Confessions of a Zen Novelist

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In 2003, when my second novel was published, I felt like everything in my life and in the larger world was falling apart. My father had died several years earlier after suffering a series of heart attacks. My country, still reeling from the shock of the attacks on September 11, 2001, had been plunged into war. My mother, who already had Alzheimer's, was diagnosed with cancer, and my husband and I were trying to care for her in our home on a remote island in Desolation Sound, British Columbia. In addition to all this—or because of it—I found myself unable to write.

No, that's not quite right. Let me clarify. I *was* writing, or trying to write. I sat down at my computer every morning. Characters would come to me, suggesting shadowy ideas for plot. Random congruencies began to accrue into themes, and images would resonate. Cautious, but fueled by hope, I would fill pages with scenes. At the end of the day I would shut down my computer with an uneasy sense of satisfaction, which grew into an uneasy sense of excitement as months passed, and the story—a nascent world or, dare I say, *novel*—grew larger and richer and more complex.

And then, invariably, a couple of hundred pages into the project, I would face the screen one morning and find that overnight my beautiful round world had gone flat. Shriveled and limp, it lay on the floor like a deflated balloon, and no amount of huffing and puffing could resurrect the shimmering bubble of fictional promise. Despairing, I would spend the next few months moving commas around before finally giving up.

When bestselling author **Ruth Ozeki** becomes a Zen priest, she finds out Zen and novel writing do not easily go hand in hand.

Depression followed, and my mind, which in the early stages of the project had felt so lively and lucid, turned to sludge.

Meanwhile, my mother's Alzheimer's was growing worse. We'd been forced to move her from the island to a city with a hospital where her cancer could be treated, and I'd moved, too, into a nearby apartment to be with her. Every afternoon, after a futile and frustrating morning of "writing," I would visit my mother in her tiny bedroom in the nursing home, watching news of the Iraq war on television and listening to her tell the same stories, or fragments of stories, over and over again. Our minds were stuck in dull ruts of narrative that went nowhere. Eventually, as the dementia and the cancer got worse, she stopped using language, and we would sit, side by side, holding hands in a silence that was both an affliction and a relief.

I'd been meditating in a halfhearted way since I was a teenager, but when my father died, I got serious about it. I couldn't do anything about sickness, old age, death, terrorism, war, or even writer's block, but I could do something about my grief-stricken state of mind. I started sitting regularly, and then I met Norman Fischer and began practicing with his sanghas, attending longer retreats and sesshin. While my mother was undergoing radiation treatments, I sewed a *rakusu*, and shortly after she died I took lay ordination, or *jukai*.

Norman is a poet, and we often talked about writing. On the back of my rakusu, Norman had written the alphabet, ending with a Z that morphed into the Japanese kanji for *shin* or

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kokoro, which means heart. That character was part of the dharma name he gave me, Kanshin Do-on, meaning generous (or ample) heart, voice of the way. I was both thrilled and scared to see myself reflected in this way. The name was a lot to live up to, especially since neither the alphabet nor my voice was working very well for me at the time.

My Zen practice was working, however, helping me in myriad ways. Studying the dharma was transforming my understanding of the world. Zazen was giving me some emotional stability and insight into old habits of body and mind. And sangha was offering me the community that I'd always longed for. I wanted to give back, to be a part of this lineage and its continuity, so I asked Norman about *shukke tokudo*, or priest ordination. It seemed like the logical next step, and after putting me off for a year or two, Norman gave me permission to start sewing an *okesa*, the robe I would wear as a priest. I was overjoyed. The way forward now seemed clear, and if I noticed any hesitation or reluctance in my teacher's manner, I ignored it.

During this time, I brought up my writing woes in dokusan, a private meeting between student and teacher. I recall making a joke of it, saying that the problem seemed to coincide with the intensification of my Zen practice, and wasn't that funny. But instead of laughing, Norman nodded solemnly and said, "Yes, I was afraid that might happen."

I was shocked. I pressed him for an explanation. "You were such a nice writer," he said. "I was afraid Zen would wreck it for you. I've watched you getting so serious about your practice, and I wanted to warn you. Practice will ruin everything! It will change you so you won't be able to write in the same way anymore. Maybe you shouldn't practice Zen so much." He was smiling when he said this, so I knew he was joking—sort of. He shrugged and continued, "But I knew it was hopeless; it was already too late. You were in too deep already, and besides, I knew you wouldn't listen."

If he said anything else, I didn't hear it. All I could think of was this terrible question: *Had Zen wrecked my writing*?

Ever since I first learned how to hold a stubby pencil, I wanted to be a writer.

No, that's not quite right, either. It wasn't a matter of *wanting* to be a writer. I simply *was* one.

I was a writer because I wrote. Some people have fond childhood memories of birthday parties and ski trips. My fondest memory is of choosing my first fountain pen. I was the only child of elderly scholar-parents, so writing was my refuge. The pleasures I took in words and stories—sensual and solitary, contemplative and creative—were urgent and undeniable.

In elementary school, I wrote short stories and dreamed of the novels I would write one day. They would be long, muscular books about life—my life, *real* life, filled with passion, grit, and incident—writing that would make me *me*. I still have a battered canvas three-ring binder filled with pages of practice autographs, a testament to my belief that by signing my name, I could somehow inscribe myself into being.

In high school, I joined the editorial board of the school's literary magazine. We held our meetings in smoke-filled rooms, where we read submissions and debated their merit with great fervor, exercising our strong preferences and newly forged opinions. We read William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sylvia Plath and Denise Levertov, Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein. We thought we were Virginia and Leonard Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, F. Scott and Zelda—or if we weren't yet, we soon would be—so we drank heavily and behaved recklessly. We did drugs,

suffered anomie, and engaged in passionate or meaningless sex, and some of us (girls) even tried to commit suicide. We were brief but brilliant flames, fueled by the romantic-heroic ideal of the writer, burning up our lives and minds on the altar of our Art. Sustainability over the long haul didn't interest us.

SOMETIME BEFORE my ordination as a Zen priest, I was researching a uniquely Japanese genre of fiction called the I-novel when I came across the work of Harumi Setouchi. I-novels became popular in Japan in the early 1900s, when Japanese writers, responding to Western notions of individuality, began investigating the possibilities of the autobiographical self as hero. Harumi Setouchi was born in 1922, and as a young woman she led a dissolute life, abandoning her husband and child to run off with a young lover and later writing I-novels about her affairs. These were dismissed as pornography by the mostly male Japanese literary establishment, but needless to say, she was wildly popular among her readers. Then, at the age of fifty, she shaved her head, changed her name to Jakucho, and took Buddhist vows. After reflecting upon her life, she said in an interview, she realized that she'd done things she regretted and that if she were to continue writing, she would need a "backbone."

When I read this, I felt a jolt of recognition. Like Jakucho, I was reflecting upon my life in preparation for ordination and I felt unsure about my writing. But what really resonated was the deeper connection she made between writing and regret.

My parents were intensely private people, and while they supported my writing, the publication of my novels violated our unspoken family proscription against self-revelatory acts. I was devastated but not surprised when my father died a week before my first novel was published and again when my mother died shortly after the second one came out in paperback. I'd been expecting some kind of retribution from the moment I signed the contracts and turned in the manuscripts to the publisher.

I used to wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night, thinking, Oh my god, what have I done? During daylight hours, I would console myself with the thought that the intensity of my mortification must correlate with the honesty, and therefore the worth, of the work, but at night the remorse returned, teeth bared and gnashing.

There is something inhuman—or perhaps relentlessly human—in what writers do, in their naked attempt at truth telling. I've long been aware that I write from remorse, usually over something I've done or not done. My regret acts as an irritant, like a lump in a mattress that triggers a dream, and I then write in an attempt to understand my behavior, to test alternative possibilities and outcomes, and to discover something true. But every book I write misrepresents something else, generating more remorse, which I then must try to address in the only way I know, by writing another book. In trying to get at one truth, I distort others. It's a process fraught with contrition, and I used to think this was good news, in that I would never run out of things to write about. But the bad news was that as my work got published, my sense of remorse intensified, and I stopped being able to write.

Publication is a kind of exposure. Writing, once published, exists in a public arena with a life and a karma of its own. Zen practice is a kind of exposure, too, only the arena of scrutiny is private. As I studied the precepts and prepared for ordination, my questions proliferated. How could I write with honesty and candor about the core questions of my life without implicating my family and friends? How could I write humorously without hurting others? How could I write dramatically without distorting the truth? How could I write fiction without lying or stealing other people's stories? How could I take on the responsibility and consequences of representing the world with what I knew was my flawed and limited vision?

Perhaps my writing problem wasn't Zen's fault, but Zen practice certainly was exposing the fault lines underlying my writing and bringing them into sharp focus.

An old Zen aphorism, attributed to Qingyuan Weixin and variously translated in Buddhist writing and pop culture, says:

> Before a person studies Zen, mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen, he sees that mountains are not mountains and waters are not waters; but after this, when he attains the abode of rest, mountains are mountains and waters are waters.

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For me, mountains were no longer mountains; writing was no longer writing. I couldn't continue to write—or to live—in the old ways. I wanted to change, and Zen practice was enabling me to change in ways that felt right, but as my ordination approached, I found myself facing the biggest question of all. The abode of rest sounded promising, like a writing retreat in the Berkshires, but would I ever reach it? And would I need to give up writing completely to do so?

Ordination is a renunciation. Jakucho said that when she was ordained, she was ready to throw away her typewriter, but instead she continued to write, and now, at age ninety, she is still publishing books and is more prolific than ever. I was not so sanguine, but I knew that were I to continue writing, I would need a backbone, too.

On the morning of my ordination, after my head was shaved, I felt light and clear, as if a weight had been lifted. I could feel every ephemeral breeze against my scalp. When I looked in the mirror, I saw myself for the first time. *There you are! Where have you been*? Suddenly, there was no place to hide. But there was no need to hide, either, and this was a powerful feeling.

Thomas King, a Canadian aboriginal writer, wrote, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are." My old story is that I am a novelist. My new story is that I am a priest. Ordination didn't eliminate one story; it just added another plotline, and the two often feel irreconcilable.

Novelist, priest—these words describe vocations, but can vocation, a singular calling, be plural? Is one allowed to have two? Writing a novel is an act of devotion. It requires unthinkable amounts of time, day after day, to sink deep and find the still, clear place that is the source of stories. You could say the same is true for Zen practice, only what's required in Zen is the opposite of what's required for fiction. In zazen, we become intimate with thought in order to see through it and let it go. In fiction writing, we become intimate with thought in order to capture it, embellish it, and make it concrete. Fiction demands a total immersion in the fictional dream. This is not compatible with sitting sesshin, which demands total immersion in awakened reality. You can't do both at once. Believe me, I've tried.

And then there's the sticky problem of language. Linguistic representation is an unreliable and even dangerous business, which is why religion views language with wary circumspection and requires such a range of strategies—from fundamentalist Christianity's insistence on the literal word of God to Buddhism's partiality toward silence—to cope with its slippery and ineffable complexities. The Buddha wordlessly transmitted the dharma to Mahakasyapa by twirling a lotus flower, and Mahakasyapa received it with an equally silent smile. Bodhidharma gave his transmission, the marrow of his teaching, to the student who remained silent. His lineage, my lineage, Zen, seems almost to disparage the written word, as this verse, attributed to Bodhidharma, describes:

> A special transmission outside the scriptures,
> Not founded upon words and letters;
> By pointing directly to one's mind
> It lets one see into one's own true nature and
> thus attain Buddhahood.
>
> —from *Zen Buddhism: A History, India and China*, by Heinrich Dumoulin; translated by James W. Heisig and Paul Knitter

Still, for a lineage not founded upon words and letters, Zen is filled with stories, which means there is also a long tradition of reluctant and apologetic Zen writers. This should be comforting to me, but it's not, because most of these writers are poets. Zen poets can be forgiven. Their expression—an irrepressible diamond flash of insight, delivered onto the white page in bold brushstrokes of black ink—is brief and spontaneous. They do not dwell, carrying their cumbersome stories around with them on their backs. They get their writing over with quickly

and then return to the real business of enlightenment. But as a novelist, my work is plodding, methodical, and time-consuming, and I carry my stories with me everywhere. Like a tortoise with a very heavy shell, I live inside my encumbering delusions. This seems very un-Zen-like to me, and unbecoming for a priest.

HAVE YOU HEARD the one about the two monks crossing the river? An old monk and a young monk happen across a beautiful woman on the bank of a fast-flowing river. She needs to get across, and the older monk offers to carry her. The woman clambers onto his back, and he wades into the water. The young monk follows silently, quivering with umbrage. When they reach the other side, the old monk lets the lady off, she thanks him, and the two monks go on their way. But of course, the young guy can't let it go. He keeps thinking of the woman's legs wrapped around his master's waist, and the old man's grizzled fingers clutching the white flesh of her thighs. Finally he can't contain himself anymore. "How could you do that?" he cries. "Touching that woman! Breaking your vows!" The old man looks at his student and shrugs. "I left her back on the riverbank. Are you still carrying her around?"

I've always liked that young monk. He's a novelist like me.

In 2007, before my ordination, I'd started another novel and worked on it in fits and starts for several years. As with previous attempts, it grew into hundreds of dense, opaque pages before the bubble burst. But this time, when I gave up, I gave up more completely, and it was okay. As I prepared for ordination, I felt grateful that even though the novel-writing thing hadn't quite panned out, I had a new vocation, and I was happy. I knew I would always write—nonfiction, essays, maybe even some poetry—and that this would be enough.

But then, perversely, something else started to happen. I felt like my mind was changing, or my relationship with my mind was changing. My thoughts were slowly coming into focus again, and the beam of my attention was growing steadier and more precise. On a whim one day, I opened my old computer file and started toying with the abandoned novel. Before I knew it, I was deep into the world of fiction again, only this time I was able to stay with the story long enough to penetrate its depths, untangle it, and find the way through. Several years and many drafts later, I finished it, and it will soon be published. It's called *A Tale for the Time Being*, and it's about a suicidal young girl, a 104-year-old Zen nun, and a novelist with writer's block. It's an I-novel, of course.

We are all the stories we tell ourselves. As the heroes of our own I-novels, we never stop conceiving and reconceiving ourselves and those around us. Ever since I learned to hold a pencil, I've written myself into being over and over again: *I am a novelist. No, I am a priest.* Who is this "I" who feels torn between these identities and thinks she can only be one or the other? The problem is clearly one of dualistic thinking, and I don't have an answer, except to say that by positing these identities in opposition to each other, my relentlessly discursive novelist's mind (a handicap for a spiritual practitioner) has probably created a problem where none need be. It's an occupational hazard, since language, the tool of my trade, is also a tool of discriminative thinking and is, by its nature, divisive: it exists in order to distinguish this from that. But language has adhesive properties as well, drawing us together by enabling us to share our stories. And in this regard, I like to think that novels are special. By inviting us into another's skin, novels encourage us to practice empathy. And good novels celebrate the myriad complexities of individuals by creating ample room for all characters to have a voice.

Birds live in air, fish live in water, and human beings live in language. That's what Norman says, and I agree. We can no more remove ourselves from language than we can stop breathing. Dogen Zenji, the founder of Soto Zen, was an incorrigible writer. He agreed that language was a prison of delusion, but he had a more expansive view of the matter, maintaining that we can escape the thrall of language only through language itself. So as a student in Dogen's lineage who remains hopelessly enthralled, I find comfort in his wide and spacious embrace, which allows us characters ample room to be all of who we are. His all-inclusive approach has become my backbone, one that keeps me upright and enables me to write, or not write, as the case may be, and, either way, to hold my stories just a little bit more lightly. BD