

Bodhisattva in Berea: John Stephenson and the Tibetans

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I was present when John Stephenson began his love affair with the Tibetan people. His spirit resonated instantly with a group of Tibetan professionals touring America finding ways to preserve their culture in exile. The Tibetans were impressed with Berea. In the President's office that morning there was a sparkle in John's eye when the Dalai Lama's niece asked if Berea College might educate Tibetan students. With a bright, quick smile John simply said yes, surprising all of us. Thus began a remarkable era of cooperation and intimacy between Berea College and the Tibetan Government-in-exile headed by Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama.

Berea's Tibetan Refugee Education Program is unique in American higher education and is straightforward: top Tibetans graduating from high schools in India are offered full scholarships and transportation to and from Berea. Ten Tibetan students have attended Berea College since the program began, and now the first students chosen are graduating, having done very well indeed. Working out the details of this unusual program began with a remarkable trip to Dharamsala, India, seat of the government-in-exile, in March 1990. On this trip John Stephenson was accompanied by the dean of the college, Al Perkins; Dr. Patrick Kelleher (John's physician); and me.

As official guests of the government we spent days visiting schools, talking to educators, and attending meetings. There were many things to consider: How would the selections be made? Would Tibetan students from both Indian and Tibetan schools be eligible? Were current evaluation procedures adequate to determine future academic success? How well did students speak English? Would American culture affect Tibetan youth? Could we expect them to return home and serve their own communities? These and other questions were pondered and resolved in long meetings with government officials. As the head of our delegation, John Stephenson the educator was brilliant, and in his element.

One afternoon we had the opportunity to meet with the Dalai Lama himself. I do not know a great deal about John's relationship with the

Dalai Lama, but I do know that they hit it off rather well from the start. The Dalai Lama engaged John in a number of topics, among which, unexpectedly, was the overspecialization of academic education! The Dalai Lama recognized greatness of spirit immediately in John Stephenson, and John was charmed and quite impressed by His Holiness. These two high-minded men deeply respected each other and had, I think, many things in common.

During the lengthy negotiations, John Stephenson was often head to head with Juchen Namgyal, the powerful leader of the Tibetan cabinet. He was a large man and a former freedom fighter, responsible for the deaths of many Chinese. One night we were treated to an evening of traditional Tibetan dance followed by a huge formal feast. At the high point of the affair, in front of a large crowd, Juchen, who had risked his life helping the sixteen-year-old Dalai Lama escape from Tibet, stood to thank John Stephenson and Berea College. Showing his respect, he placed a special white silk scarf around John's neck. Suddenly John, face beaming, removed his Berea tie and to everyone's astonishment and delight ceremonially placed it around the neck of this great Tibetan figure. Al Perkins and I exchanged a glance of pure appreciation at this act expressing such humility, creativity, and daring. During this trip John Stephenson the leader was positively masterful . . . a man with true gifts, to be sure.

One day we were taken to a small town called Bir, which could only be reached by dirt roads that were impassable during the monsoons. In Bir, Tibetans who have recently escaped from Tibet gather to learn English and adapt to life in India. The situation was grim, and contrasted sharply with the happy faces and beautiful buildings we saw in Dharamsala. New arrivals lived in the ugly metal buildings of an abandoned carpet factory. Faces were dirty and sullen. Amenities were scarce. Few people spoke English. John, however, would not be deterred and was out in front, smiling broadly, making contact, avoiding no one. He radiated warmth as the refugees, many of them older, showed him their bunks, their treasured photographs of the Dalai Lama, and their few books, and spoke English as best they could. Here I saw John Stephenson the healer, reminding me of Mother Teresa making her way among the poor of Calcutta, a smile for each face.

At Bir we saw the stark reality of a people in exile. We talked to children who had walked nine days on foot over the Himalayas in the dead of winter to escape Chinese oppression. We heard about the cultural genocide, murder, and torture. We learned that the tragedy of Tibet was not history, but was still bitter and ongoing. John's eyes shone with a hard, bright light that day in Bir. He was the activist, appalled at the conditions

here, committed with a fierce determination to right the wrongs before him. He told us how profoundly he wanted to help these brave and self-reliant people put their broken lives back together. He felt the same way about his own people, the Appalachian people.

I believe that John was attracted to the Tibetan people for at least three reasons. First, there is the similarity between Tibetan and Appalachian people. Both had an earthy humor under pressure, were curious, friendly, and neighborly, worked hard, and were deeply religious. Second, John was moved by the tragedy of the Tibetan cause and had immense respect for their effort to rebuild a culture in exile. Here too there are similarities with Appalachia. Third, he was impressed by Tibetan religion, which combined an other-worldly mysticism and plain pragmatism that did justice to both. John was a voracious reader of things religious and was struck by similarities between Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity. In particular the Buddhist concept of bodhicitta, or loving kindness for all beings, seemed especially “Christian.” John never lost his deep allegiance to Christianity but he often allowed it to be broadened and enriched by other traditions.

A memory of John Stephenson I will not forget occurred on a visit to a Tibetan orphanage. We were told that these were orphans whose parents still lived in occupied Tibet, parents who had wanted a better life for their children and so at great sacrifice to themselves and great risk to the children sent them over the Himalayas to be raised in among free Tibetans. At first the small children, three or four years old, stared at us. Then suddenly they crowded around John, their tiny faces bright and eager. In moments he had half a dozen orphans hanging on his legs, begging to be held. I watched John take all this in, felt his pain and compassion, watched his eyes moisten as child after child was lifted and held. We did not speak for a long time after this experience. Here I saw John Stephenson the saint, full of sadness and mercy at the unspeakable sufferings of the world.

The Dalai Lama has a little prayer that he says to himself:

For as long as space endures,
And for as long as living beings remain,
Until then may I too abide,
To dispel the misery of the world.

The Buddhists call someone who has vowed the deliverance of the world a bodhisattva. Certainly a bodhisattva came to Berea when the Dalai Lama visited the college in 1994. But a bodhisattva already lived in Berea . . . so few people knew.

daughter of Jairus. When he got there, Jesus said she was only asleep. He said the same thing when his friend Lazarus died. He seems to be saying that death is not any more permanent than sleep is permanent. That if death is the closing of one door, it is the opening of another one. Today we can affirm that faith.

Today, says the Psalmist, is the important day. In the entire history of the universe, let alone in your own history, there has never been another just like it and there will never be another like it again. It is the point to which all your yesterdays have been leading since the hour of your birth. It is the point from which all your tomorrows will proceed until the hour of your death. If you were aware of how precious it is, you could hardly live through it. Unless you are aware of how precious it is, you can hardly be said to be living at all.

This *is* the day, John. The day of new beginnings for you and for all who knew you, the day when “the substance of things hoped for” produces for you “the evidence of things not seen.”

This is the day, John, the day the Lord has made. It is the day when *we* say the race has been run, the day when *faith* says life has only begun, the day of victory for the faithful visionary, your day because it is ultimately God’s day—and you are God’s. We really can rejoice, celebrate, and be glad in it.

Editor’s Note: *The above was spoken at John Stephenson’s funeral.*