

## Indralaya talk 3 - Raven (and wet shoes)

Monday, May 2, 2022

8:53 AM

I had a moment that killed me with delight soon after our morning sit when I brought up Mary Oliver's poem Mindful. After it had been raining a little while and we were listening to the symphony I remembered I'd left my shoes outside. So they'd be getting plenty wet by now. So I practiced accepting wet shoes. I did a bit of future tripping about how I would handle this: maybe I should take off my socks and walk barefoot across the lawn, then try to dry them inside the dining hall - maybe they'll have that fire going again! - and then I'll have dry socks to wear for breakfast. But I was mostly able to bring myself back to the symphony and not think about wet feet too much. Not beat myself up for leaving them outside in the first place - Pacific Northwest in May, it rained in the morning yesterday, you should have known, etc. Occasionally the mind wandered to an image of soggy running shoes on the edge of that wiping map outside there. So I did okay I guess practicing acceptance.

But then when I got up to go slip on wet shoes or not I looked out the window expecting to see exactly the image of soggy shoes I'd imagined and...no: no shoes at all. I was startled for a moment: reality is not as I was holding in my mind. I guess my answer to 'What do you call the world?' was "wet shoes" but the answer was wrong. And then a rush of delight. I actually said "awww!" out loud as I realized some thoughtful person had moved the shoes left outside inside.

So a bit of practice of acceptance but much room to go on practicing not knowing. On not investing in a unfortunate vision of the future. It's such a deep habit we have isn't it? This anticipating the problems and trying to solve them in our minds before they arrive - if they arrive. The unneeded stress we add to the system.

I was embarrassed to realize the other day that when I was talking about our native friends and neighbors the Lummi and Nooksack nations I left out quite a few others: the Samish nation I've had some contact with, the Swinomish and Skagit are close neighbors of theirs, further south Tulalip, Puyallup, Muckleshoot, Duwamish; to the north the Semiahmoo and Tsawwassen, and many others.

And I've learned that several of these names aren't the traditional names of the people. After the treaty of Port Elliot - which turns out to have been in 1855, I was close - groups were forced together in several cases. So what's now the Tulalip tribe for instance is a mix of different peoples who took that name for the reservation they received and it became the name they are Federally recognized under but really it's a mix of people from the Duwamish, Snohomish, Snoqualmie, Skagit, Suiattle, Samish, and Stillaguamish peoples.

So *many* different peoples who used and still use these waters. One of the few fair-ish things that happened legally was that they are guaranteed half of all of the salmon caught in the Salish Sea as part of their treaty rights. But it took until 1970 for that part of the 1855 treaty to be honored. And the super sad fact that logging and clearing and modern inhabitation of the Puget Sound have degraded the salmon fishery enormously, but still half to the tribes. And I also just discovered, of course, there was a horrible backlash from the Fishing Industry So hopefully about half of the fishing boats you see in our waters are native fishers. I don't know as much about this as I should so many later our fisheries biologists can help me learn more.

Pre-contact I don't know if there were winter villages in the San Juans or mostly summer fishing camps. Probably by the best clamming beds and near the best sites to set up reef nets to catch the salmon. The church camp on Samish Island we also use for retreats, Samish Retreat Center run by the Community of Christ - a very similar kind of operation to this one in many ways - that place held a winter village with a large longhouse. The cultural density of these lands was, and is, really amazing but so easily lost track of in a wash of American dominant culture and the English language. About two DOZEN different languages within what we now call the greater Puget Sound - lots of overlap between them but different languages. Some of these tribes

The pair of ravens who've been hanging around helped me remember that this is a native place we practice on and to think a bit more about this. Because Raven is an important character in northwest stories and tales. It's good, I think, even if in it feels like barely enough on the face of what happened here to bring this up, to learn a little, to hold it in our hearts as best we can. And I myself want to renew my intention to go to events at Lummi and get to know people a bit. It's not just the history: it's now.

Here's a raven story that I don't have a great attribution for - Wikipedia says it's a Coast Salish story but not which people it comes from. Some stories were the property of families and only told by them but apparently raven stories were more widely shared. Hopefully it's reasonable for me to share this story. It fills out the picture on water, sun, and fire!

The collector's preface says: "This is an ancient story told on Puget Sound and includes how Raven helped to bring the Sun, Moon, Stars, Fresh Water, and Fire to the world."

And this is the story:

Long ago, near the beginning of the world, Gray Eagle was the guardian of the sun and moon and stars, of fresh water, and of fire. Gray Eagle hated people so much that he kept these things hidden. People lived in darkness, without fire and without fresh water.

Gray Eagle had a beautiful daughter, and Raven fell in love with her. At that time Raven was a handsome young man. He changed himself into a snow-white bird, and as a snow-white bird he pleased Gray Eagles daughter. She invited him to her fathers longhouse.

When Raven saw the sun and the moon and the stars and fresh water hanging on the sides of Eagles lodge, he knew what he should do. He watched for his chance to seize them when no one was looking. He stole all of them, and a brand of fire also, and flew out of the longhouse through the smoke hole.

As soon as Raven got outside he hung the sun up in the sky. It made so much light that he was able to fly far out to an island in the middle of the ocean. When the sun set, he fastened the moon up in the sky and hung the stars around in different places. By this new light he kept on flying, carrying with him the fresh water and the brand of fire he had stolen.

He flew back over the land. When he had reached the right place, he dropped all the water he had stolen. It fell to the ground and there became the source of all the fresh-water streams and lakes in the world.

Then Raven flew on, holding the brand of fire in his bill. The smoke from the fire blew back over his white feathers and made them black. When his bill began to burn, he had to drop the firebrand. It struck rocks and went into the rocks. That is why, if you strike two stones together, fire will drop out.

Raven's feathers never became white again after they were blackened by the smoke from the firebrand. That is why Raven is now a black bird.

I grew up in California and studied Coyote stories a bit there. Like Coyote, Raven doesn't do these things out of great altruism. It's more like he's just messing around and it works out well for everyone but not always so well for him. How cold and dark it must have been for the people before Raven freed the sun, the moon and fire. How thirsty they must have been before he stole the water and dropped it. And I think when it says "dropped it" that's what they mean, more of an oops than a great gift.

In some of the Coyote stories Coyote ends up taking all kinds of punishment as a result of his fluid, free actions. In this one Raven gets charred black. I bet he was a proud bird who loved being clean and white but now for the rest of time he's black. And I think Raven usually is a he - no idea if that's original, probably, or how they get translated into English with its tradition of defaulting the pronoun to male. Maybe both. It's also I think important, respectful even, not to idealize native culture - nobody's perfect.

Raven and Coyote, messing around, stirring things up, getting into trouble. There's plenty of sex in these stories too. Raven and Coyote live it up whenever they see the opportunity. Raven would have been chuckling at us if we had judgmental thoughts about the parties across the water the other day. Such prideful meditators - geeze, loosen up. Probably he wouldn't have said that, but maybe he would have swooped into the pavilion at break time and tossed all of our meditation cushions into the Sound.

We're such a careful self-conscious group of people, maybe it'd be good if we were a little looser and willing to get into more trouble. Maybe comedians and slapstick artists fill a similar role in mainstream American culture: as we laugh with them, and at them, and moan a little at their craziness it loosens us up a little and accepts our own craziness.

Not that I want everyone to take up pranks and practical jokes at our retreats but maybe we can soften up and relax a bit more about what we're up to here. Notice the tightness that comes up around wanting to do it right, to make the best use of the retreat. If we do feel like we're finding some benefit or realizing something new then the desire to take that with us can arise. In the stories Raven doesn't spend a lot of time thinking about what he learned from his latest misadventure. He just goes cheerfully on to the next escapade.

In our case maybe rather than taking refuge in foolishness - which wouldn't be the worst idea really - it's more accessible to take refuge in trust. Trusting the mysterious process we're in the middle of. See how since we're in the middle of it we usually can't see where it's going - we really can't. We sure want to. And we're prone to making up all kinds of stories about what's happening, what will happen, and how we'll handle it - or the powerful distress over the fear that we just won't be able to handle it. From wet shoes on the lawn to our loved ones getting sick - there's a vast range.

Someone was telling me they found a traditional Buddhist teaching on this called the five remembrances troubling. Of course it's fine to pick and choose what ideas, phrases, teachings and so on we hold in our

hearts and find helpful. That's wise. But maybe troubling teachings are also important - here's a typical version of the five remembrances:

1. I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.
2. I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape having ill health.
3. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.
4. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.
5. My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand.

The idea isn't just to get bummed out, it's more like that powerful idea: if you knew, for sure, this was the last day of your life how would you live it? How would you meet each moment? How would you interact with each person you encounter? How will you think about your life?

And the point being that that's actually deeply so: you have no way of knowing this isn't the last day of your life.

And the last point is the practice point. The pivot out of despair and suffering and into possibility.

My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand.

Maybe "cannot escape" sounds more negative than it can be. Let's rewrite this one:

My actions are my only true belongings. My actions are powerful. My actions can bring great joy. My actions bring can bring great sorrow. My actions create and destroy the world. My actions are the ground upon which I stand.

And an important and central point in Buddhist ethics is that your thoughts are actions too. Unlike the Western idea that actions are only external things that someone else can see. "it was in the privacy of my own head" we say. Or "it was just an idea, never mind" - but we invested energy in a thought, a vision, an idea, a judgment, a wish. These are powerful actions too.

So even though we aren't doing so much in an obvious way here we are taking lots of actions. What are you creating with your actions of body, speech, and mind. "What you practice grows stronger" is another great teaching phrase: what are you practicing in your mind? In your heart?

I love the theater but for some reason I haven't made it much of a priority to go see shows. I got too busy I guess. In my endless free time coming up I want to see more shows. Not to mention go to more live music. Join those native cultural events. More hiking, more paddling. See my friends more. Oh my...we all do have these lists don't we.

Anyway I bring up the theater because this idea of the importance of our actions makes me think of a show song I love. "Only Remembered" from War Horse. A great play about life, friendship, loyalty, love and loss in the context of World War I, the last time horses were used in active combat more or less. The central character is a young man - a boy really - and his horse.

The opening is also a great example of the realities we see and perceive and how much more there is in the bigger world.

In the opening scene we see just our hero and his horse (Albert and Joey) center stage - there's a top light and a spotlight on them - all else is dark - and Albert sings the opening verse solo:

Faded away like the stars in the morning,  
Losing their light in the glorious sun—  
Thus would we pass from this earth and its toiling,  
Only remembered for what we have done.

and then the chorus arises from everywhere on stage - this vast range of voices - and the lights come slowly up and we see that he's surrounded by the rest of the cast.

Only remembered, only remembered,  
Only remembered for what we have done;  
Thus would we pass from this earth and its toiling,  
Only remembered for what we have done.

Only remembered for what we have done. Our actions are all aren't they.

Here's the whole song which turns out to be a re-write of an 18th century hymn. Feel free to join me on the chorus if you like. The first half of the chorus is the same each time:

Only remembered, only remembered,  
Only remembered for what we have done;

Then the third line varies reprises the third line of the verse so pause there and I'll sing it.

And the last verse for all of us is:

Only remembered for what we have done.

And if that's too complicated don't worry about it.

Faded away like the stars in the morning,  
Losing their light in the glorious sun—  
Thus would we pass from this earth and its toiling,  
Only remembered for what we have done.

Only remembered, only remembered,  
Only remembered for what we have done;  
Thus would we pass from this earth and its toiling,  
Only remembered for what we have done.

Horses and men, plowshares and traces,  
The line on the land and the paths of the sun.  
Season by season we mark nature's graces.

Only remembered for what we have done.

Only remembered, only remembered,  
Only remembered for what we have done;  
Season by season we mark nature's graces.  
Only remembered for what we have done.

Only the truth that in life we have spoken,  
Only the seed that on earth we have sown;  
These shall pass onward when we are forgotten,  
Fruits of the harvest and what we have done.

Only remembered, only remembered,  
Only remembered for what we have done;  
These shall pass onward when we are forgotten,  
Only remembered by what we have done.

Only the truth that in life we have spoken. That's what continues even after we are forgotten as individuals. Says this teaching song. Hymns are all teaching songs really I guess right?

Okay, that's what I wanted to say today it seems. Native stories, history, and awareness. Not taking ourselves too seriously. And the serious matter of our actions of body, speech, and especially mind.

Just a coda on mind and thoughts: it's not like we can control our thinking exactly right? Someone was telling me that her practice really lightened up and felt more possible when she heard that she could let go of trying to control her mind. Thoughts arise according to conditions from this vast mind of ours - conditions from the past, from our surroundings, from stimuli of the moment, from complex mental objects that churn below the surface from all of this. Thoughts arise. There they are. That's how what you did, that's have emerged. Like a weather event in the mind.

The "then what" is the interesting point for us. How do we meet that. Do we justify, do we dig in, do we feed that particular fire? Do we leave it be? Do we make a note to go back to it later? That's the action - the then what. For that we will be remembered. How would you like to be remembered?

I'll continue the one on one check ins this afternoon. If you put your name on the list early and we didn't get to chat yesterday we should be able to today - the order got a little random there. And I will check after lunch for new sign ups. There's tomorrow too. And I appreciated yesterday that someone felt some urgency about something so she just came up and asked if we could check in then. My pleasure. Teresa and I are really here in service as best we can be. Don't hesitate to ask for what you need and you can trust us to be clear on what we have time and energy to give.

Oh and if it's actively raining we can do our Qi Gong inside at 3pm. We'll see how it is. Might be kind of fun to do it outside anyway if it's pretty light. Meet the water element in that way if it's in a gentle form. Have a rain coat?

And one last thought: if you like to walk - they have a lovely little trail system here if you haven't explored it yet. It takes off right behind the big pile of dirt in the bathhouse construction site over here.

There are a few different places you can get right down to the water. A variety of habitats you get to walk through in the forest here. Maybe in tomorrow's talk we'll explore trees together in this form. I invite you to explore the trees that are here in person today too.

Thank you very much.