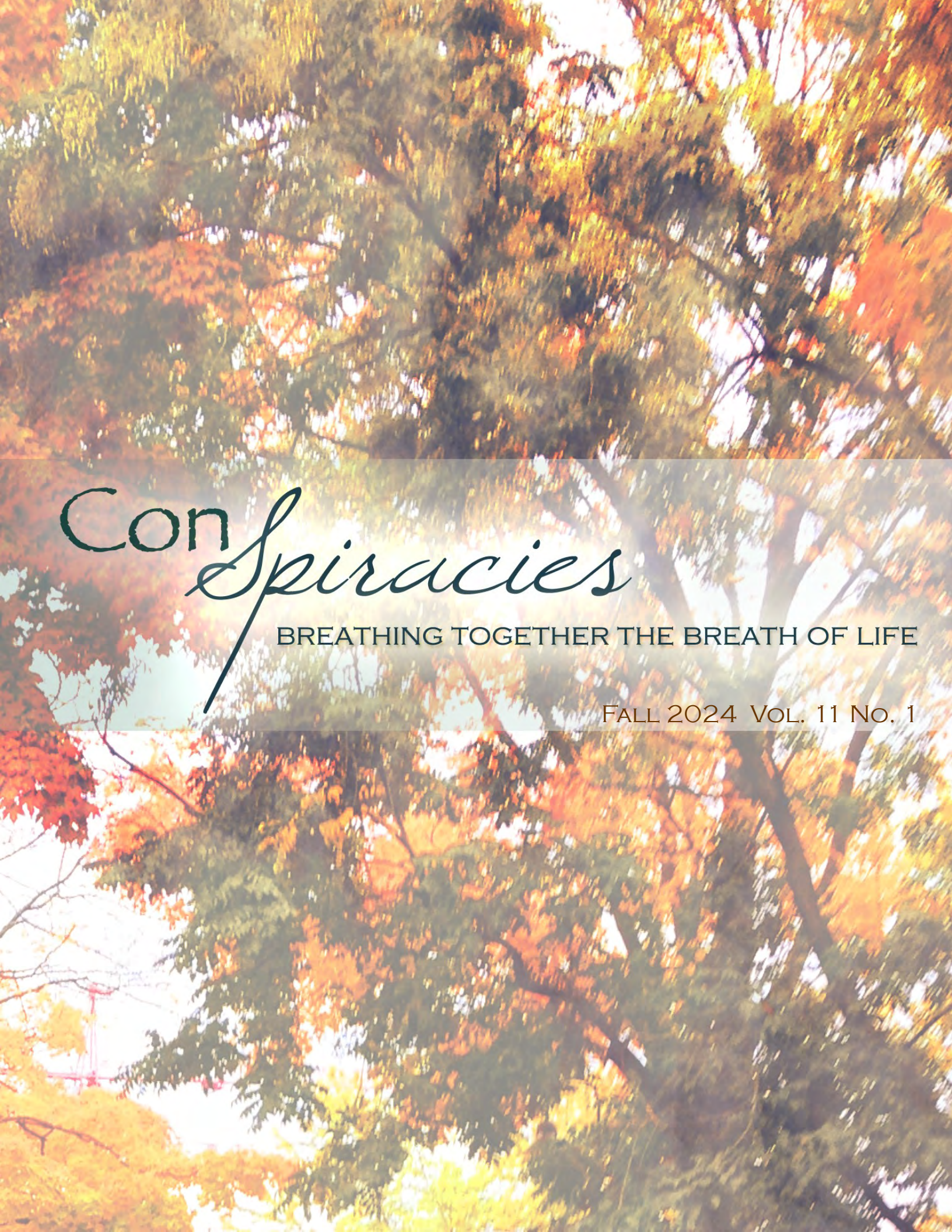




Con*Spiracies*

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

FALL 2024 VOL. 11 NO. 1

Con*Spiracies*

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TURNING TOWARDS GRIEF, TURNING TOWARDS EACH OTHER

JOSH KURTZ
MDiv '25

Josh offered this d'var Torah at the Noon Service hosted by HDS Jews for Liberation on October 9, 2024.

Friends, *shanah tovah*, *gut yontif*, *chag sameach*, happy new year. I am so grateful to be here with all of you.

This week, many in our community are observing the Days of Awe, a ten-day period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when we reflect on the past year – our regrets, our joys, our hopes – and prepare for the year to come. These are the holiest days of the year. They are days of repentance and transformation, of renewal and return. Days in which we are called, again and again, to wrestle with the most difficult questions: What are our values? To whom are we connected? What are our responsibilities – as storytellers, caregivers, community members, witnesses? How have we been complicit in harm? And what needs to be healed within us so that this year, we can continue the work of building a more just world?

This year, the Days of Awe feel especially tender, especially fraught. On Monday, we marked the 1-year anniversary of the October 7th attacks, which killed over 1,200 Israelis and resulted in the kidnapping of hundreds more. This week, we are also marking the 1-year anniversary of a genocide that has killed well over 40,000 Palestinians. A genocide that has left millions without food, water, shelter, and access to medicine. A genocide that has been perpetrated in our name and with the support of our country and of leaders who, time and time again, have chosen to look away.

In the midst of such unimaginable devastation – in the midst of such profound grief – how are we to celebrate the New Year? Last week, a friend suggested that this year, we should dip our apples in salt water rather than honey. Over the past week, I have experienced everything from anger, sorrow, and bewilderment to gratitude, joy, and even hope. It has felt jarring, to say the least. So I ask again: what does it mean to observe the Days of Awe this year?

Of course, there is no single answer. There are only questions. And yet, I think that there is wisdom in our tradition.

Jewish tradition teaches that, during the Days of Awe, the veil between this world and the next is at its thinnest. There are, of course, many ways of interpreting this mysterious and poetic teaching. What is *this* world, and what is the next? What is the veil made of? What does it feel like? What kind of light does it let in?



Josh Kurtz

TURNING TOWARDS GRIEF, TURNING TOWARDS EACH OTHER

JOSH KURTZ
MDIV '25

Tradition teaches that, on Rosh Hashanah, God opens the book of life and on Yom Kippur, God closes it. This means that, during the Days of Awe, the book is open. Over the course of these ten holy days, God decides who will be written in the book of life and who will be written in the book of death – who will live this coming year, and who will not. The border between this world, *our* world, and the world of the dead collapses.

Many believe that, during these liminal days, we have the opportunity to influence God's decision. By repenting for our misdeeds, we can convince God to write us into the book of life. That is one of the reasons we beat our chests in shul, why we cast our sins into bodies of water, why we say, "May you be inscribed in the book of life," to one another.

When I was child, this traditional interpretation terrified me. I used to imagine two enormous books, each the size of my grandmother's apartment building in the Bronx, the building where, each year, we'd eat honey cake and try our best to find some sweetness in our lives, in one another, in our world. I used to imagine a stern God, a God who only used permanent ink, a God who didn't grant second chances. I put so much pressure on myself. If I ran out of bread to throw in the river, if I forgot a mistake I had made the year before, if I didn't beat my chest sufficiently in shul, I would panic. I'd worry that, this year, someone I loved would not make it into the book of life.

And yet, despite my anxiety, there was something about this language – something about the phrase, *may you be inscribed in the book of life* – that always moved me. Something I could not quite put my finger on.

This year, though, I worry that this particular interpretation of the Days of Awe, this image of some divine ledger that dictates who lives and who dies, is harmful. Or at the very least, I wonder whether this understanding of the High Holidays misses the point.

Every day, the death toll in Palestine and Lebanon increases. Millions are displaced. The future is uncertain. And the fissures within our own communities continue to deepen. In this context, I can't help but wonder: Who is granted access to the book of life, and who is shut out? Who holds the pen? What lives, to borrow Judith Butler's terms, do we deem grievable? What lives are deemed lives at all?

This year, this tender year, what if we understood the Days of Awe as an invitation to grieve? An invitation to *turn towards* a grief that bends rather than breaks, a grief that softens us, that attunes us to our interdependence, a grief that many of us have not had time or space to hold. The book of life is open. Let's read it. Let us flip through its pages, allowing our ancestors, near and far, to speak to us, to speak *through* us. Let us mourn the dead, and let us fight like hell for the living.

TURNING TOWARDS GRIEF, TURNING TOWARDS EACH OTHER

JOSH KURTZ
MDIV '25

The veil between this world and the next is thin, not only between the world of the living and the dead, but also between this world, our world, and the one we seek to build. A world where grief is *held* rather than weaponized, a world that is centered around the notion that our fates are intertwined.

There is a translation of Psalm 118 that I always think about this time of year. “From the narrowness, I called to God. God answered me with vastness.” For me, the core of Judaism – the central aim of our rituals – is this transformation from narrowness to vastness. Time and time again, Jewish tradition asks us to turn towards the expanse – towards God, towards mystery, towards one another.



HDS Green. Photo credit: Kristie Welsh

This year, amidst so much suffering, let us imagine what that expanse might look like. What it might sound and smell like. Let us imagine a world free from colonialism, apartheid, and genocide. Let us imagine a Judaism that is rooted in the diaspora, untethered from harmful narratives, committed to inclusivity and solidarity, and open to change – no matter how painful.

To close, I want to offer a blessing. And a shout-out to our favorite witchy Jew, Dori Midnight, for giving us new language to describe God.

Beloved mystery, You of many names, of many doors, of many paths, we are grieving. May our grief soften us. Let us be reminded of

all that we are connected to. Although our bodies know little of deep time, we still hear the echoes of creation within us. When you call out to us, let us respond with vastness and humility. And when we call out to you, may you respond with rushing water, with protest chants, with birdsong.

May this be a year of healing. A year of difficult conversations and tender moments. A year of storytelling. May this be a year drenched in justice and liberation.

THE HOPE PODCAST

JORDAN AHMED, MDiv I
NICOLE MARIE, MDiv III
MICHAEL FUHRMAN, MDiv III

RSL's weekly podcast continues with new episodes in the 2024-2025 academic year! The Hope Podcast features Chaplain Intern Michael Fuhrman, MDiv '25 interviewing HDS students about their spiritual lives and practices and about what gives them hope at this point in history. Check out the first two episodes of this year, and be sure to [listen to earlier episodes on the HDS SoundCloud stream](#).



Nicole Marie



Jordan Ahmed



Michael Fuhrman

AMITABHA: HONORING THE DIVERSITY OF BUDDHIST EXPERIENCE

JIAMIN LI
MDIV II

Jiamin offered this sermon at the Noon Service hosted by the HDS Buddhist Community on October 16, 2024.

Thank you, Venerable Deung Myoung Sunim, for leading us in the Amitabha Chanting practice and sharing your story with us. Thank you to Matta and Maya for co-leading the chants, and thank you all for joining us in this veneration practice.



Jiamin Li. Photo credit: Marisol Andrade-Munoz

My name is Jiamin. I'm a second-year MDiv student and the Director for Harvard Buddhist Community this year. Today, I would like to share a bit about my stories with religion as a framing for the work of the Harvard Buddhist Community and larger Buddhist communities in the U.S.

I want to take you to my childhood home in Fuzhou, Fujian, China. You walk down a hallway inside an apartment building and see an emerald green door decorated with red pieces of paper, where the sacred words "Namo Amitabha" are written in calligraphy. Once you enter the apartment door, to your right sits an altar with pictures of my great-grandparents and multiple statues of Bodhisattvas, including Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and

Di Zang Pu Sa, the Bodhisattva of Earthly Treasures. In the living room, a calendar shows pictures of the Goddess of the Sea, Mazu. Legend says she is a deified form of a female Shaman from Fujian from centuries ago. Then, as you turn to the kitchen, a printed image of Zao Shen, the Daoist God of the Stove, oversees the hustle and bustle of pots and pans.

There were a lot of seemingly incongruent sacred symbols that shaped my cosmology and oriented my community life. My family would go to the Buddhist temple for major holiday rituals, invite Daoist priests to preside over funerary ceremonies, and make our annual trip to a nearby village to watch You Shen, or Procession of the Gods, an Indigenous practice in Fujian where villages host grand parades of Daoist and local Gods to celebrate the new year and pray for safety and prosperity. I came to learn these rich traditions not by studying, but by witnessing and participating in communal life.



AMITABHA: HONORING THE DIVERSITY OF BUDDHIST EXPERIENCE

JIAMIN LI
MDiv II

Amid all these sacred symbols, the figures of Bodhisattvas remained the most influential. When I was young, my grandmother told me that whenever I was in trouble, I should chant “Namo Amitabha” in my heart, and all troubles would be resolved. As a child, I most often called upon Amitabha when I forgot to do my homework and asked him to save me from my teachers’ punishments (I don’t think he answered my calls as much here!) Regardless, I think my grandmother imprinted an impression of Amitabha as the all-knowing savior in my head. From that time onward, whenever I experienced fear or despair that I could not make sense of, my intuition was to think of Amitabha’s presence and call upon his name.

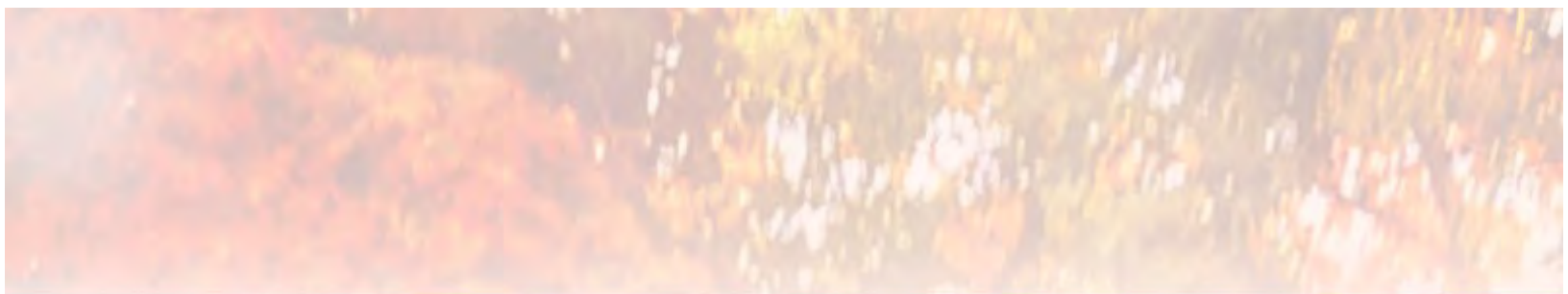
When I was 12, I was uprooted from my life in Fuzhou and arrived in the U.S., hoping for a better education. The pains of immigration, racism, and identity crises consumed my being. Reinventing myself to conform to the white-dominant culture became my survival strategy, and I drifted away from the community and the practices that had grounded me.

By the time I was in college, I longed to find a Buddhist community again. The first week of my freshman year, I went to the Buddhist sangha on campus and participated in meditation for the first time. When we introduced ourselves, I noticed people mentioning things like “I come from a Zen tradition” “I am a secular Buddhist” or “I practice with Tibetan Buddhist teachers”. When it was my turn, I did not know what to say. How did I explain that the way I came to see the world was not only rooted in Buddhist beliefs but also shaped by the prayers to the Daoist pantheon of Gods and an affinity to Mazu, the Goddess of the Sea, who governed the waters that raised my people? When my spiritual experiences did not fit the existing boxes, I panicked. This is also a dilemma that the diaspora community faces as we find ways to translate our existence in America. The assumed singularity of “Asian American” or “Chinese American” erases the possibility of contradictions and multiplicities in our beings.

Though I did eventually find a community of practice on my college campus, I still encountered many instances of subtle exclusion and blatant erasure of my various identities in Buddhist spaces in America. It was all too easy for those with social power over me to discount my lived experiences as a Buddhist when I could not spontaneously quote arcane scriptures or talk about ancient Buddhist history off the top of my head. The modernization of Buddhism in the West and China has also treated many ritual practices I grew up with to be “backward folk traditions”, a similar language used by colonizers to describe the religious practices of the people they colonized.

At the same time, my Chinese-ness paradoxically positioned me both as an idealized and exoticized representative for my community while also being excluded as a perpetual other in predominantly white, so-called mindfulness meditation-focused, and intellectualized Buddhist spaces. These stories are far too common for Asian and Asian American Buddhists in the U.S.

I ask the question: Instead of treating Buddhism as something that needs to conform to a singular vision of modernity, how do



AMITABHA: HONORING THE DIVERSITY OF BUDDHIST EXPERIENCE

JIAMIN LI
MDIV II

we enlarge spaces to celebrate the multitude of experiences as Buddhists in diaspora?

A few years ago, my grandfather passed away. When I saw him draw his last breath, I froze in place, unable to comprehend the fact of his death. But I did not have time to ruminate; shortly after we confirmed his death, my mom pulled me to my knees and told me to start chanting “Namo Amitabha” while she and my aunts chanted the Sutra on the Buddha of Infinite Life.

For forty-nine days after my grandfather’s death, my family, friends, and I chanted the name of Amitabha whenever we could and transferred the merit to him. When we no longer had sound left in our bodies, we would play the chant from audio recordings. In these moments of plea, the incantation of Amitabha felt excruciating.

When I asked my mom why we must repeatedly chant Amitabha’s name, she explained that this is the only way for the living to aid the dead’s safe passage through the intermediary realm, hopefully onwards to the Pure Land or a good rebirth. I asked where this explanation came from, expecting an academic or historical source, and she said this was the ritual taught by our teacher and the generations before us, who preserved these practices despite the intense policing and censorship of religious teachings and activities they experienced.

What lies in the incantation of Amitabha’s name? In the death of my beloved grandfather, Amitabha did not make sense as an all-knowing savior. How could He lessen the agony of loss? However, I think His name was where the family’s grief turned into hope. We didn’t just chant Amitabha hoping for our own arrival in the Pure Land to practice and become Buddhas. In those forty-nine days, we concentrated our energy to help my grandfather reach the Pure Land. Moreover, this was the moment my mother passed this grieving practice on to me so it could continue to live on.

Standing here, chanting the name of Amitabha, I carry the dreams and devotion of my ancestors. Sharing the Amitabha chanting practice at Noon Service has reminded me of the spiritual communal life I grew up with. Here, we have built a Buddhist community that honors the lineage of our Asian ancestors and embraces the diversity of experiences with Buddhism. Here, we are doing the work of enlarging the margins of what legitimate representations of Buddhism look like. I want to honor all the people who made this vibrant community possible — all the teachers, leaders, practitioners, and students who are here and who have been here in the decades before. Our collective labor of love has sustained this community of multiple lineages and created more space to hold experiences similar to mine, where quick words and identifications fail to capture the beauty and abundance of wisdom, community, and lived experiences from the past and the present.

THE FEAST OF TERESA OF AVILA

STEPHANIE PAULSELL

SUSAN SHALLCROSS SWARTZ PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF
CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Stephanie preached this homily at the Tuesday Ecumenical Eucharist on October 15, 2024. The Gospel reading of the day was John 14:1-3.

In my several decades of living in tiny apartments in Chicago and in Cambridge, first with my husband and then with my husband and our daughter, I had a recurring dream of coming across an extra room that I hadn't known was there. In my dream, the room was always messy and unfinished, with straw on the floor and two by fours exposed in the walls. But I was always so thrilled to find it. Once I clean this up, I would think to myself as I dreamed, we could have a study.

I've since learned that this is a fairly common theme of human dream life. Apparently a lot of us have this dream from time to time, in which we stumble onto a room that has been in our home all along but remained hidden from us somehow. Something in our dreaming mind, I think, is trying to teach us that there is more to us than we know.

"In my Father's house are many rooms," Jesus says to his disciples in the gospel of John. Those rooms took root in the imagination of the 16th century writer and reformer, Teresa of Avila, whose feast day we celebrate today. From those rooms, Teresa created a theological anthropology that cherishes the human soul. Just as in heaven there are many dwelling places, she wrote, we can imagine our soul to be a castle made of diamond or very clear crystal, an interior castle that is full of rooms through which we can move, drawn by God, who dwells in the center, in a room we might not have even known was there. Everyone, Teresa says, contains this castle of many rooms. People who know it's there, and people who don't. People we love, people we consider our enemies, people who to whom we are attracted, people by whom we are repulsed, people we know well, and people we will never know: everyone is full of rooms, in the center of which God waits. The great adventure of life, Teresa believed, was to explore that space, discovering one hidden room after another.

Teresa wrote her *Interior Castle* in 1577, in the second half of a violent century. Jews and Muslims had been expelled from Spain for nearly a hundred years, converted families had been surveilled and, like her own, punished for alleged "backsliding." Columbus had made his voyage to the so-called new world, Cortez had conquered Mexico, and the violent project of colonization was well under way. So was the transatlantic trade in human beings. The wars of religion raged in France, Protestants and Catholics slaughtering each other in the streets. Who was considered human in the violent 16th century? Who was made in God's image? Who was worthy of blessing and care?

We know the tragic answers that dominated in Europe and the Americas, and we are still living in the wake of the violence those



Stephanie Paulsell

THE FEAST OF TERESA OF AVILA

STEPHANIE PAULSELL

SUSAN SHALLCROSS SWARTZ PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN STUDIES

answers inspired and justified. But Teresa left behind in that same century an anthropology that called those answers into question. Everyone has an interior castle within them, she argues in her last book. Even if we're not aware of it, even if it's obscured by our sins and mistakes, it's there. And it's there, she said, in everyone else.

Back in the day when Dudley Rose and I used to teach Intro to Ministry Studies, we used to begin the year with everyone offering a 10 minute autobiography in section—we all offered one, teachers and students alike. And for several years, Matt Potts was our TF, sometimes doing as many as three sections at a time, and he heard a lot of these autobiographical stories. In those days, he and his family were living out on Cape Cod, so he had a long bus ride home at the end of the day. And he told Dudley and me that once, while reading on the bus, he looked up from his book and realized: *everybody on this bus is full of stories*.

Teresa had a similar vision, I think. Not only of the hidden rooms inside herself but of the rooms hidden inside everyone else. This is a fundamentally nonviolent vision, I believe. Because it is surely more difficult to harm or kill someone when we know they have an interior castle inside them where God is dwelling. So on this feast of St. Teresa, may we all look up from our reading, from our phones, even from our own interior castles and remember that everyone else is full of hidden rooms, everyone is more than they, than we, appear to be. And that *more*—even when it is invisible, even when it is unknown—is worthy of our reverence and our blessing and our care.



CSWR Courtyard. Photo credit: Kristie Welsh

GOD'S DREAM FOR THE WORLD

KERRY MALONEY

HDS CHAPLAIN AND DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

Kerry preached this homily at the Tuesday Ecumenical Eucharist on October 22, 2024. The lectionary readings for the day were Ephesians 2:12-22; Ps. 85; Lk. 12:35-38

The Gospel of Luke 12: 35-38

Jesus said to his disciples: "Gird your loins and light your lamps and be like servants who await their master's return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them. And should he come in the second or third watch and find them prepared in this way, blessed are those servants"



Kerry Maloney

I promise. I am not stealing the premise of Stephanie Paulsell's homily from last week. The night before she preached it, I had one of those archetypal dreams to which she referred, only in my case, it wasn't about finding a precious, previously unknown, hidden room in my home as her lovely dream had been. It was that more familiar and terrifying one we've all had: taking the exam for which you are utterly unprepared. You've all had this dream; I know it. Usually, for me, it takes the form of finding myself at a final exam for a class I never even took. And if I'm really lucky, I get to be naked in it, sitting in the first row in front of the whole class in my all-together. You've had this dream, or some version of it, right?

But one week ago last night, it took a spectacularly bad turn. It assumed epic proportions, and it played out in vivid, florid detail. I was taking a standardized exam that held the key to my entire future. I was, inexplicably, in my grandmother's living room, surrounded by people far younger than me who all clearly knew what they were doing; and the test was in a language that not only could I not *read* but did not even *recognize*. Furthermore, everyone in the room but me had, for some unknown reason, color-wheel charts that seemed to be letting them work out the answers to the questions on the test before us—questions that were impenetrable, apparently, *only* to me. And to seal the deal? For the purposes of the exam, I had been issued both black ink pens and number 2 pencils, but no one would tell me, no matter how loudly and frantically I shouted, "Do I use pencil or pen? Pencil or pen?!"

Of course, this is a classic anxiety dream. We'll have to leave it to my therapist to get to the bottom of this particularly vivid anxiety, but we can all agree, I'm definitely anxious about *something*. And aren't you too?

As we approach the end of the liturgical year in late November each year, the church universal turns toward pondering the end of all time, the close of the ages and the hidden, apocalyptic meanings it contains. We find our lectionary readings each Sunday and throughout the weekdays too circling around these mysteries. Of course, the early followers of Jesus believed that they were

GOD'S DREAM FOR THE WORLD

KERRY MALONEY

HDS CHAPLAIN AND DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

living at the imminent edge of the End of Everything, fully expecting Jesus to return to earth to rescue them from their daily round of oppression in the form of occupation, persecution, and death; so it's no surprise that much of the Second Testament is preoccupied with these themes.

Frequently, these texts look very much like collective anxiety dreams – or, more precisely, nightmares. They might even be called communal night terrors. They're often vividly frightening stories of suffering in which people find themselves completely unprepared for a sudden, violent end, and then find themselves eternally condemned. Today's Gospel is one variety of that phenomenon, but its emphasis seems less on *anxiety* and more on *dream*. Less apocalyptic nightmare and more beatific vision. In this text, the returning one finds those left behind fully ready for that return, not idling away their time or collaborating with the reigning violence and oppression of the day. And as their reward, they are faithfully and lovingly served rather than exposed, condemned, or punished. They are not unclothed. They are not prevented from passing the exam. They are not locked forever out of a future they desperately want.

In the texts of End Times, there is, of course, no shortage of obvious parallels to our own times—unimaginable oppression, occupation, violence, and death at every turn: the Middle East, Haiti, Sudan, our own streets, especially two weeks in advance of the Presidential election. No shortage of reasons to be *riddled* with anxiety— and even despair—in the middle of the night but also throughout every single day.

I don't want to make light of the necessarily sobering themes of the apocalyptic passages of scripture in which we are found sorely wanting, not least in the Gospel of Luke; but neither should we miss the stunningly Good News in our texts this morning—that our own nightmares are countered by God's dream for this world. It is a dream in which God longs to serve us. It is a dream in which, as we proclaimed with the Psalmist today, "God speaks of peace to the people." It is a dream in which we might wake up to that shockingly healing promise of Love we heard in today's Psalm: "Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss. Truth shall spring out of the earth, and justice shall look down from heaven." (Ps. 85: 11-12)

May we awaken to God's dream for us, here at this Eucharistic table, "free from all anxiety," as the Roman Catholic liturgy used to proclaim, "as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior Jesus the Christ."

TRANSDISCIPLINARY PALLIATIVE CARE

NAOMI TZRIL SAKS
MDiv '10

*Naomi is a board-certified chaplain and assistant adjunct professor, who serves in palliative care with the Division of Palliative Medicine at University of California, San Francisco. She is the Director of the Individual and Collective Wellbeing Program for the Hospice and Palliative Care Fellowship. An ordained Rabbinic Pastor, Naomi has 18 years of experience working in health care and palliative care. This is an excerpt from a new book she co-edited, *Intentionally Interprofessional Palliative Care*, published by Oxford University Press in 2024.*

Teams are more successful in moving toward a professionally inclusive, egalitarian practice, free of stereotyped professional images that previously resulted in siloed care, when they aim to practice transdisciplinary collaboration. Transdisciplinary team collaboration in palliative care is distinguished from other approaches to teamwork in that it includes both the inclusion and transcendence of professional boundaries in the evolution of holistic care. All professions work as equals at the height of their abilities. All members of the team assist in creating transdisciplinarity by clarifying roles and responsibilities, improving communication, addressing conflict, and developing shared policy and practices. Limiting boundaries recede, healthy differentiation develops, and a new alchemy arises as shared decision making, team support, and professional growth result in quality services.



Naomi Tzril Saks

-from Saks, N. T., et al., (2024) "Profession Specific Roles in Palliative Care." Donesky, D., Milic, M. M., Saks, N. T., & Wallace, C. L. (Eds.). *Intentionally Interprofessional Palliative Care* (pp. 41 – 79). Oxford University Press.

A MEDITATION ON DIWALI

SUDARSHAN SUNDAR

HINDU MONASTIC RESIDENT FELLOW

Diwali or Deepavali, literally meaning a line of lights, is the major Hindu festival of lights. During this festival diyas, small earthenware lamps filled with oil, are lit in every home. This festival portrays the victory of good over evil depicted by various folklore. It is a time for celebration, joy, and invoking prosperity. For some, Diwali also marks the start of a new year. The spiritual significance of Diwali as per my Brahma Kumaris tradition is that the Supreme Light pours the oil of spiritual knowledge and re-ignites the inner light of every soul, so that it can glow bright to its fullest. The soul can then serve an unlimited role of being a beacon of light for all.

Here are some questions to consider on the auspicious occasion of Diwali. Readers are encouraged to contemplate their own answers to each question.



Sudarshan Sundar

How can I visualize the self as an embodied soul? An earthenware lamp of Diwali

What makes the clay base of this lamp? The physical body equated to earth

What is the flame of the lamp? The living spark, the spiritual self, in the center of the forehead

What is the oil of the lamp? The spiritual knowledge that keeps the flame or soul lit

What is this knowledge? The knowledge of my spiritual form as a living light, my nature of peace, and whom I belong to
How does this help? This can be calming, regardless of the chaos outside.

What is the wick? The mind or mental awareness soaked in spiritual knowledge

Who ignites the flame? The Supreme Flame whose light is never extinguished

What is the nature of this flame? Unending peace, love, and inner power

A MEDITATION ON DIWALI

SUDARSHAN SUNDAR

HINDU MONASTIC RESIDENT FELLOW

Where does the Supreme Flame take me? To a reality of soul consciousness beyond my biases of gender, race, and nationality
What is my connection with others in this world? Diverse siblings of divine individual lights and thus a feeling of innate and healing spiritual love

What helps me stay resilient in the storms that make my flame flicker? The awareness of being a peaceful actor behind the mask (s) of my varied roles

What happens in the company and radiance of qualities of the Supreme Flame? I, the soul, awaken to my unlimited role and become a beacon of light to provide hope and spiritual strength to the world.



Representation of a diya (an earthenware lamp used in Diwali)

PARADISE AND THE WHITE SKY: FINDING HOME WITH THE GREEN MARTYRS AND THE TERTÖNS

JORDAN BORGMAN
MDIV '26

Jordan wrote this essay as her final paper in Kerry Maloney's course Comparative Monasticisms in the Spring of 2023. It was published in the Summer 2024 issues of The Harvard Divinity Bulletin.

In 1962, on the high slopes of Earth's third tallest mountain, Kangchenjunga, a Tibetan lama named Tulshuk Lingpa attempted to open a crack in the world.¹ It had been eleven years since the Chinese takeover of Tibet, three since the Dalai Lama had spirited himself away to India, and nearly a decade since Tulshuk Lingpa—whose name, roughly translated, means “crazy treasure-revealer,” which contains valences in equal parts of high spiritual attainment and mania—had started having visions of the way to Beyul Demoshong. This was one of the paradisiacal hidden valleys that, in the words of author Thomas Shor, “can be opened only at a time of the most dire need, when cataclysm racks the earth and there is nowhere else to run.”²

Lama Tulshuk Lingpa arrived at Kangchenjunga with some three-hundred monks and lay followers and a series of divinely-revealed instructions. Across the dizzying dreamscape of the glaciers, Tulshuk Lingpa and a dozen select companions went ahead to open Beyul Demoshong. Glittering lights beckoned them forward: there, on the heights of the ice, they felt a warm breeze scented with saffron. Beyond the glacier there was green and warmth and rainbows and the gyaling music of the monasteries.³ The group turned from heat and paradise to gather the remaining followers, and then the crack in the world opened and out came the avalanche, and Tulshuk Lingpa and his companions were vanished into snow.⁴



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Sometime during the eighth century, the great Vajra master Padmasambhāva—also known as Guru Rinpoche—consecrated and closed the world in one-hundred and eight places scattered across the Himalaya.⁵ Padmasambhāva is widely credited for spreading Buddhism in Tibet, and his proselytizing efforts included subduing local indigenous deities and reforming them, sometimes forcefully, into guardians of Buddhism.⁶ Yet in spite of these efforts, Padmasambhāva foresaw calamity in Buddhism's future: “the time will come for Tibet when the temples will be destroyed, the laws will no longer be respected, and the servants will become masters. These will be times of terrible calamity, when people will sacrifice their own animals, drink blood and eat flesh of their own fathers. The followers of Buddha will suffer great hardship, and the reign of peace will be at an end, while hatred and disorder will dominate everywhere. These signs will indicate that the time has come to escape to one of the hidden lands.”⁷

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Panorama of sunrise upon Kangchenjunga. Photo credit: Carsten Nebel, creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en

These hidden lands were valleys “of perfect beauty and eternal bliss...a safe network of locations to shelter and offer refuge to followers of the *dharmā* in times of danger.”⁸ To ensure that the valleys remained safe, Padmasambhāva decreed that entering the hidden lands at the wrong time, or with a less-than-pure heart, would result in a horrifying death.⁹ He followed up by hiding the secret to finding and opening the secret valleys in “in rocks, caves, trees, rivers, and even the sky”¹⁰—and, most importantly, in the minds of the reincarnations of his first twenty-five Tibetan disciples.¹¹ These lamas would be known as tertöns, or treasure-revealers (the “lingpa,” of Tulshuk Lingpa’s name, simply refers to an exceptionally realized tertön, a name that he was given while still a boy monk at the Domang Monastery in eastern Tibet).¹² These places, these cracks in the soul of the world, Padmasambhāva called beyuls. It would be the calling of certain Buddhist monastics to guide the faithful to these beyuls, from calamity to paradise. In other words, it was up to the tertön monks to help their followers home just as, it seemed, home was forever lost.

Around the same time that Padmasambhāva was creating his beyuls, another group of monks were touching another edge of the world. They were Christian, not Buddhist, and they were building a monastery on a small, craggy island that jutted into the waters of the dead. Skellig Michael (or Sceilg Mhichíl in Irish) strains into the Atlantic off the western coast of what is now known as County Kerry in Ireland. At the time that the Irish monks were first building their monastery on the island, Skellig Michael was quite literally the westernmost limit of known Christendom, and pre-Christian Irish lore placed Skellig Michael as the seat of Donn, the Lord of the Dead, and as the border to the Otherworld.¹³ Lashed by rain and fog, accessible by boat only on the clearest of days during a few fleeting months of the year (yet somehow still prone to Viking raids), with few horizontal surfaces and precious little soil for crops, Skellig Michael—the Lord of the Dead crowned with thousands of birds, including puffins, gannets, gulls, and fulmars¹⁴—was and remains far kinder to its avian than human inhabitants. Yet here they were, these monks, building a monastery that was essentially a deathtrap.

These monks were so-called green martyrs, setting out in the spirit of Saint Brendan, one of the Twelve Apostles of Ireland and one of the country’s earliest monastics, who sailed with a motley crew of other monks in a cow-skin boat to find the Garden of



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Eden, with no expectation of return.¹⁵ Their decision was borne of a peculiar spiritual crisis. In 312 C.E., the Roman Emperor Constantine had a vision during the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and converted to Christianity,¹⁶ which had—until that point—been viewed by many Romans a fringe religion of death-seeking fanatics. Constantine’s conversion also brought to an end the state-sponsored violence against Christianity that had defined the religion from the moment that Christ was executed on the cross: that is, since its very inception.

The emperor’s conversion, then, brought both celebration and replaced an existential crisis with an ontological one. The persecution that both defined Christianity and whose threat informed the daily lives of its adherents was suddenly lifted, leaving the religion adrift. During Christianity’s infant three centuries, veneration of those martyrs executed with spectacular gore on the sands of the Roman games arenas, along with frequent retellings of martyr narratives, had served as a cornerstone to the faith,¹⁷ and so enflamed the pious that annoyed Roman bureaucrats occasionally outright refused to order the deaths of Christians eager for glorious martyrdom (at the end of his patience, the second century proconsul Arrius Antoninus stymied the efforts of would-be martyrs by saying, “You miserable wretches, if you want to die, you have cliffs to leap from and ropes to hang by.”)¹⁸ And now, with Christianity’s abrupt installation as the state religion, martyrdom was off the table entirely. Yet what was Christianity without its martyrs?

This sense of unmoored purpose was felt especially strongly in Ireland, which had been Christianized in the fifth century with almost no bloodshed.¹⁹ The Romans, at least, had the glories of their past martyrs to look towards—but Celtic Ireland had nothing. Christian doctrine preventing suicide did not help.²⁰ How could one give one’s life for the faith when there was no one interested in taking it?

Responding to this existential agony, early Irish monastics invented two other types of martyrdom to hold up against the bloody “red martyrdom” of persecution. There would be “white martyrdom,” where voyager monks “sailed into the white sky of morning, into the unknown, never to return”²¹ to spread the Gospel of Christ,²² and “green martyrdom,” where believers would exile themselves to those distant “green” places far from human civilization, to live lonely, ascetic lives in the tradition of the desert fathers of Egypt.²³ In both cases, these were martyrdoms not of blood-filled executions, but of excruciating life sentences. The white or green martyred monk “was doing the hardest thing an Irishman could do, a much harder thing than giving up his life: he was leaving Ireland.”²⁴ With unexpected poignancy, the *Brewer’s Dictionary of Irish Phrase and Fable* defines such a martyrdom as “The renunciation by the early Irish monks of everything they loved for God. The most cruel relinquishing possible was that of their homeland.”²⁵

The monks were rowing into the waters of the Otherworld because they had offered the most painful sacrifice they could: home.



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In spite of the obvious differences—temperate island versus landlocked mountain extremis, separated by great swaths of land, empires, history, and culture—Ireland and Tibet fall across curious parallels. Buddhism and Christianity swept into Tibet and Ireland, respectively, and commingled with indigenous, highly-organized animist religions (Bon in Tibet, which is still practiced today, and the more obscure Druid practices in Ireland and across the Celtic world). Both Ireland and Tibet languished across relatively far-flung areas, secluded by geography for hundreds of years from the graspings of empire. This allowed syncretic, highly distinct versions of Christianity and Buddhism to bloom in each place, separated by hardship and language—and quite possibly preference—from the increasingly cohesive, centralized interpretations of each religion. In Tibet, this localized, distinct variant of Buddhism continued to rocket forth to the present day, developing into the highly systematized and influential Vajrayana school of Buddhism. The syncretic early Irish church, however, was largely washed away by Norman and later British colonialism,²⁶ even if a few distinct quirks continue to characterize Irish Catholicism today.

Both the beyuls of the Himalaya and the monastery of Skellig Michael are ontologically linked to monasticism: no monks, no island monastery or hidden valleys. Both, too, are inseparable from the religions that gave rise to them. Yet both are also mapped onto the spiritual geographies²⁷ of pre-Christian and Buddhist traditions. Skellig Michael, after all, already commanded respect in Celtic lore as a gate to the Otherworld and burial site of would-be invading marauder Donn, who after being drowned with Druid magic returned to the iron waters as Ireland's immortal protector and Lord of the Dead.²⁸

Similarly, anthropologist Davide Torri, in "Notes Towards a Theory of Landscape: From the Animist Landscape to the Buddhist *Beyul*," has demonstrated how much of the Buddhist Himalaya is laid directly onto pre-Buddhist sacred elements, in ways that range from generative to tense.

Much of the religious-scape has been shaped by the interactions between the Buddhist master Padmasambhava and the local host of non-human inhabitants of the valley, mountain and snake deities. The outcomes of these encounters transformed the space by a taming process that, binding the wild, reluctant and riotous local deities to Buddhism and its soteriological way, radically altered the essence of the territory. Landscape was recreated by and through the adaption of Buddhism and conceptually rearranged to fit into an ethically oriented cosmic scheme....[T]ransformation is woven into an ancestral, unchanging structure: the old power-places are not erased but given a new meaning and purpose.²⁹

(By contrast, sociologist Corey Lee Wrenn has suggested that Skellig Michael's close-knit association with animism led to its abandonment in the thirteenth century, with Ireland's Norman colonizers looking askance at the many pre-Christian beliefs infusing the space, most pressingly the complete indifference by the early Irish to distinguishing between humans and non-human animals.)³⁰



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There is another key similarity. One can brave the seas, resign oneself to nausea, and travel by boat to the monastery at Skellig Michael. But one can travel to the hidden valleys, too.

Tulshuk Lingpa may or may not have located Beyul Demoshong in 1962, but he did not succeed in opening it. The beyul remains closed and unmapped. There are one-hundred and seven other beyuls, however, and many are not only known, but house entire villages; some can even be reached by car. They are magical, they are mystical, and then they are suddenly there.

Shangri-La, the ageless paradise of James Hilton's 1933 utopian novel *Lost Horizon*, was inspired by the idea of the beyuls:³¹ it is a place that may or may not exist, that may or may not be found. The difference between Shangri-La and the beyuls, however, is that the beyuls are not only spiritually present, but they are tangible, physical facts of the landscape. Some savvy ecologists have even made use of an area's sacred beyul status to encourage conservation efforts.³² In one of Padmasambhāva's more surprising twists, some of the hidden valleys are, in fact, common knowledge.

Even those beyuls outside of the realm of the quotidian seem to be firmly based in physical presence. The beyul of Pemako, located behind a waterfall of unearthly height in the Tsangpo Gorge—the planet's deepest—was derided in 1924 by a Royal Geographic Society finding expedition as a “romance of geography”; but lo and behold, in 1998, historian and explorer (and, perhaps most saliently, long-time Kathmandu beatnik) Ian Baker found the beyul on a National Geographic Society-funded expedition.³³ Tellingly, Baker learned about the waterfall from locals who hunted in the area;³⁴ they needed no assurance from an American that their beyul existed.

There is the beyul, then, that can be reached with a decent four-wheel drive—but then there is the beyul whose access, as Tulshuk Lingpa was warned, is “akin to opening a crack in the very fabric of reality and passing into another world, a world from which one could never return.”³⁵ Tibetan lamas explain this by noting that there are three levels to any given beyul, which varied,

according to the individual level of understanding...three levels are envisaged: an external one, an internal one, and a secret one. The external one can be perceived by ordinary sensory experience and allows the vision of a peaceful and fertile valley, but does not confer any spiritual power. The internal one can be enjoyed only by the yogin, who can receive from the vision of the inner secret land a strengthening of his spiritual powers as well as the possibility of finding secret treasures, hidden sacred texts and every kind of tangible good, all of which will make the initiation journey easier. The secret level can be perceived only by those who have reached a high level of spiritual fulfilment, and who can enter a condition of intense mystic ecstasy and gain access to highly esoteric teachings. At the deepest level the hidden valley corresponds to the earth and mind of the yogin who will no

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longer differentiate in any way between himself and the outside world: in this way he will have reached the 'hidden valley of suchness', the place of ultimate reality...The secret land becomes a vision, and in the same way its geography becomes a visionary geography.³⁶

Similarly, to reach the physical threshold of the Otherworld at Shellig Michael is not the same thing as having the wisdom—or foolhardiness—to cross it. Both the beyuls and Skellig Michael exist in brooding liminality; a layperson can set foot on their lands, but only a monk has access to the full breadth of the reality. One can walk into a beyul, but not necessarily open it. To strain for heaven at the high south peak of an Irish monastic island is not the same as touching it.



Skellig Michael in background. Photo credit: Holly Crilly, creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en

As the success of opening the beyul is based on faith, the followers of Tulshuk Lingpa were required to sacrifice everything, not least any notions of return. Gone were possessions, houses, even the hope of regress that would come with crops planted for the following season.³⁷ The followers left these homes on the edge of destruction—by the Chinese, by the nuclear threats of the Cuban Missile Crisis, by a world and culture under siege—for the true home of the beyul.

The Irish Christian monks who sailed to Skellig Michael did the precise opposite. They gave up home and human companionship (except for the not-insignificant company of a dozen brothers in the faith clinging to a mist-drenched rock in a grey sea) for hermitage at the edge of the world. Both sets of

monks were moving to para-homes: for the Tibetan tertöns, these were the true homes of paradise and true homes of the spirit, physical embodiments of safety in a shifting landscape, while for the Irish monks, Skellig Michael was the physical deprivation of home and creature comforts that allowed for spiritual sacrifice—and thus for transcendence. They were extreme places that called for extreme faith.

Where do we find home? What does it mean to give it up, and to find it again? What does it mean to set out to the sea, to the snow, to look up, up, up—to the peaks of the Himalaya, to heaven, to the paradise beyond the white sky of morning?

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4. Butler, "The Himalaya's Hidden 'Paradise Valleys.'"
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6. Torri, "Notes towards a Theory of Landscape: From the Animist Landscape to the Buddhist Beyul," 49.
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12. Shor, *A Step Away from Paradise*.
13. Wrenn, "Beehives on the Border," 144–45.
14. Wrenn, 150.
15. Barron and Burgess, *The Voyage of Saint Brendan*.
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17. Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.
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