

The Value of Experience

Information not mixed with experience is a thin thing.

- Kathleen Raine

There's a saying that if you tell me a fact I may learn, tell me a truth and I may believe, but if you tell me a story it may live in my heart forever.

So it is, when the December holidays arrive, we look forward to the stories that come with the season. One is *It's A Wonderful Life*, the Frank Capra film starring James Stewart. Another is Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol*. Usually we watch the movie with George C. Scott as Ebenezer Scrooge.

Both stories involve seeing into the future. As the despairing George Bailey in *A Wonderful Life*, James Stewart meets a guardian angel – Clarence Oddbody (angel second class) – who shows him what the future will be like if he doesn't survive. It's a bleak picture. Without Bailey's civic compassion and decency, his hometown of Bedford Falls is taken over by Mr. Potter, the greedy corrupter in the story, and renamed "Pottersville." The guardian angel helps Bailey see the virtue of his lifelong toil, even amid harsh difficulties. Bailey's faith in the sense and nature of things is restored.

Ebenezer Scrooge too sees into the future. You likely know the story. Scrooge has been living a materialistic, utilitarian life without examining or questioning it. Then, on Christmas Eve, he is visited by the spirit of his deceased partner, Jacob Marley, who tells Scrooge of his terrible fate. Marley must wander forever in chains. "I wear the chains I fashioned from my life, link by link," he tells Scrooge. Marley is never able to share what he might have shared on earth, or to make amends for his missed opportunities. "I cannot stay or linger anywhere," he says; "I have no comfort to give, no rest, no peace, incessant torture of remorse." Ending his visit, Marley implores Scrooge: "Remember what has passed between us this night – *for your own sake.*"

Then, the Three Ghosts of Christmas – Past, Present, and Future – visit Scrooge. Each ghost takes him on an experiential journey, forcing him to look at his life. In a sense, the ghosts do for Scrooge what the bare attention of Zen training does for us: we study self. Looking closely, Scrooge sees his life as it has been, is now and, by extension, as it probably will be.

In Christmas Past, Scrooge is again with his former fiancée when she tells him, “Your nature has changed from all I once valued,” and that “you fear the world too much.” She breaks off their engagement, informing Scrooge, “You may have some pain in this – when you recollect what was between our hearts.” He also revisits the untimely death of his only sister and best friend. The ghost thus shows Scrooge the shadow of things that have been and says, in departing, “They are what they are.”

In Christmas Present, Scrooge sees the frail Tiny Tim, son of assistant Bob Cratchit. He hears his nephew commenting that Uncle Scrooge’s offenses, such as ill humor, carry their own punishment. From Christmas Past and Present together, Scrooge becomes aware of how others regard him. It is painful and unsettling for him.

Then, to his great alarm, the Ghost of Christmas Future shows Scrooge his own grave. He asks the ghost if there is still time for him, but receives no answer. Though in turmoil, Scrooge realizes *the grave hasn’t yet been dug*. Then comes an epiphany. He *feels* his life. Scrooge senses he doesn’t have to continue as he has been. Within, he discovers a natural sympathy for the Cratchits and Tiny Tim. He wants to be useful and kind. Scrooge is emotional and thankful to see and understand in this way. With great joy, he laughs – “I’m light as a feather, I don’t know anything. I’m quite a child!”

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The lived experience of George Bailey and Ebenezer Scrooge bear out a couple of truths we find in the self-study of Zen. One is that wholesome and unwholesome actions bring their respective results. Our actions always lead somewhere, they have this directional power. There’s a Buddhist saying that “everything rests on the tip of motivation,” the key quality of mind that determines the direction of our actions.

It’s A Wonderful Life and *A Christmas Carol* demonstrate wholesome and unwholesome ways of being through the main characters. Bailey lives in connection with and service to others; Scrooge separates from others in service to himself. While Bailey did not see the virtue accumulating from his service to others, Scrooge did not see his growing alienation from them, nor their efforts to help him.

Realizing the truth about themselves, our heroes adjust in their awareness. Bailey adjusts by returning to life in Bedford Falls, home ground of his toil and virtue altogether, where those he has helped now help him surmount a grave financial threat. Scrooge dramatically reverses his way of being in the world and begins caring for others.

Ebenezer Scrooge's epiphany reveals another truth about lived experience. By the power of awareness, our understanding/memory of experience selects what belongs to wisdom and love and lets go of the rest. (It was not too late for Scrooge.) We let go of days, weeks, months, and years of chronological existence. For the mere chronology of our life has no power for inspiration or guidance. We treasure certain moments perhaps known only to ourselves. Our experience is the substance and continuity of our spirituality.

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The English poet Kathleen Raine (1908-2003) speaks powerfully of this truth. Three lines of her poem "The World" appear as the epigraph of Robert Kennedy Roshi's book *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit*:

It burns in the void
Nothing upholds it
Still it moves...

Quite a pithy expression for Essential Nature!

Kathleen Raine was an authority on two poets: William Blake and William Butler Yeats. Raine concluded that both Blake and Yeats possessed specific knowledge of reality and spirituality. I now want to quote extensively from her three-volume autobiography: *Farewell Happy Fields, The Land Unknown*, and *The Lion's Mouth*.

Kathleen Raine claimed that "certain moments are of another kind of consciousness altogether. Such a state has been often enough described: Tennyson said he could enter it at will... Those who know are unanimous in reporting that such changes of consciousness are not of degree, but of kind; not some strong excitement but a clarity in which all is minutely perceived as if by finer sense."

Raine held that “*information not mixed with experience is a thin thing.*” She described her experience of a flower: “All was stilled. I was looking at a hyacinth and as I gazed at the form of its petals and the strength of their curve as they open and curl back...abruptly I found that I was no longer looking *at* it but *was* it; a distinct, indescribable, but in no way vague shift of consciousness into the plant itself. I and the plant were indistinguishable; as if the plant were part of my consciousness. I dared scarcely to breathe, held in a kind of fine attention in which I could sense the very flow of life in the cells. I was not perceiving the flower but living it...The whole was living and inspired a sense of holiness.”

“The experience lasted for some time – I do not know how long. I had never experienced the like, nor have I since in the same degree; and yet it seemed at this time not strange but infinitely familiar, as if I were experiencing at last things as they are, was where I belonged, where in some sense I had always been and would always be...”

By including such passages in her autobiography, Kathleen Raine is selecting the lived experience of most importance to her. She also included her mother’s lifelong memory of an experience: “My mother, when she was over 80, confided an experience she had as a girl. ‘I have never told anyone before,’ she told me, ‘but I think you will understand. It was simply that, one day, sitting among the heather near Kielder I saw that the moor was alive. That was all.’ ”

Raine continues: “But I understood that she had seen what I had seen. And as she spoke, it seemed to me as if she and I had been the same person, our two lives lived by the same consciousness; for I knew what she meant, I had seen the hyacinth in the same way as she had seen her heather moor.”

In Zen language, we might say Kathleen Raine experienced being “one-with” the hyacinth, and that her mother’s experience may have been one-with the heather moor. Perhaps both saw, with varying clarity, into the heart of wisdom – realizing the emptiness of self. This comes from forgetting the self and experiencing one’s self-nature at that very moment.

Raine continues: “Poets such as Blake and Yeats knew, as my mother knew, from immediate perception. Their experience – like that of Moses who saw the bush ‘burning’ – was positive and affirming. But such spiritual experience cannot be ‘explained’ to materialists who don’t believe in it

because it's not measurable or tangible. The objects of perception are the same yet not the same; the object of knowledge is itself different. The difference lies not in what is known 'about it' but in the thing known."

"It is not the logic of the materialists which precludes this knowledge, but a kind of consciousness. And to their 'I don't understand what you mean by...' [when they refer to experience that cannot be measured], one can but quote Blake: 'Reason or the ratio of what we have already known is not the same as it shall be when we know more.'"

"It is just in these primary experiences [spiritual insights or epiphanies] that the difference lies. The mystic and the materialist do not see different things; neither do they see the same things and draw different conclusions; they see the same things but differently."

"For certain kinds of knowledge – such as my mother's vision of the moor as 'alive' or mine of the hyacinth – once is enough. Those who have had the experience recognize instantly what is meant by others who speak of it; those who haven't can never argue it away by logic, or dissect it by science."

Raine continues: "The terrible thing is that spiritual realities should have ceased to be premises [of what one may know in experience]. I would despair were it not for the irreversible nature of knowledge; we may come to know but we cannot un-know. Those who reach a certain degree of understanding do not lose the way anymore."

Kathleen Raine's remarks that "once is enough, ... we cannot un-know... [and] do not lose the way anymore" remind me that the Zen Way received from our ancestral teachers is to grow and embody our insight through continued training. In koan study, for instance, we practice coming forth from our Essential Nature again and again, thus bringing its power increasingly into our daily lives.

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Early in his career, the nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-73) upheld a materialism despaired of by Kathleen Raine. Mill championed the creed of utility, and the greatest happiness principle, holding that actions are right in proportion to their result of happiness – defined as

pleasure and the absence of pain – and wrong if they promote unhappiness, defined as pain and the privation of pleasure.

In reading about the greatest happiness principle, I thought that if we wanted to stimulate our discriminating consciousness – our judging mind – what better way than to classify all actions right or wrong as they relate to happiness or lack of it. It hurts my head to think of trying that! Such a principle denies the first Noble Truth taught by Shakyamuni-Buddha, the truth of suffering. To deny suffering simply leads to more of it.

But utilitarian ideology and methodology provoked a crisis in John Stuart Mill's mental life. He saw that his philosophy ran counter to feeling, sentiment, and imagination. He sensed that being a thinking reformer in the utilitarian mode was meaningless and heartless. To paraphrase Raine, philosophy not mixed with experience is a thin thing.

Chapter 5 of Mill's *Autobiography*, "A Crisis in My Mental History," recounts the experience that helped him come out of his slough of despond: "One day I was reading, accidentally, Marmontel's *Memoires* – and came to the passage which relates his father's death, the distressed position of the family, and the sudden inspiration by which he [Marmontel], then a mere boy, felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them – would supply the place of all that they had lost. *A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears.* From this moment my burden grew lighter."

"The oppressing thought that all feeling was dead within me was gone. I was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or stone...I gradually found the ordinary incidents of life could again give me pleasure."

We sense what a relief this experience was for Mill: "A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears...[and] my burden grew lighter." There was *something* about that scene. To a degree, Mill became one-with it.

As an aside, in Zen training, tears sometimes accompany the emptying of the mind. It's not a voluntary matter. It can be a sign of dissolving a block or lump of experience in practice, a vital part of letting go. In Philip Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*, the Japanese Retired Government Worker gives an account of tears arising in *sesshin*: "Involuntarily I began to cry...then the

tears streamed down my cheeks. Tears, tears, tears – a veritable river of tears!..After the sesshin I mentioned this crying episode to the roshi (Yasutani)...(who) told me that while I hadn't yet reached the point of [insight], nevertheless I had attained to a significant degree of ego attrition, of which this crying was an indication.”

John Stuart Mill continues: “The experiences of this period had marked effects on my opinions and character...I now thought this end (happiness) was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those are only happy I thought who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness on the way...This theory now became the basis of my philosophy of life.”

Mill's insight about happiness deriving from effort expended toward other ends reminds me of “right absorption” in Zen. It is based on our self-nature.

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Taken together, the stories and experiences recounted here offer us keen encouragement. We're accustomed to such encouragement from our ancestral teachers. Coming from outside the Zen tradition, these stories too are of special and affirming interest. For they parallel, in differing degrees, the Zen experience of forgetting the self and seeing into our self-nature.

Ebenezer Scrooge, Kathleen Raine, her mother, and John Stuart Mill all recognized and internalized experiences that clarified their understanding of self and gave them faith, hope, and an onward lead. The actual experiences were as distinct as our heroes themselves: Scrooge's undug grave, Raine's hyacinth, her mother's heather moor, and Mill's family scene.

All treasured what they knew and understood – not just information or some chronological event – but a living power for inspiration and guidance in their daily lives. This was so for them as it is for us, because experience is the substance and continuity of our spirituality.

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