

THE STORY OF A HOLLOWED-OUT BONE

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The bone rested in my hands as if it belonged there. My left palm slid over the ball joint, feeling its rough knobs and the sharp edges of the wide opening where sound emerged, and my right hand closed around the smoothed circle of the narrow end, the opening so many lips had touched. My fingertips settled on the hollowed-out shaft that so much warm breath had passed through, creating sound out of emptiness, deliverance from evil.

IN 1986, WHILE VISITING A TIBETAN refugee village outside Kathmandu, I came upon a hollowed-out bone lying in a glass case heaped with ritual objects. It was old, worn smooth, and burnished to a golden caramel. Here and there, delicate carvings rose from the foot-long shaft. I longed to hold it.

"It's a femur," my doctor-husband said. "Strongest bone in the body. See the ball joint? Where it attached to the hip? And how it tapers toward the knee? Probably female."

The shopkeeper nodded. "From a young girl. A virgin." Seeing me recoil, she quickly added, "No killing. If a girl dies, maybe disease, maybe accident, they take her bone and make this trumpet."

"It's like a [*shofar*](#)!" I said to my husband, thinking of the hollowed-out ram's horn curled on our shelf back home, the trumpet blown on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to wake sleeping spirits, call them to face death, and

live anew. Bending closer, I saw the bone lay nestled among other thighbone trumpets. But unlike the bone that captivated me, these were all sheathed in silver or copper at each end, the casings intricately carved and studded with turquoise and coral. On some, a braided silver chain linked the two casings. On others, a silver girdle encased the middle as well. These trumpets were exquisite. Great care had been taken to adorn them. But my bone, brown and humble, shone with a darker beauty.

The shopkeeper reached in the case to show me the bare bone trumpet. Waving her to stop, I escaped to the other end of the shop where I busied myself testing hand drums, spinning prayer wheels, and dragging a wooden mallet around the edge of singing bowls to see if I could make them sing. In one corner I discovered [*malas*](#) whose skull-shaped beads were sculpted from bone; [*khatvangas*](#) or staffs made from a long bone and carved with skulls; and [*kapalas*](#)

or skullcups, bowls crafted from human skulls, lined and bordered with silver and inlaid with coral and turquoise. I didn't need to know how these objects were used to understand that they were tokens of impermanence, bodily reminders to face death so you will know how to live.

I returned to the display case. The shopkeeper removed the bone and laid it in my open palms. It felt strangely heavy, solid, and it grew warm as I held it, the thighbone of a young woman, a woman who had once walked the earth, whose dead body had



Detail of a Tibetan rgyan tshogs (sets of ornaments) banner, showing hollowed-out bones, 18th–19th century.

become a sign signifying how to live, a sign I couldn't comprehend but was holding in my hands, my body touching hers.

Here and there, Buddhist symbols rose out of the bone, each no more than an inch or two across. A conch shell. A dharma wheel. A swastika. They looked like they had grown out of the bone, like leaves budding from a branch. I ran my fingers over the carvings, lingering over each raised symbol—the shell, the wheel, the swastika—as if I were reading Braille, hungrily searching for meaning. As I turned the bone over, the largest carving appeared, a six-pointed star woven into an endless knot. A *magein* David, a star of David! That bone seemed marked for me, and I wanted it.

“What’s this used for?” I asked the woman.
“To drive away evil spirits.”

Now I really wanted that bone-become-trumpet. I desperately needed help countering forces of destruction in my life. Hoping to keep evil spirits at bay, I'd been wearing eighteen Navajo ghost-berry bracelets on my left wrist for several years. I told myself the elasticized bracelets, all different colors, all bought at powwows in Minnesota, were arty, fun, a tangible link to the Native American students and colleagues I worked with at the seminary where I taught. But I was wearing them for protection. I never took them off. And now this bone-become-trumpet appeared, offering a stronger defense. I imagined putting my lips to the narrow end and blowing hard, watching my breath expand and leave the wide end full and powerful, pushing away all that would harm me and creating a space around me in which I felt safe.

I wanted that bone.

Still, I hesitated. I was afraid of that bone. Cradling that young woman's dead body in my hands made me uneasy, and I didn't understand why. Superstition? Repulsion? Fear, certainly.

But of what? My life being extinguished? Used for another's purpose? Hoping to escape its grip on me, I asked, “Is it okay to buy a sacred object like this?”

The shopkeeper nodded.

“I’m not a Buddhist,” I explained. “I’m a Jew. I wouldn’t want anybody to come and buy one of our ritual objects as a souvenir or art object. It seems wrong to make a sacred object part of a money transaction.”

“It’s good,” she said, nodding. “It helps us.”

Since 1959, when China annexed their country and restricted their religious practices, many Tibetans have chosen self-imposed exile over submission to Chinese control. My people, the Jews, were forced into exile also—thousands of years before by the Babylonians and not so long ago by England, France, Spain, Germany, Russia, and other nations. Tibetan Buddhists and Jews were both an ancient, spiritual people struggling to keep their way of life, their people alive, as the Dalai Lama would later publicly acknowledge when he met with a group of Jewish scholars in New York in 1989 to learn, as he said, “the Jewish secret technique” of survival.

Who was I to question what Tibetan or Jewish refugees deemed necessary for their survival? And where was all this pious worrying coming from? In most religions, no thing is sacred in and of itself. Any object marked as sacred by a community can become secular, when necessary, by an act of that same community. How many *menorahs* have, by violence or assimilation or poverty, become candelabras sold in shops? How many amulets sold as jewelry? Tewa pots and Lakota pipes as art objects? Bibles as rare books? The [*Sarajevo Haggadah*](#), carried out of Spain to the Balkans during the expulsion of the Jews, was, after centuries of family [*seders*](#),

sold by its family to keep them alive, and it now lives behind a bombproof glass wall in the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The bone rested in my hands as if it belonged there. My left palm slid over the ball joint, feeling its rough knobs and the sharp edges of the wide opening where sound emerged, and my right hand closed around the smoothed circle of the narrow end, the opening so many lips had touched. My fingertips settled on the hollowed-out shaft that so much warm breath had passed through, creating sound out of emptiness, deliverance from evil. Dead girl or not, I needed that bone.

I bought it for one hundred dollars.

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I SLID THE BONE IN MY DAYPACK FOR THE LONG flight home, along with a copy of Alexandra David-Neel's [*Magic and Mystery in Tibet*](#), hoping to learn more about how to use my strange new companion to drive away evil. When I found her description of the “mystery” of *chöd* (cutting off), “the dreadful mystic banquet,” the ritual in which the thighbone trumpet or *kanglang* is used, I devoured her words and quickly fell rapt to the scene she depicts. The celebrant goes alone to a cemetery “or any wild site whose physical aspect awakens feelings of terror.” He goes to such wild places because it's there that violent or evil forces may be stirred up, either by deeds that took place there or by the concentration of many people's minds on imaginary events at that spot. It's at such spots that one is most likely to encounter demons, spirits of those who habitually harbored hatred and ill will, who delighted in cruelty during their lives, and who are still trapped in their viciousness. Once there, the celebrant blows the *kanglang*,

“calling the hungry demons to the feast he intends to lay before them.” At those words, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and my scalp tingled. The trumpet was to summon demons? Could the shopkeeper have gotten it so wrong?

Hoping I'd misunderstood, I read on. The celebrant imagines that a goddess, a personification of his own will, “springs from the top of his head and stands before him, sword in hand. With one stroke she cuts off [his] head . . . Then, while troops of ghouls crowd round for the feast, the goddess severs his limbs, skins him and rips open his belly. The bowels fall out, the blood flows like a river, and the hideous guests bite here and there, masticate noisily.”

I put the book down. When my breath and heart caught up with this gruesome scene, I resumed reading. While the demons are chewing his flesh and bones, feeding on his blood, the celebrant excites and urges the demons on with liturgic words of unreserved surrender:

For ages . . . I have borrowed from countless living beings . . . all kinds of services to sustain my body, to keep it joyful in comfort and to defend it against death. Today, I pay my debt, offering for destruction this body which I have held so dear.

I give my flesh to the hungry, my blood to the thirsty, my skin to clothe those who are naked, my bones as fuel to those who suffer from cold. I give my happiness to the unhappy ones. I give my breath to bring back the dying to life.

Shame on me if I shrink from giving myself!

My mouth went dry. I glanced at the



overhead bin where the trumpet was safely stowed in my pack. I no longer wanted to touch it or be near it. I had seen in it a powerful ally and protector, promising relief from my suffering. But it had quickly shown its true and terrifying face, an adversary challenging me to offer myself—my flesh, skin, bones, blood, happiness, breath—to relieve the suffering of others.

Without reading how the *kanglang* ritual ends, I closed David-Neel’s book, stuffed it in the seat pocket, and tried to escape into sleep for the rest of the flight.

When we got home, I hid the trumpet in our Judaica cabinet, blocking it with our silver Shabbat candlesticks, *menorahs*, *kiddush* cup,

[havdalah](#) set, and *shofar*. I wanted to make sure no curious person picked it up and blew it, unwittingly unleashing demons in the [mikdash ma’at](#), little sanctuary, that was our home, to wreak God-knows-what destruction.

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THE BONE STAYED SAFELY HIDDEN FOR twelve years—through the birth of our son, the birth of our daughter, a move to rural South Carolina, and another to Charleston, South Carolina. But one morning after the kids had left for school, I took it out of its hiding place, sat down on the living room floor, and prepared to blow it.

image info

My life had become a “wild site” that “awakened feelings of terror,” a place where violent and evil forces had been stirred up, where a person who delighted in cruelty made frequent visits—my mother. As my father slipped into the darkness of Alzheimer’s, my mother descended into a kind of moral Alzheimer’s, forgetting how to act lovingly and justly toward others, taking vengeance on those who didn’t agree with her or do her bidding. She railed at my sister for questioning her care of our father. When my sister refused to be our mother’s *factotum* any longer and to stay quiet about her neglect if she did not get help for our father, our mother’s anger descended into rage. She stalked my sister and her husband, broke into their house, threatened to disinherit her and her family. Trying to mediate, I called her to remind her that she could never be that cruel to her own daughter and grandchildren, that it wasn’t loving or Christian, which she professed to be. “You’re just mad right now,” I said. “You don’t really want to do this.”

“Oh, I do. And I will. I have every right.”

“May God have mercy on your soul,” I spat out before she hung up.

My mother rarely spoke to me after that. When I joined the rest of the family for Christmas that year—all of us except my sister and her family, who chose self-imposed exile over submission—my mother barely tolerated my presence. She accused me and my sister of lying about my father’s dementia—“There’s nothing wrong with him!” she insisted and threatened to bring legal action against us for plotting to kidnap him. She told lies about me to my brothers, undermined me to my children, and locked me out of the room when she called the whole family together to announce the changes to her will.

It was the week after that Christmas that I picked up the thighbone trumpet to call the demons. Though desperate to run from the pain and anger that were choking me, I remembered the lesson my Baha’i self-defense teacher had taught me. When an attacker chokes you from behind, don’t try to pull away. That only strengthens their hold. The way to break free is to raise one arm fast while turning to face them. I had to turn and face the forces of destruction and violence. I had to call them to me. For what I wasn’t sure. I hadn’t opened David-Neel’s book since the flight home from Nepal, and I had only a vague memory of the *chöd* ritual she described. Something to do with going to a place, real or in the mind, where violence or evil had occurred and calling the destructive forces so they could devour you. A kind of sacrifice, I seemed to remember, offering oneself to ravenous demons so they could be satisfied at last, their suffering ended.

I don’t believe in ad hoc syncretism: individuals assembling a pastiche of ritual beliefs and practices from diverse traditions. I don’t believe in cultural appropriation: Christians celebrating Passover *seders* focused on Jesus, whites holding sweat lodges or sundancing or going on vision quests. I don’t believe in performing a ritual one doesn’t understand; it could be dangerous. Dabbling in another’s tradition is like breaking into a Lotus or Lamborghini or Rolls Royce on the street, hotwiring it, and taking it for a joyride, during which you end up crashing the car and being taken to jail; or maybe you’re shot dead in a high-speed chase. Yet here I was. Breaking all my rules. Courting disrespect, desecration, disaster.

Sitting cross-legged, holding the trumpet in my open palms, I began to call the demons

that had been tormenting me, the destructive forces set in motion by my mother, a restless, unhappy soul whose only pleasure seemed to be telling lies, sowing mistrust, stirring up jealousy, inciting violence—an Iago in drag. “Come and consume me,” I called. “Devour me.”

I put the thighbone to my lips and blew. A sound sputtered out, like someone gagging. I took a deep breath and blew harder. This time a clear blast pierced the room. I held the bone with both hands before me, the way a snake charmer holds his flute, and waited. Silence. “Here I am!” I called. “Come and destroy me! Finish me off! Leave nothing behind.”

I waited. Nothing. I think I expected to see my mother appear. Like the goddess of the *chöd* ritual, springing forth from me, sword in hand, ready to cut off my head, sever my limbs, and disembowel me—the skills she had used so effectively on me since I was a child. Or like one of the demons in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a shapeshifting, growling-and-grunting horror of a beast, chained to her habit of hurting others, thrashing about, lashing out in her misery, beside herself with the desire to destroy. Or a hissing, fanged snake. Or a black hole that swallowed all joy.

She didn’t show up. No one did. I could hardly breathe. My spirit wanted to burst the bonds of my body. Something had to happen. Even if I had to take that virgin’s thighbone and splinter it against the light streaming through the window or crack it over my skull. Something had to happen. I couldn’t carry all that pain and horror and righteous indignation and raw anger inside me anymore. It was eating me alive, hollowing me out.

And then I saw the demons. They had been there all along. They weren’t out there, in my mother or the harm she worked in the world. They were in me, living in the cemetery of my

heart, that stony, blood-soaked battleground where so many family dramas of violence had been played out over the years—all the lies, treachery, terror, woundings, beheadings, dishonorable surrenders, amputations, retreats, routs, banishments, exiles. The evil I had to face was not hiding in a dark and dank ether outside me. It was not them I had to defeat. It was not her, my mother, I had to overcome, whether by an indomitable spirit or psychic courage. It was my heart I had to sacrifice, the withering demons that lived in that wild place—my rage, my grief, my suffering, so comfortingly familiar and not altogether unenjoyable. I had shrunk into a pinprick self, a pinprick that cast a shadow that eclipsed the world. Who was I if I remained withered by my own suffering and did not give myself for the suffering of others? It was time to let go of my unhappiness and make room for the world once more, my mother in it. She was an unhappy soul, and I hadn’t made life easier for her. I was the “little devil” that dared to question her, the child who told her No! to her face. Now I wished her peace, an end to her suffering, true satisfaction of her desires so she would no longer hunger for chaos and thirst for power, love so boundless it would heal her shame and self-loathing. “May God have mercy on your soul,” I said out loud to her, this time without sarcasm.

My hands tightened around the bone of that young Tibetan woman, and I rested it over my heart while I let the demons eat my flesh. With each mouthful they ripped from me, my spirit became lighter and lighter, until I was almost nothing, a heap of bones.

Hardly the *chöd* ritual of intentionally and nobly sacrificing oneself to relieve the suffering of all other beings. But stumbling

into compassion for my mother was magic and mystery enough. Twenty years later, in an op-ed on overcoming hatred by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Arthur Brooks, I would read these words of the eighth-century Indian Buddhist master Shantideva in his [*Guide to a Bodhisatva’s Way of Life*](#): “Unruly beings are as unlimited as space. They cannot possibly all be overcome. But if I overcome thoughts of anger alone, this will be equivalent to vanquishing all foes.” Somehow in that plundered ritual, the illusion of my mother as my enemy had been destroyed long enough for my hatred to die.

I kissed the thighbone trumpet and put it back in our Judaica cupboard, this time beside the *shofar*, not behind it. Two trumpets to wake deadened hearts to forgiveness and compassion. Two bodily remains calling out: *Face death and you will know how to live.*



AFTER I SUMMONED THE DEMONS, I BELIEVED my journey with the bone-become-trumpet had ended, that the gift it had given me could not be surpassed—a heart stirred up in compassion for the suffering of others. But the ritual was not complete. I was a heap of bones, but not yet charred. I had not burned away my pride at having moved from terror and grief and anger to love. I had not yet realized I had nothing to give away because I was nothing. My spirit had not yet been hollowed out.

Several years passed. The bone-become-trumpet lived happily on the shelf beside the *shofar*, untouched but now a welcome companion. The darkened cavities at the top of the ball joint, twinned eternal eyes, no longer threatened me as I passed by. Then my father died, followed a year later by my mother. At her

funeral, my sister and I were ushered to a back row. In his eulogy, the minister, who had met with us the day before and greeted us as we entered the chapel, announced that our mother was survived by three sons, each of whom he named. Our names, our lives had been erased. Our three brothers refused to acknowledge us also, declining to shake our hands or speak to us when we approached them, a habit they have practiced faithfully for seventeen years.

Within days of the funeral, we found out our mother had disinherited my sister, me, and our families, having deemed that we, her two daughters, had “predeceased her.” My sister remembered our mother sexually abusing her and suffered a harrowing breakdown. One of our nephews committed suicide. My teenage daughter became defiant and courted danger after danger, making me fear I would lose her too. I wanted to die, to end the suffering and the terror of living in constant fear of being blindsided by fresh traumas. Then my husband of twenty-one years left, without warning, and a year later we were divorced. By that time, 2009, I was living once again in a wild place, a place of violence and anguish, a haunt of demons.

In separating our property, I sorted through all the ritual objects that had graced our family *Shabbats* and holidays and *simchas*. I packed up the ritual objects my husband had brought to our Jewish family, a *kiddush* cup from his grandparents, his grandfather’s *tallit*, an ancient and pearl-inlaid *siddur* or prayer book, and a lace headcovering his grandmother had worn when lighting *Shabbat* candles. I loved these ritual items, had used and cared for them lovingly. But they belonged to him and his family, and they needed to return to their home, so I gave them back, though with an ache in my heart that lasts until this day.

I came at last to the bone. The bone I had feared and loved. The bone that had lived with me for twenty-three years and taught me hard truths. I needed its help again now. Cast out from my family of origin, exiled from the family I had created, I no longer knew how to live. Living seemed a kind of death. I put my lips to the narrow end, desperate to blow it, to blast away all the evil and anguish of the recent years. I knew that would backfire, that I would instead be facing down the demons of my own heart once again, and I wasn't sure the encounter would end well this time.

What then to do with my strange companion? Cradling the young woman's thighbone over my heart, I felt its sorrow and loneliness. It had lived in exile too long: first from its homeland, Tibet, then from its people: the Tibetans and the refugee community in Nepal. None of her people know her, look on her with love and gratitude, delight in her. None of her people pick her up, caress her, comfort her, speak to her in her mother tongue, use her for the purpose for which she had been born and made and set apart as sacred. Without that, her life was a kind of death. When I realized that, I could hardly bear that she should live another day in exile. I needed to return her home.

I called the Sakya Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism in Seattle, explained that I had a very old thighbone trumpet I wanted to return to the community. The man on the phone set up an appointment for me with the resident lama. "He's very close to His Holiness the Dalai Lama," he said.

During the week before our meeting, I kept the bone near me. Though I knew it had to return home, I was loath to give it up. I loved that bone. Before I could let it go, I needed something more from it, like Jacob refusing

to let the angel he was wrestling go without a blessing. But what?

I dug out *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* and located the description of the *chöd* ritual that had terrified me so long ago. I read through the scene of bloody dismemberment and mastication. I read again the exhilarating prayer of offering the celebrant chants while being devoured.

*I give my flesh to the hungry, my blood
to the thirsty, my skin to clothe those
who are naked, my bones as fuel to
those who suffer from cold. I give my
happiness to the unhappy ones. I give
my breath to bring back the dying to
life.*

*Shame on me if I shrink from giving
my self!*

This is where I had stopped reading on the flight home from Nepal, too shaken to read further, not capable of imagining there could be more to the ritual. But the drama was far from over, and this time I read to the end.

Once the dismembered and bloody celebrant is being devoured by the destructive forces, feeding them with her being, she must imagine that she is but a heap of charred bones left behind, a sacrifice for the sake of others. Then comes the final act: she must renounce her sacrifice itself, realize it is an illusion created by her pride, and that she has nothing to renounce, that "[s]he has nothing to give away, because [s]he is nothing." The heap of bones she has been reduced to symbolizes the destruction of her phantom "I." Once she relinquishes the elation she experienced at her sacrifice, having offered up her whole self, spirit as well as body, the sacrifice is complete and the ritual done.

I had not given up my whole self, spirit as well as body. I had not slain my ego. I was proud of sacrificing my need to be right, my hurt, my fury for compassion for my mother. I thought myself noble for not hating her. I was proud of the sacrifices I had made to nurture a marriage over twenty-one years. I assumed he owed me gratitude and faithfulness until death. I was proud of the sacrifices I had made to create a loving and joyful family of my own. I believed the reward for my investment of time and effort and care was a loving and sheltering family that would always be mine, that would never change.

To save my bruised and battered self, I was clinging to illusions.

My sacrifices did not exist because there was no "I." I was nothing. I had nothing to give, nothing to lose but my pinprick self that clung to illusions. I was nothing. I was emptiness. There was my freedom. There was the way to make a joyful sound: to be hollowed out.



AT THE MONASTERY, I WAS USHERED IN TO see the lama immediately. I sat down across from him in his study, the bone on my lap. He was a slight man, no taller or heavier than I, and of indeterminate age. He sat still, waiting for me to speak. Shaking, I told him where I had bought the trumpet, how long I had had it, and that I wanted to return it. Three minutes. No more. Yet in that brief telling I felt my self inflating, stealthily, like a robber entering a house where the owners are sleeping. Look at this noble gesture I am making, it whispered; I am giving up my precious bone, this beautiful possession, for the good of your community.

The lama listened, smiling and nodding. He

knew what I was up to. He knew the thighbone trumpet had never been mine. That it would take me the rest of my life to complete the ritual, to relinquish my sacrifices—if I ever did. That I would have to face death clear-eyed again and again so I would know how to live. And he knew I would see that soon enough.

He did not question me. He did not judge me. He listened, his face opening to me. I don't recall him saying anything.

Suddenly, we both stood up and I handed him the *kanglang*. He accepted it graciously, smiled, and nodded again. I bowed and left him in his study holding the trumpet. As I approached the exit at the far end of a wide corridor, I heard his robes swishing toward the opposite end. I opened the door. Sunlight streamed in. Behind me, the sound of the trumpet rang out. Full. Clear. Joyous. And in the silence that followed, I heard the lama laugh.

His laugh woke me up more than the blast of the trumpet. His lightness stirred my heart, rang in my bones. His delight, like that of a child, tickled me. He was not warning evil spirits away. He was not calling demons to him. He was rejoicing in a friend returning home, ready for whatever work she was called to do.

And then I was out in the sun, the lama's mirth a fragrance around me, my earnestness cracked by his laughter, my ego slain yet again, returning home to an emptied and emptying self, a self hollowed out to make a joyful sound, ready for whatever work I was called to do.

"We seven billion human beings—emotionally, mentally, physically—are the same," His Holiness the Dalai Lama says. "Everyone wants a joyful life."

From time to time I miss my friend. But I remember her in joy. ♦