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Lessons with the Mystics: Refreshing Our Vision in Mid/Late Career

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Cover Page Footnote

Gina Briefs-Elgins is a professor at New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico. She teaches composition and creative nonfiction and directs the Writing Center. She wants to research mysticism, to write about and hang out around the places where poetry, visual beauty, and spirit intersect. Her joys are her artist husband and son, teaching, traveling, riding the train, cooking, fishing, and reading Dickens. She is fascinated by the early translators of Eastern scriptures—often merchants or military men who fell in love with the ancient texts, taught themselves Sanskrit, etc., and made the first translations. Her dream is to spend a month each year in India, tutoring street teens with a Railway Children program.

Lessons with the Mystics: Refreshing Our Vision in Mid/Late Career

Gina Briefs-Elgin

*“You are empty reeds, / but you can become sugarcane again.”
(Rumi, Essential Rumi 242)*

So here we are, in our forties, fifties, sixties. Only yesterday, we picked up chalk and wrote our name and course number on the board, then turned to face our first students. We were new, scared, exhilarated. When we entered the field, teaching was the most exciting thing in the world to us. And, when we think of it in the abstract, it still is. Teaching, scholarship, service—our evaluation criteria—are words we resonate to, words that make us feel privileged. But now, 20,000-plus student essays later! We may sometimes fear that as more years pass, we may simply burn out like Wendy Bishop’s “rocket ships crashing to desert dunes due to physical and emotional exhaustion” (329).¹ We may have thought we could save the world, or a tiny part of it; now we may sometimes feel as if we’re just trying to save ourselves, to get through the day, to get through until we can retire. We’ve accomplished only some of our heartfelt goals, and we find ourselves, in the workday pressure, frequently failing to live up to the standards we set for ourselves. We may feel that, in some ways, we are failures. We may feel that we should simply accept this dull ache, this perhaps universal humiliation as part of the human condition, and attribute this acceptance to the wisdom of age.

But, if despite such fears, teaching is our mission, and we know we need energy and joy for it (and for ourselves and loved ones), what do we do? It’s not going to be enough just to attend conferences or to catch up on the journals stacked in the bathroom. Something radical—refreshment at the root—is called for. So how can we sail free of mid/late-career doldrums and give ourselves new heart for the voyage?²

When I teach developmental English, I sometimes have my freshmen respond to a selection of writings on happiness by career counselors, psychologists, and Eastern and Western mystics. One of my favorites is a story Rabbi David Cooper tells in *God is a Verb*, his extraordinary book about Kabbalah, the mystical branch of Judaism.

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¹In their article “Preparing Future Teachers to Respond to Stress: Sources and Solutions,” Brown and Nagel review the literature on causes of burnout and on ways it may be alleviated.

²Just as an effective approach to physical health includes many different strategies—diet, exercise, rest, and so forth—so an effective approach to teacher burnout should address the physical as well as mental/spiritual domains.

"The Snuffbox" concerns a rich man who neglects to offer a pinch of snuff to a poor, burdened man, a schlepper, fasting and praying in the back of the synagogue. This pinch of snuff would have given the laborer the strength to continue in his prayers, which were just about to open the gates of heaven for him. The rich man's fate, for withholding this refreshing pinch of snuff, is to change places with the schlepper. He is told that his position will be restored only if a time ever comes when the now-wealthy schlepper, in his turn, refuses *him* a pinch of snuff. And so, in rags, he taps the former schlepper on his shoulder at the most inopportune times he can think of: as the man settles happily into a steaming bath, as he hurries home to his wife, arms piled high with groceries so his wife can finish cooking for the Sabbath, and finally just as he takes his daughter into his arms for a dance at her wedding. And each time the schlepper smiles, sets aside his own agenda, takes out and proffers his box of snuff. The rich man learns his lesson, his riches are restored, and the two men become best friends, famous in the city for their generosity to the poor.

This story of the snuffbox illustrates a fundamental belief of mystical Judaism: that every request from another human being, no matter how unappealing that human being might appear (the homeless panhandler, the annoying student) and how bad his or her timing, should be responded to with respectful kindness, with the gift of one's self and one's attention. And that the universe takes notes when we fail to make ourselves open to the importunities of our fellow human beings. Or, better, that the universe rewards us with the riches of happiness and contentment when we do. The discovery of this small story buoyed me in my relations with students precisely at the time, when, rounding fifty, and with increasing pressures at home and school, I found myself often feeling exasperated and invaded by people's sometimes inopportune needs. Now, when a student accosts me at a bad time, I try to think of the snuffbox story and instead of perceiving the encounter as an *interruption* of what I'm supposed to be doing, grading papers, preparing a class, administering the Writing Center, to perceive it as *central* to what I'm supposed to be doing. This lesson from the Hasidic mystics of eighteenth-century Eastern Europe gave my attitude a needed tweak, so that at least in this one particular area, the area of inopportune interruptions, I feel that I'm acting from a place of newness, not burnout.

I began to wonder what other wisdom applicable to potential mid/late career dol-drums I could find in the writings of the mystics, which I had begun reading avidly—particularly the eastern mystics—for a number of years. It seemed to me that there might be many lessons to be learned from the mystics that could apply directly to my daily life as a teacher. The lessons I am learning address what I see as the two besetting ills of mid/late career. These ills are a sense of failure—no great thing accomplished and time running out—and a sense of the unimportance, even triviality, of our daily tasks and encounters.

All mystical traditions East or West have much to say about the frequency of failure and the puzzling triviality of daily life. Although my own path is based on Christianity and Hinduism, this paper does not explore solutions to the sense of failure and triviality found in the rich treasury of Christian mysticism.³ This is for an unremarkable reason: ultimately because it was Hinduism, Sufism, Zen, and

³Excellent introductions to Christian mysticism appear in Smith, Harvey, and Flinders. A fascinating in-depth study of the subject is Underhill's *Mysticism*. Christian mystics address both problems my paper explores: for example, Brother Lawrence and Therese of Lisieux model superb responses to the problem of the triviality, and St. Paul and the nineteenth-century Russian peasant who wrote *The Way of a Pilgrim*, to the problem of failure.

Kabbalah that happened to be the traditions unfolding for me and delighting me during the same years that I struggled to deal with a dawning concern that I might be burning out.⁴ In fact, during this time I first taught a new course I had developed, Eastern Spiritual Classics as Literature.

My plan is to showcase each ill—a sense of failure and a sense of triviality—in the traditions above that foreground it or that present it in the most unforgettable and transformatory language and images.

Failure: What Hinduism and Sufism Have to Say

*“The blue sky opens out farther and farther, the daily sense of failure goes away,
the damage I have done to myself fades, a million suns come forward with light,
when I sit firmly in that world.”*
(Kabir, qtd. in Fisher 26)⁵

*“He falls into a hole. / But down in that hole he finds something shining,
worth more than any amount of money or power.”*
(Rumi, Essential Rumi 8)

*“Others may be saying, Oh no, but you
will be opening out like a rose / losing itself petal by petal.
Someone once asked a great sheikh / what sufism was.
“The feeling of joy / when sudden disappointment comes.”*
(Rumi, Essential Rumi 171)

In the course of our teaching lives, most of us have accumulated a certain number of failures, two flavors: the “it didn’t work out” kind and the “I let someone down” kind. The first is the failure we all sometimes encounter despite our deepest dedication: the rejection slips or the lovingly designed new course that doesn’t make. The second is the way we let our students, colleagues, families, friends, and self down with things done poorly or left undone. Of our letting-people-down failures, again two kinds: first, the times we let ourselves or others down with little or no excuse: we accumulated half-written articles in our files year after year, we didn’t volunteer for orientation but let the tenure-track folks do it, we got papers back to our students late because we chose to watch reruns of *Sex in the City*. Second, the inevitable kinds that result from having multiple priorities. As the years go by and administrative duties accumulate, we have less and less time to accomplish more and more, to multi-task more and more ineffectually until it feels as if we’re doing a half-baked job on every front. We’re short-changing family, friends, students, and administrative duties. Several times I’ve caught myself, before I fall asleep at night, literally asking myself, “Whom have

⁴The message of the Christian mystics is basically identical to the message of the eastern mystics in content, but also, surprisingly, in images and language. As the Russian archeologist and philosopher Nicholas Roerich and others discovered, credible evidence suggests that Jesus spent his mysterious “lost years”—the gap in the Gospels from his mid-teens until his thirties—studying and teaching in the East, predominantly in India (qtd. in Prophet 296-300).

⁵India’s fifteenth-century weaver-saint Kabir is claimed by both Hindus and Muslims.

I failed today?" These failures are not our fault, but they're a constant dull ache: in a society that honors multi-tasking, they make us feel incompetent, not up to the mark.

Mainstream Western education and popular psychology encourage us to have a strong sense of ourselves as successes. We are told that, with the proper will power, self-esteem-building, and, perhaps, coaching, each of us has the potential to become a personal and career success. There is real value to such a can-do, success mentality, and, mostly, I'm a believer. However, success is only one side of the coin—sometimes the side we rarely see—and beliefs about success need to be complemented by wisdom about failure. Surprisingly, but for reasons that will become clear as we continue, failure is a major topic in the literature of mysticism. As Mary Rose O'Reilly puts it, "All great spiritual traditions advise us, one way and another, to screw up" (11). Every wisdom tradition offers insights that can help us not only reconcile ourselves to, but actually embrace, the inevitable failures we experience in our teaching lives.

Two mystical traditions have a great deal to say about failure. The first, mystical Hinduism, dismisses the concepts of failure and success as being completely irrelevant. The second, Sufism, enthusiastically embraces failure as a powerful ally on the path to enlightenment.⁶

Hinduism and Failure

We'll begin by looking at what Hinduism recommends as an attitude towards failure. A central text of Hinduism, the *Bhagavad Gita* (between 400 B.C.E. and 400 C.E.) explores *karma yoga*, the path of work. The *Gita* offers many insights related to work, in fact, a whole philosophy of work. And yet the one thing that most of us take for granted as a motivation to work—the desire to succeed at whatever we're attempting, that is, the desire to avoid failure—appears to be absent. The *Gita* dismisses the whole problem of failure in a startlingly simple way: by regarding attachment to success or anxiety about failure as mere egotism. It sees work not as a way to achieve success and prestige but merely as an inevitable—perhaps even regrettable—feature of the human condition: "Not even for a moment can a man be without action," says the *Gita*. "Helplessly, all are driven to action by the forces born of Nature" (3:5). Or, we might add, by the forces born of assessment. But work can be a source of joy if we approach it with the right philosophy.

Vedanta teacher Pravrajika Vrajaprana points out that as humans we normally fuel every action—cooking dinner, cleaning the yard, writing an article—with the expectation of some reward such as love, admiration, a promotion, or financial success (25-26). But the *Gita* cautions us to work without attaching ourselves to outcomes: "How poor those who work for a reward!" (2:49). Instead, if we're wise, our undertakings are "free from anxious desire and fanciful thought" (4:19), the grasping desire to succeed and egotistical daydreams about success.

The *Bhagavad Gita* cautions us also against worrying about failure. Freedom from such worry will take the wise person beyond the duality of good and bad: "In this wisdom a man goes beyond what is well done and what is not well

⁶*Sanatana Dharma* (eternal religion) is the preferred term today, but I will use *Hinduism* for its familiarity.

done” (2:50); “in success or in failure he is one: his works bind him not” (4:22). I was dubious when I first read this. Isn’t it a good thing to worry about doing a good job? And, when we fail, isn’t feeling guilt or shame a sign of character? But the *Gita* dismisses worrying about success or failure as an example of “selfish desires”: “Do thy work in the peace of Yoga, and, free from selfish desires, be not moved in success or in failure” (2:48). The *Gita* seems to be saying that it’s not virtue at all, but selfishness being thwarted and ego being humiliated that give failure its sting.

Instead of holding on to the outcomes of their work, clinging to their successes and suffering from their failures, people who are wise, says the *Bhagavad Gita*, offer the fruits of their work to the universe. And they trust the value of this offering, even if they’re such a failure in terms of the world’s values that they have nothing to offer but a leaf: “He who offers to me with devotion only a leaf, or a flower, or a fruit, or even a little water, this I accept from that yearning soul, because with a pure heart it was offered with love” (9:26). Offering up our outcomes seems to me a key component in Hinduism’s philosophy of work. A philosophy of no rewards, no worry, no guilt could leave us human beings with little motivation to perfect our work. What will keep us honest when we abandon the reward-and-guilt work ethic is approaching our work as a gift of love to the universe. And when we have offered our work in this way, we know that even if we have bad outcomes, we ourselves are not failures. Every religion has a tradition of offering up the (work)day. I find my morning commute a perfect opportunity for this practice. Rather than starting the day with the bad news from Iraq, I leave the radio off, try to center myself in the beauty of the landscape, and say a morning prayer, which begins by offering up the day.

I find these teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* about failure a great relief. When I get to the end of my school day, now, if I haven’t finished all the work on my desk, I no longer beat myself up. I used to count the day’s worth according to whether or not I got all my work done; now I count the day’s worth as to whether or not I have made time for spirit. I now know that it’s an empty victory if all I’ve gotten when I’ve gotten through the chores of the day is gotten through the chores of the day. The train I’m on has moved off the success/failure track and onto a quite different track, on which it’s not so much the destination that counts as the companionship of spirit, mile by mile. I am constantly cheered, too, by the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*: “If you meditate, the Lord supplies your deficiencies and makes permanent your gains” (9:22). For me, these words take the worry out of failure.

Another feature of Hinduism that applies directly to our topic of mid/late career sense of failure appears in the ancient practice of the ashramas, the four stages of the human life. Hinduism explicitly incorporates “failure” into the third and fourth stages.

Ideally, a man’s life (the ashramas were only for upper-caste men) was divided into four stages or ashramas: student stage, householder stage, forest hermit stage, and wandering ascetic stage.⁷ One spent the first 25 years of one’s life as a student acquiring knowledge and the second 25 as a “householder,” securing one’s successful place in the world. So far, just like the mainstream Western model. But then a psychologically brilliant shift in values. In mainstream Western culture, the successful career person may dread growing older as a time of decreasing power and prestige. The

⁷ Sexism and remnants of the caste system are two major flaws in Hinduism.

retiring CEO may fear becoming a nobody, an object of pity. But in the traditional Hindu model, loss of power and social prominence were built right into the plan: in the third stage of life, traditionally set at the graying of one's hair or the birth of one's first grandchild, one abandoned one's job and comfortable house and went off to live in a hut as a forest hermit (often with one's wife), beginning to detach from worldly success. Then, in the fourth stage of life, in one's old age, one gave up everything and lived as a wandering ascetic, with no possessions but God and a begging bowl. The last two stages—forest dweller and wandering ascetic—entail the powerlessness, possessionlessness, humbling, that to the mainstream Western mind are marks of failure. It's true that even in ancient times, the ashramas were an ideal, not universally practiced, and that today, as Mary Pat Fisher points out, "the majority of contemporary Hindu males do not follow this path to its sannyasin conclusion in old age" (98);⁸ however, this ancient practice invites us, in mid/late career, to reframe our awareness of failure.⁹ It may be that part of our job as we grow older is to bless the inevitable ways in which failure enters our lives and to find in its humbling a doorway to a deeper, freer mode of being.

Suggestions that failure may be a crucial stage in our journey as humans are the examples we often see of people in mid/late career who abruptly jettison their success mode. Sometimes the universe does it for them: Christopher Reeves thrown by his horse, Michael J. Fox by his Parkinson's. We can read the accumulating physical and intellectual failures of our later lives as signs that we are falling apart, or we can read them as signs of the ego-self's departure, making room for our real Self to manifest. It may be that in order for us to grow as we are meant, we need to begin to see ourselves as full of failings—in some cases, as actual ruins—as the years go by.

The ideal of the *ashramas* has affected my life as a teacher in mid/late career. Many of us as we age are increasingly drawn to matters of the spirit, but our mainstream culture may make us feel as if we're losing our focus if we shift our gaze away from achievement and success. The *ashrama* model does the opposite: watch in hand, it says, "Okay, time to shift your mission." With this encouragement, I've found myself exploring spirituality without stealth. I've found myself actively looking about for spiritual role models. A dear friend spends the first hour of every morning in spiritual reading and contemplation. A swimmer prays for a different student or friend during each lap. Another says the rosary during her morning job. Another is exploring mystical Judaism. A cousin goes on ten-day Jesuit retreats. A chance acquaintance shares her plan of moving to an ashram. These women inspire me to contemplate my own "forest dwelling." Meanwhile, I feel my yoga/meditation practice becoming more central to my life, like a boat that I'm now sailing around the lake but one I can envision taking out to sea in the near future.

During a person's working years, then, Hinduism considers failure a non-issue. During retirement, Hinduism considers what in the mainstream West would

⁸Fisher notes, however, that today "many Hindus still become *sannyasins*" (98).

⁹I find that I'm not alone in suggesting that we look to the *ashrama* model as we address issues of aging. Leder, for example, turns to the ashramas when he suggests that the West adopt a more spiritual model of aging. Rose explores the four stages as they apply to her own life as a university professor; she writes eloquently about her current life in the "forest dweller stage" and her understanding of the challenges and blessings awaiting her in the "beggar" stage.

be called a lifestyle of failure as the greatest ideal. Sufism, the second mystical tradition we will explore for its take on failure, goes even further: in its teaching stories and poetry, it actively celebrates failure. Failure is the ally of the Sufi because it is the natural enemy of ego. In order to understand why Sufis value failure, we must first understand the obstructive role of ego on the mystical path; to do so, we'll linger a moment longer with Hinduism.

Mainstream Western culture celebrates the ego and the success of its projects in every possible way. Mysticism, Eastern or Western, does the opposite. Central to all the wisdom traditions is the teaching that it is the ego that prevents illumination. We are absolutely *not* on earth, they say, in order to build the ego up, to push the ego to achieve its greatest possible potential. On the contrary, the wisdom traditions teach that the whole reason we're on earth is to break free of our egos. As mystics of all traditions point out, our egos are not our real Selves. Our egos are made up of our ephemeral cravings, preferences, likes and dislikes, quirks, bad habits, self-centerednesses, and, to get to our point, smugnesses and insecurities due to our successes and failures. The ego's mantra is "It's all about me."

As teachers in mid/late career, we can visualize our ego-self as a sort of grotesque pinata, a papier-mache effigy of our self. Our true Self is stifled, not only by our everyday cravings, likes and dislikes, habits, etc., but also because it's stuck all over with the psychological paperwork of the academic success/failure model: degrees, vitas, articles finished and unfinished, evaluations, awards, accumulated emails, rejection slips, publications, memos, journals read and unread, letters written and unwritten, complaints and compliments. We're so papered over we can't see clearly out of our eyes or hear clearly through our ears. The voice of our heart is muffled.

Now, imagine the opposite: egolessness. As an image of egolessness, Hindu mystics offer "pure water raining on pure water" (*Upanishads*, "Katha," part 4). Sufi mystics—to whom we'll turn in a minute—like the image of sugar melted into water, or, more colorfully, the image of a snake molting. Sufi mystic Bayazid says happily that he came out of his Bayazid-ness the way a snake comes out of its tight old skin (Fadiman and Frager 250). Rumi wants to be as lost as "gnats inside the wind," or—marvelously graphic image—a donkey so dead that it's melting back into the salt flat (*Essential Rumi* 124).

In shrinking the ego down to zero, we are not giving up our efficacy or our self-worth. We are simply moving the locus of our power and self-worth from the self with a small s—the self-willed ego with its baggage of preoccupations and desires—to the Self with a big S, our indwelling portion of the divine, our true personality, radiant and unique. (This true Self is that indefinable thing we can't put our finger on but that makes, for example, a beloved friend so uniquely wonderful.) Gandhi explains how the confluence of this Self with the divine makes the individual so effective: "There comes a time when an individual becomes irresistible and his action becomes all-pervasive in its effect. This comes when he reduces himself to zero" (qtd. in Easwaran, *Life* 44). Many mystics have demonstrated in their own lives the truth of Gandhi's paradox. Extraordinary successes are possible with minimum resources for those who break out of the ego-selves and align their projects with the divine will. We see examples in St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, and the contemporary Hindu mystic Amma. So it makes sense that failure, by breaking down the constrictive seawall of the ego and open-

ing us to the ocean of divine power, can ultimately make us not less but more effective human beings.

Sufism and Failure

The mystical tradition that explores most strikingly the benefits that are to be found in failure is Sufism, a path, as Andrew Harvey tells us, “of the sacred heart, a path of direct experience through abandon to God” (138). Rumi, the best-selling poet in the United States (Barks and Bly), is the quintessential mystic poet, so it is to him we will chiefly turn for examples of Sufism’s embrace of failure. As Coleman Barks tells us, Jelaluddin Rumi was born in 1207 in Persia, the son of a famous teacher and theologian. On his father’s death, Rumi succeeded him as head of a dervish learning community in Konya, the Western end of the Silk Road and thus a melting pot of Islamic, Judeo-Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist cultures. When Rumi was thirty-seven, he was shaken out of his daily life as a brilliant scholar and theology teacher by a meeting with a stranger, Shams I Tabriz. Shams was a dervish, probably in his sixties, who had wandered all through the Middle East seeking a spiritual soul mate. He was guided to Rumi, and the two spent three years almost constantly together in *sohbet*, spiritual conversation (“Introduction,” *Branching*) until the night of December 5, 1248, which Barks describes: “As Rumi and Shams were talking, Shams was called to the back door. He went out, never to be seen again, probably murdered with the connivance of Rumi’s son Alladin” (“Introduction,” *Essential Rumi*). After Shams’s disappearance/murder, Rumi felt that Shams was writing the mysterious and striking poetry that began flowing from him and which was eventually collected into the 42,000 verses of the “works of Shams of Tabriz,” the *Divani Shamsi Tabriz*. He also composed six volumes of spiritual couplets, the *Mathnawi* or “branching moments” (“Introduction,” *Branching*).

Vanquishing the self is so central to this mystical tradition that Sufism is defined as the discouragement, even death, of the ego. The eleventh-century Sufi Hujwiri notes, “The follower of Sufism is he who seeks to reach the rank of being dead to self. . . . He who has reached this end is called a Sufi” (Shah 49). “If you could get rid / Of yourself just once, / The secret of secrets / Would open to you,” promises Rumi (Fadiman and Frager 244), and he relates how when “someone once asked a great sheikh / what sufism was,” the sheikh responded, “‘The feeling of joy / when sudden disappointment comes’” (*Essential Rumi* 171). The mystic Abu Sa’id recounts how when he returned from extended travels and expressed regret to his sheikh that he’d missed so many of his lectures, his sheikh told him that even if he were to miss ten years’ worth of lectures, he’d have no need to worry because the teaching is always one thing, and “that one thing can be written on a fingernail: ‘Sacrifice your ego; nothing more’” (Fadiman and Frager 158).

James Fadiman and Robert Frager describe the complete overhauling of the self that the Sufi seeks: “Most of us believe that we are basically all right as we are. We just need a little more money, a little more love, a little more free time—then we will be just fine. The Sufis believe that this is far from the truth. We all need fundamental change; we need to hatch into a whole new level of being” (243). Sufi teachers see the shedding of the ego as a process with seven levels. Examples of the advanced levels are “the Contented Self” (“the self can now

begin to ‘disintegrate’ and let go of all previous concern with self-boundaries and then begin to ‘reintegrate’ as an aspect of the universal self”) and the appealingly named “Pleased Self” at which stage the individual has abandoned almost all ego and welcomes even painful trials that the universe permits (Fadiman and Frager 22).

To illuminate these levels of transformation, Fadiman and Frager use the image of the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. Their description may resonate with many of us in mid/late career.

At a certain point the caterpillar feels impelled to wrap itself in a cocoon. Immobile, it begins to dissolve. There is no sense of a marvelous new life that is coming; there is only the dissolving of the old, and the deep fears that accompany this. The caterpillar literally turns into a kind of goo. (244)

Mid/late career can be a time when everything seems turning to goo, not only in our teaching careers where we may feel increasingly overextended and inefficient, but also in our personal lives. We can’t help but feel that structures are failing as our parents die, our children leave home, some marriages dissolve, and our bodies age. The cumulative effect of these career and personal “failures” may be that we experience downhearted exhaustion, move into survival mode, and believe our teaching mission irrevocably lost.

And so we don’t need a sheikh to lead us through the seven levels. Everyday life helps us dismantle our egos. Rumi says, “This being human is a guest house, / Every morning a new arrival. // A joy, a depression, a meanness, / some momentary awareness comes / as an unexpected visitor. // Welcome and entertain them all! / Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows, / who violently sweep your house / empty of its furniture” (*Essential Rumi* 109). These guests tend to cross our threshold more and more frequently as we grow older.

Mainstream thinking expends itself keeping these guests out with security systems, insurance policies, antidepressants. But not Sufi wisdom: “Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows, / who violently sweep your house / empty of its furniture / treat each guest honorably,” says Rumi. “He may be clearing you out / for some new delight” (*Essential Rumi* 109). Rumi’s images seem uncannily pertinent to us as teachers—but, of course, he too was a teacher transformed in the middle of his career: “The Absolute works with nothing. / The workshop, the materials are what does not exist. // Try and be a sheet of paper with nothing on it. / Be a spot of ground where nothing is growing” (15). He offers us a whole new attitude towards failure. Only from this emptiness, he says, can something new emerge, “where nothing is growing, / where something might be planted, / a seed, possibly, from the Absolute” (15).

Repeatedly in Sufi writings we encounter this paradox of failure being the site from which the greatest possible good fortune can emerge. This concept culminates in the Sufi image of the *tavern of ruin*. In his *Paradise of the Sufis*, Javad Nurbakhsh, a master of the Nimatullahi Order of Sufis, explains this mysterious image: “At the end of the Path, the disciple is emptied of the attributes of the self and adorned by the Divine Attributes. . . . As Hafez has expressed it, ‘Purify thyself, and then proceed / to the “Tavern of Ruin”’. . . The ‘Tavern of Ruin’ represents the ‘passing away of the self in God’” (15). Having through suffering and failure grown out of the small self and into the greater Self, the

Sufi has arrived at the Tavern of Ruin, which is, at the same time, the tavern of happiness: “Vanish,” says Rumi, “and He’ll make you shine like the sun” (qtd. in Schiller 345).

Triviality: What Zen and Kabbalah Have to Say

*“The great gate is wide open to bestow alms
And no crowd is blocking the way.”
(Cheng-tao Ke, qtd. in Watts 145)*

*“The guard of one of the gates is the notion you have that trivial matters
are trivial. That little things are unimportant.”
(Kushner 130)*

Less dramatic than the awareness of the ways we may have failed, but, I think, more debilitating—because so pervasive—may be our sense of the apparent triviality of much of our workday, its routine tasks and interactions. For example, in mid/late career, we may begin to lose our tolerance for the administrative tasks we’ve performed year after year and which may now be proliferating. *Such tasks may begin to seem to us not only dry but actively pernicious, as if they’re subtracting from us soul hours that can never be restored.* So, even, may administrative encounters with colleagues and students: we may feel as if they’re taking us away from our “real” work: teaching, mentoring, tutoring.

And yet all wisdom literature assures us that seemingly trivial actions and encounters have a tremendous hidden importance. I’ve chosen Zen and Kabbalah in which to trace this idea because it is foregrounded in them. Zen shows us that we may find “the garden of Eden” (D. T. Suzuki 45) by total absorption in even the most routine tasks, and Kabbalah, that each such task, each encounter, approached with the proper intention, is a unique opportunity to “raise the sparks,” to participate in *Tikkun olam*, the repair of the universe.

Zen and Triviality

To continue finding meaning in our work lives, we need permission to engage with, even to enjoy, our small, routine chores as we may have done in the thrill of our first years of teaching. Zen gives us that permission. In fact, it is the mystical tradition that most powerfully validates the everyday routine.

If anybody ever needed their routine validated, I did. For too many years, I’ve happily hurled myself through the routine parts of my day, multi-tasking in my hurry to get to the “meaningful” work. Instead of treating objects with dignity, I’ve assaulted them. I’ve jerked, flung, yanked, slammed my way through my trivial tasks. At home, my headlong rush has left dings in our tub, countertop, and stove. At school, I’ve knocked bits of plaster off the projecting hall corner with my rolling briefcase. My mantra was “Let’s get it over with so we can get to the real stuff.”

Exploring Zen mysticism for my new Eastern Spiritual Classics as Literature course helped open my eyes: this was the real stuff.

Originating in sixth-century China from an amalgam of Indian Buddhism and Taoism, Zen migrated to Japan in the twelfth century and was brought to the

United States in the first decade of the twentieth by D. T. Suzuki. Among Buddhists, Zen Buddhists are the meditators; the word Zen goes back to the Sanskrit word *dhyaana*, meditation (Tanahashi and Schneider xii-xiii). At the heart of Zen practice is sitting zazen—quieting the mind, dropping from it all concepts, expectations, memories, opinions, categories, plans. Zen meditators seek to encounter what each new task brings without the expectations and labels that separate them from the riches of the living moment.

Zen's path is the path of the ordinary, the undramatic; we could say, the trivial. The famous definition of the Zen path is *wu-shih*: "nothing special" (Watts 126). "Zen is not some kind of excitement," writes Zen master Shunryu Suzuki, "but concentration on our usual everyday routine" (57).

Zen practitioners seek a purity of focus, an ability to see what is before them without the intermediary of abstractions such as labels, opinions, fantasies, expectations, likes, and dislikes. "Zen," writes Alan Watts, "is seeing reality directly. . . . It is simply a quiet awareness, without comment, of whatever happens to be here and now" (155). "Our teaching is just to live, always in reality, in its exact sense," says Shunryu Suzuki (89). But paying attention to reality isn't easy, as Zen master Charlotte Joko Beck explains: "The reason we don't want to pay attention is because it's not always pleasant. It doesn't suit us" (10). Instead of paying attention to what is unpleasant—for example, boring or trivial—we spin off into a mental web of fantasies. "This goes on constantly: spinning, spinning, spinning, always trying to create life in a way that will be pleasant" says Beck. "But when we do that we never see this right-here-now, this very moment. . . . So the crux of zazen [sitting meditation] is this: all we must do is constantly to create a little shift from the spinning world we've got in our heads to the right-here-now." (11). When we master this practice, life can be, says Beck, "luminous and ordinary at the same time" (189).

Value judgments are irrelevant. From the Zen perspective, there is no such thing as a "trivial" task. There is simply the flow of life to live in and the next indicated thing to do, with complete attention and with no fanfare: "To make our effort, moment after moment, is our way" (Shunryu Suzuki 89). Beck notes that this same commitment to the next task was what impressed her in watching a documentary about Mother Teresa: "What I found most remarkable was that she was just doing the next thing and the next thing and then next thing, totally absorbing herself in each task—which is what we need to learn. Her life is her work, doing each task wholeheartedly, moment after moment, [experiencing] the joy of doing what needs to be done with no thought of *I want*" (201).

When we let whatever task the moment brings us—chopping wood, carrying water, grading papers, writing reports—fill the scope of our consciousness and absorb our full attention, the payoff of this single-pointed, nonjudgmental concentration on our everyday routine can be enormous. "As we practice life steadily becomes more fulfilling, more satisfactory, better for us, better for other people," says Beck (14). "More and more I can be who I truly am: a no-self [no-ego], an open and spacious response to life" (19).

Zen changed my mantra. My new mantra is "Don't let's get it over with: this is the real stuff." Yes, it's scary to think of giving a routine, trivial action room to breathe, to expand without a time-boundary. What if my teeth-brushing, my spreadsheet-data-entering goes on forever? On the other hand, if I learn to give each small action a chance to breathe and be itself, my whole day will have more personality, be more alive.

I'm making progress. One morning recently, I had regressed into multi-tasking. Half-dressed, with the bed half-made, my commuter bag half-packed, I was flinging things about and thinking how much of daily life is simply getting ready—that apparently meaningless series of trivial actions: teeth, shower, hair, make-up, bags. Suddenly I realized I was breaking my resolution to be one-pointed, to do each small action of my routine with quiet mindfulness. I screeched to a stop, like Roadrunner digging in his heels. At that second, these words came to my mind: “This might be the most important part of your day.” And this thought struck me as deeply true—for the first time, I understood what Zen was trying to say, not just in my head, but in my heart. The words “This might be the most important part of my day” have changed the whole way I perceive my morning routine.

I can think of at least five overlapping approaches to mindfulness, to being present when we have “trivial” actions or tasks to perform. First, we can keep our five senses alert to enjoy the task. Second, we can repeat a mantram while performing the task (the anonymous author of *The Way of a Pilgrim* notes that because mind and heart [and body] are not the same, human beings can attentively perform at least three distinct actions at once (23). The mantram enriches the performance of the task rather than distracting from it). Third, we can turn the task into a symbolic mini-ceremony. Fourth, we can “practice the presence,” the companionship of spirit while we perform the task. Finally, we can offer the task up.

From these approaches have come some daily practices that help me appreciate, value, and stay focused in routine actions and tasks. Most are consistent with Zen practice, some are less purely experiential, and some are just plain silly:

- Setting my home clocks a luxurious twenty minutes fast
- Using ceremony to slow me down to mindfulness. “Be mindful 24 hours a day,” says Thich Nhat Hanh (24)
- Enjoying the cool water in the tub, the cool rain from the shower. No divided mind, just pure pleasure (I imagine bathing in the sacred Ganges—something which, having recently looked at the Ganges, I would not actually do)
- Laying out my clothes on the bed and admiring them before putting them on
- Keeping the radio off on the commute to work, making time for a morning offering and contemplation
- Keeping my five senses alert for small pleasures: the heft and glide of good chalk, the smell of dispenser soap, the gentle clicking of dozens of hands at their keyboards, the taste of adventure when black coffee comes in a Styrofoam cup
- De-trivializing routine action—filling the coffee pot, erasing the board—by seeing their symbolic potential
- After my students leave, lingering in the classroom to enjoy the silence, the hum of a quiet room
- Practicing gratitude for routine actions, the drink at the water cooler, the quick lunch at my desk

- Choosing computer passwords that remind me of lessons from the mystics; collecting quotations from the mystics inside the covers of my pocket calendar; keeping images of spiritual teachers on my office desk, computer, daily calendar
- Noticing sunlight speckled on walks or walls: using it as a reminder that radiance is present behind the everyday routine, a reminder to recognize all the little places it breaks through
- Realizing how beautiful most sounds are: distant plane, tires going by, wind in the elms, truck's back-up beep, whirl of the fan, someone's footsteps
- Abandoning the rushed, half-articulated, trailing-off handwriting with which I used to jot memos to myself
- Making signing my name a moment of centering, of commitment to being who I really want to be. Seeing my name as me and shaping it mindfully as I write it
- Walking mindfully as if planting a lotus at every step (O'Reilley 35).

Reading about Zen mysticism has helped me put a different face on chores I used to judge trivial and psychically empty—chores that I used to feel were actually *injurious* to me, as if they were using up some of my allotted soul-energy. It's not that I no longer dread certain routine chores—transcriptions of classroom observations, for example, or the Writing Center Annual Report that eats up a quarter of every summer. It's that instead of seeing them in jailhouse gray, I can now see that I can see them in color. I'm not there yet, but Zen shows me an astonishing possibility: that I can judge tasks valuable for other criteria than direct service to students or intellectual or creative draw. Zen offers us a whole different measuring stick. According to Zen, the most precious work in the world is the work that we need to do right now, whatever it is. What's immediately before our noses to complete, the next indicated thing, is where we can find paradise. This is an extraordinary and beautiful claim that rings true to me, that seems sometimes out of my grasp but always worth reaching for: that routine duties can be luminous places, can be the abode of the Buddha.

Kabbalah and Triviality

Some years ago a news item appeared about a Gulf Coast man who threw a big party for his buddies while his wife was away. When she was due home, the party was going strong. To delay her arrival, this enterprising man dragged two sandbags out of the nearby levee and laid them across his road. A trivial act. But the Mississippi River pushed through the tiny gap and burst the levee; as a result, hundreds of homes were swept away, and explosions burned thousands of acres of homes and wilderness. This story could be a tale told by the Hasidim, eighteenth-century followers of Kabbalah, the mystical branch of Judaism which emerged in Judaism in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Provence and Spain. One of the most important beliefs of Kabbalah is that every action, no matter how tiny, creates good or evil repercussions (“angels” or “demons”), and that the tiniest act may have enormous repercussions (Cooper 134).

There are two schools of Kabbalah, the first based on lifelong studies of the mysteries with a teacher, and the second based on a teacherless path of meditation and kavvannah, mindful action (Cooper 11). Those of us not in the position to undertake a lifelong assault on the Kabbalah's mysteries can learn lessons with Kabbalists of the second kind: "Kabbalah," writes Rabbi David Cooper, "is a way of life and a way of looking at things. One becomes a Kabbalist by bringing a new level of awareness to every act, every word that flows out of one's mouth, and every thought that arises in the mind" (5).

In mid/late career, routine duties began to seem trivial to me, nitpicking and insignificant to what I saw as meaningful work with students and their writing. But—worrisomely—there were also beginning to be times when my encounters with students seemed trivial, in a been-there-done-that sort of way. And this is when the snuffbox/Kabbalah came to my rescue.

In Kabbalah, we find the same solution to the problem of triviality that Zen proposes, that is, a wholehearted engagement with every task or encounter that arises, no matter how trivial it appears in our eyes. There is, however, an interesting difference in the ways these two mystical traditions perceive routine action. In the Zen ideal, triviality is a non-issue. The present moment is the only game in town. What is before you to do, you do, directly, and with a childlike purity, your mind unclouded by value judgments ("trivial" or "important") and other abstractions.

In Kabbalah, on the other hand, the seeming "triviality" of small actions is a big issue, enormously relevant and important to ponder. In fact, Kabbalah attaches a value label—"Important! Important!"—to every single action or encounter. I find the source of this attitude in three interrelated and marvelously curious teachings of Kabbalah: the teaching of the levels of reality, the teaching of the holy sparks, and the teaching of the *lamed-vav tzaddikim*. Each of these teachings can provide an inspirational model for our approach to seemingly trivial tasks and encounters. The first of the three teachings concerns interconnected levels of reality. According to the central text of Kabbalah, the thirteenth-century *Zohar* or *Book of Light* compiled by the Spaniard Moses de Leon, "The Holy One has disposed of all things in such a way that everything in this world should be a replica of something in the world above" (Cooper 36). The universe is not a done deal, like a clock set ticking. Instead, it's "an ongoing creative emanation" (64). In the view of Kabbalah, human beings through free will are co-creators of the universe, minute by minute. The universe is constantly balanced upon a symbiotic relationship of Creator and creation, which "defines and nurtures each moment" (64). "Things are more than we think they are," writes Cooper (6). Our physical world mirrors and affects the spiritual realms. Thus, "when a thing below bestirs itself, the result is a simultaneous stimulation of its likeness above. The two realms form one interconnected whole" (36). Even the smallest action or encounter could have cosmic consequences, just as in chaos theory a butterfly's wing beat can cause a distant typhoon (132).

Kabbalah takes a further extraordinary step. Cooper quotes the *Zohar*: "It is said: 'Sometimes it happens that the world is exactly balanced between people whose good deeds bring life and those whose evil deeds bring death. Then, one righteous person can turn the scale and the world is saved'" (198). Thus, the *Zohar* advises, "A person should always imagine that the fate of the whole world depends upon his or her actions" (198). "Everything," says Cooper, "can turn on a word" (118).

This principle that even the most trivial-seeming action has potentially far-reaching repercussions is embodied in a second teaching of the Kabbalah: the mysterious and compelling cosmology of the holy sparks. Sixteenth-century Kabbalist Isaac Luria, who was born in Jerusalem and lived for ten years in retreat on a river island in Egypt, proposed a cosmology in which God, like an artisan pouring liquid gold, poured the golden light of divinity into molds to create a nexus of ultimate awareness (Matt 15). But the divine light proved too powerful, shattering the molds. Cooper describes what happens next:

The gold spreads . . . the flecks themselves split apart until untold numbers of gold atoms are scattered across creation, each one surrounded by a shell of dust that hides it. The gold drifts everywhere. . . . The gold represents the light of divine consciousness, and each atom a spark of holiness. If gathered together into one place—not a physical place, but symbolically the center of the universe—all the sparks combined would radiate ultimate awareness. (28)

According to Kabbalah, everything in existence contains within its shell a spark of the divine. Our job as human beings is to restore the body of the divine by freeing or “raising” these sparks. We raise these sparks by performing acts of “lovingkindness” (as opposed to merely “kind” deeds which can be done without love), by living harmoniously with the universe and by developing our spiritual consciousness (29). Cooper suggests the “enormous” “ramifications” of this teaching:

In each moment of existence we have the potential to raise holy sparks. . . . Our opportunities to raise sparks are boundless. The choices we make for our activities, the interactions we have with our family, friends, neighbors, business associates, and even strangers . . . the books we read, the television we watch, the way we relate to food, everything in daily life presents sparks locked in husks awaiting release. (29)

This raising of the sparks is related in a wonderful way to the teaching of the levels of reality. As Cooper tells us, since our personal world and the world of the divine are intricately interconnected, it’s impossible for our actions to benefit only one and not the other. Thus each spark we raise to contribute to the mending of the world (*tikkun ha-olam*) also contributes to the mending of our own souls (*tikkun ha-nefesh*) (179).

For us as academics in mid/late career, dispirited by the seeming triviality of many of our routine tasks and encounters, this teaching of the sparks can provide a powerful restorative. What if we resolved to encounter each triviality—each action item in our department mailbox, each routine faculty meeting, each errand to the bookstore or business office—as an opportunity to raise a spark, to participate in rebuilding our soul and rebuilding the body of God? And when a project is stressful—the memo to the dean we don’t want to write, the awkward phone call we want to postpone—what if we offered up our dread and imagined this offering raising a particularly vigorous spark? Kabbalah has helped me approach routine tasks with more cheer, no longer fearing them as psychically debilitating. I remind myself that far from siphoning off soul energy, these routine tasks are *generating* it—raising sparks.

Some tasks that are clearly *not* trivial, commenting on papers, for example, may *appear* to us trivial after many years. We know how many papers we've already graded since we began our careers, and we know how many thousands more we face before we can retire. No human could look at this prospect with relish, but what if we could at least *value* the very enormity of the number of those papers remaining for us to grade—5,000, 15,000, 20,000—because each paper represented a spark to be raised? In other words—in the Jewish-Zen poet Miriam Sagan's words—what if we perceived every trivial action and encounter as “part of the endless / Preservation of the world”? (qtd. in Tanahashi and Schneider 40).

A third important teaching of Kabbalah is the mysterious teaching of the *lamed-vav tzaddikim* or thirty-six hidden saints. According to Kabbalah, the world contains, at all times, thirty-six hidden saints who work to keep the universe in balance (Cooper 123). These hidden saints are catalysts whose quiet actions shift destinies and prevent disasters so that the world's suffering does not become unbearable. “Sometimes we think we are having a casual conversation with a stranger,” writes Cooper, “but in fact this other person is helping us avoid a serious tragedy” (125). Sometimes we ourselves are unwittingly acting as *lamed-vav tzaddikim* (125). Another teacher of Kabbalah, Lawrence Kushner, tells us, “People chosen to be messengers of the Most High rarely even know that they are His messengers” (68).

The Hasidic revival movement in eighteenth-century Europe was the source of wonderful tales of mystics and mystical encounters, which Martin Buber collected in *Tales of the Hasidim*. Over and over in these tales the figure of the pest, the beggar, the social outcast appears—a figure of unimportance, someone despised, even—who turns out to be a *lamed-vav tzaddik*. Cooper notes that “the person giving us the hardest time actually may be saving our lives” (242). It's easy to see how this teaching of the thirty-six hidden saints could be useful in our daily lives. The interrupting student who's always in a minor crisis, the janitor who bends our ear when we're trying to work late in the office, the dean who stops us in the hall as we're finally hurrying out the door to the car and asks, “Do you have a minute?”—what if we could see these people as possible *lamed-vav tzaddikim* sent to us as an opportunity for an act of “lovingkindness” that will help us raise the sparks? Or perhaps even as a distraction that will preserve us from some misfortune? Kabbalah can help us respond from a new place to inopportune requests by colleagues or students—seeing them no longer as meaningless interruptions of our real work but as moments of opportunity that may prove to be unexpectedly valuable in the great scheme of things.

I've recently realized that as teachers we are sometimes so busy working for our students that we forget to make time for them. We may not even notice we're giving the student in the hall a brush off; we think what we're doing is being very busy taking care of their needs. Recently, I've had a series of encounters with students in which I have been shown (slow learner) the same lesson again and again. An apparently cheerful student asks me whether I have a minute, and I say, “I've got to get ready for class. Can we talk later?” But then I remember that I'm supposed to be giving each student a fully attentive ear, so I sit them down. In every case, it's emerged that the student was actually not serene at all, but in the throes of serious decision-making or despondency, and I've listened appalled to think that I wanted to give them the brush-off.

So my goal is to learn to be the kind of listener Brenda Ueland describes in “Tell Me More: The Fine Art of Listening.” Each of us, she says, has a “little creative fountain” in us, “the spirit, or the intelligence, or the imagination” (39). When people “have not been listened to in the right way—with affection and a kind of jolly excitement . . . their creative fountain has been blocked. Only superficial talk comes out—what is prissy or gushing or merely nervous. No one has called out of them, by wonderful listening, what is true and alive” (40). Ueland writes: “When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life. . . . It makes people happy and free when they are listened to” (39). Her description of how to listen sounds Zen-like: “With quiet fascinated attention” (40); not critically, not self-assertively (44), but like this: “suddenly you begin to hear not only what people are saying, but what they are trying to say, and you sense the whole truth about them. And you sense existence, not piecemeal, not this object and that, but as a translucent whole” (44).

With its teachings of the interconnected levels of reality, the raising of the sparks, and the thirty-six hidden saints, Kabbalah can disabuse us of the notion that our everyday tasks and encounters are routine and unimportant. According to Kabbalah, nothing is trivial, no task, no encounter. Cooper writes, “More than we realize, our lives hinge on little things: one telephone call, a letter, a thoughtful gesture, even a nod or smile at just the right moment” (xiii). This makes sense to us, experientially. We remember small kind acts that changed the course of our own lives. We know already that a trivial, kind interaction with a student—a warm smile in the hall, a few words of encouragement at the end of a paper—may prevent that student from despondency, who knows, binge drinking, dropping out, from, perhaps even, despair. (An engaging contemporary exploration of this theme is Phil Hay and Matt Manfredi’s movie *Bug*, whose entire plot is the concatenation of effects that result when a large black beetle gets stepped on. “Every step counts” is the movie’s moral. Our tiniest actions can have enormous consequences.) Kushner writes this: “The guard of one of the gates [to the higher worlds] is the notion you have that trivial matters are trivial. That little things are unimportant” (130). Wrong! says Kabbalah: “This is the way you will go to higher worlds. You will pay great attention to the most trivial matters” (129).

Meditation

“Don’t open a shop by yourself. Listen. Keep silent. . . . Try to be an ear.”
(Rumi, Essential Rumi 143)

“Go up on the rooftop at night / in this city of the soul.”
(Rumi, Essential Rumi 103)

We’ve looked at four classes in the mystical curriculum, those addressing ills that can plague academics in mid/late career. We’ve examined what Hinduism and Sufism can teach us about failure, what Zen and Kabbalah can teach us about triviality. Before concluding, I’d like to consider one other course, one that could be a prerequisite if that weren’t completely contrary to the spirit of the thing: An Introduction to Meditation.

Let’s change the metaphor. Each of the practices we’ve examined is a ray of

color from a prism, restoring brightness to our work-lives threatened by disappointment and triviality. The light that animates that prism is meditation, stepping outside of time to center ourselves in the inexhaustible treasures of the universe and our own souls.

There are as many different ways to meditate as there are people. The great religions offer an extraordinary variety of meditation practices, for example, mantram, rosary, Jesus Prayer, mandala, zazen, contemplating a candle flame, whirling, recitation of the Name, watching the breath, walking, combining and permutating Hebrew letters. When we ask the universe for the right one, we stumble across it, the one that suits us like our own fingerprint, that makes us feel like we've come home. The teacher could be living or dead, a friend, an animal, a tree, a book.

It's true that the practice of meditation may start out badly, full of failure and triviality. Instead of centering peacefully, our monkey minds may be in a whirl. We spend our entire meditation dragging our thoughts back to center and then watching them escape again. During one of my meditations, I found myself thinking about pasta puttanesca, lampshades, and feral dogs. During another, the only thought I could successfully focus on was, "Should I throw those terrible stuffed mushrooms over the fence for the ravens?" Nothing happens, and we want to quit. But as Saint Francis de Sales notes, "Even if you did nothing during the whole of your hour but bring your mind back . . . , though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well employed" (qtd. in Easwaran, *Meditation* 37).

Every wisdom tradition tells us that in the very sitting, the not quitting, something invisibly begins to change, like a crystal taking imperceptible shape underground. We mustn't expect to feel results, but other people might mention a difference in us, and we might start to notice how an empty quiet room seems to fill up with a kind of peace that's like a physical presence. I like what Beck, describing the advantages of meditation, says: "Still, when we sit, everything else takes care of itself" (31).

Conclusion

In one of his poems, Rumi contrasts two kinds of intelligence. There is academic intelligence which brings us promotion and earns us point on our annual evaluations—but despite which as we enter mid/late career we may feel a sense of failure, a sense of the triviality of our busy daily lives. Then there is another kind of intelligence that the mystics can help us rediscover, an intelligence deep inside ourselves. Rumi describes this intelligence, this "second knowing" that can refresh our vision in mid/late career:

With [academic] intelligence you rise in the world.
 You get ranked ahead or behind others . . .
 You stroll with this intelligence
 in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more
 marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one
 already completed and preserved inside you.

A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness
in the center of the chest. This other intelligence
does not turn yellow or stagnate. . . .

This second knowing is a fountainhead
from within you, moving out . . . (*Essential Rumi* 178) ☉

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