

PRACTICE

by Michael Ventura

Letters at 3AM – July 8, 2005

I write this a little under protest. My writing-self says, “Write about your practice. *That* is your subject tonight!” But another self cringes: “I don’t want us to write about that, it’ll screw things up.” Yet another (rather stuffy) self chimes in: “To act, or to fail to act, out of fear -- only creates more fear.” I don’t know what they’re fussing about, the writing-self always wins anyway (though sometimes that second voice is right). So it seems that after years of enacting my practice, it’s come time to write about it. (I don’t know why. My writing-self never tells me that.)

“Practice” is what Buddhists call it. The usage suits me, though I’m not Buddhist. (I’m not any -ist or -ism or -ian.) “Practice,” in the modern sense, means to work at something persistently, trying to get it right -- which also fits my meaning, my practice: the hour or so a day when I read my “devotionals” (a Catholic usage), then to go to my altar to meditate and pray.

I should begin by admitting that I know little of such matters; I do the little I know. My practice refreshes and calms me, and helps me feel connection to a larger, more inclusive reality, beyond the everyday and beyond this crazy moment in history. When, twenty years ago, I felt the need for such a practice, my practicality -- underneath it all, I’m *very* practical; to get away with what I’ve gotten away with you’ve got to be practical -- my practicality instructed me: “Form your practice simply, out of simple things known to you, without dogma, and without the grandiose or esoteric. Just a plan to sit and ‘pray in your closet,’ as Jesus suggested.”

Which is how it began. Over the years there’ve been some modest elaborations. (My practical self is very firm with this instruction: “Don’t get too fancy in this realm. Keep it simple.”)

From the first I had the need to read “devotionals,” as I call them now. I sit with several books and slowly read a page or so of each aloud. First I recite a line from a Zen verse: “This day will not come again...” Then another: “When the hubless wheel turns/ Master or no master can stop it...” Words from Paul Reps’ *Zen Flesh Zen Bones*, from which I then read. Then a page or so from the *Tao te Ching*, Idries Shah’s *The Way of the Sufi*, Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim*, Dorothy Day’s *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, John Dominic Crossan’s rendition of Jesus’ sayings, poetry by Hafiz, and poetry by Ikkyu. So: a Zennist, a Taoist, a Moslem, a Jew, a Catholic, a Roman emperor, Jesus (another Jew), another Moslem, and finally the wildest of all Zennists.

It wasn’t my intention to be so multi-cultural. These books were gifts. Butch gave me Idries Shah; Jodie, the *Tao te Ching*; Mikey, Buber; Dave, Dorothy Day; Hannah, Marcus Aurelius; Karen gave me one Ikkyu book and the other was given by a stranger. There’s my practicality’s voice again: “Don’t go too far out of your natural way for such things. Take what’s given.”

A kind of personal community of wisdom-teachings, then. The *Tao te Ching* instructing: “Do your work, then step back. That is the only path to serenity.” Buber: “The world in which you live, just as it is and not otherwise, affords you that association with God, which will redeem you and whatever divine aspect of the world you have been entrusted with.” In the Sufi book, Saadi of Shiraz: “Make no friendship with an elephant-keeper if you have no room to entertain an elephant.” Dorothy Day working for “that kind of society where it is easier to be good.” The emperor: “The Mind of the universe is social.” Jesus: “Love your enemy.” Ikkyu: “Entrust yourself to the wind-blown clouds and do not wish to live forever.”

Hard stuff to live up to. I like to think I am an intelligent and capable person, reverent in my way, doing what I can -- but I need help and I’m bad at asking for it or taking it. These voices give it in a form I can manage. My “devotionals,” then, are no more than that: listening for help.

Then I go to my altar, where candles are burning. My long messy altar. I like a mess. I like crowded streets and crowded desks. Messy walls with lots of photographs and art on them, and nothing exactly level. Shelves of books emphatically not in alphabetical order. My altar is in that spirit. And again, so much of it is *given*: Deb’s shrine, Spider and Lora’s box, Evann’s cross,

George's cross, Daisy's rock, Jenni's candle-holder, Brendan's shaman figure, the little shrine Kathleen and Cynthia built, the small wood box that Dave built and the larger box my father built, Andrew's angel, Kyra's leaves, Jazmin's dried flowers, Big's vial of Italian soil, JoCarol's cards, my mother's books, my cousin's candle-holder, my stepmother's incense burner, Hannah's little duck (altars should QUACK, shouldn't they?)... and photos of the dead of my blood... so my altar is a space that is peopled, connected, no matter how solitary my daily life appears. (I've often gone days without a face-to-face talk with anyone I know.) I'm praying, in effect, in my crowded, peopled, messy closet, so small in the shadow of God.

John Coltrane wrote: "No matter what... it's God." A transcendent and awe-ful vision. I don't expect to know what I mean when I say "God." If I knew what I meant, it wouldn't be God. Joseph Campbell put it another way, saying something like: "God is beyond human category. 'Good' and 'evil,' 'order' and 'chaos,' are human categories. God is beyond all that." (Coltrane's "no matter what.") My brother Aldo used to say to me, "How can you pray to a God you have no personal relation to?" I'd answer, "The Moon doesn't have a personal relation to me, that I know of, but I can still think it beautiful and love it and talk to it." Anyway... first, I beg God to forgive all that I haven't the strength to forgive. For Jesus (whom I don't worship, but whom I do revere) instructed that before we pray we forgive all those we have anything against. And then I pray... for my beloveds, for strangers, sometimes even for myself, that I may act truly.

There's no need to relate what I say in prayer. We must all find our own words, whether we compose them ourselves or find words from whatever serves our longing. (Kathleen says that there's really only one prayer: "Thank you.") In any case, I pray. In *Tales of the Hasidim*, Rabbi Pinhas says, "The prayer a man says, the prayer, in itself, is God... for prayer unites the principles." Unites the one praying with God. May it be so. I don't know. As I don't know what God is. I simply desire to pray. Realizing it may be: nothing. I seek no comfort. I ask no favors. I can think of nothing more pathetic than to present God a shopping-list of one's desires. Insofar as I am able, I attempt to stand naked before the will of the Universe. I always fail. At best, I strip down only to my underwear. Usually, I'm wearing the spiritual equivalent of a tuxedo at the very times I fancy I'm most naked! It doesn't matter. I have to pray for my people or I don't feel that I'm doing my job or even living my life. What God does about that is God's affair.

And then I meditate. Meditation and prayer are very different. In prayer, one addresses the sacred as best one can. In effect, one seeks an audience with God. Which may be impossible -- and so, very worth trying. In meditation, one enters the realm of possibility. But very carefully. In the tradition in which I was taught, which does not need to be named, one does not teach a meditation to someone one does not know. So I'll say little about it. Over the years I've developed my own meditation, but it's best to start with what's simplest: to sit with back straight for a half hour or so, and breathe evenly, and be as quiet as possible, quieting the mind. This aligns your spirit-body with your physical body. (Let "spirit" stand for that part of you which can't be measured.) It's my experience that when you do this every day you become much more patient. My testimony: only after I did this for years did I really and truly grow up emotionally -- insofar as I've grown up, that is. Meditation... gives you more space. You live in a larger world. That is my experience, my testimony.

After I've meditated I say aloud, "Thank you." I'm not sure to what, exactly, except to the calm and connectivity of the moments that have just passed. It just feels right to say it.

And that's it. My practice. Which my writing-self, in its dictatorial fashion, commanded I tell. We live in a time of "dire beauty" (Caroline Casey's words). At the center of how I face this direness and beauty, is my practice. Perhaps my writing-self decided to speak of it, over the protests of several other selves (including one that said, "This is gonna make us really look silly," and another chirping, "We *are* silly!"), because... in dangerous times we owe each other an account of how we survive, for it may be useful to someone else's survival. This practice is at the heart of how I survive.

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