



LES, AMBER, HONEYBEES, NEW MEXICO, FROM THE SERIES "BARE HANDED," 2008 MILLER YEZERSKI GALLERY.

real enough

ZEN TEACHERS **ROBERT CHODO CAMPBELL** AND
KOSHIN PALEY ELLISON TALK WITH POET **NICK FLYNN**

How do we wake up to the intimacy of meeting the moment at hand? How do we practice compassion in the face of cruelty and the unknown? Where does our imagination come from? Who is thinking? These are some of the questions that are alive in poet and writer Nick Flynn's work and life.

Koshin Paley Ellison and Robert Chodo Campbell, Zen Buddhist teachers and cofounders of the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care, invited Flynn to the Zen Center for an afternoon of conversation. They spent a few hours talking about poetry, bees, his time with the Abu Ghraib detainees, and letting our hearts break to open wide.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOLLY LYNTON

Robert Chodo Campbell: It is lovely to be here with you. We want to explore three of your poems with you, and how they may relate to stillness, attention, and diving in. If you were to submit pieces of your work to a Buddhist magazine—say, *Tricycle*—which would you choose and why?

and I thought the colors were so gorgeous that I wanted to build a wall of honey jars. But after I'd buy the jar of honey I'd eat it. Maybe one day I'll build my wall of honey.

Koshin Paley Ellison: What captured your imagination with the bees and the beekeeper?

Nick Flynn: The first one that comes to mind is one from my book *Blind Huber*, "Inside Nothing." *Blind Huber* is a series of linked poems, some of which are seemingly in the voice of the beekeeper Huber and the bees themselves. But it could very well be that Huber is making up these voices in his own head and then attributing them to the bees, because he studies them.

NF: I was at a dinner party one evening, and a beekeeper was sitting next to me—I had never met him before. At the end of dinner we were having tea. There was honey on the table, and he held it up and just began to speak rhapsodically about honey and bees. He murmured to me, "Do you know how many bee hours went into this jar of honey, how many bee hours?" I had never thought of "bee hours," but I liked the idea. He had an ardor, an intensity about bees. His passion infected me, so I went to visit his hives. I ended up spending the weekend with him, sleeping in the fields where his hives were.

Huber is a real historical figure. During the research and writing of the book, I did a lot of reading about bees, I talked to beekeepers, and whenever I traveled I would see bees everywhere. I was traveling a lot, and I wanted to buy a jar of honey from every place I went to. The colors were so different from one another—the Vietnamese honey was very different than the Mexican honey, for instance—

I began reading books about beekeeping, and discovered a 1901 book by Maurice Maeterlinck called *The Life of the Bee*, written in this really beautiful, pre-modernist Victo-



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rian language. It was like entering the mind of a bee—it was a thrilling book. This and many other books led me to discover the 1700s naturalist Francois Huber, who was the father of modern beekeeping. For 50 years he sat in front of beehives. He was blind, and he had an assistant named Burnens. He would say things to Burnens like “What happens when you seal up the hole of the hive? What will the bees do? Let’s see.” And Burnens would seal it and then tell him what the bees did. In the winter, he would move a hive into his room and let the bees out. He would sit there, and the bees would build a hive all around him, so he would live inside a hive, just sitting and paying attention to every sound and movement.

To me this feels very contemplative. It’s much like the role of a writer: observing something, and then translating it into language. I try to encourage my students to encounter the world within themselves, to try to follow the thread as to why they’re writing as deeply as they can into their subconscious. I tell them

before they do any research, they should spend time with themselves, however long it takes: it could be a couple of days,

or a couple of years. After that, you actually encounter someone else as someone else. You allow the world to enter and to become part of you, to break whatever cage you’ve been rattling around in. That part is interesting, too: we have to see our own cages.

KPE: Right. How can we have the world enter into us unless we know who and what we are? In the *Genjokoan*, Dogen writes: “To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to allow the world to advance.”

NF: That reminds me of his writing about painting a rice cake! What’s that about? I showed that to some students and they were utterly befuddled by it. The only real hunger is painted hunger. It’s wonderful, just wonderful. I’ve read it over and over again. I start my writing workshops with it. I’m fairly sure this is what we’re doing, and I don’t know what it is. Something about painted hunger, because these poems aren’t real, right? The painting is real because it’s using the materials of the world. On some level, a painting of a mountain is painted with the pigment that comes from that mountain.

(continued on page 103)

MARATHON

From above—

petals on a river, a tree in blossom, one pink bud—unopened—falls

& is carried downstream & out to sea. The other petals seem to carry

it. Closer—

this is our map, these our footprints, we grew up drinking this water. At the start

there was doubt, we lit a torch, no one believed we would make it. Closer—

the legs, the heart, the lungs. It’s too soon to say we were lucky, it’s too soon to say

anything, until the cloud is pulled back from the sky, until the ringing

is pulled back from the bells. Look—everyone we’ve ever known

runs without thinking not away but into the cloud, where we

are waiting.

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BLIND HUBER (VI)

Our words mingle & entwine, I say, *ambrosia*,

he says, *night*, the visible world & the invisible, who speaks by now unimportant. Honey, you imagine, must fall like rain, to be gathered up like pig-corn, but you cannot gather it yourselves. It would be like holding on to air. Imagine each flower pulling this ambrosia up, imagine it might, like us, begin in darkness.

INSIDE NOTHING

A sun-fed engine, the inside constant, a flower taken whole. In winter our wings move faster, to keep the sun inside, inside nothing & we fill the nothing with suns, line them up, swallow sap, swallow field, drop by drop, each stem a pump. Rose to rose to rose to rose to rose to rose to rose, calyx & anther, all summer gone. We move still faster, fields grow constant, inside the color of heat. Clinging we pull our bodies across a chain of bodies, become the chain, climb nothing, always up, toward suns, line them up inside us, a flower taken whole, a field built inside. It rises. Each blade, each sun.

FROM “SAUDADE”

The leaf dropped from the branch

The seed rolled onto the deck
The seedling pushed into the caulking

The sapling split the plank
The tree lifts her into the fog—*beam, stem, keel, oar*—

this boat, this broken boat, this beach
littered with broken boats—*We have come back*

*from Jerusalem where we found
not what we sought*

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RCC: Thinking of the seeds you are planting with your poetry students reminds me of an image in one of your poems, “The Seed in the Boat.”

NF: I’ve had that image for so long: a seed falling and suddenly blowing up through a house or through a car, like, in the woods. You know, when I was a kid there used to be a house where a hermit lived. The house was beautiful, but if you went on his land, he would shoot you with rock salt—that was the story, anyway. So I when I was a really young kid, 8 years old, I would crawl on my belly to get as close to the house as I could before he ran out of his house to shoot his rock salt. [Laughs.] He had a Model T in his yard with a huge tree growing out of it. The car was a sculpture. I would go and look at this ancient car and tree. That image is always with me.

RCC: In your last book, *The Captain Asks for a Show of Hands*, there are poems referencing your experience in Istanbul, where you met some of the detainees from Abu Ghraib. Can you talk a little about that?

NF: The book examines my own darker tendencies. It’s not hard for me to imagine why someone tortures someone. And yet for me the whole thing was, just because we could imagine doing it does not mean that we should make a law that makes it okay to do it.

RCC: Why did you go?

NF: It was extremely difficult arranging to meet with these people, just the logistics of getting there and the cost: thousands of dollars in airfares alone. I flew to Istanbul once and had to fly back because they couldn’t get out of Iraq. It just seemed really important, and I didn’t know why. I had ideas. “I already know who these guys are. I’ve read their testimonies. I don’t really need to do this. I don’t need to sit in front of these guys. I’ve read everything. I know everything. There’s nothing to learn.”

KPE: It sounds like the curiosity you work to instill in your students initially wasn’t present in your thoughts of going. How did you wake up?

NF: I did not question it for a second until I sat across from the first person. And then I realized that I only had an *idea* of who these people were. I was carrying this stereotyped idea of who they were, these ex-detainees. The first guy we talked to was the guy that Lindy England dragged on a leash. It was just like, “You’re the—you’re the guy that—” I didn’t recognize him. He weighed 50 pounds more because he was no longer starving. He no longer had a long beard, because he could shave. He’s this fun guy to be with, making jokes all the time. And I’m thinking, “No, wait. You’re supposed to be an angry, damaged fundamentalist. I had this whole idea about you.” We went out with ten guys over the course of the week. We shared meals. Each one had taken his experience and internalized it in ways that were completely individual. Why wouldn’t I think that they would

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have done that? The surprising thing was how ignorant I was before I went.

KPE: Powerful. Sometimes when we wake up we grieve our ignorance. I know I do. At the end of the book, you have a quote from Jung's *Red Book*: "We have come back from Jerusalem where we found not what we sought." What is this enigmatic ending for you?

NF: It is a little enigmatic, isn't it? Jung is a poet. He deals with the realm of the unknown, the archetypes, and the collective unconscious. These ideas may or may not be real, but they're real *enough*. Jung somehow took incredible chances and pushed into these mystical realms. I wanted the book to end in an open, mysterious way. There's that mystical element, which is poetry. It's nice to have someone like Jung on your side.

RCC: You wrote a poem about the bombings at the Boston marathon. How did that come about?

NF: *Boston* magazine got writers together the following day and asked if they would write something in response to the tragedy. We didn't know who was responsible at that point. I didn't think they would take my poem, because I didn't really know what they wanted. I also thought, what could you possibly write about this?

KPE: Because of your experience in Istanbul, I'm wondering what arose in your mind. How did you see these perpetrators as

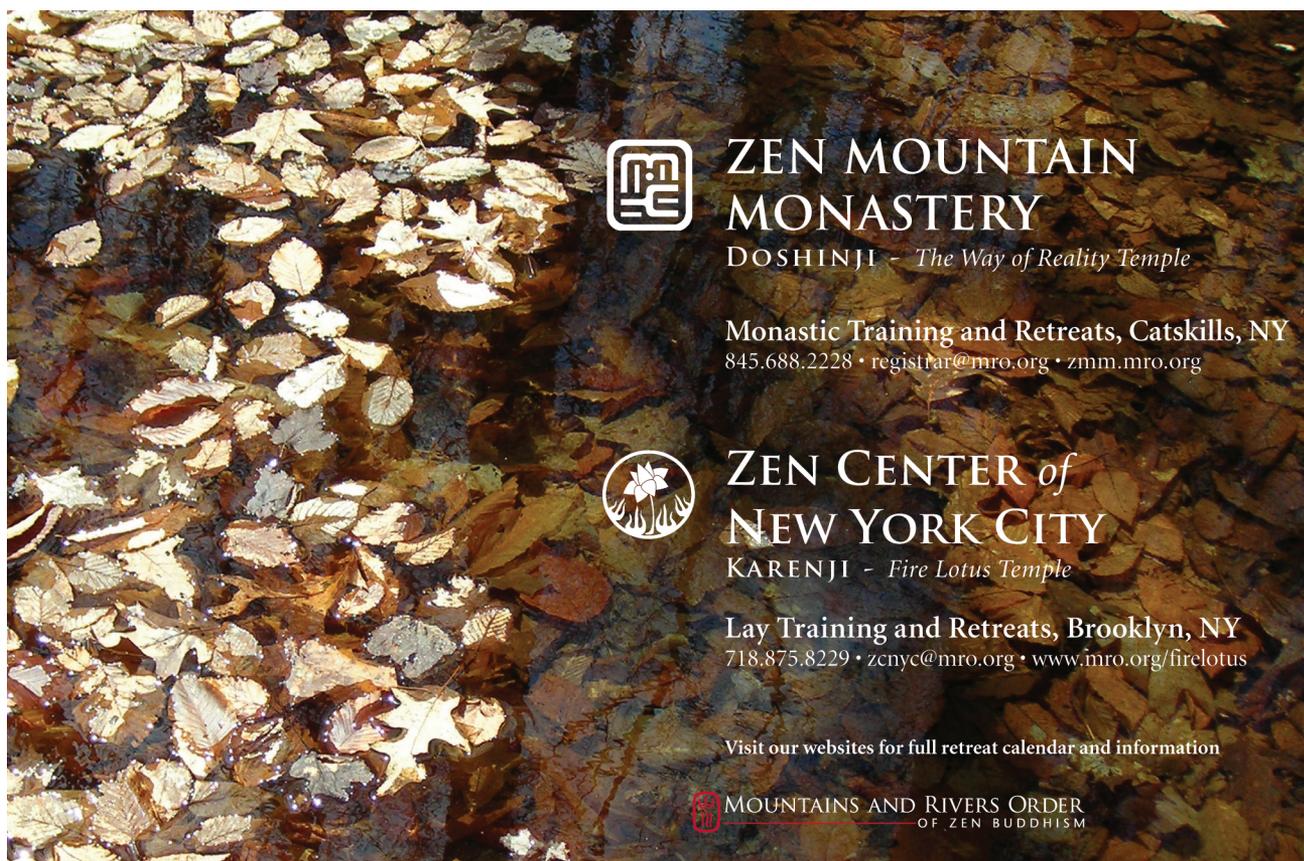
people, when the mass reaction was to demonize them?

NF: I wrote the poem before we knew anything about the perpetrators, so the poem is based on the moment the bomb went off, and not them.

KPE: Once we knew who was responsible, did anything change for you?

NF: When I found out who it was, I was beyond anger. I'm from Boston and I'm identified as a Boston writer, so I was filled with even more rage. I was not filled with benign compassion for either of them in any sense. I just don't think about them now. I know the spot where they set the bomb off. It is the exact spot where my father would sleep in the streets. I've walked over that spot thousands of times, and I know the people there. My heart just opens thinking about it—I could cry right now. What moves me is that in the moments following the explosions, people ran into the smoke. There could have been more bombs—they didn't know. In my mind I could see people not running away from it but running toward the smoke instead, in order to help people. That's what the poem was about. And that's what moves me. Who did it? That's another story, and I have my own demons to wrestle with about that. ▼

Robert Chodo Campbell and Koshin Paley Ellison are cofounders and co-executive directors of New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care, the first Buddhist organization in America to offer fully accredited chaplaincy training. The center provides= contemplative approaches to care through education, direct service, and meditation practice.



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