

Making Raspberry Jam

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

March 10, 2024

One of the many things we learn when life takes unexpected and difficult twists and turns is the necessity of allowing friends, loved ones, and even strangers, to help us.

I am blessed to be part of two ministerial collegial groups. We keep each other sane. We laugh and cry. We hold each other's pain.

When my dear colleagues learned of all that we and the community at large are going through with Rev. Helen's tragic death, they offered to share some of their sermons that I could preach, as a way to help ease my load right now.

I told them that wouldn't work last Sunday, but this Sunday it might, and that our topic was dharma. The first sermon a friend sent was about grandparents who were elders in a congregation they had ministered to. Though it wasn't the right sermon for today, its gift was no less important. My grandparents are here. We are always surrounded by love.

The second sermon offered was perfect, and so here it is: a sermon about dharma entitled "Making Raspberry Jam," by Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie, minister of the Arlington Street Church in Boston.

Making Raspberry Jam

I recently overheard a debate about how to pronounce the Tibetan mantra, *Om mani padme HUM*,¹ and was glad to know just enough not to engage. *Om mani padme HUM* is known as the *mani* mantra. It doesn't really have a translation, or at least not one that would make much sense

1 For what it's worth, here's how I learned it: *Om* (ohm) *Ma* (mah) *Ni* (nee) *Pad* (pahd) *Me* (may) *Hum* (hum). The vowel in the syllable *Hum* is pronounced as in the English word *book*. The final consonant in that syllable is often pronounced *ng* as in *song*: *Om Mani Padme Hung*. Colloquially, the syllable *Pad* is pronounced *Pe* (peh) by many Tibetans: *Om Mani Peme Hung*.

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to most of us, but it is said as an invocation to the spirit of compassion.

In Tibet, stones painted or carved with the *mani* mantra—*mani* stones—are everywhere, since seeing the mantra is said to have the same effect as saying it out loud or silently, to oneself. Spinning the written form of the mantra around in a prayer wheel is also believed to invoke compassion. In every land influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, there is a profusion of *mani* wheels—small hand wheels and huge wheels—with millions of copies of the mantra inside.

I wanted to share this, because *om mani padme hum* features quite prominently in the story I want to tell you today from one of my favorite spiritual teachers, Ram Dass.

Ram Dass was born here in Boston in 1931; his parents named him Richard Alpert. As a psychologist in the early 1960s, he was best-known for his research at Harvard, with Timothy Leary, into psychedelic drug-induced states of consciousness. In 1967, Dr. Alpert left for India, where he began to study for a different kind of enlightenment, under the direction of Neem Karoli Baba, who gave him his new name, which means "Servant of God." Ram Dass remade himself, teaching and serving all over the world, which, despite a debilitating stroke ten years ago, he continues to this day.

He told this story in the early 1970s; it remains one of my favorites, and is a whole sermon, all by itself. Here he is:

"I [was] in India ... [when my mother died] ... I [had] to come back to be with my father in a new way than I was ever with him before... When I came back to Boston from India, I arrived at the airport and I was wearing a beard and I was barefoot, and I had come from India with my tamboura (which is a kind of Asian lute) and I was generally a weird-looking being.

My father came in his car to pick me up—a

Making Raspberry Jam

March 10, 2024 page 2

conservative Boston Republican [lawyer] and a very responsible member of our society. He took one look at me, and his response was, 'Get in quick, before anybody sees you,' which I did, and we started to drive toward the house."

"Now what he regaled me with all the way home was the fact that he was experiencing a depression, a deep depression, as he approached death. He was seventy-two at the time.

He told me all about how his life was meaningless, and even though he had started Brandeis University ... and been president of the [New York, New Haven, and Hartford] Railroad, and done lots of glorious and grand things in his life, he was experiencing the feeling that he was a failure as a human being..."

"And he was telling me all about his will and the clauses in his will, and... I was [just] sitting in the car doing my *Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum*. And it was like his mind was creating ... this heavy, ... depressed place of "it's all over" and "we'll look through the old photographs tonight" —you know that kind of place. And I just did my mantra..."

"We got home and he said, 'What would you like to do now?'"

"I said, 'I don't care, Dad, anything you'd like to do.'"

He said, "Well, I want you to rest. You've had a long trip... I'm going to make some raspberry jam," because that's one of his hobbies..."

"So I said, 'Well, can I help you?'"

"No, don't bother."

"I said, 'I'd like to.'"

"He said, 'Well, all right.'"

"So... we start to make the raspberry jam. We're sterilizing the bottles and mashing raspberries and so on, and he's telling me about the horror of his life and how sad it is... It's a very heavy story... I feel fantastic compassion for him, because I love him very dearly, and at the same moment... I see where he's stuck. So I'm just doing my mantra [– *Om Mani Padme Hum* –] and

mashing raspberries and so on, and I'm saying things to him like, 'Should the bubbles all rise to the top? ... Where do we put that?' and so on."

"After a while, since I'm giving him no reinforcement at all for this fantastic dark cloud that he's creating and holding all by himself, *since I'm part of us, but I'm not helping him hold it up*, ... he starts to say, 'Well, get all the bubbles up...' and pretty soon, his conversation is shifting until it's here and now. That is, he's talking about how to make raspberry jam..."

"And as he starts to talk about how to make raspberry jam... the lines of his face are relaxing, and the whole model of himself as somebody who's old and about to die... and all this stuff..., that's all sort of falling into the past, and here we are making raspberry jam. We're just two guys making raspberry jam..."

"Now we finish making the raspberry jam, and he's happy, see, he's smiling." *Om mani padme hum!*

Eight months later, Ram Dass gave away the bride at his father's wedding. And for the rest of his father's long life, when Ram Dass called the newlyweds, they would be heading out to dinner, or having people over, or traveling, or they were writing songs or movie routines together at the piano, or his father was writing love songs.

At the wedding, just before they went into the temple, his father turned to Ram Dass and said, "This is all your doing, you know."²

My spiritual companions,

It all starts right here, right now.

Realized beings walk on water, but they also stand in the kitchens of the bereaved and make raspberry jam.

May we give ourselves the gift of the healing power of coming fully into the present, and pass the gift along.

2 Ram Dass, *The Only Dance There Is* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 61-64

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Making Raspberry Jam

March 10, 2024 *page 3*

Let us seek our own version of jam-making;
we will find it in unexpected places.

Let us invoke the spirit of compassion,
and may we embody compassion.

Let us give ourselves to love.

And, I add—may we honor our path, the dharma
we are following, and see its power however it
may look.

Even when it's making jam.

Perhaps especially when it's making jam.

Amen and blessed be.