute feelings to inanimate objects. But hoarders haven't learned how to say thank you and good bye.

Here's a true story, a little less dramatic, one I heard about a woman – a distant relative – who had been burdened all her life by a bracelet, a beautiful and valuable bracelet, but one which was not really hers. Tess, I'll call her, knew that somewhere she had an older half sister, from her father's first marriage, and that the bracelet was designated for that sister. But she had no idea where she was or how to find her, or whether any contact would be welcome in any case. This family is not notable for its ability to talk about difficult issues. And so, with no other siblings, and no children, and her parents long gone, she wore that bracelet for years, troubled by its meaning. Eventually the clasp broke and she couldn't get it fixed. The bracelet languished in a drawer. Finally, she sold it for the value of the gems. And that was that. She was lightened. Or was she? More later. . . .

Second, we need to shed ourselves of an **excess of certainty**. At least that's what I'm calling it today. It might be arrogance, or complacency, or narcissism. We see it all around us. An inability to see any viewpoint but our own. Just look at the Congress, unable to get anything done, because each side just knows it is right on every issue. One side knows that the other is a bunch of sleazy corrupt deal makers. The other side knows that the first are nothing but a bunch of nay sayers, lacking in compassion and foresight. Or look at the presidential election campaign. Is President Obama an outstanding president, who rescued the nation from financial disaster, brought down the debt, helped the long recovery, brought health care to millions, holds and comforts us in times of terrible sorrow? Or is he a secret terrorist, the worst president we've ever had? On second thought, don't look at it. It will make you sick.

And in the world beyond, are so many angry, lost souls who just *know* that if they kill enough people, if they do it ruthlessly and spectacularly enough, they will usher in an age of dignity and liberty and prosperity, for *their* people, anyway, and who cares about these others?

Always, some people are quite certain that others are less than human and deserving of death, exclusion, erasure.

Let's look at a somewhat less fraught example. How people dress for church. Look around you. We see a variety of styles and modes. You could be quite certain what each mode means. Those people who dress up for church? Show offs, snobs. Or maybe oppressed by childhood rules they haven't been able to get rid of. Wear a hat to church? It used to be required. I remember putting a hankie on my head on a trip to New York City because we unexpectedly stepped into St. Patrick's Cathedral to look around. Those people who don't dress up for church? Disrespectful bums. Too poor or too ignorant to know how to dress. Did I say this was less fraught than health care? Not much. Maybe you could ask a person. What might you hear? "I dress up for church because what we do here on Sunday morning is important, and I want to show that." Or "I wear jeans because everyone is welcome here and I want to express that." Or, "I have to wear jeans/ a uniform/ a tie/ painting clothes to work, and here is my only chance to dress up – or dress down – without being judged. Or, "If sandals and an old blanket were good enough for Jesus, jeans and a t-shirt are good enough for me." Or, "I just love hats, I always have, and I collect them. Where else can I wear them?" So whether it's white gloves and a hat or jeans and a t-shirt, there's no telling what it means to the wearer. You could ask the same questions about other modes of dress – why does my Fayetteville Arkansas Muslim friend wear a head scarf? Habit? Solidarity with her mother after 9/11? Modesty? Obsessive rule observance? Actually, she's gone back to uncovered hair since I last saw her. It's not up to me to decide what someone else's reasons may be. Less certainty, more sympathy, please.

Apply all this to theology, and see if you can make a more peaceful world. Consider the religious right, trying to impose its views about the nature of the universe on society at large –

claiming we are a “Christian nation?” They’re happy to decide for you who may marry, what the right to privacy means, or how your children should pray in school or if your acceptance of evolution means you are godless and therefore dangerous. Or look at the so called New Atheists, equally happy to sneer at believers as gullible and narrow minded proselytizers. About the only thing they all agree on is exactly what words like God and prayer and faith mean, the one and only literalist definition that forces you to stand in one camp or the other without nuance or subtlety . I do recommend Karen Armstrong’s books, especially *The Case for God*. It’s a plague-on-both-their-houses view of those who are so certain about their beliefs. The body of the book is a long analysis of the evolution and development of spirituality and theology over thousands of years. The short version, looking primarily at Christian history, is that for most of the Christian era, “belief” has had more to do with what you love and what questions you wrestle with and how you engage with the goodness in the universe than about assenting intellectually to propositions about which there can be no knowledge and no certainty. The great theologians have all said we can know nothing about God, can make no claims, can only stay engaged. Armstrong’s book is sprinkled with wonderful words like *apophasis* – a kind of stunned speechlessness that recognizes the inadequacies of human language to contain the infinite; *hesychia* – an inner tranquility that comes with ardent spiritual exercises; *ineffable* – literally unspeakable. Armstrong describes the three phase spiritual exercise of a Medieval theologian known as Denys the Areopagite. (P. 125ff):

First we must affirm what God is: God is a rock; God is One; God is Good; God exists. But when we listen carefully to ourselves, we fall silent, felled by the weight of absurdity in such God talk. In the second phase, we deny each one of these attributes. But the “way of denial” is just as inaccurate as the “way of affirmation.” [Sounds like the Buddha. . . ] Because we do not know what God is, we cannot know what God is not, so we must then deny the denials: God is therefore *not* placeless, mindless, lifeless, or nonexistent. In the course of this exercise, we learn that God transcends the capability of human speech and “is beyond every assertion” and “beyond every denial.” . . . This exercise leads us to *apophasis*, the breakdown of speech, which cracks and disintegrates before the absolute unknowability of what we call God.

As our language fails, we experience an intellectual *ekstasis*.

Ecstasy, literally, a standing outside. . . By contrast, Armstrong shows us how over the course of centuries, the successes of science and rational thought have infected and distorted the kind of mythos thinking suitable for spirituality. “Western people, she writes (p. 322)

fell in love with an ideal of absolute certainty that, it seems, may be unattainable. But because some are reluctant to relinquish it, they have tended to

overcompensate, claiming certitude for beliefs and doctrines that can only be provisional. This has perhaps contributed to the aggressive tenor of a great deal of modern discourse. There are very few Socratic “philosophers” these days who know that they lack wisdom. Too many people assume that they alone have it and, in matters secular as well as religious, appear unwilling even to consider a rival point of view or seriously assess evidence that might qualify their case. The quest for truth has become agonistic and competitive.

And Tess, the lady with the bracelet? She, too, has suffered all her life from an excess of certainty. Not her own, her father’s. He was the sort of person who always knows exactly how things ought to be, what long hair on a man means for instance – he’s a bum – and will tell you in no uncertain terms. She doesn’t say that he was a bad person, or that he abused her in any overt way. But her whole life has been overshadowed, by his certainties. A little less certainty would do us all good, a lot more compassion, and even apophysis, or silence, emptiness.

And third, many of us are weighed down by **old junk** from relationships. Each of us has some junk to deal with, and it ranges from the tragic and soul crushing to the trivial and distracting. But junk there is, even if we are not emotional hoarders. I’m not about to tell you what your junk is – nor am I about to deal with my junk here – or tell you how to deal with yours. But I know it’s there. People make unwise choices when they are burdened with anger and fear and resentment. They try to numb old pain with drink or drugs and – duh! – it doesn’t work, at least not for long, and in the end it makes things worse. Or recall that icon of the American romantic psyche, the person who has been hurt in love and makes the same mistake over and over again, choosing the one person most likely to make them miserable in the long run. Or the person who is angry all the time, always ready to erupt, because they are still carrying the grievous injustice of an old betrayal. Or that person who just knows how everything ought to be, and is ready to tell you, and is just ready to write you off permanently if you do it wrong.

None of these people is wrong hearted or evil or hopelessly damaged. They’re just carrying too many burdens. *We’re* just carrying too many burdens. There is no “they” there’s only us. Maybe we need to delve deep, with a therapist, and face the terrors of old pain and move towards healing. Maybe we need simply to mourn a loss, a death, a cut off, a lost love. Maybe we need to just let go of that injustice, name it and cry over it, process it with art or prayer or vigorous exercise, and watch it dissolve. Or we just need to understand in our guts that anyone who would make you cry is not worth crying over. Just let it go. Forgive. Just decide to act more compassionately, no matter what may still be in our memory. Give ourselves over to the spiritual reality of living by our Unitarian Universalist principles – every person starts out with inherent worth and dignity. Every person deserves justice, equity and compassion. Our principles, whether they are grounded in faith in the divine or the rational desire for a just and orderly human society, our principles call us always to be better than we want to be. Whether we see humanity as the lodestar of the earth or whether we are simply made in the image of God, we

have it in us to try a little more, to put ourselves aside, to find the true meaning of humility, to look beyond our own desires, to make a better world for everyone. Let's put down our junk and get on with it.

And the bracelet? Sixty years Tess kept that bracelet, carried the burden of her father's harsh demanding opinionated presence in her life, long after his death. She struggled to make a life for herself. And then one day she took it out of the drawer and sold it. She emptied herself of that burden. And then, It turns out that it was probably that very same day, hundreds of miles away, a distant cousin she barely knew was doing genealogical research. Debby – my sister, the researcher here – found herself in touch with the daughter-in-law of *another* distant cousin, one Debby and I had known nothing of. Yes, Debby knew of that previous marriage, of the tombstone of a child buried far too young. She knew there had been an estrangement in the family, our ancestor cut off from her brother. It had something to do with borrowed money, a business deal gone sour between brothers in law. That's why we hardly knew Tess, and certainly had never even heard of her sister or the bracelet itself. You know the sort of story. But now here was a living relative, a woman in her eighties by now, half sister to the cousin we almost knew, the older sister, whose daughter-in-law, also a genealogist, was looking for Tess.

Debby held the key. She knew the outline of the story, the blood kinship, the cut off, the possibilities for restoration. None of us is undamaged. We all have old pains, losses, reasons to be cautious, not to reach out. Tess had never been communicative, never indicated a desire to know us at all. She was in a different world. Our ancestors had broken off relations. Why open that can of worms? Debby sent Tess a Christmas card, with a note about finding the cousin. Would you like to be in touch? Tess phoned my sister and talked a long time. She told her about the bracelet, about the missing sister. Yes, I want to find my sister. But the bracelet; I just sold it, I feel so bad. . . .

Debby reassured her that the bracelet was of far less importance than the relationship. Who knows if she even knew it existed, or if it would be meaningful to her, or if she is still in a condition to appreciate the whole story? And so after a breach of over eighty years, there was a moment for healing in this family. The two sisters were able to meet once or twice before the elder died. Was it the act of selling the bracelet that somehow caused a disturbance in the ether that brought about the connection? Not in the rational world, that's for sure, not in the world of logos. But in the world of quarks and quantum physics? Who knows? Probably not, but there's a lot we don't know. Plenty of room for uncertainty. Maybe the causality went the other way – some wave of potential information broke, Schrodinger's cat was alive after all, and that knowledge washed back in time and disturbed the bracelet, so that Tess sold it. Or maybe it's just all a metaphor. In the world of mythos, Tess traded away a gold and diamond bracelet in return for a sister she had been missing her whole life, a family, a chance to put down some of the junk from old relationships and make a better life for herself. And for us.

I can't say that arranging this opportunity for reconciliation will compensate the losses in Debby's life, or mine, or yours. And yet, that small act has done something to right the world, to balance out pain and injustice and betrayal with hope and healing. That's what kenosis ought to be, the humility to put aside our own concerns and self centeredness, to make possibilities for others, to empty ourselves of stuff we don't need, junk both material and spiritual, to make room for love. So may it be, amen, shalom, salaam, and Blessed Be.