

Tracking the Footprints of Invisible Monsters

raising three daughters in the wilds of Los Angeles. I had been hurt as a child when I discovered that others saw my dark body as ugly. And as I aged and moved from romantic relationships with men, I lived in fear of being annihilated for taking a woman as a lover and partner in life. I had grown bound to feelings of injustice, rage, and resentment. I held my life tight in my chest, and my body ached with its pain for many years. Depression, unhealthy relationships, dependency on substances to numb the pain, and thoughts of suicide were my responses to the tension. I felt tension between what was imposed upon me and the true nature of life in all of its beauty and perfection. So how does someone who has experienced deep hatred, from within as well as without, become Zenju, Complete Tenderness—a liberated tenderness that is not a wound but complete liberation from the rage that hatred breeds?

I listened to Zen teachers address suffering with Buddha's teachings. I listened for what might help me to face rage and to develop a liberated tenderness. Some suggested that if I "just dropped the labels" I would "be liberated." Some said, "We are delusional; there is no self." Others said, "We are attached to some idea of ourselves." If I could "just let go of being this and that, my life would be freed from pain." I thought for a time that perhaps I was holding on to my identity too tightly. Perhaps, I thought, if I "empty" my mind the pain in my heart will dissolve. What I found is that flat, simplified, and diluted ideas could not shake me from

The Way of Tenderness

my pain. I needed to bring the validity of my unique, individual, and collective background to the practice of Dharma. "I am not invisible!" I wanted to shout.

Although my teachers taught us the absolute truths of Zen practice, they seemed to negate identity without considering the implications that identity can have for oppressed groups of people. The critique of identity overlooks the emotional, empowering, and positive effects of identity on those who are socially and politically objectified. My own powerful sense of identity, of connection with my ancestors, developed in the Civil Rights and Pan-African movements of the '70s, came through identifying with black people. Leah Kalmanson, a Drake University professor, philosopher, and author, has written, "If this emotional dimension is not brought to the foreground, it threatens to sabotage the practice of identity critique by preventing a person from taking a hard and honest look at herself."¹ Dogen Zenji, founder of the Soto Zen tradition, said, "To study the Buddha way is to study the self." In order to forget the self, we must study it. We must look at the identities that the self is emotionally attached to. This is a life-long practice because identity is ever evolving.

•➤ How could I become complete tenderness? Eventually, I accepted that there was no easy answer. I would have to unearth complete tenderness in the midst of the hatred and rage that I felt. So, while participating in a silent seven-day meditation retreat, I began to practice

leaving everything—or at least leaving my obsession with things: leaving my aspirations, hopes, dreams, identity, all notions of being this or that, of doing this, that, and the other. I was to say goodbye to these things for seven days. I sat for hours simply breathing in and out. As things came up I would say goodbye, bowing dutifully at the parade of passing thoughts.

During one of the hours of meditation, my deceased mother came to mind. It was as if she had come to silently sit with me. I could not tell her to leave. I immediately began to cry. In that moment I couldn't tell the reason for the tears. It was an upsurge of old pain, harbored from the time of our difficult relationship. How could I be tender given my violent past with her?

I kept breathing and crying, sitting with this vision of my mother. Her face was sweet. She was smiling. She did not appear as the rage-filled, yet beautiful, person that had frightened me when I was young. I opened my eyes to wipe the water pooling between my eyelids. I looked around the room and realized that I had separated from everyone in the room for that moment. I felt they could not possibly be sitting with as much pain as I was. They seemed to be calm and composed. I was not like them. I was a volcano waiting to erupt. I recognized in that moment that old wounds had kept me from fully engaging with folks my entire life. I could be polite or kind to others, but I was unwilling and afraid to experience the wounded tenderness that would have eventually opened into a

complete and liberated tenderness. I was unwilling to allow others completely into my heart.

I cried more as the room seemed to darken, and I fused with the darkness. We were all in the dark. In the darkness I was a part of everyone and everything, whether I accepted it or not. Everyone else in the room was as invisible as I was. "I am invisible," I whispered to myself.

In the dark I recognized life without all of the things we impose upon it, and upon each other. As I continued to breathe, I felt a warm breeze near my face, but it was cold and raining outside and there were no open windows or doors. I thought perhaps it was the spirit of my mother. And then I thought, no, perhaps this is how complete tenderness feels when it arrives, having sloughed off rage. When I turned toward the hurt in the silence, I entered a kind of tenderness that was not sore, not wounded, but rather powerfully present. I sat up straight. The silence had tilled hard ground into soft soil. I sunk deep into the soft ground, where the source of life was revealed—wordless, nameless, without form, completely indescribable. And then—I dare to say it—I was "completely tender."

To ease below the surface of my embodiment—my face, my flesh, my skin, my name—I needed to first see it reflected back at me. I had to look at it long enough to see the soft patches, the openings, the soft, tender ground. Would I survive the namelessness—without my body, without my heart—while engaging the beau-