
Rebirthing on Death Row: Alabama Parable

A sermon by the Rev. Thee Smith

In the name of God: Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend. Amen

Oh well, I failed to wear something green last Thursday. How about you? Yep, let's show those hands. Good for you! But I just totally forgot St. Patrick's Day. And I had been thinking about it all week. But just at the moment when I was deciding what to wear that morning my mind skipped a gear. Or else it was a case of "'Murphy's Law:' you know, the law that says "'thou shalt not remember to wear the right color for the right occasion on a day that comes only once a year!

I didn't fully realize my mistake until that evening when I was walking across the Emory campus on the way to my car. That's when I saw the business students playing lawn games on the grass in front of the "'B-School.' Of course everyone loves a party!" and they looked so energetic, wearing those green St. Patty's Day hats, and green tee shirts, and drinking, of course; drinking cups and cups of green beer! As for me, not only was my shirt a different color but the rest of me was dressed in black because ""well, because I'm also a priest and because also, after all, it's Lent, right? Right.

But 40 days of Lent is a long time to go without a big party! So I was not surprised to come across this story last week from a writer who lives in a place where Mardi Gras is a really big festival. I found this account by a newspaper columnist who writes for that famous New Orleans paper, *The Times-Picayune*. Listen to the story she tells about how one man managed to continue drinking beer and yet still observe his Lenten rule; the fast he set himself to refrain from drinking beer.

An Irishman walks into a pub in a small town in Ireland and orders three beers. Then he takes the beers to a table where he sits alone and polishes them off in about an hour. He gets up, orders three more and does the same thing. Another hour later, he gets one more round of three, drinks them and leaves. [That's three rounds of beers, and three beers in each round, an hour per round.]

This scene repeats itself the next evening and then the next, and pretty soon this pub is abuzz about the man they're now calling Mr. Three Beers. When he comes in again, the bartender's curiosity is overwhelming, and he asks his new favorite customer what the deal is.

He replies that he has two brothers who are no longer in Ireland, they're worlds apart, and they all vowed that each would order an extra two beers whenever one of them went drinking to keep the brotherly bond.

The bartender and the tavern regulars bought the story, admiring the brotherly love, and Mr. Three Beers became a pub favorite.

But one day he came in and ordered only two beers. The bartender poured them and the pub [onlookers] took immediate notice, thinking the worst--that one of the brothers had [died]. This went on for several days [""three rounds of beers, but only two beers in each round].

One day, the bartender offered his condolences on behalf of himself and the pub regulars. The man thanked him for the thoughtfulness but said his two brothers were alive and well.

So what's with ordering only two beers? the [barkeeper] asked.

"It's Lent," the man replied, "and [as for my brothers, I keep my bond of commitment to them no matter what, but] I, myself, have decided to give up drinking until Easter."

Friday, March 06, 2009. Maria C. Montoya, The Times-Picayune.

Well, of course we all admire men who keep their bond of brotherly love, don't we? "No matter what!" as "Mr. Three Beers" was described in that Irish story about fasting for Lent. But now let me tell you a very different story of brotherly bonding, and one that is much closer to home; closer for us here in the South.

It's a true story from our next door Southerners in Alabama, and it's about a group of men called, "Dhamma brothers" ("Dhamma" is spelled with two "m's" at the end of the word, and pronounced with an "r" sound in the middle but spelled d-h-a-m-m-a; "dhar-ma" brothers). Maybe you've heard of them, but I was introduced to them for the first time last month in a video screening at Emory.

The following account, however, is not from that video, which you can order for yourself online at Amazon.com. Rather, I'm reporting the version of the story that you can find on the website of NPR's National Public Radio. It's titled, "An Unlikely Escape, from An End-of-The Line Prison" [paraphrased].

An ancient Eastern [meditation] practice is taking root in the unlikelyst of places: the highest security prison in Alabama. And officials say it's transforming hardened criminals.

NPR's Debbie Elliott takes us inside.

(Soundbite of steel doors slamming shut)

DEBBIE ELLIOTT: William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility outside Birmingham is a tough place, where Alabama's most violent and mentally unstable prisoners go - many to stay.

Unidentified Male #1: I've been down 30 years, down for capital murder.

Unidentified Male #2: Capital murder, life without parole now. First I got sentenced to death.

Unidentified Male #3: Capital murder, life without, I've done 25 years.

DEBBIE ELLIOTT: Donaldson [Correctional Facility] has death row cells, and about a third of the approximately 1500 prisoners are lifers with no chance of parole. The prison is named for an officer killed here in 1990. The lockup has a history of inmate stabbings, deaths and suicides and is the target of lawsuits.

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ELLIOTT: In the isolation blocks, food trays are slid through a narrow metal box built into the cell doors so the inmates can't hurt the officer feeding them.

That's a sharp contrast from the scene inside the prison gym. About two dozen inmates in white pressed uniforms roam freely, working together to clear bed pads from the concrete floor.

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ELLIOTT: They just emerged from a 10-day silent Vipassana meditation course.

Mr. JOHNNY MACK YOUNG (Inmate, William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility): Vipassana means seeing things as they are.

ELLIOTT: Johnny Mack Young kneels on a blue mat, resting back on a small wooden stool. This is the position he keeps for up to 10 hours a day during the program.

Mr. YOUNG: For the first three days, the only thing we do is sit and focus on our breath. This is to still the mind and get the mind sharp.

ELLIOTT: Isolated in the gym, the inmates wake up at 4 AM and meditate on and off until 9:00 in the evening. They eat a strict vegetarian diet. They can't smoke or drink coffee. And there is absolutely no conversation, only an internal examination of how the body is reacting.

Mr. YOUNG: You'll start feeling little stuff moving all around on your body. Some guys can't handle it. Some guys scream.

ELLIOTT: It's a rude awakening for some prisoners, say Vipassana teacher, Carl Franz.

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DEBBIE ELLIOTT: For convicted murderer, Johnny Mack Young, that [awakening] includes his childhood role in the accidental death of his baby sister, the fact he never mourned his mother's death and his [particular] crime - a drug-related murder.

Mr. YOUNG: So that's one of the things that tortures me. As you can tell . . . kind of breaking me up. But we learn this stuff. We learn it too late in life. We learn after we make these mistakes, after we do these things that we shouldn't do.

ELLIOTT: Now at 61, and likely in the last home he'll know, Young says he just tries to have the highest quality life he can.

Mr. YOUNG: It changed my life. Prior to taking the meditation course . . . I kept trying to escape. I stayed in fights with police, inmates.

ELLIOTT: That's typical behavior for an inmate with his defenses up, in denial about his crime and blaming others, says Dr. Ron Cavanaugh, treatment director for the Alabama Department of Corrections.

Cavanaugh says the meditation practice chips away at those defenses.

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ELLIOTT: Cavanaugh says inmates who go through the course have a 20 percent reduction in disciplinary action. But it hasn't been an easy sell in Alabama, a state known for harsh punishment policies like chain gangs and hitching posts.

The Vipassana technique, though secular, is based on the teachings of Buddha. Soon after it started at Donaldson about a decade ago, the prison system's chaplains expressed concern that it might not be in keeping with Christian values and the state put an end to the program.

But warden Gary Hetzel brought it back after noticing dramatic changes.

Mr. Gary Hetzel, (Warden, William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility): I could see a significant decrease in behavioral problems, acting out. And the inmates that participated in those previous Vipassana programs seemed to be much calmer, much at peace.

ELLIOTT: . . . Hetzel says he's convinced the program is not religious and he's encouraged staff members

to take [their own] mediation course to dispel [any] misperceptions.

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ELLIOTT: To date, 430 inmates have gone through the Vipassana meditation program, the only one of its kind in North America . . .

Johnny Mack Young, Lawrence Parker and Frederick Jackson attend graduation ceremonies at William E. Donaldson prison in Bessemer, Ala., after completing Vipassana meditation classes. The courses are held four times a year in the prison gymnasium. At End-Of-The Line Prison, An Unlikely Escape by Debbie Elliott. www.npr.org/2011/02/08/133505880/at-end-of-the-line-prison-an-unlikely-escape

ELLIOTT: Sixty year old convicted murderer, Grady Bankhead, says he's walking evidence [that it works].

Mr. GRADY BANKHEAD (Inmate, William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility): Before I went to a Vipassana meditation . . . I was probably the angriest man in this prison.

DEBBIE ELLIOTT: Now he's recruiting other inmates to take the difficult course. Bankhead says, quote, "We have to have some kind of balance back in our lives from the horrible things that we've done."

Debbie Elliott, NPR News. Copyright © 2011 National Public Radio®. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to NPR. This transcript is provided for personal, noncommercial use only, pursuant to our Terms of Use.

But in addition, in the video "Dhamma Brothers," Grady Bankhead also says (I'm paraphrasing from memory) something like:

I ain't never going to get out of this place. I'm going to die here. And doing this [meditation] is the one thing I've found to die in peace.

Now, with that one-sentence""~ this is the one thing I've found to die in peace""Grady Bankhead verifies the subtitle of the NPR report, "an unlikely escape." But he also provides a one-sentence testimony to the truth of today's gospel appointed for this Second Sunday in Lent. Listen again to that question posed by Nicodemus at the beginning of the gospel:

". . . after having grown old . . . Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (John 3.4)

No, Nicodemus, not by ""entering a second time into the mother's womb;" but yes, Nicodemus, one can ""be born again after having grown old.'

Ask the Dhamma brothers serving life sentences or escaping death row at the Donaldson Correctional Facility outside Birmingham. Maybe they're not being ""born again' by meditating so many hours a day whenever they can. And they may not be inheriting the ""eternal life' that Jesus promises those who believe in him (John 3.15-16). However their story is a remarkable parable of the rebirthing that one can experience through meditation and contemplation of one's inner torments and joys, hopes and fears.

And that's what a parable does, doesn't it? It takes some ordinary features of our everyday existence and exaggerates them""parabolically, if you will""to reveal some extraordinary features of a grace-filled existence. That kind of grace-filled existence is precisely what St. Paul announces in today's passage from Romans, when he declares that it is not necessarily the people who are law-abiding or crime-free who will inherit the promises of God:

For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" ...

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through

the law but through the righteousness of faith ...

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed ... not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us ...

[all of us who are justified] in the presence of the God in whom he believed, [the God] who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. "Romans 4.3,13,16-17

My gospel brothers and sisters, during this Lent I invite you to find justification in the presence of this very God; the God "who gives life to the dead places in you, and who calls into existence holy things in you that do not yet exist.'

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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