

# We Catch Fire: Observations on the Transmission of Knowledge

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*"It is a common mistake to think that education is on the level of ideas. No! It is always a transmission of experience. . . . People are not convinced by reasoning; either they catch fire or do not."—Father Alexander Schmemmann<sup>1</sup>*

There's a tradition in Mahayana Buddhism that the Buddha once gave a sermon without uttering a single word. An expectant assembly had gathered around him. Some of them may have sensed from observing him that something remarkable had happened. Maybe some had heard that there was something about the quality of this man's presence that inclined one to listen to what he had to say by way of explanation. He regarded the crowd with compassion, wondering, I like to think, if it would even be possible to convey anything about what he had come to understand. Then he did something unexpected: he picked up a flower and held it up for them to see. He scanned their faces for hints of understanding until his eyes came to rest on his disciple Mahakashyapa, whose gaze met his with a smile that expressed the joy of recognition. The Buddha recognized that what he'd understood had been conveyed to at least one other person. He smiled in response.

He's said to have spent the rest of his life teaching skillfully with words, some of which were written down on palm leaves but only quite a while af-

ter he died, so we're dependent upon the memory of his disciples and on the faithfulness of his transcribers. The story of the Flower Sermon and Mahakashyapa's smile doesn't come from those most ancient sources. But whether it's an account of a real event or just a skillful fabrication doesn't matter a lot to me. For I see it as a true icon of the phenomenon of the transmission of knowledge. The fact that the transmission is wordless is testimony to the fact that such transmissions, which are always mind-to-mind or heart-to-heart, are about something beyond words, even if words are used to effect them.

Transmission seems to happen this way whether the knowledge involved is profound or relatively insignificant, whether it relates to ordinary things or to ultimate things. There's an experience of revelation in the moment one learns to keep one's balance on a bicycle that can be compared to the moment one awakens to see the nature of reality—and for all sorts of knowledge in between. An early memory of the phenomenon for me comes from a high school English class more than forty years ago. My teacher, in trying

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann, 1973–1983* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2002), 8.

to convey to us what poetry is about, showed us the line from “Ars Poetica” by Archibald MacLeish: “A poem should be equal to: not true.” Something clicked, as they say, and I understood the truth those words pointed to without containing it. Reading poetry became an entirely different experience for me after that. A transmission of knowledge had taken place. It was a transmission of my teacher’s *experience*. I don’t think my memory is fabricating the subtle smile that I remember illuminating Mr. Walther’s face when he saw that I got it.

I find Father Schmemmann’s statement about the phenomenon of knowledge-transmission to be apt, particularly if I avoid imagining the fire he speaks of as a roaring blaze, but think of it instead like a flame that’s passed from one candle to another. For the transmission of knowledge is generally quiet like that, even when it causes a revolution of mind and heart. The previous state and the new one can be as different as darkness is from light, and, since no amount of agitation or vocalizing is adequate for expressing such a revelation, quietness is usually a better response than many words.

Moments of transmission can alter the trajectory of one’s life, yet there’s no guarantee of such realignment, and in fact it seems fairly common for transmission to have no such effect. This kind of stillborn transmission can happen when one imagines the moment of transmission to be in some way an end in itself or as the last word in whatever realm of knowledge it belongs to—as though, say, I’d taken the my English-class revelation to include everything that would ever need to be known about poetry. If the transmission of knowledge doesn’t come with the understanding that there is more yet to be understood, then something

has gone wrong. When the transmission goes wrong in this way, there’s often a sort of nostalgia for the experience, since, though everything rests on it, the moment of the experience can never be gotten back. Another sign of this going-wrong can be resistance to or even rejection of the creative direction the experience should engender—as though such progress would pose a threat to the original transmission.

This temptation to make an idol of the transmission hovers around knowledge of all kinds, but it seems to me nowhere more prevalent than in organized religion. The profundity and preciousness of the knowledge that is transmitted in that realm compounds the problem. For there always seem to be people with no particular interest in or aptitude for catching fire who associate themselves with the spiritual traditions and with the prominent figures within them. The tendency to identify oneself with the “alpha male” (it’s usually a man) is as strong in religion as it is in the corporate world. The inner-circle intimate Judas can be seen as the archetype. It seems to me Christ might as well have amended his famous statement in the Gospel of Matthew (18:20) with, “and wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, it’s a sure thing that one or two of them will have no idea what gathering together in my name is all about.”

The late root teacher of the Zen school in which I practiced for some years, Master Seung Sahn, was one of those people who was able to convey the experience of awakening with great clarity and power. He was Korean, and he never learned English very well. Or if he did, he pretended he didn’t, and he taught mostly using the same five or six exclamatory English phrases in various combinations. To see one of his talks written down would leave

you scratching your head and reasonably wondering how this guy had gathered a school of students around himself. But if you sat in front of him for a bit, it became clear. Something happened simply from being around him. Your head got rearranged in a beneficial way. Some of the stories that lived in your mind were revealed to be just that. Maybe it was just from being in the presence of someone who saw through the stories so clearly. Whatever it was, it wasn't so much about hearing Dae Soen Sunim (as he was called) shout "Only go straight!" "Only don't know!" in annoying response to every question posed to him as it was from just being around him to listen to how he chanted the Heart Sutra or to watch how he drank a cup of tea.

Just a few years after his death, the Kwan Um school he founded seems to be faltering a bit, which is maybe just what happens when a charismatic leader is gone and takes the charisma with him. But I suspect part of the reason for the loss of spirit may be that for too many of Dae Soen Sunim's students, what he had to offer was taken as something on the level of ideas (in spite of the well-known Zen imperative for seeing through ideas, and in spite of the fact that he certainly never employed reason to teach), and, as always seems to happen, only a limited number of people really caught fire from him. I've noticed that catching fire doesn't necessarily imbue one with ability to pass the flame on oneself. Thus, Dae Soen Sunim's faithful and good-hearted students often simply taught by repeating the same few phrases he'd employed, with all their confusing syntax, as though there was magic in the words. There wasn't, and the experience began to be less often transferred than it was in the days when he was there to do it. This was complicated by the phenomenon I not-

ed above: he attracted a lot of people who never really caught fire at all, who were really only looking for an education on the level of ideas anyway. Or who saw in devotion to him a way to associate themselves with whatever it was about Zen they wanted to have as part of their identity. None of this is either good or bad (as I'm sure he would have said). It's just something we human beings do. Being aware of the phenomenon is ultimately more useful than trying to eradicate it.

Father Alexander Schmemmann seems to me in some ways a comparable figure in the world of Orthodox Christianity, which, regardless of the universal truth it bears witness to, operates as a small, specialized cult within American culture and is subject to the difficult-to-avoid superiority complex that comes with small-religious-group identity. Father Alexander was responsible for leading a significant number of people of a certain era into the saving fold of the Orthodox Church, and for waking up a large number of those who'd been born into church to the fact that the faith they'd been brought up in was something potentially profounder than they'd imagined. His legacy is important in several areas: as a pastor, as dean and guiding influence on St. Vladimir's Seminary and several generations of its students, and also for his academic work, particularly in the realm of liturgical theology. But apart from that legacy (though probably inseparable from it), I suspect that he was just one of those rare people with a knack for the kind of transmission of knowledge that he wrote of in the passage I've used for an epigraph above. It may be audacious for someone like me, who never met him in the flesh, to say so, but I've continually gotten the impression that the most important sort of knowledge he transmitted didn't come through his analysis of the his-

tory and meaning of Christian ritual, but rather through the way he lived in the midst of those rituals and outside them. What he conveyed was his own experience of all creation as sacrament, as a means to God. It's an experience that can't be faked.

You can catch fire from his experience simply by reading his little book *For the Life of the World*, as happened to many of us. I can recall the experience of awakening I had myself from that reading: of understanding something about God in relation to the cosmos that I hadn't considered before and having my direction altered by this understanding. Christ's words to Nicodemus, that "you must be born again," began to make sense—though only if I took that particular small yet life-changing rebirth to be one of an endless series of such rebirths. Such an experience is, I think, common among people who read that book. But from the people who knew Father Alexander in the flesh, I get the idea that this truth was conveyed most powerfully of all in his person, in the way he moved through the world, in the way he interacted with the people he encountered, and especially from the way he served in church. I've heard the term "no separation" used to describe the quality of his presence in the liturgical context. I have no doubt that a great deal was conveyed simply through the way he stood at the altar table.

When I entered St. Vladimir's Seminary to study in 1985, less than two years after his death, Father Alexander's spirit there was still quite strong, and he was naturally looked to as a guide. A good number of the faculty had been his students and would likely have identified themselves as his disciples, yet none of them, people of mostly good will, seemed to possess that quality Father Alexander had of transmitting

the freedom that should be inherent in the life in Christ. This was to be expected, as people like him don't grow on trees. But I observed the beginning of a process in which he was beginning to get codified, made into a kind of human "proof text" like the Evangelicals rely on. I remember one professor lamenting Father Alexander's relatively young death, complaining the he didn't leave detailed instructions about "what we were supposed to do next," as though we were incapable of knowing "what to do next" without him—as though he were the sole reliable guide in the whole church, or that what to do next perhaps had to do with something other than growing in love toward God and fellow person. I don't mean to say that such attitude had completely taken over, or that evidence of the genuine transmission of experience Father Alexander had effected wasn't very much apparent. I only mean to say that I saw evidence of some of that general phenomena I described above beginning to happen. Father Alexander's spiritual descendants weren't immune to it, and it should have come as no surprise that some people were moving toward relying on his experience rather than their own, not understanding that in doing so they missed the point, as he'd surely have known. I imagined him rolling his eyes.

Though Father Alexander's legacy remains, I've gotten a sense of disappointment from the few people I know who knew him—from among those who caught fire from him—that the flame didn't get passed on more than it did. It was so wonderful. What happened?

I think most of what I said above about the perils of transmission within religious institutions applies: giving in, to various degrees, to the temptation to make idols of either the transmission



or the transmitter and in doing so to disregard or mistrust one's own experience; clinging to the transmission in a way allows *only* the transmitter to be worthy of knowledge, or that even makes further knowledge into a threat.

A further problem is that it's fairly easy for the freedom and creativity necessary to the transmission of

knowledge to be given lip-service—to allow ourselves to cling to a particular transmission in a way like I've mentioned above and to call it "freedom," when it's really only a pose. It may also be audacious to accuse some of Father Alexander's disciples of this tendency, but it's really, I'd say, just a common human tendency, and their tendency to fall into it is nothing that doesn't happen to all of us. I should also note that the phenomenon is seldom black-and-white—that a person either gets it completely or doesn't. Things fall into very human shades of gray.

The problem of identifying the knowledge too much with the teacher who conveyed it is a tricky one, because gratitude for and faithfulness to the people who cause you to catch fire is necessary and appropriate. But, as those with a gift for transmitting experience know, the transmission isn't about *them*. For that reason, those skilled at such teaching often exhibit a quality of transparency, of being "not there"—in the sense of not getting in the way of the truth they point the way to. The wise teacher knows that identifying the truth with his person or opinions is wrong, but it's easy for students not to get that. Unable to walk the line between gratitude for the teacher and idolization of him, there's a tendency to skew toward idolatry. A skillful teacher won't let himself be made an idol. It's harder for his students to avoid, though.

Which is why I've found Father Alexander Schmemmann's published journals to be a blessing, as they seem to me a gracious antidote to such idolatry. One finds in them deep insights of the sort expressed by his observation above about the transmission of knowledge. One sees statements that seem truly prophetic. The journals are also full of joy he experienced in every person, in the Liturgy, and in all cre-

Daiko Sogen, *Circle (Enso)*, 1835. Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

ation. They seem to me effective in conveying through words that quality of seeing God in all things that people who knew him experienced in person. They show the wisdom expressed in *For the Life of the World* put into practice. But they also show a man of almost astonishing naiveté, unaware of the fact that the worlds he inhabited throughout his life were so small and isolated. One sees a man who never considered the need to examine or question the views that came with the social class in which he was raised. One also sees someone as susceptible as any of us to the allure of power and celebrity and someone who at least to a degree bought into the myth that was being created about him even while he was still alive, and to which he inevitably contributed.

This aspect of the journals is a relief and a blessing to me. It's a wonderful corrective to the temptation that naturally arose to make the truth he conveyed about *him*. One would need to cling very hard to an idolatrous view of Father Alexander not to see the human frailty exhibited in the articulation of his intimate thoughts. His editors were unable to expunge it. I have to wonder if this personal de-idolization was what he intended when he first decided to start setting his reflections down on paper, knowing that they would eventually be published. I like to think that it was. In which case, I thank him sincerely. As I've said, I've noticed that the best teachers exhibit a kind of transparency, a tendency to disappear under the truth they transmit, because those who transmit what's true must understand it's not about *them*. They don't accept devotion, or if they operate in a system where devotion is part of the model (as in the guru-yoga of Tibetan Buddhism), they often

disappear beneath the devotion even as they let it happen. Such transparency of the teacher seems to me to be one of the signs of the real transmission of knowledge, and lack of such transparency the sign of something gone wrong.

Another sign of real transmission is the imperative for further exploration. I don't think stasis can ever be an honest response to catching fire. Transmission can only set one in a direction of further movement. It's inevitably, always, the beginning of some process of "glory to glory," whether the glory has to do with perfecting your béarnaise sauce (the perfection might free you up to add more tarragon at some point in the future) or with seeing Christ everywhere (seeing Christ everywhere might be the beginning of the process of having your *ideas* about Christ exposed and transcended). The process doesn't stop with catching fire. Clinging to the knowledge imparted by the transmission as an end in itself—as something not subject to being transcended—may also be the sign of something gone wrong.

Another sign of real transmission is the imperative to pass the experience on. Keeping it to yourself belies the astonishing miracle of catching fire. Press Christ's analogy about keeping one's light under a bushel a bit and you'll see that such a concealment not only hides the light, but tends to extinguish it as well. There really isn't an alternative to letting the light shine. Sharing the experience can be problematic, as few of us are skilled at it, and figuring out how to do it requires some experience and discernment, but that's not something to be worried about too much. The impulse to share is the important thing. Lack of that desire may also be a sign of something gone wrong.



Bada Shanren, *Hibiscus*, c. 1692. Freer Gallery of Art.

I think it's important to be aware of these ways that the transmission of knowledge can go wrong, but it's equally important to realize the going wrong can't be completely prevented. We're only human. We'll always find ways to extinguish the fire. I think being aware of that tendency is ultimately more beneficial than trying too hard to prevent it. We have to be easy on ourselves to a certain degree when we allow it to happen, and we also have to be easy on our teachers when they, as humans, give in to it. We can take a certain comfort in our human weakness, because we all share it.

But I think it's also possible to have faith in, and be encouraged by, the

fact that when we're ready to catch fire, there's always a way. It seems to me that the history of the world argues in favor of this view. Knowledge won't let itself be kept under a bushel when there's someone ready to get it. There's a much-quoted Buddhist proverb: "When the student is ready, the teacher appears," and I take that saying to be quite true. We catch fire when we're ripe for it. If it's not through direct contact with a living person—if the right teacher isn't physically around when you're ready—it may be through contact with the words of such a person on the pages of a book. Or maybe the right person will simply hold up a flower. It happens that way sometimes. If necessary, the flower by itself will suffice. ☸



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