

THE MOTHER OF ALL COMPASSION

© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine

University Congregational Church

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Reading: “Perceiver of the World’s Sounds,” *Lotus Sutra*

If someone, holding fast to the name of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds, should enter a great fire, the fire could not burn him or her. This would come about because of this bodhisattva’s authority and supernatural power. If one were washed away by a great flood and called upon her name, one would immediately find him or her self in a shallow place.

Suppose there were a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million living beings who, seeking for gold, silver, lapis lazuli, seashell, agate, coral, amber, pearls, and other treasures, set out on the great sea. And suppose a fierce wind should blow their ship off course and it drifted to the land of rakshasas demons. If among those people there is even just one who calls the name of Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds, then all of those people will be delivered from their troubles with the rakshasas.* This is why she is called Perceiver of the World’s Sounds.

If a person who faces imminent threat of attack should call the name of Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds, then the swords and staves wielded by his or her attackers would instantly shatter into so many pieces and he or she would be delivered.

Suppose there is a person who, whether guilty or not guilty, has had his or her body imprisoned in fetters and chains, canque and lock. If he or she calls the name of Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds, then all of his or her bonds will be severed and broken and at once he or she will gain deliverance. ** ¹

We know Julia Ward Howe as the author of the hymn, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” It was an abolitionist hymn choked with militant language. She wrote it in 1861. It was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1862. The song was extremely popular in the Civil War and remains a patriotic hymn. Howe had not only witnessed the carnage of that war but was also deeply troubled by the casualties of the Franco-

¹ “Perceiver of the World’s Sounds,” *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 299. Print.

* Rakshasas is a demon or goblin in Hindu mythology.

** I have altered Watson’s translation, reflecting the earlier Chinese presentation of Quan Yin as a goddess. In Japanese Buddhism she became Kwan Yin and then Kannon, a male persona. I have also made Burton’s translation more gender inclusive. All are reflective of the Avalokitesvara, one of the eight great Bodhisattvas whose activities are notably those of compassion.

Prussian War. She determined that war was the deterioration of civilization into barbarism. In 1872 she organized the Mother's Peace Day Observance, to be held the second Sunday in June. It continued for several years but was later moved to May and became simply known as Mother's Day. I think it fitting that we read Howe's

"Mother's Day Proclamation:"

"Arise, then, women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts,
Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly:

"We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies,
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country, will be too tender to those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

From the bosom of the devastated Earth a voice goes up with our own.
It says: "Disarm! Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."
Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence indicate possession.
As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war,
Let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great day of counsel.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.
Let them solemnly take counsel with each other and as to the means
Whereby the great human family can live in peace.
Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,
But of God.

In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask
That a general congress of women without limit of nationality
May be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient
And at the earliest period consistent with its objects,
To promote the alliance of the different nationalities,
The amicable settlement of international questions,
The great and general interests of peace."

Julia Ward Howe's passion for peace reveals her profound compassion for all the soldiers and their families around the world. She sees in the tears of mothers the tremendous burden that warfare brings to every nation and race around the world.

There are many mothers of compassion throughout the many cultures and religions of humanity. The mother of compassion in Tibetan Buddhism is Tara. In Africa it is Yemaya; in South America it is Virgen de Guadalupe. In Western Christianity the Virgin Mary is the most well known. But there are many Mothers of Compassion such as Bridget of Ireland, St. Philomena of the working poor, and Mother Teresa.

If you do not know her, please allow me to introduce to you Quan Yin. She is known in ancient China as the Great Mother. In Buddhism she is the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In Buddhist philosophy a Bodhisattva is a person who has achieved enlightenment. Enlightened men and women are free from the constant wheel of birth and death and rebirth. In some sense an enlightened person transcends this world. But a Bodhisattva chooses to remain on the wheel with the soul purpose of relieving the suffering of others. They forsake the opportunity to be relieved of this mortal coil to serve others toward their freedom and peace of mind. A Bodhisattva vows to remain in the earthly realm until all human suffering ends.

Like all saints, messiahs, and mystics Quan Yin is probably more story, legend, and myth than an historical figure that we can pinpoint in time and place. She is largely symbol, the ideal of mother and human being. In some graphic images she is seated in restful pose; in others she stands serenely on the head of a dragon in a stormy ocean. The dragon is an ancient symbol for deep spirituality, wisdom, and

divine power. Quan Yin, Goddess of Mercy, rides the dragon's head. You may also find Quan Yin pouring healing water from a small vase. These are the "Waters of Life," that bring physical and spiritual peace. Quan Yin is also depicted as a many-armed figure. With cupped hands she offers many doors of sustenance, healing, and fertility. Bethleen Cole points out that this form symbolizes the womb that opens "the door for entry to this world through the universal female principle."²

Quan Yin is also thought to give women protection and demonstrates a way of life that could either be an alternative to marriage or a rich life with family and children.

On this Mother's Day I invite you to consider the major attribute of Quan Yin that celebrates the life of mothers and brings great dignity to all women. In the reading from the Lotus Sutra that I shared with you the word "perceive" is used repeatedly. She is the "Perceiver of the World's Sounds." That is to say that this Bodhisattva of Compassion hears the words and pleas of those who suffer. She listens and she understands. She hears the wail of a child who falls and skins her knees; the weeping of the teenaged boy whose heart is broken for the first time; the bawling of a husband or wife whose partner has just left them; the moaning of a family whose loved one has died; the lament of one whose diagnosis is terminal. Quan Yin hears the lonely whimper of those whose minds struggle with constant pressure and loneliness.

Please understand that in the Buddhist tradition the Compassionate Mother hears and listens to the cry of all sentient beings. Her mercy is not reserved for human

² Bethleen Cole, "Quan Yin: The Goddess of Compassion and Mercy," *The Compassionate One's Page*. <http://www.lava.net/tribalartifacts/qunynex.htm>. Internet, downloaded 5/4/2010.

suffering alone. Thus Quan Yin perceives the howl and yelp of injured and dying animals and the bleating of the lamb that has lost its mother. She hears the creak and groan of tall trees decimated by lumbermen in the rain forest. The Mother of Mercy apprehends the squawk of dying birds on the shoreline of the Gulf of Mexico this very morning.

Can you imagine such a love as that? Can you hear the compassion of a great soul like Quan Yin who perceives all of this heartbreak? She takes it into her ears, her heart, her mind, and her soul. Dare we believe that God has the time to listen to us; to pay attention to us; and to hear our concerns?

I wonder if the church has lost the ability to hear. Protestant churches all across America are shrinking. Despite those large churches that bring in 40,000 people to church on a given weekend, the percentage of Americans who go to church is dwindling, especially those under the age of 50. The so-called “mega church” has not had any impact on this trend. Praise bands, entertainment values in worship, and advertising have not made a difference in the downward spiral of church attendance.

Why do you suppose this is? Some say that the church is no longer relevant. That may be part of the answer, but why is that the case? I suggest that we have lost our relevance – our place in the lives of people – because we cannot hear any more. We do not listen to nor do we speak what is really in the human heart.

Part of the problem is that we want people to think that we have our lives under control and everything is in order. Our culture has created a sense of shame about vulnerability. We do not want anyone to possibly imagine that we are afraid or feel guilty or out of control. We are even afraid to admit that we are tired and

frustrated. So the church has basically given up the idea of prayers of confession. And if they are offered they drone on about not being worthy to gather up the crumbs on the floor of the Lord's Table. That's not a prayer of confession. That is judgment. Our hearts remain overwhelmed with loss and fatigue, guilt and anger.

All the while we hide under a façade of composure and silently hope that people will like us. We throw up the shield of "privacy" and "individual rights" scared to death that if we let out one whimper the floodgates of despair will wash us away.

Quan Yin asks, "How is that working for you?" I ask if the church – all of you and me – cannot hear anymore how can the church possibly be relevant? The Mother of Compassion reminds me that I need to do a better job of listening and to be more perceptive about the real needs and pain in the lives of people.

One of the first questions that people ask when they go into training for a program like Stephen Ministry or a parish visitors program is, "What am I supposed to say to them?" We want so much to offer a word of great insight or healing that will relieve people of their suffering. Sometimes our desire to say the right thing makes us deaf. The first task of compassion is to listen. More often than not that is not what people want. They do not expect some magic word that will take away their pain or disease. They want to be heard.

The Mother of Compassion first listens. After the terrorist bombings in New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, the nation prepared for war. Someone asked the Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, how he would respond to such horrible deeds. They said that we needed to listen deeply, not only to our own

suffering but also to the suffering that caused men to commit acts of terrorism. Only when we listen deeply can we understand the suffering and the causes of that suffering.

So very often people remember their mother as the one who listened. Because she listened she heard. Because she heard she understood. Because she understood she healed. That is how I remember my mother. Even after I moved away to college and then graduate school, even until the week she died I called her every Sunday evening. She wanted to hear what was happening in our lives. And believe me, my mother heard it all – the good, the bad, and the ugly. I have no doubt there were times when I am sure she did not want to hear all the details. Or as my niece, Vita, would say, “Information overload!” But that never stopped my mother from listening.

Months after she died I found myself in the middle of the week saying, “When I talk to mom on Sunday I will be sure and tell her...” I am sure it is just a fantasy, but I think she is still listening, just like Quan Yin. Her listening still brings me solace and often a smile.

I am reminded by Quan Yin and Jane Blaine to do a better job listening. I hope that our church might also hear and perceive. I love this poem by Julia Kasdorf,

“What I Learned from My Mother.”

“I learned from my mother how to love
 the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
 in case you have to rush to the hospital
 with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
 still stuck on the buds. I learned to save jars
 large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole
 grieving household, to cube home-canned pears
 and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins
 and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.
 I learned to attend viewings even if I didn't know

the deceased, to press the moist hands
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
What anyone will remember is that we came.
I learned to believe I had the power to ease
awful pain materially like an angel.
Like a doctor, I learned to create
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.
To every house you enter, you must offer
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.³

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³ Julia Kasdorf, "What I Learned from My Mother," *Good Poems*, selected by Garrison Keillor (New York: Viking Press, 2002), p. 156.