

I had not noticed until it was pointed out to me, but in Mark's gospel, whenever someone comes up to Jesus and kneels, asking for a blessing, it is always a healing story. The person either has a disease or is possessed by a demon. And whenever Jesus orders that person to "go," it's in relation to a healing.

So when the rich young man comes to Jesus, asking what he should do to inherit eternal life, perhaps his condition is also an illness: heartsickness. Maybe he's been conscientiously following every instruction for living well, and he still feels empty. He says, "Teacher, I have kept all these commandments since my youth;" and nobody keeps all the commandments without trying hard and being conscious of trying hard. But he doesn't feel like he's arrived, or knows anything of eternal life. So Jesus, looking at him, loves him, and tells him what a good Buddhist master would tell him: "Go, detach yourself from what reinforces your false self, and come travel with me." But that is too hard, and the man goes away grieving.

The Buddhist publication *Lion's Roar* published a story about a man named Wade who very much wanted to make progress toward Buddha-consciousness. He thought that what was getting in his way was the inadequacy of his meditation space at home. The statue of the Buddha that he had did not appeal to him, so he went looking for another. His teacher had told him that the right one would "exhibit emptiness," whatever that meant. While he waited for the right Buddha statue to cross his path, he worked on decorating his meditation space. He found a low table at a flea market for an altar, and used some dishes his mother had made to hold incense.

He found a folding screen inscribed with the Heart Sutra. Still no

improvement in the meditation experience. He actually went *shopping* for the appropriate Buddha statue, and was overwhelmed with the abundance of inappropriate ones. In his next session with his teacher, he said, “Shi, my meditation practice is suffering and I don’t know why.”

Shi replied, “Is it only your meditation practice?”

“No, actually it is the entirety of my moment-to-moment practice.”

“And do you think you know why?”

“I can’t seem to find the perfect Buddha for my spiritual space at home. The one I want I can’t seem to find.”

Shi inclined his head toward the altar there in the temple’s meditation room.

“What do you see on the altar?”

Wade stared not realizing what Shi meant for him to see. “I am unsure.”

“When you recognize then you will realize.”

After some time, he realized that he was not after a Buddha, but after Buddha-nature, which is emptiness. He had been focusing on the finger that points at the moon, rather than on the moon. The empty altar was exactly what he needed.

One more story, a little less spiritual but closer to home: when I was eleven I decided I wanted a unicycle. I really, really wanted a unicycle. But my parents wouldn’t buy me one. They said I was welcome to save my allowance and get one myself, and I resolved to do just that. But the unicycle cost \$21, and I only received fifty cents a week, so what with other things I wanted and the slowness of racking up even five dollars, I never got the unicycle. And I was a little bitter about it.

But later I realized that it wasn’t the unicycle I wanted; it was that I wanted to be the kind of person who rides a unicycle. I wanted that quirkiness, that artsyness, the carefree attitude and *je ne se quois* that goes with a unicycle. It was, at that point in my life, the most sophisticated and suave thing I could imagine, and I aspired to it. I didn’t know how else to *be* so sophisticated, but with a unicycle.

You see where I'm going with the rich young man. He envisioned himself a certain way, and he had done all the things he could imagine in order to achieve that goal, eternal life. He had kept all the commandments. But perhaps his knowledge of the law, his perfect piety, his abundant wealth – had distorted his sense of himself, and of God, and of his neighbor. Perhaps he did not think he could feel good about who he was if he didn't have the right props—the good haircut, the ability to travel, the ability to give generously. Maybe Jesus tells him to divest himself of those resources so that he can rely on the grace of God to validate him. It's not the money, exactly, that's the problem; it's what he needs the money to do for him. You could be in exactly the same position if you were attached to a concept of yourself as a deeply generous person, and you were constantly giving away money: as long as you're invested in this constructed identity, you are not naked before God, as it were. You're not aware that you live by grace. As far as the rich young man knew, all he had going for him was his virtuous life and his wealth—to walk away from those felt like death.

But Richard Rohr says that grace is found at the depths and in the death of everything. He says, 'the only "deadly sin" is to swim on the surface of things, where we never see, find, or desire God or love. This includes even the surface of religion, which might be the worst danger of all. Thus, we must not be afraid of falling, failing, going "down."' <https://cac.org/grace-is-key-2016-02-01/><sup>1</sup> In other words, Jesus was inviting the young man to "die" to his constructed, curated self, and see what happened. It sounds terrifying, like letting go of the rope when you're rock climbing,

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Jossey-Bass: 2013), xx-xxii.

but it's the only way to escape the false self and enter abundant life. Again, Rohr:

*When you go to the full depths and death, sometimes even the depths of your sin, you can always come out the other side—and the word for that is resurrection. . . .* Something or someone seems to fill the tragic gap between death and life, but *only at the point of no return*. None of us crosses over by our own effort or merits, purity, or perfection. We are all carried across by an uncreated and unearned grace—from pope, to president, to princess, to peasant. Worthiness is never the ticket, only deep desire, and the ticket is given in the desiring. The tomb is always finally empty. There are no exceptions to death, and there are no exceptions to grace. And I believe, with good evidence, that there are no exceptions to resurrection.

Jesus said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” And I do think he’s warning very literally about the hazards of wealth, because it can insulate us from the unpleasant experiences that our neighbors are having, and allow us to trivialize the suffering of others. But I think the warning is fundamentally about whatever we cling to or seek after to save ourselves—just the right Buddha statue, or the unicycle, or the identity as a good person who follows all the commandments. Jesus affirmed his disciples who had let go of everything to follow him. “There is no one who has left [all] for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold.”

The man in the Buddhist story continued his practice of meditation in front of an empty altar. Then one day while cutting through an alley, he saw a neighbor struggling to get some trash into a dumpster, and stopped to help out. When they’d loaded all the trash, he noticed a Buddha abandoned under some honeysuckle vines, and asked the neighbor about it. “Oh, that,” the man said. “It’s an old plaster Buddha that’s been disintegrating in the rain and weather. It can get thrown too.” But the Buddhist took it home, because he realized that he had found the

Impermanent Buddha, the image that would remind him of non-attachment.

Let us pray:

Grace beyond grace, we remember that in the wilderness you told your people, "If Yahweh set his heart on you and chose you, it was not because you were greater than other peoples. In fact, you were the least of all the peoples. It was for love of you and to keep the covenant that he swore to your fathers and mothers that Yahweh has brought you out with his mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery" (Dt 7:7-8). Help us respond to your love and move toward your love; give us the courage to let go of the props we think we need, and die to our false selves, that we might live abundantly and eternally in you. Amen.