

Gene Chung
Spiritual Journey Service
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“Spiritual Journey” is an uncomfortable phrase for me. I didn’t grow up with a living religious tradition, even if my family has a long history of Buddhism. I never once saw my parents ponder spirituality, not that they are not thoughtful people or that they didn’t do that in private. I did not inherit a spiritual life, just an intellectual one. Weighty titles like “spiritual journey” can reflect self-importance that can perpetuate itself without a fruitful end; of course it is possible that the act of searching and looking is more important than the end result. My instincts are to intellectualize, with an existential twist; but I do believe spiritual exploration is important, and that there may really be something to this.

Few images and conversations recur for me. Not epiphanies but everyday events that I remember again and again.

When I was in tenth grade, at a boarding school, I once went to the school chapel on a weekday afternoon. I can’t recall why I went there. At the time, I was not a fan of religion. It was so out of style, full of ignorance, oppression, mindless following of seemingly random edicts; practically a standard bearer for ignorance. You know, I was smarter and better than the masses and was not going to be fooled by the biggest scam in human history. I walked into a small room with some stain glass and a few pews. It being off-hour, there was only one person there. The English teacher I admired most and my dorm-master, Mr. Germaine, was a cool, sharp, James Joyce quoting, agnostic. He was sitting on a pew, looking down, hands folded. He wasn’t praying, I don’t think. He was just sitting there, eyes open, looking down, and deep in thought. I sat near the door and looked at him for several minutes. When he didn’t move, I left. I never asked him what he was doing. He might have been tired and wanted to sit in a quiet room. He might have been hiding from the students in his dorm. Maybe he had a hangover. Maybe he was praying. No idea. But the image of this pure intellectual sitting quietly in a chapel room stays with me; I remember actually saying to myself, “it might be possible to be really smart and understand most things and still be a believer in something else.”

A few years ago, I asked my father what the Buddhists believed. I figured he’d be able to summarize for me in a few sentences. Give me the Cliff notes version. He said, “Ultimate happiness is to be able to sit still, look ahead and see, hear, feel NOTHING, just a blank space.” Instinctively, I saw what he meant. To simplify your life and thoughts would be very nice. I know that when I line up over a golf shot and I am not worried about something at work, feeling guilty about playing golf, etc, the shot is more likely to go straight. I think it’s unlikely that nirvana was invented to help my golf game but I think I understand.

Last week Sharon spoke about death. I interpreted her sermon as a reminder to *pay attention* to my life. To me, the absurdity of how life develops out of chemistry and biology is very real. There is a randomness to life that is very reassuring; there is no grand design or an afterlife to live up to. My randomly given life is mine to develop and enjoy, so that when I die, it'll be OK. As one president might have said, "it's the journey stupid"; and as our current president might say, "it's hard." And I am lucky to have filled it to the brim with love and affection, concern for others, near and far, professional and financial successes. These are all things that I worked so hard to achieve, dreamed about in the 30th hour of hospital call. But surprisingly, having all that doesn't really feel that different. One thing I have noticed, however, is that now it is much more difficult to pay attention to my life. Pay attention to the details.

For me that is the struggle, and journey. Take this full life and try to get to the blank space while enjoying the journey. Let me say that aside from family, this church and its members are the most important part of this struggle and I am grateful.

Thank you.