

Trickster

*Sit or stand as you will,
but whatever you do,
don't wobble.*

-Alan Watts

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The aisle in the plane was backed up with people who seemed agitated and anxious. I craned my neck to see around the man in front of me, a biker from Arkansas who wore a tee shirt that read “Sons of Silence” and a long, scraggly beard. His graying hair was pulled into a ponytail that hung halfway down his back. When I asked about the hold-up in finding our seats, he shrugged his shoulders but never looked back, or answered me. His shrug said all he had to say.

Travelers on the way from here to there, we were all tired.

We inched down the aisle, people thrusting heavy baggage into the overhead bins and falling, spent, into their seats. In a few more rows, I planned to find my seat and sleep the way home, putting behind me my love and the piercing ache I felt when leaving him for another stretch apart. A few more minutes crawled by, the crowd thinning unusually slowly, and then I was at my row...but someone else was in my seat; an older woman with a grim set to her mouth and a fierce determination flashing in her eyes.

“Please!” she spoke in a voice hushed with false politeness, as she was firmly settled in and obviously had no intention of moving. She gave a nearly imperceptible nod of her head to a row behind and to the left of my seat, which she conspicuously occupied. “I couldn’t sit there. I hope you won’t mind changing seats with me?”

I glanced at the last empty seat in zone six of the Delta airlines plane headed for Maine. An aisle seat, fine with me. But I had a seatmate who was...I paused, wondering what it was about him that seemed so out of place...*odd*. I looked back at the woman, who was pleading now. Her voice trembled, "I just can't sit there. I'm afraid of him."

"Him" was just a boy, or so it seemed, although I learned as we talked that he was forty years old. Eddie was blind and autistic, rocking gently back and forth in his seat, rapping his head lightly against the seat in front of him. As people passed his seat, pausing for a moment as the crowd inched along, he looked up at each potential seatmate he couldn't see and repeated endlessly, "Hi! I'm Eddie. Glad to meet you!" Over and over, he stuck a hand into empty air, ready to shake the hand of the person who sat beside him. Only the people in the aisles turned away, discomfited or afraid; no one reached for Eddie's hand. Embarrassed, he placed it back in his lap, rocked against the seat ahead, waiting for the next pause in movement and the next possible seatmate.

Oh, for heaven's sake, I thought, watching my plans for a long nap quickly fade. I didn't want to deal with Eddie any more than anyone else, but most passengers were seated by this time, and I had to either make a scene or a choice. The day before, as we drove north along Florida's Route 75 from Palm Island to Sarasota, my companion and I had been listening to the words of Alan Watts, a former Anglican priest who turned, at mid-life, to Buddhism as a spiritual practice and way of life. *Sit or stand as you will*, Watts' distinctive voice still rang in my ears, *but whatever you do, don't wobble*. I chose to sit.

I took a big breath and reached for Eddie's hand. He seemed relieved, perhaps excited, that there was a real hand to grasp. He held mine tightly and pumped with all his might.

"Pleased to meet you, Eddie," I said, "My name is Meredith."

"Meredith!" he exclaimed, "I know a lot of Merediths! Beautiful name, Meredith." And he began to list the litany of Merediths he had known in his life. Most of

them seemed to be radio announcers; in minutes, it was clear to me that a main focus of Eddie's life was the radio. He introduced me to his cell phone, his talking watch and his scanner, which—he explained in a rush of words—“follows every police, fire and ambulance call from Cape Elizabeth to Portland. I hear every one. I keep it on all night so I don't miss any of them.”

I belted myself into the seat. “Where do you live, Eddie?” I asked when the introductions were complete and I had properly exclaimed over the marvel of his technical prowess.

“Group home. Forest Avenue,” he said, rocking gently left and right. “They'll save dinner for me. Since it's Monday, it will probably be spaghetti tonight. That's what we always have on Mondays. I'm hungry. Are you hungry too, Meredith? I smell food. Did you bring your dinner on the plane? Are you eating it now?” I delicately balanced a salad, partially eaten, on my knees while Eddie jumped in excitement. “I'm sure to have spaghetti, but I'll wait to eat until I get home. RTP is picking me up at eight-fifteen. I sit outside by the stone bench, and they always come right on time. I can tell it's them by the sound of the tires on the pavement. Do you know about RTP? Just have to call them and they come right out for me. You don't have to pay if you have a ticket. Will there be someone there to pick you up, Meredith?”

“Yes, Eddie, someone is picking me up.”

“Good! What time? Are you sure they will be on time, Meredith? Are you sure they are reliable?”

“Yep, I'm sure. The same person picks me up every time I travel. She never misses a time.”

“Oh, that’s good. I call RTP. Do you know about RTP? Don’t need to pay if you have a ticket. Maybe we can talk if we’re waiting by the bench together. Is that where you get picked up, Meredith, near the stone bench?”

I gasped uneasily as Eddie’s fingers first groped my arm and began to trace the lines of my body from shoulder to fingertips. There was no self-consciousness, no awareness of the fact that most of us try never to touch the body of the stranger traveling with us. How many times had I arrived at my destination with a sore neck or back from contorting my body into impossible positions to avoid touching the person in the next seat? But Eddie simply *loved* touching me.

“I like your sweater,” he crowed as he ran his fingertips along my arm, “What about your pants? What kind of pants do you have on?” His fingers were stubby and his nails cut or chewed almost to the cuticle line, but those fingers were his “eyes,” Eddie’s only means to “see” the world around him. The information I could gather in a single glance, he had to probe to find. “I’ve been blind since birth. I’m my parents’ only child. My stepbrother is on the plane too.” His voice raised, he called out, “Aren’t you, Bill?” Two rows ahead, a man tipped his cap to acknowledge his presence.

“Do you mind if I touch you? There is the issue of appropriateness, of course. I know all about that. I’ll try very hard to be appropriate. Do you mind, Meredith? It’s the only way I can tell what you have on.”

“I don’t mind,” I said, and was surprised to discover that I meant it. There was eagerness in Eddie, authenticity, something so real and refreshing it was infectious. Ordinary social niceties seemed foolish observances in his presence. I took his hand in mine and guided his stubby fingers to feel the fabric of my pants; I attempted to explain *flax* without much ground gained by my efforts, but that didn’t dim Eddie’s enthusiasm. “Oh! I really like the clothes you’re wearing! They feel very nice. You must have very good taste.” I was in my most comfortable sweater and pants, the most decrepit clothes in my wardrobe, called to service only for the relocation from Florida to Maine.

Perhaps my favorite moment in this Eddie adventure was when he asked me, following a long pause to consider something carefully, “I wonder, Meredith, is it possible that you’re *famous*? Most people named Meredith are famous, did you know that? I know famous people, lots of them. Mostly by radio, of course, but they are still my friends. So are you famous, Meredith, because I could add you to my list if you like!”

I regretted telling him that I wasn’t one of the *famous* Merediths. Sighing quietly, so as not to hurt my feelings, Eddie was silent for a while, but it wasn’t in his nature to stay quiet for long.

For the rest of the flight, whenever Eddie wanted to know what I was doing, he probed me up and down my arm. He could tell from the felt slope of my shoulder or the angle of my elbow if I was reading or sleeping. “You must be reading now. Then I’ll be quiet. Are you reading something good?” Minutes later, he would ask, “Are you asleep, Meredith, because I wouldn’t want to wake you up if you’re sleeping?”

It became quickly apparent that the best way to manage Eddie’s insatiable curiosity was to invite him into my world. I’m an introvert, a private person, and I use flying time as the way to think through the tasks that wait for me when I get home. *Water the plants before bed. Turn up the heat in the office for the clients coming tomorrow. Bring in the mail but check only for essentials; everything else can wait for another day. Whatever else I do, don’t turn on the computer. I’ll get caught up in a long list of emails and never get to bed.* Those are the thoughts I untangle as I travel, helping myself adjust to being back in my other home.

But this year, flying back and forth to Florida led me (reluctantly) into several significant encounters with a diversity of folks: a National Guard soldier from a Maine engineering battalion stationed in Mozul, who opened his heart to me as he pulled away from his wife and three year-old son for a second unplanned tour of duty in Iraq; grandparents treating their entire family of thirteen children and grandchildren to a week

at Disneyworld after suffering an unexpected litany of sudden deaths in their intimate circle; stumbling on an old friend I hadn't seen in years of too-busy lives. As a result of these encounters, I was more than usually ready for a next "holy surprise," and to invite my traveling mates into my privacy. Would I leave Eddie out of the possibility that he was another adventure-in-waiting for me to show up and enjoy whatever we might learn with one another? *Sit or stand as you will, but whatever you do, don't wobble.* I chose to include Eddie, a man who—by most unseeing people—would be called "disabled."

Blind, autistic, Eddie was certainly an adventure-in-the-waiting. If I widened the circle of silence I tended to spin around myself and allowed Eddie access to me during this flight, how could I accomplish that without compromising my own needs? I thought, *No harm to be had in treating him as I would treat any other person, accounting for his blindness.* To limit his need to probe my body, I simply told him what I was doing before I did it. "Eddie, I'm going to take a nap now. I won't be talking for a while. I'll tell you when I wake up so you won't have to wonder."

Every so often, those stubby fingers strayed to my arm and gently checked to see that I was doing what I said I was doing. There wasn't going to be any "little white lying" with Eddie. His hearing was so acute he was attuned to every slight shift I made, his fingers so sensitive he could tell everything I might try to hide by the ever-so-subtle position of my arm. *This is a good time to practice truth-telling,* I told myself, and did. "Eddie, I'm in the middle of reading my book right now, but I'll stop in a while, and we can talk again."

Armed with information, Eddie was excruciatingly cooperative. He wanted to be as much like everyone else as he could be; the effort he made to manage himself was heroic, and much appreciated by me. A flight attendant passed our row of seats, quietly touched my shoulder and asked, "How's everything going?" "Fine!" Eddie piped up before I could say anything. "Everything's just great!"

And everything was great. When I woke from my nap or put down my book to talk again, Eddie chatted on about his life at the group home, his friends, his father's visits, his trip to Colorado to spend Christmas with his mother. He spoke intelligently and insightfully about his life; the only indication that he was *different* was the rocking motion he made when he got excited. I asked how it affected his life to be blind, and he explained that he was no more able to answer that than I could tell him how it affected my life that I could see. "This is all I have ever known," he told me, occasionally tapping his fingers against the window of the plane, groping, probing, always *feeling* to determine what I could use my eyes to tell me. "This is just the life I'm used to. I get around and do a lot of things for myself. I travel by RTP all the time. Do you know about RTP, Meredith?"

The one thing Eddie never told me was that he was sometimes *afraid* to "get around and do a lot of things" for himself. At one point, he had to use the bathroom. I stood up to let him out of the window seat, and the flight attendant walked ahead of him, Eddie's right hand on her shoulder, his left gently counting the rows from ours to the bathroom. Once or twice, always by accident, he touched another passenger who didn't see his approach from behind. I watched as people turned on him, annoyed, or winced and pulled away at his unexpected, unwelcome touch. Watching, I thought about the monumental hurdles of ignorance and unkindness Eddie had to clear everyday.

When it came time for our initial descent into Portland, the flight attendant asked Eddie if he wanted a wheelchair to meet him at the gate. He hesitated but finally said, "Please, if you could, that might make it faster to get where I have to go." Eddie knew speed wasn't the problem; we were landing forty minutes ahead of his pick-up time. He meant, I think, that it would be *easier*, but he seemed to want the small amount of personal dignity that one word afforded him. A few minutes later, Bill stood up from his seat two rows ahead of us, stretched and strolled back to Eddie. "Buddy," he said in a most gentle voice, "you don't need a wheelchair. When you get up, I'll step out into the aisle and you can reach for my shoulder. I'll get you to the bus and wait with you till they

pick you up.” I realized in that moment that, at some point, all of this had been carefully planned.

Bill had been in one part of the country for Christmas, and Eddie in another, but it wasn't coincident that their respective planes rendezvoused in Atlanta so they'd be on the same flight into Maine. No coincidence that Bill sat two rows ahead of Eddie and allowed him his autonomy for the entire trip. No coincidence that there was no one seated next to Bill. Perhaps the plan had always been that, if Eddie couldn't manage on his own, Bill would bring him forward to sit with him, but—as long as Eddie could remain independent—Bill would respectfully allow him that independence.

“Oh, okay, Bill!” Eddie chirped brightly. “But I can do it by myself.”

“I know you can, buddy,” Bill said, “but this way you can tell me about your new scanner and Christmas at your Mom's.” Bill stepped back into his row as unobtrusively as he had stepped back to talk to Eddie. A quiet man, calling no attention to himself, he'd watched the same difficult walk to the bathroom I had seen Eddie make.

Once the plane was at the gate, I moved out of my seat and helped Eddie locate his bag in the overhead bin. But Bill had just taught me something, and I used that lesson, “What does your bag look like, Eddie?” He described its shape and color. “Just move your hand to the left by two bags. I think that one's yours.” I waved off the attendant who was going to lift it out for Eddie.

“Right!” he laughed as his fingers found his bag. “You got that right, Meredith!” Then he tilted his head to listen through the cacophony of sounds as people shuffled out of their seats and gathered their goods, “You there, Bill?”

“Right here, buddy.”

Eddie jumped up and down three or four times, turned around in a complete 360-degree arc, and put out his hand to me, “Meredith, it’s been a pleasure traveling with you. If you ever ride on RTP, keep a lookout for me! I’m usually there.” He and Bill moved swiftly out of the plane and rapidly outdistanced me. They were out of sight before I’d unpacked my heavy backpack for that extra pair of socks and a pair of gloves to brace myself against the first blast of frigid air after ten days of tropical weather, and started for the bench. My best guess is that they used Eddie’s high-end cell phone to call RTP; Bill probably drove him home and quietly made certain there was a spaghetti dinner waiting when Eddie got there.

By all standards of measure we habitually use to evaluate people, Eddie was an oddity, a boy-man who shoulders the double burdens of blindness and autism. Not many of us actually witness the presence of *Mystery* shining through his daily heroism, the God-in-him that demonstrates extraordinary courage to go out and meet everyday life on terms that are never his own; they see, instead, the disabilities that weigh his life heavier than most. Or, like the woman who refused to sit beside him, they’re simply afraid of anyone whose *different-ness* is so obvious, so visible. Afraid of what they don’t understand and unable to comprehend as an opportunity to be stretched out of their small, timid selves.

Over and over again, the Mystery rises up in unexpected moments, people and places to aid us in expanding our hearts to include someone we might, out of fear, leave out of our compassion. Eddie served, at least for me on that particular day, as the human emissary of that sacred teaching. “God comes to you disguised as your life,” Paula D’Arcy noted, and Eddie came disguised most like the Trickster—the archetype from Native American spiritual tradition who mysteriously appears to tweak us out of spiritual stupor and guide us back to being awake—of my encounters and travels to date.

Sit or stand as you will, so says the teacher Alan Watts. Choose this or that, it does not matter to the big picture. There will be one encounter with Mystery waiting if you sit, and still another if you stand. *But whatever you do, don’t wobble*. If we wobble,

the encounter slips right past to another, more receptive person, and it is lost to us forever. In wobbling, we still choose, though we may think not, but the choice is to stay small.

Eddie was an odd spiritual teacher, I admit, but a powerful one. Bill too, and the woman who fearfully gave up her opportunity to grow so that I might have it in her place. Funny how it all works with such a subtle and marvelous intricacy we don't always realize until later that we have been touched by another holy surprise. But there it is: we can present ourselves for encounter with the Mystery and expand as a result of it, or we can remove ourselves from the risks inherent in such encounters...and remain safely unchanged. In each moment, for each person, there is the opportunity to choose.

When your opportunities arrive, consider them thoughtfully. Be awake for them. Choose as you will. The Mystery is waiting to be invoked in you, waiting to emerge and show you just how big you really are, but the means and the method are in your hands. Whatever you do, do it with spiritual gusto. Look for the opportunities to grow that wait in every one of the choices you make. Whatever you do, do it with all of your heart and soul and spirit. This is your one extravagant life, your great adventure; your chance to find out just how much of you is sheltering the Mystery, or the God-within, which is waiting to dance in the world through you.

Grab it, and go for it, whatever your choice. Don't let the moments pass you by, nor lose the chance to discover the expanded life that is yours alone to live. It's really not so hard to figure, after all. Remain gently mindful that unexpected encounters will come into your life to encourage your awakening. Welcome their arrival, and embrace the holy surprises waiting for you there.

Just don't wobble.

- Who, or what, have been your “Eddie’s”, the people or events that take you by surprise and help you choose who you are as the result of encountering them?
- Where in your life are you faced with those defining choices today? Are there any people or issues that find you wobbling rather than choosing? What do you need to make a conscious, intentional choice in these situations?

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Ms. Jordan’s first book, Embracing the Mystery: The Sacred Unfolding in Ordinary People and Everyday Lives (2004) was well received both critically and in terms of national sales (the book is still selling steadily two years after its release). Interviews with Ms. Jordan have appeared on public radio, Beliefnet.com (the internet’s largest interfaith/spiritual website), GoodNewsBroadcast.com (a multi-cultural educational media company) as well as numerous print and radio media outlets nationwide. Her books have been reviewed in numerous magazines, and her stories and articles have been sought after by print media and online magazines. Meredith’s new book, Standing Still: Hearing the Call for a Spirit-Centered Life, just released the first of this month.

*In addition to her two books and short stories, Meredith also created a meditation CD titled **Be at Perfect Peace**. The CD is a series of five meditations developed for use by people confronted by major life events such as illness, depression, loss, significant life transitions, and unexpected life challenges or upheavals. The CD is appropriate for both patients, family members of patients, and caregivers.*

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