

Once a visitor asked the great teacher **Brown Bear**: What is the meaning of the passage “Forms are no other than emptiness”?

*Brown Bear said: I don’t know, it’s from an old scripture.*

*Later Raven told this story and Owl asked: Brown Bear knew the scriptures well, how could he say he didn’t know?*

*Raven: He doesn’t know.*

*Owl: but he is a great teacher.*

*Raven: He really doesn’t know.*

1. So . . . *I don’t know either.*

But, meanwhile, here is another story: 70,000 years ago *homo sapiens*, perhaps through a random genetic mutation, developed an advanced symbolic ability. Like other animals, our ancestors could already use languages to communicate practical information, like the type and direction of food or the type and direction of danger--and even to engage in deceptive signaling about such matters.

But somehow this one particular species of humans added something new: **the ability to confabulate**. To make up elaborate stories, myths, fictions; to have shared imaginary worlds. And so gods were born, spirits . . . totems—and tribes—vast communities of people most of whom had never met one another, but experience one another as close kin (Fire up Chips!) And so while the other (now extinct) types of humans also fabricated tools, only we *sapiens* fabricated figments such as money and nations and justice; human rights and God Almighty: Stories that become powerful when we can count on others following along the same story line.

One really might think that weaving elaborate fictions would be maladaptive, but it turns out quite otherwise. Stories that no one else buys evaporate; others grip our imaginations go viral. Stories about being the turtle people or the Serbians have allowed us to organize ourselves into ever larger and more powerful groups, so that we can seek to obliterate more efficiently threats we see as external: **[3} homo neanderthalensis, homo florensis, dire wolves**, saber tooth tigers, Carthaginians, **commies**, corporate competitors, Aggies/Mustangs . . . or Rohingyas.

Seventy thousand years of successful conquest later, we usually perceive the world as though our more useful fictions were objectively real. Sometimes we even take our perceptions as pallid versions of *the real world*-- that being the one our narratives describe.

So, in this sense, the world is made of stories. The world in which *homo sapiens* live and move and have our being is a world we create for ourselves; we live not by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouths of gods we **dream together**.

Of course there are things other than stories, but to say what they are is already to tell a story. So until we become something other than human, we will live by *stories*, including stories about the importance of stories themselves, stories about how to find the best stories. We can recognize this, or not.

As imagined in Mahayana Buddhism, **a buddha** has utterly transcended narrative. That is, while we tell stories about buddhas, the Mahayana story is that a buddha dreams no dreams at all, but simply *responds* perfectly, free of thought. This is a human story about seeking to become, and in some fundamental sense always already being, something *other than human*.

If we recognize that we live by stories, and that our fellow humans are just like that, then we are liberated to seek stories that help best in each particular situation. In Buddhism we call this *skill in liberative technique*. In stories of tricksters and master life-artists, the hero must be *extraordinarily* nimble: *never* locked into one line, always creatively defying expectations. The Buddhist figure **Vimalakirti**, for example, feigns illness, mocks righteous monks, plays practical jokes; he orders takeout food from the only the *very best* heavens; he hides a goddess in his closet; he lectures each monk on that particular monk’s personal style of self-righteousness—but he also shows deep respect for the Buddha Shakyamuni. At just the right moment, he lapses into utter silence—but this silence becomes profound *only in the context of the story*.

Some prefer to talk about “meaning.” Humans are *meaning-makers* and often we can bear a great deal—as **Viktor Frankl** saw—if we can find, or create, some sense of meaning or purpose within it. Those who can tell themselves a story about, or find some meaning in, loss or trauma have a better chance to reassemble themselves and become effective in the world. There are a great many such therapeutic stories we can tell; recent literature on bereavement attempts to list and classify these narratives.

But it is important to say: Doctor Buddha was not a quack. He does not prescribe one medicine; which means: he does not tell a single story. He is said to have **given 84,000** prescriptions, 84,000 being an old technical term for “one hell of a lot.” He dispensed different stories to different sufferers on different days. Because, of course: there is *no* panacea; there are only what is more or less helpful at a given moment for this or that particular person.

In my time of greatest loss, greatest loss *so far*, I—like anyone else—**had allergic reactions to certain narratives** that well wishers offered, and I got some healing benefit from others. I had times of being judgmental and angry with folks who were only trying to help as best they were able. But after a while I got softer and saw that even stories that seemed toxic to me have persisted in part because they bring real benefits to some of people. So it is unskillful, it is imprecise, it is ultimately unkind, to *story-freeze*—that is, to insist that there is just one right way to cope—or one right way to help someone else. Great healers never have just one medicine.

## 2. My story

In 2013, my first **wife Valerie died after 28+** years of marriage. For a while, I was a wreck.

### **Two stories that did not help me:**

1. *it is fair*, just, or a natural consequence of past choices
2. fair or not, it is a great spiritual opportunity and thus perhaps *for the best*

### **The story that did help me, this time, mainly**

3. that it may *not* be fair, need *not* be considered as for the best, but it also is not *mine*, it is not anyone’s in particular; it is the situation we all share: and therefore our deepest kinship: ancillary to that: that I might be in a position to talk about this in way that would be helpful to some others.

#1 Let’s consider first the story that life is fair.

Our oldest *written* story is more that 4000 years old: The Sumerian **Epic of Gilgamesh** includes these lines:

*Lay upon the transgressor his transgression,*

*punish him a little when he breaks loose,*

*do not drive him too hard or he perishes . .*

*Would that a lion had ravaged the earth rather than a flood,*

*would that a wolf had ravaged us rather than a flood.*

### **Messages:**

(1) floods *are simply the worst*; a big problem in ancient Mesopotamia with deforestation along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates;

(2) floods are *punishments*, the justice by the highest powers and

(3) we would hope or pray that such justice be tempered with mercy, perhaps induced by our admission of guilt.

**Pros:** when people believe that the universe, or the powers behind its operation, are ultimately just, then they are motivated to behave well. Because, obviously:

(1) they may fear consequences of harmful actions, seek rewards of helpful actions, and:

(2) At a higher level of moral development, they may also be motivated to act in harmony with the universe's justice by taking actions to seek justice in society. E.g.: Equal justice initiative; abolition; MLK; Confucian virtue.

(3) Even when very bad things happen to them personally, many people gain a sense of peace or consolation from believing *that whatever happens is a consequence of their past choices*. They get, thereby, a sense of CONTROL. Most humans apparently would rather feel guilty than to imagine themselves helplessly bobbing about in the universe; so when bad things happen to us, if our story is that in some way this is always a consequence of our choices, then we can make choices now to purify whatever sin or bad karma is causing our misery.

So this story has been a medicine of choice for many for thousands of years, around the world.

But it has several side effects, the most important of which is this: the victim of any crime, any rape, any hurricane must have committed some action that laid them open to this particular misery. **Victims are always guilty;** they are primarily responsible for whatever harm befalls them.

*I think that the important message is that our choices matter; they have real consequences.* And it is so important that people GET THAT, that we avoid despair, fatalism and passivity. To get this across to many, the message has to be *overstated*. But what is medicine for some is poison for others.

The fairness of the world is such an important issue that many traditions articulate, and thus place in their pharmacies, *contradictory* stories. The Book of Job seems to say that we should not assume that the sorely afflicted are being punished; Jesus likewise says that it is wrong to assume that the blind or those who are crushed by falling buildings are being punished by God. Yet the notion that suffering is divine punishment for sin is still a dominant strain in the Hebrew Bible and in Christianity after Augustine. *Many* Buddhist traditions seem to say that *every good or bad experience is the result of some specific past action*; but it is doubtful that this *comprehensive determination* of each experience is the teaching of the earliest Buddhist texts. I speculate: cultures spread farther and probably last longer when they offer *a range of therapeutic stories*.

One can tell a story about the Hurricane Harvey wherein the force of the storm arises from global warming, which in turn arises from choices made in Houston. This could then motivate an oil-city-based anti-carbon-fuel initiative. But what about all the people who made global-warming-inducing decisions and used their riches to stay dry? Were the particular victims, those who drowned, *particularly* responsible?

I wonder how many in **Houston would find solace**, healing in this message: "A hurricane has hit us, let us consider what we did wrong. Let us purify ourselves and repent." It's a big city, so there must be many for whom precisely this is *the most* healing message. But it is acid in the wounds of others.

Story #2: Lemonade: **Bad things are actually good.**

Whether we can manage to conceive of horrible events as the natural outcomes of bad human choices or not, we can tell another story in which, while not necessarily fair, grievous loss is nonetheless beneficial. When bad things happen to good people, that is, paradoxically, the best of all fortune.

This Olivia Newton John's story about her cancer. And it's a Buddhist story.

Beastie Boys commentary on Bodhisattvacaryavatara states:

"If others disrespect me and give me flak, I take the opportunity to exercise patience; we need other people to create circumstances for learning. Therefore it only makes sense to thank my enemies despite their intent."

The floppy trees inside the eco-dome—no wind means no strength. "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger": works for some—but not always true.

**Pema Chodron** has been wonderfully helpful, and successful, writing about loss. It is clear her work is good medicine for lots of folks. She goes so far, in her best-selling book, to say that "death is delightful;" she explains that this delight rises from the fact that the bereaved, in shock, lose any sense of themselves or the

ground beneath their feet. This groundlessness she understands as the openness that is the basic condition of all things, the reality-nature that our ego-driven stories have been obscuring.

But are we really able to say:

Thank you, Universe, for the horror you have brought us this. May you bless us with an even more educational horror show tomorrow.

**Trump-inspired kid in my class.** How I tried to talk him down. Who gets to say what horror is to be counted as good fortune? example of the Federal judge.

Who can, who has the right to, weigh *up the net goodness of benefits that would not have arisen without horrible evils?*

Of course we hope not only to survive trauma and grievous loss, but to somehow grow. If we do, if we can, if we are made stronger or more kindhearted, then that is wonderful.

**Many things have gone extremely well for me** over the last few years; my kids are doing well and Carolina and I are very happy together. But I can't label past traumas for people I love as blessings or strokes of good fortune. And who else has the right to say that this is the "right" story?

### Story #3: **Breaking down the barriers**

One of my favorite stories is that we suffer needlessly because we don't see people or things as they are; instead we impose upon them an exaggerated, frozen way of being, making them seem graspable when in fact they are just like flickering flames or fast-flowing streams.

In Buddhism we have the idea that if one sees deeply into impermanence, suffering and no-self, one becomes liberated from needless misery.

**Suffering** means that everyone gets painfully hurt, that we are all at every moment totally vulnerable, and that we all inevitably lose everything we care about. We make life suck by allowing ourselves to be deceived into not facing these facts.

But why does insight into pain lead anyone to liberation?

To explain, back to my story:

In 2014, still a wreck, I was invited **to teach at Sravasti Abbey**. Unable to do anything else, I started teaching Buddhism in relation to my personal experience with loss rather than what I have read in books.

Reaction from people: their own stories. Orphan rape. Seeing friends disappear into quicksand. Did not know what was happening to me, but in retrospect it seems clear. **A visceral sense of being all together:** opening heart so as to feel part of one fabric with everyone rather than a skin encapsulated ego.

**Kisa Gotami** story: she was healed by the empathy she felt hearing her neighbors stories.

**NPR:** Charles McKee, double amputee, headed to a porta-potty in a wheelchair outside a shelter in Beaumont after Hurricane Harvey. "You can't feel sorry for yourself because *everybody has lost everything.*" This is what Buddhaghosa calls: breaking down the barriers.

Conclusion:

**We don't know often know how to help** ourselves, let alone another. But if we know that we don't know, then we can have the good sense to pay attention, to be patient and forgiving of our own mistakes and those of others. To show up and see what we can see and then try as best we can.

**As a Jewish Wisdom text** says: Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. We are not obligated to complete the work of healing the world, but neither are we free to abandon it.