

The Transfiguration presents the disciples, and us, with a paradox. Shortly before this passage, Peter has identified Jesus as the messiah, the anointed king sent by God for the liberation of Israel. He is the new King David, as yet unknown, but sure to triumph. This is validated by the appearance on the mountain of the great prophets, Moses and Elijah. Peter, James and John see Jesus' glory, and they hear the voice of God: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" It doesn't get much clearer than that.

But when Peter had identified Jesus as the messiah, Jesus had said immediately that "the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected . . . and killed." He said that any follower of his should also expect to carry a cross. That is defeat and humiliation; it doesn't get much clearer than *that*. No wonder Peter and the others kept silent; how could they make sense of this paradox?

Back at the foot of the mountain, the remaining disciples had failed miserably to heal a boy. Jesus complained about a "faithless and perverse generation" and healed the child, and "all were astounded at the greatness of God." But then this healer who manifests the greatness of God repeated, "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands." And they did not understand.

Ann Montgomery's sister wrote a terrific article in *Tiny Buddha*, "How Your Ego Thrives on Fear and Keeps You Panicked." She reminds her readers of the distinction between what we think of as our selves, our "tiny self" or our ego, and our real self, our soul. She says our tiny self is reactive and self-protective, easily hurt, easily provoked. It sees threats everywhere. Our real self, she says, is like the

honey badger. You know the honey badger meme? There's a video on YouTube with video footage of a honey badger, and a voice-over pointing out how badass the honey badger is. Stung by bees, bitten by a cobra, the honey badger doesn't care. It just keeps going. The soul, says Ann's sister, is rooted in love and a deep-seated well-being. What bothers the self just bounces off the soul. So we need to practice listening to our souls. Listening to God. She tells of a time when her self felt injured. Her self thought it needed an apology, assurances that she really was loved, and a guarantee that the injury would never happen again. She checked in with her soul: whoops, she already had everything she needed to be okay.

Things like wounded pride, which are all-important to ego, don't really faze the honey badger much. He's got a much tougher hide and a bigger heart by far. Honey badgers *do* care, but not about the things ego finds important.

So this is how my soul dealt with these situations: First, because I felt genuinely hurt, I let myself feel that pain with [compassion](#). I didn't dismiss the hurt. Next, I looked carefully at my own part in what happened, to find out if there was anything I needed to clarify or apologize for. Then I reached out and expressed my feelings as kindly and truthfully as possible. And then I stopped.

The story of the Transfiguration shows us the disciples sort of whipping between self and soul—on the one hand, they see, really see, that Jesus is the Chosen One of God, the messiah, the one whose victory is their victory. On the other hand their selves cannot see how that reality can co-exist with the reality of humiliation and death, and they are bewildered and afraid. Jesus can hold both realities together; his small self has submerged itself into his soul, if you will. But the rest of the faithless and perverse generation just cannot believe both realities; they cannot see how powerlessness could be Jesus' superpower.

What Jesus did that got him into trouble was to act from deep compassion.

His compassion was such that there was no room for fear. So when compassionate deeds would put him in danger, calling out the authorities for their failures, he endangered himself. He did not do violence, but he didn't refrain from doing what would provoke violence from those he offended. Fear did not stifle his compassion.

The threat of humiliation, violence or death intimidates the small self, but it doesn't bother the honey badger soul. In his weakness, succumbing to betrayal and death, Jesus revealed the honey badger invincibility of God's compassion. If Jesus had fought back, if he had responded to violence with violence, we would only have seen how poorly armed he was, far inferior to the resources of the Romans. But when he responded with the soul, they couldn't touch him. All they could do was kill him, but the boundless compassion of God could not be stopped by death.

The Transfiguration story gives the disciples and us this paradox: God's Chosen, doomed to defeat. The conquering king, dying on a cross. How do we make sense of the two realities in which we live? Tracy Cochran

(<http://www.dailygood.org/story/1518/in-the-midst-of-winter-an-invincible-summer-tracy-cochran/>) writes that in Buddhism,

a definition of faith is the ability to keep our hearts open in the darkness of the unknown. The root of the word *patience* is a Latin verb for "suffer," which in the ancient sense meant to hold, not to grasp but to bear, to tolerate without pushing away. Being patient doesn't mean being passive. It means being attentive, willing to be available to what is happening, going on seeing, noticing how things change. When we aren't wishing for something to be over, or when we aren't freezing around an idea about what it is we are seeing, we see and hear more."

In other words, faith—or wisdom, I would say—is living in the questions, to borrow a phrase from Rilke. It's being able to recognize that the distress of the self is not

necessarily a reflection of the truth. It's tolerating without anesthetic the fact that life is uncertain, and there are no guarantees—and all is well.

There is a lot to be said for failure. The Buddha failed in his quest to attain enlightenment through meditation; when he decided to stop fighting for enlightenment, he accepted the kind offer of a bowl of rice from a village girl. That act of compassion reminded him of a moment in childhood when he had sat under a tree and watched his father and others plowing the fields for planting. He had been simply aware and attentive, and he now realized that such attentiveness was all that was required. J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, once told a graduating class of Harvard that failure was the bedrock upon which she built her real life. Failing utterly by worldly standards granted her the freedom to strip her life down to the essentials, to tell the story of a lonely boy who, unknown to himself, was really a wizard.

This is not self-help advice. It's more a reflection on what is. I'm trying to say that when all is lost and we feel profoundly unsafe, that may be when we have a chance to connect with reality. When our crutches and workarounds betray us, if we can stay open, we have a chance to see what's really there. When what we thought was sustaining us gives way, if we can stay open, we'll find that we were really sustained at a different level the whole time. As Albert Camus, of all people, that ray of sunshine, said wisely, *"In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger, something better, pushing right back."*

Good God, you ask us to have faith in the times when our vision and our hope is shrouded in mist. Thank you that we do not need to fear but trust only in you.