

If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!



I wear the most beautiful, hand-made Kimberly McDonald Ivory Buddha with black geode when I speak.

It's a showstopper, a gift from my eldest daughter, and visually allows me to share with my audience my philosophy of teaching, coaching and working with others.

As a young graduate student, I was introduced to the psychotherapist Sheldon Kopp who wrote the book *If You Meet the Buddha On the Road, Kill Him!* Sheldon was dying of cancer when he was writing the book, observing that as therapists, we are helpers and healers who are but a spec of dirt along the road to recovery. If we do well with our clients, they will heal and move on, far surpassing us in their life journey. Early on as an educator, I adopted this posture, and I am sure my mentor, Glen Haworth, followed a similar path as he has always told me I far surpassed him.



My mentor, Glen Haworth, and his wife, Joanne, circa 2013.

With me as his mentee, I met Glen on my path, and indeed I killed him.

This is the greatest gift your students and clients may give you – transcending, exceeding you in their talents, in

their healing. You rejoice in the knowledge that you were that tiny catalyst albeit an inspirational spec along the way. Such is the blessing with several of my students.

Joel Garfinkel comes to mind. He was a member of the founding group *Student to Student*, an award-winning alcohol and drug prevention program at San Diego State University. Soft spoken and inquisitive, he was president of his fraternity, and had a heart for changing the world one person at a time. He and a few other sorority type folks joined with a band of ex-cons to start changing the “red solo cup” and Playboy Magazine’s number one party school in America atmosphere at SDSU. After college, Joel traveled to the Far East to sell carpet, and ended up studying the global leader and spiritual healer, animal and peace activist, Thích Nhất Hạnh. Joel did that and much more. Today he is one of the most

famous executive coaches, helping men and women all over the world achieve success in their business lives as evidenced by the many testimonials he has received from top notch executives from companies such as Oracle, Google, Gap, Amazon and Cisco.

Joel graciously kept in touch as I watched him grow from afar. In a great work of irony, Joel began coaching me professionally and personally once my work at the University of San Diego began to deteriorate. He became the gift of the Buddha to me – the apprentice-becomes-master sort of role reversal.

I heard from another former student just the other day. She said she was planning on retiring soon.

What?!

How could my sweet, young student, Ali, be retiring? Then I remembered – that was thirty years ago.

I met Ali when she was living in her car. She was homeless at the time, fighting the demons of substance abuse. So I let her sleep on my office couch, and kept on her about her undergraduate studies, even when she was busily falling asleep in my classroom. Ali went

on to graduate school, becoming one of the finest licensed social work clinicians in our field.

She still asks for my advice on the brink of her retirement. She writes to me *you know everyone. Who should I send my new clients to?*

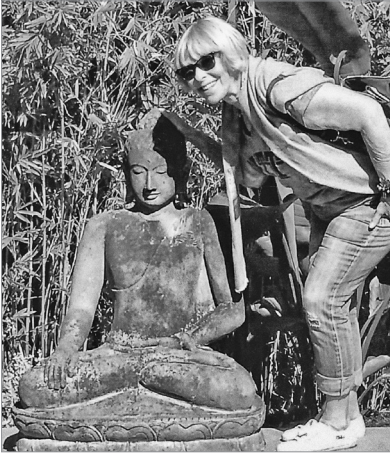
With the same wisdom of Buddha, I told her *trust your instincts. People come to you for wisdom so be sure to share your own. I trust your judgment.*

Okay. That's all she needed to hear. I wonder if Ali knows that her growth over the years is the fuel that feeds my soul.

Through the years, I have worked with families who learn to shine and no longer need weekly (in some extreme cases daily) professional counsel, healthily killing me off. Speaking of daily counseling, I recall working with a family that was deeply entrenched in a field of emotional landmines. It's a tricky business – defusing the bombs that lead us down Pity Road, suddenly hanging a left down Sorry-For-Myself Lane where we lose direction in Hurtsville. One issue was a breakdown of communication, making black and white declarations that steer us toward I'll-Never-Speak-To-You-Again Boulevard. And it begins with a landfill of substance-infused catastrophes.

The mother opened with a speech straight from the Victim Manifesto. Her tears erupted like a geyser at Yellowstone. The crying would not stop, and often her eyes would crust shut with blood and she would have to go to the ophthalmologist for treatment. I did all that I knew how to help them – I listened, suggested, laughed, cajoled – but mostly loved in the most compassionate way I could muster. Their pain was so great and their hearts were so empty, it took a great deal of time to have a breakthrough to compassion. Eventually they began to embrace their pain and change their behavior. It’s easy to get lost in a city of emotional wreckage, the streets, avenues and lanes blurring together through the lens of pain. Proper direction, communication and an adrenaline shot of empathy finds a pathway out.

Like many families I have worked with, it takes time to discover the sacred truth that self-worth comes from an internal locus of control. My clients discover, as Twelve Step programs suggest, to “suit up and show up” as a way of feeding the inner sense of worthiness. This means going out with friends, laughing, and living a transparent life. They are *learning* to take care of themselves, knowing that doing the best they can comes from within, which in turn builds a defense against the orchestra of shame. These building blocks



Thankful for the Buddha in my backyard in WeHo, circa 2014.

serve to silence the “you are not good enough” overtures that play through the mind’s eye.

And so the Buddha dies the noblest death of all – a dot in the landscape, blurred lines in the rearview mirror, spurring us on, igniting our passion as we travel the pathways of life.

Recovery. Transformation. Hope. Inspiration.