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 Arlington Street Church
 4 January, 2014

Change Your Mind

One of the Buddha's teachings can be translated into three words in English: he said, "Change Your Mind."

Walking through a field of dragonflies with his teacher, a student of the Japanese poet, Bashō, composed this haiku:

Red dragonflies
 Remove their wings
 And they are pepper pods.

Bashō told his student this was not a true haiku, and – on the spot – corrected it.

Red dragonflies
 Add wings
 And they are pepper pods.

Here they are again:
 The student:
 Red dragonflies
 Remove their wings
 And they are pepper pods.

The teacher:
 Red dragonflies
 Add wings
 And they are pepper pods.

A haiku, taught Bashō, is not just a technical construction. It must break open a moment of insight, bathing a familiar object in a new light, or revealing something that invites new meanings.¹

¹ Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) is recognized as the greatest master of haiku. Greg Allen, *Artist Transforms Guns to Make Music – Literally*, NPR, 1/25/14, 2:24 a.m. (Eastern time). Please see npr.org/2014/01/25/265794611/artist-transforms-guns-to-make-music-literally

Change your mind.

The mudra – or hand gesture – for Change Your Mind is simply this (you can do it with me, if you'd like): your right thumb touches your left forefinger; your left thumb touches your right forefinger. You can rest your hands in your lap, and close your eyes a little – rest your eyes. Breathe. Wait. If we find ourselves up against it, stuck, in need of a break, a new perspective, try it! Something shifts: an opening.

Change your mind.

There are many wonderful Zen teaching tales under this heading. Here's one of my favorites:

Out for a walk in the mountains, a man encountered a tiger. Terrified, he grabbed a thick vine, let himself down over the edge of a cliff, and dangled above the abyss. Just above him, the tiger paced and growled with hunger. Looking down, trying to judge if he could jump to a ledge and then find a way to the bottom, he spotted another tiger. Perhaps, he thought, he could wait them out. Surely they'd leave for easier prey. But as he hung there, suspended between the tigers, two mice² appeared from a hole in the cliff and began to gnaw on his vine. He tried to shoo them away, to no avail. Just then, the man noticed a succulent wild strawberry, growing out of the cliff wall. He plucked it and popped it into his mouth. Delicious!

The moral: Even if we are dangling above an abyss, tigers above and tigers below, we can still taste the sweetness of life.

Change your mind!

Speaking of tigers – please forgive this segue – on December 15th, Angalifu, one of only six northern white rhinos, died of old age.³ Fifteen days earlier, Ian Player, the man responsible for saving the white rhino from extinction, died at the age of 87.⁴ Reading Ian Player's obituary in the Washington Post, I fell in love with him.

The son of a white Johannesburg gold miner, Ian Player left school at 16 to fight with the Allied forces, and saw combat in Italy. He returned from

² In the original story, one mouse is black; the other white. Why?

³ Angalifu died at the San Diego Park Zoo. He was about 44 years old.

⁴ Ian Player died of a stroke.

the war, he said, a “lost soul.” He went to work for the South African parks service. “I will never forget my first view of a white rhino,” he wrote. I was in the Umfolozi Game Reserve in 1952.... It was a misty morning and I was looking into a patch of bush when two white rhinos came looming out of the mist, with steam rising from their flanks and their backs.... Something within me was deeply touched by this primeval scene, and I had an intuitive flash that somehow my life would be bound up with these great prehistoric animals.”⁵ There were 437 white rhinos left in South Africa; Ian Player became determined to save them.

“Conservation is not a plaything, or a luxury,” he said. “... It is survival.... We must experience wilderness.”⁶ “[H]e foresaw the economic value of preserving nature, [advocating for] what is now called eco-tourism; instead of hunting parties,” Ian Player organized outings on which visitors to the park could view wildlife in their natural habitat.” He was also an outspoken supporter of black culture in South Africa.... [H]is closest friend was a Zulu park ranger named Magqubu Ntombela, who taught [him] how to track animals in the bush.⁷

“The wilderness has no perception of race,” Ian Player said. “That is where the inner change can take place.”⁸

Change your mind.

All She Has is a wonderful story by writer Connie Ellison about the fears she has for her seven-year-old daughter Jean, who learns slowly and has behavioral challenges. At a particularly low moment, Jean comes home from school in tears, having noticed that she is the only student whose work isn’t featured on a bulletin board. Connie Ellison writes, “I’d like to believe that, with enough educational therapists, visits to the doctor, experimenting with different medications for ADHD, and drill, practice, and patience at home, I can turn my Jean into a valedictorian, a teacher’s ‘dream child,’ the wiz kid who gets everything right and never colors outside the lines. But I can’t. And every failure is yet another blow to [Jean, as well as to me].”

⁵ *Business Day*, South Africa, 2011

⁶ Ian Player, interview, *Sports Illustrated*, 1972

⁷ Matt Schudel, “Ian Player, South African conservationist who worked to save the rhino, dies at 87,” *The Washington Post*, 12/6/14. Please see [washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ian-player-south-african-conservationist-who-worked-to-save-the-rhino-dies-at-87/2014/12/06/e6a928d8-7cc5-11e4-84d4-7c896b90abdc_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ian-player-south-african-conservationist-who-worked-to-save-the-rhino-dies-at-87/2014/12/06/e6a928d8-7cc5-11e4-84d4-7c896b90abdc_story.html)

⁸ *The Washington Post*, 1984

Later, Connie Ellison is trying to get Jean to focus on the weather map in the newspaper – something for science homework. But Jean is distracted by a photo of a woman with two kittens in her arms, tears streaming down her face. Distraught, Jean insists on a diversion from the curriculum; she wants her mother to read her the article about poor Mrs. Hamilton, whose house has been struck by lightning and burned to the ground. All is lost except, miraculously, the kittens. The church, it says, is taking up a collection. Connie Ellison promises her daughter that they can drop off a donation.

The next day, the Ellisons arrive at the church, and Jean runs to find the minister. In her hands is her keepsake box and a hand-drawn card, decorated with rainbows and smiley faces. In creative spelling, the note says,

Mrs Hamilton,

I am saveng mony for you.

I pray for you.

I love you.

Jean

Inside her precious box is \$8.54 – every penny the child has saved for things she imagined she wanted. What she wanted was for Mrs. Hamilton to be happy.

At this unbridled gesture of generosity, Connie Ellison realizes that Jean is, indeed, her dream child.

*Change your mind.*⁹

Six years ago, artist Pedro Reyes went to the city of Culiacan, in his native Mexico, a city rife with drugs and violent crime. Through radio and television ads, he put out the call for people to turn in their guns in exchange for government-sponsored vouchers for household appliances. 1,527 semi-automatic weapons, rifles, pistols, and shotguns were thrown in the path of an army tank, then flattened by a steamroller, driven by Pedro Reyes, while people cheered and wept.

Then he melted down the ruined guns and fashioned from them 1,527 shovels. The shovels are now a traveling exhibit; wherever it goes, people plant trees, with the goal of 1,527 new trees in Culiacan.

⁹ Rev. Jennifer Slade, Unitarian Church of Norfolk, VA, *Claiming Happiness*. Thanks to my late colleague for sharing this story. *¡Presente!*

Two years ago, he was at it again. This time, more than 6,700 weapons were exchanged, and Carlos Reyes collaborated with six musicians to create an orchestra of musical instruments: clarinets, drums, lutes, marimbas, trumpets, violins. In each one, you can still see some part of the gun: barrel, handle, magazine, trigger. Composers were commissioned, and there ensued the great transformation from terrible to beautiful.

Zach Pedigo is a graduate student in jazz at the University of South Florida. He “is playing a bass. The neck is made from a double-balanced shotgun. Curved magazines from AK-47 rifles form the body of the guitar. ‘To me, ... [he] says, ‘the concept is about taking weapons that are destructive ... and chaotic ... [by] nature ... and trying to make them for something else. So instead of objects of destruction, they become objects of creation.’”¹⁰

Pedro Reyes writes, “It’s important to consider that many lives were taken with these weapons; as if a sort of exorcism [were] taking place, the music expels the demons they held, as well as ... [sounding] a requiem for lives lost.... [S]ince we cannot stop the violence only at the place where the weapons are used, but also where they are made.... [t]his is also a call to action....”¹¹

Change your mind.

Beloved spiritual companions, as we welcome this new year,

Touching right thumb to left forefinger
and left thumb to right forefinger,
let us rest, breathe, and wait for an opening,
moments of insight, and new meanings.

Tigers above and tigers below, may we taste the sweetness of life.

Change your mind!

¹⁰ Please see Greg Allen, *Artist Transforms Guns to Make Music – Literally*, 1/25/14, at npr.org/2014/01/25/265794611/artist-transforms-guns-to-make-music-literally and thecreatorsproject.vice.com/show/pedro-reyes-disarm-turning-weapons-into-instruments

¹¹ Thanks to my colleague Rev. Victoria Safford, *Wondering, Wandering, Under the Sky*, White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church, Minnesota, 12/23/12