



# A Different Drum

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Excerpted from *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*

## EVERYTHING BEGINS BY LEAVING

**P**EOPLE ALWAYS ASK about beginnings. We strive after newness, the shiny, the acquisition of possibility. A proxy for our own longing to begin anew on the journey of finding ourselves because we haven't yet gotten there. What we don't often ask is, "What made me choose me?" and "What had to end?" and "What got left behind?"

## STAGES AND VOWS

**P**ERHAPS IT HAD just come out, I don't remember any longer, but the bright yellow cover of M. Scott Peck's book *The Different Drum* caught my eye's attention, though it was its title that caught my soul. I had always been a different drum, even when

I looked the same. Most of my early life was spent desperately wanting to be the same, trying to fit the molds handed to me and the ones I thought I belonged in, only to realize with stunning certainty that I, in fact, did not. Rinse. Wash. Repeat.

Peck's proposed stages eventually provided a lens through which I continue to envision the spiritual and the political life journeys as simultaneously parallel and intertwined. More acutely, Peck's stages gave me the answer to a question I'd held in stubborn arrogance, one that prevented me from seeing people who counted themselves part of some religion—most especially Christianity—with respect. By that time, I had developed growing admiration for obvious figures like Desmond Tutu, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, but also Malcolm X and the great Dalit hero and liberator of the Untouchables, Bhimrao Ambedkar. They were, by all appearances, religious. But they seemed smart, reasonable, and deeply concerned with social justice, too. Not only did Peck's description of development unseat the stubborn aversion I had to other people's religiosity, it also freed me to accept my own path as not just philosophical but spiritual, too. . . . Turns out that the Four Vows, written for ordinary lay folk as far back as 1,500 years ago, and uttered at the end of every Zen practice session, speak to each of Peck's stages. I take these vows again and again, marking my life's journey through these stages as practice. . . .

#### STAGE I: CHAOS—EARLY CHILDHOOD: TOLD WHERE TO GO, WILLED AND CONTROLLED

*Beings are numberless; I vow to save them all.*

**L**IKE MANY CHILDREN born “into” a religion or tradition, Christianity by way of the Black Baptist Church wasn't a choice I was given so much as a place I was made to go. I was toted along like a shiny Sunday handbag. It meant having my hair pulled and twisted into pristine “Shirley Temple curls,” spotless white patent leather shoes with pom-pom socks sitting just so beneath unscuffed caramel brown knees, dresses of just enough delicate white lace and frills so that there was never a safe place to sit, and a paper doily pinned uncomfortably to my head.

My earliest recollection of a life utterly controlled by an abusive babysitter-turned-pseudo-mom was the weekly pomp and circumstance of going to church. It is also the most poignant reminder of the gross conflict between the life we lived in full view of everyone and the one that went down behind closed doors where the yelling, shaming, emotional manipulation, arm-twisting, head-thrust-into-the-flushing-toilet scenes were performed alongside the rehearsal of stories that obscured the truth.

My father was raised Catholic. D took care of me from soon after my mother left to spare herself my father's philandering. He was a firefighter by night and day, and a womanizer in the spaces between. It was the early '70s—love was free and boys will be boys, after all. D was seventeen when she came into my life . . . red-bone bright with gleaming hazel eyes and a big, welcoming smile. No one would suspect she was a faithful product of the good and pious church lady's den of abuse and molestation that was held together by fear.

It was D's church I first recall. I liked the choir, so I tried to make it work, but it never really did—the other big church ladies fanning, folks faintin' and hollerin' as they caught the Holy Ghost streaking down the aisles. The pretense of Sunday-only proper manners in other peoples' company mixed with stylized high drama fit for its own reality show and threw into relief the falsehood of my own overwhelming existence.

My role was to submit to the highest and most fearful authority, and I did as I was willed. My lighter skin and springy "good hair" that could be tightly controlled made me the best kind of windup doll. A child model who was a model child: starting school early but still commanding the three Rs better than anyone, being brilliant in every way as if by shining so bright no one would really see me and the suffering I endured.

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## STAGE II: FORMAL-ADHERENCE TO ORDER AND RULES

*Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them.*

**B**Y THE TIME I was eight, D's sadistic ways had been found out. Both the harrowed life and only motherly love I could remember disappeared overnight.

My father's relationship with his newest girlfriend was serious enough to take us to Brooklyn. It was the heart of Flatbush and the height of the West Indian population explosion there. I was a foreigner in my own homeland, navigating a sea of Black faces that I felt neither kin nor camaraderie with. The golden years of living in the wildly multicultural Lefrak City—a kind of United Nations of massive housing in Queens—were now behind me. The safety of being different among difference was left against my will. . . .

Many of the West Indians despised us Yankees for our mistoried laziness, and yet envied the security of citizenship; we were all caught in the territorial wars waged between Black bodies vying for a higher place on the lowest rung of the totem pole reserved for us in the land of the freely white. The Hasidic Jews and Italians eventually receded to the higher ground that white-skinned people always seem to find when a tide of Black and brown rolls in. Rather than seeing ourselves as aligned, we were repositioned as bottom-feeders fighting among ourselves for the rotting remnants and decay white folks left behind. . . .

My stepmother had an enormous white King James-version of the Bible gilded in gold. Along with the twenty-one-book set of brown and black World Book Encyclopedias and Childcraft books she sold and I immersed myself in, that Bible became yet another hiding place for me. . . . My new stepmother's Episcopal church was a welcome relief from the ecstatic drama of D's church. I took refuge not so much in the church but in the silence I found.

While I was always skeptical, the stories were entertaining enough, so I perused the Bible. Dissecting the scenarios provided hours of fodder for my imagination: the greatest refuge of the shy, introverted, non-belonging. I secretly wanted to be a priest but was already a "tomboy" and knew women in the church and military had to wear dresses, which wasn't happening now that I had a say.

Me and Jesus were getting along fine. I knew things didn't turn out for the best for Christ given the images of the emaciated and wounded white man with pained blue eyes I'd grown up with, but I wasn't prepared for confronting his agony.

About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, eli, lama sabachthani"—My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? —Matthew 27:45–46

I was angry. How could God forsake him? What kind of good could this God ever be if so cruel? He'd turned his back while his only child suffered alone and in the dark. For some time, I imagined my anger was because I couldn't make sense of it, but really, I couldn't make sense of how I had been left to bear a burden so great so young because the people in my life—my own father, too—had forsaken me.

### STAGE III: DOUBT–SKEPTICISM, REJECTION OF RULES AS GIVEN, INDIVIDUAL INVESTIGATION

*The truth is boundless; I vow to perceive it.*

**B**Y AGE TWELVE, I'd excused myself from Sunday school, church, and eventually Christianity. School provided me with science as a less painful story of human existence, and my time devouring World Book Encyclopedias gave me access to agnosticism. . . .

*'Tweens and Twenties*

Mercifully, I escaped Brooklyn and went to live with my mother in lower Manhattan, though I straddled the Brooklyn Bridge and the vastly different worlds it joined together more often than not. The harshness and violence of Flatbush was tempered by the Bohemian understated class of Tribeca. Both of them were set against the backdrop of a Chinatown school that was more than mostly ethnic Chinese, so I lived again as a foreigner in a familiar land. I learned that context was everything, dictating norms of culture, speech, expression of gender, intelligence, and the rules for

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how to belong. This bridging, as both survival function and choiceful act, taught me a basic Truth: Each world you inhabit is no more or less real than the others. It is all just a protocol, a made-up and agreed-upon set of codes. In fact, moving fluidly between worlds of difference meant developing an awareness of what of “so-called you” remained still and apparently the same.

In my high school years, I explored the wide-open land of no real parental oversight. Cutting school. Lounging in the upscale diner in Chelsea learning the cheeky talk and refinement of everything from gay white men. They came in stronger and stronger waves, with their dinner parties, studs, and leather boys, washing over the mostly Puerto Rican and Black families that lived there until those families were drowning and almost none.

Rolling up lesbian, then gay, then mixed clubs through the night, I reveled in the last deep breaths of queer culture in the West Village in the '80s. We didn't know it was dying then because *we* felt most alive. . . . A natural aversion to the disorderliness of drugs and my high-minded downtown disgust with the sloppiness of being drunk kept me relatively safe in those days. . . .

In the meantime—maybe in response?—gender was becoming more complex. You were no longer policed into a strictly female or male role-play inside of being Lesbian or Gay. BT and eventually Q were finding their way into our landscape and language. We were finding new allies, paving new intersections, telling new stories and seeding a Queer Nation by reclaiming what was meant to shame us. It felt radical and emergent. I was alive and fighting for justice. And then I had to leave.

A trip to San Francisco landed me on a cushion in the temple made famous in my mind by reading Shunryu Suzuki Roshi's book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. I'd found it by accident rummaging through New York's old Tower Books. The chance to try out meditation beyond my closeted setup at home was too much to pass up, even if I had to make my way through an unknown city, already

farther away from home than I'd ever been. More than leaving home and my sleeping lover, I'd begun to leave my former self in the still shadowy dawn light that September morning. . . .

Not too much longer after, I knowingly carried my tender grief to the funeral of my relationship with my now grown-up friends. The truth I was seeking was more and more at odds with the stories we told ourselves to be right, to keep fear and overwhelming at bay. Standing increasingly on the outside and no longer wanting to be in, I turned and walked away, leaving my friends behind.

#### STAGE IV: MYSTIC/COMMUNAL

*Liberation is unattainable; I vow to attain it.*

**T**HE INTERSECTION AND influencers of my life left little room for some outside and some in. . . .

Being in the territory doesn't make you belong. Every time I tried to stay within the lines, they ran over me, so I chose the borderlands and left divisions behind.

The hero and liar that nurtured me. The mother-punisher who stole from me and stole for me, raised me up and shoved me down. The church lady dealing sin dressed as saint, building a house of protection and pain. The fierce queens from the runways who sex-danced their way to early deaths and lived forever on screen. The Black and brown boys gone to prison, queer colored girls behind bars and behind sassiness that reminded me where I might have been. . . . The low-key, high-brown urban Bohemians who showed me How to Sit with the invisible cloak of class on, a formless field of benefaction, to exude the quiet cool my Zen would one day be.

Whenever I feel around for me, I find all of them and someone else I didn't know was there before. I want for their liberation because, inside theirs, I found mine. The dharma that I would come to taught me everything I already knew about life—that it is indeed suffering, and the path of liberation is paved with pain and joy but always near when you know you're just looking to return to you and have to leave the home of Me behind.

Enter here. It's everywhere and in everyone. ♦





# Boundaries

You say,  
your God is better than mine.

You say,  
your God is mightier than mine.

You say,  
your God is loving, kind, forgiving.

I say,  
no one has a monopoly on God,  
If God is God.

—Avideh Shashaani<sup>1</sup>

