

A jealous Buddhist in God's Orange County *by Bethany Saltman*

LAST MONTH I CROSSED THE CONTINENT to visit my born-again Christian cousin Kate (not her real name), who promised to show me around the southern California church scene and take good care of me in the seventh month of my first pregnancy. Pretty much everyone I talked to about the trip found it odd I would leave behind husband, house and fellow Zen practitioners in the monastery down the street to waddle around a palm-treed land of strip-malls and mega-churches interviewing Christians.

They wanted to know why. Why would a Buddhist spend all this time researching Christianity, and especially that type of Christianity? It's a good question, one I have become nearly obsessed by. I keep putting off things – like turning our guest room into a nursery – so I could read C.S. Lewis or transcribe an interview with a fundamentalist. People are beginning to wonder. I wonder. But there's one thing I know – jealousy is a powerful force and I am terribly jealous of the born-again.


I have been practicing Buddhism for nearly ten years. I discovered the dharma by fluke, and threw myself in with an abandon I had known only for self-annihilation. Instantly, I was rewarded – my mind settled down and the prison I had been in started to disintegrate. Someone who first met me shortly after I discovered Buddhism later said I had seemed like someone who had been saved, yes, even born

again. Indeed I felt like I had been delivered. But even then, when the payoff was greatest, the goods didn't come easy. I was devoted. I threw myself into my practice as though extinguishing a fire upon my head, as Master Dogen would say. It was natural, in that sense, but certainly not effortless.

ONE OF MY COUSIN'S FAVORITE TERMS IS "SEASON," as in "in this season of my life God's plan for my life is x." For me, those first years of my Zen practice were a blessed season. Since then, things have gotten harder. Until getting pregnant, I did a silent retreat nearly every month, searching for comfort and finding it only in shards, and even then only in the realization that I must give up all hope, which I, apparently, have refused to do. I even lived in a training monastery for two years, waking well before dawn and working hard, maybe too hard. It's not that I don't find joy in my practice; I do. But the joy comes from being pretty consistently thwarted, and learning to surrender to that. It is a long season of patient but rewarding diligence. It is a slow joy.

So I find it confusing and fascinating that for 40 percent of Americans – those who are born-again – forgiveness, joy and eternal life are handed over in the blink of an eye. From sinner to redeemed, just like that. So while I have rational reasons for researching Christians, I am also driven, in part, by my dismay that others seem to be getting relief but not

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me. And my trip, which explored the more extreme “quick fix” end of the born-again spectrum was, at least in part, an attempt to find out what that kind of relief is made of.

FOR MY FIRST NIGHT IN CORONA DEL MAR, Kate took me to her friends’ house. On the way we stopped at In and Out Burger. As much as I was trying to do the Rome thing, I was surprised to find myself eating a cheeseburger in a car in a parking lot. As we ate, Kate told me about her friends Deb and Jack and how they are such neat people, and how their three-year-old son Stevie recently died in his sleep.

Deb and Jack were in fact really nice people and as we sat in their living room, Deb shared with me the story of their son. After a dramatic pregnancy, he had been born with heart trouble. Not long before my visit, little Stevie had told Deb he was going to “fly to Jesus.” She said, “No you’re not. You’re only three.” But he was sure. “Yes I am,” he told his mother.

“I believe everything happens for a reason,” Deb told me, fighting the tears that must come often, “there are no accidents.”

She was sharing a wound that I, being pregnant and all, found particularly brutal. Her tenderness ran deep. But as soon as the Jesus stuff came on the scene – and it didn’t take long – I felt myself hardening. Deb told me about the work

she does with homeless people and how she met a woman who was “high on crack” and neglecting her three kids. She said the only reason this woman was worried about someone taking her kids was for fear of losing the welfare check to which the kids entitled her. Deb would happily take one or all of those kids and love them, she said, and I am sure that’s true. But her comments about the woman felt so harsh. I was feeling more and more distant. Suddenly Deb was no longer a woman who lost a child but a self-righteous born-again Christian fundamentalist who didn’t have the time of day for a crackhead, and I was seeing through her charade of compassion. It’s like what Buddhists get all the time: “If you’re so spiritual, why are you such an asshole?”

KATE IS A CHEERFUL WOMAN, 39 years old, beautiful with her long blond hair and bright grey eyes. Impossible not to like. She has never been married, but would like to be if, of course, it is God’s plan. To me, she looks and feels like someone who is already married to God, or at least an angel.

I was impressed by her willingness to field all my potentially obnoxious questions. At times I could tell she was getting uncomfortable, like when I asked: “so why do you believe that what the bible says is true?” and she responded with an awkward: “gosh, that is such a good question.” She knew I was trying to understand her faith from my own

perspective and present her world to “unbelievers.”

And while she was fully aware of my commitment to Buddhism, how could she not have had some hope that my curiosity would lead to my salvation? As she later said with uncharacteristic gravity, “the Bible talks about hell as a place that’s really pretty horrible, and so that drives me to prayer.” Kate is not the only person I met on my trip who may still be praying for me, and I’m still not sure how I feel about it. Part of me can receive the love that I know is intended, while another part of me thinks, I should be praying for them.

The day after our visit to Deb and Jack was Sunday and we were planning to attend Saddleback Church, home of Rick Warren and his runaway bestseller, *The Purpose Driven Life*. We were in a small, painfully hip cafe in Newport Beach when Kate’s friend called. In California, there is evidently no shame in talking at full volume on cell phones in public, so Kate told the whole place we were on our way to Saddleback. She must have said the word “church” five times. I was mortified.

But when I got there, I had a different feeling. I felt good to be part of something so huge, and I even found it oddly pleasant for people to assume I was no different than them.

Coming from a religious community that feels cramped by a hundred people on a Sunday, I found Saddleback a fascinating cross-cultural experience in magnitude – from the mall-sized parking lot (complete with attendants in matching red shirts), to the stadium-like chapel, to the sound system in the bathroom (piping in the sermon so you don’t have to miss a word). Just the fact that 30,000 people – the number involved in Saddleback’s “small groups” – are engaged in any spiritual pursuit is incredible to me.

And this is not just any group of folks. This is Orange County. This is the group that offered to pay three months salaries for 400 pastors whose churches had been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

Why is it that megachurches are attracting so many, while Buddhist centers like mine remain so small? Is it because we don’t offer easy answers, which is what some Buddhists tell me when I ask this question. Is it because our practice is too tough and rigorous for most people to even consider joining? Is it because we are the chosen few, with just the right karma to land us in the buddhaheld?

Saddleback is what it is: gigantic, terrifying, inspiring and surreal. Though it was not as creepy as many people assume all evangelical havens to be, and though Rick Warren was not, at least not on the surface, filled with the hatred often associated with intolerant fundies, I still get hung up on the favorite scriptural apologia of all the born-again Christians I met – the belief that when Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me” he meant that if you don’t believe Jesus is the only son of God and all the rest, you will go to hell. As if in this one line the whole thing is buttoned up. For all the good I saw in Rick Warren and the other Christians I met,

I still cannot wrap my mind around how they believe what they believe.

My other Orange County church experiences were equally dizzying. First, there was the Calvary Chapel study group which started with 30 minutes of worship music played on an electric keyboard, a rain tube and a little set of chimes. It felt like an AA meeting in its random cross-section of people – the Indian man on his knees wiping away tears, a bird-like lady in a belted suit and hat who might have been crazy, a beautiful Arab woman, a mean-looking Korean lady and the requisite California tall and lovely young Asian men. Plenty of folks who looked beaten up, plenty of middle-class ordinaries. And me in the back, looking around, trying not to stare, writing, and Kate standing, singing, swaying (palms up) and, as usual, wiping away tears. What the hell is she feeling, I wondered, totally numb, filled with judgment about the low-class lyrics and bad lighting. After the music subsided a dude in jeans got up to lead a study session on intercessory prayer, which sounded an awful lot like Zen meditation.

The study group ended with folks being called to the front, anyone who wanted to take Jesus into their hearts, or simply have someone pray with them. A good fifteen people went up and another handful rose to place a soft hand on the back or shoulder of someone who needed a witness. Music played in the background. The scene was mesmerizing. Even the grumpy Korean lady got up to help a stranger. I was tempted to walk up and ask for someone to help me pray for something simple like safe travels so I could feel what they were feeling. But I knew once I got up there I would chicken out or feel overwhelmed by the closeness of another person, the smell of their breath or whatever. So I just sat in the back and watched. It looked like people were really getting healed, at least for the moment. Or maybe it was me being healed. There in that dingy room, human hands penetrating human hearts moved me.

I felt badly for taking notes during “worship” (music in praise of God), or the message (sermons). How many times have I sat at the front door of the monastery welcoming those entering for the first time, giving the sweetly stern recommendation that they participate fully in the service, including chanting and bowing. And here I was, sitting in the back, hunched over my note pad, absolutely unable to get up and sing “Jesus, I am so in love with you.”

The next stop was the Vineyard service, which is the home of the original Jesus Freaks. This time, the music was more like an amateur indie rock concert, or a wealthy suburb’s junior high talent show. The crowd was bigger, younger, cleaner, whiter. They were grooving on the jam-min version of Amazing Grace. When the music was over, the pastor – again, a very casual guy – gave a message about how Jesus wants everyone to pay better attention to the poor. Fair enough, I thought. Then he would throw in a little fundamentalist flavor, telling a story about a guy who told him

he didn't believe in hell. "Well," the pastor had told the man "that's not gonna make it go away."

He also talked about the connection between wealth and God, implying God rewards believers with riches. With my discomfort level rising, he went on to actually say that when pagan cultures are introduced to the gospel they are "improved" within a generation; these "undeveloped" nations accept Jesus, and lo and behold, they "develop." Then he said God has poured out his blessings on the U.S., implying our wealth is proof of blessing. But, of course not everyone in the US is wealthy, and besides, his sermon was about how much Jesus loved the poor, not the rich, so how is it that we are so blessed? Maybe we're cursed.

The pastor then went on to outline a seemingly respectable plan to feed needy people in the neighborhood (the un-blessed ones?). But he made it seem like even this is done in the name of saving one's own butt.

And then the altar call. But this time, the pastor made a more specific call – for people who had difficulty with their finances and wanted to make a change with the Lord. Plenty of people, including Kate, went up for that one. I watched from my usual position, pen poised, waiting for feelings to enter my pea-sized heart. Nothing. Still lots of impressive affection given out for strangers, but something about the capitalism of the call turned me off.

On my last Sunday in California, I visited Rock Harbor. The congregation was 70 percent single and mostly under 25. This pastor was chill and funny. The girls in the audience were all gussied up in their Coach bags, tight low-riders, clingy T-shirts, pointy heels and lacquered hair. The guys were appropriately clean yet rumpled. It felt more like a mall than a place of worship, but I guess that is so East-Coast-mainline-denomination of me. The theme of the sermon was, of course, sexuality, and learning how to be single not as a default position but as an offering to God. I couldn't quite figure how these folks think they are going to save themselves for marriage in an environment like that. I thought about the monastery where I lived and how we had to dress "modestly" – no shorts, no tank tops, no jewelry. It is always a dicey matter since clearly it is the women who are held mostly responsible for the vibe. But in a context where young singles are working together on their spiritual lives, it only makes sense to try to keep distractions to a minimum. And in our community we aren't even necessarily trying to remain celibate, just decent and focused.

I don't know if that service ended with an altar call, though it probably did since that's the general format. After the short sermon, as the music went on and on, Kate, who is always sensitive even to the heathen's needs, could tell I was getting hungry, so we left for a cafe nearby. I was wiped out from all my looking, drained from trying to understand. As I had sat in the church, trying to notice everything – the simple wooden cross, the industrial loft details, the complex

lighting system – I also scanned the crowd, really trying to study these Christians. Some looked familiar, like people I have known all my life, people trying to fit in, look good, feel better. And more than that, people wanting to know how to live, who they are, who God is. People like me. And yet there was something totally mysterious there too – faith in a doctrine that I do not understand: a firm belief in God as the benevolent father, Jesus Christ as his only son, heaven as a place beyond death and beyond this earth, the Bible as the inerrant word of God and salvation realized only through these beliefs. But do they really believe it?

My teacher tells us all the time, "don't believe me, experience this great dharma for yourself." He is also fond of saying that if he discovered the whole Buddhist story was a myth, that Shakyamuni Buddha never existed, it wouldn't make one bit of difference to him. I guess, for me, it would make a difference. As much as I know only I can make my life real, only I can realize myself, only I can feed the poor, I can't help but feel the temptation of belief.

That night as I lay in bed, hands on my hard round belly, my mind filling with the faces of all the believers I had met and seen, I tried, really tried, to pray. I tried to feel what it would be like to believe in someone watching over me, some big Father – my true, one, original dad – the one who never got distracted, never looked at porn, never died a pathetic death. Someone who loved me no matter what I did, was always ready with forgiveness, and a forgiveness that actually mattered and would relieve me from my guilt and shame. I tried to talk to him and ask that he make himself known, and if he couldn't or wouldn't do that, would he please watch over me and my baby and make her healthy.

But I knew I was praying all wrong. I knew what I should pray for is God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, or for the fortitude to face my life as it is, to trust myself as God's unique daughter who is filled with heavenly grace, if only I could realize it. I should pray that I could forgive all who have hurt me. I should pray that I take good care of my baby girl, regardless of her health or disposition. I should pray to see God in all beings, for the wisdom to not disregard a single speck of dust. I should pray to see through my desire to feel superior, to point out others' errors and faults, to separate myself from anything or anyone. I should pray to stop looking outside of myself.

But the other prayer was so much more of a relief.

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