
VIVIANNE:
Blaming God

*“Speak what you perceive to be the truth
Without guilt or blame.”⁵³
But even in the midst of guilt and blame,
In the sticky swamp of anger and complaint—
Right there is a path.*

KOAN

Vivianne told her teacher: “For myself, I know that God does not exist. Nevertheless, I am very angry at him for taking away my parents much too early.”

REFLECTION

An old friend used to say that Zen practitioners talk a lot about no-self and impermanence, including the lack of any permanent soul, but the moment tragedy hits, they pray to God.

Or else they blame God. When something unexpected and painful happens, don't we invoke the presence of an omnipotent being whom we could blame? More generally, whenever the gap appears between life as it is and life as we think it should be, between people as they are and people as they should be, don't we often need to name someone, or Someone, as the responsible party? In that gap lie our anger, disappointment, and blame, accompanied by feelings of weakness and helplessness. In a dualistic paradigm, weakness and helplessness find their opposite match in authority, power, and control.

When we ascribe these latter qualities to the Unknown, we are making of it a mirror image of ourselves, giving it the opposite qualities of those we take on. Psychologists call it projection; some spiritual teachers call it idolatry.

Many mystical traditions have defined God as that which can't be known. Not-knowing is the source of all manifestations, including things like the death of loved parents, children, animals, and anything we hold dear. But when tragedy hits, doubt rears its formidable head: *How is it possible? How could it happen?* When things fall outside our conceptual understanding of what's right and wrong, what's justified and what's not, isn't it common to point to some being to whom we ascribe omnipotence and say: *How could You do this?*

We don't have to believe in God to behave this way. All we have to do is keep company with grievances and indignation, and repeat to ourselves our favorite monologues concerning disappointed loves and dashed hopes, accidents and tragedies. Does life care one bit? Can all the vigilance in the world, including praying to and invoking the protection of a divine being, prevent bad things from happening?

So what helps? First, take a breath. Pay attention to how your body lives without asking for permission, how it lives even when deep inside you want to die. Drink a cup of tea. Inside you feel raw and grief-stricken, sure you'll never be happy again, but when you pay attention, notice what comfort you took from drinking the hot tea, how each swallow settled and calmed you.

Continuing to pay attention, you may later notice that your face softens while watching the sun set, that you stroke the dog as it nuzzles against you, and that though you didn't have much appetite for dinner you enjoyed the blueberries. In those moments is there grief alone, or also hot tea, a sunset, a dog, blueberries? The point isn't to deny the loss, just not to stay in the story of the loss. When I stay with the loss itself, there is plenty of sorrow and heartbreak, but there's also the feel of a hot bath or the shock of cold night air when I go out.

"How are you doing?" someone asks. If I'm answering from my story, I might say: "I can't stop crying." If I've been paying attention, I might answer: "I cry a lot, smell flowers, feel a terrible sadness, talk to someone I love on the phone, look up at the sky, cry again, watch TV, sleep." Sadness arises in the moment, joy arises in the moment, as do surprise, sorrow, pain, peace, and everything else. In my head I'm sure I've been mourning relentlessly for weeks, even months, but when I pay attention, I see that the stirrings of life haven't gone away. At first they're muted and subtle, but when I shine the light of attention on them, they are unmistakably there.

There is another practice to be cultivated here. "I need to be reminded that most people out there carry far bigger burdens in a more humble and noble manner than I ever will; have forgiven far more; have contained far more; have had to come to more peace with life than I ever will have to," wrote Fr. Greg Boyle, founder

of Homeboy Industries, serving gang members in Los Angeles. "It is literally mind-blowing to live with that again and again."⁵⁴

Pain and loss are everywhere. When they hit us, it may feel natural to implode and collapse inside. But are you the only one who has lost parents suddenly, come down with cancer, or gotten hurt in a car accident? Millions have. Can you feel that?

It's important to practice ahead of time. When something joyous happens in your life, you can say to yourself: *I am happy; may everyone be happy.* When you're enjoying a glorious summer afternoon, you might say: *I am having a beautiful day; may everyone have days like this one.*

It may feel contrived at first, but you're practicing expanding your personal universe to include more and more people, more and more beings. You're bearing witness to how we mix with and penetrate everyone and everything through our experiences. It's natural to feel your own loss worse than anyone else's, but by including the universe in joys and sorrows, you are practicing to become more supple, more aware of the flow of emotional energy. You participate in the joys and sufferings of the world, and the world participates in your joy and suffering.

Another name for this is grace. Do you have to live and work in the gang neighborhoods of Los Angeles, like Greg Boyle, to be amazed by people's strength? Haven't you learned by now that the neighbor across the street, the newly-arrived immigrant you greet at the grocery store, and the caregiver ministering to your father have dealt with tragedies and losses that defy imagination, and still they smile at you, greet the day, raise their children, take care of life? Do they look like heroes?

When you learn their names and listen to their stories you are plowing the field, developing an inner culture of reaching out and

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connection. In that way, when loss finally happens in your life, it will affect you more than others, but will it be yours alone?

You may find that the world grieves with you.

*"I've been sad all day. I'm a neurotic mess. I'm a manic-depressive."
Tell me, right now, where are your feet and hands? Did you have
breakfast? Did you wash the dishes? Do you hear the play of
wind chimes outside?*