

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
 7 March, 2021

## **Soul School**

Whether or not it's true, it's immeasurably helpful to think of life on earth as Soul School. In *Transcendental Etude*,<sup>1</sup> American poet Adrienne Rich writes,

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,  
 make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history  
 or music, that we should begin  
 with the simple exercises first  
 and slowly go on trying  
 the hard ones, practicing till strength  
 and accuracy became one with the daring  
 to leap into transcendence, take the chance  
 of breaking down in the wild arpeggio  
 or faulting the full sentence of the fugue.  
 – And in fact we can't live like that: we take on  
 everything at once before we've even begun  
 to read or mark time, we're forced to begin  
 in the midst of the hardest movement,  
 the one already sounding as we are born.

My eyes have filled with tears more than once in the past week, approaching this anniversary: one year ago tomorrow, we gathered in this sanctuary for the last time before the pandemic hit in full force, driving us apart. But my tears have not been tears of grief. This feeling — this huge feeling — is gratitude. Sitting in my empty, quiet house — a year ago, I would have joked about the noise of living with more than 30 teenagers! — I open the Arlington Street Zoom room. I am alone. I find my breath and wait for you. And then, one by one, there you are — your beautiful faces framed in a square, centered against a backdrop of your living room, dining room, kitchen, bedroom — and I am filled with joy at the promise of the time we'll be together, sharing poetry, a book discussion, meditation, a cup of

---

<sup>1</sup> from *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977*

tea, lively conversation, astonishing intimacy, and the good work of Arlington Street Church.

I am also grateful that, one year ago, we had no idea of how long this — all of this! — would go on, and how many would be lost. We have done a good job taking each day, one day at a time, weeping together and celebrating together, together while apart. I recall the words of Henry Stanley Haskins — incongruously, a Wall Street trader with a checkered background — who said,

What lies behind us and what lies before us  
are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

And these, by Kentucky farmer and poet Wendell Berry:

The smallest unit of health  
is a community.

\*

A Zen Buddhist teacher described spiritual practice as “one mistake after another.” Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa described the spiritual path as “one insult after another.” Challenges are considered to be of great spiritual value. His tradition instructs all students,

Make difficulties into the path.

This is Soul School — the understanding that everything is grist for the mill; everything that happens is an opportunity to grow our souls.

There’s a very common Tibetan prayer that asks,  
Grant that I may be given appropriate difficulties and sufferings on this journey  
so that my heart may be truly awakened  
and my practice of liberation and universal compassion may be truly fulfilled.”<sup>2</sup>

At best, we are learning to ask,

not, “Why is this happening to me?,”  
but, “Why is this happening for me?”

\*

American Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön writes, “Generally speaking, we regard discomfort in any form as bad news. But for ... spiritual warriors, ... feelings like disappointment, embarrassment, irritation, resentment, anger, jealousy, and fear ... are actually very clear moments that teach us where ... we’re holding back. They teach us to perk up and lean in when we feel like we’d rather collapse and back away. [These difficult feelings are] like messengers that show us, with

---

<sup>2</sup> Please see Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, pp. 72-73

terrifying clarity, exactly where we're stuck. This very moment is the perfect teacher, and, lucky for us, it's with us where we are."

Pema Chödrön continues, "The most precious opportunity presents itself when we come to the place ... we think we can't handle [whatever's] happening.... Most of us [don't] take these situations as teachings. We automatically hate them. We run like crazy. We use all kind of ways to escape; all addictions stem from this moment when we meet our edge and we just can't stand it...."

"[Every] day, we're given many opportunities to open up or shut down.... The spiritual journey involves going beyond hope and fear [and] stepping into unknown territory...."<sup>3</sup>

\*

G\*d knows, we don't have to go looking for trouble. Across eight centuries, Persian poet and mystic Jalāl ad-Din Rumi, tells the story of a priest who answers why he prays for thieves,

Because they have done me such generous favors.  
Every time I turn back toward the things they want  
I run into them. The beat me and leave me  
in the road, and I understand again that what they want  
is not what I want.

Those [who] make you return...  
to [the spirit], be grateful to them.  
Worry about the others who give you  
delicious comfort that keeps you from prayer.<sup>4</sup>

We all have our version of thieves in our lives — those who steal our peace of mind and threaten to derail us from the spiritual path. American author Carlos Casteneda's indigenous teacher, Yaqui "Man of Knowledge" don Juan Matus, says, "A [spiritual] warrior cannot complain, or regret anything. [Their] life is an endless challenge and challenges cannot possibly be good or bad; challenges are simply challenges. The basic difference between [a spiritual warrior and] an ordinary [person] ... is that a warrior takes everything as a challenge, while an ordinary [person] takes everything as a blessing or a curse."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> *When Things Fall Apart*, pp. 12-15

<sup>4</sup> Coleman Barks, trans., *Rumi: The Big Red Book*, p. 76

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Casteneda, *Journey to Ixtlan*

\*

The most important discipline on the spiritual path may be to keep moving.<sup>6</sup> And you know I always say the best way to keep moving — the best way through whatever life throws our way — is to reach out and bring someone along. It is so much harder to feel sorry for ourselves — and so much easier to feel good about ourselves — when we’re helping.

Neem Karoli Baba was one of the greatest spiritual masters of our time. Ram Dass is perhaps his best-known American student; Krishna Das, called by the New York Times “the chant master of American yoga,” was also Neem Karoli Baba’s student, and lived with him in the Himalayan foothills in the 1970’s. These are KD’s words:

“It took a while to get with the program. You have to understand, we came over from America, we wanted to be yogis. He wouldn’t buy any of that. We would ask, “Maharaji, how can we know G\*d?” We figured we got the guy here, he knows the answers, we’re going to ask him the questions. “How do we find God?”

“‘Serve people.’

“What? It was totally beyond our understanding. We tried again. ‘How do we raise our kundalini?’

“‘Feed people.’

“‘What? But Maharaji, how can we be happy?’

“‘Stop thinking of yourselves.’”<sup>7</sup>

\*

I was reminded of this last month when Rev. Beth forwarded me an email inviting me to be a part of Beto O'Rourke's “Welfare Check Phone Bank,” which, in its first day, made over 151,000 calls to senior citizens in Texas. The goal was to connect them with resources during the unprecedented weather crisis and infrastructure collapse there. One of the volunteers spoke with an elder stranded at home without power. He hadn’t eaten in two days. He was immediately connected with a ride to a warming center and a hot meal.

---

<sup>6</sup> Pema Chödrön, *op cit*

<sup>7</sup> “Sing!,” *Yoga International*, 11/01, pp. 76, 79

And I loved this story, which surfaced on TikTok around the turn of the year. Jimmy Choi, an athlete who posts videos of himself doing one-armed pushups and planks with weights on his back, also shares that his hands shake too much to button his shirt, tie his shoes, or handle the tiny pills prescribed to treat his Parkinson's disease. Brian Alldridge, who makes country music videos for a living but who is most famous on TikTok for knowing obscure facts about Snapple, decided he would teach himself to use a design and modeling tool called Fusion 360 so he could help Jimmy Choi.

Astonishingly, it took Brian Alldridge exactly one day to meet the challenge. He dreamed up a bottle with a rotating base that isolates a single pill, which is then dispensed through a chute to an opening at the top. He posted a video of his design and offered to freely share the schematics with anyone who wanted to test it or improve it.

It was a great idea, but it didn't quite work. The next day, dozens of engineers and the 3D printmakers of TikTok took up the charge. Antony Sanderson stayed up for hours to get the pill bottle to work. Others improved the design, making it spill-proof.

It took this small army a mere three days to put the design through its paces and create a working prototype. Jimmy Choi tested every iteration; it cuts down on the amount of time it takes him to grab a pill, he says, and significantly reduces the frustration and stress that makes the symptoms of Parkinson's worse. "The anxiety level goes away," he says. "The time it takes and your risk of spilling these pills out on the floor [is] almost zero."

Version 5.0 is made with less plastic than the average McDonald's toy. The design was released with the caveat that it should be priced as such; Bill Alldridge hired an attorney to insure that it remains open source, and donated the patent to the The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research.

In the meantime, for anyone who needs this pill dispenser and doesn't want to wait 'til manufacturing in scale begins, they can buy one directly, at cost, from the TikTokers who are printing them at home. Bill Alldridge says, "For everyone

involved in the project, the point is to get [this pill bottle] into the hands of people whose lives would be improved by it at as little cost as possible.”<sup>8</sup>

*Serve people. Feed people. Stop thinking of yourselves.*

\*

Beloved spiritual companions, let’s close with a poem from Danusha Laméris,<sup>9</sup> poet laureate of Santa Cruz County in California. Susan Kreiger Judge brought it to this past week’s gathering of Poems to Go On, and now it’s a gift to us all — lessons from Soul School. It’s called *Small Kindnesses*.<sup>10</sup>

I’ve been thinking about the way, when you walk  
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs  
to let you by. Or how strangers still say “bless you”  
when someone sneezes, a leftover  
from the Bubonic plague. “Don’t die,” we are saying.  
And sometimes, when you spill lemons  
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you  
pick them up. Mostly, we don’t want to harm each other.  
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,  
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile  
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress  
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,  
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.  
We have so little of each other, now. So far  
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.  
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these  
fleeting temples we make together when we say, “Here,  
have my seat,” “Go ahead — you first,” “I like your hat.”

---

<sup>8</sup> Kate Sanchez, “Parkinson’s Meds Are Hard to Grab, So TikTok Users Crowdsourced a Solution,” in *The Verge*, 1/23/21. Please see [theverge.com/2021/1/23/22244673/parkinsons-tiktok-crowdsourced-pill-bottle](https://www.theverge.com/2021/1/23/22244673/parkinsons-tiktok-crowdsourced-pill-bottle)

<sup>9</sup> pronounced Dah-NEW-shah La-MERE-is

<sup>10</sup> Fran Peterson’s wife, Michelle Buteau, was honored with this poem at her memorial service. Michelle Buteau: *presente!*