

A meditation on Jazz during Lent

We are flakes of snow; we are notes vanishing in the air.

by [L. Roger Owens](#) in the [March 24, 2021](#) issue



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My 15-year-old son was staring out the window as he leaned on the dining room table. From behind he looked like he was posing for a sculpture: his strong, lithe body perfectly still, one hand balanced on the table, the other in a pocket.

It was snowing outside. The locust tree ten feet from the window had donned a white shawl since last I'd looked out. Flakes blew parallel to the ground. I imagined the boy was meditating on the impermanence of snow—how it wasn't there hours earlier, how by this time tomorrow rising temperatures will have erased every trace, how the transience of weather mirrors the flux at the heart of things.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Meditating on the snow?”

No answer. He was deep in concentration, having shut out all else. “What are you doing?” I said again, louder.

His head jerked around. He plucked an earbud from his ear.

“What? Oh, I’m listening to jazz.”

Not watching the snow, but listening to jazz—which is not so different from considering snow’s impermanence, if you think about it: the way the saxophonist tosses notes into the air, one after another, ephemeral sounds melting into nothing. The improvised solo never gets played the same way twice. Each phrase, an offering for the moment.

Of course, he wasn’t meditating on transience—I was projecting, as this aspect of reality had been much on my mind and still is. It’s a truth the season of Lent invites us to contemplate. We are flakes of snow; we are notes vanishing in the air. From dust we came; to dust we shall return.

Lent lasts 40 days. But it feels like we’ve been in a Lent of 400 days, since the specter of pandemic began scratching at our door over a year ago and then walked in, sat down, and refused to leave.

When it became clear to me that this wasn’t going away and the constant news coverage of mounting death tolls inflamed my anxiety and threw me into fear, I ran to a philosophy of impermanence, gorging myself on books on Buddhism: *Peace Is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hanh; *Insight Meditation* by Joseph Goldstein; *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki; *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* by D. T. Suzuki, longtime correspondent of Thomas Merton. If engaging the spiritual practices of the East was good enough for Merton in the troubling years of the 1960s, why not for me during a global pandemic?

I’ve cycled through the church year enough times to know this theme exists in the Christian tradition as well. As one church year is passing into another, we consider the end of the present age. On the first Sunday after New Year’s Day we often sing, “Time like an ever rolling stream bears all who breathe away.” On Ash Wednesday we receive the oily smudge on our foreheads, remembering that grass withers, flowers fade, and so shall we. In the season of Easter we read Paul’s take on resurrection. He looks at our bodies and sees something perishable, however much he longs for the day the perishable will be clothed in imperishability.

Christianity does teach impermanence—but more around the edges. For us, it's something of an embarrassment, like an odd aunt we invite to visit only occasionally. It's something God needs to fix.

As the pandemic began, I needed to learn from the people who see transience at the center, from teachers who acknowledge flux as something to be not overcome but accepted. Not fled but embraced. And Buddhism offers a kind of technology—meditation—for just that. Follow your breath. Mind your body. Observe your thoughts. See them for what they are: melting snow, fading notes. Do this not to escape, change, or force a silver lining around the fact of ephemerality. Do it to live that fact—and to savor life nonetheless.

It's what I needed a year ago, and still do, as we journey again through this season of ash and dust.

Shortly before Lent began, I was reading Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, one of his first books translated into English. In it he tells the story of how, when he was a 19-year-old monk, his teacher sent him into a graveyard to meditate on how corpses decompose, a traditional Buddhist meditation, as a way of overcoming his aversion to death and impermanence, his own in particular. Hanh balked, believing he wasn't old enough.

As I read this, I remembered Evagrius, an early desert monk, who offered parallel instruction: "Sit in your cell, concentrate your intellect; remember the day of death, visualize the dying of your body." An early proponent of memento mori, Evagrius recommended this practice to remind us that one day we'll face God's judgment, not to help us ride the waves of temporality. For him, it was good enough to remember that we will die.

Hanh, on the other hand, was instructed in a graphic meditation on bodily disintegration:

Meditate on the decomposition of the body, how the body bloats and turns violet, how it is eaten by worms until only bits of blood and flesh still cling to the bones, meditate up to the point where only white bones remain, which in turn are slowly worn away and turn into dust. Meditate like that, knowing that your own body will undergo the same process.

Isn't this a perspective Christians need? Weren't the women heading to the tomb on Easter, prepared to anoint the body of Jesus, about to do something similar? How could they avoid imagining his eventual return to dust?

Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann begins his book *O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?* by considering the bloody 20th century and remarking that the whole world is a graveyard. If he's right—and after a year in which more than 2 million have died from a pandemic, his observation holds—then why should Christians resist such a graveyard meditation? To perform it might render our Lenten observance more honest and our Easter celebration more authentic.

So, on a recent walk, I wandered into the outdoor columbarium of a church close to our house. I stood in the middle of the oblong structure. Pillows of snow sat atop benches. A few American flags sprung like flowers from small pots. Covers on niches in the walls bore names and dates. The youngest was 19 when he died—the same age as Hanh when he resisted meditating on death.

Surrounded by brick walls, I couldn't feel the wind. Snow began to fall around me. I easily entered into the meditation on death, having just over a year ago been with my mother when she died. One second she was my mother; then, after a failed gasp for air, she'd become the body of my mother. A week later, we lowered an urn containing her remains into the ground. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust*: this truth was all around me. I contemplated the lives and the grief represented by ashes tucked into brick. I couldn't—or wouldn't—conjure graphic images of decomposition, but the sense was sufficiently present.

And then I thought of my son, standing in front of the dining room window: another picture of transience. How is it possible that he was once a child I could lift with one arm? How is it possible that this young man will become an old man, and that one day he will pass from being my son to being the body of my son, remains lowered into the ground or cached in a wall?

He hadn't been meditating on impermanence. He'd been listening to jazz. Charlie Parker or Sonny Rollins. Considering this as I walked home, I had something of a realization. Yes, jazz improvisation dances with impermanence, relishes in the fleeting present, but if we look steadily enough into it, meditate long enough on it, we might see something else as well: a creative freedom behind each note, something—someone—releasing it into the air, each note a springboard for the next

and the next a surprise that keeps the tune going, moving purposefully, unexpectedly forward—impermanence mixed with playful possibility, freedom, and creative purpose.

Might I suggest we Christians take up going into graveyards and meditating on impermanence, taking it as seriously as do our Buddhist friends and neighbors? But also that we add another meditation to our discipline. Call it meditation on jazz. Do it anytime or anywhere—but a cemetery or columbarium isn't a bad place for this one, either. Listen to jazz, meditate on it, gaze into it until you see the jazz of life, the divine creativity at its heart, something of the hopefulness of a tune carrying on with purpose, something of the new and the next springing from the fading of the old. Something, you might say, of the logic of resurrection.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "My Lenten practice is jazz."