

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 45

J. Scharfen
August 7, 2021



Bishop Vasa never responded to my second letter, but then again, neither was I fired. The school began to suffer a decline in enrollment as parents felt the community become increasingly fundamental and less welcoming to non-Catholics, who on the average made up approximately 40% of our enrollment. The faculty existed in a state of constant agitation, which in turn, affected personal relations and harmony within and between the various departments. And yet, teachers performed well, worked long hours, and cared intensely for their students. They volunteered to chaperone dances, sporting events, and student retreats. Many of the teachers also coached, which entails more long hours for very little money. Thus, despite the

counterproductive influence of the bishop and his chaplain, the faculty sustained the spiritual heart of Newman through sacrifice, service, and a genuine love for their pupils.

It has been my experience that teachers always search for opportunities to better serve their students. In that spirit, Dr. Maryanne Berry suggested we offer "Intersession" classes and teach anything that might inspire us. As a result, we began to offer a short window of time at the conclusion of Christmas break before the beginning of spring semester, for students to participate in these more creative sessions. Kids did everything from astronomy and snow camping to outdoor photography and dramatic arts. I taught a "Zen and Japanese Poetry" class.

I drew my readings for the intersession from Daisetz Suzuki's "Zen and Japanese Culture," Shunryu Suzuki's "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind," Katsuki Sekida's "Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy," and selected poems from Basho, Issa, and my favorite, Saigyō. We would meditate at the beginning of the class, spend some time with the readings, write our own haiku, then close the session with meditation. At least one of the days would be spent hiking in a local state park.

The class proved to be quite popular, so much so, I offered to repeat it at the close of the school year.

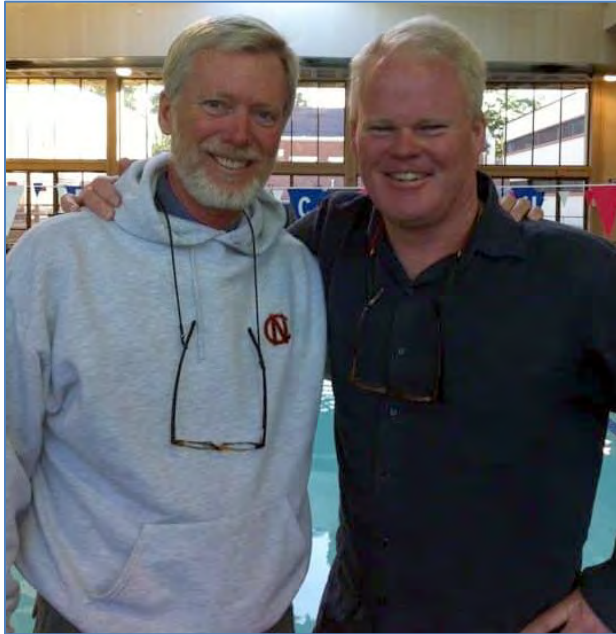
And this is when a problem arose. For some reason, the administration assigned me a different classroom for my summer session, which would have been fine, except it was the chaplain's. When he heard, he strenuously objected to Zen meditation being practiced in his space, on the grounds that I was surreptitiously teaching Buddhism and introducing my students to pagan and demonic traditions. I suspect the administrators purposely made these arrangements to tweak the hapless and unpopular chaplain. I immediately offered to seek another space but felt compelled to write him a short explanatory letter.

Padre,

Out of consideration for your wishes, I will not teach Zen Meditation in your classroom. However, I feel compelled to provide you with some background and my perspective on the subject.

I was introduced to Zen by the Abbot of Holy Cross Abbey, Fr. Edward McCorkell, in 1972 at the age of 20. I have meditated continuously for 42 years and it has proven to be a spiritually fruitful discipline. When I first began meditating, one of the priests at the abbey, Fr. Matthew, approached me and warned

me that, if I continued to practice Zen, I would surely be possessed. Fr. Matthew had close ties to the fundamentalist community and was quite suspicious of the Vatican II reforms. His fear, and it was profound, was contagious and I began to wrestle with doubt. I suspended my Zen practice. As I have always done in my life of faith, I brought my doubt and anxiety to prayer. As I prayed, the fear communicated to me by Matthew gradually evaporated. I realized, though incompletely at the time, that what Father Edward had taught me was true: Zen meditation was a physical and mental discipline easily transferable to any religion. So I renewed my practice with fresh enthusiasm.



As a rule, I do not often share my inner life with others but, since you have raised the issue, I will make an exception. My practice of Zen led me to deeper realms of contemplative experience. I came to understand that meditation is external, and contemplation, internal. I began to experience, in the stillness of my heart, a deepening relationship with the heart of Jesus that became increasingly intimate. In Lectio Divina, as I ruminated on scripture, the Word of God would come to life for me. As I prayed over scripture, I often felt profound sorrow and understood the heart of God. Throughout my stay in the abbey, I reported my mystical experiences to both Fr. Edward and the Prior, Fr. William. Through their guidance, I learned not to seek after these experiences but to focus on the love of God and charity to others--or caritas the great Cistercian virtue. Often, Fr. William and I would meet at his hermitage for

morning Mass. During those moments, meditating after the eucharist, we would have a shared mystical experience with Jesus. I cannot explain it but to say, in the stillness of that moment, the world of heart would open up and Jesus, William and I would dwell there. Years later, I was meditating one morning, and I had the experience once again of Fr. William's presence. I later called the abbey and learned that he had passed on. From this, I learned that the bond of heart we form in Christ transcends death. In the stillness of the early morning, I know the reality of the communion of saints.

Most importantly, though, my practice of meditation has taught me empathy and led me to compassion and Christian love. As promised by John in his first letter, perfect love casts out fear. I have learned to follow that love and to be suspicious of impulses arising from fear. Throughout my life, I have been challenged to make that choice: do I erect boundaries between myself and others, rooted in fear, or do I follow the course of radical openness to the Holy Spirit as I experience the presence of God in others? Over the last several years, I have experienced that challenge in ways I could never have anticipated. I know that, till the moment I stop breathing, that challenge will remain before me. Thomas Merton addresses this in his *Seeds of Contemplation*, he cautions us regarding the "theology of the devil." If I had listened to Fr. Matthew, 42 years ago, I would have succumbed to that ersatz theology and deprived myself of a rich course of spiritual growth and experience.

As one brother to another, don't be afraid.

In Christ,

J.