To Call Myself Beloved
-- For David Webb

By Leah Harris

“And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.”
– Raymond Carver, “Last Fragment,” *All of Us: The Collected Poems*

The bell rang to signal the beginning of a forty-five minute sit. I listened as its sound rose high and clear through the meditation hall with its vast domed ceiling, until my ears could no longer perceive its tone. I adjusted my posture. Reached the crown of my head towards the sky, lifting and straightening my spine. Felt the weight of my body seated upon its cushion, the density of my hands resting on my thighs. Settled in to the familiar rhythm of my breath as it rose and fell through my lungs. This human body, breathing.

In July of 2004, I was twenty-eight, sitting my first intensive silent meditation retreat. I had flown all the way from my home in Washington, DC to this hippy-dippy place called Spirit Rock in Marin County, California for twelve hours of sitting and walking meditation per day. For seven days.


When my mind wandered, as minds do, it meandered over to my lie.

I had lied on the application to get into this retreat. I was not proud of it. That dreaded part where it asks about previous or current mental health conditions. It did not ask about a history of suicidality that I can recall. If it did, I surely would have answered “none” to that as well. I knew that if I was honest, they would have turned my application down. I did not want to explain or expose myself in this way, on an online form, where they cannot see my face, where

I once heard a teacher say that the entirety of the Buddha’s teachings can be distilled down to two subjects: suffering and the end of suffering. I knew about suffering. I knew it intimately. What I wanted was to begin to understand a way out of suffering that would not necessitate death at my own hand.

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Just six months before, if you had told me that I was going to go meditate for a week at some crunchy retreat center in California run by aging hippies, I would have laughed in your face. I hated anything I deemed as “New Age bullshit,” which definitely included meditation, yoga, and anything involving “vibrations.” All a navel-gazing waste of time, in my opinion.

It was an especially painful dark night of the soul that brought me to the Buddha’s feet.

I was beginning my life as an activist, organizing and speaking out for compassionate alternatives to a mental health system that is all too often punitive to people in pain, especially if that pain is suicidal pain. At the time, I was traveling around the country and connecting with all of these other survivor activists. I went from being someone who had my story narrated in medical records, in the language of damage and disorder, to reclaiming my narrative and telling my story on my own terms. In front of people! What was once my mess had become my message. There was a very exhilarating high to it all.

In late 2003, I was going to be speaking on a panel at a conference in Washington, DC. Liz, one of my fellow panelists and an acquaintance from activist work, arrived from out of town to stay with me for the weekend. When I opened the door, I could immediately tell that something wasn’t right. Her face was drawn. There were huge circles under her eyes. She looked like she had lost a lot of weight.

She spoke in a low, quiet monotone and wouldn’t meet my eye. She would disappear for long periods of time into my bathroom and then emerge with downcast eyes. Finally, I knocked on the door. She opened it a little, then all the way. I’ve been cutting myself, she confessed, showing me her arms. I want to die, she continued in a barely audible voice, telling me about a few of the ways she was thinking about ending her life.

I began to sweat. I was fourteen again and in my room, door locked, razor pilfered from my grandfather’s medicine cabinet. My grandmother, screaming at me to open the door. I couldn’t. The police, banging, banging on the door. The young cop’s disgusted eyes when I finally opened it. Why would you do that to yourself?

I didn’t call 911 on Liz. Couldn’t, wouldn’t bring the cops to the door. Behind her back, I called one of my fellow panelists and told him what was going on. He got ahold of her family. Picked her up, and made sure she got safely onto a plane back home.

When he arrived at my apartment to remove her, she finally looked me in the eye. A mixture of surprise and hatred, swirled with accusation. If the look could talk, it would say, you’re a hypocrite.

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1 For privacy purposes, her name has been changed.
That’s what I was saying to myself. *You’re a champion for the human rights of suicidal people, but someone who is suicidal right in your own home? You shut down. Kick her out. You’re a complete fraud.*

Today I know that my nervous system was overloaded with memories of unresolved trauma. Suicide is traumatic, and the responses of others can add more trauma still. Intellectually, I know I froze in a situation I wasn’t prepared to handle at the time. But deep inside, I loathed myself for how I responded. I crawled into a psychic hole of self-blame and recrimination. The world beyond my bed felt like an uninhabitable place.

In the midst of this rapidly spiraling shame-fueled depressive state, I was scheduled to give a talk at a conference in Charlottesville, Virginia, a few hours’ drive away. The talk was supposed to be about my lived experience as an attempt survivor. I considered cancelling. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

Before getting on the road, I pored through the audiobooks section at Politics and Prose, seeking something to distract. My eyes darted over novels, biographies, and then landed on a title that would have definitely fallen under my “New Age bullshit” category: *Creating True Peace* by this Vietnamese Zen Buddhist dude named Thich Nhat Hahn. But my hand shot out and selected it.

As I drove, I was mesmerized by the perspective of this extraordinary monk and activist. He talked about mindfulness meditation as a way for us to learn how to choose how we respond, rather than be ruled by our unconscious reactions. He talked about how people hurt one another out of their own unconscious pain. Something about his message lodged a crack in the wall of judgment I had built between myself and my own heart.

The incident with Liz was the mirror that showed me my shadow. How I had been expending tremendous amounts of energy trying to fix the world “out there,” while neglecting my own pain. Living this way caused me to shut down in the face of another’s suffering. To cause harm.

I knew I needed to try this mindfulness thing.

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Listening to a fifteen-minute guided meditation on a CD, sitting cross-legged on a pillow in my living room, I discovered for the first time that the breath is an anchor. A place to return to. A home inside of me that I never knew existed.

When I opened my eyes after that first fifteen-minute sit, the world was somehow different.

Please. I am not saying I was struck enlightened. Far from it. But through mindfulness practice, I discovered something within that a decade of traditional talk therapy had never unearthed. The Observer. Also known as “Witness Consciousness.” The part of my consciousness that can
notice what is happening in this body, heart, and mind, and meet it all with nonjudgmental curiosity. Kindness, clear-seeing, and compassion: that’s the Observer.

For much of my life, I had wanted to stop myself from breathing. But the first time I sat in meditation, I learned how to follow my breath. To love it, even.

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May you be safe and protected from harm.
May you be happy and peaceful.
May you be healthy and strong.
May you live with ease.

On that silent retreat at Spirit Rock, I was introduced to the phrases of metta, or lovingkindness. The Buddha originally taught these phrases to a group of forest monks as an antidote to fear. Instead of focusing on the breath, you repeat these phrases over and over in your mind. Prayers of well-wishing. Starting with yourself and extending out to all beings, everywhere.

The meditation teacher was speaking from the front of the hall. The metta phrases may bring up the opposite emotions. We may begin to think about all the ways in which we and others are not happy, healthy, or don’t feel safe, or peaceful, or at ease.

I was grateful for that reminder. Traumatic experiences had imprinted a sense of hypervigilance on my nervous system. Right now did not feel safe. The suffocating sense of being trapped in a body, in a life not of your choosing. That feeling of wanting to claw your way out of your own skin. The fertile ground of suicidal imaginings. Edwin Shneidman, the founder of modern Suicidology, called it the psychache.

May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be--

Who was I kidding?

I stood up and silently padded out of the meditation hall. My feet needed to move. They moved and they moved until I found myself standing on a vast hill covered in bleached tan tufts of grass, overlooking a small valley. The sun gleamed in a cerulean sky. The air smelled of warm, dried grass.

I laid myself down on the earth, my eyes towards the heavens, arms and legs splayed out like a star. Sivasana. Corpse pose, they call it in yoga. The hardest pose. I never understood why yoga teachers said that. Until one day, I did. Letting go is the hardest thing to do.

I felt the presence of my suicidal girl, floating above me like a ghost, demanding that I meet her baleful gaze. We overlapped, she and I, a human Venn diagram through space and time. The suicidal girl whose body was the only thing under her control. Until she crossed a line, and it wasn’t anymore. Danger to herself. That suicidal girl who was handled with rough male orderlies’ hands, thrown onto stretchers, deprived of human eye contact, deprived of liberty,
left alone in hallways and rooms both locked and unlocked for hours with her traumas old and new. Left with a fist of shame lodged halfway between her throat and her heart. Convinced of her original, irreparable damage.

The body remembers. It waits, patiently, until we feel strong enough to meet the parts we have abandoned. The ones we want most to forget.

The Observer stepped in, as vast as the sky, witnessing our reunion. For the first time, I was able to feel compassion for the girl who hurt herself, who swallowed the pills, who inflicted the scars that were only now finally beginning to fade. I no longer hated her. No longer wanted her gone.

My heart opened wide enough to allow her to climb in, to take her rightful place there, no longer confined to a graveyard in the recesses of my unconscious. No longer a frozen ghost.

The dam between my heart and me broke. I howled on the hilltop with grief and rage for my suicidal girl inside. For Liz. For all the girls who feel they must drop their bodies, because life is too much to contain. For all the girls whose voices have evaporated into the dust because they saw no choice but to leave. For all the girls who survive, with a host of visible and invisible scars.

I will stay for them, I decided.

A strange calm rushed in. For the first time, I felt myself as beloved upon the earth. Belonging to it. Not separate from it. Whole in my brokenness.

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Nowadays, people in suicidal distress contact me fairly often, because of the very public ways in which I tell my own story as an attempt survivor. While I will never be able to change how I responded to Liz, I have since learned and practice the fundamentals of peer support and resource referral. How to be an ally to someone who is suicidal. How to listen without needing to fix people or talk them out of their feelings. I have since learned the art of staying grounded in the face of another’s distress. How to have boundaries around what I am and am not able to give. How to express my needs and to be authentic in relationship with others. How to let myself receive. It’s an ongoing process and it’s messy. I’m far from perfect at any of it.

Mindfulness meditation did not “cure” me of suicidal thoughts and urges. From time to time, my mind still wants to convince me that death is a good idea. That my preteen son would be better off without such a damaged mother.

Meditation has taught me to see the suicidal thoughts as an early warning system. I must not take the thoughts literally, believe them, or obey them. What the suicidal urge is showing me is that something about how I have been living needs to die. My brain points me to all the ways in which I abandon myself, drive myself unforgivingly in the name of whatever pursuit I falsely
believe is more important than caring for my sensitive soul. I am forced to acknowledge my vulnerability. The places where I need love, care, understanding.

The suicidal thought is now my cue to stop. To tend. To seek solace.

When my suicidal warning system sounds, sometimes all I need is to connect to another human being who receives me without judgment, without fear.
Other times, I need to find the nearest patch of grass and lie down, letting the earth cradle my entire body. I practice the art of letting go. Sivasana. Corpse pose. The hardest pose. Letting all doing slip away. Letting life live through me. I allow tears of grief and rage to stream down my cheeks and onto the grass, where they become one with the ground.

I stare up at the bowl of the sky until I remember the truth. My deepest-held truth, echoing throughout the chambers of my beating heart. I want to stay. I want to stay. I want to stay.