

From a *Zazen* Journal 4

Neil Myers

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A three day zen center retreat that starts with blanketing dread, opens to a fragile presentness. At the end, the black robed figures who've been bowing to one another after each zazen, seem encased in flames

A few weeks later, at Shomrei Torah a speaker on the *Zohar* describes how kaballah adepts walk night & day, repeating torah phrases until flashes of comprehension occur, as if pressing language to the breaking point. The deep parallels with zen are startling.

— 2/18/07

France. Nyons: Sunday morning. Huge leaves hold their paws up in the terrace garden out back, framing George's big white-stone grenouille, curtained by green as in a Rousseau jungle.

The beauty of this provençal village house, at moments utterly haunting, at others suddenly uninhabitable. Two nights ago, after conservatives won a presidential election, local kids out back were tossing rocks at our roof.

— 5/14/07

Santa Rosa, CA: Zazen. In the distance, the faint rim of a dog yowling without stop. I think of my brother's recent stroke, that's left his speech slightly impeded but otherwise intact. & years ago, my father's, "the candles are going out around me, one by one. Who am I to have lived so long?"

— 5.26.07

Today, in *dokusan*, Roshi reminds me of "No Origin" as a way to deflate common fears. But these still have origins, I nearly say, then see his point: that since most surges of stress come & go, what counts is the "mind essence" recognizable in any deep encounter.

— 8/3/07

Jim Moore, in a wonderful piece on Santoka:

It's unseemly to hope, since hope so often betrays what we know to be true of the world, and yet we do hope that the poet whose work we fall in love with will take us out of our delusional selves, give us over to a larger and truer world, the real one in which we get it once and for all: birds sing, wars get remorselessly fought, two girls walk down a street giggling, snows sweep in as if from nowhere, people live, then die.

For poet I'd say just self
A breath could blow it off its perch

Toward the end of summer years ago, troubled over my daughter's post-adolescent anguish, I suddenly heard "be happy," a cliché that came at me like a rock. Gradually it's become immensely meaningful, though still a rock.

— 8/12/07

I try a week of Ango, with its casual down-time ☺ chatter. It's strange, a pale copy of a sesshin, ☺ at first I decide to avoid eye contact ☺ stay silent, but as the week goes on, this begins to feel pretentious, ☺ by the end it's simply quirky.

Zendo is serious, however. During *kinhin* walking, my right leg soon goes numb, ☺ I wobble perilously as I pass the lit candle at Suzuki-Roshi's altar. Still, when I sit alone at the big front window, pumping from my hara, I'm aware mainly of the change of light, the shifting mist, the nearby redwood's spars ☺ solid trunk. "True practice is a sesshin embracing the world as our literal home," Roshi says.

— 8/26/07

Morning zazen. Thoughts, then stillness. Dogen: "When you penetrate this matter, the coming ☺ going of birth ☺ death is a painting. Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe is

a painting ☯ the empty sky are nothing but a painting.”

That instant at Hokyōji years ago, life whooshing by before I could take another breath. Now palm on palm in mudra, my fingers knobby, worn.

— 9/10/07

A gentle day, full of color, variously alive. A lovely *Rosh Hashanah* service last night.

In all deep spiritual practices, phrases like “in the shadow of your wings” assume that in some way something’s acknowledging or looking back. There’s a hint of this in many of Dogen’s metaphors involving moon, reflection, water, ripple after ripple, in any place.

— 9/13/07

A hectoring student talk at zen center yesterday, with a reflex contempt for language. This is simply clueless. Abandoning words like any cultural tool in deep samadhi isn’t a matter of dising them but of sensing a more embracing alertness.

Even confronting some overpowering truth, one wants to explain as well as grieve. This seems what’s happening when, toward the end of his harrowing *The Lost*, Daniel Mendelsohn makes an awkward but resonant effort to see the Holocaust in the light of classical tragedy.

— 9/30/07

In zazen I revisit the instant at three when, astonished at my father’s inexplicable mockery followed by my mother’s silence, I decided that from then on I’d hide ☯ wait for whatever might dribble my way.

Even today, nothing reduces the impact of this moment, though I’ve learned to see it as a *via negativa* — perhaps as in Katagiri’s comment that the full experience of *dukkha* reveals “that something powerful sup-

ports you.”

— 10/23/07

My father could be playful, charming, protective, & yet unpredictably short-tempered, domineering, maladroit. From time to time he'd make clear that I'd never be the man he was, but like a wind-up toy I went on trying to impress him until my mistrust hardened. By the end of his life, we'd mutually baffled each other. My brother, otherwise so different from me, once admitted that he felt the same way.

Though he'd been an outspoken Zionist, my father became frantic when in 1947, at 16, I wanted to leave home & join the combat in Israel. He forbade me, but so awkwardly that it triggered an overwhelming rage. Later I routinely rejected his strident Jewishness, grounded partly in the Holocaust we were all aware of even while it was happening, & in the anti-semitism he must have faced as he struggled out of South Philly & eventually into a dominantly white-bread north Jersey community. Though he was aging & depressed by the time he decided to make a fuss over it, my later interest in zen occasionally drew fits of temper from him.

Now, at such a distance, a tender, hesitant embrace.

— 11/5/07

I'm still put off by reading Hakuin's gruff disdain for aging monks who suddenly complain that they've wasted their lives..

— 1/24/08

During zazen, rain on the wintry tree & the bland roofs & houses across the way.

No fixed past, just a dreaming twig.

— 1/28/08

Stunning, in late January, a call out of the blue from once dear friends, Arnold & Anne, in Connecticut, after a nearly 40 year silence.

Though we slowly lost contact with them after we moved to Indiana, a deeper source was a distancing I let freeze into place.

Today I sit outside in a half-hour of afternoon clarity, reading a warm, lovely letter from Anne, which confronts me with my lapse years earlier.

We'll renew contact as cautious seniors, but without any prospect of sharing lost time. That rupture severed a relationship with two lovely souls. Time goes only one way.

— 2/08/08

In Annadel yesterday, we run into C., who withdrew abruptly from SMZC seven years ago. He's been hiking, & as he comes down the trail behind the trees he sees us, grins, sits on our bench, & tells us eagerly that, among other things, for several years he's been writing an essay on spirituality & science, touching on Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, etc. He still seems questing, intuitive, restless but reserved. His persistence is striking, but like others he's determined to avoid sustained practice, letting self go in order to return to it more coherently later. There's a diminishment in him I've come close to in my own experience as well.

— 2/18/08

A haunting Roshi talk on the relation of "defilement" to *bodhi*, i.e., enlightenment. Raw obsessions as compost for deep samadhi.

— 3/2/08

My first one-day sitting at Sonoma Mountain since surgery is an ongoing struggle with what Nyoze calls "trash," scattered fears, urgencies, life-debris.

“Where is all this trash? Where is it?” Roshi asks at the end, after we’ve gone around the talk circle, saying our things.

This includes news of dear Tony Vevers dying. He’s here for me, though, like sun reflecting off a lake.

— 3/10/08

At an edgy afternoon *dokusan*, Roshi quotes the Dalai Lama addressing a conference of ecologists, “first heal your selves!” Then he turns to Hakuin’s dealing with “zen fever” — probably tuberculosis — by lying in bed, determinedly pushing breaths from his hara into his lower body, then exhaling them slowly away.

I ask Roshi if the surges of bleakness I sometimes feel these days are also “trash.” “They’re illumination too,” he says.

Later, at home, translating Char’s *Hypnos*, I come across, “We’re the same as toads who in the austere night of the swamp call each other & don’t see each other, burdening their cry of love with all the fatality of the universe.” Brrrup!!

— 3/13/08

Zazen starts with throbbing distractions. I keep checking the little clock on the wooden chest, the mottled wall behind it, then pass into a field of quiet light. Soon I’m I-no-I, in which even God is just another face.

Later, looking at our photos of the sand garden at *Royanji*, I see an entire mind, its five stone islands utterly arbitrary & still, at the hinge of Life & Death.

Plus the eloquent cliché uttered last year, by my much loved Uncle Mal — my father’s school buddy from the 1920’s, & an intimate family partner since my infancy — “so much water under the bridge!”

Reading Simon Montefiore's terrifying chronicle of Stalin's "court" ... a clutch of hungry ghosts, grounded in narcissistic paranoia & murderous savagery.

— 4/9/08

A three day Buddha's Birthday Sesshin. The first night, hooked by leg cramps, I take tylenol, which the next day guarantees incessant narcolepsy. Still, exquisitely slowly, the inner fog drops away

The next morning, at the first zazen I spin toward my primal trauma involving my two year younger brother, who in a still horrific instant I impulsively attacked, probably in 1936 — after which, 4 years old, I knew with almost unmanageable clarity that I'd escaped a lifetime calamity by a hair

Then step by step, as if accessing the buddha Trungpa says lives in every corner of hell, I sense that, badly scarred, we survived that trial, & that, as the dharma has it, we're also "perfect as we are." I sense what this may mean as if from inside a wave that began to form the instant I sat down here days ago.

"Nothing is lost!" cries William Carlos Williams, in *Asphodel*, the great redemptive poem of his final years. As in the *Heart Sutra's*, "form is emptiness, emptiness form" — a synergy through which I have to repeatedly struggle but not suffocate.

— 4/16/08

Our fragile lives! Oskar's lovely wife Nora a suicide, after two years of unyielding auto-immune illness. Whatever clarity follows must carry this heartache tenderly.

When we call Iceland, Oskar says that Roshi, in a "beautiful message" (below) will fly there next week to conduct a service in the Rejkyavik Zendo:

Dear All: Sorry to inform you all that Oskar's wife, Nora, took her life yesterday. Their family, myself, friends are all in shock and grief. What can a tragic thing like this do but inspire us to live our lives fully! In this way we honor her life. She was under a tremendous amount of pain that the doctors did not seem to understand, but she faced everyday. Without any hope, it drove her to end her life. Please honor this very precious existence. Dharmas are without blame.
Roshi

— 5/9/08

A second shock: my little sister, Linda — who suffered 66 years from a preventable calamity, oxygen deprivation at birth — dead in her apartment.

My mother once told me that because the obstetrician was late, the nurses pushed the infant back until he showed. This was common then (as with JFK's sister), but recent medical opinion explains that it would have severely compromised the child's pre-frontal cortex. The result was an endearing, thwarted, often wildly irritating being, street-smart but incapable of comprehending or managing her life — a perpetual ten year old, on a long path of frantic hopes, whims, & her own as well as her family's grimly paralyzed bewilderment.

— 5/12/08

I wake up from an early teacher-panic dream, wheels spinning crazily until I see that ok, all I really need do is show up, coherent, here.

Zazen. Beyond the web of whistling birds, the dog across the way barks interminably like a hungry ghost, "*Mu*, you idiots! Lemme in! *Mu!*"

— 5/17/08

After Linda's cremation, surprisingly heavy sandy fragments of cartilage

☞ bone pour across our hands ☞ into the rushing Farmington River, where she wanted her ashes scattered.

To no one's surprise, her karma brings a clutch of passing motorcyclists, long haired, heavy bearded guys who pause respectfully at the bridge, their motors humming quietly.

Little one, goodbye!

— 5/30/08

Beauty of early dawn: late spring songbirds, then a sudden crow.

In the afternoon, on the terrace, bees in the lavender, I read Marianne's *Book of Hours* for the second time, ☞ suddenly sense an anguish that seems barely speakable.

My mother's last words, "if I must, I must."

— 6/5/08

While Nyoze ☞ I are drying dishes in the Sangha House kitchen, I remark that at that instant nearly every person on earth is probably either sleeping or engaged in thinking something or other. "It's so vast!" he replies.

— 7/20/08

Morning zazen: I work slowly past an abiding layer of grief, ☞ continue until I'm pulled up again by the 8:00 a.m. dog barking tonelessly.

— 7/22/08

Fictions: In Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay's sublime realization before her death a few nights later, that "We are in the hands of the living God." Only a single older guest acknowledges her "triumph," friends drawn together in a multi-windowed room lit brilliantly against

the wave-strewn dark.

Also a haunting Alice Munro story in a recent *New Yorker*, in which a child with a narcissistic father is crippled by an empty craving for validation. The mother is anguished, but neither parent comprehends. Here's the Abraham / Isaac tale with no ram in sight.

— 9/4/08

Apparently the brain projects a constantly refreshed grid of whatever sources of aid or danger occur in the tiny clearing of any life.

At the opposite end, the physicist James Jeans' familiar notion that "as one studies the universe, it begins to look like a great thought."

— 9/06/08

Confucius's advice for the bowman who flubs his target:

Archery enshrines the principles of human relationships. The archer perfects his form within himself. If his form is perfect ☯ yet he misses, there is no point in resenting those who have done better. . . . Once anxiety fades, even failure evokes a coherence that binds everything.

A lovely *teisho* by Dokai Georgeson, from the Hokyoji blog:

"Now" is when I pass someone on the pathway, and stop, and bow to them, and when, with full attention and mindfulness, I continue on. "Now" is when parents experience their first baby being born. "Now" is when I smile and say, "Good morning" to someone with nothing else on my mind. "Now" is seeing the moon, stars, and seeing the sunrise and hearing the bird's first song in a quiet morning. "Now" is also my mother's face at the moment when her

second son stopped breathing. “Now” is my throat as my father took his last respiration. “Now” is when my best friend’s mother cried, “Where has my baby gone?” upon his death.

— 9/13/08

During a recent meeting in Cleveland, an innocence seems to blossom in my brother, possibly the result of a diagnosis of fatal dystrophy turning out to be false. Exactly as he used to do in childhood, he keeps singing to himself & reciting poems we’d learned from our mother.

There’s also the frightening image from my teens, of my father’s older brother, who we visited as teenagers for an exquisitely awkward half-hour, in some rundown Philadelphia loft: an angry, half-shaven figure, humped over a workbench, refusing eye contact, looking shockingly like us, & who I later realized was probably furious over his sibling’s competence in life.

— 4/16/09

Reading Merton, I’m struck by the energy of recovery he elicited in himself. His *Asian Journals* are full of little chinks of light:

The contemplative life . . . should create a new experience of time, not as stopgap stillness, but as temps vierge — not a blank to be filled or an untouched space to be conquered and violated, but a space which can enjoy its own potentialities and hopes . . . compassionate time, rooted in the sense of common illusion and in criticism of it.

“What’s the courage of a patch-robe monk?” Dogen asks. Simply patching, he says — eating rice, folding bedding, no matter how banal. Entering the dark, with every illusion intact.

— 5/4/09

In deep zazen:

Words may be fingers pointing toward the moon, but you need to know where to look first.

Questions of what is or isn't "real" are usually the panicked ego's ruse.

Dogen, "All Buddhas express the dream within a dream."

True "renunciation" means that everything one abandons also survives in some form, even if still shadowy or needy.

— 6/5/09

Everywhere, long dark rollers of unruly energy. My 8 year old grandson Charlie the other day, writing about Pooh scolding Tigger, "You have been a tornado to me!"

— 6/26/09

Immensely moving, *Into Great Silence*, a year in a worn Carthusian monastery near Grenoble. Beautiful aging faces, white robes, elemental routines, quiet fellowship, hard-won renunciation. An old blind monk watching his own dying from a level past fear or revolt.

— 6/30/09

Annie Dillard quotes a *Ch'an* master, "Use whatever means expedient to preserve the power of concentration as if you were taking care of a baby."

— 7/15/09

Last night a classic *doppelganger* sci-fi film, *Moon*. In a bleak lunar-scape a worker, ignorant of his condition, accidentally meets the slave-clone due to replace him. Programmed to die, as he sickens he discovers the truth, & prompts his twin to flee toward earth & expose the situation —

where, like any awakened being, he'll have trouble being taken seriously.

Deeply sensing *dukkha* means that, when passive ignorance is no longer viable, one grasps the knife-edge of the game.

A superb talk by Nyoze today — gentle, thoughtful, brimming with quiet understanding.

— 7/27/09

I try another summer sesshin. The second morning, Roshi in a hushed voice announces “shocking news from Iceland” — a cherished sangha veteran, Oskar Ingolfson, has died of a massive stroke in his mid-fifties. Asked to say something later, I can choke out only that, like everyone, I loved him — I could have added, for his generosity, his pleasure in the dharma, his gift of intimate friendship. Nyoze comments, “We don't know when we'll die!”

Mourning dominates the week. Roshi gives a powerful talk on Dogen's view of Life-Death, then flies to Iceland to conduct a funeral for the local sangha & Oskar's sons, who in one year have lost both relatively young parents. The shuso runs our sesshin.

I sleep fitfully in the Godo, stuff scattered everywhere. Ibuprofen for nightly leg cramps raises my blood pressure, & pushes my early zazen into fragmenting dreams, so that I can only sit, blinking awake every few minutes, relying on my rhythmic breathing as if it's all that's left.

By afternoon I'm alert, & after a brilliant group discussion of the Korean master Chinul's *Tracing Back the Radiance*, I'm drawn in zazen toward childhood traumas, & then to an approximation of a primal self, a “face before I was born,” followed by an image of a hooded figure I glimpsed forty years ago, bent over the small pool of my mind, dropping in the phrases I found myself thinking seconds later.

Immediately forms like Leonardo's Vitruvian figures appear, psychopomps, arms raised in semi-circles, measuring, as if there's no other

space. Light fills the entire zendo. I shiver, then for long moments exchange the apologies I'd never uttered with my long dead father, whose voice comes warmly from beyond a wall. Then there's a long rush of surreal chatter, like the overreaction Roshi once warned me could accompany unexpected *kensho*.

— 8/17/09

Sometimes the perceived futility of existence has a gravity that cradles the self, & keeps everything from blowing away.

— 8/19/09

After a powerful Yom Kippur service, I drift in zazen toward *Ha Shem* without voice, body or visibility except in us.

— 9/29/09

In deep samadhi something lunges like a huge fish in dark water, & I instantly see that I'm sitting before a dresser with my dad's foot-high bronze pan-piper, beside a streaked plastic water-glass & a little silvery digital clock.

— 10/11/09

To students in a *Heart Sutra* study group, worried that distractedness in zazen might destroy their inner coherence, Roshi says flatly, "You can't lose it!" Shinko urges them to see what the mind does in "thinking" & samadhi alike as forms of "reflection." I add that while the sutra warns that the dharma can't be conceptualized, it also suggests that, with "no hindrance in the mind," we can enact it fearlessly in our daily being.

Sitting behind us, Goscia remarks that she adores "reflecting" on the past, & wonders if this may hinder her practice. "It's all good!" I say impulsively. "Whatever you encounter in full zazen is good, everything, every experience!" "You just keep bouncing up," Roshi observes—"you're buoyant!"

Shinko talks further about the deep “intimacy” this involves. “This is like Roshi’s ‘it’s just us,’” I respond, since we’re talking about our lives as Buddhas — a mimesis that, arcane as it sounds, underlies our entire practice.

There’s a pause, then Roshi says that once we abandon conditioned thinking in zazen, everything is new. Even “this bell beside me on the table becomes a wonder,” Shinko says. A minute later, the two of them bid goodnight to “all you buddhas & bodhisattvas.” To my surprise I’m near tears.

— 11/4/09

I send thanks to Roshi & Shinko “for that superb Study Group on the *Heart Sutra*. . . I remember how bewildering but haunting I used to find that text. It’s the sort of thing one absorbs very gradually, almost subliminally, through repeated zazens.”

— 11/18/09

When predictably, morning after morning I draw away from thorny self-defensiveness to long swells of meditative breath, I sense how even the most intimate relationships can bend & transform, like branches incessantly moving in an imperceptible wind.

— 12/1/09

I keep revisiting that superb Dutch 17th century show in Paris last month: paintings of *natura morte* — skulls, “vanity”, time closing in, divine judgement pressing — & *natura vif* — luminous consciousness, world, fate. Light within the skull, skull within the light. The sheer impenetrability of sacred space.

— 1/8/10

Roshi recites a poem ending in “sadness! sadness!” at the loss of a dharma teacher & friend, then talks of “silence near the end.” I think

of Pound's choice to "enter the silence" in his last years — his quirky passions hanging around him like tattooed skin.

— 1/29/10

When at 15 my mother asked why I was gloomy, I admitted to a sudden awareness of the finality of death. Instantly she quoted Longfellow's, "Life is real, life is earnest,/ And the grave is not the goal/ 'Dust thou art to dust returneth,'/Was not written of the soul!"

Dear mom, remembering how emphatically you uttered that still moves me. You must have learned it in high school, but its haunting singsong served you well. My own parallel is Valéry's "*Il faut tenter à vivre!*" Boiler-plate or outcry, makes no difference now.

— 2/3/10

At last night's Ango inauguration, Roshi once more thunders "Only This!" while his stone wedge slams the wood base violently.

Is there a dharma premise akin to the psalmist's promise of guidance in the valley of the shadow? This may be what Roshi was trying to convey in *dokusan* a few weeks ago. He kept staring at me. For long moments I didn't look away.

— 2/10/10

Notes on last week's sesshin:

Nights are fierce. At first I lie awake, heart pounding.

After a few days, Shinko faints & falls with a dull thud onto her zabuton. A shock for everyone.

Ray as shuso, gives dire warnings about staying awake during zazens. He talks about Dogen's *Uji*, "Being Time," both a "three headed eight armed" monster & a "twelve foot golden Buddha." Not a hair's breadth

between.

Simple *mu shin* continues, with turbulence at the edge. When uneasiness falls away, I literally see, as if to my right, a huge suit of bright scales suddenly shatter onto the floor. Without armor, I'm exposed. I remember my mother's tender letter my first year in college: as she went from room to room, "everything" repeated, "Neil is gone." How tone-deaf I was, locked in clueless immobility!

In two *dokusans* with Roshi, I mention the small self I sense lurking behind my karmic bluster. "That's your Buddha Nature," he says — a spark of divine oneness, intact under scripts blanketing it for years.

When he asks me to free-associate about my sense of ongoing dread, I arrive at surprisingly innocuous memories — at two, perhaps, awakened by a noise on the stairs, lights suddenly on, strange smiling faces of my mother's friends appearing around the bed.

At another moment, a jarring after-effect of ibuprofen, then a rush of crazy-wisdom from which I emerge wholly attentive, accepting.

Days later, at the Amtrak station in Vallejo, saying goodbye to my brother, I impulsively hug him & find myself speechless over such a backload of unacknowledged love.

— 3/25/10

France. Nyons: Morning calmly fills the wall before me, just before the explosive lycée traffic begins.

True *busho* also includes hooligans, angry drivers, raucous predawn busloads of resentful kids, however. *Il faut faire le pont.*

This stone lined garden, broad leaves & April breath.

— 4/22/10

Zazen once more sitting before Pedro's haunting *Cascade* watercolor, the wide ceramic bowl on the chest below. I hear Eliot's quote, from *Juliana of Norwich*, "all shall be well, & all manner of things well. . .".

— 5/08/10

Zazen: the darkness of our recent trip to Poland, Warsaw, Bialystok, Treblinka.

The sheer gravity of the Holocaust, alongside "self settling on self" — not a matter of happiness but of insistent hara breathing that gradually lets everything in.

— 5/12/10

Lorna's gift for my 80th: Al Ponders' stunning landscape, another Umbrian mountain fantasy: vast sky, red earth, clouds, patches of forest, fields, towns, footpaths, roads.

I keep seeing my father, in his closet after his stroke, nearly motionless, hovering over his remaining shelves of silver plate, ceramics, ivories. His life a cut cable, pressing on him whenever he stirs.

Choices: Rothko, fleeing his turmoil into the fierce red of Matisse. Or René Char, charging year after year into the provençal terroir now visible above the ragged walls & spindly cypresses out back— burning sunlight, lizard on a stone.

— 6/22/10

Santa Rosa, CA: Saturday morning, zen center has never looked so welcoming.

At lunch Nyoze talks about their month at Suzuki-Roshi's *Rinso-in*, south of Tokyo, where, at his father's dharma transmission at 8, accepted by the family as both another Asian child & the son of a major

American zen master, he'd suddenly felt free of rural California racism.
— 7/04/10

Meditation at 80 ... rivers to cross ... deep quiet once chatter drops
away.
— 8/05/10

For Christian Bobin, in *L'Enchantement Simple*, it's Helene, a child-goddess of grief rooted in memory, that guides us, in opening to the all. This may sound like mystic babble, but as he handles it, it's utterly concrete.

"L'éternité est la partie la plus friable du corps," he says. A constant lesson to understand this enough to keep the soul intact. The "angel that sits at the threshold" of such a struggle, has "a shadow in place of a shoulder" — a defect which, once noticed, marks its incalculable presence as well.

For Bobin, at those times when self knows but can't effectively speak, truth comes so near that the obvious task is to simply wait.
— 10/10/10

Zazen: a fire engine klaxon snorts, & a siren wavers, not near, not far. All dials register tweaks & rumbles of wrap-around being.
— 10/12/10

Nyons, France: Clear light, wind rattling balconies on the street.

Yesterday afternoon with a French family: hilarity over impending disasters, which François says will go on "until we're all victims of machines."

Later, with a gallows laugh, he hands me a black-white petition with a graphic, titled *Demeure du Chaos*, over a plea to preserve as art a

hideously transmogrified mansion in an upscale neighborhood that wants it torn down.

“We’re living on a reservation,” he remarks. A smiling melancholy under it all.

— 5/18/11

Apparently memory neurons are a few seconds slow in registering, hence the sensation of always being behind. Still, letting go of linear thought in samadhi may bridge this lapse, easing any grip on what’s already vanishing beyond the sill.

— 5/19/11

Re Camus: it’s still moving: how, in *The Stranger*, Meursault’s speechlessness makes him briefly murderous but so naive that, once his defenses fail, he encounters the full impact of wind, sun, voices, time — enough to intuit how a few others furtively share his solitude.

His friend, René Char: *‘La poésie est la solitude sans distance parmi l’affairement de tous, c’est à dire une solitude qui a le moyen de se confier.’*

— 5/21/11

Santa Rosa, CA. On the dresser while I do zazen: a plastic cup; a torn tissue box; the bronze MacMonnies flute-player my father loved — debris washed by a river around a rock.

— 6/5/11

Shocking for the entire sangha, Mark, one of the people I’ve most admired at Zen Center, signals that he’s abruptly abandoning zen center after a year as an irreplaceable resident & thoughtful organizer. A Vietnam marine veteran, child of an alcoholic father, scrupulously ethical, generous, committed, the isolation & constant zazen here could have brought him up against issues hidden for decades. Though his leaving

is being misconstrued as an insidious betrayal, I suspect that it may have been triggered by an overwhelming satori, a discovery of personal need like Jacob wrestling an angel, as if “the Lord was here, we knew it not.”

— 7/15/11

In *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* Herzog’s camera pans over torch-lit horses, bisons, rhinos, a vast underworld circuit of ice-age life death. This, & the husks of rituals behind it, calls up visions much like Char’s adumbration of the living world as a beast encumbered by bright sun.

— 7/26/11

After 35 minutes I’m riding long swells of pulse & breath, like Dogen’s boat on an ocean whose circle is constantly in motion, contingent & illusory at once.

Later: to my surprise, I have the following email exchange with Roshi:

Sekiku,
Among the myriad dharmas - What is the most important thing?
Sampai-Roshi

My reply:

Massive mountains.

His response:

Sekiku,
It is said that even Mountains are not permanent. . .
Gassho, - Roshi

No doubt, I finally say:

Impermanence itself.

After this, I write him:

Even dharma words change, but gradually one sees that they also point toward a source where they ☞ everything else emerge ☞ fade. The lines Barbara quoted, from Symborzka — “the stone says, ‘I have no door’”— do exactly this. They imply that Zen’s “one pure thing” is like the furnace of the sun that licks daily at our skins.

“La vita non e sogno,” says Quasimodo. “Life is not a dream.” It’s a nexus, in which all oppositions appear, merge, change. Like the sun, it’s impossible to look at directly, except through words like the negative film used to follow an eclipse.

— 8/8/11

I keep circling over Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands*, with its massive, matter-of-fact enumeration of wartime murders in central Europe. Millions sacrificed to some cockamamie, razor-edged myth.

Bob Melson once summarized his response to the Holocaust he lived through ☞ later studied formally, as simply “haunting”.

Waste to Waste

All day the sun crawled outside
the slow trees full leaved bent ☞ swayed
nothing was left but light one way ☞ the next
☞ earth’s cry as if as if from death

— 8/27/11

Samadhi also implies staying close to harsh alterations of mood: this morning, over the missteps that marked my futile connection with my father. . .

Day to Day
this going nowhere
crumbles in a palm
self or no self
just the same

Bloodlands also throws light on my grandparents on both sides fleeing Russia, 1900–1910 — small cogs in a vast upheaval, driven by others' savagery, one's own intimate courage, & plenty of luck.

Char again, in *Leaves of Hypnos*, on “the resistance of a humanism conscious of its duties, cautious of its virtues, wanting to keep the inaccessible open to the imagination of its suns & determined to pay the price for that.”

“Lucidity,” he says in a late poem, “is the wound closest to the sun.”
— 9/1/11

In Char the weave of vision & rage has an explosive edge, but the aim is also close to Dogen's “unaccustomed light” shining from “walls, roofs, tiles, grasses, trees,” once “all distractions are struck aside.”
— 9/7/11

A zazen of chaotic transitions, that abruptly give way to a grounding immediacy.

Shinko, to a crowded, restless zendo a week after 9/11: “We believe in nothing!”

My first teacher Sensei's reference to the Chinese legend of the “hun-

dred Chi-Chi” — “wise wise” hidden among wastelands & mountains, who in times of intermittent anarchy preserve cultural memes until coherence takes root again.

— 9/9/11

Zen’s *mu shin*, empty mind, though beyond any immediate contingency, also carries an urgency like Madame Rolande’s cry, “Life is so sweet!” at the foot of the guillotine.

Yesterday I impulsively hug Nyoze, who’s about to leave for six months of harsh Soto training at Dogen’s *Eiheiji* in Japan.

— 9/20/11

In the hilltop observatory in Sugarloaf State Park, refracted on a blank sheet in a small room there’s an image of the sun, a swirling circle with storm loops at the edge, that could hold a hundred earths. Everything we are or know was spawned by this swirling furnace. How’d it get there? What monitors it? What’s it doing on this tabletop?

— 9/27/11

Yesterday’s *Rosh Hashanah* centers around recitals of life-long “sins,” for some of which one can be “stoned to death.” Though general & often archaic, these always call up for me the rages of my childhood.

Later, in the afternoon *tashlich* ceremony, sins in the form of bread crumbs get tossed into moving water — here, into little Lake Ralphine, where we’re actually feeding the local ducks.

On tv the other night, the Dalai Lama’s naive, “I talk only to fellow humans, you’re all my friends, we’re exposed to every toxicity.”

& last weekend, during the San Francisco Symphony’s thunderous Mahler 3rd — Nietzsche’s midnight call to “wake from a dream,” because “the world is so deep!”

— 9/30/11

In zazen, once my inner haze fades I pick up phrases from the two standard texts we'd hear during our secular grade-school mornings: the Lord's Prayer, & the 23rd Psalm. . . which years later the rabbi helped us recite at my father's funeral, while beside me my shrunken mother trembled like a leaf.

Afterwards, at a gathering for "Children of Holocaust Survivors" I hesitantly mention the parallels I sense between deep Buddhist & Jewish practice, & am moved by their instinctive empathy, as if the ritual we've just shared trumps any narrowness.

— 11/4/11

I keep returning to Mark's explanation in a talk before he left, that many of the assumptions that guided him earlier just weren't "real." I see his point, but I think that what we call illusions are neither more nor less tangible than the effort we make to let them go, once we see how they confront us with extraneous pain.

That is, to deal with karmic "errors" we need to respect their presence in the first place. This isn't so different from Suzuki Roshi's wish to "take care of" his cancer because it was so intimate to him.

In its banality, dawn light releases the world.
Massive mountains! Equanimity! All things true.

Joan Didion's memoirs of her husband's & adopted daughter's dying within a year. Whitman's sea whispering "death, death, death." & in W.C. Williams' "Mental Hospital Garden," a child opening her eyes as "her heart / beats wildly / & her mind / drinks up / the full meaning / of it all."

— 11/9/11

A letter from Mark:

“I have no regrets about my decision to leave,” he writes, but “it is sad to think that I will no longer share Dharma practice or our friendship together from this point on. I have the deepest regards for the support & shared experiences we have had over the many years.”

I reply, “Being a true zen person means that the world is open to you, & when you reach out, it reaches back toward you as well. What else is our discipline about?”

He eventually answers, “It’s clear to me that first & foremost, this practice is about loving kindness & compassion toward ourselves & others. That is what being open to the world means. . . . The response we choose in this, or any other like situation, is a test of the depth of our practice to stay the course: to take the high road of loving kindness & compassion not only for others but ultimately ourselves.”

— 11/19/11

In zazen posture, palms open & thumb tips touching, I’m an *enso* hoop through which thoughts vanish somewhere else..

Nyoze writes from Japan, “whenever I think I’m depressed, but when I’m in the present there’s no trouble.”

Russ sends his haiku postcards to witness personal pain, socio-economic victimization, & his own unrelenting dharma practice. In this mix of urgency & hard-won patience, he’s a Bodhisattva, unscarred by sudden revulsion, shame.

— 1/5/12

There’s a point in every seven-day sesshin when ego-thoughts churn, coalesce, then pop like bubbles in one’s wake. & though my physical crisis is making these retreats increasingly difficult, their impact remains, even in small ways, as in the ability to recognize gestures of empathy from anyone, at any time.

— 1/18/12

I come across a blog about about the persistence in France of archaic anti-semitism, in which Jews remain designated scapegoats for social distress. Robert Bellah, in *Religion in Human Evolution*, explains how raw myth-rituals can freeze into rigid re-enactments, & produce centuries of savage distrust. Hence Roshi's insistence that Buddhist practice continue over the next 300 years, to filter the mass of toxic disturbances plainly on the way.

— 1/19/12

A One-Day Sitting. Up at 3:45, & while I wait outside for my ride, I stare into the driving rain, angry over a trivial domestic tiff. Sitting in the zendo, however, I'm swept into meditative routine, & stay focused until early afternoon, when I crash in low-metabolism pre-dreams, which I see for the thousandth time are merely routine — so that any evasion is just another gesture, lacking gain.

Then, against the cold wind, branches creaking at the walls, everything rushes into presentness, & I turn into the current for long stretches of wordless transparency. At the end, in the talk circle, full of wonder, I sputter something like, "A seven day sesshin is like the full moon; this was a little sliver of the moon, but just as bright!" I try to project my voice, but there's nothing further to explain.

— 1/22/12

Saturday, responding to something in Chris's dharma talk, Mike interrupts with a phrase about the storms of turmoil he felt when he did tangaryo [unbroken day-long sittings] last week. The zendo is silent, as if embarrassed, so I blurt, "Inside every practitioner there's a wild man screaming to get out. But they're the same, not a hair's difference between them. Just sit, breathe, remain. That's it!"

Moments after, it's as if no one's heard.

— 1/30/12

Another hectoring student talk, that seems to suggest the usual simplifications — that dharma posture is a competitive challenge, that dharma practice requires that all “words” without exception be seen as as obstructive & irrelevant.

Come on! Words may distort, change, falsify & fade like anything else, but they remain indispensable in identifying our selves & our situations, as well as navigating the world within the zendo or beyond. The real point, as Dogen urges repeatedly, is to “study this” as a living contradiction: i.e., to “Keep your mouth shut & speak with a true heart,” as Kwong-Roshi says.

— 2/19/12

For 40 minutes I can either reject the tag ends of conceptual flotsam or just drift among them

A dream: I’m trying to swim across water that covers the gravel driveway of my childhood backyard, toward a boat anchored near the garage, but suddenly there are just pebbles underfoot, that I have to walk gingerly across, scraping bare skin.

I keep seeing my father, after a major stroke, sitting for hours in his closet, gazing at the remnant of his antique silver, ivories, ceramics, a few loved things that must have stirred his memory, & anchored his life.

— 3/12/12

When a few years back Roshi offered in *dokusan* to “show me my mind,” I was doubtful, but after I shut my eyes what I visualized was a ribbed fleshy cave, with an opening to an ocean a few yards away. For a long time this was puzzling, but now I sense that I was visualizing both a birth canal, & a refuge a stone’s throw from the vast surge just beyond.

— 4/9/12

I remember the primordial clarity of sesshins during my first years at *Hokyoji*, when I'd find myself watching a single insect moving on the panel in front of me as if it was crossing the universe. Like the bird choruses that exploded every dawn & dusk, this was a teaching.

facing forward
always this chattering
at the edge

— 8/2/12

A few days ago, in a tender *dokusan* with Roshi, I mention that I sometimes feel smoldering irritability as I age. That, he says, “has no place,” & quietly relates how, during an interminable bout with shingles last year, he was never angry, since the searing pain was simply “as it is.”

This morning I notice for the thousandth time that what strikes me as sheer distraction is perfectly commonplace. Like the crows around here lately, their vocalizations insufferable but indomitable, & always pressure-filled.

Later, I sit, talk then walk comfortably with Lee in the cool summer day, then drive up to Zen Center on an afternoon where no one's around, & where, over the years, so much intense comprehension has occurred.

— 8/5/12

Summer Sesshin: During a few grimly hot days, I drive home before supper to keep evening & early morning schedules there, & returning before samu at 8:30. That's now part of my practice, Roshi says. As a result, the line between world & dharma blurs, & though the transitions are hard & my concentration slippery, I'm more attuned to the moods of others on roads, in super-markets, news, mail, casual talk.

“Simply connect,” Roshi tells me during the week. Later he says in a laser-like talk that since weakness & dying take their own course, they

don't really need to be attended to. So in zazen I shut my eyes for long seconds to break my habit of pinning insights to the wall, & just let wordlessness evolve until "dropping off body & mind" becomes tangible as salt.

"Before the donkey leaves, the horse has arrived," he remarks.

On my last day he says of human fate, "you leave the shore in a boat, & when you get to the middle of the ocean it sinks under you." Here's the raw *dukkha* of the First Noble Truth, in which illumination takes root. Nyoze later talks about how his initial fears usually become part of his tensile strength.

Afterwards, I come across this, in Shohaku Okamura's *Living By Vow*:

When we face our death, strategies of accumulation & avoidance don't work. No matter how successful your life, when you face death, you have to leave everything. Your property, your fame, & all your accomplishments disappear. . . Until we wake up to reality our life is like a building without a foundation. . .

— 8/10/12

During the recent sesshin, distractions, mental lapses, dead-ends were pebbles rattling in a cup. Now, a week later, with less formal support, they're boulders booming wildly downhill.

Saturday at the post-sesshin *mondo*, Nyoze, as shuso, responds to a sharp question from an old Indiana acquaintance, Tom Huffman, who'd spent years studying wolves, by suddenly howling wildly.

— 8/21/12

I'm outside on the terrace, in morning heat, reading further in *Living By Vow*, & come across a passage on how sensing an ungraspable "now"

brings us close to core emptiness. This seems a Buddhist no-brainer, but when I glance aside at bushes waving & bees shifting in the lavender, it strikes me as beyond any summary, but intimate to the seeing, listening, measuring we do daily.

Here's mind as "emptiness looking into emptiness," as in Dogen's insight that "each moment is all being, is the entire world."

— 8/28/12

Uchiyama, dipping the ladle of the universe into nothing, drinking thirstily.

Tillich's "Holy Waste," a "sacred spilling" that scatters rather than gathers, eliciting at once awe, denial, despair.

Shiva the destroyer of worlds!

Constant reawakening. A distant bird, gravity, sunlight, every breath.

— 10/9/12

An email tonight, profound, echoing shock & sadness.

You may know by now that Ronny died this morning. I hate to resort to an email but hope for forgiveness.

His death is very sad but sorrow is alleviated by the sweet knowledge that he did it his way in his time. — He wanted to be home & not cooped up in some awful hospital alcove with bells going off. &, in fact I have the satisfaction of knowing that I made a difference, & helped him get his heart's desire. & that I was supported by wondrous dear friends, including you.

We had a wonderful run of almost 42 years. We planned to have more but one must play the hand dealt, not some other one.

Roberta

— 11/15/12

Such beauty during the last few days — autumn sunlight on the graveyard in Sandisfield, the rural ambiance Ronnie loved. Over two-hundred friends & neighbors there. The kids threw cut-outs of a chain-saw, a tractor & clock on the raw pine coffin, along with flowers, & chunks of dirt. When it came to my turn, I hobbled along the narrow path between the dirt pile & the open trench, & managed to drop in a rock that hit the wood with a bang.

long breathing
in the end
one comes back to this world

— 11/25/12

In morning *zazens* lately, brain-fog gives way to a space that contains my own death, a speck tethered at the edge.

Processing two forms of *dukkha* — one manageable, the other a reminder that the wastage of the first is unredeemable.

— 1/7/13

Joyce Kennedy is dealing so lovingly & graciously with dear Wally, whose slow dying manifests such dignity. This amazing couple, who taught me so much, now seem to be drawing strength from the void, grieving but allowing little opening to complaint.

— 1/8/13

I keep returning to Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies*, focused on intimate compressions of life-death at cruxes of familiar history... as in

Shakespeare, huge karmic circuits in which everything's perpetually at stake.

Part of her insight is also to limn what Lee pointed out recently, that the dying often go on planning for tomorrow as they'd always done, in spite of the certainty of what's about to occur.

Sitting in *zazen*, I can understand this inconsistency. Here's my stage, hands in my lap, thorax pumping air, all anchored in a region where one seems to balance in a dance before the lord. While they last, such rituals loom over otherwise ego-narrowed lives.

— 1/17/13

My brother's final sense of reconciliation & completion was of a piece with the way that, during his last years, he withdrew into a clarity that must have been another gift from my mother, who, once I became distant, chose to nurture him in a way I learned about years after.

Vers l'arbre-frère aux jours comptés
Harpe brève des mélèzes,
Sur l'éperon de mousse et de dalles en germe
— Façade des forêts où casse le nuage —.
Contrepoint du vide auquel je crois.

— René Char

Brother Tree Whose Days Are Numbered
Brief harp of larches,
On the spur of moss & emergent rocks,
Façade of forests where the cloud breaks —
Counterpoint of the void in which I trust.

— 1/24/13

After Wally's death, Joyce, piercingly articulate, says on the phone that every morning she faces a great blankness. Later she describes his struggle to inhale, their last night, until the sound simply stopped.

Buber's *Thou*, extended toward us by God, can be a dreadful if utterly commonplace weight.

— 5/18/13

Long before his last illness, my imaginative, fiercely practical, restlessly inquisitive father responded to something I'd uttered about time by exclaiming, "it's all like a dream!" Years later, he told my mother he'd "talked with God" to ascertain the timing of his death.

— 6/5/13

This morning I'm driven by clamoring voices, then, as my head clears, the wall below my grandkids' photos fills with a quiet light, a turning world.

— 7/12/13

A few days of summer sesshin, '13. Returning weeks ago from strenuous trips to sanghas in Poland & Iceland, Roshi experiences a bout of internal bleeding. They get him to the ER just in time; he's lost six of the seven pints needed to survive. Now, "rebuilding my blood," he's often absent from the retreat. Still, when he's in the zendo his voice is strong, & at the end of the sesshin, his stick slamming the floor is as alarming as ever.

Shuso June Davis, a sweet, formidably intelligent Japanese-American from Hawaii, begins with a quote from Aitken-Roshi about ego vanishing like a bubble on a stream. She interacts warmly with Roshi, & a few days later, in a talk about "the void," he turns to her for help in describing the Japanese shrine of the Sun-Goddess *Ameratsu* where, in a sacred enclosure formally accessible only to the emperor, a curtain billows in the air before the forbidden core — a huge polished mirror, that

reflects whatever appears there.

Roshi now turns powerfully to the noetic metaphor implicit here, the sun as source. I think of literally looking down at it a while ago at a local observatory, refracted by a concealed projector onto a sheet pinned to a wooden table — a stunning, flaring icon of the primal energy adumbrated in Buddhist emptiness, in the Godhead behind the theistic faiths, & in the mystic traditions derived from them.

On the last day, during one of many intense zazens, I suddenly find myself wondering, *if everything surges but remains impermanent, what am I?* Instantly I hear an equally naive response, *I don't know.* Then I literally see the entire zendo fill with what seems a luminosity prior to knowing, but tangible through the “backward step” Dogen that stipulates. After a pause I look up, at the row of black-robed sitters extending toward the sunlit hallway yards away.

That glance briefly seems to suggest a juncture of samsara & nirvana, where dharma focus meets the traffic of our pressure on this earth. This may approximate what our lives essentially mean, even if we're just bubbles on a stream of words, desire, time.

Seconds later Roshi's stick hits the floor. Over! Done!

— 8/22/13

At the post-sesshin *mondo*, June's response to my asking, “with what eye does the heron look out in the snow?” is simply *mu! mu!* I'm thinking, however, of Meister Eckhart's, “the eye with which I see god is the eye with which god sees me,” & this in turn evokes Virginia Woolf's pivotal outcry in *To the Lighthouse*, “We are in the hands of the living God.”

All this! Patience & reserve before volcanic fury. The skill to carry without distraction an instant that stretches on, & briefly holds us in it, *here*.

Leaves Beside a Window

the wallpaper of infancy
such gravity
late autumn air

— 8/25/13