



PUNK PALACE IN THE MOONLIGHT

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ABSTRACT

The adventure with my son in Glasgow's drug world showed me how interconnected I was with a world I scarcely knew. It also brought home to me that when all else fails, there is still mindfulness - and it can work miracles. The story of Punk Palace has squalor, despair and alienation woven into it. Yet, I also found humor, goodness, and wonderful surprises. I provide a meditation for "Young People Who Are Lost", that I invite the reader to do. The Divinity we quest for is found in places such as Punk Palace. It is difficult to come home to our true nature without discovering, from firsthand experience, how interconnected we are with everything. If we can stop discriminating against others, we can know wholeness. This is a life experience, not an intellectual construct.

Introduction

How do we create Heaven on Earth? Is this something we wait for, to come down from on high when the time is ripe? Or are there seeds of Heaven within us, and it is up to us to create the conditions for Heaven to emerge? I find the second option more appealing, as I am not very good at waiting for things to come down from on high, and I do believe we have it all within ourselves. We simply need to find a way to experience the Dinity within; whether we call it God, Buddha Consciousness, Krishna Consciousness, Christ Consciousness, the Creator or by any of the other expressions for the same experience. We are all searching for the way home to our true selves, to truly reflect and manifest the Divinity we quest for.

Realistically, however, we have internal work to do, unresolved issues and traumas to surface and clear. This necessary part of our journey refines our consciousness, so that the experience of our selves begins to touch the Divinity that

inherently dwells within. When we touch that Divinity, however fleetingly, we are then able to recognize Divinity within others – no matter how the others may first appear to us. The fundamental step is one of taking responsibility for everyone and everything that we interconnect with. It is not possible to rush around the world and fix everything - that is not it. “It,” is that we communicate and extend the consciousness of responsibility to all we meet. This produces transformation in the most unexpected ways. It is a step into being a true parent to the world. This is quite a responsibility, yet a surprisingly easy one, as it reflects back to us our true nature as human beings. When we realize that taking responsibility from a full heart also generates love, then the task of being a parent to the world may not appear to be so daunting.

Instead of restricting ourselves to our home as the world, we take the step so that the world becomes our home. The world becomes our ashram. Gandhi provided an example of this. To liberate India he took responsibility for everyone – Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Christians and also the British colonialists. His vision was for Britain to leave as a friend to India, and this vision was shared by the last Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten. Gandhi’s words, inscribed on a plaque in his mausoleum in India, demonstrate his generosity and sense of responsibility for all:

I came to the conclusion long ago, after prayerful search and study and discussion with as many people as I could meet, that all religions were true and also that all had some error in them, and that whilst I hold by my own, I should hold others as dear as Hinduism, from which it logically follows that we should hold them as dear as our nearest kith and kin and that we should make no distinction between them.

Now we begin to see that there is more than responsibility in our initial recipe of creating Heaven on Earth. We need a dash of vision, a sprinkling of inspiration, a total lack of judgement, well stirred with a generous mix of surrender – to go along with the initial ingredient of responsibility. The recipe for being a parent to the world is almost complete. The extra ingredient is that we stand for the wisdom that assumes there is Divinity in our true nature, and indeed that such Divinity is the basis of our true nature. So we begin a creative process of supporting everyone to take responsibility for themselves, their communities, nation and planet.

This is how we create Heaven on Earth. First of all we have to create a space within ourselves to find a deep silence, so that we may touch the seeds of our true nature.

From there it becomes apparent how to create Heaven on Earth, as everything is then created from the consciousness of Divinity. This is available to us right now. It simply needs our commitment to be responsible for everyone, and to bring all people we connect with, to this awareness. It is through the window of commitment to responsibility that we create a different world. Without this, it is not possible to create Heaven on Earth, and we flounder around in uncertainty and doubt. Furthermore, our lack of responsibility creates entropy and rundown. Heaven is the energy of Responsibility, Truth and Love and will find different forms and structures to express through. Yet it all starts with me, with you – creating Heaven inside ourselves by embracing our Divinity, our true nature, and sharing that with everyone.

Drugs and Glasgow

These thoughts and lessons were brought home to me in a totally unexpected way. My preparation for Zen Master Thich Nhat Hahn's 1996 retreat on "The Heart of the Buddha," at Plum Village in France, was not at all what I had anticipated. My eighteen year old son, Alexander, was studying at the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland, and from our transatlantic phone calls that summer, I knew he was in trouble with drugs. I arranged to spend time with him in Glasgow prior to the Buddhist retreat. As we had not seen one another for a few years this was overdue, particularly as he was the child of a divorce that had spanned two continents. At Glasgow airport I scarcely recognized him, as he now sported a multi-colored punk hairstyle with all the required black accoutrements. Yet he recognized me with a warm hug and a big smile.

On arriving at his dwelling, I knew something was dreadfully amiss. There were no books or art materials in his room. His large rambling apartment was occupied, as I later discovered, by a population known as "The Tribe" - a shifting population of punks, drug users and dealers. As I sat in Alexander's squalid room wondering about him, he left for a while. There was such an atmosphere of decay and hopelessness that for a moment I felt utter despair for Alexander - I did not know what to do. So I went into my own deep silence and meditated, in order that I could be clear and calm. I hoped this would enable my actions to come from the consciousness of my heart. The despair

slowly receded, and along with it my judgement of his living space. I did, however, ask myself one question – “ How can I create Heaven in this situation?”

Alexander returned several hours later, very badly beaten up from a drug deal that had gone wrong. He told me that he had lied to me over the phone, that his requests for financial support to complete summer art courses were untrue; he needed the money as he had got in deep with Glasgow's world of drug dealing. I listened to him very quietly, stayed calm and washed his re-arranged face, and learned that he could easily have been killed this night. He had not fought back when he was beaten up, surrounded by dealers and their thugs, all of whom were armed. He simply took the beating. Perhaps the first smart move he had made for a while, as it certainly contributed to his remaining alive. I also had to be very clear about the moves I had to make, the consciousness I had to occupy, in order to turn this hell into heaven. We went for a walk to Kelvingrove Park that was nearby and once there I introduced him to walking meditation, to trust the earth to absorb his pain and distress on each out-breath. As he became calmer I told him that perhaps the beating was fortuitous, a stark wake-up call about the life he had chosen, and that the timing of it happened to coincide with my visit! Then I offered him two alternatives. The first was \$1000.00 in cash so he could enter the drug dealing world in a bigger way, and likely end up dead within six months. The second alternative was to spend the next few weeks living mindfully with me; to see the difference as we endeavored to create a different lifeway for him. At this time both alternatives were equal in my mind - I did not discriminate between them. He refused the money, so I will never know how much bluff and shock tactics I had loaded into the first alternative. But that was no longer important as a magical time of living mindfully unfolded between my son and I.

I had Thay Nhat Hanh's book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* with me. We read most of it together and did some of the exercises. I invited Alexander to join me in walking and sitting meditation, to enjoy silence during meal times and to use his breath with awareness. I focused a lot of the breathing exercises on martial arts training and on Qi-Gong exercises. I taught him to co-ordinate body movement with in and out-breaths; and also how to defend himself. His comments were frequently very funny - "Hey Dad, this breath stuff is cool," "I'm getting a buzz off breathing!" I pointed out the obvious;

that the breath "stuff" was both cheaper and safer than dealing drugs! We discovered that we enjoyed one another's company and humor.

An important turning point for Alexander was the fact that I did not drink alcohol during our time together. He had memories, when he was younger, of my drinking too much. During a time of great unhappiness I had used alcohol to cover up the pain and disappointment of a failing marriage, and everyone in my family suffered from the impending marital breakdown and divorce. That I no longer consumed alcohol astonished him, and I realized later how important it was for him to see this. I also shared with him my own vulnerabilities and struggles, and how step by step I had come to choose a way of life distinguished by a commitment to meditation, but that it had taken many false starts to get there. He liked that!

Our working meditations included simple things like mindful laundry and cleaning up his living space. These actions so impressed the other residents of "Punk Palace" (as I had aptly named the place), that they cleaned a bathroom for me to use. I was convinced that their bathrooms and kitchen contained alien life forms and types of mould unknown to science! I would walk each morning to a nearby swimming pool for a swim and a shower and return with healthy breakfasts for "The Tribe" - fruit, juice, cereal and honey - types of food on their "unknown to recent experience" list. One morning I returned to find two members of "The Tribe" cleaning out a bathroom and they proudly announced that I did not have to go for such early morning swims anymore. I thanked them for their consideration.

Each evening all the residents would gather in one of the five bedrooms of "Punk Palace" and sit, listen to extreme heavy metal, do drugs and talk. Alexander had given me a commitment not to take drugs during the time I was there - so he would smoke cigarettes, and I would simply listen to these young people as they poured out their lives. I had no judgment about them, and for the short time I was in their midst they became my family. No other parent had ever visited them, let alone lived with them. I chose to be with them as my own family.

Several of the punks asked me one night if I would teach them walking meditation - they had obviously been talking with Alexander about it. I said I would be happy to, as long as they remained drug free for two days. They agreed, which was quite an

undertaking for them, and they did comply with it. Two evenings later there ensued a totally hilarious adventure. At midnight, my punk friends broke into a private park. They found a tree outside the park, boosted me up it and instructed me to crawl along a branch that overhung the park. They just bounced over the fifteen-foot high railings, as they were much more agile, then they caught me as I dropped from the branch. Once we had picked ourselves up and stopped laughing, I introduced them to the basics of walking meditation, slowing them right down with breath and guiding them to release their distress into the earth. I still smile to myself when I remember this scene: my punk friends and I walking barefoot in the grass of one of Glasgow's finest private parks, breathing slowly and walking mindfully for over two hours. We talked about it afterwards and at the next evening "sit". Drugs were still being used, but less so.

My new friends had shown great consideration for me. When they knew I was in "Punk Palace" they would turn their heavy metal music down, as they knew I could not bear it. Also, no drug deals went down while I was there, and the kitchen even got a cursory clean. They said they were very aware of my presence in the "Palace". I thanked them and quietly said that I was very much aware of them, of every acid hit, of every cocaine use, of every moment of their despair and anger, as I felt the energy of it all in my body. A thundering silence ensued that dragged on for ages. One of the girls started to cry and one of the boys too; yet it was a good silence, for it had healing and heart in it. I ended the silence by very softly thanking them for their kindness and consideration towards me and told them that I was there for all of them. I then left them to talk amongst themselves. They had listened to my stories of wilderness adventures in Canada, of my pet wolf and how it felt to swim with dolphins. They instinctively knew for themselves how everything interconnected. They were simply lost. I spent time listening deeply to them and learned a great deal from my punk family about the angst of alienation amongst young people. I was there to provide counsel when asked, and always steered conversations around to the topic of taking responsibility in their lives.

They felt abandoned and marginalized, yet were so creative and intelligent. They talked openly, for they sensed that I had no judgement of them. I fed them with healthy food and counseled them in simple philosophy that related to their situation. The basic frustration for my punk family was the powerlessness they felt over their own lives, a

deep hopelessness they escaped from through drugs, pimping and dealing when necessary. Each time this would arise in our many talks and walks - mostly one on one – I referred to a fundamental equation. This was that power over one’s life came with taking responsibility. And so we talked of practical alternatives, their creative dreams and neglected dynamism. I also talked about my own struggles in life dealing with childhood sexual abuse that was buried in my unconscious mind for many years, as the events were too horrific for my conscious mind to handle. That was very much a point of connection, for each one of them had a history of abuse and neglect of one kind or another.

My work and focus with Alexander continued. Our working meditations involved practical measures that we prepared for with meditation. With Alexander, I met with his college tutors who had not seen him for six months. Alexander told them the truth of his activities and was surprised to discover that his tutors were fully supportive in providing guidance and tutorials for him to redo his first year courses. With his college counselor he voluntarily entered into drug and alcohol counseling and his bank manager was vastly amused at our joint meeting (no pun intended!). Alexander had been very creative with his bankcard and overdraft to finance his drug activities. I cleared his financial deficit, then asked Alexander to give me his bankcard. With a pair of scissors supplied by the bank manager I cut Alexander’s card up and instructed her to withdraw all overdraft privileges until she was satisfied that he could be responsible. Alexander's response was utter astonishment - "I don't believe you did that Dad!" Yet he told me later that he admired the firmness and clarity. I also enrolled him in a martial arts academy as he needed a safe place to leave his frustrations and anger. It was run by a rugged world kick-boxing champion who furthermore had a wonderful heart. I had sparred, many years ago, with one of his major Canadian opponents. I was impressed by the quality of his instruction, by the way he treated his students as an extended family, and also by the fact that his training sessions began and ended with meditation exercises.

The final step was to talk to the drug dealers. I met with some of them in Alexander's room at "Punk Palace". They were the toughest, most hardened young people I had ever met. Alexander's outstanding debts with them were cleared, and the message from me was quietly and firmly that Alexander was out of dealing and using.

The tension could be cut with a knife, as nobody is released from the world of drug dealing through such an announcement. I made myself breathe slowly in and out and extend love and compassion to them from my heart. After a time they too relaxed and had many questions about my martial arts background, which Alexander had no doubt exaggerated. I am not in Arnold Schwarzenegger's "Terminator" class at all, but they had the misguided impression I was. An impression, I should add, that I did nothing to correct! This was fine at the time, as it was the only common ground, apart from Alexander, that these hardened young people could connect to me with. I wove a web of stories and showed them some training drills and several quite deadly moves, eventually talked to them about the many martial arts experts with a base in healing and meditative practices. Not a seed that may get watered in their world, but at the time it was the best conversational piece I could come up with. The more I talked quietly and directly to them, the more did violence leave the room. In the end I was silent, and Alexander did the talking. When they left I knew they would leave Alexander alone, as there was that unspoken "honor" that sometimes arises in these situations, but their energy disturbed me.

It would be ideal to say that all of this did not really get to me but that would be untrue - it did. After one all night party at "Punk Palace" with acid hits flying and heavy metal ruling the air waves I got angry - really angry. Several sleepless nights did not help and although I knew Alexander was not using drugs, I was angry at his pattern of wasted opportunities and irresponsibility. I looked deeply into this anger and saw shades of the same patterns in my past. I did walking meditation to try and calm myself down, so I could respond rather than react. But it did not work. I was still angry. I got dressed and packed my bags at 6:00 a.m., found Alexander and asked him to walk me to the bus stop, as I was leaving. The shock and panic on his face was palpable, as the fear that I was walking out of his life showed up on his face. We walked in silence to the bus stop. Alexander insisted on carrying both my bags, which were much too heavy for him, but I let him do it anyway. Then I stopped, asked him to put the bags down and hugged him. I told him I loved him - we were both crying. Then I explained my anger. He told me the party was for me, but they all thought I was sleeping! I had to laugh at that one, and it did not matter if it was true or not. I made it clear to Alexander that I was there for him, but that I had limitations, and invited him to join me at the airport hotel for the next few

days to continue our mindfulness training together. The relief flooded into his face and being. He apologized for not thinking of me. I apologized for getting so angry with him, when I had suddenly and clearly seen into his life this past nine months and was upset by the wasted opportunities that irresponsibility brings. We both cried again.

That evening, after his kick boxing class, Alexander joined me at the airport hotel and our mindfulness training continued with an emphasis on life skills - how to budget finances, handle peer pressure, complete college assignments, how to investigate and do research etc. We meditated a lot together and continued the breath work with martial arts training - that really appealed to him - and once again we drew closer. Then I left for the Buddhist retreat with Thay Nhat Hanh in France. Alexander saw me off at the airport and the real test, both for him and for me, began. He had to choose how he wanted to walk through life, and I had to allow him the freedom to choose.

At Plum Village I shared this story with the Lower Hamlet sangha. My friend, Sr. Vendana, a Christian nun from India, asked the whole sangha to hold Alexander steady in their hearts and everyone did so in a deep and beautiful silence. I would ask the reader of this chapter to stop now, and take time to hold in their heart not just my son Alexander, but all young people who are lost. Please, dear reader would you do this now?

Meditation for Lost Young People

Would you hold all lost children close to your heart, and extend the energy of loving kindness to all of them wherever they may be? Please do this with me.

Sit quietly and breathe in to the heart center in the middle of your chest, and up to the crown. Pause for a moment. On the out-breath take the light of the universe, and of your heart, throughout your body from your crown to your toes. Continue to breathe in and out like this for several minutes until you settle into a steady calm. Once you feel calm:

On the in-breath say to yourself: I am aware of the suffering of lost children;
 On the out-breath say to yourself: I am calm enough to deal with this suffering.
 Continue to breathe in and out like this for ten breaths until you feel stable and solid.

IN-BREATH: AWARE
 OUT-BREATH: CALM

Once you feel stable and solid:

On the in-breath say to yourself: There is love and healing energy within me;

On the out-breath say to yourself: I extend this energy to all lost children.

Continue to breathe in and out like this for ten breaths until you feel an expansiveness and sense of interconnectedness within your being.

IN-BREATH: ENERGY OF HEALING

OUT-BREATH: EXTEND TO LOST CHILDREN.

Breathe in and out with this awareness and direction of healing energy for approximately 10 minutes. Then slowly open your eyes and consider if there are ways and means for you to help lost children in your home community.

During the Plum Village retreat my thoughts frequently turned to Alexander, yet I was calm and surprisingly confident, as I do believe that mindfulness brings about miracles. Two weeks later I received a wonderful letter from him. Here are some excerpts:

12 October 1996

Dear Dad,

I hope this letter finds you well and at peace. How is Plum Village, Thay Nhat Hanh and the early morning schedules? I know I'd be hard pushed to get up early for more than two days in a row.....

*If Plum Village is anything like I imagine it, it will look and feel amazingly beautiful and tranquil. One day I hope to have the opportunity to travel there and experience what it has to offer and hopefully bring whatever I have to it. However, right now and for the next few years I'll be busy with my studies ... I hope for you all the best and would like you to pass on a message to Thich for me. Tell him that what I have learned and discovered from your guidance, and the reading of Thich's letter to a brother monk written many years ago (*The Miracle of Mindfulness*); is that I have made the shift from a poisoned, lost and confused kid into manhood. Although I am still testing the waters in places, I have this overwhelming desire to better myself. I hold on to the words and example that are close at hand to guide me through the rough spots. Thank you both, Dad and Thich Nhat Hahn. I am very, very grateful.*

Lots of love

Alex

I was very happy. I shared the news with my friend Sr. Ani Lödro, a Tibetan Buddhist nun. She had earlier expressed to me a wish to present a tree to the Lower Hamlet, to commemorate the beautiful and aware death of her friend Kay. We agreed to join forces in this enterprise, so I could add a commemoration for my son's new life. We purchased an apricot tree from the nearby garden center at Bergerac, and of course it grew bigger than our immediate and particular concerns. It became a tree to honor the Third Refuge, a sangha-building tree that belonged to everybody. It was planted in Lower Hamlet and Thay Nhat Hanh graced the occasion with his presence, placing the first earth around the tree. The Lower Hamlet community, which was drawn from all over the world, gathered together for this tree planting ceremony. Each person placed earth around the apricot sapling and added their own heartfelt prayers as we committed this symbol of community to the earth. There were prayers for the starving children in the world, love for the planet, songs for world peace, guidance for our leaders to be loving and compassionate – and on it went in this vein. I was moved to tears by it all, as I was a privileged witness to the Plum Village sangha making a commitment to be parents to the world – each in their own beautiful way. A sangha that I thought of was "The Tribe" from "Punk Palace", and my prayer was for all of them to create the opportunity to walk mindfully through life.

I did not see any of them until a year later, as I was en route to India after the Plum Village retreat. I was amazed at the steps they had taken, the responsibility they had exercised in different ways. Without mercy, they all teased me about walking out of the party they had put on for me at Punk Palace! Alexander still had his fair share of difficulties with drugs, and sometimes it seemed to him like two steps backwards for one step forward. Yet he had a very clear picture of the alternatives, and knew that my support and love were there for him. There was one very notable exception. One of the boys had decided to remain with his lifestyle as a warning to his friends. If he stayed in the gutter, then his friends would not. There was nothing I could say to this, other than that I prayed that his example would become unnecessary. I do remember his eyes – they were so gentle and calm when he said this to me.

One of the most memorable occasions that I can bring to mind from this unexpected adventure in parenting, was when Alexander and I sat on the doorstep of "Punk Palace" watching the full moon rise above the city of Glasgow. We took turns composing lines of a poem to the moon and I cannot discern where he began and where I ended, which is perhaps just as it should be.

Punk Palace in the Moonlight

The moon a delicate mistress
veiled by fleeting clouds and mysteries
conceals that penetrating light of grace.

It makes the stars and galaxies dance.
The moon does this,
with all that is in me.

This gateway to boundless space
is the door to my troubles and joy,
For I am in the moon and stars
and they are in me.

We dance together
- Now Bright; Now Turbulent
Now Lost; Now Found -
Beyond sense or reason.

And the night sky casts movement and hues
to something I touch
with that in me.

The full harvest moon
rises from banks of pastel grey,
pacing existence
through the rhythms of our universe.

I dedicate this to Jamie - wherever you are.