

Finding My Mantra

The foolish man seeks happiness in the distance; the wise grows it under his feet.
~James Openheim

As a writer I'm always looking for an edge. I've done yoga in Costa Rica, and walking meditations in Phnom Penh. I've even had needles stuck into the top of my head, an acupuncture move called One Hundred Meeting Places that is designed to unleash my inner muse. So when a doctor gave a lecture at a local hospital extolling the virtues of meditation as a way to increase mental acuity, productivity and creativity, I was all ears.

He led us in a seated meditation. We closed our eyes, breathed deeply and counted from one to ten. Despite the shuffle of feet and occasional snuffles, I found myself relaxing. After the lecture, I eagerly waited in line for my signed complimentary copy of the book. That night I sat down and read about the cutting-edge science behind his methods as well as compelling accounts of people for whom it had worked.

Then, on page 55, things took a different tack. There, instead of counting from one to ten, I was being asked to substitute a word. A mantra. One that was rooted in my personal belief system. And that's where I hit a wall. It's not that I don't have a personal belief system. I have many!

I was raised a Catholic. I loved the smell of smoking incense rising from the thurible our priest used to bless us congregants each Easter. I fingered rosaries and lit Advent candles. I walked the Stations of the Cross.

Later I converted to Judaism. I liked the liberal politics of my reform temple. And ritual? I had ritual galore! I could light candles on Friday nights, inhale spices on Saturday evenings. There were prayers for waking up and prayers for going to sleep. Prayers before eating fruit, breaking bread or drinking wine. But how do you capture all that in a word: the religion that raised me and the one that called me? The incense, the candles, the Hebrew, the prayers. Wasn't that just ceremony anyway? Catholicism and Judaism, these were my religions. But were they my personal belief system?

The doctor's book had suggestions for mantras: "Jesus Loves Me" for Christians and "Shalom" for Jews. I tried. After all, I believe in peace. Who doesn't? But Shalom just didn't cut it for me. It was the easy way out.

I thought I had it when I thought of *ruach*, the Hebrew word for spirit. Aha! Breath. Wind. Spirit. Voilà! A mantra. But then I tried it. I found that meditative breathing doesn't happen easily when your mantra has that guttural "ch" sound in it. But it was also more than that. Ultimately, *ruach* just wasn't a personal belief system.

So I was back to square one. This time, instead of trying to come up with a word or phrase that captured my belief system, I tried going at it from the other end. I tried to figure out just what it was I believed in, and then tried to name it.

And this is the thing. I believe in family. I believe in us. In me, my husband, my sons. We are there for each other. My husband and I have taken turns as breadwinner and homemaker over the years. We have cared for our parents as they aged and passed on. When my youngest son was in a car accident a few years back, his older brother flew home from a semester in Mexico and literally slept on the floor beside him in the ICU. That's what I believe in.

This generational belief system manifested itself for me when my husband and I visited Vietnam earlier this year. It was Tet, the Chinese New Year. We watched folks readying their homes for the holidays. They strapped miniature orange trees and live chickens and pigs to the backs of their motor scooters. They placed fresh fruit and cups of water before the Buddhas in their homes. Our host family, too, placed their offerings before the gold-painted Buddahs. But then, our host Phi raised sticks of fragrant incense up to a faded photo of an elderly Asian couple above the mantelpiece.

“Before we pay tribute to the Buddha,” Phi explained, “we must first honor our ancestors.”

I froze. I took a breath. I remember thinking, “This is it. This is what I believe.” Here, halfway around the globe, I had discovered it. My personal belief system. The hand of one generation giving to and caring for the next. The younger generation reaching back for that ancestral hand.

I watched with loving interest as Phi lit candles and bowed in front of his grandparents. I bowed, too, thinking of my own parents. Though they are gone, they come to me daily in the lessons they taught and the values they instilled. My father’s work ethic. My mother’s grace.

My father wore his heart on his sleeve. He loved my mother and acted as though he could hardly believe his luck that she loved him, too. My parents were role models for what a loving relationship looked like, sounded like and felt like.

My mother’s lessons were more domestic but no less potent. She taught me how to square the corners of a flat sheet. That I could substitute a cup of whole milk with a teaspoon of vinegar in it for a cup of buttermilk in any recipe. How to save a fabric’s nap by ironing on the wrong side of corduroy. These small household lessons keep my mother alive and with me daily as I live my own matriarchal role.

We ate the lunch our host family had prepared. Pumpkin soup, steamed rice, fried pork molded onto stalks of lemongrass, sliced dragon fruit for dessert. I ate quietly, absorbing the meaning of all I’d just seen. My husband knew I’d related deeply to the tableau inside. On the car ride back to our Hanoi hotel he summed it up. “Honey, I think you’re Vietnamese.”

But I was not Vietnamese. I was a Jewish-American woman in search of a mantra. A breathable phrase that captures everything I believe in. And on my next visit to our synagogue after our Asian adventure, I found it. It was right after the part of the service where we explicitly acknowledge our duty to teach our children our faith, to pass on the torch of religious tradition.

“These words which I command you this day you shall take to heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children.”

And there it was. In Hebrew. My mantra. L’dor Va-dor. From generation to generation. My belief system, summed up and perfectly breathable to boot. L’dor. Breathe in. Va-dor. Breathe out. Inhaling one generation. Exhaling the next.

Now I happily meditate with my new mantra. Willing wisdom from my ancestors. Praying for insights to share with my sons. Oh, I still stick needles in my head from time to time, East meeting West in my constant quest for enhanced creativity. But at least now, I know what I believe in.

~Carolyn Roy-Bornstein

