

“Enough, Already”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

17 November 2019

Once upon a time, a very long time ago,
there was a wise Zen master.¹

People from near and far would seek her counsel
and ask for her wisdom.

Many would come to the nun and ask her to teach them,
to enlighten them in the way of Zen.

She seldom turned anyone away.

But one day, a very powerful man,
a man used to commanding obedience from others
came to visit.

“I have come today to ask you to teach me about Zen,” he said.
“Open my mind to enlightenment.”

The tone of the man’s voice
was of one used to getting his own way.

The Zen master smiled and said
that they should discuss the matter over a cup of tea.

For a long time the old master sat in silence,
perfectly at ease.

Sometimes she smiled at the man warmly,
and at other times she gazed out the window
at the beauty of the gardens.

But the man grew uncomfortable with the silence.
He squirmed and tapped his fingers nervously.

¹ This telling of this famous Zen koan is a mix of many different tellings and draws specifically on the version in *Kindness: A Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents*, collected by Sarah Conover, 2005.

He looked around anxiously for the tea to arrive.

Finally, he couldn't bear the silence any longer.

The only thing that came to his mind
was to share a lecture on Buddhism
he'd recently given at the university.

And so, clearing his throat,
he began a lengthy speech.

The old Zen master made a fine audience.

She nodded in a friendly way
at the most outstanding points
and seemed to have a look of unending curiosity.

So the man was encouraged to keep talking—which he did!

Another half-hour passed,
and still the tea did not arrive.

The man thought it would be impolite
to bring attention to this fact,
so, he continued his speech on Buddhism and
the Zen master continued to be a most courteous audience.

At last, an attendant carried in an elegant tray
with a ceremonial teapot and two cups.

The Zen master smiled and in the deliberate manner
of a Japanese tea ceremony, she carefully placed a teacup
before her chattering guest.

She then poured her visitor a cup.

She poured and she poured—and then she poured some more.

The tea rose to the rim and began to spill all over the table
and finally onto the robes of the man.

Finally, busy trying to absorb the tea with his napkin,
the man shouts, “Enough!
You’re spilling the tea all over.
Can’t you see the cup is already full?”

The Zen master at that point finally stopped pouring
and smiled serenely at her guest.

She then said, “You are like this tea cup,
so full that nothing more can be added.
Come back to me when the cup is empty.
Come back to me with an empty mind.”

*

This famous Zen koan is sometimes known
as the Parable of the Tea Cup.

It speaks to Shoshin,
the Buddhist notion of “Beginner’s Mind.”

To have Beginner’s Mind is to be in a place of possibility,
a state of mind where learning and growth and discovery
can unfold, because the mind is open and empty,
eager and receptive.

It is to be free of fixed ideas and preconceived notions.

It is to be in a state where everything is fresh and new,
and beyond the reach of “shoulds” and “oughts.”

As Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki described it:

If your mind is empty,
it is always ready for anything,
it is open to everything.

In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities,
but in the expert’s mind there are few.

Beginner’s Mind isn’t something to achieve.

It's more something that we uncover, by stripping away the layers.

This isn't necessarily difficult to do—at least in theory.

Buddhism considers Beginner's Mind our natural state.

It is seen most clearly in the curiosity of young children,
who carry an openness to the world
that few of us sustain as we age and our cups runneth over.
From a Buddhist perspective, the task is to empty the cup.
To spill out all the distractions.
To quiet our minds.

It's done, as always, by focusing the breath,
by mindfully monitoring the flow of air in and out of our bodies.

By getting grounded—
by being fully present to where we are, in the here and now.

By calming our brains through mindfulness practice.

And letting go of labels,
resisting the pull to put things in categories.

It means giving up being a know-it-all,
so that there might be room to take in something else,
something new, something life-giving.

As I say, it's easy to do, *theoretically*.

And, yet, for so many of us,
myself included, at times,
our cups are full to overflowing.

Our minds are flooded with information these days.

We contend with more knowledge, with more data,
and, it must be said, with more distraction,
than any generation in human history.

Through the steady stream of news that comes our way,

we hold in our brains and our hearts
more knowledge about the state of the whole wide world
than any other humans have ever held before.

Through just a quick scan of this week's headlines, alone,
we can come away with an overwhelming awareness
that Venice is flooding
and Sydney is burning,
that Evo Morales has been ousted in what many see as a coup,
that Donald Trump hangs by an all-too-tenacious thread,
and that Don Cherry's career has come to an end,
for many, not a moment too soon.

We arguably weren't designed to hold all of that,
and so much more that life brings—
from the demands of our day-to-day
to the expanding catalogue of whatever is streaming on Netflix.

Far from the steady pouring of tea by a Zen master,
we are subject to having our teacups overfilled with a fire hose.

In our busy lives, it can be a struggle to find the still point,
to find the quiet centre, that leads on
to more intentional ways of being.

What's worse, in our ever-more segmented, siloed ways
of getting information, research shows
we are locking down our opinions,
living increasingly in bubbles where we only take in
the facts and figures that reinforce
much of what we already believe about the world around us.

So, it's fair to ask how much room we really have
in our proverbial teacups.

It's fair to wonder how open and receptive
we truly are to gift of insight.

It's fair to ask whether it's not past time to say, "Enough, already."

The world around us right now can be utterly exhausting.

So much so, we may well resonate
with what Germans call *weltschmerz*, or world-weariness.

(Anyone feeling world weary?)

And, yet, rather than emptying our cups,
we often just keep pouring.

But what if we were to say, “Enough, already,” and really mean it?

What if we were to empty our cups,
to make room—room for wisdom,
for possibility, for life itself?

In this age of anxiety, in this era of endless distraction,
the world needs more people with empty cups.

More people willing and able to receive,
to take in what really matters,
to learn and to understand,
to be awake and to act.

If we’re already “full up,”
if we’re busy sopping up tea
as it soaks everything around us,
if we’re so locked into being know-it-alls
who are deeply convinced that we’re already right,
we aren’t going to be able to make room
for the possibility that we need wisdom
more than mere information.

We need to say, “Enough.”
We need to empty the cup.

Fortunately, some of this emptying
seems to happen naturally as part of the aging process.

A friend of mine swears
that one of the unexpected gifts of menopause
has been a feeling of empowerment
to simply refuse to play along in the ways she might once have.

Perhaps it's simply a product of reaching a certain age,
where what's past and what's future
cast what's present in a different light.

Whatever the cause, José Micard Teixeira
seems to get at it brilliantly in this description,
which has recently been misattributed to Meryl Streep:

I no longer have patience for certain things,
not because I've become arrogant,
but simply because I reached a point in my life
where I do not want to waste more time
with what displeases me or hurts me.

I have no patience for cynicism,
excessive criticism and demands of any nature.

I lost the will to please those who do not like me,
to love those who do not love me
and to smile at those who do not want to smile at me.

I no longer spend a single minute on those who lie
or want to manipulate.

I decided not to coexist anymore with pretense,
hypocrisy, dishonesty and cheap praise. . . .

I hate conflict and comparisons.

... I avoid people with rigid and inflexible personalities.

In friendship I dislike the lack of loyalty and betrayal.

I do not get along with those who do not know how
to give a compliment or a word of encouragement.

Exaggerations bore me and I have difficulty accepting
those who do not like animals.

And on top of everything I have no patience for anyone

who does not deserve my patience.

Does any of this resonate for any of you?

[Why?]

I find the older I get, the less willing I am
to tolerate passing tempests in my teacup,
especially when they are not real,
when they're manufactured for petty reasons.

There's just too much else that needs my attention.
Too much else that I need to learn from.

It's a matter of saying, "Enough, already,"
and tipping over the cup.

It's a matter of clearing away the chaos and the clutter,
that we might take in clearly what we need,
on life's deeper level, to better understand.

In dedicating Fionn this morning,
we paused, on some level,
to celebrate the marvel of Beginner's Mind.

To be reminded of what it means
to move through this world with childlike curiosity.

With openness, at every turn, for wonder and insight.

With an empty, waiting cup,
in which possibility might be born.

Though most of us have many, many years on Fionn,
let us resolve today to be like Fionn.

To recover the Beginner's Mind that allows us
to truly learn and grow in wisdom.

In recent weeks, as I thought about the boat

we would present to Fionn today,
I couldn't help but recall the old Breton fishers' prayer:
"O God, thy sea is so great, and my boat so small."

It's not a petition for help, but, instead, a recognition of what is.
An acknowledgement of the real nature of the world.

It is a humble confession of Beginner's Mind.

I wish I had a boat to present to each of you.
A tangible reminder to empty yourselves
before the vastness of the universe,
that you might make room for what matters most.

What I can offer you is the same blessing I offered Fionn.

A reminder:
To stay anchored
To look for new horizons
To ask questions when you don't know the ropes
To let your dreams set sail
To know, no matter the weather,
 your nearest and dearest are your safe harbour
And to let your heart be your compass.

As we drift here on these seas with our ship's companions,
let us remain ever empty and always open. Blessed Be.