Meetings With Mentors

A Young Adult Interviews Leading Visionaries

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Chellis Glendinning
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Malidoma Somé
Br. David Steindl-Rast
Starhawk

Soren Gordhamer

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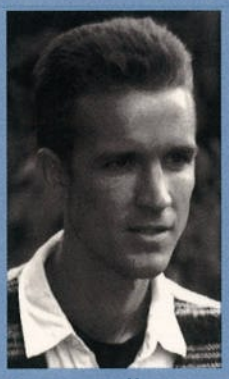
In this engaging book we journey with the author who spends three years during his mid-twenties interviewing leaders in the fields of psychology, spirituality, and the environment. His quest is to find pieces for a new vision—one that honors the earth, spirituality, and community. The people he interviews—monks, shamans, witches, environmentalists, psychologists, philosophers, meditation teachers—tell stories from their own lives and offer a wide range of perspectives on issues such as mentorship, rites of passage, right livelihood, and social action.

Cultures throughout history have valued initiation for their youth. Although rites of passage have been mostly forgotten in our time, youth reaching their late teens and twenties still long to go on a journey that re-unites them with the ways of nature. In *Meetings With Mentors* one young man shares his personal journey. The questions he asks in his interviews are the questions we all must ask at some point:

• How do I live in a way that is inwardly rich and outwardly responsible? • How do I find my own unique path and contribution? • How do I take care of myself while caring for our earth?



Soren Gordhamer

I think most young people face a very deep spiritual longing since the time of being a teenager. They look out at the world and ask, "What am I supposed to do with this? I see that the modern society around me has screwed up royally!" Any young person whose eyes are even a little open can see that. And then this person asks, "What can I do? What is my place in this? How can I show myself? What is my gift or my art in the world?"

—Jack Kornfield,
author of *A Path With Heart*, from his interview in *Meetings With Mentors*

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Meetings with Mentors

To Brother David,

for many years of
gentle support and
kind encouragement.
Thank you dearly,

Bone

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Finding Your Boat and Keeping It Afloat

with

Brother David Steindl-Rast

Brother David Steindl-Rast

Brother David Steindl-Rast has for many years been a leader in teaching the benefits of contemplation and the monastic life. Born in Vienna, Austria in 1926, his early years were greatly affected by the Second World War. He witnessed the Nazi occupation of Austria when he was twelve. After the War, he became interested in both art and psychology, and earned a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Vienna. When he completed his studies, Steindl-Rast traveled to the United States and visited a group of monks who had started a monastery based on the classic monastery guidebook, *The Rule of St. Benedict*. Steindl-Rast later joined this group, becoming a member of the Mt. Saviour Monastery in 1953. Since that time, he has traveled throughout the world lecturing and exploring the relationship between various spiritual traditions. Having also studied Buddhism and having lived for three years in a Zen monastery, he has been active in dialogues exploring the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism.

The author of *A Listening Heart, Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, and, most recently, *The Music of Silence: Entering the Sacred Space of Monastic Experience*, Steindl-Rast does not limit himself to the Benedictine tradition, often leading workshops with Taoists, Zen teachers, African shamans, and a wide variety of others. He has also co-authored two books: *Belonging to the Universe* (with physicist Fritjof Capra), discussions on the relationship between mysticism and physics; and *The Ground We Share* (with Zen teacher Robert Aitken) which consists of conversations on Buddhist and Christian views of spiritual practice. Steindl-Rast is one of those rare individuals who can be spiritually at ease in many different environments, while still remaining firmly planted in his own tradition.

I know Steindl-Rast from the time I lived at the Esalen Institute. I participated in many of his workshops and greatly enjoyed them, but it has always been the small actions that have impressed me about Steindl-Rast. At Esalen I worked as a dishwasher, and it is customary to ask workshop participants if anyone would be willing to help in the kitchen after the evening meal. One night I was dishwashing and I approached Steindl-Rast's group to request volunteers. No one volunteered to help, but as I was leaving, I saw Steindl-Rast's hand raise. He said something to the effect, "I have a little free time. I can help in the kitchen." So between groups, he spent about an hour helping me wash dishes while the music of Tracy Chapman blasted through the speakers. He is the only workshop leader I ever saw volunteering in the kitchen. It is these small actions that have had the most impact on me.

Due to Steindl-Rast's wide range of experience with spiritual traditions, I wanted to explore with him how one can find a spiritual tradition that is right for that person. I was also interested in discussing how religion and spiritual practice can help unite people, rather than separate them and create more conflict. In this interview, Steindl-Rast and I explore these issues, as well as the role of social involvement and right action.

I arrived at the Immaculate Heart Hermitage in Big Sur, California to meet with Steindl-Rast at seven o'clock, just as it was getting dark. After walking around a few minutes a bit unsure where to go, I saw Steindl-Rast's cheerful face through a window and he motioned me to come inside. I joined him in a semi-lit room that contained a small table, a lamp, a heater, and three chairs. He was dressed very casually, and being in his presence made me feel very comfortable and at ease. After spending a few minutes catching up with each other, we each pulled up a chair, huddled around the heater, and began our conversation.

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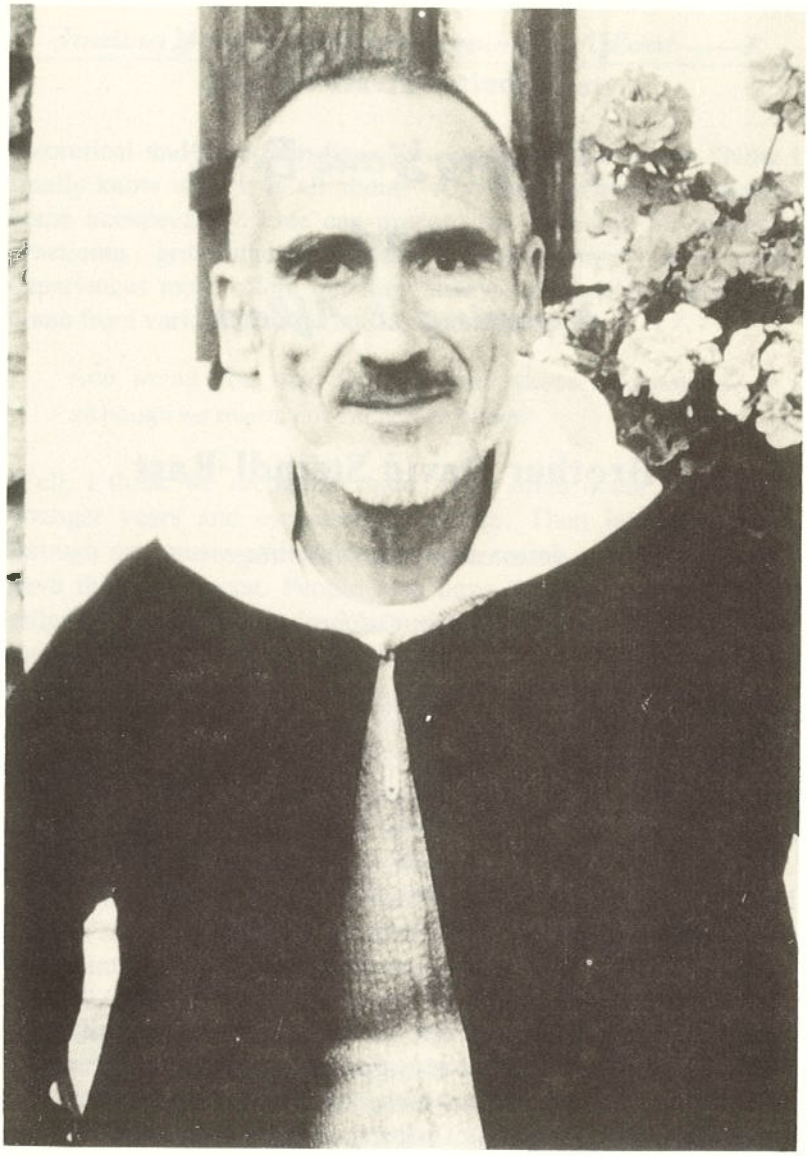

Brother David Steindl-Rast

Finding Your Boat
and
Keeping it Afloat

with

Brother David Steindl-Rast

Immaculate Heart Hermitage

Big Sur, California

Soren: As I was driving here, I was thinking about something you refer to as "peak experiences." I thought this might be a good place to start talking about what each spiritual tradition offers: maybe they offer us a deeper connection to these moments. I was wondering what these peak experiences are to you and if you remember having any when you were younger.

Brother David: Yes, I'm glad you start with reference to the peak experience, because if you hadn't, we would have eventually come to it. It is hard to talk about any spiritual path without reference to those moments, because in those moments, as far as one can generalize, we get a taste of what it is like to be "limitlessly one with all." The common denominator of these experiences is probably the sense of belonging. This is the starting point for all the spiritual traditions, whether they are theistic or non-theistic. If it is theistic, they say the reference point to this experience is what we call God. So before we have an experience like that, God is just a word. But it becomes an experiential reality only in this context. That is why people who are in a school that is more

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theoretical and who then have this experience, will say, "Now I finally know what it is all about." And these experiences usually come unexpectedly. One can prepare for them by, for example, practicing gratefulness. Grateful people have these peak experiences more often, but they always come as a surprise and come from various sources and circumstances.

> And would you say we've all had these experiences, although we might not recognize them?

Well, I think we recognize them. They often occur in people's younger years and especially in nature. Then later on in life through art, music and dance, through seeing a rainbow, people have this experience. People also have this experience through religious practices or drug experiences (although that doesn't justify drug experience), but it is a by-product sometimes. So there are many different ways we can come to this experience. But I don't want to emphasize the experience too much because then people will just want it again and again—and you just can't will it to happen. It is more of an awareness, and once we know what it is all about, we can cultivate this sense of belonging. We cultivate it by living with others as we live when we feel we belong together. This then makes us behave toward others in a different way. And when I say "others," I don't mean only other human beings, but also plants and animals—really everything.

Something I mentioned earlier, this gratefulness really springs from this experience of belonging. It comes instantaneously when someone has that sense of limitless belonging. It is hard to be grateful without this reference point. This again is something we can cultivate and celebrate in every moment of life.

So all the different paths start in some way from this mystic awareness. They start from this sense of being "one with all" and they ultimately lead to this same goal. There are all these spiritual paths, both of the East and the West, yet their goal (they proclaim) is to lead you to communion with Ultimate Reality. So ultimately,

it is the starting point and the ending point. Now, whatever is in-between can be extremely different from one tradition to another, more so than most people realize. It is important that they are different, because that makes them available to a wider variety of people. It is important to have the different paths so there is something for everyone, but the beginning and the end points are most important.

> Brother David, I know you've spent part of your years as a Christian monk studying Zen Buddhism. You didn't feel there was any conflict in studying Zen Buddhism as a Christian monk?

In studying Zen, I found that the ways and the forms are very different from my Benedictine tradition. On the surface they may look similar, but deep down they are very different from one another. I'm familiar with different forms of Buddhism but mainly Zen Buddhism. The difference between the Christian faith and Zen is like the difference between a bell and a gong. Zen Buddhism is like a gong with its emphasis on Silence, while the Christian faith is like a bell with its focus on the Word.

The Christian faith is about the Word in the widest sense; the message and the meaning of life embodied in form, in people, in situations, and in everything you can experience. That is why the key word in the Bible is, "God speaks." Whether it is the Hebrew Bible or Greek Bible, it is always, "God speaks." This insight is that in each situation, in everything that is, God speaks to us. This is what makes this particular tradition tick. While Buddhism, as I understand it, is much more about Silence. When you hear a gong, it sounds like it is constantly pulling itself back into Silence. It comes from Silence and returns to Silence. Zen is about entering deeper and deeper into this Silence.

So they are extremely different in many ways, but when you experience them both deeply, you see that the Word comes from the Silence and that the Silence is in the Word. When you really

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Brother David Steindl-Rast

listen to God speaking to you in each moment, you see that what speaks to you is the Silence.

> For someone who is looking for a spiritual tradition to explore and follow, what advice would you give them? Would it be to focus on their peak experiences?

To focus on their peak experiences could easily be misunderstood. The person could become preoccupied with getting a certain high. I would make reference to the peak experience by saying, "When you have experienced the bliss of being one with all, that is what it's all about." Those are the moments in life which have meaning. Those are the moments in which everything is experienced as being real. That's what it is all about. Then the question is, "How can we make this a more permanent awareness? How can we live a life that embodies this experience, that carries this experience on? If this is our encounter with meaning, how do we make our life more meaningful?" Then I would ask someone, "Are you not already familiar with one path?" Most people are familiar with one path a little more than others, but they usually reject those they have been brought up with. If they grow up with a Catholic background, they often say, "I don't want anything to do with that." Whatever tradition a person comes out of, he or she often says, "Yes, I come out of this tradition, but I don't like it."

Sometimes you meet someone whose parents left it up to them to find their way, but then you can ask them, "Where is your bliss? Where do you find yourself most alive?" Some people say they feel this when they are in nature. Others find this in social action or in working for peace. I think the contact with nature is for many people today a very religious experience. It comes closer to what religion really meant to people a hundred years ago than most anything else. And that awareness can possibly lead people towards responsible action, or to working for the environment, or for peace. Still others find that music and concerts are filled with religious meaning.

For example, have you ever been to a Grateful Dead show? They don't do it for me, but some people describe it as a religious experience for them.

Yes, I was thinking of that one, actually.

You once wrote: "A measure of one's religious life is a measure of one's aliveness. A measure of one's aliveness is a sign of one's spiritual life." That has always stayed with me as something I can look at in my life.

Yes, and I would ask someone who is looking for a path to follow, "Where are you most alive? In what area of your life are you most alive?" Then realize all areas of your life can come alive in that way. In that area where you are most alive is also the place you can find community, because the religious life is healthiest and happiest when we live in community. That's a very important element.

One can also go visit one of the communities that already exist, like Green Gulch,[1] Tassajara,[2] the Lama Foundation,[3] or Findhorn.[4] Many people find that living in one of these centers for a month or so, where there is that community support that leads in some spiritual direction, is often very useful. Some people come to a monastery or hermitage and it helps them as well. Many people come to this hermitage who are not planning on being monks or nuns, but they want to live in a monastic setting for a short time.

If someone says to me, "Well, I've started doing this but I'm not sure. . . ." I tell them, "If you started there, then stay with it unless it is very important for you to do something else." You should keep digging in the place you started. Like Swami Satchitananda has said, "We often go from one place to another digging holes and just as we are about to hit water we move to another spot." If we had only stayed in that one spot we would have eventually hit water. But on the other hand, if you have to go somewhere else,

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then go somewhere else. There is a great deal of unrest in our time, especially among younger people.

> We also seem to be living at a time where there is so much information about various traditions. Forty years ago I think it was very difficult to find a copy of the Tao Te Ching[5] or a book on Tibetan Buddhism, and now you can find a copy in most major book stores in any city. This makes the possibilities greater, but I also think it can prevent one from committing to a certain way because there is so much to explore.

It is like going to a smorgasbord and there is all this food, but we end up eating practically nothing. (Laughter)

Another element to this is that we were often told that one way is the only way. The practitioners of each different path have had the tendency to think "our" way is the only way. Nowadays, the idea that there is only one way has been completely shattered.

> Do you think so?

Well, we have to look and ask ourselves, "Why did they say that formerly?" Were they just so narrow-minded that they really thought one way was the only way? That's probably true in some cases, but I think there was also a didactic reason for it. When you tell someone that one way is the only way, they often make a lot of effort. If you tell them that this is only one way among many, the strange effect of that is, rather than saying, "Oh wonderful, then I will find the one that I really want," they don't do anything. The moment you say, "Any of them can get you there," they don't take any. It's a strange thing that I don't quite understand. This is the way I've seen it work. So you may have to play a trick on yourself and look around until you find something that looks quite possible, and say to yourself, "For me, this is now the only one. Until further notice, this is the only one." Then really sink your teeth

into it, because if you don't, you won't be able to get very far. It takes no less than everything.

There comes a point of commitment after which it is not a good idea to question whether you should have made that commitment. You need every ounce of energy to go through with that commitment, and to ask yourself over and over if you should have made it is an energy leak you cannot afford. You need that energy to make a go of it. It is similar to a relationship that you are just playing around in. There comes a point when you need to make a mutual commitment. From that point on, if you constantly ask whether that was a good idea, you will just lose the energy to really make a go of it. There are certain questions we should not allow ourselves to ask after a certain point. It's a delicate balance because you don't want it to get too rigid. But to set out on a one-way street and decide not to go back—that can be very important.

> I've always wanted to meet someone who is totally committed to a certain way, but who also knows there are other ways and respects them. The people I see who are very committed often say, "This is the only way." Or I hear people say that it is all the same, but they don't do anything. I don't see much aliveness or movement in them. I've always looked for the type of person who could balance these two sides.

Yes, I resonate very strongly with that. You choose one way that you really commit yourself to, but you go deeply enough into it so that you reach the point where they are all one; you know that it is only your way to the Absolute.

> Brother David, one of the sadder things I saw while I was traveling recently was all the wars and fighting occurring in the name of religion. In India, certain Hindus and Muslims were fighting over a particular temple. Then in Pakistan, nineteen people were killed in the city I was

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Brother David Steindl-Rast

staying in due to differences in religious belief between the Sunnite and Shiite. So from another perspective, we see how much destruction is done in the name of religion. I know you have tried to bring understanding between various religions so that this does not happen. As our technology and strength build, it seems we can no longer afford to let differences in dogma cause us to fight with one another.

These religious wars are one of the saddest things. Most traditions have at one time or another fallen into this trap. The thing is so bad that some people may want to write off everything that has to do with religion.

Yes, I think many people do.

What helps is to look very closely at it. Wherever there are two groups fighting who are religiously opposed to one another, which ever ones are doing the fighting—no matter which religion they are from—they are less religious compared to the ones who are working for peace. The more religious you get the more peaceful you become and the less you fight. So the ones who do the fighting are not the most religious, but the least religious by their own witness. This is the only thing that can justify not writing off religion.

Maybe it is a sign we need to go deeper, not further away. Maybe if we went further into our practice, that common thread would be found. Yet many people are ready to write it all off because of what we were just talking about.

This is true of any tradition in which you stand. Usually those further away from a tradition look at it more palatably, and as they get closer they see more of the flaws. We also have to realize that any tradition we follow has in the course of its history

accumulated elements that are not necessarily helpful and may in fact be in contradiction to the core of the tradition. So, whatever tradition we take on, *we* are responsible for it. This is a very important thing, especially for people who are somewhat "shopping around." You may think of a tradition as a particular train that comes along. You think there are all these trains, and you pick the one that goes where you want to go. But that is not a particularly healthy way to look at it. You have to make it what it is. *It* won't take *you* there; *you* have to take *it* there! At the same time it takes you there, you also take it there. It is not so much like a train but more like a rowboat. *You* have to do the rowing. You'll probably even have to fix a couple of leaks along the way, throw buckets of water out when it gets too heavy, and keep it in shape. It will help you, but you have to also help it.

If you sit there complaining about the boat, it will sink.

Well, we are not always prepared to take more responsibility. It's too difficult. It's too messy. And it is often very difficult when you come to a tradition as a newcomer to really understand what is important and what is not. I don't think in the first week or ten days you can see what needs to be discarded, because often those things you think should be discarded are precisely what you need most. Those things are the ones that are pushing you against the grain. So we have to ask questions and learn—not just simply to accept everything lock, stock, and barrel. Ask questions. Ask them respectfully and clearly, but also critically. We have the duty in a particular tradition to do that, and only in this way can we distinguish what is a true spiritual path from what is called "a cult." There is a very good way to distinguish the two. If a religion is designed to empower you and make you stand on your own two feet, then it is truly religious, because that is what the institutions are here for. It has an authority over you to empower and strengthen you. If it makes you dependent and puts you down, be very careful. Although it seems good and promises you salvation, if it puts you down, I don't think it is very good. It has to make you stand on your own two feet. It may put you in a position of

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Brother David Steindl-Rast

being a learner for awhile, but even then you can ask yourself, "Do they allow you to ask questions? Do they encourage questions? Or are they afraid that if you ask the wrong question the whole thing will come tumbling down?" So you have to be careful there.

> Maybe in some ways a spiritual practice doesn't take all your problems away but instead shows them to you. You don't get to lean back in your first class chair on the train and say, "Wake me up when we get there."

I think this whole idea of a "spiritual path" needs to be addressed. Too often one confuses the spiritual path with this or that *practice* of a particular tradition. Someone often does yoga exercises, or meditates, or chants, and says, "This is my path." These methods, or practices as we call them, are just what the word "practice" says. You're practicing, like you are practicing an instrument or a particular dance. It is a practice for what is really your method or path, and that is everyday living, only more alive. It's going to work, it's doing your studies, it's living with your partner, it's getting along with your friends and enemies, it's driving your car, it's keeping your toenails clipped, it's everything. It is all the spiritual path, only more alive. If your practice isn't to be more alive in all these areas, then it is just an alibi for the real spiritual path. It's everyday living, only more alive.

> It is ironic how our practice can actually keep us from that greater learning. In the sense of thinking we've done our work for the day and can now go back to sleep.

Whatever you do as a practice should then set you up to do everything with that attention, or with that feeling of gratefulness. I'm always coming back to gratefulness because it is such a general, everyday term that leads you directly to what is most important in spiritual life—the awareness, the joy, the trust, the openness, the sense of being connected with everything. You can't be grateful in isolation. Gratefulness really ties you in to this sense of belonging.

What I often bring to a meditation practice and other practices is the opposite of gratefulness. I go into it with this accumulating attitude. What I've liked from your books is that you first talk about being grateful for what we have and letting that be the starting point.

Yes, realize that gratefulness is always gratefulness for *opportunity*. Opportunity is the key word here. Most of the time it is the opportunity to enjoy. When you get a present, you are grateful because you enjoy the present. But when you get something that you don't want, it is also an opportunity to do something with it. When you are trained by always taking the opportunity and rising to the occasion, most of the time to enjoy, then when other opportunities come for you to struggle and learn patience, you'll take those opportunities too. You can be grateful that you are there and have the opportunity to see this. It is about being alert to opportunity.

That goes back to one being responsible for one's practice.

Exactly. The term "to be responsible" comes out of the spiritual tradition. If we experience every moment as "God speaks" or "Ultimate Reality," then the answer to the response is responsibility. Responsibility is really a better term today than the term, "obedience." It covers much of the same traditional notion of obedience, but obedience for us has lost its meaning. We think of obedience like the obedience of a dog—just doing what another tells you. That's not exactly it. That is a very narrow aspect of the meaning. The essence, the virtue of the meaning, is to respond. It is to listen so deeply that it calls forth a response. Every moment tells you something, every moment wants something from you. The world, life, God—whatever you want to call it—it expects something from you. To arise to it is responsibility.

You talked earlier about speaking out for the environment. I know this is a delicate issue for some

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people. The whole argument about whether the world is perfect the way it is or if it needs to be changed continues to be a big question for me.

Yes, that is a very important question. I know this is something that confuses young people. Well, the world is perfect as it is, you can say that, but that includes you at this moment seeing what needs to be done and doing it. If you don't do it, you have failed. It doesn't mean that the next moment won't also be perfect, but in that perfection of the world you can't take out yourself seeing what needs to be done and doing it. That is part of that perfection.

Even though it is you who thinks it needs to change? For example, if I disagree with something, say a forest being clear-cut to make room for a shopping mall, one argument I hear is that it is merely my own idea that that is wrong and shouldn't happen.

Well, yes, of course, if it is simply a whim then it may be just an idea. But if you have studied the situation and know how important forests are, and someone else says, "No, it is good because it stimulates the economy," then you have to weigh these two ideas against each other. Why do they say it is good? Well, because it supports the economy and people can make a buck. But on the other side, what does it do the environment, to our children, to the future? Those things have to be weighed against each other. It is not always easy. We need to present our side and of course keep an open mind. There are always things I haven't seen. It is not so either/or. In the discussion, hopefully, I learn some things and help the other person achieve what they want in a way that is fruitful for both of us in the long run.

And hopefully have peaceful communication within the discussion?

Well, we often think of *we* and *they*, and the moment we fall into this trap that *we* are the good ones and *they* are the bad ones, there

is very little we can do. We should always think of *us*. When there is a problem, it is not *they* who give *us* a problem. It is *us*, all of us together, who have to work that problem out. If we start from that place we have a much better chance.

The question of whether the world is perfect or not is a very important question. We can trust that things are as perfect as we can get them, but that includes my response, doesn't it? If I don't give it, there is something missing. The next moment will be the same: I have to play my part.

This is very closely connected with another misunderstanding, and that is, "If only I get myself together, the world will be better." Perfectly correct, but why will the world be better if I get myself together? Because when I get myself together, I will also know how to respond to the world. This is often left out. People say, "If only I get myself together," but does that mean you forget about the rest of the world? Is that what it means to get yourself together? Just thinking of the rest of the world and its needs is precisely the way you can put yourself back together. You've seen how often this happens. People think, "I'll just sit on my mat and meditate." I'm not saying this is necessarily bad, because that might be exactly what you need to do, but in the measure in which you get yourself together you will know whether you should stay there sitting on that mat or go out and do something.

> But one's practice must be related and included in a way that embraces humanity?

It has to be included, because otherwise this statement, "If only I get myself together, and that is all I'm responsible for, and the world will be better for it," there is something missing. It is this link between putting myself together and doing whatever I'm called to do for whatever needs there are.

> I remember that you had this conversation with a Zen teacher once. The focus was on Third World countries

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and the destruction of the planet, and the question of our responsibility to that situation in other countries. Do you remember that?

Yes, it was in Boulder with Eido Roshi.

You were presenting the side that we each have a responsibility, and that we are a part of the five percent of the population using forty percent of the world's energy resources and in that we have a responsibility. He was presenting the side that the world is fine the way it is and that there is nothing we need to do.

Yes. We realized afterwards that we missed our opportunity. We talked about it afterwards. At the last moment we should have both said, "Okay, that was enough, now you take my part and I'll take your part and we'll go right on for another five minutes playing the other person's part." We could have done that because it takes both parts to find a balance.

Well, what did you learn from that experience? That there isn't just one answer? As I hear it now, you could have taken that other view just as well.

Yes, we should have done that because whenever you take one side over another it is falsified. But when you take both you can see with both eyes.

And then you can find the balance for yourself?

Yes, that's what it is. Stated in the abstract: here is one view and here is another view. But in reality, we have binocular vision. We live in a world that isn't so clearly obvious.

Then it is more about hearing both those voices in ourselves?

Yes, then somehow finding the way. When you are getting carried away by thinking you need to fix the world, which is the danger from my perspective, you have to listen to the other voice. If you are just sitting there letting things go to the dogs and you are not doing anything, you have to listen to the other voice. And nobody can tell you beforehand where exactly you will be. You have to hear that for yourself. You have to allow that little compass needle in your heart to point the way.

> Every letter I receive from you has stamped on it: "Money spent on arms is stolen from the poor." It always surprised me because it came from a monk.

Well, other people have bumper stickers because they have cars. This is the poor man's bumper sticker. I also have one that says: "Question Authority."

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To bless whatever there is, and for no other reason but simply because it is . . . that is what we are made for as human beings. This singular command is engraved in our heart.

Whether we understand this or not matters little.
Whether we agree or disagree makes no difference.
And in our heart of hearts we know it.

—Brother David Steindl-Rast
From *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*