

The Emergence of the Urban Monk / Daniel Tice

By eighth grade, I had reached the crowning position in the junior high social hierarchy. The girls inexplicably loved me, the drama department erupted in applause for my artistry, and the sports teams roared for my athletic talents. Yet, something edged my being, as if piercing the very essence of who I was. My Uncle Leon had just committed suicide, a baffling concept to someone with my sense of self-appreciation. And it was upon hearing this news of his sudden and shocking death, that my mind entered a field of darkness, never to return to the superficiality, and ignorance, of a life I once loved. I was suddenly subjected to the fact that life was impermanent, and without warning it could be taken away. The real truth of life began to unveil itself. Slowly and incomprehensibly, my consciousness initiated an unending transformation. No longer did I find self-satisfaction, but rather, I eventually discovered an absence of self all together!

Questions of death fluttered in my mind upon hearing the news of my Uncle's departure from this world. I was pulled back to my mother's spiritual guidance as a child, where she taught me the ways of Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. She had laid a foundation of options that allowed me the freedom to choose my own belief structure. The only definite thing she told me was that God was in everything. The rest I had to figure out on my own.

And so, I began my soul searching by examining the Christian faith, for me, the most accessible of religions. But to my horror, I found Christian doctrines dictated that one who commits suicide is sentenced to hell. I also found that the Christian faith dictated that one who does not accept Jesus Christ, as the lord and savior, would also go to hell. I quickly

dismissed these precepts as mere marketing techniques. It seemed what Christians truly desired was to sell a religion. And certainly, there is no better way of making a sale than stating, "if you do not buy this product, then you will perish in eternal flames!" Truly, today's businesses should take a tip from these ancient advertisements.

After failing to come to peace with my Uncle's death through the use of the Bible, I shifted my attention toward Eastern thought. Religions such as Hinduism, and Buddhism, taught that life was one giant cycle, and that our souls were bound to this merry-go-round through reincarnation. This sounded plausible to me. In fact, it sounded fairly close to the truth. Perhaps my Uncle's soul had to go through thousands of lives, thousands of deaths, to find his warm center in the universe. The prospect of this possibility was momentarily comforting, until I faced the darkest question of my young life, "If this was one big cycle of inevitability, how could individuality and freewill possibly be included in this package?" When all was said and done, I came to the realization that nothing really mattered. Everything that is created, is destroyed. My mind entered a vacuum of complete darkness, a passageway void of life and death, and it took me a long four years to reach the other side.

Mundane activities like sitting in a classroom, or waiting in line at McDonald's, began to radiate with pointlessness. I thought, "A thousand years, or even hundred years from now, McDonald's won't even exist, and neither will I." My mind went so far outside the box, that I discovered a completely new box. And if one didn't know me any better, they would have arrived at the conclusion that I was depressed. I quit sports, drama, rarely went to school, spent most of my time smoking pot, and pondering my place in the universe. In a sense, I became a monk. A friend of mine was going through a similar journey. While he did not abandon the world as I did, he called us "The Urban Monks." We loosely followed the demands of society, while simultaneously achieving a sense of understanding beyond that of society's.

Eventually, it was my conversations with my friend that finally, completely freed me from the box, and allowed me to come to terms

with the cycle of life and death. Utilizing theories from quantum physics, we determined that the universe, God, "what is," or whatever you want to call it, was an infinite cycle. And our place in the universe was simply being appendages of "what is." In other words, we felt we were separate creators within the creation. And since we were obviously part of this infinite creation, we had complete freedom. I could never feel lost or trapped again, because I found my warm center in this concept of infinity. Instead of God being in everything, everything was in God. And in grasping this, I knew nothing was truly lost. Furthermore, it was this understanding of "what is" that allowed me to come to terms with death. My Uncle Leon was still in God, and never truly died, because he was recycled after death as something else. It didn't really matter what, because although all good things must end, eventually there will be new good things to replace them. And, these new good things may even be an evolutionary step beyond the old good things.

In retrospect, it is only natural that my conclusions may confuse and bewilder you, which they should, because that was my intention. And it is absolutely fine if you do not see what I see, because we are all separate matters, and see respectively through our differing eyes. Certainly, you can use mediums of faith to see the big picture, or just search within yourself as I did. But the fact remains that there is always refuge from the problems of daily life through spirituality, something I wish my Uncle had considered. And it truly does not matter what medium you choose to achieve serenity. To paraphrase a Zen expression, "At the end of the day, we all gaze upon the same single moon."