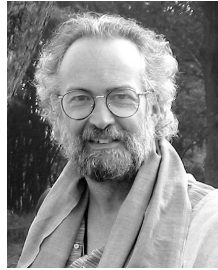


## Swimming in the Deep End: Merging with the River

BY DOUGLAS KRAFT, LEAD MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY OF SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA



Walking along the American River I came upon a tiny cove. I sat on some boulders near where the cove and the river met. In front of me the main body of the river rushed by at thousands of gallons a minute. It formed standing waves and white caps. But in the cove the water drifted slowly upstream. The downstream rush rubbed against the upstream, meandering, spawning dozens of whirlpools. Some were as narrow as pencils. Others were as broad as watermelons. Some funneled down a hand span below the surface. Some were gentle depressions. Some were wide enough to hold three or four little ones inside. Some winked out in a moment. Others lingered.

The effect was magical. I pictured river spirits dancing across the water leaving whirls in their footsteps. I imagined, “What if the whirlpools and the river were conscious?” If they were, the whirlpools would have little awareness of the river, their attention focused inward on their frenetic turning. They might occasionally glimpse the larger river-universe beyond: every now and then they might slow enough to notice the flows in which they existed. But mostly they would be preoccupied with their own dance.

The river, on the other hand, would be aware of the whirlpools. With so much going on in the river, and the whirlpools being so ephemeral, the river might not think the little swirls important. But it would have no problem seeing them.

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The river surrounds us and flows through us whether we recognize it or not. And we ignore it at great peril.

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As I watched, sooner or later each whirlpool drifted away, ran out of energy, spun itself out and dissipated back into the river. As it vanished, nothing was lost, just merged. The water of the whirls remained right there in the river. Even the energy

that caused the spinning remained in the river, though it was more dispersed.

And as I watched I wondered what might happen if we embraced a shift of mind and heart that could be called “merging with the river—a little bit”: shifting from whirlpool consciousness to river consciousness, from wave consciousness to ocean consciousness. Like the whirlpool merging with the river, it begins when its energy relaxes and spreads out. For us, it begins when our identity shifts a little from the whirling inside to the currents that flow around us.

Unitarian Universalism is a child of the Western Enlightenment, with its emphasis on individuality and freedom. It’s no coincidence that our first principle affirms and promotes the “worth and dignity of every person.” This is where we began.

But we now belong to the post-modern era. Another consciousness has emerged that is more aware of complexity, ecology, systems and the power of connections. This consciousness acknowledges how we are embedded in an interdependent web. The river surrounds us and flows through us whether we recognize it or not. And we ignore it at great peril.

It is no coincidence that our seventh principle affirms and promotes “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” So the first and last principles are opposite poles: individualism versus the web, independence versus interdependence, dignity of each person versus the reality of interconnection.

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A single event  
can awaken within us  
a stranger totally  
unknown to us. To live  
is to be slowly born.  
— Antoine de Saint-  
Exupéry

A monthly for religious liberals

### THINKING ABOUT AWAKENING

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Today, most UUs value both. But we don't bring them together in the same thought. After all, they are separated by five other principles. They are like cousins who co-exist but barely speak to one another. Today, possibilities and perils are greater than ever. Population growth, rise of technology, stress on the environment, strain on democracy, dysfunctional economies and so forth create more risks and opportunities than ever before.

To deal with these thorny issues, the two cousins must get together. We must ask, *What happens when the dignity of the individual meets the reality of the web? What happens when the whirlpool merges with the river?* We want a consciousness that integrates the worth and dignity of the individual with a realization that separate individuals do not exist. Without the river there are no whirlpools. Without the web of everything there is no single thing. To pretend we can protect our individual welfare without caring for the collective welfare is suicide—like a whirlpool trying to leave the river.

This shift of mind and heart can be hard to describe. But perhaps it can be illustrated by analogy.

Have a look at the two images below. The first is Edgar Rubin's two portraits illusion. If we see the white part of the image as foreground and the black as background, we'll perceive a vase. But if we see the white as background and the black as foreground, we'll perceive two faces nose to nose.



The second image may be less familiar, but it's fun. If we see the white as foreground, we see a woman's face. If we see the black as foreground, we see a cartoon of Bill Clinton playing the saxophone.

If we only glance quickly at an image,

it is easy to assume we know what it is without seeing alternate possibilities. If, away from the image, I call it a woman's face and you call it Bill Clinton on the sax, we may each think the other is daft.



As the images shift from a vase to two portraits or from a face to Bill Clinton, nothing in the external world changes. The ink on the page doesn't move. The shift is entirely in our minds. We change *how* we see, not *what* is actually there to be seen.

It is difficult to hold both the woman's face and Bill Clinton in mind at the same time. As we become familiar with the image, it can flip back and forth quickly. But it's hard to hold them both at once. However, it is not impossible. If we mentally step back and relax as we look at the image, we may be able to see them both at once. If our mind is tight, this is difficult. But if we are gently attentive, it is possible.

That is what this shift of mind and heart feels like: not shifting from one construct to another but shifting from one-at-a-time to all-at-once.

This phenomenon applies to more than parlor tricks. For example, is it more important that we save the spotted owl or that we retain jobs for people in the logging industry? Is it more important that we save fish in the delta or that we give local farmers water?

Depending on our inclinations, it is easy to take one position or the other—black or white—and think the other positions are absurd. But the real solution comes out of a relaxed, attentive, wider systemic view. If we cut down too much forest we'll have neither owls nor jobs. If we destroy the delta ecosystem, we'll have neither smelt nor useable water. Real solutions require seeing the health of the system as more important than any elements within the system.

When one part acts like it is more important than the whole, we call it cancer. Health care, the economy, terrorism, job creation, legislative gridlock—all of these beg for merged, systemic, broad-view thinking rather than a black or white stance in one part of the system.

A shift to what's called "flex and flow" systemic thinking is vital to solving many practical problems as well as to deepening our spirituality. Let me suggest an example:

Imagine your young daughter running up and telling you a joke. From your personal perspective, the joke is dumb. But she laughs with delight and you find yourself smiling easily. The delight did not arise out of your whirlpool. Your sense of self eased and spread out to include some of the river around you—in this case your child. You feel her delight as your own. Your mind and heart merged a little with this other being—your daughter.

This shift of mind and heart may not be profound. But it is a movement in a profound direction.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across [the] mind from within..." Pay attention to small glimpses of light, the touch of peace, the unbidden smile of delight, the glimpse of the river, the presence of the ocean.

When the worth and dignity of our individuality meets the interdependent web, our sense of who we are as separate entities becomes less demanding and more spacious. And the web of life feels less abstract or impersonal and more intimate.

And if we patiently follow Mr. Emerson's advice, with time we feel less like a whirlpool in the river and more like a river with whirlpools. We shift from seeing peace to being peace, experiencing illumination to being luminous, from experiencing spaciousness to being space. ■

## On Mortality

BY BRENDA MILLER

It seems that the older I get, the more I understand the way mortality shapes our perception and our willingness to be fully in this world. It's not something I used to think



about directly—too scary—but now I often find myself reading the obituaries, musing on what I would want my own to say: What are the things that will sum up my life? What will stand out? I know this sounds a little morbid, but as Mother Theresa has said: “Each of us is merely a small instrument; all of us, after accomplishing our mission, will disappear.” I wonder what small things people will remember: my dinner parties on the deck? My love for my dog? My weird obsession with cooking magazines? Will they remember my writing, my teaching, or will they remember a particular morning with coffee, a conversation that delved deeper than expected?

We can't really know. All we can do is keep learning, until the very end, how to live an authentic life. How to be really *here*. And we can look to others as teachers in this lesson.

My next-door neighbor, Winton Manley, is just such a teacher for me: He's ninety-eight years old and still drives his own car. I see him in the afternoons, backing out of the driveway, swerving a little wildly sometimes, but he always makes it safely into the street, then putters away in his white Oldsmobile to wherever it is he needs to go. He takes care of things. He takes care of his wife, Dorothy, who is ninety-four and has such bad arthritis now that she can't move without her walker. “I have to persuade her to get up,” Winton says to me sometimes, when

he walks over to admire my petunias or my pansies. “There are good days and there are bad days.”

I remember so clearly a day last summer, when I saw the two of them sitting out on their new deck in the sun. (Winton had it built because Dorothy can't get out into her garden anymore; here she can admire her pots of geraniums.) The light glinted off their white, white hair. They were just sitting and smiling, not saying a word, and when I finally waved to announce my presence, Dorothy gazed at me as if I were just the most blessed creature on the planet. Her face looked translucent with love, with her expectation that I was exactly what the doctor ordered.

“A beautiful day!” she exclaimed, in a voice that's grown so wavery in the years I've lived next door. I echoed her, speaking as loudly as I could: “Yes, a beautiful day!” And because I was on my way to my own back patio to do who knows what—some reading, some weeding—and because it would have been exhausting to keep talking in that loud, hearty voice, I just waved again and continued on, leaving them sitting there, nodding, enjoying their beautiful day.

And I know that sometime soon, their daughter or grandson will come to my door and tell me that one or both of them has “passed.” And I know I'll gasp and say, “I'm sorry,” because I *am*: sorry not only for their passing, and for a daughter's grief, a grandson's pain, but truly sorry for all my moments of inattention, my reluctance to keep talking a few minutes longer, my unwillingness to walk the few steps necessary to chat. I'll remember all the cucumbers and green beans Winton left on my doorstep—bags of them, more than a single woman could ever eat—and I'll wish, so heartily, that I'd had even a sliver of such abundance to return.

There's a poem I love by Miguel de Unamuno called “Throw Yourself Like Seed.” In it he exclaims, “Throw your-

self like seed as you walk, and into your own field.”

When I consider my life as one defining moment after another, I see that I am most fully alive when I “throw myself like seed,” not holding back. I ask myself: What am I holding in reserve? Why? So I take this as my lesson, allowing Winton and Dorothy to be my unexpected teachers: As much as we can, we must never pass up the opportunity to connect, to be fully with each other and with the world, to make each day beautiful for the time we have.

## On Mortality

BY HOLLY HUGHES

Until I turned forty-six, it was easy to imagine that growing old was something that happened to others, that death was a long way off. While I hope death *is* a long way off, I'm coming to accept that it will happen to me, that none of us—no matter how healthy or fit—will escape it and that, much as we might wish, we won't be able to choose our departure.

When I turned forty-six, I lost my mother to Alzheimer's disease. She'd always been in good physical



shape, practiced yoga before anyone else I knew, and even when she was in her sixties still loved to bike, swim, and hike. She kept her mind active, too, going back to college to learn French and study philosophy after her four daughters moved away from home. As is often the case with this terrible disease, her death was a slow process of subtraction; we lost her cell by cell, synapse by synapse, over ten years. Because we lost her slowly, her death was a kind of relief for us, and, I hope,

for her. When she died, she returned to us as our mother—even if only in memory—no longer the stranger she'd become.

Knowing her experience, I began to consider both death and life differently. Her last gift was the reminder to live in the present. Because she could no longer remember her past or imagine a future, she lived fully in the moment, delighting in the red cardinals at the feeder, in the squirrel sneaking up to steal birdseed. The clear evidence, not

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### Her last gift was the reminder to live in the present.

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just of mortality but of the possibility I will be afflicted by a similar disease, made me think more deeply about my own actions. While I'd tried to remind myself to live in the present, I tended to do so only when it was easy, like at a meditation retreat. Now, my mother's voice followed me everywhere, reminding me not just to live in the present but to appreciate every robin I see, to exclaim over every sunset as she would.

Ten years later, I'm still grateful to my mother for this last reminder—and to others who continue to remind me. This week, my former journalism teacher and friend Rags is visiting. Rags has lived and traveled all over the world—he shipped out on a freighter for South America at seventeen—so perhaps it's not so surprising that he's still game for adventure at ninety-seven. (Several years ago, he traveled alone to Mozambique to visit his daughter and son-in-law.) He had a stroke two years ago that affected his balance, so his gait, which used to be lithe and quick is now slow and shuffling, though he still moves with great dignity. On this visit, I promised him we'll have dinner with friends, visit Port Gamble, go to the Rose Theater, and eat at the Silverwater Cafe in Port

Townsend. "Oh, a vacation!" he said.

As we spend these days together, I marvel at the patience and acceptance he needs now: patience for how long it takes to move across a room, acceptance that he can no longer read. But his memory is as sharp as ever, and as we sit together in the flickering light of the fire, he remembers the blackouts in London, where he was stationed as a foreign correspondent during World War II, recalls how the war was an elixir, how it made him—and everyone—grateful to be alive. Those who know him intimately know he's never lost that spirit, know how it's served him well over all the years of his very full life.

Even now, he insists on living in his own home, alone, despite offers from his three daughters to come live with them. When I try to help with the small tasks that consume much of his day, he gently refuses: "If I am to keep living at home, I must be able to do these things myself." We all know that his independent spirit is what keeps him here with us, alive and still vital at ninety-seven.

Years ago, when Rags and I were driving to his cabin on Harstene Island, we hit a deer. It was a dark night, rain pelting down, when we came around the curve to face the deer standing on the road. There were no other cars on the road, so Rags swerved and almost missed him—just struck a glancing blow—and the deer leapt off into the woods. We pulled over, parked, and stumbled into the dark, wet woods, trying to find its trail, wanting to know the deer wasn't suffering. After tramping through the woods for an hour without finding it, we hoped that meant the deer had survived uninjured. We drove more slowly then, chastened.

As much as we try to avoid these brushes with death—and for good reason—in other cultures death is not sequestered so neatly from life. As part of training his monks, the Buddha used to take them to the graveyard so they

could practice being with death. And these graveyards were less antiseptic than ours; there, the monks would find bones, tangible reminders that this life is fleeting. How would we live if that knowledge informed every moment?

When I look up, Rags is dozing, half-way in the spirit world, and I'm filled with gratitude for his wise presence. By delighting in each small detail of the world going about its business (this lesson I've learned many times over the years from Rags), I hope to find acceptance of my body slowing down, my own inevitable mortality. May we have the courage and wisdom that Rags embodies.

*From The Pen and the Bell: Mindful Writing in a Busy World by Brenda Miller and Holly J. Hughes. Published by Skinner House in 2012, this book is available from the UUA bookstore ([www.uua.org/bookstore](http://www.uua.org/bookstore) or 617-723-4805).*

*There is an interactive website for The Pen and the Bell at [www.penandbell.com](http://www.penandbell.com). ■*

## CLF Seeks Leaders

The Church of the Larger Fellowship Nominating Committee seeks CLF members to run for positions on the Board of Directors and Nominating Committee beginning June 2013:

- **Directors:** three for three-year terms
- **Treasurer:** for a one-year term
- **Clerk:** for a one-year term
- **Nominating Comm.:** for a three-year term

**Please contact the CLF office at [nominating@clfu.org](mailto:nominating@clfu.org) or 617-948-6166 by April 15, 2013, with your questions/nominations. ■**



# Listening For Our Song

BY DAVID S. BLANCHARD, MINISTER,  
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF  
CANTON, NEW YORK

*I have spent my days stringing and unstringing my instrument while the song I came to sing remains unsung.*

—Rabindranath Tagore

On sabbatical in East Africa, I heard a story of a people who believe that we are each created with our own song. Their tradition as a community is to honor that song by singing it as a welcome when a child is born, as a comfort when the child is ill, in celebration when the child marries, and in affirmation and love when death comes. Most of us were not welcomed into the world in that way. Few of us seem to know our song.

It takes a while for many of us to figure out which is our song, and which is the song that others would like us to sing. Some of us are slow learners. I heard my song not necessarily from doing extraordinary things in exotic places, but also from doing some pretty ordinary things in some routine places. For every phrase I heard climbing Kilimanjaro, I learned another in a chair in a therapist's office. For every measure I heard in the silence of a retreat, I heard another laughing with my girls. For every note I heard in the wind on the beach at Lamu, I gleaned more from spending time with a dying friend as her children sang her song back to her. What came to astound me was not that the song appeared, but that it was always there.

I figure that the only way I could have known it for my own was if I had heard it before, before memory went to work making sense and order of the mystery of our beginning. Our songs sing back to us something of our es-

sence, something of our truth, something of our uniqueness. When our songs are sung back to us, it is not about approval, but about recognizing our being and our belonging in the human family.

It is good to know our songs by heart for those lonely times when the world



is not singing them back to us. That's usually a good time to start humming to yourself that song that is most your own.

They can be heard as songs of love or of longing, songs of encouragement or of comfort, songs of struggle or of security. But most of all, they are the songs of life, giving testimony to what has been, giving praise for all we're given, giving hope for all we strive for, giving voice to the great mystery that carries each of us in and out of this world. ■

*From A Temporary State of Grace, published by Skinner House Books in 1997.*

## Making a Fist

by Naomi Shihab Nye

For the first time, on the road north of Tampico,  
I felt the life sliding out of me,  
a drum in the desert, harder and harder to hear.  
I was seven, I lay in the car  
watching palm trees swirl a sickening pattern past  
the glass.  
My stomach was a melon split wide inside my skin.

“How do you know if you are going to die?”  
I begged my mother.  
We had been traveling for days.  
With strange confidence she answered,  
“When you can no longer make a fist.”

Years later I smile to think of that journey,  
the borders we must cross separately,  
stamped with our unanswerable woes.  
I who did not die, who am still living,  
still lying in the backseat behind all my  
questions,  
clenching and opening one small hand. ■

*Used by permission of the author, from  
The Words Under the Words: Selected Poems,  
by Naomi Shihab Nye, published by Far  
Corner Books in 1995.*





## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

When did you have your first moment of spiritual awakening—one which you knew consciously as spiritual awakening? I can still remember mine vividly. I was just out of college, working as a secretary, drinking too much on weekends because I couldn't think what else to do, talking endlessly with friends about the elusive purpose of life (mostly while drinking). I was pretty much a lost soul.

I began attending the Quaker Meeting close to my apartment on Sunday mornings. Week after week I sat with them. Nope, no awakening for me there. Probably a good thing, too, because I wouldn't have had a clue what to do with it. But at one of those Meetings I heard about a daylong workshop on Indian Treaties.

I went to the workshop, honestly, for something to do. It was free. It would last all day. Maybe I would meet some people. I went alone, stopping on the way to eat a soul-less breakfast at a chain restaurant. And then I sat down in the workshop, listening as I had listened through college classes and movies and a million other things. Hoping to be engaged, but more or less passive.

The speakers began. I listened dutifully. And then a young firebrand, an activist from the American Indian Movement by the name of John Trudell, got up to speak. The words he said are etched in my heart and soul forever. After describing the ways white Americans, by not honoring treaties, did not respect the word of our own elders, he said, "America, you are spiritually bankrupt." He went on to describe what that meant.

And somehow those words—just five words—jarred something loose in my life. The drinking, the job I didn't care about, the soul-less breakfast, it all lit up in recognition of his words. I came into a focus I'd never had before. I must have known the word spiritual, because I knew exactly what he was talking about, but I had never seen someone point the way across the bridge toward another place to live.

That's what woke me up. An embodied experience, maybe something akin to what's called "transmission" in many spiritual communities. Perhaps it's because of this particular awakening that I have never been able to separate, for a moment, spirituality from social justice. Perhaps, had I awakened elsewhere, I would have lived a whole different life. I'll never know.

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**Perhaps it's because of  
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from social justice.**

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It's not that I hadn't tried a wide variety of ways to wake up before. In college, my friends and I had chanted with the Hare Krishnas, attended meetings of an odd Buddhist sect that believed in overcoming desires by fulfilling every one of them, had taken the Scientologists' personality survey. We had transported ourselves to a variety of places with a variety of drugs. We had hopped freights, hitch-hiked, taken ridiculous risks that I hope my own kid will refrain from taking. But a deeper awakening did not come.

It's not like I hadn't engaged in work for justice before. I was raised UU! I had marched, chanted, dialogued, lobbied, picketed, educated myself on issues, been filled with righteous indignation with the best of them.

I had just never before seen that sacred place where justice and spirituality flow together as the same river. I had never experienced—without artificial stimulants—the epiphany of Alice Walker's character Shug, in *The Color Purple*: "I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed."

It's a funny thing about awakening. I was in a room of hundreds of people that notable day. I wonder if any of the rest of them heard the truth of those five words, "America, you are spiritually bankrupt," and felt their jaws go slack in recognition, felt their soul open up, saw tiny breadcrumbs shimmering with the promise of a path to new life if taken seriously.

Awakening is alchemical, and mostly mysterious. One thing I'll stake my life on, though: No matter whether we are in a crowded room of activists, or meditating for years in a Himalayan cave, none of us wakes up in isolation. I believe that we awaken as part of something big and beautiful, whatever name we call it. Indra's net. God. The Universe. The interdependent web.

Here's the thing: I think doorways to awakening are around us moment after moment, all day, every day. But only some of those doors come with a key to open them and walk through. A key with our name on it. What awakens you may just provide me with a dull moment to space out or send someone a text message. Why I awakened from deep slumber one Saturday, years ago, remains a mystery to me. But awakening changed everything, and for this I will always be grateful.

Each day, each moment, may you notice the doorways beckoning on all sides of you, telling you that life is behind them. May you recognize your alignment with the ones who hand you their key. May you walk through those doorways, knowing that to do so will change everything. And, when you are awakened, may you share what you can see with all who cry out for its beauty. ■

## REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

What does it take to become enlightened? What is required in order to awaken to the truth of the universe? How do you go from your ordinary "I wonder if we're out of milk?" frame of mind into a higher consciousness? The world's most famous story of awakening is the story of how Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha.

Siddhartha was born in India around 566 BC, to King Suddhodana and Queen Maya. Soon after Prince Siddhartha was born, a wise man prophesied that he would become either a great king or a great spiritual leader. The King had no doubt about the life he wanted for his beloved son: he would be a great ruler, an emperor, even! But how to prevent his son from being drawn to the religious life? He told Queen Maya, "I will make life in the palace so wonderful that our son will never want to leave. Everything he sees will be perfect, and he will never have cause to long for more."

Eventually, however, Siddhartha became bored with the sheltered luxury of palace life and wanted to see the outside world. In spite of his father's best efforts as the ultimate helicopter parent, on four trips outside the palace Siddhartha saw four things that changed his life. On the first three trips, he saw sickness, old age and death. The very existence of suffering came as a complete shock. He asked himself, "How can I enjoy a life of pleasure when there is so much suffering in the world?"

On his fourth trip, he saw a wandering monk who had given up everything he owned to seek an end to suffering. "I shall be like him," Siddhartha thought. Leaving his kingdom and loved ones behind, Siddhartha became a wander-



ing monk. He cut off his hair to show that he had renounced the worldly lifestyle, wore ragged robes, and wan-

dered from place to place. In his search for truth, he studied with the wisest teachers of his day. Alas, none of them knew how to end suffering, so he continued the search on his own.

For six years he sat in meditation and ate only roots, leaves and fruit. At times he ate nothing. But a life of extreme hardship got him no closer to enlightenment. Neither luxury of his

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**Enlightenment,  
awakening, the possibility of change, only comes when you are willing and able to see things as they truly are.**

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early life nor the deprivation of his life as a monk gave him a path to enlightenment.

On a full-moon day in May, he sat under the Bodhi tree in deep meditation, and he decided that he would not leave that spot until he found an end to suffering. Considering that he had already devoted years to seeking the end of suffering, without much of anything to show for his pains, it might have been a reckless decision. Nonetheless, it was in meditation under the tree that Siddhartha finally came to understand the cause and the cure for suffering. Siddhartha became the Buddha, The Awakened One.

It seems to me that this story has a few things to say about the process of becoming awakened. For starters, it requires being willing to see the world as it really is. This can be a pretty scary process. It's no fun to deal with the ever-present reality of sickness, aging and death, knowing that these things

will happen to us and every one we know eventually. It's also hard to live with the knowledge of climate change, massive poverty and the extinction of species. If you have the choice to stay in the palace, it can be a lot more pleasant. But enlightenment, awakening, the possibility of change, only comes when you are willing and able to see things as they truly are.

The story also implies that awakening requires not only commitment and courage, but also a readiness to try new things. If luxury didn't bring Siddhartha understanding, neither did



the extremes of poverty and starvation. Some people come into liberal religion determined to shed every aspect of a religion that left them feeling locked be-

hind the palace walls. And sometimes those same people find that they have locked themselves away in a different palace that they built as a reaction to the first—just as restrictive, but with a different set of rules. Awakening is a process that requires us to keep looking, to keep opening doors, and, ultimately, to be willing to sit with ourselves and our lack of knowing.

In the end, I suppose awakening comes from the ability to hold on to both sides of the paradox: to understand, like the Buddha, that release from suffering comes from accepting that suffering is inevitable and not trying to hold on to the things we desire. Perhaps it also means understanding that there is nothing so important as our individual rights and personal gifts, other than our connection and responsibility to our communities. Or that there is no God, because God is everywhere. Or, perhaps, that there is no path to enlightenment, other than being on the path. ■



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We already have everything we need. There is no need for self-improvement. All these trips that we lay on ourselves—the heavy-duty fearing that we’re bad and hoping that we’re good, the identities that we so dearly cling to, the rage, the jealousy and the addictions of all kinds—never touch our basic wealth. They are like clouds that temporarily block the sun. But all the time our warmth and brilliance are right here. This is who we really are. We are one blink of an eye away from being fully awake.

by **Pema Chödrön**, from *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living*, published by Shambhala Publications in 1994.

