

DO NO HARM

A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
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Buddhists take a vow of non-harming. This is the bedrock of practicing Buddhism. As a beginner Buddhist I thought that sounds pretty easy: I'm generally kind, I like animals, I've been a vegetarian for 40 years.

But then I thought about the cockroaches. We New Yorkers have to deal with cockroaches and that usually means smashing them or poisoning them. The thought of peacefully living with cockroaches seemed beyond my capacity for compassion. Some of my Buddhist friends sympathetically told me there were contraptions for catching and releasing bugs so I searched online and found one that looks like a plunger – a stick with a clear plastic dome on the end. You place the dome over the cockroach, then you slide a plate under the dome, and voila! The cockroach is then stuck, alive and well, inside the dome.

How ridiculous: I see a cockroach, I dash to find the plunger, if I'm lucky the cockroach is still in the same spot...but I'm terrible at sneaking up on them; they outrun me every time. And even if I did succeed I'd have to suffer the humiliation of carrying the creature--darting around inside the plastic dome--down in my elevator to let it go on the sidewalk.

Lucky for me, my husband turns out to be a superb cockroach catcher.

When I first began to practice non-harming, my habit of killing bugs was my biggest worry. As I started to understand the practice more deeply, I became aware that my heart aches for all sorts of harm I have caused.

My dearest friend, Jane, and I met in high school. We had our first children at the same time. Next thing we knew she had two children about a year apart. Her children were 4 and 5 when Jane was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer and told

that her best prognosis would be 10 more years. Jane lived in Boston, and throughout the years of her illness I visited her regularly. By the time her children were 10 and 11, there was nothing more that could be done.

As she began to absorb the reality of her imminent death, she asked if I would help her write letters to her children. This was mid-March, and we settled on a date in early April when I would visit for a couple of days to focus on this project. It was our understanding that Jane still had many months to live and we had plenty of time for letter writing and existential conversation.

In the mean time, I was taking my children to Florida for spring vacation. While I was there, Jane's sister called and said, "Honey, she's in the hospital, and she's dying." Even though I knew Jane didn't have long to live, the news that she was dying was a complete surprise to me. I told her sister that I would fly up the next day to say goodbye, and I sent an email for her sister to read to her in case I didn't make it in time.

Here is an excerpt of what I wrote:

My dearest Jane,

Your sense of adventure is deeply ingrained in me. We had so many adventures. You made all the crazy details funny and animated and exciting.

I told ONLY you when things were falling apart for me. I could tell you because I didn't have to feel ashamed. You had all the time in the world for me and my problems.

You have my solemn word that I will have all the time in the world for Richard, Cordelia and Charlie. We will always have your sense of adventure and your passion to keep us together and to keep us strong. I will reach out to them at every turn, and I will always be by their sides for support. I will not disappoint you.

I will never have another friend like you, but I won't need one because you have given me enough of you to last forever.

Go in peace, dear one. Your loved ones know what you want, and there is a big gang of us who will do our best to make the future look just how you would have hoped.

Devotedly,

Pamela

Jane died a few days later.

I immediately undertook the project of staying close to Jane's husband, Richard, and their children. I invited them to visit, but they didn't come. I tried to visit them, but it was difficult for me to get away with my own small children. I talked to Richard over the phone a lot. Their daughter didn't brush her hair for a year, she got into trouble at school for bullying, their son became reclusive. I tried to help Richard find a therapist for the children. But they refused to go. I talked with Richard about moving their daughter to a different school where she could start over, I looked for a summer camp where the children could be with other children who had lost a parent. Nothing worked. I couldn't figure out a way to make an impact on these kids. Maybe it was impossible; maybe I gave up too easily; maybe I wanted to separate myself. I missed Jane terribly, and being with her family made me miss her more.

I gradually slipped away from my commitment to care for them. The more I felt unable to help, the more I felt the heaviness of guilt. And every time I thought of Jane, I fed the guilt. I could not think of her without feeling disgusted with myself.

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Henry Marsh is a neurosurgeon and the author of *Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death and Brain Surgery*. “Do no harm,” of course, is a reference to the Hippocratic oath of ethics taken by physicians.

Marsh was a top neurosurgeon in the UK. He tells story after story about the intensity of brain surgery, microscopic maneuvers with precision instruments under magnification. He says that working on the brain requires the tenacity, judgment, and delicacy of diffusing a bomb.

In a chapter entitled “Hubris,” Marsh tells a story from early in his career when he operated on a schoolteacher in his late 50s. The schoolteacher had begun to feel uneasy walking, and before long he needed a cane. His hearing was failing. A scan of the schoolteacher’s brain revealed a very large tumor near the base of his skull. The tumor would most certainly continue to grow and the schoolteacher would continue to deteriorate and die before long. Surgery, on the other hand, could provide a complete recovery. It could also lead to paralysis or immediate death. The schoolteacher consulted with his wife and son, and elected to have surgery.

Dr. Marsh began the day of the operation by buying snacks and drinks to fuel his team, he selected Bach and Abba CDs to play during the procedure. He knew it would take a long time. In fact it began at 9am and took 17 hours during which he slowly suctioned the tumor away from the brain. By midnight Marsh had removed almost the entire tumor. There was a sense of triumph in the operating room, they cranked up the music to celebrate.

As Marsh examined the remainder of the tumor before stitching up the schoolteacher’s head, he thought about the post-operative scans of the patients who were presented by big name neurosurgeons at international conferences. Those scans never showed residual tumors. Marsh decided to keep working on the tumor in an attempt to remove it all. As he painstakingly worked away, he tore a small

perforating branch off the basilar artery. The basilar artery carries blood to the brain stem which regulates the rest of the brain. Although Marsh quickly stopped the bleeding, the oxygen deprivation was enough to irreparably damage the schoolteacher's brain, and he never regained consciousness.

Marsh writes, "Nobody, nobody other than a neurosurgeon, understands what it is like to have to drag yourself up to the ward and see, every day—sometimes for months on end—somebody one has destroyed and face the anxious and angry family at the bedside." Seven years after the failed surgery, Marsh was visiting a home for patients in a permanently vegetative state. He stumbled upon the schoolteacher who was gray colored and curled up in a ball. Marsh writes, "I will not describe the pain."

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We try to do our best, yet we do harm. We come to church to better ourselves and the world, we work for justice. And yet we do harm. We can't help it; we're not perfect. The question is what happens after we do harm. We can regret our harm and take care of those whom we hurt, or we can hide the harm and feel guilty.

What is guilt exactly? Buddhist teacher Alexander Berzin writes, "Guilt means 'I have blown it; there is nothing I can do; and I am just a terrible person.'"

We all suffer from guilt, and its accompanying sadness, anger, and fear. We suffer over finding time to care for aging parents. We grieve failed relationships. We are impatient with our children. We don't call friends often enough. We speak harshly to people we love.

When we keep the guilty feelings a secret, we imprison them in our hearts, and believe "I have blown it; there is nothing I can do; and I am just a terrible person." And the more the guilt churns inside us, the more intense and persistent it

becomes, the more we define ourselves by it. When we allow the guilt to see the light of day and we process it, we free ourselves.

Catholics have confession, Jews have Yom Kippur, Buddhists have purification practices, and AA has the 12 Steps. All of these rituals have four key parts:

- 1) fully opening up to regret and taking responsibility for our harmful actions;
- 2) resolving to try our best not to repeat the harm;
- 3) making heartfelt apologies;
- 4) and reaffirming the positive direction of our lives.

When these rituals are performed sincerely, they make us whole again.

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I began to see the power of my guilt about Jane's family through the practice of mindfulness. My guilt turned out to be a signal for me to grow. I first brought my guilt out of hiding by becoming curious about it, and by asking for guidance from one of my spiritual teachers. I took responsibility for it; I stopped blaming circumstances for getting in the way. I acknowledged how sad it was for me to connect with Jane's family after her death and how I chose to prioritize my time with my own family.

I resolved not to repeat the harm—though my intentions were pure, I should not have made a promise of that magnitude to Jane. I am more clear now about the difference between hopes and promises.

I wish I could apologize to Jane. What I can do is make sincere efforts to stay in touch with her husband and siblings. That is the best that I can do.

I no longer see this regret as defining me, it is a piece of my history that I will never forget, but it now rests in my memory in the larger context of the positive direction of my life.

For Marsh, the pain and the shame of his failures were, at times, completely overwhelming. And yet he was compelled to share them. Late in his career he gave a lecture to fellow neurosurgeons titled “All My Worst Mistakes.” To prepare the lecture, he spent months reviewing his mistakes in his head. He writes, “The more I thought about the past, the more mistakes rose to the surface, like poisonous methane stirred up from a stagnant pond.”

A couple of years later he wrote *Do No Harm* because he wanted to confess his blunders and atone for them, and because he was curious about how he was changed by them.

Throughout his career he continually resolved to adjust his behavior according to the lessons of his failed surgeries.

He faced his patients and their loved ones with humility, he took responsibility when the outcomes were tragic.

Ultimately he was able to view his regrets in the context of the many patients whom he rescued from pain and whose lives he saved. He could see that his life was moving in a positive direction.

Marsh’s book begins with an epitaph from 19th century French surgeon Rene Leriche: “Every surgeon carries within themselves a small cemetery, where from time to time they go to pray.” Not just surgeons have a graveyard full of regrets. We all do because we all do harm.

When this harm becomes guilt, it is a signal that we need to explore. Guilt begs us to expose it to daylight, to take responsibility for our harmful action, to resolve to try not to repeat the harm, to make apologies, and to reaffirm the positive direction of our lives.

Here you find yourself in a spiritual community that welcomes you and acknowledges your imperfection. Share your regrets (with ministers, with friends),

make apologies. Allow this community to help you become whole. You are here today to reaffirm the positive direction of your life.