

Tricycle Talks

Episode #66 with Sarah Ruhl

“Inside the Issue: Sarah Ruhl on Finding Her Original Face”

November 10, 2021



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. In this special series of episodes, I sit down with three contributors to the winter issue of the magazine, out this month. Today, I’m joined by Sarah Ruhl, an award-winning playwright and poet. Sarah and I discuss the relationship between the face and the self, the role of theater in building empathy, and the power of not praying for outcomes.

James Shaheen: I’m here with Sarah Ruhl, award-winning playwright, author, and poet. Hi, Sarah. Thanks for joining us.

Sarah Ruhl: Hi. It’s so nice to be here.

James Shaheen: So you were interviewed by Ronn Smith in the magazine about your new book, *Smile: The Story of a Face*. In 2010, you were diagnosed with Bell’s palsy. Can you tell us a little bit about that condition and how it has affected your life?

Sarah Ruhl: Sure. Bell’s palsy is an idiopathic condition, meaning it’s a little bit veiled in mystery in terms of causes and cures, but it’s essentially the paralysis of the seventh cranial nerve, which in my case was on the left side. What’s tricky is many people just get better automatically after three months. But for a minority, it’s a really slow, slow road to recovery, or you might only partially recover or not at all. It affects the facial muscles on the face, so smiling, and it also affects things like blinking. In my case, it was postpartum. Women can get Bell’s



palsy in the third trimester or postpartum, and I had just had a high-risk pregnancy and delivered twins when I was diagnosed.

James Shaheen: So what inspired you to write about the experience?

Sarah Ruhl: For a long time, I resisted writing about the experience. It felt far too personal and far too resistant to plot. Because I'm mainly a playwright, I tend to think of stories that have a way of creating transformation externally in a certain frame of time, and in my case, the transformations were quite internal, and they happened so incrementally and so slowly. But after a while, I remember talking to my husband, who is a psychiatrist, and he said, “Why aren't you writing about the Bell's palsy? You usually write about things that you think about a lot or that cause you sorrow, and you think about Bell's palsy quite a bit, and it does cause you sorrow, so why not write about it?” And when I started trying to write about it, I found that I had a lot to say.

James Shaheen: You also mentioned that it might be helpful for people to have a book that you didn't have when this happened.

Sarah Ruhl: Yes, I really wanted a book that would provide comfort or solace to people going through something similar, whether it was actually Bell's palsy or another form of paralysis or asymmetry or postpartum depression. I think there are a lot of conditions in our culture that are hard to find language for and therefore that can become quite isolating.

James Shaheen: You know, at one point, you quote Khenpo Pema Wangdak, who said to you, “Art and religion aren't very different. And someone has to do it.” I love that. So how does this inform how you see your own work as a playwright?



Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, I loved when he said that, and he laughed and then we all laughed. I do think theater is a form of secular ritual, and I do think poetry is a form of secular prayer. I see it all on a continuum: art, life, the life of the spirit. I don't really separate the three that distinctly.

James Shaheen: Well, you mentioned prayer, and I wonder if you could read a passage from the book on that topic. We have it in the current issue.

Sarah Ruhl: Sure. Chapter 23: Refuge. Ever since I was 18 and my father was diagnosed with cancer, I felt I could not pray for an outcome. When my father received his diagnosis and already had stage IV cancer, I was pretty sure he would die in the near future. He could barely walk. To pray for his miraculous recovery when I felt I was an agnostic felt impossible. But even as a Catholic, it felt ignoble, blasphemous. I should pray, I thought, for the courage to accept his sickness. I should pray for his peace of mind, but not for an outcome. In the back of my mind, I knew if I prayed for an outcome, a miraculous return of health that did not come, it might tip the balance of my faith, which was already not sturdy. It would turn me from an agnostic to an atheist. No, God does not intervene in bodily affairs, I thought as a teenager.

I refused to think of prayer as gambling. As in: Please God, let me roll a three and not a six. As someone raised Catholic, I thought it was possible to get in trouble just for praying wrong. Flannery O'Connor writes in her prayer journal: “My dear God, it takes no supernatural grace to ask for what one wants and I have asked, but I don't want to overemphasize this angle of my prayers. Help me to ask You, oh Lord, for what is good for me to have, for what I can have and do Your service by having. I have been reading Mr. Kafka and I feel his problem of getting grace.” The hope to obtain grace—something that cannot be gotten but received, unbidden—can it even be asked for?



I recently met the theologian Serene Jones. She wrote in her book *Call It Grace* that her father once said, “God comes to us, even though we can’t reach God. That’s love.” As I talked to Serena over dinner, I noticed something familiar about her face. Sure enough, she told me she’d also had Bell’s palsy. Hers had resolved almost completely.

We talked about her experiences, and she told me one of the things she hated most about not being able to smile was tending to a multiracial congregation and suddenly being transformed into a white woman who was not smiling but instead grimacing. The smile, she said, has the potential to be disarming, particularly between people of different races, cultures, and faiths.

Jones writes that according to Calvin, the purpose of prayer is not a thing to be gotten, healed, or fixed but instead “a simple but constant practice of consciously lifting up our messy, mixed-up, hard-hearted lives before God, and in doing so, knowing that God is present.”

James Shaheen: Thank you so much. That’s really wonderful. I got so much out of that. I was thinking in terms of not praying for outcomes, I remember once very clearly in crisis thinking I can’t pray for an outcome because I’ll lapse into a kind of fantasy world when I most need to be present. I much more need to be present than to be living in a fantasy. So when I heard what you wrote, it augmented that. It made it even more meaningful to me. So thank you.

Sarah Ruhl: That’s really interesting thinking about that kind of prayer as living in the future rather than accepting the present as it is.

James Shaheen: Yeah, exactly. That’s what I got from it. Among other things. You say that artists are essential workers. I love that. You write, “As artists, we do mark passages, create mourning rituals, mark grief in the culture—and that is indispensable.” Can you say something more about writers in the time of crisis? I’m not talking about just COVID. I’m talking about the



environment. I'm talking about our political situation. I think everyone everywhere on all sides of issues feels that we're in a moment of crisis.

Sarah Ruhl: We are, and I think increasingly our culture doesn't know how to think clearly, doesn't know how to be, doesn't know how to apologize, doesn't know how to speak across difference. So I do think writers are charged with trying to think clearly when culture feels completely chaotic. And it's not easy. It was not easy for me to think clearly. For example, during the last presidency, I felt constantly enmeshed in my own reactions to the news. But I also think, for artists, there's a way to speak to the life of the spirit, which is hopefully bigger than the kind of sound-bite, Instagrammable, moment-to-moment living so many of us are asked to do all the time.

James Shaheen: You know, I like serendipities. In this issue of the magazine, we had Reverend Kenji Akahoshi, a Pure Land priest, write a piece called “Finding Spirit in the Ordinary” on how to give thanks for everything, so I thought of your piece. You also mention how simple, mundane things can be a portal to the sublime. How does the mundane figure into your writing and even into your Buddhist practice?

Sarah Ruhl: I think a button can be as interesting as a beautiful mountain. I mean, I think that the small, the attainable, things you can hold in the palm of your hand, my children, all those domestic moments, I treasure looking at all of those moments carefully. For example, there's a part in my book where I tried to describe my kids' temperament by looking at the way each of them vomits. One vomits quite tenderly, one quite dramatically. So I feel like there's a way of kids bringing us back to the present moment and poetry doing the same. We just practice having the same alignment. I remember talking to a neurologist, Julie Roth, at one point, and I was saying how do you deal with patients when there's a neurological diagnosis that's really hard to



bear or can't get better or patients feel like it substantially changes their identity. She said she tells them to make lists of things they're grateful for, but not the kind of cliched received gratitude list that we recite on Thanksgiving like "I'm grateful for my family and friends." Not that we shouldn't be grateful for that, but Julie was saying try to make a list of all the things that if it disappeared by midnight, it would be very awful if you didn't have them in your daily life, like "I'm grateful that my hot water's running, I'm grateful that my child's arm is working," to get very, very specific, that even if you've lost a particular sense or ability, if you really are attending to the particulars of what you do have, sometimes there's so much there.

James Shaheen: In your book, you share a story of a colleague who was disappointed when someone said to her, "I cannot imagine what you're going through," and she offered an alternative: "I can only imagine." Can you say something more about the distinction between "I can't imagine" and "I can only imagine"?

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, this colleague, it was a remarkable insight I thought. She's a grandma, and she lost her granddaughter when the granddaughter was very young. She said she really was grieving, and she felt like people couldn't reach across with empathy because they didn't want to imagine and that in a way them saying, "Oh, my God, I can't imagine what you're going through" was a way to cut off a conversation. She felt like what she craved was people saying, "I can only imagine." I felt like that was such an important distinction for life. It's made me more careful to say "I can only imagine" and not "I can't imagine."

James Shaheen: I like to ask that question because when I was in such a situation, my partner was ill and people kept saying, "I can't imagine," and finally I reached this point and I said, "Well, you better start trying because it's going to happen to you." It wasn't the nicest response, but there was a certain exasperation. So when I read that I thought, empathy, I can only imagine,



or I'll even try to imagine. So how do you see art in relationship to this ability to imagine? I suppose it's empathy.

Sarah Ruhl: I think it is. I think empathy is the magical elixir that flows through art. It's the ability of a book to be put in another set of hands and for that ink on the page, to create life and to create identification. What a miracle that is, really. We're given these bodies. We have to imagine how it feels to be in other bodies, and art and books can sometimes be a portal in. Sometimes it's just conversation, where you get to imagine the other and do the work of that. But I do feel like they've measured that empathy has gone down generationally. I guess it's measurable. And they've measured that people, after they go to see the theater, their empathy neurons increase, which makes sense. But I feel like all of these religious practices—metta meditation, all these practices, and art when it's really doing its most important job—help us refine our empathy.

James Shaheen: I wonder if empathy declines as anxiety and fear ratchet up. They seem to oppose one another. So another question you raise in the book is, “Is the self the face?” I know, when I look in the mirror, I think, there I am. So how has living with Bell's palsy informed how you see the relationship between the self and the face?

Sarah Ruhl: It's true, the self has sort of come to mean the face and sort of always has. And I think what I found excruciating about particularly acute Bell's palsy is when I looked in the mirror, I really didn't see myself or I didn't see the image of what I felt inside. My own mother at times couldn't interpret my affect, and she had had Bell's palsy. So I really felt like a cipher, and it took me 10 years of a kind of spiritual *Pilgrim's Progress* to get to the point where I thought maybe I'm not exactly my face. But still, I'm grateful for the face that I have. And to think about things I can do with my face, how I can refine the muscles to keep pushing to create affinity and



understanding. But it was sort of excruciating when I couldn't smile at my babies, for instance, when the twins were born, and I felt like here they were learning expressions, and their mother couldn't give them a full, joyful smile. I realized later on that they were experiencing my voice all that time, the warmth of my arms and my voice, that all these other senses take over. But I read at some point about this concept of the original face in Buddhism, which is a mysterious concept, and I'm sure someone else could explain it better than I could, but this sort of Zen koan of “Who were you before you were born? What was your original face before your parents even met?” I find it so mysterious and beautiful, this idea that was there a subtle you before and before and before and before, and so then I thought, well, I should spend more time looking for my original face and less time looking for my old face.

James Shaheen: Oh, that's so nice. You write about that in the excerpt that's in the magazine. I wonder if you would mind just reading a few lines about that. How the excerpt ends is really wonderful.

Sarah Ruhl: Sure. “The phrase original face comes from the *Platform Sutra* that asks, “When you're not thinking of anything good and anything bad, at that moment, what is your original face?” The original face is unconditioned, nondualistic, not thinking of good and bad things. It is also something of a paradox, a koan, as in this Zen question: “What was your original face, the face you had before your parents were born?” How can we possibly know what our faces look like before our own parents were born? Which might lead us to the thought: what we think of as the visible self is not the self at all. This kind of thinking is so different from a dualism that divides a face into a good side and a bad side.

The 13th-century Chinese Zen master Mumon wrote of the original face: “It can't be described! It can't be pictured! It can't be sufficiently praised! Stop trying to grasp it with your head! There is nowhere to hide the primal face; even when the world is destroyed, it is

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indestructible.” I had been so occupied looking for my old face, it hadn’t even occurred to me to look for my original face.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much, Sarah Ruhl. It was great having you on. I hope to speak with you again soon, and thank you for your contribution to the winter issue.

Sarah Ruhl: Oh, thank you so much for having me. I love everything that you all do.

James Shaheen: Thank you. You’ve been listening to Sarah Ruhl on *Tricycle Talks*. You can read an excerpt from her book at tricycle.org/magazine. We’d love to hear your thoughts about our podcast. Write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be and Sarah Fleming. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!