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Reflection on the Baptism Ritual

Although I was baptized and confirmed in the Episcopal Church, the idea of baptism is unfamiliar to me 50 years later. And although I have been in discussions about it in CPE class, last Saturday when the wife of a dying patient asked me to perform a baptism of her husband, it shocked me. Luckily the woman had already done her own ritual and I was able to affirm the strength of it. I have been given a kick, the invitation to look at what this concept means and how I can incorporate an understanding from a Buddhist perspective. I am there for my patients and want to be able to do what will bring them meaning and comfort. My supervisor and fellow students spur me on with their questions.

I interpret baptism as a high blessing and agree with a quote I saw recently that “it doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it”. It is a blessing that acknowledges the Oneness and the inclusion of this particular person as a part of the divine love. It is a reminder that we are whole. This need for closeness to God may become more acute/important when a patient is dying. It may be seen as necessary by the patient’s family to link their loved one with God before death. But from my perspective the connection is already there, always there, even if we cloud it with our own doubts or thoughts or actions. Baptism can be a reminder, a coming back, a blessing, and honoring of that connection with the Eternal.

There are times that baptism may be seen as an exclusive ritual that brings privilege, which makes a person special and different from others. Is there fear embedded in this idea? Are people afraid that if they or their loved one is not baptized that they will not get into Heaven? It would be this version of baptism that would be harder for me to fulfill. The wife of this weeks patient said that she had done her own baptism of her husband but she thought maybe a Chaplain should do it. I was able to assure her that her baptism was strong with her love for him. This baptism was motivated by love and the desire to connect her husband with God.

The Buddhist tradition of taking the three refuges seems like a similar ritual only this practice can happen daily. This encompasses taking refuge in the Buddha (the historic Buddha, the Buddhist ancestors and great teachers), the Dharma (the great teachings and understanding), and the Sangha (the community of practitioners). This can be said in English or in Pali, the Indian dialect used by the Buddha, and is recited each day as a reminder of all that we are a part of. For me this ritual clarifies my daily intention to a non-harming practice, reminds me of the tools available and shows me the interconnectedness of all past, present and future.

There is also an important element of surrender in taking the refuges and maybe in baptism. I surrender my ego-self into the all-encompassing knowledge of the Eternal. I surrender to the Knowing and re-commit each time, to listen to the Higher Voice. It reminds me to relax into life so that I can experience my life as not separate from all others.

Can I perform a baptism from this background of understanding? I think I can. As a Buddhist metaphor teaches, as a raindrop is absorbed into an ocean, no longer knowing which is raindrop and which is ocean the baptism of a person can remind them that they are not separate. They are whole. This message I can bring to them. I can present something that will honor the religious tradition, and I believe that I can provide a ritual that can honor both their tradition and mine.

This is a preliminary look at this issue, and an attempt to begin to sort out feeling from understanding. I will visit this again as experience comes and I explore this dance of Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions as they relate to patient care.