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Mama God, The Dalai Lama, and Us

In our last year in Fayetteville, Arkansas, the Dalai Lama came to visit. It was big news for weeks. This is kind of amazing, a once in a lifetime event. The preparation for him included a visit by Buddhist monks, and exhibits of Tibetan arts and ceremonies on campus and in town. Of particular importance was the creation of a sand mandala – a large and intricate sand painting which represents a visual distillation of the whole Buddhist philosophy. Professor Sidney Burris, and English professor and long time Buddhist activist, along with Geshe Thupten Dorjee, a Buddhist monk on campus, both well known around town, were instrumental in bringing the Dalai Lama to Fayetteville. Professor Burris described the mandala tradition to the interfaith ministers group and shared a little bit of “monk gossip” with us. Monks, like everyone else, he said, enjoy a little gossip, he said. Sidney has seen the construction of these mandalas many times, both here and in India. One was made every year in Fayetteville, and noted in the local paper. He noticed that the mandalas in India are more intricate and elaborate than the ones he had seen here. So he asked a monk friend about the difference. Sidney told us that he doesn’t speak much Tibetan, but understands enough to follow a simple conversation, so when he asked his friend, his friend translated to another monk, shifting the meaning slightly. “Why are the mandalas in India more intricate than those in the US?” asked Sidney, but what he heard was “Why are the mandalas in India *better* than the ones in the US?” “Shall we tell him?” came the response. “OK, let’s tell him.” It seems that the Indian sand mandalas are more intricate and elaborate than American ones, because the *Dalai Lama* sees the ones in India. So Sidney pointed out to the visiting monks that week, that with the Dalai Lama coming, *he* might well see the one being made in the Mullins Library right then.

The ministers’ discussion shed a little more light on this whole process. The mandalas, they said, are very beautiful, made with grains of colored sand, drizzled painstakingly in place by hand over the course of six days. As you see it grow, you get pulled into it, and become attached to it. You find yourself wondering how to preserve it – lacquer the sand in place perhaps. Even though you know from the beginning that it is made only to be ceremonially destroyed, you begin to dread its demolition. The prospect of receiving a little envelope of colored sand doesn’t seem adequate compensation for the loss.

But of course, that eventual destruction is the whole point of making the mandala in the first place. Or almost the whole point. Gala Rinpoche, leader of a group of eight monks who travel as the *Mystical Arts of Tibet Troupe*, interviewed in the *Democrat Gazette*, said that the mandalas are “believed to be imbued with magical power and are said to prolong life and protect against evil.” (ADG 5/5/11) But Sidney didn’t make any claims about magical powers – he focused on the destruction. Destroying the mandala, even though you have become attached to it, reminds us of the impermanence of life, of possessions, of our selves and all our ideas and preferences. So whether the mandala is made with special care for the Dalai Lama to see, or with the more ordinary effort, it doesn’t matter. It is not meant to last. We are not meant to last. Our certainties, our opinions, or desires, all will disappear. We should not be attached.

We've come to that part of Karen Armstrong's book about the twelve steps to a compassionate life where we begin to see the spiral nature of the endeavor. The first three steps were learning about compassion, looking around at your everyday world, and having compassion for yourself. The next three steps are tools that get us closer to a compassionate life: empathy, mindfulness, and action. Now we are entering another curve, reprising the first three steps at a deeper level: **(7) how little we know, (8) how should we speak to one another, and (9) concern for everybody.** My attention was caught by the name of the seventh step, How Little We Know. After those three crisp one word titles, it seemed awkward. I would have called it "Admitting our Ignorance." But Armstrong was right, because ignorance, which ought to mean simply *not knowing*, has come to have all sorts of overtones, so she avoids it. She is telling us that even though we have come to the seventh step, we don't know everything. We should not allow ourselves to get stuck in attachment to all that we think we know, all that we think is best, our own idea of how others ought to behave. We ought not to be like lizard guarding the well. We may own the hole in the ground, but it's Mama God's water.

Armstrong urges us in so many ways to live with and embrace our not knowing, our uncertainty. In all her books she describes fundamentalism as a response to fear, and our western desire for certainty as a limitation that can lead to a kind of fundamentalism itself. (*Compassion*, p. 137 & *passim*.) She speaks of a footnote in a book referring to the "science of compassion" and how it led her to "opening a space" for *the other*. The instructions for a religious historian that she encountered would help any of us to become more compassionate:

[S/he] must not substitute his own or his readers' conventions for the original," . . . rather he should "broaden his perspective so that it can make place for the other." He must not cease interrogating his material until "he has driven his understanding to the point where he has an immediate human grasp of what a given position meant" and, with this sympathetic understanding of the context, "could feel himself doing the same." (116f)

In her second memoir, *The Spiral Staircase*, Armstrong tells us of living in solitude and silence, of sitting alone at her desk engrossed in scholarly study, and finding a moment of

transcendence, awe and wonder that gave me some sense of what had been going on in the mind of the theologian or mystic I was studying. At such a time I would feel stirred deeply within, and taken beyond myself, in much the same way as I was in a concert hall or a theater. I was finding in study the ecstasy that I had hoped to find in those long hours of prayer as a young nun. (2. 287)

The process she undergoes, of silent receptiveness, of entering the mind of another, of making a space for another, of listening – these form the basis of compassionate understanding. This is what Armstrong means when she speaks of "dethroning ourselves" from the center of the universe, or when St. Paul speaks of *kenosis*, emptying, or Socrates claims wisdom because he knows that he doesn't know anything, or Henri Nouwen speaks of a sacred space of hospitality, or when we let go of the beauty of the sand mandala. Or when Mama God warns Frog that the little patch of sky you can see from the bottom of the well is not the whole immensity.

Armstrong offers us a threefold goal for the step of knowing how little we know

1. To recognize and appreciate the unknown and the unknowable,
2. To become sensitive to overconfident assertions of certainty in ourselves and other people.
3. To make ourselves aware of the numinous mystery of each human being we encounter during the day. (128)

From this stance of not knowing, it is a small step to civility and concern for everybody. If you have truly made a space for the other, if you have come to understand them through the science of compassion, then it makes no sense to speak disdainfully of them or to them, to write anonymous notes, or make bullying posts, or to treat them badly or with indifference.

I had a small experience of this several years ago. When word came late one Sunday evening that the President was going to speak unexpectedly, I didn't know what to think. There was an undercurrent of solemn importance, and a little frisson of excitement. Was he going to announce an imminent attack? An ongoing but invisible attack – bio-terrorism? I felt anxious. But the anticipation among the news people had a suppressed hopeful air about it. And then came the announcement: Bin Laden was dead. Welcome news, perhaps, as the President said, a moment for some satisfaction, a step of justice, a bit of closure. And then I saw the crowd gathering at the White House gates, chanting USA, USA, and cheering, waving flags. I flashed back to the night before the first Gulf War – arguably the moment that set all this in motion – when Dave and my then fifteen year old son and I stood with candles outside those same gates in a spontaneous – non-facebook – anti-war vigil. The crowds then and now felt entirely different. We were quiet, subdued. Why were those college students cheering? Someone was dead. It might be justice, it might be a relief, but not a lighthearted moment. The next day on facebook, my daughter posted, “I wasn't raised to celebrate a death.” I was proud – after all, I raised her, and she got my message. I commented, “This is a death, not a touchdown.” And I stand my Amanda's comments, and mine.

And then over the course of the next few days, I began to unknow my own stance. Or at least I saw another side. I saw interviews with some of those who had been chanting and cheering. Young people who had been children at the time of September 11, whose whole conscious lives had been lived in the shadow of the fear of terrorism. The death of Bin Laden, whether it is actually important to the outcomes of history, was perceived as a lifting of that shadow, a sudden move towards a normalcy these young people had never known. I recalled myself at seventeen telling an adult, a stranger, that my generation had grown up, right outside of target New York City, in the constant fear of nuclear war. This stranger was disdainful of my fears. “We had WWII,” he said. I felt dismissed and disrespected. And in making a space for the cheering college students, I saw it through their eyes for a moment – not the death of a real person, a husband and father, but the zapping of a scary bad guy. Yes, it is unseemly to dance on a grave, but for a moment I felt a flash of sympathy. I would not speak harshly to those I saw cheering, not even the middle aged man at the gym wearing an American flag shirt that Tuesday.

And more recently, when I saw crowds cheering at the death of Tamerlan Tsarnaev and the capture of his younger brother, the suspects in the Boston Marathon bombings, I held my tongue again. Jingoistic gloating was not the only possible interpretation of that cheering. It might have been relief. And surely the cheers for every police officer who came by were recognition of the courage and dedication of the first responders who had done so much and risked their lives to protect the public.

Holding back my normal automatic disapproval of jeering, was my small step towards embracing Armstrong's advice, which she offers especially to liberals dealing with fundamentalists, after reminding us that not only is fundamentalism rooted in fear of annihilation, but that each fundamentalist movement has "begun with what was perceived to be an assault by the liberal or secular establishment." (137)

Aggression, righteous condemnation, and insult only make matters worse.
Somehow we have to break the escalating cycle of attack and counterattack. We
have seen what happens when fundamentalist fear hardens into rage.
(P. 137)

There was a facebook post a couple years ago about Bill Nye the Science Guy. He's a well respected science popularizer and entertainer. But he got himself booed in Waco, Texas. How? By saying what every school child knows, that the moon shines only by reflected light. This would not normally have upset anyone, but Nye had deliberately set up his statement with a reminder that Genesis 1:16 says that God set forth two great lights in the sky, the sun the greater light and the moon the lesser light. His juxtaposition underscored the point that the moon isn't a light at all, and by implication, the Bible is wrong. So people booed and some stomped out, saying "We believe in God." This made me roll my eyes, but neither his behavior nor theirs is how to break the cycle of aggression and insult. (Website, Madison.com and others)

Better to follow what linguists, Armstrong tells us, have recognized as a "principle of charity," a built-in human desire to understand what is being said to us. This principle causes us, when we hear something odd or out of tune, to seek some context or explanation which would make sense of the apparently false statement. Language, she says, is based on trust, the trust that the other person is speaking truth and has something of value to say. Our covenant at UUG says something much like this: We agree to respect others by "assuming that others act and speak with good intentions."

Clearly, this is not always correct, we must also filter everything through our reason and knowledge, but an intentional and consistent application of the principle of charity as a first step in both speaking and listening would go far towards helping us to live more compassionately and break the cycle we see in so much of our culture.

Some years ago in another congregation far away in Virginia I found myself in conversation with a member who holds a conservative, libertarian position on most political and social issues. It sometimes happens that people who appreciate Unitarian Universalism's libertarian position on intellectual and theological freedom – the free and responsible search for truth and meaning – do not also appreciate our sense of connection and interdependence with the

whole world. I was having trouble understanding this man's views, his feeling of separation from the welfare of others, and I finally asked him "How wide is your circle of care and concern?" It didn't include people on the other side of the world, or people in New York, or even people in Washington, DC. He thought it would include himself and his family, in some instances people on his street or community, in a few cases it might include people in his region, the peninsula he lived on. He had his reasons, and I thought it might have made an interesting dialogue sermon, though no one recorded our words and it all dissipated. This was long before September 11, so I wonder how he might now view our connections with the Middle East, though perhaps Ground Zero or even the Pentagon were not close enough to him to trigger a concern for those victims. Maybe he has more recently been moved by the local effects of the New York based economic collapse, or the interruptions in the supply chain caused by the earthquake and tsunami in Japan or the disruptions of Superstorm Sandy or the Sequestration. How wide is your circle of care and concern? Who do you see as "us?"

Are "we" the people of Syria who are still struggling, to rise from tyranny? For my friend and neighbor Mohja Kahf they are, literally "my people," old friends and family, new facebook friends, and total strangers whose lives are deeply connected to hers – and by two or three degrees of separation from ours. "*No intervention, no indifference,*" is the principle she has been promoting – other nations, including or perhaps especially the US should refrain from interfering, but to be supportive, to be connected. People who march waving olive branches are gunned down. Others are "disappeared." Children are tortured. There is evidence of the use of poison gas. The growing death toll and refugee rate make action feel urgent. But how do we choose between a violent dictator and a violent radical Islamist army? How do we choose between more violence or doing nothing? It is an intractable mess as far as I can see. And yet, if we have concern for everybody, these are "our" people. Our concern is for everybody.

We didn't know exactly what the Dalai Lama would say that week in Arkansas. Word is that whatever the official topic, he hears it from an aide as he steps up to the podium, speaks to it for a few sentences and then segues to peace. Here's what Karen Armstrong offers us from the Dalai Lama's book on compassion, *An Open Heart*, (9-11) (Armstrong 145)

But we are now so interdependent that the concept of war has become outdated. . . One-sided victory is no longer relevant. We must strive for reconciliation, and always remember the interests of others. We cannot destroy our neighbors or ignore their interests! This would ultimately lead to our own suffering.

We have completed another course of the spiral of compassion: certainty, civility, and concern for everybody. As the steps become more challenging, they also begin to blur a little. On this Mother's Day, let our compassion honor our mothers – the women who raised us if we can do that, or the Mother who lives in each of us, the Mama God who tells us to guard the water, not to own it. Let us move along the spiral of compassion. Amen, shalom, salaam and blessed be.

