

EVE MYONEN MARKO

Prologue

I have many stories relating to Bernie Glassman, my husband for some 20 years. But the one that comes up for me often is an old story he told me from his years at Zen Center of Los Angeles, long before I met him. It took place at a time when Maezumi Roshi was in Japan and put Bernie in charge. At that time, almost every noted Eastern teacher who came into the U.S. talked at ZCLA because there were very few forums for Eastern teachings in this country.

The Case

One day a Hindu teacher asked to speak at the Zen Center, but there was a condition: For this teacher, the color black evoked death. The teacher would not appear in any room that had black in it. Of course, Soto zendos at that time were mostly black, including the mats, cushions, and the robes.

Bernie agreed and set to work changing the look of the zendo. He told all members not to show up wearing any black: no black priest robes, no black rakusus, no black sitting robes of any kind. And since there was nothing he loved more than putting people to work, he also had them cover up the mats and cushions with different color fabrics.

In that work crew was John Daido Looi, who finally turned to Bernie and said: "Why is it that we're

the ones to change the look of the place where we sit when they're the ones coming to visit?"

Bernie told me that he said to Daido: "Because we're the ones with the practice of being one with everything. That may not be their practice, but it is ours."

Commentary

Bernie may have said it tongue-in-cheek, like the joke about the Zen practitioner who tells the hot dog vendor to make him one with everything. But over the years I find myself recalling that story again and again.

I come from an orthodox Jewish family from eastern Europe that was fundamentalist in nature, with almost no tolerance for anything different. To this very day, when I visit them, I avoid wearing sleeveless or short dresses in summer; in visiting grandparents in the past, I would cover my hair. They, of course, didn't make the slightest effort to reciprocate or try to understand my Zen practice. I would grumble about this, and then remember the above story. It's my practice to bear witness to everything, not theirs.

Bernie never implied that this way of being is the only way or even the best way. He just said that this was our practice, unconditioned by how much reciprocity—or lack thereof—we get from others.

This has helped me in many other situations, reminding me to deeply listen to someone I may not agree with and who may virulently disagree with me. It could be anything—from a friend who tells me that

coronavirus is not real and that no one has died, to someone who loathes every single voter who helped Donald Trump get into office, to someone blithely informing me that everybody knows that Buddhism is a form of idolatry. It could be encountering subtler but hostile reactions to my practice, my gender, or my politics. I bear witness to them; I don't agree with them, but I bear witness, trusting to that to inspire whatever action I wish to take.

I've learned not to make bearing witness conditional on what the other person does. As Bernie said, it may not be their practice, but it is mine.