(Both parts of "Mujako and William Carlos Williams" are based on talks given at the Open Source Mahasangha Retreat at Pueblo Mountain Park in Colorado in June 2019. They are substantially revised. Also giving talks at the retreat were Open Source teachers Sarah Bender, Megan Rundel, and Andrew Palmer. The retreat focused on the long koan about Mujako adapted by Open Source founding teacher Joan Sutherland from *Samurai Zen*, trans. Trevor Leggett.)

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Uh-oh, poetry. But not quite yet, so please sit comfortably.

It seems like I always talk about poetry when I come to Colorado—something I do only rarely while wearing a zen hat in Tucson. But with four teachers giving talks on the same koan, maybe it brings in a slightly different flavor.

But not too different. In key respects poems are a lot like koans, and they can have similar effects on us. Hakuin, commenting on the great koan "when it's hot, let the heat kill you; when it's cold, let the cold kill you," says the student doesn't realize "he's been given a method of changing his bones." "What's the message of the poem?" beginning lit students sometimes ask. Hakuin makes clear that in koans the action is elsewhere: not in a take-away lesson or "message" but in an intimate transformation. Ditto for what's on offer in poetry. So the literary critic Kenneth Burke points to "the 'incantatory' factor in imagery: its function as a device for inviting us to 'make ourselves over in the image of the imagery.'" The kind of world the poem implies, he's saying, in the way it images things--let yourself change till you're like that, become that, make yourself over in its image. Burke might as well have been reading Hakuin.

So we can let a poem in, the way we let a koan in: let it wash over us and permeate us, soften us into its sense of things. And poems, like koans, are good at making intensely imagined, realized worlds that help us do that.

This morning I want to talk a bit about our koan and then just introduce a poem to you, and invite you to spend time with it if you don't have anything better to do at some point during the retreat. You can dream with it the way you would with a koan—or let it dream you. One piece of Open Source advice is to sit with any part of a koan that swims toward you, trusting the rest will follow along at some point. Same for the poem. Thursday night, I'll talk about some of the ways the poem pulls on me, and then we can talk some more about it together if you like.

The poem I'm inviting you to spend time with is William Carlos Williams's "The Widow's Lament in Springtime." For me, it resonates with our retreat koan in a helpful way. The poem slows down and unfolds something that happens very fast, or goes without saying, in the koan. So let's start with the koan, the first part of it, and then we'll bring in the poem

> Mujako was widowed at 32. She couldn't get over her grief and became a nun.
> She came to the teacher Bukko and asked, What is Zen?"
> Bukko replied, "The heart of the one who asks is Zen; you can't get it from someone else's words."

In her beautiful 2008 talk on the koan, Joan Sutherland notes about this moment:

> In [Mujako's] question, I hear: what can zen do about this grief, how can it help me deal with this unbearable sorrow that I feel. And her teacher responded not by telling her how she needed to fix things or change things or be different; her teacher said the heart of the one who asks is zen. So your heart, your grieving heart that feels it can't bear the sorrow, that, exactly, is zen. That's where you start, and you don't have to throw yourself away, or change yourself, or try to become something other than exactly what you are. And if you do in fact become exactly what you are, with no separation, that is zen.

That's the heart of the matter. If it feels clearer than the koan does at first, that's maybe because the koan itself moves very fast—the way zen can move very fast, and the way the world can--presenting a sequence of actions through what feels almost like a succession of jump cuts, a montage in a movie or a dream. Maybe we sense a deep connection between one moment and another, but can't quite pin it down:

> At that moment a deer at a nearby stream gave a cry. The teacher asked, "Where is that deer?"
> The nun listened.
> The teacher shouted and asked, "Who is hearing?"
> At these words Mujako has a flash of understanding and left.

We might have the right to a head scratch here: like, excuse me, I thought we were talking about Mujako's unbearable grief, and being right with it. How did a deer get into this? And why does Bukko suddenly shout? Well, because he's a Japanese Zen teacher, and that's what Japanese Zen teachers do. But what is it, this shout? And Mujako's sudden "flash of understanding"—what's that about? And, by the way, who is this "who" who is hearing? Koans. Jeez.

Maybe Mujako should have gone to see Buddha rather than Bukko. Confronted by another women consumed by unbearable grief, the Buddha at least gives her a task to perform, a particular Rx to follow. Here's part of the story:

> Kisa Gotami had an only son, and he died. In her grief she carried the dead child to all her neighbors, asking them for medicine, and the people said: "She has lost her senses. The boy is dead." At length Kisa Gotami met a man who replied to her request: "I cannot give you medicine for your child, but I know a physician who can . . .Go to Sakyamuni, the Buddha."
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> Kisa Gotami repaired to the Buddha and cried: "Lord and Master, give me the medicine that will cure my boy." The Buddha answered: "I want a handful of mustard-seed." And when the girl in her joy promised to procure it, the Buddha added: "The mustard-seed must be taken from a house where no one has lost a child, husband, parent, or friend." Poor Kisa Gotami now went from house to house, and the people pitied her and said: "Here is mustard-seed; take it!" But when she asked, Did a son or daughter, a father or mother, die in your family?" They answered her: "Alas the living are few, but the dead are many. Do not remind us of our deepest grief." And there was no house but some beloved one had died in it.
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> [. . . .] Kisa Gotami had the dead body buried in the forest. Returning to the Buddha, she took refuge in him and found comfort.

In this beautiful, haunting story, grief isn't overcome, or outgrown, or brought to some satisfactory conclusion; it's passed, warm hand to warm hand, along the circuit of families in the village, an unbroken circle of loss returning finally to Kisa Gotami, who receives it with open hands.

"The gift has to circulate." In our koan, maybe the deer moment is like that. Mujako enters a kind of haunted circle of gift exchange, a circuit of loss and grief moving from creature to creature and letting her heart begin to move as well. "Where is that deer?" Well, where's Mujako? Here's Joan again, in her recent piece "Invisible Ceremonies":

> "Where is the deer?" the teacher asks. She listens, concentrated, ripe with something. "Who is listening?" The ripe thing bursts in her; the deer's cry echoes through the trees and rises simultaneously from her own scarred heart. She is there, cloven hooves wet, and she is here, wondering—and everything is listening to everything.

That's a beautiful, poignant evocation of a painful but beautiful shift. So, just to be flippant for a moment, OK then: deer cry, check. But that's not the strangest part. Why doesn't Bukko ask "who hears" right then, right after the deer cries and he asks "where is that deer?" Why does he first make a sound himself? And how come he doesn't "cry," echoing the deer, but shouts instead? Is a shout the same as a cry? Is Trevor Leggett just a casually wobbly translator? Maybe not. Maybe Bukko's shout doesn't simply repeat the cry, but responds to it, bringing in another note to make a kind of chord. And it's then that Bukko asks "Who is hearing?" Who is it who hears both the cry and the shout, a "who" who can respond to that chord, or begin to?

So ends today's episode of "Mujako." Next time on "Mujako" . . . well, stay tuned. But we have enough time this morning to turn quickly to a first look at Williams's poem and maybe begin to feel our way toward a possible connection to the koan. How might Mujako's heart begin to open? In response to what?

For me the poem illuminates something about what Bukko does. It's possible, for starters, to imagine Bukko's shout as inappropriate, or at least upsetting. A cry of grief, we say; but a shout of what? Doesn't Bukko's shout intrude on Mujako's grief?. But, right after that, she has "a flash of understanding." She's responding. But what might this shout have to do with her grief? If it does call to my heart, she might ask, who am I? Who is hearing?

In Williams's poem these are, implicitly, the sorts of questions the speaker, another deeply grieving widow, asks herself. Blossoming springtime trees are the shout here. But, catching herself responding, she holds off; she holds up, for examination, the springtime and her visceral response, measuring them against her grief. It's as if she's asking herself, though she doesn't quite want to: what if I open my hand and let my grief slip into this circuit of transient forms, burgeoning now in spring, to be returned to me in its time? And if I do, who am I? Who hears?

So, to put it a little baldly for our purposes, the poem might help us unpack Bukko's shout and Mujako's response, as if replaying this brief, enigmatic moment in the koan in slomo. Here's the poem:

THE WIDOW'S LAMENT IN SPRINGTIME

Sorrow is my own yard
where the new grass
flames as it has flamed
often before but not
with the cold fire
that closes round me this year.
Thirtyfive years
I lived with my husband.
The plumtree is white today
with masses of flowers.
Masses of flowers
load the cherry branches
and color some bushes
yellow and some red
but the grief in my heart
is stronger than they
for though they were my joy
formerly, today I notice them
and turn away forgetting.
Today my son told me
that in the meadows,
at the edge of the heavy woods
in the distance, he saw
trees of white flowers.
I feel that I would like
to go there
and fall into those flowers
and sink into the marsh near them.

It's quite a poem. I find it intensely moving, time after time. If you do too, focusing in and asking about particular moments might feel a little intrusive. That's an occupational hazard of lit crit. But if it's done well, this kind of close focus can help us return and hear the poem even more responsively. We actually learn to do something similar in meditation, and in koan work. So here's a first look, some questions that come up for me as I listen to this woman in her grief. I hope what I say doesn't sound cold-hearted. I don't think it is. What I'm hearing are some moments where her responses and feelings are beginning to move, to open, in ways she's perhaps not quite ready to accept or even acknowledge; it's as if she's insisting that her hand, or her heart, ought not to open ever again. So human: "isn't that how it is?" Joan used to say.

For this morning, here are just a few moments that catch my attention:

"Sorrow is my own yard." For me, there's something a little odd about this phrase. I know, it's a poem, and poems don't talk exactly like real people. Still, if you were sitting at a bar, and a stranger sat down next to you and said, "Sorrow is my own yard," what might you think you were hearing? Would it maybe sound just slightly "off" somehow, in a way you might want to find a name for? If the phrase is a little odd, what does that oddness reveal?

The plumtree and masses of flowers passage: for me, this is an amazing, beautiful part of the poem. One thing that draws my attention is that she's *looking* at the trees, but "masses" and "load" are both registering the *feel* of something—they are less visual than tactile or kinetic. That's pretty common: stuff we see can activate a tactile or kinetic response in us. It's one version of the subtle, unspectacular synaesthesia that emerges often in koan work: a literal sensation registered by one sense, like sight, provokes a kind of phantom response in another of the five senses, such as touch. It's a sensation we might want to call imagined, but might not. Following Yuanwu in the *Blue Cliff Record*, I've been using the term "subtle touch" when it's a tactile or kinetic response that gets activated by something we see or hear. Subtle touch is intimate, an intimacy that opens up into the Sambhogakaya, toward the Dharmakaya. So for me, it wouldn't be a bad zen afternoon, sitting with this passage, feeling my way into, or toward, how it might change my bones at least a little. By the way, you don't have to stick to the literal letter of the poem to enter this zone: anything you see or hear around you today, or something that swims up with no obvious reason from the recesses of memory, might be your cherry trees. But you might also just sink into the poem and the flowers, or the deer cry and Bukko's shout.

The end of the plumtree passage: "today I notice them / and turn away forgetting." It's crucial, I think, that "notice" is in the present tense, as is "turn away, forgetting." The psychology here is tricky. What are you doing right now? Oh, I'm forgetting the cherry blossoms, I'm forgetting the elephant in the room. Oh really? You don't say! It's a little strange, and revelatory. "I am turning away I am forgetting the cherry blossoms" is an odd thing to say. As a statement of fact and a description of the actual present moment, I think it names something that's impossible. So what's up with that?

Finally, there's the dream-like passage that ends the poem, where the speaker builds out in her imagination the image of something her son tells her he saw at the edge of the woods. Why does it pull on her so strongly? How is it like her own yard, and how unlike it? Does it resolve anything, this dreamlike sequence of images, or might it? Does it allow something to start to move, perhaps to heal? And how are the final two lines, two images, related to one another? Is there a kind of contrast between them? And does it, perhaps, begin to get reconciled, in the saying? "I feel that I would like / to go there," she says

> and fall into those flowers
> and sink into the marsh near them.

Quick caveat: One tricky issue, in responding to poems—and maybe in koan work—is that the characters conjured up aren't real living people: they exist only as what we read of them. They don't have actual childhoods full of joys and traumas the results of which we're seeing in their present, or real futures we need to predict or fret over. So who knows how the speaker, who doesn't exist, "really" feels, or, especially, what her clinical prognosis would be. We have to tread lightly here, and there's plenty of room for divergent responses, which luckily can't have disastrous clinical consequences. Here's mine, at least for now: given how elaborately hypothetical and conjectural this final passage is, I don't feel impelled to grab the phone and dial 911. To me the dream images at the end, in combination, actually move toward assuaging and healing—they imagine falling into the circuit of forms--rather than being suicidal. Anyway, that's another passage I wouldn't mind sitting with, falling under the spell of the incantatory function of the imagery, the invitation to make myself over in the image of the imagery:

> I feel that I would like
> to go there

and fall into those flowers
and sink into the marsh near them.

More on Thursday.

Maybe the poem, or some piece of it, some image, will call to you, maybe even fetch you, sometime between now and then.