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Sitting with Burning Man



The Oracular Ghosts of Lahontan, affiliate, extension, or perhaps perversion of the Limitless Poison Zendo, sat down for zazen every morning at eleven o'clock. By Burning Man time this was, if not quite 4:30 AM, nonetheless not at all late—things were just waking up. We blew a conch and rang the triangle and camp members stumbled into the dome. A diverse group: a few of us followed the Zen way, a few were Vipassana practitioners, a few were beginners or nonaligned meditators of varied histories. On the Esplanade in front of the “Oraculon” (our dome), scores of bicyclists, pedestrians, and the preposterous-looking “art cars” passed back and forth, everyone costumed, pierced, painted, feathered, or, as often as not, simply naked. This was Carnival.

I said a few words about the voices and the noise, the amplified techno and the ubiquitous generators, that these sounds were all Buddhas trying to help our meditation. I lit incense, rang a bell, and we all sat—an outlandish and disheveled little circle lost within a larger circle of nearly thirty thousand artists, crazies, libertines, and curious gawkers. Someone at the adjoining camp (“Camp Water Boy”) opened up with a megaphone.

The theory is all so sensible: these shouts and rantings are trying to help us stay focused, trying to awaken us, but it was hard zazen and the twenty-five minute period seemed more like an hour. But somehow it felt right: our bit of added zaniness was not the least out of place in the greater circle of Black Rock City, wholly devoted to free artistic expression of every imaginable description (along with a generous chunk of hedonism).

On a couple of occasions a passerby would join us, usually just grabbing a cushion on the perimeter of the dome and sitting for a few minutes.

Most just looked in and continued on. I don't think anyone was ill-mannered enough to feel an impulse to quiet down—a rather experienced crowd, you might say.

At night we held open house, usually starting around midnight. The dome was beautiful—wrapped in hundreds of feet of electro-luminescent wire, draped with banners and black lights. The floor was covered with rugs and cushions, and people simply wandered in off of the Playa and the Esplanade in various altered states of consciousness and were free to make themselves at home. That was the essential base of the piece, just an evening at home with the Oracular Ghosts. So to entertain ourselves we played music, sang, chanted, or sometimes just talked, all tweaked a little with a small fortune's worth of amplifiers, electrified instruments, digital effects boxes, distortion pedals, and microphones. This was an art piece—we weren't trying to be private.

One microphone faced out: this was the “Oracular Mic,” and was open to whoever wanted to join in with us. People would come in and ask “what's an oracle?” and we'd say “It's you. What's happening out there?”

Sometimes people would join right in with the music, singing or chanting. Sometimes poets came by who could improvise verses the way we did. Some people brought their pain, or their confusion, maybe just screaming into the mic or mumbling. I'd sample them and loop whatever they had said. The drummers and other musicians would join in and we'd make a song of it, whatever it was. Sometimes Laura would sing nurturing protective harmonies and I would weave a circle with the wind gong. Usually the person would come back and add more to the mix (nothing like having your own words repeating over and over to inspire a coda). Some danced, making that their offering. Others left crystals, candy, or food, or just a quiet and appreciative presence. We'd close down around dawn.

The sister of one member of our camp, responding to her brother's descriptions of Burning Man, wrote back to him indignantly. She worked with social programs for women, and was outraged at this expenditure of time and resources on ephemeral art. What if each of the 29,000 people who went to Burning Man had given five hundred dollars to alleviate the suffering of unemployment, poverty, or mental illness—

then it could be called “Living Man.” It was an appropriate question. What, after all, could be said of this extravagant, hedonistic, privileged indulgence? What about the Buddhist precept of “not squandering dharma assets”? My friend, a psychiatrist who works in prisons and with victims of abuse, wrote back that being at Burning Man would help him do his job. Myself, a preacher’s kid, I thought of Mathew 26: “for ye have the poor always with you.” But if a god were walking the playa, it wasn’t Jesus but Dionysus, and we were performing his potlatch. I thought of Mark Salzman, who, having spent five years on a novel that both his agent and his best friend assured him was a disaster, faced with having to scrap it entirely or to rewrite it from scratch, wondered about the value of his life compared with his friends who were social activists.

The man with the megaphone kept barking, inanely trying to bring the passersby in to his camp to experience “Water Boy.” I kept thinking, “instant asshole, just add megaphone.” A redneck vehicle drove by blaring Elvis. A small dust storm was moving towards us from across the playa. We sat, legs crossed, breathing. At last, mercifully, the incense burned down and I rang the bell and we looked up at each other. We smiled. And laughed.