

**THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE**

**WHAT IF GOD  
WERE A STRANGER  
ON THE BUS?!**

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**READING** from *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* by Jack Kornfield

Today, I want to talk about a couple of the many things that we are called to do on the spiritual path.

Our Reading is from the introduction to Jack Kornfield's book, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*. Kornfield is a popular Buddhist writer.

*When I found myself becoming a Buddhist monk in a forest monastery of Thailand over thirty years ago, I had to learn how to bow. It was awkward at first. Each time we entered the meditation hall we would drop to our knees and three times respectfully pace our head between our palms on the stone floor. It was a practice of reverence and mindfulness, a way of honoring with a bodily gesture our commitment to the monk's path of simplicity, compassion, and awareness. We would bow in the same way each time we took our seat for training with the master.*

*After I had been in the monastery for a week or two, one of the senior monks pulled me aside for further instruction. "In this monastery [he explained], you must not only bow when entering the meditation hall and receiving teachings from the master but also when you meet your elders." As the only Westerner, and wanting to act correctly, I asked who my elders were. "It is traditional that all who older in ordination time, who've been monks longer than you, are your elders," I was told. It took only a moment to realize that meant everybody.*

*So I began to bow to them. Sometimes it was just fine —there were quite a few wise and worthy elders in the community. But sometimes it felt ridiculous. I would encounter some twenty-one-year-old monk, full of hubris, who was there only to please his parents or to eat better food than he could at home, and I had to bow because he had been ordained the week before. Or I had to bow to a sloppy old rice farmer who had come to the monastery the season before on the farmers' retirement plan who chewed betel nut constantly and had never meditated a day in his life. It was hard to pay reverence to these fellow forest dwellers as if they were great masters.*

*Yet there I was bowing, and because I was in conflict, I sought a way to make it work. Finally, as I prepared yet again for a day of bowing to my "elders," I began to look for some worthy aspect of each person I bowed to. I bowed to the wrinkles around the retired farmer's eyes, for all the difficulties he had seen and suffered through and triumphed over. I bowed to the vitality and playfulness in the young monks, the incredible possibilities each of their lives held yet ahead of them.*

*I began to enjoy bowing. I bowed to my elders, I bowed before I entered the dining hall and as I left, I bowed as I entered my forest hut, and I bowed at the well before taking a bath. After some time bowing became my way – it was just what I did. If it moved, I bowed to it.*

*...The true task of spiritual life is not found in faraway places or unusual states of consciousness: It is here in the present. It asks of us a welcoming spirit to greet all that life presents to us with a wise, respectful and kindly heart.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Kornfield, Jack, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path* (New York: Bantam Books, 2000), pp. ix-x.

## WHAT IF GOD WERE A STRANGER ON A BUS?

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

On the spiritual path, we are called to do many things. Consider the following traditional Swedish tale as told by the Buddhist writer Jack Kornfield (from whom we just heard about bowing). Here is the tale.

Because of the mishaps of her parents, a young princess named Aris must be betrothed to a fearful dragon. When the king and queen tell her, she becomes frightened for her life. But recovering her wits, she goes out beyond the market to seek a wise woman, who has raised twelve children and twenty-nine grandchildren, and knows the ways of dragons and men.

The wise woman tells Aris that she indeed must marry the dragon, but that there are proper ways to approach him. She then gives instructions for the wedding night. In particular, the princess is bidden to wear ten beautiful gowns, one on top of another.

The wedding takes place. A feast is held in the palace, after which the dragon carries the princess up to his bedchamber. When the dragon advances toward his bride, she stops him, saying that she must carefully remove her wedding attire before offering her heart to him. And he too, she adds (instructed by the wise woman), must properly remove his attire. To this he willingly agrees.

“As I take off each layer of my gown, you must also remove a layer.” Then, taking off the first gown, the princess watches as the dragon sheds his outer layer of scaly armor. Though it is painful, the dragon has done this periodically before. But then the princess removes another gown, and then another. Each time the dragon finds he must claw off a deeper layer of scales. By the fifth gown the dragon begins to weep copious tears at the pain. Yet the princess continues.

With each successive layer the dragon’s skin becomes more tender and his form softens. He becomes lighter and lighter. When the princess removes her tenth gown, the dragon releases the last vestige of dragon form and emerges as a man, a fine prince whose eyes sparkle like a child’s, released at last from the ancient spell of his dragon form. Princess Aris and her new husband are then left to the pleasures of their bridal chamber, to fulfill the last advice of the wise woman with twelve children and twenty-nine grandchildren.<sup>2</sup>

On the spiritual path, we are called to do many things. In this case, like the dragon, we are called, perhaps, to look deep into ourselves. We are called to peel away our scales – the scales of our anger, perhaps, and our pride, the scales of our fear, perhaps, and acquisitiveness, the scales of our longing, perhaps, and envy. We are called to peel away those things that blind us to our deeper natures, our deeper capacities, our deeper callings.

But that’s not all. As Kornfield suggests, all of the characters in this story – the princess, the dragon, the wise grandmother, the hidden prince, the once irresponsible king and queen, and even the unknown one who cast the original spell upon the hidden prince – all of the characters in this story, as in a dream or in a spiritual myth, can be seen to lie within each of us.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-27.

So, for example, in our own lives, like Princess Aris, we are called, perhaps, to seek out wisdom from our elders, like the wise grandmother, when we face some difficult task, and we are called, perhaps, to honor those things we've needed to do in order to survive. Like the princess, we are also called, at times, to take risks and sometimes to face considerable danger.

Like the wise grandmother, each of us possesses great wisdom, deep within us.

Like the hidden prince, there likely are parts of us – capacities and callings, and perhaps whole beings – that lie deeply concealed (sometimes even from ourselves!) beneath the scales, beneath the many masks of our outer selves.

Like the king and queen who wickedly betrothed their daughter to the dragon, we, too, sometimes do things to others, even to our own children and friends, that in retrospect we may regret.

Thus, all of the characters in this traditional Swedish tale can be seen to lie within us. On the spiritual path, we are called to see each of them and to learn from each of them, that we may transform ourselves, becoming deeper, more whole, more joyful and loving, though it brings us, at times, to tears.

So, a question for all of us to consider is: what beings, what capacities, or what callings lie within ourselves that we have yet to set free?

## II

On the spiritual path, we are called to do many things. Consider the following story by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. It is found in an essay he wrote called, “An Ocean of God: The Interconnectedness of All Being.” A true story, it goes like this.

A light snow was falling and the streets were crowded with people. It was Munich in Nazi Germany. One of my rabbinic students, Shifra Penzias, told me her great-aunt, Sussie, had been riding a city bus home from work when SS storm troopers suddenly stopped the coach and began examining the identification papers of the passengers. Most were annoyed but a few were terrified. Jews were being told to leave the bus and to get into a truck around the corner.

My student's great-aunt watched from her seat in the rear as the soldiers systematically worked their way down the aisle. She began to tremble, tears streaming down her face. When the man next to her noticed that she was crying, he politely asked her why.

“I don't have the papers you have. I am a Jew. They're going to take me.”

The man exploded with disgust. He began to curse and scream at her. “You stupid bitch,” he roared, “I can't stand being near you!”

The SS men asked what all the yelling was about.

“Damn her,” the man shouted angrily. “I'm so fed up. She always does this! My wife has forgotten her papers again!”

The soldiers laughed and moved on.

My student said that her great-aunt never saw the man again. She never even knew his name.<sup>3</sup>

On the spiritual path, we are called to do many things. In this case, like the stranger on the bus, at times, we may be called to stand up for what we believe in. Rarely, of course, are the stakes so high, fortunately. But we all face our moments of truth, times when we are called upon to witness to our values.

So, a question for all of us to consider is this: what do we need to do, what do we need to cultivate within us, to give us the strength and courage we'll need to be able to stand up, if and when the time comes, for what we believe in?

### III

On the spiritual path, we are called to do many things. Consider another story by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. "I am standing," Kushner begins,

in the middle of the New Mexico desert last winter. It is thirty degrees and a half-hour before dawn. We are in the *Bosque del Apache*, the Forest of the Apache, a bird sanctuary.

I am not a big-time naturalist but my wife is an avid birder. And so, like spouses do, I tag along.

"For this one," teeth chattering, while sipping coffee from the thermos, I whisper, "I want extra points."

She smiles.

In the distance, the horizon is becoming visible now as a dark ribbon of deep red in the winter chill. And dawn comes. The whole sky explodes into bright orange.

And then, within the next fifteen minutes, we watch in awestruck silence, as 25,000 snow geese, cranes, great blue herons, and God only knows who else, awake from their sleeping on the water and fly off for the next leg of their migration.

They are so close and there are so many of them, I can literally feel the flapping wing-flung wind on my face. The park rangers call it "the flyaway." Last evening they warned: You're never the same after the flyaway. And I understand: Somehow, simply being present to experience this event changes [one's] perception of what it means to be a creature.

And here's the thing that chastens and humbles me: The birds do this all the time. Whether we're here to watch them or not, they land in the waters of the Bosque, and come first light, they fly away into the dawn's early light, a sky full of wings and beaks and feathers on their way to somewhere else. And they do it year after year. Just like the great whales do it

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<sup>3</sup> Kushner, Rabbi Lawrence, "An Ocean of God: The Interconnectedness of All Being," in *God at 2000* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), edited by Borg, Marcus and Mackenzie, Ross, pp. 68-69.

through the waters of the sea and mitochondria do it through the fluid within our cells. Great flowing streams of life, currents of protoplasm – flying, swimming, running, moving, flowing, praying – doing what they know how to do, doing the only thing they know to do, doing what they were “meant” to be doing, doing what they’re “supposed” to do. While I, in my ignorance – obsessed with completing some writing assignment – am doing what I’m supposed to be doing.... All these creatures, moving on their ways, going about their business...[in] the flow of life. My God, I can still feel the wind of their wings on my face.<sup>4</sup>

On the spiritual path, we are called to do many things. In this case, like the Rabbi, we are called, I think, simply to be there – to fully experience the awe, the wonder, and the ever-present connections that tie us to one another and to all other sentient beings. We are called to realize anew, as all the great spiritual traditions insist, that at some deep, dimly perceptible level, we are all connected.

We are the rabbi standing next to his wife, awestruck by the “flyaway,” and we can still feel the wind of their wings in our faces.

We are the stranger on the bus, suddenly inspired by a creative and courageous conviction to stand up for what we believe in.

We are the grateful great-aunt, Sussie, miraculously saved from the Nazi storm troopers by the stranger whom we never knew, but will never forget.

We are the fearful dragon peeling off the scales that blind us to our deeper natures, our deeper capacities, our deeper callings. We are also the Princess Aris, the wise grandmother, the irresponsible king and queen, and the unknown wizard who cast the spell upon the dragon-prince.

We are all of these and more. We are the deranged bag-lady who is walking, perhaps right now, on a circuit downtown, wandering from St. Ben’s where she gets most of her meals to the library to the Grand Avenue Mall and to the river to feed the ducks, while talking out loud to herself and to others whom no one else can see.

We are the buttoned-up, stressed out attorney, working hard for our clients, for our firm, for our family, worrying about our mother in Quincy, Illinois, who is getting too frail and forgetful to stay in her home by herself much longer.

We are the frightened seventeen-year-old Rwandan woman whose parents are dying from AIDS, and whose half-starved younger siblings are looking to us as the oldest child to know what to do next.

#### IV

On the spiritual path, we are called to do many things. One of the greatest of these, a life-long task, is to realize anew, as all the great spiritual traditions insist, that at some deep, dimly perceptible level, we are all connected. We are all a part of the whole. We are all tied together —as Martin Luther King said, “in a single garment of destiny.” We are all tied to one another and to all other sentient beings.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 69-70.