

The Razor's Edge
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Chiaroscuro is a word about art from the renaissance concerning light and shadow, the arrangement of light and dark, light and dark together. I learned this word because when trekking in the Himalayan foothills it was so cold, in the 30s or 40s, that when we got back to our teahouses where there was no heat and no running water certainly no hot water, we would jump dirty and sweaty into our sleeping bags and Gary would read me a book that someone on the trail gave us called, The Tale of Despereaux,¹ about a little mouse who fell in love with a princess and was a hero in the dark underworld of rats, where he was at last helped by the rat named Chiaroscuro.

Despereaux means despair and there were days we felt like that little mouse, cold and hungry and lost a bit too, but Despereaux was also full of light and hope. Chiaroscuro, the rat, embodied light and dark, the sacred and profane and because of him, Despereaux could do his hero work.

I told myself originally that the reason I went to Nepal and India for 2 months was to see how people did religion differently in these regions, how religious belief and culture changed them, gave their lives texture, a meaning and grain that our lacks in some way, that mine lacks in some ways.

This is not untrue but it is so much more than this too. I think I went there to explore chiaroscuro, the play of light and dark inside myself and in others, how we manage and negotiate this dance, this dance of good and evil. None of us is only one or the other. All of us has beauty and ugliness in us; and I find fascinating what tools we use to negotiate this.

Walking in Kathmandu, Nepal, where there was so much light and dark right out in the open, I felt like Peaches that I mentioned in the welcome, jumping off that stage at a concert into what one hoped were outstretched hands. The rush and crush of people and cows and scents and shops and meat and dogs and taxis and pollution were dizzying. And it was a dance, a complicated, swirling, ingrained dance in which each person knew their steps.

I remember once on one of these city streets that I could not keep from going on to, no matter their risk it seemed to me (of what I do not know now: maybe being crushed or getting sick or somehow ending up whirled and twirled enough to place my mouth on a statue made of nails and cement said to cure tooth aches which, beautifully, just to illustrate chiaroscuro, sat right outside a dentist's office); I remember once thinking, just let go Linda, just let go completely and let the crowd take you altogether and see what happens.

¹ Kate DeCamillo, The Tale of Despereaux (Cambridge, Candlewick Press, 2003).

As I was thinking this, a police woman dressed in a bright pink police uniform and casually pushing cement pieces with her baton on the road that was full of broken cement pieces, stopped right in front of me and sat down on one of the stoops as if to break my fall. I decided this was a sign from one of the many gods that watched over us in Kathmandu to keep on my way, keep my spine straight and my head clear and continue to negotiate my place in the dance.

What struck me in Kathmandu right away was how the sacred and profane sat side by side. The meat on the hooks and laying on the wooden tables that had no refrigeration with dogs pacing below, right beside someone lighting a candle to a god surrounded by stone etched with sacred text, right beside an ancient Buddhist stupa, a round temple where sacred texts or ashes of great Lamas are often kept, with eyes engraved on the top looking down on you, right beside a monk lighting hundreds of candles for love and peace and hope, right beside someone asking for food, right beside children playing with a ball made out of string rolled over and over and over again around a piece of cloth, right beside someone urinating.

The people in Nepal practice Vajrayana Buddhism. When I learned what this meant, I already knew it in my bones. I knew it from the streets and the meat and the cars and the dogs and the gorgeous vegetables laid on the baking streets and the temples and the love and the blessings and the laughter and the tangled, swollen beauty.

Though all Buddhists agree on the 4 noble truths, basically that suffering exists and is caused by attachment, and the 8 fold path to end all suffering: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, Buddhism varies greatly around the world, not only based on schools of practice but on local cultural influences.

Vajrayana, means to weave the sacred and profane. Great emphasis is placed on having a teacher for in this form of Buddhism the risks are high. The focus is placed on using and transforming the mind poisons of anger, desire and ignorance into tools for enlightenment. All is perceived as sacred, which can be dangerous. Nothing is rejected. It is understood that compassion and suffering have many unexpected faces. Who can decide what is good and bad? What we perceive as good is so often harmful and what we reject is often full of something needed.

Those who practice Vajrayana seek a mind of equanimity beyond good or bad. Carroll Dunham, a friend of Polly Miller's and a medical anthropologist who has resided in the Himalayas for more than 25 years and currently lives in Kathmandu, had lunch with Gary and I and told us about Vajrayana Buddhism.

She told us that it is like licking honey off the razor's edge because it is said to be the quickest way to enlightenment but also the most perilous—no different from taking the short cut up the mountain that is the most treacherous path, no different than the skill required to lick honey off a razor's edge and not cut your tongue: it requires total concentration of mind, focus, awareness, and purified motivation of an open loving heart of compassion.

Rather than distancing ourselves from our wrathful nature, which in Vajrayana is just energy, people who practice Vajrayana utilize it with awareness for the benefit of others, they harness it for good, for its source, which is the same source as all life or the infinite. It is a state of being beyond the outward appearances of good and evil, pleasant and unpleasant, pure and sullied. It requires entering it all. Enlightenment is not in the far beyond. It is attainable in the here and now.

The dangers are real. When dancing with one's own evils without a wise and skilled teacher, one can as easily become Darth Vader as Luke Skywalker!

In Kathmandu, this dance of the sacred and profane is everywhere: the beauty and ugliness side by side, the worshipping of the faces of gods who are wrathful, fangs bared and those who are joyfully pouring out compassion: the splayed, sun cooked meat beside the bags of spices and sweets, the temple shading the market, the raucous and the silent, the gardens and the burning trash, the holy and the profane matching heartbeat for heartbeat.

Vajrayana Buddhism is growing in Nepal. The many Buddhist temples we visited in Kathmandu and in the foothills of the Himalayas were full of young boys dressed in red robes with shaved heads. They would gather for prayer in these inner sanctums where we were allowed to join them, that were covered in colorful murals of gods: gods of love or wrath, hope or destruction, peace or foreboding. In Vajrayana Buddhism, one practices with deities to hone various part of one's own nature.

The many children in these temples who live and study and play there, while they turned the pages of their texts, sitting cross legged on the floor, on some cue I could not follow would blow these huge copper trumpets that were 6 feet long, and clang symbols, and would also laugh and smile and poke each other, right in the middle of all this ritual. The sacred and the profane. The willingness to be whole. All of it available and present.

We started our trip in Kathmandu at an International Unitarian and Universalist conference and there were keynote speakers in this city where no one can breathe or see very far because the air is so thick with pollution it takes your voice away and sits on your lungs like one of the sacred cows roaming the sidewalks.

One keynote speaker, Rev. Diane Rollert, Minister of the Unitarian Church of Montreal and member of the Canadian Unitarian Council, who grew up Jewish, read us this Jewish Kiddush or mourner's prayer:

I have tried to love you with all my heart
And with all my soul...
Even though I don't know why you come,
Even though I am angry at the way you take me...
[I love you.]

This is a prayer about god but for me it is a prayer about Nepal and India, places that took me, that changed me, that shook me with violence at times, and yet, and yet, that loved me too, that asked me to see myself with new eyes and new heart and new soul.

How can I not love something that asks me to see myself anew and still leaves me whole enough, loved enough through it all? I can participate in the chiaroscuro, the light and dark, with more acceptance and hold my own light and darkness with more patience.

When it came time to leave India and Nepal, Gary and I made a list of what we would miss the most. Buddhism was at the top of our list. We would miss the way the people embodied it and practiced acceptance and a willingness to be present to what was in and around them. We would miss the prayer flags and the monasteries and the children and monks and nuns in their red robes walking everywhere and sitting in cafes.

We would miss the meditation and hearing the chanting and the easy smiles of the people. Mostly, we would miss the peace that the practice left in us and in the environments in which it was practiced and lived.

At the end of the book Despereaux, the little mouse rescues the princess who was coerced into the dungeon and saves the day with the help of the rat, Chiaroscuro, the light and the dark. We need our darkness and light to become our truest selves.

May the craziness of being part of it all lead us to an acceptance that offers peace so that we might go on loving one another through thick and thin, through the beauty and the sorrow, through the love and the fear, through the grace and the suffering.

Amen.