

Delusions and the Transforming of Them
Joan Sutherland, Roshi
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I wanted to talk tonight about stories — about how they can wound us and how they can heal us. We know that one of the poisons — that is, the things that cause us suffering and cause us to cause suffering for others — is our delusions. These are the stories we tell ourselves about the way the world is, or we are, that might give us an odd, wounded sort of comfort in the moment but really limit us in the long run. They usually contain words like ‘always’ or ‘never’ or ‘everybody else’ or ‘nobody.’ If we’ve been practicing awhile, most of us will have gone through many cycles of the rising, and with any luck, the falling, of such delusions.

There’s a particular delusion that’s very American : we’ve been born into a narrow slice of time in human history in which we have the notion that there is a good and wholesome life that’s the norm, and if we haven’t been lucky enough to have it, our life is doomed to be somehow defective. After you’ve done a lot of *dokusan*, heard a lot of stories, you come to know for sure that if the prerequisite for happiness and sanity is to have this ideal life, all of us are doomed, because no one, not a single one of us, does. But we swim in this delusion and it seeps into us, and it’s very difficult not to take it on and make it our own. So we can think that if only there hadn’t been violence in my childhood, if only my mother hadn’t died when I was a teenager, if only I’d gotten a better education, or not gotten this chronic illness or found the right mate, I coulda been a contendah. We stand a short distance from our own lives and find them flawed, and in the quiet hours of the early morning we fear that the flaw is irredeemable.

But here’s the thing : we’re not living some flawed version of a possibility that has escaped us, we haven’t been robbed of something. This is human life. Exactly this. The vastness throws up redwoods and skyscrapers and killer whales and human beings who are exactly like this, and it is not a mistake. “What about when it’s a disaster?” someone asked Zhaozhou, and he replied, “Thats it!”

This is exactly the kind of delusion our practice is about letting go of. Not so we can come into some kind of perfect life, but so we can come into relationship with what is actually true about life. There are a couple of different ways we can work with this; here are two story fragments I offer in place of the tales about ‘always and never.’ Both say something about how

we can transform the inevitable traumas of being human.

During the Civil War, thousands of battlefield photographs were taken in a process that used glass negatives. After the war, when people turned to other things, the glass negatives were sold as scrap, and some were made into greenhouses. So over the years the images of those soldiers, many of whom had died in battle, faded in the sun, turning to ghosts and then going transparent as the light streamed through them and the plants grew up underneath.

Sometimes it's good to remember the emptiness of all things, that everything rises and falls in its own season, everything has its own fate. Not every part of us is destined to endure for our whole lives. We can offer up our own ghostly images, the dead fragments inside us that continue to haunt us, to the light, to allow them to dissolve back into essential nature.

We do this mostly by simply allowing it to happen. As we go deeper in our practice, the vastness rises up to meet us. It puts space around things so that they do not press in on us so much. The things that are thick in us can grow porous, the hard edges feather and soften. And eventually the vastness brings moments when the prison of our delusions falls away and we experience the perfection of all things just as they are. In such a moment, it's not that our haunting images have vanished; it's just that they've ceased to be a problem; they've ceased to haunt us. Inevitably the moment passes and the world returns, but never in quite the same way. If we look carefully at our images, we find that they're not quite as solid as they once were, not quite as inevitable. The emptiness has begun to reclaim them. If we allow this, it will continue.

When we sit, day in and day out, we put ourselves in the way of eternity. We may suffer and worry sometimes, but all the while the light is shining through us, and time and the Dao will work on us. Knots will dissolve. New and green living things can grow up through our toes.

The second story I want to tell is about another way of living what life has given us. There was a young Japanese woman who became a photojournalist. She had a mysterious passion about the Afghan-Soviet war, and she went off to cover it. Working on the front lines, she was killed, and her body was lost in the confusion of battle. When the news reached home, her mother, who had never in her life left the village where she was born, carefully packed the wedding kimono she had sewn for her daughter at her birth and traveled to Afghanistan to find her daughter's body and bury her in the kimono she had made.

This way, the way of the mother from the small village, is the way of love and unknowing. Life spoke to her in the most tragic of ways, but she heard it as a call, and she responded. In the face of tragedy, there was something she could do, even if she had no way of knowing what the outcome would be, whether she would even find her daughter's body. She set out to meet the world as it is, and in her gesture she added the mystery and the beauty of poetry, or of myth, to a story that might have only become her own haunting image, and in so doing, she transformed it.

In the way of the mother from the small village, if it is what we are given to do, we turn the wedding robe into a death shroud, not because it fixes anything, not because it makes what happened all right, but because it allows for something new to happen, for the story to keep moving. In ways she never could have imagined, the story moves off in many directions, even stopping for a moment in a meditation hall in Northern California, and her love for her daughter is alive, for a moment, in us.

In the way of the mother from the small village, we do not turn our love away from what is painful. When we love in this way, what we love pulls us deeper into our own lives. Daughter calls to mother from half a world away, the woman hears and takes a journey she wouldn't have made in any other way. Perhaps she thought, *This is not the wedding I wished for you, but it is yours, and I bless it.* Whatever our own circumstances, whatever we feel about how things have turned out, perhaps we can offer this to ourselves : *This may not be the wedding I imagined for myself, but it is mine, and I bless it.*

Every act of love is a deep unknowing, a plunge into life that we're aware, even as we do it, will contain sorrow, may end in grief, but has its own necessity. *I choose this. In all the vast emptiness, I choose this.* Not as a charm against the night, but as a taking of the night into us, a willingness to devote ourselves to the few bright chips of that night given into our care.

We are willing to endure a lot for our practice, because we know somehow that it is in the long days and years of aching knees and the light streaming unawares through us that we find what Rilke called our great inner solitude. And it is in that solitude that we come into relationship with the Dao, we become subject to the deep laws, in Rilke's words. But always we fall through the bottom of that great inner solitude into relationship, into love, because this too is one of the deep laws, and our reckless generosity in loving allows us to truly receive and pass on life's own reckless generosity. And in washing the face of a sleepy child, ringing the

bell to awaken our friends at 4:00 in the morning, we join our voices to the long, slow steady song which is the life inside life, the song that has no beginning, and no end.