

“Excuse Me, Mr. Dragon...”

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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley. I minister to North Universalist Chapel Society or North Chapel here in Woodstock, VT. I'm so happy to see you this morning.

Today is Sunday, February 7th and the title of this morning's reflection is “Excuse Me, Mr. Dragon...” To this service and to this day, I bid you welcome and every blessing. To all souls, I say, “Good morning. It is so good to be together.”

Effortlessly, they say, the sky holds the universe in its embrace. It is all right there...all there is...if only we are brave enough to see it...but we are not always brave. We don't see it all sometimes. Sometimes, there are monstrous impediments...dragons. How do we get them to stand down? How do we encourage the dragons of life to get out of the way?

In The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, Sogyal Rinpoche writes, “Perhaps, our deepest fears are like dragons guarding the deepest treasures of life.” He borrowed this idea from a well-known poet—Rainer Maria Rilke. This is the thought that has been with me this week, not I have been feeling particularly afraid. I have not. I've just been dreadfully aware that we are fast approaching a grim threshold as a nation. We are fast approaching it, actually—the marker of half a million American deaths from COVID-19. Globally, right now, the total number of lives lost is 2,296,806. Just over 20% of the worldwide loss in here in the United States...among only 5% of the global population. It is a devastating time and we are—all of us struggling. I light a special candle of memory and hope to recognize this coming marker...this threshold that I don't want us to cross.

[light]

For this, I have been reflecting on the power of thresholds in our lives...those that we pray to heaven high above that we do not to cross and those, by grace, that we must cross...in order to grow...in order to heal...in order to find joy...and in order to live.

I have been led along this road by a man named Sogyal Rinpoche. He is a teacher and a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. He is the author of a wonderful piece of writing, The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying. I have been reflecting on this subject and I was reminded of a feeling that I had back in 1987.

The previous year, in the early summer of 1986, when I was 21, I was elected to lead a week-long, youth conference at Star Island. It was an honor. I spent a year gathering the strongest and most talented leaders that I knew and asking them to plan workshops, organize trainings and prepare to counsel the 120 campers and conferees who were going to show up the following June. I gathered up a most impressive staff. Don Schoenewolf, my local advisor from New Jersey, agreed to lead his Taoism workshop. He had done it before. It was

a big hit. A lot of people were going to sign up to that one, for sure. Maggie agreed to lead the Women's Circle. She was a strong leader and a quiet but highly charismatic person with a powerful smile. I knew that anything that she would offer would be amazing. Things were going well...and then, Jaco kind of killed the momentum. Things were on the up and up until he said that he wanted to lead a week-long workshop on the topic of death. Talk about a buzz-kill. I hoped that he wasn't serious but he was. His mood was super positive and he wasn't kidding. Rev. Jaco ten Hove... I thought that he was crazy at the time. I thought, "Would in their right mind goes on vacation for a week and chooses to spend a great deal of their time reflecting on the topic of death.

I didn't say anything at the time and I'm quite sure I didn't have to. He knew that it was a challenging topic. He knew my level of emotional maturity. And he knew that I'd have a hard time with his proposal. He also knew that I was likely to pretend that I was cooler than I was and silently and begrudgingly accept his crazy proposal. And he was right. I didn't say and anything...and I did accept his proposal...and it was an awesome workshop, much to my surprise. Jaco was then and Jaco is now one of the most important teachers in my life. I absolutely love that phenomenal man.

The thing that I remember most about what he said about his workshop was that reflecting on the topic of death can encourage the living of a deeper life. I remember that I was afraid of the topic at the time. I still am, in some ways...but not like I used to be. I didn't take the workshop that Jaco offered in '87 but in my own way, I have been reflecting on it ever since...for the last 33 years or so. That's a pretty long time. It's also a pretty short, depending on how you approach it.

I was afraid of the topic of death because I was afraid of the experience of grief. I really couldn't separate the two. I didn't know how. Certain things get easier with time. Things change. We get wiser when we're ready. Sogyal Rinchoche begins The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying with these words. I will quote the book directly.

For all of its technological achievements, modern, Western society has no real understanding of death or what happens in death or after death. People today are taught to deny death and taught that it means nothing but annihilation and loss. That means that most of the world either lives in denial of death or in terror of it. Even thinking about death is considered morbid. Many people believe that even mentioning death is to wish it upon ourselves.

That was me, unfortunately...in all of these measures. I was in denial of death and I was terrified of it and I didn't want to talk about it...and I thought that talking about death was danger. It was as if Sogyal Rinpoche was writing his book about me.

I can't imagine that my feelings weren't obvious. I'm sure that Jaco saw them plainly...in my words, in my attitude and my body language... I wore the feelings that I was proud of on my sleeve for all to see. I hid what frightened me and I'm sure I did that poorly. I'm sure that all of my fears were just as obvious.

I've grown up a bit over the years...not a lot but some. As they say, "We grow old by inches"...which is good because inches is what I've got...and I only have these inches because I stopped being so afraid. I stopped denying that which is universally common.

Death is not particular. I remember when I thought it was...and I remember when I was brought back to my senses about twenty years ago. My minister in North Carolina did me the service—Rev. Arvid Straube. I still so dearly love that man. He was preaching on the topic of fear—specifically, the fear about AIDS that was plaguing us at the time...the fear that was far, far more pervasive than the disease itself. From the pulpit, he confessed his own anxiety. He shared his fear with us...and he shared the insight that had strengthened him. He said something like,

I was afraid of AIDS. I was terribly afraid of it. I was afraid because AIDS is a sexually-transmitted, terminal condition. I was terribly afraid right up until the moment that I realized that LIFE is a sexually-transmitted, terminal condition. If I am not afraid of life, then why should I be afraid of AIDS.

This realization did not alleviate the dangers of that disease but it did lessen the fears that he had attached to those dangers. It did allow him to think more critically, more courageously, more lovingly. When we are able to face our fears, they do not go away but they do become accessible to us. We can talk to them. Instead of being chased away from the most meaningful thresholds in our lives...chased away by the fire-breathing monsters that fear creates, we can face these monsters. We can appeal to them. We can say, "Excuse me, Mr. Dragon, you are standing in the doorway...in the very doorway through which I intend to pass." We can say, "Excuse me, Mr. Dragon, you are standing on the threshold...on the very threshold over which I'm bound to travel." All we have to do—as gently and as humanly as possible—all we have to do is face our fears.

After 9/11, when the world seemed newly dangerous ('newly dangerous' to Americans, that is), Arundhati Roy spoke of the importance of this. She said, (I think, prophetically), and I quote,

...what I would really love to talk to you about is loss—loss and losing, grief, failure, brokenness, numbness, uncertainty, fear, the death of feeling, the death of dreaming, the absolute relentless, endless, habitual, unfairness of the world. What does loss mean to individuals? [she asked] What does it mean to whole cultures, whole people who have learned to live with [loss] as a constant companion?

Since it is September 11th we're talking about, [she continued] perhaps it's in the fitness of things that we remember what that date means, not only to those who lost their loved ones in America last year, but to those in other parts of the world to whom that date has long held significance. This historical dredging is not offered as an accusation or a provocation. But just to share the grief of history, to thin the mists a little, to say to the citizens of America, in the gentlest, most human way: "Welcome to the world."

The world is a pretty, big place...big enough for all of us to meet. And herein lay the challenge, doesn't it? ...the challenge that is made more difficult by fear and by grief...made more difficult by denial and naïve joylessness. That's where I was when Rev. Jaco proposed his week-long, Star Island workshop. I was very lonely in that place. I could not yet cross over into the garden. I was afraid of the power of the threshold. I was afraid because, as far as I could tell, there was a great, big, fire-breathing dragon that was standing in the way. I couldn't get by...and I didn't really understand the nature of the threshold. I was afraid of losing more in life than I already had.

It is common to think of thresholds as places of transition, as markers between this place and the next. According to the dictionary, the word "threshold" is commonly defined in two ways. In the first way, a threshold is "a strip of wood, metal, or stone forming the bottom of a doorway and crossed [whenever one is] entering a house or room. This is a threshold, this strip of wood, metal, or stone that forms the bottom of a doorway. In the second way, a threshold is that specific order magnitude or level of intensity "that must be [met and] exceeded for a certain reaction, phenomenon, result or condition to occur or be manifested." Water cannot freeze until it passes a threshold, the threshold of 32°Fahrenheit or 0° Celsius. Once this threshold is passed, transformation is possible. Water cannot freeze until it passes this threshold. It cannot boil until it passes a different threshold, the threshold of 212°Fahrenheit or 100° Celsius. Once this threshold is passed, transformation is possible. It's never otherwise. This is the simply nature of the world. Somehow, beautifully though, it is not its Buddha nature.

Buddha Nature is a beautiful and beautifully elusive concept. It is the goal of all spiritual practice. It is the deepest truth of meditation. "All beings are Buddhas," the sacred books tell us, but this truth is obscured by "incidental stains." "When those [stains] have been removed, there is Buddhahood."¹ Buddha Nature is that unstained and unstainable essence that lay within in us that is forever capable of highest things.

In order to experience this, we have to face our fears. Compassionately, gently, humanly, we have to grow a little...just as grows the lotus flower from what lay beneath. Out of the rot, we rise. Out of the brokenness and the decay, out of the spoil and out of the ruin and the dissolution of things, grows the lovely flower entirely free. The rising that is life and the release from it are inextricably linked. It is the relationship between these forces that yields the garden—its fruits and flowers. This is what we discover by standing on the threshold—neither departing from what was nor stepping into what will be but by holding both in balance and in perfect opposition...just like the lotus blossom does. As is expressed in The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying,

According to the wisdom of Buddha, we can [] use our lives to prepare for death. In the Buddhist approach, life and death are seen as one whole where death is the beginning of another chapter of life. Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected.

Back in 1987, Jaco was trying to explain this to me but I wasn't ready. I was too afraid. I couldn't listen. I could not yet face the dragon on the threshold of my life. I was afraid of what it might do to me.

You many of you may know, North Chapel has offered a class online. It's called Learning and Thinking Critically in Challenging Times. We met for the second time last night and are now halfway through our process. We had a lively debate—and a spirited one—about Civil Disobedience, not the choice of action but the famous essay by Henry David Thoreau. He was one who learned to think for himself. He made that choice. He could have cowered but he chose not to. He chose to face the dragons on the thresholds of our lives. He was not afraid. He was not limited by his fears like others were. Thoreau wrote, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." I wonder if "quiet desperation" is what happens to us sometimes...when we cannot face the dragons that we create for ourselves, when we live inside the fear that we create for ourselves.

I was afraid...back in 1987 at Star Island. I was afraid of even so much as talking about the subject of death...and I didn't tell anyone about it (although I'm sure I failed to hide it). For a time (for quite a long time), I was quietly desperate about the subject. I wasn't curious like Jaco ten Hove was. I wasn't insightful like Sogyal Rinpoche. The subject death always filled me with dread...but it doesn't have to...not generally. Here, I am speaking out of the context of the pandemic. Of course, I am driven by its urgency, confronted by its costs but I am standing quite apart from the pandemic in this reflection. I am standing along side of it, as it were. I am thinking about the nature of this threshold, this change, this metamorphosis that we are experiencing...and I'm calling upon Sogyal Rinpoche for wisdom and guidance...and he is insightful. I learn so much from him. I'm more at peace for what I learn. According to The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying,

The purpose of reflecting on death is to make a real change in the depth of your heart. Looking into death needn't be frightening or morbid. Why not reflect on death when you are really inspired, relaxed and comfortable? ...when you're lying in bed or on holiday? ...or when you're listening to music that particularly delights you? Why not reflect on it when you're happy, in good health, confident, full of well-being?

Don't you notice that there are particular moments when you are naturally moved to introspection? Work with them gently for these are the moments when you can go through a powerful experience and your whole world view can change quickly.

What a concept!! How fascinating...and even the dragon agreed...that dragon that, moment's earlier, had made me feel alone and afraid. It turns out that the dragon was not so scary after all, not nearly as monstrous as I had made him in my mind.

When we're lucky, there are gifts and there are benefits of chasing the dragon...depending, of course, on the nature of the dragon. Now, dragons in modern, Western society are things of legend. They are ultimate guardians. They station themselves at threshold between what we know and know not of.

“Hic sunt dracones” was the Latin phrase commonly inscribed on medieval maps of the world. Translated, the phrase “Here be dragons” was the phrase that marked the boundary line, the threshold between safe and dangerous waters. They mark places of fear—sometimes rational fear and other times, irrational fear...depending on the nature of the dragon. So, which nature is it here? What do dragons mean in the context of this reflection. Sogyal Rinpoche suggests that “our deepest fears are like dragons guarding the deepest treasures of life.” He quote Rilke, Letter from a Young Poet. Rilke wrote,

Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

These are the kinds of dragons we should face. If we don’t face them, we are at risk of being ruled by them, at risk of being ruled by fear. Is that what we want for ourselves? I don’t think so.

James Baldwin used to say, “If you are afraid of something, take a deep breath, soften you belly and turn toward it.” Don’t fight the dragon but don’t fear it either. Move through the fear and see what the dragon has to teach. See what it has to show us of the deepest treasures of life.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

¹ Third Karmapa Rangjun Dorje. <https://buddhaweekly.com/buddha-nature-one-important-understandings-mahayana-buddhism-tathagatagarbha-buddha-nature-not-soul/>