

The Joy of Finding Agates.
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*Motto: The deciding question for a person is:
am I consciously connected with the Infinite?*

*Musical Introduction: The first Prelude of Johann
Sebastian Bach's "The well-tempered Clavier"
(Julia Black)*

GOOD MORNING AGAIN

Before I really start I have to tell you something. At one point last week, seeing a disabled beggar on the street, I thought: who am I that I dare to present a sermon about joy – realizing how utterly privileged I really am. It made me feel humble.

Anyhow - Remember that age when kids ask WHY? Why this, why that, why whatever? I am still, and frequently, asking: Why....? So why am I doing this, standing and talking here. Do I have the Big Answers? No, most certainly not. But I think it is kind of fun, this story about agates, and I enjoy sharing it. On the surface it looks as if it is about agates – but not really, as you will notice.

Ever found an agate? Many of you did and you will share some of my experiences. Agates are also called half-gems. By the way, I asked Julia to play that short piece of Bach's music because it is such a little gem. And so are agates. Remember what an agate looks like? (slide)

When I first came to these shores in 1995 my future spouse introduced me to the fun experience of looking for and finding agates. Agates are just little rocks, or pebbles that you can find on the beach. Just little chunks of quartz but different from quartz in being amorphous, that is: not crystalline. They have a very characteristic, somewhat glassy texture.

Let me show you what it looks like on the beach. (slide) There, in the right hand corner. You don't see it? Well, neither would I if I had not taken that photo myself – they are devilishly difficult to recognize. At first I hardly ever found one but gradually I got better at spotting them, and by now we have a small jar full.

Somewhere along the line I wondered: why are we doing this. They have no value, you can't sell them, barter them, buy stuff with them – no value whatsoever but for the fun we have together looking for them. They end up in a jar, or a basket, or the grandchildren use them in their fantasy plays.

But still, I like to find them, to hoard them – I got kind of attached to them. And I started to understand that it was solely the value that **I** attached to them that made them "valuable". Now this is a fun thought: extrapolating from there I realized that "Value" is always a very personal notion. Is there actually anything that has an absolute value? I wonder.

At first I started polishing my agates in a rock tumbler but I soon let that go: they are too polished (small wonder if you polish them). It is not their “true nature”. Inside this (shows agate) rough agate there is an infinite number of polished agates, but by polishing you create or manifest this single specimen. And I realized that creation is not a process of adding, but of subtracting, removing, limiting. It doesn't always look like that, but still..... seen from this perspective the Universe, in all its magnificence, is still a limitation. And it cannot be otherwise.

So, finding agates – you find them at the strangest places, like my neighbor's gravel path. But most commonly, here in this region, on the beaches, especially sandy gravel beaches. We walked, and still walk, many beaches. Our preferred place is Ebey's Landing on Whidbey Island. (slide) At one point I noticed that I preferred to walk along the edge of the water and started to wonder why. (There is that why again!). Then it suddenly occurred to me that walking along the edge limited my search area: one does not find agates under water. And I suddenly saw that that is how it works: when we search, we by sheer necessity limit our field of observation, otherwise we drown in the abundance of information. That counts for Googling, but also for our spiritual quest. And I suddenly understood one of the reasons why some people need to join a specific church – have to follow a specific path. We just can't handle the full spectrum of spirituality and have to limit ourselves. Even in the UU we limit ourselves. We have after all only 7 principles.

One more thing about this limiting of information: apart from doing it ourselves we also ARE BEING limited, for example by the media: what gets to the front page? And that is perfectly OK, you can't print everything – but I think it is good to be aware of both: being limited and of choosing to limit ourselves.

After that realization of setting up my own boundaries when searching, I started to walk the beach more randomly. It certainly felt less constrained. We picked up agates here, and there, sometimes one only, sometimes seven, sometimes none. And there seemed to be no logic in it, no system. We came up with ideas like: “You don't find an agate, the agate shows itself to you”; or “agate are not there, they manifest when you least expect it”, or “when you deserve it”. Now that is a nice example of self-depreciation! Also a little bit of new-age thinking. But gradually it became clear that there is indeed logic in it, and a system. For example: you have a better chance to find one if you are looking in the direction of the sun, or when they are moist but not wet. Now what does that mean?

Out goes **New Age** thinking, enters **Science**. It's all about light reflection and crystalline and amorphous structures. And I started to realize that you find agates because they look different – they reflect the sunlight differently. And finally I understood that over the years we had trained ourselves to pick out that specific reflection out of all the reflected light information that enters our eyes. Because when I look at say a square yard of pebble beach, I unconsciously see EVERYTHING, every minute detail – but I only consciously pick out that single agate that happens to be there. I have “conditioned” myself in what I allow myself to see. Had I started to collect red stones I would have conditioned myself on seeing red, and would have jars full of red stones by now.

Now, again, this offers a wider perspective: we see what we want to see, or we see what we have learned to see, or have conditioned ourselves to see, or have been indoctrinated to see. And THAT IS PERFECTLY OK – as long as we are aware that what we consciously see, what we allow to enter our awareness, is only a fraction of what is really out there. Aware that that same reality may look totally different to somebody else. “That guy, he is a mess”. “What do you mean, he is a sweetheart”. Same guy, different perspective.

So there: the high word is out: AWARENESS. But let’s first take a few more steps along that beach. (slides) Imagine me, strolling along that beach, focused on where I walk and what I may or may not find. Occasionally I look up if there are any stumbling blocks ahead but quickly I go back looking for agates. Once Marjon said: do you even SEE the magnificent mountains of the peninsula? I look up, look at them, say “Yes” and go back to my agates. But slowly it sinks in that I do NOT see the magnificent mountains, or the water, or the atomic submarine that happens to pass, or the loons, hear the waves, the sea gulls – I am totally focused – obsessive, sometimes. And again I get this insight in how things work: if I am totally focused on one thing, I don’t see, hear, feel anything else. And again, THAT IS TOTALLY OK, but it helps if I am fully aware of that and can toggle the knob when needed or requested. It makes me a more pleasant person to live with. Awareness of what I am doing – there you have the big word again.

And so the story goes on – I like to find agates. I like to keep them, hoard them, have more of them. Now where does THAT come from – this need for more? I have some thoughts about that but that is a topic in itself. Another time, perhaps?

However, I cannot go to a beach and NOT look for agates. The Buddha would smile: that’s how it works, brother, attachment. Once we visited Tom and Nola Beeler on their Guemess Island. In the late afternoon we walked to a beach and I start meandering, looking for – you guess – an agate. Forget about the family, our hosts, the beauty of that environment. And low and behold – there it is: a really beautiful, medium-sized agate. Happy me. I turn around to show it to the group and meet a young girl who also collects agates. She had found a little one, and possibly not even a real one (they are tricksters, those stones). I thought: give yours to her – but all my hoarding instincts raised their heads and I withstood the temptation. I didn’t even ask WHY it was so hard I had stopped asking WHY ---- I got stuck.

I walked to the family, showed them the agate ----- and then turned around, walked back to that girl and said: would you like to have this agate? Her smile at that moment made that little rock without any value PRICELESS. I went home, very happy. The Buddha smiled and said yes, that’s how it works.

So here the story ends – it turned out among other things to be a story about the importance of keeping asking WHY rather than agates. But rightly you might ask: then what about that joy? Because this was kind of serious – not very, but still. Yes, the joy of finding agates is to a large extent the fun and the pleasure of being out there together, finding some – or not. But if you substitute the word agate with “insight”, the joy is also that it is such a glorious and inspiring way of gaining little insights in the long and slow process of what I call “awakening awareness”. Going back to that disabled beggar, I realize that there are many other ways and not all are necessarily this pleasant.

But still, awakening awareness, my friends, is what some people think is what life is all about. And I am one of them. So: finding agates, or insights, go for it – and keep asking Why?

Now I invite you to once more listen to that little gem of music, while pondering these things.

Musical response: same Prelude.

Thank you. A thought occurred to me. If awareness is so important – then you might rightly ask: “Awareness of What?” There is no quick and easy answer to that. You may have guessed that it has to do with what my motto expresses, our relationship with the Infinite. However, let’s do that another time. For now, let’s end today’s service with Extinguishing the Chalice. But first, in the language of my country of birth:

Selamat djalan, Blessed be thy path.