

4/17 Downtown Dharma Meetup (5pm Malcolm X Park)

Hi everyone!

For the next iteration of the Downtown Dharma reading/discussion group we're going to try meeting up....IN PERSON at Malcolm X park at 5pm on Saturday the 17th. Hopefully the weather is nice!

The material for this month's conversation comes from Annie Dillard's book A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, which despite not being a Buddhist book is one of the most inquisitive and joyful explorations of how mindfulness can reveal the miraculous in our surrounding environment I've encountered. She is a beautiful writer (seriously, like sublimely jaw-dropping in places) who captures how clear attention can transform experience, and also probes the relationship between mindfulness/attention and wisdom.

Please feel invited to join on the 17th. I wrote up some [discussion questions](#) (pdfs included) to frame the conversation. I think this should be fun, and thanks for being YOU.

Heaven and Earth in Jest (15 pages)

1. Annie Dillard writes the following about being absorbed in an environment:
“When I cross again the bridge that is really the steers’ fence, the wind has thinned to the delicate air of twilight; it crumples the water’s skin. I watch the running sheets of light raised on the creek’s surface. The sight has the appeal of the purely passive, like the racing of light under clouds on a field, the beautiful dream at the moment of being dreamed. The breeze is the merest puff, but you yourself sail headlong and breathless under the gale force of the spirit.”

Have you had any experiences reminiscent of this image, when your attention has been so fully involved in an environment that you feel like your thoughts aren’t completely your own, that you’re being pulled through or sailing across a medium of feeling? Where is the self in those moments? Personally I remember watching a large plume of birds in Kenilworth Marsh, hundreds, maybe thousands of them, expanding and shape-shifting over a marsh. It was one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen and a moment when the concept of “Luke” totally dissolved.

2. If Pilgrim at Tinker Creek has a theme, it’s that the heavenly can be experienced within the perfectly ordinary when we pay attention. She refutes Pascal’s notion of an absent God and believes that God is present wherever we care to look:
“It could be that God has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe has spread, to a fabric of spirit and a sense so grand and subtle...that we can only feel blindly of its hem...have we come even that far? Have we rowed out to the thick darkness, or are we all playing pinochle in the bottom of the boat?”

Elsewhere, describing how vivid experience can give rise to wisdom, she quotes Thoreau (in the chapter *Intricacy*)

“Think of our life in nature—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common* sense! *Contact! Contact!* Who are we? *Where* are we? The Lord God of gods, the Lord God of gods, he knoweth...”

However you define it, where do you find God? Is perception the best way to understand the deeper truths of life? If so, what is the role of abstract philosophizing or reasoning?

Intricacy (28 pages)

1. Among my favorite images from the book is Dillard’s description of John Dee’s thought experiment of a giant mirror zooming from earth faster than the speed of light which allows an observer to view our planet’s unfolding, from the early earth “swaddled in mists,” to floods and plagues and the building of cities, to finally *your* own existence: “Slow it down more, come closer still. A dot appears, a flesh-flake. It swells like a balloon; it moves, circles, slows, and *vanishes*. This is *your* life.”

In a related passage she describes how her own dream about time’s unfolding helped her understand that the history of the world—and the present—are filled with beautiful conscious moments:

“All the individual people, I understood with special clarity, were living at that moment with great emotion, in intricate detail, in their individual times and places....That was a good time then, a good time to be living. And I began to think of our time.”

These passages are, for me, a restatement of the core Buddhist theme about how experiencing a human life among the flux and randomness of the universe is miraculous.

What practices or experiences, for you, highlight the miraculousness of experiencing a human life?

2. A recurring theme of this chapter is how the uncontrolled hodgepodge of life and matter created by evolution constitutes a “fluted fringe” that doesn’t seem necessary for the universe to function (couldn’t a forest have simply been a gob of chemical g GToo instead of the complex interaction of soil and trees and fungi and leaves). Dillard asserts that the myriad, superfluous forms nature assumes allow for beauty, and marvels that all of the jagged nooks and crannies of a toy globe aren’t just suggestive, but actually *there* in more detail than the wildest imagination could dream. She’s describing in this chapter, I think, how curiosity and wonder fashion a subjective experience of beauty.

I am curious whether the wonder Dillard so eloquently describes can motivate expression of love, or whether it is itself a form of love. **How does wonder function**

within the context of the Buddhist practice of supporting the well-being of all beings? Dillard begins this chapter by describing her interest in a simple goldfish purchased for 25 cents. It's clear in this passage that the attention she pays to the goldfish, the beauty she's appreciated, has given rise to a sort of reverence. **If we pay close attention to and experience wonder in the world, are compassion, love, and care for living (and non-“living”) beings the natural response?**

Fecundity (5 pages)

In this chapter excerpt Dillard observes that death is the driving force of evolution. She wonders whether the pain inherent to the world reflects something malevolent in nature, or whether the real problem is our emotional reactions to natural processes. She decides that our emotions about death are amiss and that the world is “fine.”

This reminds me of concepts I've learned through Buddhism (and largely agree with) about finding peace in a turbulent world by adjusting our mental/emotional attitudes. **Do you think this reasoning applies to all forms of pain and distress in the world (man-made as well as “natural”) or does the suffering caused by human society (poverty, racism, war) require a different response? How should we relate to socially-created oppression while trying to practically be of service?**