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Arlington Street Church
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Dropping the Story

Hours before the crack of dawn one cold morning in the first week of January, headed from Boston to Chicago, I handed my ID to the TSA representative at the top of the American Airlines security line. She looked at my photo, looked up at me, made some magic scribbles on my boarding pass, looked up at me again, and said, “Your license is expired.” My blood ran cold. Seemingly against all odds, she waved me through.

When I returned to Boston – to my great relief, the TSA representative in Chicago missed it – I drove home from the airport: an unlicensed driver. I didn’t know what the penalty was for my infraction, but I did know that I was – and had been, for some time – breaking the law. Gripping the steering wheel at 10 and 2, I obsessively watched for the speed limit signs, glanced down at my speedometer, and checked my mirrors for the police, feeling like the criminal I was.

Two days later, nerves frayed, I pulled in to the registry of motor vehicle, parked at the space farthest from the door, and walked inside with a nonchalance I didn’t feel, joining a line that snaked the length of a city block. I wondered who else in line had also broken the law: my partners in crime. I wondered if the woman who was checking us in would ask me if I had driven myself to the registry ... and then what?

So it felt like a miracle when she asked only why I was there, and waved me to a self-service kiosk. All I had to do was insert my expired license, smile at the automated camera, swipe my credit card, and wait for my temporary new license to be spit out. It was literally over in a flash; in a flash, I went from being an outlaw to being a law-abiding citizen.

The woman behind me in line at the kiosk was Japanese. Her license was not expired, but she was very anxious about being able to understand

the electronic prompts, and getting the renewal right. Back in familiar territory, and still paying off the karma from wandering around Japan as a 20-year-old, depending on the kindness of strangers, I offered to help her. She gladly accepted.

She, too, was done in a flash, but as she put away her credit card and her temporary license, suddenly, she couldn't find her old license. She'd just had it. She checked the kiosk, then dumped out her purse and rifled through the contents. No license. And then she looked at me and said, "You took it."

No good deed goes unpunished.

Of course I hadn't taken her license, but she didn't know that I'm not a criminal. And wait – just ten minutes earlier, I was a criminal. Maybe I had taken her license!

I'm sure I looked stunned as I tried to navigate my way in the no-man's-land between identities. "You have it," she said accusingly. I managed to say, "I think you put it in your pocket."

Keeping her eyes on me – holding me there with her gaze – she reached into the back pocket of her pants ... and fished out her old license. Without another word, she scurried away – either from embarrassment at accusing her benefactor, or, perhaps, from the residual effect of assuming that I had stolen her identity. As I drove home, I kept glancing into the rear-view mirror for any sign of a flashing blue light, then reminded myself that it was okay; I was, once again, for now, on the right side of the law.

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Buddhism teaches that there are "three characteristics of experience:" *anicca*, meaning impermanence – everything changes; *dukkha*, meaning suffering – everyone suffers; and *anatta* – no self, no fixed "I." My license saga is a story about *anatta*, the belief that "the self, as we know it, doesn't really exist." The theory is that "we are ... so identified with who we think we are that it not only determines how we live, but it limits how we can be."¹

If you had to quickly answer the question "Who are you?" what would you answer? Who are you? First thought, best thought: Your gender

¹ Lama Surya Das, *Awakening the Buddha Within*, p. 117

identity? Your race or ethnicity? Religion? Profession? Your age? Political affiliation? Your personal history?

When the Buddha was asked this question, he answered,
I am awake.

As we commit to a spiritual practice of truth-seeking, we begin to see how our self-concepts and self-limitations are all based on “reflections of the ... self we construct, and keep constructing, moment after moment.” American-born Tibetan Buddhist Lama Surya Das explains, “[T]his projected ... self, in turn, conditions and creates what we experience. Each of us becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, the proverbial accident waiting to happen.”²

It’s especially hard for us –Americans who revere the self, and worship the myth of individualism – really hard to open to the possibility that “each of us is a process rather than [an] ... independent ... fixed ... concrete entity.” Sylvia Boorstein, beloved teacher of Buddhism and Jewish *bubbe*, asks, “If there is no self, whose arthritis is this?”

Sylvia tells the story of a man she knew who had gotten into a lot of trouble as a teenager, to the point that he was nothing but his rap sheet and whether he was high or trying to score drugs. And then he joined the Marines. He says, “The first day, they gave us ... uniforms, and then they gave us ... haircuts. Six of us got haircuts at the same time. They faced us ... toward the back wall, and ... clipped everyone’s hair. Then they turned all six of us around, at the same time, to face the mirror. I was scared for a minute. I couldn’t find myself! There was no one there whose story I knew!”³ How freeing is that?

Anatta – no self, no fixed “I” – is freeing. It’s a way to be liberated from the tyranny of individualism, and to begin to experience our deep interconnectedness.

I’ll close with a story from *Spare Change News*, “the nation’s oldest [and best] street newspaper.” In an essay in the “Voices from the Street” section entitled “The Secret to Life,” Mary Esther Rohman writes, “I stopped

² Lama Surya Das, *op cit*, p. 117

³ Sylvia Boorstein, *It’s Easier Than You Think*, p. 126

drinking and using drugs in my forties, but the first thing that happened was that I became horribly depressed. I was still isolated. I could feel all the symptoms caused by my twisted ... childhood. It brought me to thoughts and acts of suicide. I spent nearly a year in psychiatric hospitals and many more out on my own, [sometimes homeless,] trying to recover....

“My first healthy impulse was a desire to belong. I wandered into a church.... I don’t think it matters much what type of spiritual community you wander into, ... as long as there are good people [there] who can teach you about unconditional love. That was very important; it gave me something to believe in and a place where I was welcomed.

“At the same time, my counselor sent me to ... self-help meetings. It was there that I learned to speak. They don’t throw you out of those meetings for being socially incompetent. If they did, the rooms would be empty.... They saved my life. To my utter amazement, I discovered other people who told a story much like mine. I was no longer alone. I was learning new things every day. Most importantly,” she says, “I learned that there is no secret to life that everyone on the planet knows but me. The secret is there is no secret....

“One of the things that helped me the most, which isn’t a rule but probably should be, is to always be the first one to forgive. It doesn’t matter who did [or] said what. Apologize for your part – it takes two to disagree – and do it right away. It isn’t a matter of right [or] wrong, winning or losing. Apologize for your part, no matter how big or small. Every relationship is important.... Sometimes, you can’t bring yourself to do it. Do it when you can, but do it.... If you reestablish harmony by acknowledging and apologizing for your part, you’ll get to know yourself as well as the other person. You’ll be able to live with yourself, too.”

Mary Esther Rohman concludes, “After a few years of ... meetings ... therapy ... and community, I turned down a one hundred percent disabled for life categorization by the federal government and returned to work.” Mary Esther Rohman dropped her story. Today, she is sixty-eight years old, sober and sane and gainfully employed, loving and loved, happily married, feeling at peace ... and free.⁴

⁴ Mary Esther Rohman, “The Secret to Life,” in *Spare Change News*, 17-30 October, 2014, pp. 13, 15

Beloved spiritual companions,

Who are you?

Are you so identified with who you think you are
that you prevent yourself from being who you could be?

Let's drop the story.

May we commit to a spiritual practice of truth-seeking,
and so liberate ourselves from the tyranny of individualism.
May we know – really know – our deep interconnectedness.

May we be awake.

May we be free.