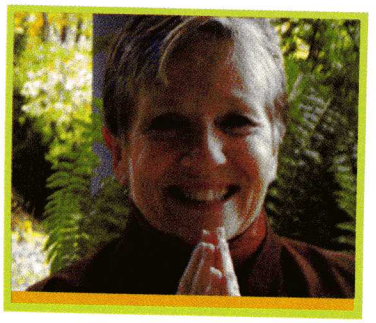
NOT EVERYDAY FAITH

Judith Toy

At the start of my Zen practice, what did I know about faith?



Our family was destroyed by the murders of three people in one night–my sister-in-law Connie and my two nephews Allen and Bobby, 16 and 14, cut down by the hatchet of a madman. Faith as I see it in Zen is rooted in experience. Faith and experience are interdependent, too. No inside and no outside. My experience at that time had been obscene, painful, heart shattering. How could I have known this tragedy would be a call to love?

Our murder was the first case involving DNA evidence in the county. It was front page, top of the evening news, and our district attorney wanted nineteen-year-old Charles Grand convicted. So did the public. My family, too, wanted him to suffer. We wanted Charles to be forced to think long and hard every day of his life about what he had done. After stopping the trial by confessing to the crime, he received three consecutive life sentences without parole.

Distraught, I took refuge in Zen. It was then I got some relief from my grief and confusion through stopping and calming my breath. The fruits of the practice came slowly. Stilling my body/mind day after day, I inched toward the faith that led to forgiveness. This didn't happen until five years after the fact. Forgiveness came suddenly, in an unbidden way.

It was autumn, near the fifth anniversary of my family's death date, October 15. I picked up a

pencil, my therapy. Out of Zen's rich tradition of meaning surrounded in silence, I breathed in. With a heavy heart, I began writing a poem about the night of the murders, trying to sort out my feelings. By then I'd become a disciple of the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, who wrote in one of his poems: I am the frog, swimming happily/in the clear waters of my pond,/and I am the grass-snake who,/ approaching in silence,/feeds itself on the frog./I am the child in Uganda/my legs as thin as bamboo sticks/and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

It's not important which words I then used to compose my poem. But what happened, to my absolute shock and surprise, was that I began to identify with the rage of the boy who was stabbing and bludgeoning Allen and Bobby, killing and raping their mother, dear Connie. Suddenly in the writing I seemed to inhabit his body! I felt blind, out of control, out of my own body and mind.

I went numb. I felt only rage, hatred and stabbing, my pounding heart.

That was the day I stopped thinking of Charles as a beast and began thinking of him as a boy in whom something had gone awfully wrong. The pain of resentment vanished! Breathing out, I saw in me the seeds of murder, seeds which have not been watered. So they've withered. Still they are there. I saw within me not only the victims, but the perpetrator. Sadly, before I was able to tell him so, Charles took a laundry bag and hung himself to death in his prison cell. I mourned his passing. Twelve years after the murders, his mother and I cried together over our mutual loss.

The Heart Sutra tells the same story. "After this penetration of prajna paramita, Shariputra overcame pain"--precisely what happened to me! We experience emptiness when we penetrate or absorb a thing, be it the mind of a murderer or a crust of bread. Thich Nhat Hanh says that when he's doing calligraphy he likes to take a tea break. One day when he picked up his tea cup and took a sip, he tasted the mountains of China.

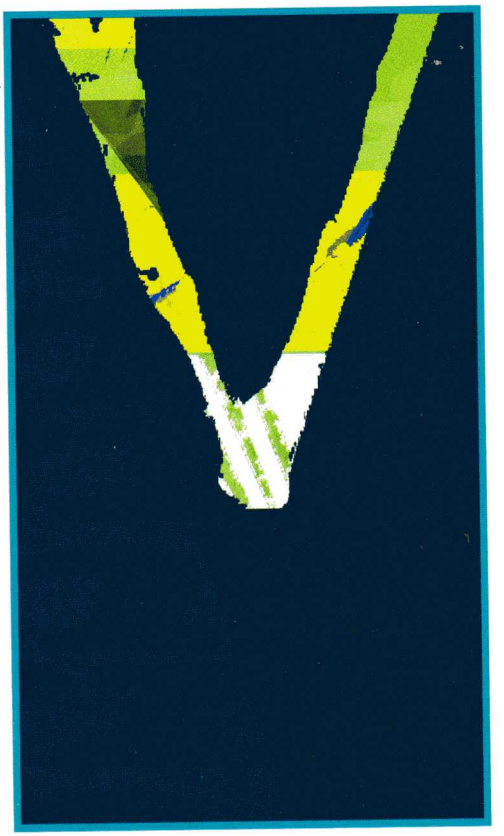
Most of the time we don't see things—dharmas—as fluid, spacious, receptive. A table for example. It looks and feels hard, when in fact it's a fluid dance of myriad molecules and space, never static. So there's a tendency to grasp at what we see as solid and apart, with edges. The same goes for our experiences. We don't need to gulp the dharma as if it were a brand name. We don't need to visit every monastery, meet every teacher, grabbing for enlightenment. If we cannot find forgiveness where we're standing now, where do we expect to wander in search of it?

Most of our murders, though, are little murders. The faith I developed from my sudden satori of forgiveness was not everyday faith. It traveled from the macro of murder to the micro of the little murders of everyday life–the "he-said-she-said" variety of drama and difficulty. I came to Zen angry, confused, demoralized. Zen taught me to embrace my anger and confusion, no matter how minor. We learn to treat our anger like a child, rock it. We ask our anger, "What is it you need from me now, my dear?" Instead of sweeping it under the rug, we sit and walk and breathe with it. Hold its hand. Pushing it away only disperses our energy. But embracing our anger,

Forgiving the boy who murdered my family was like striking a match to my grief. For as Buddha said, hatred never ceases through hatred--only through love.

seeing it as something that needs help from us–the dragon as princess in travail--we're able to transform anger to love. At this point we see deeply into the person we've perceived as the cause of our hurt. We forgive them.

Sometimes our fear keeps us from reconciling, as it did in the case of the murderer of my family. I had forgiven Charles, not condoned what he did. And I was still afraid of him. Then he hung himself to death and it was too late to tell him. Had I still perceived him as separate from myself? Is this why I did not say the words, "I forgive you," via letter or in person? Knowing he was knee-deep in his own grief, this much I was able to do: mentally, I put myself in his cell and took him in my arms every day, held him as if he were my son. But I didn't go there; I am no Sister Prejean. *



I have a brother who doesn't speak to me. It's been hard for me to reach out to him, like touching a hot stove, because I'm afraid of getting singed again. How to forgive? Or what about those times when the roles are reversed? When we need to be forgiven? When we catch ourselves up short–usually as the result of the reign of terror of our own anger? Those times when we say a thing we later come to regret. Unmindful speech! If only we could take it back! Erase that scene. Or rewind and replay it in a more skillful way. Nevertheless, here we are in a situation which, when we realize our own part in the mess, we regret. How to ask for forgiveness?

Often because we've properly alienated the other, i.e., they're not speaking to us or they're just avoiding us, our plea for pardon has to be made via letter. Once I ordered a bouquet of I'm-sorry flowers and had them delivered to the person whose appointment I blew off. That was easy. No, I'm talking here about the times we thoroughly screw up. A love letter? Yes. Extolling the real virtues of the other, owning our mistakes, our unmindful speech and actions. In such a letter, we need to be specific, sticking to "I" messages. The rule I give myself is these messages can't be forged or feigned; they have to come out of my actual truth.

There's a Zen tradition of requesting a thing of the teacher three times. My usual strategy is three attempts at throwing straw on the mud–say, two phone calls asking for a personal interview–and when my calls are not returned, the love letter. No recriminations. Just love and an expression of my desire to reconcile in person. Telling only my own feelings, without projecting my feelings onto the other. If I don't truly feel love for the other person, I do nothing.

After a dharma talk on forgiveness, a student asked me for an interview. She was angry. She wanted advice on a situation where she felt she'd been wronged. My mistake was that I gave her this advice: Stop pointing the finger of blame. Look to yourself; make this your practice. This escalated her anger; she aimed it at me; she felt judged. I called and wrote emails asking for a face-to-face interview to tell her this: I am sorry to have done anything but listen to you! She found it easier to point and click than come face-to-face. She sent a number of what I called gorilla emails. I countered with several love letters, pointing out qualities of hers I cherish. Alas, the gorilla emails continued, my love unacknowledged. I have had to let go of this one–accepting that all transactions are not clear. More often, they're muddy and unresolved. Still, I leave the door open....

The letting go took some time because I care for her. It helped me to envision her surrounded in light, in ***maitri*** meditations, saying prayers for her. And most important for me was to look deeply to understand why she was so angry. This is rarely rocket science--why people behave as they do. At that time, her mother had just had a massive heart attack. And she herself had been diagnosed with a chronic illness. Exchanging myself with her, I asked, under such conditions, would I be able to maintain

my equanimity? She didn't want my advice; she only wanted someone to listen to her, to love her through the difficulty. In this regard, I failed.

How often are we left holding the bag? Needing to forgive ourselves? How often, really, do we practice ***maitri*** meditations for ourselves? I can't tell you how often during days of mindfulness folks have said in dharma discussion, "The person I most need to forgive is myself." And, of course, they add, and my parents.

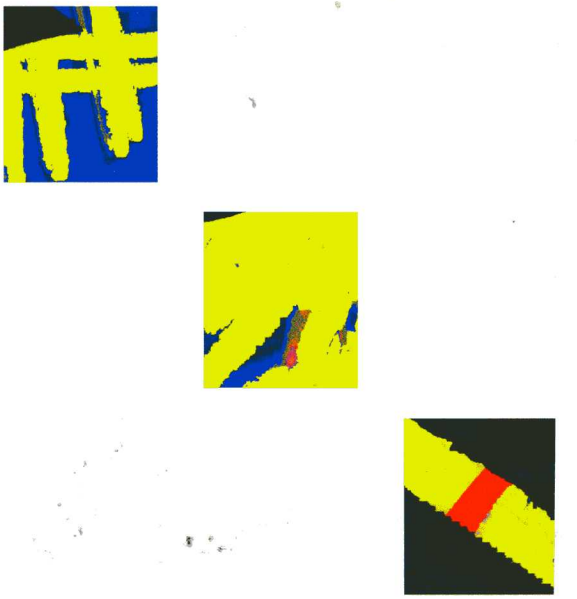
Thich Nhat Hanh suggests as a ***maitri*** practice that we envision our parents as vulnerable five-year-olds, ourselves as five-year-olds. In this way, we water the seeds of compassion that lead to forgiveness. Once in a morning meditation, I went back in time. I traveled through my life as far as toddler days. With a heart/mind of love, I called out to myself every name I've ever had–from nicknames to dharma names, good names to bad names–Jelly Bean to True Gate of Heaven. How powerful! Then I took this practice into a women's prison. One of them wrote to me, "So wonderful, this meditation. It takes me where I long to be. Even behind prison walls, I am free!"

Taoist writer Derek Lin tells a story (I've changed the genders)--about the Taoist master who instructs her student to fill up a bag of cut potatoes, one for every resentment she holds, and to carry it around for a week. The cut potatoes begin to stink, and the student's back hurts. At the end of the week, the teacher asks her, What did you learn? That my resentments are loading me down, that they stink. I think I'm ready to forgive them all, she says. Okay, says the teacher, unload the bag. The student pours the rotten potatoes onto the ground. Then the sage asks the student whether anyone offended or annoyed her during the week. Actually, yes, answers the student, reluctant to begin refilling the bag. If we continue this way, won't there always be potatoes in the bag? she asks. Yes, as long as people keep offending you, answers the teacher. So what good is the Tao? the student wants to know. This is not the Tao, says the teacher. With the Tao, there's nothing to attain. Then what is the Tao? the student wants to know. Wake up, says the teacher. If the potatoes are your resentments, what does the bag represent? The student asks, My self-importance? Yes, says the teacher. When you're ready to lay down the bag itself, this is the Tao of forgiveness.

There is even the danger that faith itself will become the bag of potatoes, the stuff of ego and dogma. But if we let go of the bag, of our separate self, there's nothing to grasp. The murders taught me that. Even more, they led me to the joy and freedom of letting go! The Dalai Lama says the sensation of emptiness–non-self--is soft, yielding.

As one of my Zen teachers wisely put it, ***"You sit, you drop yourself, and you're right in the middle–paradise."***

Sister Helen Prejean is author of **Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States. She is a member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Medaille.*



Judith Toy leads mindfulness practice at Cloud Cottage Sangha in Black Mountain, NC. She was ordained by Thich Nhat Hanh as a lay monastic in the Order of Interbeing and she is editor for ***The Mindfulness Bell***, the international journal of students of Thich Nhat Hanh. This article is excerpted from her book-in-progress, ***Minding the Fire, the Zen of Forgiveness.***