

# It's Okay. Really.

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One chaotic day in the temple kitchen during the first years of my residential Zen practice, as I ran harried with a pan of food from the oven to the buffet table, my teacher stopped me in my tracks. As he walked through the dining room doors, he took one glance at me and said, "It's okay."

It's okay? It's *okay*?

How did he know it was okay? What if it weren't okay? On what basis could he make such a claim?

Despite my ten thousand doubts, I knew that his unconditional "okay" was precisely what I had come to Buddhism to find. It was the quiet koan at the core of my practice, the longing that would push me to stay year after year at Tassajara and Green Gulch Farm; that drove me on

pilgrimage to Mt. Baldy and Shasta Abbey; to Toni Packer, and Japanese monasteries and back again.

All of my seeking boiled down to a quest to discover how my teacher knew "it's okay" regardless of whether he even knew what "it" was.

Perhaps none of us are raised to think that things are fundamentally okay; perhaps that's not something that anyone can teach us. I know I'm more fortunate than most. I have

tremendous gratitude for my family, and I always knew I was seen, loved, and valued. But I was by no means raised to see the terrible suffering and oppression in the world as anything remotely like okay.

All four of my grandparents were Mennonite missionaries, carrying their biblical values and pacifist agenda from the cornfields of North America to the jungles of Colombia and the *pampas* of Argentina. There they encountered a vibrant liberation theology that profoundly informed their Christianity. My parents were missionary kids born and raised in Latin America, and though they drifted from the doctrine and community of their parents' faith, they kept many of the core values and brought them into vigorous engagement in their work for peace and justice. They became Quakers, and their vow to live for the welfare of others was supported and polished.

I was born in Argentina and my brother in Uruguay in the mid-1970s, during the unfolding of the "dirty war." Amid the violence, disappearances, anxiety, and suspicion, my parents put their faith in the struggle for change. They saw a world ruled by injustice, and for moral people the right response could only be to stand up, to speak out, and to fight hard against oppression.

My parents joined in the resistance to the military dictatorships, and many of their friends were imprisoned, tortured, disappeared. The stories of my early childhood include my mother and grandfather visiting police station after police station asking after my detained father, or my mother clogging the toilet with Marxist books she was desperately trying to flush while army patrols swept the neighborhood looking for dissidents. There was love in their world, to be sure, and the deep solidarity of *el pueblo unido*, but it was candlelight in an abyss. There was only a guiding glimmer of redemption, a Marxist Christian hope that with the struggle of the righteous the tide might somehow turn, and the last—at last—might be first.

The world I inherited was a broken, unjust world—a world unspeakably far from okay.

And who would dare to say otherwise, in the face of endless wars, ecological devastation, starvation, oppression? Who would have the gall to walk through the dining room doors of the world and proclaim, "It's okay"? Maybe to a healthy young monk in a temple kitchen, but to struggling

farmers displaced from their land, their water polluted? To the widowed, the orphaned, the maimed?

And yet to ground our compassion we must find precisely that gall. In the dharma I found the invitation to say with full confidence—sometimes silently and sometimes aloud—that no matter what, it's okay. I depend on passionate activists like my parents to help keep my okay from becoming lazy or complacent, but I have no doubt that the bedrock of my bodhisattva activity must be "it's okay."

Not from desperate brokenness, but from the clarity and ease of "it's okay" may we bear witness to the suffering of the world and wholeheartedly work to heal it.