

Nostalgia for God “The Sky is Falling –The Sky Is Not Falling”

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“Perpetually, now, we search and bicker and disagree. The eternal form eludes us -- the shape we conceive as ours. Perhaps the old road through the marsh should tell us. We are one of many appearances of the thing called Life; we are not its perfect image, for it has no image except Life and Life is multitudinous and emergent in the stream of time...” (Loren Eisle, “the Immense Journey,” p.59)

In early September of 2001, I stood in the back room of a bookstore in Great Barrington Mass. with my good friend. She handed me an architecture book and said if her husband asked me what she wanted for either her birthday or Christmas, this was it. The book, “Manhattan Unfurled,” by the Italian architect, Fiorenzo didn’t open sequentially, page by page, but instead rolled out like a scroll. Section by section the skyline of Manhattan -- from the Upper West Side with its pre-war architectural style thru midtown – marquees of theatres and the Empire State building – to the West Village and around the tip where the twin towers of the World Trade Center stood, bigger than the rest, unraveled at my fingertips. And there, in black and white outline, one unbroken hieroglyph, was Manhattan’s Skyline. In this book, the twin towers looked out in all four directions.

I remember thinking then as we spread the Manhattan skyline open on the floor of the bookstore, how the World Trade Towers, the Manhattan skyline, made me feel as a child and young woman. I’d lived in or near New York City then and when I was very young and intrigued by mythology, I saw the Tower with the antenna, as a unicorn, bringing together infinite space, home of the sky gods – Jupiter, Zeus—with the ground under my feet. There was a sense of solidity, awe and invulnerability in this New York skyline I claimed just for me.

On September 11, 2001, “invulnerable” cracked, and became a black hole, drawing light, time, concrete, steel, blood and flesh into itself as the Manhattan skyline disappeared. As I sat, watching this event unfurl on TV, many miles away from New York City, transfixed, along with the rest of the country, the child’s rhyme I liked as a six year old, some odd security blanket now, ran through my brain...

“...and Chicken Little ran around and around screaming at everyone he could find, don’t you see, the sky is falling, ...the sky is falling...and no one listened...the sky really couldn’t fall, could it?”

But it did

On the screen planes the size of my thumb seen angled by the position of the camera crash and explode into the sides of the Towers, but then the planes and the vacant space are reversed, and the towers are whole, standing again and in my brain Chicken Little mocks it all saying...the sky is falling...the sky is falling I am watching the Twin Towers not unfurl the way they did in the architecture book, one long delicious scroll, but disintegrate instantly and disappear.

This essay, though, is not about Sept 11, 2001 or world politics or about large scale international or cosmic events or, terrorism, although in no way am I making light of these tragic events. Nor do I intend to create any misunderstanding about the grief, shock and devastation of those who were in the towers and survived on Sept. 11th and the

misery of the families and friends of those who perished. I hope others will address the actual events or 9/11 and their consequences personally and on a national and international level. I, however, am a Zen practitioner of many years and so this essay is instead about what perhaps we can learn about the “architecture” of our own egos, our as we see it, indestructible selves, including our own hidden terrorisms, as seen in metaphor from this large scale attack and in doing so, maybe get a glimpse into what it means to truly be at our own “Ground Zero. It is at this “zero” where anger, hatred, judgment, beliefs, “my god and not yours,” cease to be and it becomes possible to find genuine and generous responses and not restricted and personalized reactions. In seeing our selves for what they are we reduce the reactions that cause events like 9/11

What can we learn from the collapse of something we thought indestructible? What did the Buddha have in mind when he said, “life is but a flash of lightning in a summer sky (or an explosion in the Fall skyline?) , a bubble in a stream (smoke evaporating in the sky?)... a phantom (ghost ideas?)... a dream.(not real).” Dogen Zenji perhaps one of the greatest Zen masters of all time, at age 10 stared at an incense stick in a bowl at the funeral of his mother and the flash, bubble and dream as he saw that every single thing is impermanent; there is not one thing that is solid and unchanging.. Zen master Soen Roshi said, “everyday is a good day...everyday is a good day.” Zen teacher, Joko Beck, “...from the very beginning, there is nothing that needs to be solved...but we can’t see this perfect unity because our separation veils it from us...our life is perfect...”

What could they possibly have meant? Do we really know that the “flash” of exploding planes, the incineration, is exactly incense going up in smoke? And on Sept 11 2001, did any of us really believe in our hearts that Sept 11th was a “good day, or ”that our lives “are perfect” ...that nothing had “to be solved?”

In the dictionary, the sky is defined as “the upper atmosphere; seen as a hemisphere above the earth, the celestial region.” Place of gods, higher and better things.. Haven’t we all looked towards the heaven in times of stress to find safety, redemption, another time or place or situation in pictures behind out closed lids that soothed us, that was be better than the place or situation we were really in. I remember being ten years old and having a playmate who died suddenly of acute leukemia. I knelt in a pew in the church looking up past the sacristy thru the stained glass windows to the slip of sky I could see looking for god, for heaven, for solace and escape for my playmate for something that held a promise that things wouldn’t hurt like this, for a savior to take away the pain, for it to be ok, or reversed and Jennifer would run towards me wanting to play again anything but not here where I was about as miserable as a child can be, but up there out there in the sky, in heaven.

In any shattering, in being shook to the bones, whether it be a large scale disaster like 911 or a small personal one, like the death of my playmate, (or years of a Zen practice diligently chipping away at the concrete like structure of a “self,” to descend to zero) our minds, literally stop, even for just a split second – thought or ideas or emotions lose their grip, and what is real, or that which is before any ideas or without a concept, or words or ideas is right there, directly, immediately in out bodies, in our tasting and our touch. Have you ever said when ‘shocked’ by something, My mouth is dry; my heart feels like it could explode in my chest; I can’t stop my hands from shaking? In that “puff,” in that

pause of grace, is a stopping (the spinning mind is what is stopped) where all of life we are back “in touch” sits because Life when it touches life is what is real

I remember after 9/11 talking to neighbors and friends. We said, I feel out of touch; or I feel out of it, dis-connected. It is our “natural” state to be in touch and when we are not, when we live in our heads, misery runs us because we are completely out of touch.

And so in any shattering or being startled, in this pause both on the large scale level of buildings (the pause between the detonator and the explosion, where air in buildings is sucked out), or on the level of our bodies when our very breath is sucked out, there is a place of silence, no gap whatsoever. In this “place” we’ve touched, briefly and probably not in a way that will last, what life is really about, what Joko Beck says, “when we lose our grip, when we forget ourselves, in that direct immediate experience,” of dry mouth beating heart, without breath, our image of who we are, that precious believed by us solid sculpture -- ME, chiseled by parents, teacher, culture,- incinerates, is “up in smoke,” and in that vacancy, that pause , we are not, we are at ground Zero, the only place real freedom can begin. Why? Because without our beliefs, concepts, ideas, in the disintegration of the architecture of the ego, we have become stripped, we are poor, we are what master Eickert says is “pure poverty,” when god’s face, our true nature, shines

To get to that place without just a conceptual knowledge, or what we believe that place is, or a knowing that is not based on knowledge, is the journey of a lifetime or Zen practice which is nothing more than consistently, deliberately, every day deciding to look at who we believe we are, experiencing/feeling over and over and over again raw emotions, dropping their descriptions, until finally they melt and we are at a pause...In that work I learned to see something else in tragedy, personal and cultural, to notice how my thoughts and emotions are as ethereal as an incense stick burning up in smoke and that “being scared to death would be great if it was literal death of the ego/little self and not just an idea

When I worked with disturbed children and was trying to give them a sense that maybe what they believed about themselves was not real, and that their emotions and thoughts might just be made-up, or at least not solid, we played a game. Everyone sat in a circle. I asked a few of the youngsters to make believe – make believe they heard something sad and pretend to cry – others I asked to pretend they were angry –others to pretend they were frightened. What would their faces look like, what would their hands being doing, their bodies, and then I said, let’s imagine someone is looking at us through the window – maybe this person came from another universe and so she sees, one person with water falling down their cheeks from their eyes; another one has clenched fists, another is holding themselves and shaking, but that is all that is seen. The alien can’t see any emotions or ideas or thoughts. The being looking in through the window can’t see what is not there, can’t see anything but what is immediately and directly in the environment, and what is not there is something we call “sad,” something called “anger,” something else we’ve christened, “fright,” ---thoughts behind our eyelids. Can we do what is alien to us and turn away from make-believe, from the thoughts spinning a dream in our heads and come back to the real play – what is happening now and see it without re-write, editing, improving upon it or wishing for a different ending.

I had a beginning sense of the real, the “pause” when I learned to ride horses. I did not have that fearless abandon of the very young who seem not to be afraid of falling off. However, I did have the ability to calculate in my head, that at a horse's 12 foot cantering stride, there was a spot where the horse should be able to safely take off and jump a jump of a certain height. I thought that was what was meant by riding coaches call “finding the distance,” and for years I rode around in a ring staring at the jump and trying to figure out the exact spot where the horse should leave the ground effortlessly, safely, without either straining to get over or coming in short and possibly hitting the jump.. Horses do not naturally jump in nature. And so even though professional riders make it appear as if the horse is doing this jumping on his own it is not the case.

The rider must find the distance.

For years I thought and thought and thought about this “distance”, trying to see the measured feet in my head, as my body grew tense and stiff even though sometimes by sheer luck I would hit that spot, most of the time I felt tight and awkward and the horse was stiff and straining. One day I was exhausted. It was very hot and I was absolutely drained. I really couldn't think about 12 foot strides and a mathematical solution to take off spots. I really couldn't think at all! My body felt limp. All the anxiety was gone, but something else happened.

I started to hear. I also began to feel -- breath of my horse in and out and my own breathing, I also noticed how the ground under the horse's hooves actually creaked and I actually heard the three beat cantering stride -- da da dum... da da dum... da da dum--- of the horse's feet moving over the ground. I felt my legs melt into the animal's sides, his heartbeat in my legs, and without thinking at all about it I heard the distance; saw the distance with my ears...da da dum...da da dum...da da dum ---pause (take off) weightless flight and then dum on the other side and back to the cadence, the rhythm -- myself and this 1200 lb being: one. In life too, it is when we have exhausted our ways of thinking, the many ways and years of practice we have of being in our head, when we are at our own “ground zero,” that we “find the distance” the take off spot where we become un-weighted (by thoughts, emotions, ideas) and free (of the gravity and tug of our self centeredness) and are still --in that “still point of the turning universe,” or as Joko Beck says, “the silence” where there is real freedom.

“... accidents and natural disaster often cause people to feel that life is fragile. In my experience, life can change abruptly and end without warning, but life is not fragile.. there is a difference between impermanence and fragility. Even on the physiological level, the body is an intricate design of checks and balances, elegant strategies of survival layered on strategies of survivals, balances and rebalances...” (Rachel Naomi Remen, a pediatrician (Kitchen Wisdom),)

The young Dogen at his mother's funeral stared at the incense on the altar filled with all the grief and sadness any of us would feel at the death of someone we loved, but as the young Dogen stared, he shifted his gaze from inside to what he could see directly in front of him, and as he looked at the incense, and we can imagine, can't we, staring intensely at something, watching it for what it is, forgetting any ideas we have about it and he saw the incense stick turn to smoke, the incense stick lose its shape and form and turn to smoke and the smoke at first hazy and spinning evaporate and disappear. At that moment, ten

years old, alone, completely alone, stripped of anything to lean on, any architecture of the ego, Dogen saw life as it is, ever changing flow, just a flow - life, that beating merciful heart, of just what is, which is "...everything, ...every act, ones we like or hate or avoid, ones we love and try to hang onto, are just this ... incense changing to smoke and smoke changing, movement, and flow:, This is God.'

Life/God always "goes our way," life never "does us wrong," life is neither "lucky" nor "unlucky." It is total and whole and we finally see what Joko Beck meant when she said, 'we can have a sick, ailing body" (or a sick ailing country) and still be healthy."

In the remains, the dirt and muck of ground zero in NYC, in the collapse of our selves, "life and death are continually appearing and disappearing coming and going, constantly changing... seen even in a speck of dust,(Dogen Zengi, "Shinjingakudo," Shobogenzo), life springs up; it is the rise of the Phoenix from the ashes; the lotus blooming in the mud)..and so "...Every day is a good day... even when we are afraid – because everything is This. Even a miserable day is a good day (even 9/11)...a cruel day...the warm flesh and blood...the merciful transformation...everything will change...not only us...not only us...everything...there is nothing else but changing, transforming..."(Soen Roshi)

And finally in the attacks of life, in the collapse of the architecture of our ego, we enter "heaven" or life, as Joko Beck states, "we are no longer caught in ourselves...and can say not, 'It is I', but It is thou'."

Here words themselves open and fall back to the "pause", to just that "puff" and they are not about anything at all and are instead the thing itself or "being" itself. The late Wallace Stevens, in his later poems, in my opinion came close to really seeing with his ears – to seeing the da, da, dum

Of Mere Being

The palm at the end of the mind Beyond the last thought, rises In the bronze distance,

A gold – feathered bird Sings in the palm, without human meaning, Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason That makes us happy or unhappy. The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space. The wind moves slowly in the branches. The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.