

## *Spirituality for Underachievers*

Sermon by Rev. Robert V. Thompson  
Lake Street Church of Evanston  
April 25, 2010

D.T. Suzuki was arguably the greatest teacher of Zen Buddhism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is a story about Dr. Suzuki, who was scheduled to give a lecture at UCLA in the early 1960's. The large auditorium was packed. The audience waited with great anticipation to listen to the wisdom of this great spiritual master. As the head of the Department of Oriental Studies came out to introduce Dr. Suzuki, the bustling crowd quieted down. The Department Chair spoke a few words of greeting and in a very quiet and humble way said, "It is my great honor to introduce you to D. T. Suzuki. He is a world class Zen scholar, writer and master. Welcome Dr. Suzuki".

The great hush filled the auditorium. D.T. Suzuki walked up to the microphone and pulled it closer to his mouth. He adjusted his glasses. Looking up at the audience he bowed and said, "Zen Buddhism. Very hard to understand. Thank you." He bowed again and walked off the stage. The talk was over.

Like Zen Buddhism, enlightenment is very hard to understand. This is what the teachers of Eastern Spirituality say. Enlightenment is a state of consciousness that is beyond description. Enlightenment requires great effort but it is not an achievement. It is letting go of all our illusions. It is waking up our true nature. An enlightened being is one who transcends desire and suffering. If there is a Christian equivalent, it is salvation.

The word "salvation" is derived from the Greek word, *sozo*, which means to be made whole or complete. For Christians, salvation begins here and now but the sure sign that you are saved is to go to heaven after you die. So, I ask, when would you like your enlightenment or salvation? Do you want it here and now? Are you willing to wait until after you die?

I don't know about you, but I don't want to wait. I'll take my enlightenment, my salvation, here and now. On our refrigerator door there is a little sticker that parodies a Lens Crafters advertisement, "Zen Crafters, enlightenment in about an hour." Enlightenment. Salvation—liberation from suffering and pain—who in their right mind wouldn't want it now—ASAP please?

What human beings want is to be free of pain and suffering. This is the universal human quest is it not? When the Children of Israel marched out of slavery in Egypt and headed for the Promised Land they believed their enlightenment, their salvation was at hand. But, as the 66<sup>th</sup> Psalm reminds us, just because they escaped their oppression as slaves didn't mean they would wake up the next morning in the Promised Land. It turns out the Promised Land wasn't even around the next corner. For 40 long years they wandered in the desert wilderness. Why? What took them off course? How did they lose their way?

According to the story, they got lazy. While Moses was receiving the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai, the Israelites got impatient, restless and careless. While Moses was on the mountain talking to God, the Israelites partied hard down below. They ate, drank, and danced. Free

at last, free at last, thank God almighty they were free at last with reckless abandonment. They took all of their jewelry, their rings, necklaces, earrings and golden bracelets and melted them down and fashioned a golden calf. Then they bowed down before it. In a drunken stupor they worshipped that golden calf. This is what the story tells us.

The Israelites were headed directly for the Promised Land, the land of enlightenment and salvation, but they got distracted. They lost their focus and suddenly they found themselves lost in the wilderness of life.

As I look back over my own spiritual journey I can understand how the Israelites got sidetracked.

I tell a story in my book about a time in the late 1980s when I took my own exodus journey. That's when I went through my divorce. It was an excruciating experience. During the early days of that ordeal my psyche was ablaze with pain. The nights were long and agonizing. I couldn't sleep, think, or work. One long night when the pain was especially intense, I ached from head to toe, and I wondered if I could survive the night. The psychic and physical pain was so intense I thought it actually could kill me. I had never known such agony. Curled up in a fetal position, I lay in the darkness. My eyes were closed.

As I looked into my inner darkness, the pain in my gut reached an excruciating peak. Broken open as never before, I had a vision. I am not one who is given to visions. Nevertheless, in the wee hours of the morning, I had a vision. Gradually a ring of light appeared in my darkness, and I heard a voice, not with my ears, but in my heart. I heard the message, "Do not be afraid. You are not alone. You have never been alone. You will never be alone."

That experience was at once compelling, powerful, and consoling. Intuitively I knew then, and I believe now, that I was seeing the light of my own soul. Intuitively, I believed then, as I do now, that God was speaking to me through the soul.

I got up the next morning not only because I survived the night but also because I had this vision. Over the next few years I just knew that I would find enlightenment, true salvation. I knew that it wouldn't be long until I entered my own personal Promised Land. I got remarried. I met a meditation teacher. I became a vegetarian. Surely, my salvation, my enlightenment was just around the next corner.

So here I am 20 years later, and I'm still waiting. Over these past 20 years I have continued to meditate every day, eat lots of vegetables, and I am profoundly grateful for my wonderful marriage. But enlightenment, salvation, my personal Promised Land, a life without illusion and suffering—this I have yet to experience. Oh I don't get as easily hooked by illusions and suffering as I once did—but I have so far to go. I once thought that I would be a spiritual highflier. But more than not I find myself mired in the muck of my own mind.

As I look back over the past 20 years I see whenever I thought life was going to be easy from here on out, it inevitably got hard. Whenever I thought I was entering the land of milk and honey—I would awaken to find myself in a new and different desert.

As John Lennon famously put it, “life is what happens while we make our plans.” Just when I think I’ve figured out how to have the life I’ve always wanted—life changes. And, when it does, I resist the changes. When I get into resistance mode, the walls go up, and when the walls go up I become self-absorbed. When I become self-absorbed, I suffer more. And I get distracted. I forget what’s really important. There are lots of ways and lots of reasons we get distracted and forget what is really important in life. When the Israelites fashioned their golden calf, it was they had become self-absorbed. It’s so easy to get derailed, distracted, and to forget where we were going in the first place.

Lake Street Church member Lydia McColloch died several years ago. Lydia was a character. She had little phrases she would often repeat. One of my favorites was: “Too often we put the accent on the wrong syll-A-ble.”

When I look back over my life I see that too often I have gotten hooked by the wrong thing. Too often, I get distracted by things that don’t really amount to a hill of beans. Don’t sweat the small stuff, so they say, and it’s all small stuff except for one thing. Relationships. This is what I have learned over the past several decades. When my relationships are clear, when I am open, when I finish the unfinished business in my relationships, the accent of my life is on the right syllable. Life is all about relationships. When my relationships are unhealthy, I become unhealthy. When my relationships are broken, my life feels broken. When my relationships are toxic, I get sick. But when my relationships are healthy, I feel invigorated. When my relationships become a source of strength, I feel strong. When my relationships become a source of joy then my life is happy.

It’s all about relationships. Enlightenment is about relationships—it’s about how we see ourselves. How we see ourselves is the lens thru which we see life. Like enlightenment, salvation or wholeness has to do with the quality of our relationships. If there is a Promised Land in this life then we enter it through our relationships.

Look at the Middle East. The conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is not about who occupies the most real estate. That’s a symptom, not the cause. It’s not about the land. This poignant truth is so obvious—the Promised Land is found nowhere else but in the territory of the heart.

Spirituality is all about relationships. But it is so easy to get distracted. It’s so easy to forget what matters. We all have our golden calves. Your golden calf is whatever it is that distracts you from paying attention to your relationships.

The golden calf may manifest as your job or career. It may take the form of money. The golden calf is whatever gets in our way of our relationships.

The golden calf can take the form of ideology or religious doctrine. It's even possible to turn your expectations of other people into a golden calf. It's easy for me to bow down before my idea of what life should be.

We are so easily distracted from what matters in life. As I walked thru MacLeish Hall last week, I saw people faithfully practicing Tai Chi. One of them, Evelyn, is someone I've seen practicing Tai Chi for 20 years. She is now a teacher of Tai Chi. As I walked by the group, Evelyn stopped, looked over, and broke into a big smile. "Hey Bob," she said, "I like that sermon title. 'Spirituality for Underachievers'." All I knew to say was "it takes one to know one." It's so easy to fall asleep. It's so easy to lose touch with what matters most in life. But when we fail to see our relationships as our central spiritual practice of life. We are being distracted by some illusion.

Tonight I will convene the fourth meeting of A Year To Live. All are welcome. Tonight's question is "how can we take charge of our lives while letting go of the things we cannot change?" This is a question that haunts every relationship we have. How can we live our lives together without getting hooked by distractions and illusions? After all, every relationship is potentially a source of pain. And there are some relationships that cannot be repaired. It's just too late, or the other person isn't interested. Just this week I have had conversations with people who are struggling with how they can let go of the pain and finish the unfinished business of several important relationships. When relationships go south, the question is always how can we turn the poison into medicine? The way to heal up from relationships that hurt us is first to turn toward our healthy relationships for guidance.

Golden calves take many forms but whatever their form—they are what distract us from finding our way.

People come to clergy in search of answers. But I don't have any answers. I am always interested in the questions. What is enlightenment? What is Salvation? What is the Promised Land?

Hello, my name is Bob and I am a spiritual underachiever. I get easily distracted. I get sucked into one illusion after another. Just when I think I've found it, I lose it. I do have several spiritual practices, but it is the yoga of relationships that is the most demanding and the most gratifying. While I believe it's possible for our relationships to bring enlightenment, I haven't gotten there yet. But, this I believe. When our relationships are clear and healthy, there is enough light for the journey. This is why a spirituality for underachievers is based on one premise: I may not be able to see all the light there is, but if I can see just enough light to take the next step, that will do.