

The Great Transformation
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Story for All Ages – “*The Birth of Confucius*” from a story by Sophia L. Fahs

Readings

I. From [*The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*](#) (1998) by Thich Nhat Hanh pgs. 111-112, 250:

(Explanatory Note: Vulture Peak in India is traditionally recognized as the site where Buddha first delivered some of his most important teachings).

If you were to hear on the radio that the Buddha is going to reappear on [the Vulture Peak] and the public is invited to join him for walking meditation, all the seats on all the airplanes to India would be booked, and you might feel frustrated, because you want to go, also...

Look deeply at your intention. Do you want to fly halfway around the world so that later you can say you were with the Buddha? Many people want to do just that...They are not able to be in the here and the now. They only want to say, “I was there, and this is me standing beside the Buddha.” But it is not true. They were not there. And that is not the Buddha...

Vulture Peak is beautiful, and Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, North and South America are also beautiful. When there is mist on the mountains, it is beautiful, and when there is no mist, it is also beautiful. All four seasons are beautiful. You are beautiful and your friends are beautiful. There is nothing to stop you from being in touch with life in the present moment. The question is, Do you have eyes that can see the sunset, feet that can touch the earth? If the Buddha were to transmit his eyes to you, would you know how to use them? Don't think that happiness will be possible only when conditions around you become perfect. Happiness lies in your own heart. You only need to practice mindful breathing for a few seconds and you'll be happy right away. Confucius said, “What greater joy can there be than putting into practice what you have learned?”

2. From [*The Great Transformation*](#) (2006) by Karen Armstrong, pgs. 287-288:

One day a Brahmin found the Buddha sitting under a tree and the sight of his serenity, stillness, and self-discipline filled the priest with awe. The Buddha reminded him of a tusker elephant: there was the same sense of enormous strength and massive potential brought under control and channeled into an extraordinary peace. The Brahmin had never see a man like that before. “Are you a God, sir?” he asked. “An angel...or a spirit?”

“No,” the Buddha replied. “Remember me as one who is awake.”

Sermon

Buddha's birthday...and yet our story is about the birth of Confucius?

Well, actually today is not the Buddha's birthday...I mean we don't think it's the Buddha's actual birthday today. Historically speaking, we just don't know.

Japan celebrates the Buddha's birthday with a “flower festival” called Hanamatsuri on April 8th. Many Southeast Asians and Tibetans celebrate Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death all together on a day

that occurs for us in May or June, while the South Korean Buddha birthday party lasts for a *week*, usually ending in May. Looking at all those dates, I figured today was as good a day as any to celebrate Buddha's birthday here in our community.

Many of you with good memories may be understandably puzzled as we recognized another Buddhist celebration back in December and at that service the Theater for All Ages actually re-enacted the birth of Buddha in spectacular fashion. On that day, however, we were commemorating, not the birth of the Buddha, but the traditional celebration known to some Buddhists as "Bodhi Day," referring to the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha sat when he attained enlightenment.

Recalling that long-ago service as I prepared for this service, I am embarrassed to say that I thought: "Geez, I just talked about the Buddha...what else can I say about him?"

Isn't that sad? And I don't mean just *sad* sad, I mean SADD...Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder.

I mean, sure, Buddhism has been around for thousands of years, has well over a billion adherents, countless people have devoted their lives to the study and practice...but two Sundays in a year? *Please!*

But I took some consolation in imagining the Buddha asking a similar question: *Why are you talking about me again? To what end? What is your point? Is it important that you recognize the right dates for these celebrations? Do you think if you read one more book about me that you will have something new to say? Do you imagine that I can give you the truth?*

No, Reverend...tell them this: Be ye lamps unto yourselves; be your own confidence; hold to the truth within yourselves as to the only lamp.

So there were a few reasons that I thought the birth of Confucius was an appropriate story for this Sunday.

The first is that Confucius and Buddha were both, along with Jeremiah and Socrates and Lao-Tse and others, part of the Axial Age, this period between the 9th and 3rd century BCE that saw the birth of some of the major religious and philosophical traditions that continue to inspire and influence humanity to the present day. This is the period that Karen Armstrong calls "the great transformation," as these unique individuals in widely varying cultures all affirmed a compassionate response to the violence and upheaval that surrounded them.

The second reason that I thought it was appropriate to tell about the birth of Confucius in our celebration of the Buddha is that the Buddha was crystal-clear in his teachings about this: it was not about *him*. It was not about *him*. If you become fixated on the Buddha as a prophet or a god or a guru or a key to your enlightenment, you have missed what the Buddha taught. This led ninth century Zen Master, Lin-chi, to utter the famous teaching: "If you meet the Buddha on the road...kill him!"

(I once unwisely used that example in a children's story. One father told me later that, upon returning home, his young son grabbed a stick and was running around outside, jabbing it forward and shouting, "Kill the Buddha! Kill the Buddha!" Which awakened me to the many unintended consequences of religious teachings...)

But the Buddha's journey was less about "finding himself," as we might say in Western parlance, as

about “losing himself;” extinguishing *self*; dying to *self*. What he found, what he taught could not be contained within any one doctrine or dogma or religion, was not the property of any one person or group of people, and was emphatically not about him but available to all.

So I think that the Buddha would be more than okay with sharing the spotlight today with Confucius.

And there’s one more reason that I found it appropriate to join the stories of Buddha and Confucius together, and this goes back to Armstrong’s book and has to do with *transformation*. Transformation. What does that word mean to you?

This is from the Merriam Webster online dictionary:

1 a: to change in composition or structure **b:** to change the outward form or appearance of **c:** to change in character or condition

Given that, let me step back a bit. I am fond of quoting the Rev. Robert Latham, a Unitarian Universalist minister, when he says that basically every religious community has the same mission: the transformation of individuals and society.

As we talked about that in the class on the great transformation, some folks pointed out that *transformation*, as a goal, really doesn’t stand on its own. Transforming from what? To what? To change in composition or structure; change the outward form or appearance; change in character or condition...The one constant in the definitions of transformation is change, but for our purposes, if transformation is what we’re after, we must have a destination, or at least a direction. Changing to what?

To put it in a single phrase: ever-greater compassion. Transformation of individuals and society toward greater compassion. That’s a pretty good mission, isn’t it? To nurture a deeper understanding of and active compassion toward all living things.

But how, then, do we go about this mission?

This is where the people that Armstrong discusses in *The Great Transformation* are so helpful.

Because part of what I described earlier—what will I say about the Buddha *this time?*—part of that is because we have a pretty good idea of what the Buddha is going to say to us. We know pretty much what Confucius is going to say to us. We know pretty much what many of the great teachers throughout human history are going to say to us. That Golden Rule just keeps popping up in each and every tradition...but it can’t be that simple, can it?

Kurt Vonnegut has a wonderful passage in his novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, in which a character who is not at all religious is invited to baptize newborn twins. He sprinkles them with water and says these words:

*Hello, Babies! Welcome to earth.
It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter.
It’s round and wet and crowded.
At the outside, Babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here.*

*There's only one rule that I know of, Babies:
YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIND.*

There's only one rule that I know of...and part of me insists that there must be more, more, more. I look forward to exploring previously unexplored philosophies; I devour various interpretations of the great teachers; I want more information, greater knowledge, wider wisdom, because somewhere, out there, somewhere there is the answer. I think, as Unitarian Universalists, our self-identification as seekers, as searchers, and the general attitude toward the value of education and the acquisition of knowledge, sometimes feeds into this notion that somewhere out there an answer is waiting for us, if we just keep seeking, exploring, learning.

But, in this matter of compassion, I already have the answer. I already have a mission. I already know what I should do.

“Why should we look to Confucius or the Buddha for help?” Armstrong asks in her introduction. “Surely a study of this period can only be an exercise in spiritual archaeology, when what we need is to create a more innovative faith that reflects the reality of our own world. Yet, in fact, we have never surpassed the insights of the Axial Age” (pg. xii).

Though religion these days is often considered to be a matter of adopting the right beliefs, Armstrong says that the Axial reformers were not concerned with beliefs. “What mattered was not what you believed but how you behaved. Religion was about doing things that changed you at a profound level...the only way you could encounter what they called “God,” “Nirvana,” “Brahman,” or the “Way” was to live a compassionate life” (pgs. xiii-xiv).

There's only one rule...and we already know it. It already rests within us.

“Hold to the truth within yourselves,” said the Buddha. The Hebrew Prophet Jeremiah reports God as saying, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” The trick, the key, the mission is to act in accordance with what we already know. Doing things that change us at a profound level.

You have got to be kind.

And that doesn't require the explanation of deep philosophical maxims. It doesn't require the unveiling of hidden truths about a transcendent realm. It doesn't require a trip to Vulture Peak or Mecca or General Assembly. It doesn't require another book or another dvd or another sermon or another moment of seeking. It just takes practice.

Confucius said, “What greater joy can there be than putting into practice what you have learned?”

It's just that simple, say these Axial Age reformers; just that simple...and just that difficult.

See, for me, part of the reason that I keep looking for answers outside myself is because I am not that comfortable with the concept of *practice*. I want to be able to play the guitar *now*. I want to be able to speak Spanish *now*. I want to plug the chip in my head that gives me the knowledge. And in just such a way, I want to have that transcendent experience that provides the irrepressible inspiration to do the right thing; that sweeps me like a tide toward unselfishness and compassion. I want to be able to *do*

it...but I don't want to practice.

And partly I see that as a failing of liberal religion. In rejecting what we see as hypocritical constructs of organized religion, we have sometimes rejected the value of doing *anything* that we don't *feel*; that we aren't *inspired* to do; acting from duty or discipline without that emotional and/or spiritual engagement is seen as hypocritical or insincere. We look back to Confucius, for example, and say, "What's with all the rules? What's with all this empty ritual?" *We* want to do what is right because we are filled with a passion for the good; *we* want to love our neighbor because our hearts are overflowing with affection for all creatures.

How's that working for ya?

We operate under the assumption that transformation always comes from the inside out. We need to understand it, to feel it, to believe it, and then we will do it. But what the Great Transformation prophets and teachers and reformers and thinkers knew is that transformation can begin on the outside, in what we do, and work its way in to change who we are.

I've been waiting almost 50 years for the inspiration that will allow me to play the guitar like a real musician, but I still can't play. I have the desire to play, but unless I practice; unless I engage the work; do it even when I don't feel like it; playing the guitar will continue to elude me.

Loving our neighbors is like that. We may want to, in theory. We may wait for the overpowering feeling of affection to wash over us...and we may still be waiting. And if and when it comes, it doesn't stay, does it?

Compassion--love for all living things--cannot wait for nor rely on emotional epiphanies or spiritual breakthroughs. It takes work. It takes practice. "Compassion is not just a feeling," writes Karen Armstrong, "It must constantly be translated intelligently into practical, concrete action."

The Great Transformation that Armstrong describes has somewhat arbitrary dates, which she acknowledges. I prefer to think of what was begun way back then as an ongoing project in which we are intimately involved. It will take practice and practice means concerted effort (even when we don't feel like it), frustration, disappointment...But it also means growing confidence and greater ability and opportunity to inspire and support others in their practice.

"As far as the Axial sages were concerned," she writes, "respect for the sacred rights of all beings—not orthodox belief—was religion. If people behaved with kindness and generosity to their fellows, they could save the world."

What is the great transformation that we seek? We seek, always, to be kind...and to save the world. It's as simple as that.