



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

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“Make Yourself a Light”

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The only part of this presentation I really struggled with was the opening line. I was home. I was walking around thinking about how I could get your attention on a subject that I care about deeply. It's a beautiful day, Sunday, in a gorgeous city, and all sorts of other things are probably floating through your mind. How do I get your attention since attention is so central to what we're doing here? I realized there was only one opening line that made any sense to me at all.

How many of you, by the end of this presentation, would like to be enlightened beings leading a stress-free life?

I'll bet you want to know what's next. If only I had a response to that. If only there were a way to make it stress-free and easy and we'd walk out of here enlightened. If you live in this area, you find all sorts of folks saying all sorts of things about how one can be enlightened quickly and easily, but the Buddhist tradition says other things. The Buddha was a master list maker—the four noble truths and the eight-fold path and all these lists of things—but brilliant. In fact, on the Buddha's death bed, so the story goes, he was asked for a final teaching, and he said, “Make yourself a light. Make yourself a light.”

I think if I have been lucky enough to have made myself at least some kind of light in this world, it came through Shanti. It came through my one great idea in the shower—and I wish you all one great idea in the shower—an inspiration that I followed up on. An inspiration that I hope you follow up on when you get yours, or maybe you have already. I don't know the specifics of your life. Maybe it's already happened for you. If it has, I would ask you to be greedy and ask for one more great idea in the shower, one more inspiration. I especially would suggest that you follow up on it, that you don't let anybody talk you out of it. The world will give you many messages about why it can't be done and why they won't let you do it and why this and that will get in the way. The world's messages are frequently messages of obstacle, but if you know in your heart that it's the right thing, then please don't let anybody talk you out of it. How many people know at least something about Shanti's role in this city through the AIDS epidemic? Okay. I can't imagine that too many of you wouldn't know.

The gay Buddhist fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the gay men's community. It is a forum that brings together the diverse Buddhist traditions to address the spiritual concerns of gay men in the San Francisco Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

Imagine if I had let folks talk me out of an idea. At the early stages of the epidemic, virtually everybody with AIDS in this city had some contact with Shanti, some support or contact. Imagine if I had let the clergy talk me out of it, the doctors talk me out of it, my psychologist colleagues talk me out of it, the government officials talk me out of it. All of those constituencies and more had reasons for why what I was intending was absolutely impossible and could not be done, and don't even try it, because you'll upset all sorts of people. It would have been easy to have believed one or more of those voices. It's not because I'm so courageous. It's not because I'm so bright. It's because, when an idea that's constitutionally right for you, an idea that's an expression of your own heart, comes to mind, it's very hard to deny it. It comes with a risk. You will always remember it like a lost love, a love that didn't pan out, if you choose to deny it.

Make yourself a light, said the Buddha. Shanti's been my light for forty years now. Before the epidemic, Shanti was a cancer program. We started at the Cancer Research Institute at UCSF. I was the first mental health professional on that unit. To this day, I can't quite get my arms around that phrase. If I was the first mental health professional on that unit, forty beds, seriously ill cancer patients in each bed, who took care of the emotional and spiritual needs before I got there? The answer, when I asked the question was, "Well, the doctors and nurses."

I'm glad you're laughing. Good people. Bright people. Good at what they did. Good at doctoring and nursing, but without much awareness of the spiritual and emotional realities facing people with life-threatening illness. In other words, virtually nobody was taking care of those needs. I'd walk down the hall, and I was right out of graduate school, and I was long on enthusiasm and short on knowhow. And I'd look in the rooms. I'd walk down the hallway and I'd look in people's rooms, and more often than not, I would understand something, and I wouldn't know quite what I was understanding, but I would look in people's eyes, and I would get what was going on in the room. Then I would visit people for more extended lengths of time and hear their stories, and I would realize I was right. I knew that there was something that I was picking up. I don't want to make this mysterious. I was picking up something that I really got. I resonated with it, like a tuning fork. You knock one tuning fork and the other one starts vibrating. I was vibrating with something that was going on in those rooms. I would hear their stories, and I would inevitably hear stories about abandonment: "My family doesn't come to visit. My partner's afraid to come. My doctor doesn't come and see me very often, and the nurses look at me like I'm problematic even though many of them are kind. They seem terribly busy and that my needs are an imposition."

How did I understand? I had never been in such a situation before. Why did I understand what was going on? What was this resonance I was feeling with abandonment? Fortunately, with a modicum of psychological training and some curiosity, I started looking at my own life. I was the firstborn child in an extended family. If you've ever been burdened with being the apple of other people's eyes and their projections about who you're supposed to be, I was supposed to be the successful one who made everybody happy and proud. It was a good job. It was better than other roles you could have played. They all said nice things to me and expected things that were good and positive. Everything was fine for three years and three months until he showed up, my baby brother. Nobody told me about that. He was sick, so they had to turn their attention away. For three years and three months, as this precocious infant who got a lot of attention, I was suddenly put into my

bedroom and told to play, just amuse yourself. I was given an occasional toy, but not much. I was banished from the kingdom. Why? You can't tell a three-year-old why.

Abandonment. There it was. It was there in my own history, written large. That was my essential wound, the wound of abandonment, the fear of abandonment, the reality of abandonment in my own history, and now I was seeing it in the eyes of cancer patients who really had something to be concerned about. The subject I'm talking about is the wounded healer, and we are all potentially wounded healers. The struggle is with the wound itself. The gift is a resonance that that wound allows with other people who have similar wounds. It is a form of genius.

In modern Western culture, we've turned the word genius. You get images of Albert Einstein and other extraordinary beings, but the original word genius in ancient Greece referred to something different. It referred to that genius that we all have, that thing itself, that predisposition that we are here for. For me, it was a resonance with abandonment that allowed me to understand my usefulness with other people who were going through the same thing. If you can get a handle on what your essential wound is, you can redeem it as a gift by being useful to other people who have the same wound, by being there for them in a way that allows you to understand what they're going through. What a gift!

Shanti went from 1974 to 1981, taking care of people with AIDS first at UCSF and then in the community. We set up in the community, and we were independent and have been ever since, independent of any other bureaucracy anywhere. For years, we did good work. We had wonderful people, people like the people who are doing work now, but with cancer patients until 1981, when I started getting some calls from physician colleagues of mine. It was very rare that I would get calls from physician colleagues. Usually the patients would call and ask for a volunteer to provide emotional support or practical support, but in '81 something strange was happening. The docs were calling me. They said, "Something is going on. We don't know what it is." They called it, at the time, gay cancer. You remember the history. There was an urgency around it. They would ask me if we had had any increase in the number of gay patients who were calling Shanti. They wanted to know. I said, "As a matter of fact, now that you mention it, yes. We're seeing more gay men than we've ever seen before. What do you make of it?" They said—and it wasn't very heartening—"We don't know."

You don't know what the illness is? It's gay cancer, but what is it really? We don't know. Then it became GRID, and then it became AIDS. Then we were in the middle of an apocalyptic challenge, the likes of which none of us were prepared for, ever saw before, understood, understood the mode of transmission. I had to stand up in front of several hundred Shanti volunteers who had come on board. Put yourself in this situation, sitting here, looking at several hundred volunteers who had come on board to be volunteers for cancer patients. That's why they volunteered. I had to tell them that we were switching our constituency. We were no longer going to take care of only cancer patients. At the beginning we were going to do both. Then we were going to phase out our work with cancer patients and delegate it to other agencies that, fortunately, existed. We never abandoned a single cancer patient that we took care of. I know that for a fact. It was one of my battle cries at the time. We were going to turn our attention to men—we thought it was all men at that point—with this new disease.

Make yourself a light, I kept thinking. In the Buddhist tradition, when we think of light, we think of a bird with two wings. The wings are wisdom and compassion. One without

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the other—you can't fly with one wing. It doesn't even look right. Wisdom and compassion.

We were short on wisdom at the time, except we knew enough to be there. Compassion we understood. At least we thought we understood. We knew we were not going to abandon people who were in the midst of a plague and who were suffering to a degree that was unimaginable to us. We didn't even know the mode of transmission at the time. I had to say to those several hundred volunteers, "You can leave if you wish, because you signed on for a cancer project, but if you want to stay, here's what the reality is." Nobody left. I thought it was peer pressure. Nobody wanted to be the first person out the door.

In the weeks and months that followed, virtually nobody left, and we got more and more new volunteers, an enormous tribute to the gay community in this city and other cities. People came. They volunteered, even in the midst of those conditions where we didn't know mode of transmissions. People at SF General and elsewhere were wearing spacesuits because they didn't want to touch people, spacesuits that I remember from Apollo IX. I mean, I knew spacesuits. I knew what I was looking at. Yet people came to volunteer. This is heroism at a very high level. Make yourself a light. It kept going through my mind.

Then I came across this quote from James Baldwin, a great writer who should not be forgotten. Baldwin said, "The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out." The danger was that the light might go out. In that quote came the antidote, the secret, so to speak. "The moment we cease to hold each other"—so we must hold each other. "The moment we break faith with one another"—we must not break faith with one another. "The sea engulfs us and the light goes out." We must not let the light go out. That was the Buddhist caution, as well. Make yourself a light. Baldwin knew it.

We had to dig deeper into this notion of the wounded healer because we wanted our volunteers to understand what aptitudes they might have. We're talking about regular people, you and me, who had not had a long history of taking care of people in the middle of an apocalypse. What is it that you can say to people that will give them confidence that what they are offering is useful?

If you show people what the essential wound is, if we were having lunch together one-on-one, and we were talking about it and you asked me about mine and I asked you about yours, in terms of what that essential wound was, and if you could identify it—I was not listened to as a child; I was rejected as a child; I was—whatever yours is. In my case, abandoned. Was I really abandoned? I wasn't really abandoned. I had two parents who had a sick child whom they were extremely worried about. He and I are good friends now. We mostly got over it, 70 years later. It takes a while. Be careful of any psychotherapeutic or spiritual endeavor that has ten sessions attached to it. It takes a while.

If you can teach people that they have an innate form of genius that is specifically related to finding that wound, then asking the question, what gift does that wound afford? What group of people might I serve in this world, compassionately? What person might I serve in this world? You don't have to start a project. It could be your best friend. It could be whoever's going through rough stuff right now in your life. What resonance might I have with that person that is sourced in that wound? What is that wound calling me to do? It called me to found Shanti and to be involved with Shanti for four decades now.

What are the characteristics of the wounded healer? I learned slowly in working with the closest people in my world. If you've ever taken care of the closest people in your world, when they were going through rough stuff, often the opportunity for wisdom comes in those relationships if we're open to them. My dad was diagnosed with liver cancer in 1990. Now my real challenge began as a wounded healer. I was taking care of my own father. I was his primary caregiver, although my mother did her job, my brother did his job. But since it was my field of expertise, so to speak, everybody looked at me as if I had sequence. I knew how to make it work. I knew how to make people okay. I was the golden boy grown up now. I was supposed to take care of my dad.

I was in midlife then, at the height of my powers. I was going to research everything on liver cancer I could, and I was going to really make sure that my dad had access to everything. This was a time when a book called *Love, Medicine and Miracles* had come out, by Bernie Siegel, a surgeon on the East Coast. He interviewed exceptional patients, people who had bucked the odds, people who had survived when the prognosis suggested that there was no chance. They made it. He interviewed many of them, and he produced this video tape of these exceptional patients talking about how they did it. I thought, "Ah ha!" This is what I'm going to get for my dad. I got a copy of the tape and I went over to my dad's house. We sat in recliner chairs, parallel recliner chairs, looking at the television. I was serious. Good old dad was going to have access to the best I could possibly supply. I popped in the videotape. It started with these talking heads, exceptional patients who had bucked the odds. I was going to get interested in this, and I was sure my father would because he was up against it. I looked over a moment or two later, and he was sleeping.

I quickly thought through all the possible reasons why he would fall asleep in the middle of an intervention of this magnitude. I thought, look, he probably doesn't get a lot of sleep at night and the recliner's kind of back and it looks kind of comfortable. I woke him up and I said, "Dad, this is important. This is what I told you about. Remember? The patients who were supposed to die but didn't?" He said, "Oh. Oh, yeah. Okay." We sat up. We sat up in our recliners and we were going to look at it for another couple minutes.

We were looking at the tape, and he's out cold again. It happened three times and finally I said, "Dad, what is going on here?" He was quiet. He looked down. Probably felt like he failed again. Then he started smiling and he looked at me. In a voice quite unlike any other voice I ever heard from him, a voice that was clear and resonant and confident, a voice that came from far away, a voice from his soul, he said, to me, "Charlie, I love you." Nobody in my life before or since has ever said I love you as convincingly as that. Nobody. I've had a few I loves you's in my life, but not like that. That came from some far away place, some level of authenticity that I never knew was in him. I knew he loved me, but it's not like he said it very much, if at all.

Love heals. On the invisible chalkboard I write, "Love heals." One of the characteristics of the wounded healer is the knowledge that love heals. It doesn't always cure. There's a difference between healing and curing. You can heal spiritually. You can heal emotionally. You can heal psychologically and socially, even if you don't heal physically. Whatever it was, whatever that glitch in our relationship had been, whatever that separation had been, his inability to say I love you, my inability to initiate an I love you kind of connection, whatever that was disappeared in that moment, and it was a backlog of I love you's from then until he died. Love heals.

Nineteen years later I had the opportunity to take care of my mother when she was dying. A different challenge. I don't know if you can name the person in the world with whom you have the most conflicted relationship. Imagine yourself as the primary caregiver of that person in their dying time. Imagine it taking place over a period of months and years. It was the hardest thing I ever did, easily. We had our wonderful moments and we had our conflicts. She was a complicated woman, dear, sweet, nasty, manipulative, all of the above. I was not about to abandon my own mother in her time of need. At one point, she looked at me and she said, "You know how I want to spend the rest of my time?" I said, "No, Mom, how do you want to spend the rest of your time?" She said, "I want to be a published author." She was 92. I said, "How are we going to make that happen?" She said, "I don't know. You've published books. You tell me." That's my mother. I said, "Have you written anything?" She said, "As a matter of fact, I have." She showed me two manuscripts, children's stories. She was an elementary school teacher and she wrote children's stories. I read both. They both were decent. They were pretty good. We did some editorial work and now, in this era of self-publishing, you and I can publish whatever we want and get it out in beautiful bound editions. She became a published author, published four books between 92 and 94, and was happy for a time, until she told me one day how frightened she was.

I said, "Why are you frightened?" She said, "I don't know where I'm going." Then there was this pregnant pause. She looked at me. I said, "Mom, are you asking me to tell you where you're going?" She said, "Yeah. It's your field of expertise. Tell me where I'm going." If it had been in the form of a joke, it would've actually been easier to deal with, but she was serious about it. I said, "Well, different traditions have different ideas. Would it be useful to go over what some of those ideas are?" She said, "Yeah." We went over a few.

In the final analysis, I had to say to her, "Mom, I don't know. I don't know." Not knowing: aptitude two of the wounded healer, not knowing, comfort with not knowing. Or, if not comfort, at least an ease with not knowing. Love heals. Not knowing.

Can we back off this tendency to be an expert? We see it so often. I teach at all the Shanti trainings of the new volunteers. I've been doing this for forty years. There's one coming up next week. It's amazing how young some of the volunteers are now. The older I get, the younger they get. I have to drill this message, it seems, that it's not about pretending that you're a therapist. It's not about pretending that you're a holy man. It's not about pretending anything. It's a comfort with not knowing, and there are so many things we don't know.

I took care of my best friend when he was dying, my closest friend. The world understands caring for a parent or a child or a partner. I don't know that the world understands all that well caring for a best friend. I think the gay world understands it fairly well, by and large, but I think the larger society doesn't understand how you can be rocked to the core. The Bay Area's a bit different. I think there are more people who are interested in self-inquiry around here than in many other parts of the world. There are other places that are like this, but I've traveled an awful lot. It's easy to have your perception skewed by living in the Bay Area and thinking that everybody's interested in Buddhism, of course. You're not interested in Buddhism? You're a heathen! There are places where people don't even know there's an inner world and wouldn't even know it if they tripped over it. That's not a criticism. That's just a cultural difference and geographical difference.

I took care of my best friend when he was dying. We were very close, good buddies. He was a very well-known psychotherapist, psychoanalyst, in this area. He was a member of the Psychoanalytic Institute, a professor at Berkeley. Bright guy. Wonderful guy. If you know anything about psychoanalysis, the image you might have, the Freudian image that you might have, is of the patient lying on a couch and the analyst sitting behind. The patient talks and the analyst listens and hardly says anything. That's pretty close to the truth, I think. The basic assumption that this man had,

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this good friend, was that the problem lay in the head of the patient. That's what they all believe. The problem lies in the head of the patient. He grew up with that. He was good at it, too. He knew chapter and verse. He was very diligent. Now he was dying of multiple myeloma, a form of cancer that you don't want to get.

When he was dying, he was going in and out of waking state consciousness. I used to think of it as deep sea diving. People would close their eyes and they'd be asleep and they'd be out of it because of drugs and illness and just overall systemic fatigue. Every once in a while, the eyes would open and they'd look around and realize that I was still there. Well, he was going in and out of waking state consciousness. Rico was his name.

Rico was going in and out of waking state consciousness, and at one point he woke up and he had this absolutely beatific look on his face that I'd never seen before. It was a look of discovery, a childlike discovery. He said, "Relationships. It's all about relationships." This was the man who thought the problem lay only in the head of the patient, and now, two days, less than two days before his death, he got that it was all about relationships.

What could I do except to sit and nod and say, "Yeah," and take his hand and say, "It's all about relationships." Bearing witness. I had no great insight to offer in response to his insight. His insight was the thing itself. It was all about relationships. It was all about relationships and all I could do was to bear witness. The poet says it best, "He also serves who only stands and waits." To just sit and be there is enough. You are enough. You, your presence, is enough.

The three things that I think are most essential in the life of the wounded healer: the knowledge that love heals, a comfort with not knowing, and the awareness that bearing witness is enough.

Freud made a very interesting observation. He said, "Every time I thought I'd discovered something, I found out a poet had been there before me." I think it's true.

Here's a poem called "A Sleep of Prisoners" by Christopher Fry.

The human heart can go the lengths of God...

Dark and cold we may be, but this
Is no winter now. The frozen misery
Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.

Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul men ever took.

Affairs are now soul size.

The enterprise is exploration into God.

Where are you making for? It takes
So many thousand years to wake...

But will you wake, for pity's sake?

Will we wake for pity's sake?

I kind of joked before about how young the Shanti volunteers look to me, but they actually are young. Most of them are in their 20s. They come to the training because they want skills. If you were going to volunteer at Shanti or at anywhere and you were going to care for people who are up against it, you'd want skills. Say you felt long on enthusiasm but short on knowing, you might say, "Please teach me something that will help me do this work." It's interesting how the most important things I have to teach in that context and in general are human aptitudes, human capacities. It's not specific to the work at all. It's specific to being the kind of person we would like to be in the world. Three things: listening from the heart, holding the other person as if they were the focus of a meditation; speaking from the heart, speaking from direct experience, your own story and its truths; and acting from the heart, doing what you do in service to the other person, for their benefit, and asking when you're not sure. Listening from the heart. Speaking from the heart. Acting from the heart. Each of those is an aptitude that can be cultivated. You can get better and better at each of these. They can become so much a part of who you are that you don't even think of them as skills anymore. You think of them the way accomplished artists think of their artistry.

When great artists do what they do, dancers, painters, singers, musicians, those involved in oratory, when they do what they do, they don't think of step one, step two, then do this, then do that. It becomes part of who they are. If you had to pick one, and this is for the new volunteers and for any other new volunteers who are interested, pick listening from the heart. Get great at listening from the heart.

People know when you are there. They know when your presence is real. They know when you're attending fully. Seventy to ninety percent of the information we send to one another is sent non-verbally. People will know if you are listening from the heart, or they'll know whether you're looking at your watch and wondering about lunch or who the cute guy is down the block. They'll know.

I'll finish with this observation. I just finished writing a memoir. Quite an interesting challenge, memoirs. Ego says this and soul says that, and other voices say what they say and you wonder, "Whose voice is that?" I think there's sort of a convention with many memoirs, not all, that you put a quote up front. I'll leave you with the quote that I chose for the memoir up front. I chose the James Baldwin quote that I mentioned earlier, "The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out."

If we follow the Buddha's instruction, "Make yourself a light," we, by definition, make ourselves that light that prevents the illumination from going out. ■