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Arlington Street Church
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Are We There Yet?

My college classmate Patrick D. is one of five boys. As kids, they were rambunctious and reckless and unrelentingly rowdy.

One summer, Patrick's mother was at the wheel, the car filled to the gills with boys and baggage on a long ride to a vacation spot. Her husband was working in the city, and planned to join his family for the weekend, enjoying the luxury of driving alone. You can imagine the way the overburdened and overwrought station wagon looked from behind, sagging under the weight and pitching from side to side as the boys pummeled each other inside. The noise, Patrick said, was deafening.

Eventually, the police pulled over Mrs. D. for “slow and erratic driving.” When the officer came to the door, Patrick's beleaguered mother. began pleading with him. *Please arrest me, officer* she said. She was completely serious. *Please take me to some quiet jail, where I can have some peace.*

For the first time in hours, the car was completely silent.

All I know of the rest of this story is that Patrick's father went out and bought a hearse. For the rest of his childhood, the D. brothers rode in the back of the hearse, and their mother drove up front in relative peace.

I remembered this story when a colleague reminded of a fabulous old *New Yorker* cartoon picturing a Bedouin family making their way across the desert: father, mother, two kids, traveling single file on their loaded camels. The caption reads, “Stop asking if we're almost there! We're Bedouins, for crying out loud!”

I don't know how many of you have memories in this vein. I think you had to have come of age before Gameboy. At any rate, perhaps needless to say, these stories are iconic, both hilarious and soul-searing. Vacations have a way of bringing out both

the very best and the very worst.

Maybe it's families that have a way of bringing out the very best and the very worst. Which is to say that families have a lot to teach us about ourselves, the power of spiritual practice, and the grace of resiliency.

Jack Kornfield writes “It is one thing to offer a multitude of prayers for the sick and the poor, or to undertake loving kindness and compassion meditations for thousands of sentient beings everywhere. It is another to bring these same practices to our own family...”¹ Need I elaborate? I don't think I can improve on this, but just would add that *trying* is a worthy enterprise ... trying to bring an open heart to our family – and I'm thinking especially here of our family of origin, the one with which we don't remember signing up; I'm talking about the high wire act of spiritual practice! The practice is to try to extend compassion everywhere, at all times: a great challenge, and worthy undertaking.

There's a Chinese Zen saying I love that says, “Don't confuse freedom ... with running away.... [It is] like running from your shadow. This is false emptiness. There is nowhere you can go that is more or less empty than your own house. Enlightenment has been here from the start.”² Jack Kornfield tells the story of a young woman who had become deeply engaged in Buddhist practice visiting her fundamentalist Christian parents. We are spared the details – I know you can imagine! – and rewarded with her insight: “My parents hate me when I'm a Buddhist,” she says, “but they love me when I'm a Buddha.”³

Did I mention that this isn't fun? Well, mostly it's not, unless you count the time we spend commiserating with friends! Please don't ever feel alone with the struggle to make peace with your past. Your spiritual companions in this beloved community also have a past, and are also trying to practice compassion: to love, to let go, and to forgive both others and ourselves. Last week, I preached the great *dharma* “change me for you” from Mipham, who is the oldest son of the great Tibetan spiritual teacher Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. Trungpa composed a death poem in which he “wrote about the value of the teachings he had offered to his students, and then reminded them, 'I will be haunting you.’”⁴ I take tremendous comfort in the idea of being haunted by the voice

1 Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, p. 216

2 Kornfield, p. 218

3 Kornfield, pp. 218-219

4 Kornfield, p. 220

urging us on to compassion, both for others and for ourselves.

Are we there yet? Sometimes we're there; sometimes, perhaps, if we're lucky. It might help to remember that even “sometimes” is good – very good! If you want to make peace with a difficult past, and you continue to call home hoping that this time, maybe, just maybe, the conversation might go differently, it might help to remember to put a sticky on your mirror that says, “Don't dial pain.” Don't dial pain, and call someone who will receive you as you are, and give you what you really want. If you want to make peace with a difficult past, it might help to remember, when compelled to make a difficult visit, to bow out of your part in the play and take a seat in the second balcony. Take a mental, emotional, and spiritual seat there, and watch the show, your family show, as if you're watching the circus. Choose your metaphor: maybe, for you, it's a Fellini film festival.

It might help to remember the Zen teaching that the capacity for enlightenment is in this very moment: take a deep breath, keep breathing, and practice what Catholic monk Thomas Merton advised: that we seek to learn to see “the secret beauty of their hearts.”

I know. Sometimes, that beauty is a very big secret. Keep trying!

And then there are those of you who come from amazing families, and those of you who have created amazing families whether or not you enjoyed the great good fortune to come from one. I have the privilege of knowing some of the amazing families of this congregation, and it has helped and healed and held me more than I can ever say. It has also been a great gift to Kem and me and to our children, since I learned so much about good parenting from the parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles here this morning. I lift this up both to say *thank you*, and to recommend the good counsel of our spiritual companions! Children do not come with operating instructions, and parenting is so hard that it helped me to forgive everything – everything – my own parents ever did wrong. I commend you to the wisdom of this beloved community of memory and hope.

In a tribute to parenting that exemplifies devotion and forgiveness, I want to close by sharing with you two extraordinary “mother” stories.

First, devotion:

The children of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo⁵ “disappeared” between 1976 and 1983 during the military dictatorship of Argentina's “Dirty War.” Exact numbers are part of the secret; eleven thousand to thirty thousand young people were systematically kidnapped, tortured, and killed.

On April 30th, 1977, fourteen founding mothers, who met each other while trying to find their children, started to demonstrate on the Plaza de Mayo, in front of the presidential palace.⁶ “Police snapped at them to keep moving, ... so ... [they] walked the plaza in slow circles,” wearing white head scarves, symbolizing baby blankets, with their children's names embroidered on them.

At eighty-five, Maria Adela Antokolz “moves with slow, tottering steps and enormous dignity.... 'We were scared to death,' she says. 'We learned to walk with fear, to live with fear. We had an obligation to find our children.'”

Even when three of their founders were “disappeared,” the Madres continued to walk. For early 29 years, they walked at 3:30 every Thursday afternoon, demanding justice. By the end, “elderly and fragile,” they walked arm in arm.... And then, on January 26th, 2006, they made their final walk, declaring that they could stop, at last, because the government was no longer “hostile or indifferent” to the fate of their children.⁷

They never found their children. But they awakened a whole nation, and the world. “In the plaza,” Maria Adela Antokolz says, “we told our story.... We cried together. The plaza ... was our educational academy. [It] saved us from the madhouse.” My favorite line is from Julio Cortázar, the exiled Argentine writer. When he heard about The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo he said, “The mothers are out. The military [has] already lost.”⁸

First devotion, and then forgiveness: devotion, and forgiveness.

This is from the director of a program for juvenile offenders in Washington, D.C., as told to Jack Kornfield.

⁵ *Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*

⁶ *La Casa Rosada*

⁷ see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mothers_of_the_Plaza_de_Mayo

⁸ as reported by *Los Angeles Times* Paris correspondent Sebastian Rotella

“One fourteen-year-old boy in his program had shot and killed an innocent teenager to prove himself to his gang. At the trial, the victim's mother sat [in silence].... After the verdict was announced, she stood up slowly ... stared directly at him ... [and said,] 'I'm going to kill you.'

“After the first [several months, she] went to [see her son's murderer]. He had been living on the streets before the killing, and she was the only visitor [he] had. For a time they talked, and when she left, she gave him ... money for cigarettes. Then she started ... to [come] ... more regularly, bringing food and small gifts. Near the end of his three-year sentence, she asked him what he would be doing when he got out. He was confused and very uncertain.... [S]he offered to set him up with a job at a friend's company. Then she inquired about where he would live.... He had no family.... She offered him temporary use of the spare room in her [house].

“For eight months he ... worked at the job, ... [and] lived [in her home]. Then one evening, she called him into the living room to talk. She sat down opposite him.... 'Do you remember in the court room when I said I was going to kill you?' [she asked.]... 'I'll never forget that moment,' [he replied].

“Well, I did,' [she said]. 'I did not want the boy who could kill my son for no reason to remain alive on this earth. I wanted him to die. That's why I started to visit you, and bring you things. That's why I got you the job, and let you live here in my house. That's how I set about changing you.

“And that old boy, he's gone. So now I want to ask you, since my son is gone, and that killer if gone, if you'll stay here. I've got room, and I'd like to adopt you if you let me.' And [so] she became the mother of her son's killer, the mother [he'd] never had.”⁹

My spiritual companions, are we there yet? We're on our way. Families can bring out the very worst and the very best. It's up to us to choose what we will do with what we are given. May we know the grace of resiliency. May we give ourselves to the spiritual practice of compassion; breathe, and seek the secret beauty of every heart. Let us remember, especially, to draw strength from this beloved community, and to give it away; may we be a people known for our devotion and forgiveness.

9 Kornfield, p. 236

