

Roland Merullo

{ IN HIS WORDS }

Finding the Balance

Like its older cousins, *Breakfast with Buddha* and *Lunch with Buddha*, *Dinner with Buddha* is a road-trip book. A funny road-trip book, I hope. I don't really like the word *spiritual*, but I guess it should also be called a funny road-trip book with spiritual questions at its core.

What I don't like about the word is that it can sound exclusive, as if certain special people are spiritual and the rest of humanity is not. Clearly, some people behave much better than others, and some moments and places are more conducive to contemplation, but I don't like a narrow definition of spirituality. To me, planting a garden is a spiritual act. Playing golf, spending time with my children, lovemaking, building a deck, driving my ninety-one-year-old mother to the store, reading, listening to people sing—all these are spiritual activities, and I believe that every human being, believer or not, evildoer or saint, walks a long and crooked path toward greater understanding.

From the time I was a ten-year-old boy, harassing the nuns with inquiries about God's purpose in allowing people to suffer, I've been fascinated by what might be called "the big questions." In one way or another, all seventeen of my books revolve around those questions. But in the Buddha books, I decided to come at them more directly, through the lens of laughter, and via the device of actual travels along the American road.

The trip in *Dinner with Buddha* takes the reader on a thousand-mile jaunt from North Dakota to Las Vegas—two poles of the American experience. The main characters, Volya Rinpoche, a more-or-less-Buddhist holy man, and Otto Ringling, a middle-of-the-road, middle-aged food lover and former book editor, make the trip on the insistence of Otto's visionary—if sometimes whacky—sister, Cecelia. They travel through Native American

reservations and empty grazing land, the Nebraska sand hills and the Nevada desert. They hike up the Great Sand Dunes and spend time in a small city at ten thousand feet. They skinny-dip on the high plains and eat *posole* in a town where you can still feel the influence of the Spanish settlers. They meet bikers and meditation students, Mormons and Catholics, exercise fanatics and obese kids, nuns and gambling addicts.

Along the route, Otto tries to show Rinpoche various aspects of American life, and Rinpoche—born in Siberia but of a Tibetan holy lineage—imparts his great wisdom in words and gestures, in challenges and friendship.

Researching this novel, my wife and daughters and I made the exact trip that Rinpoche and Otto make in the book, starting in Dickinson, North Dakota, and wandering south. We went where the spirit moved us, often without plans. We sought out adventure and good food. We took careful notes and hundreds of photographs, bought local newspapers, listened to the radio, struck up conversations with strangers all across that great western expanse. Every road and bit of scenery described in the novel, every meal, every road sign and radio program—all of that was, in fact, what we saw, ate, or listened to.

One unforgettable part of the trip was our visit to the Pine Ridge Lakota Sioux reservation in southern South Dakota. In our few hours there we saw great poverty and real dignity, and it made me think about the difference between exterior and interior spiritual traditions. Our own Judeo-Christian tradition is almost wholly exterior, and that mirrors our approach to the world. Because of that approach, we've been able to invent marvelous medicines and send people into space. But, at the same time, we also do tremendous damage to the earth; we marginalize certain people; we have high rates of addiction, violence, and mental illness; and we put very little emphasis on quiet, contemplative time and the interior spiritual search.

Drawing the graph of a spiritual search is similar, in my estimation, to drawing the graph of a life. It does not follow a straight line from ignorance to enlightenment, from birth to death. It is not a steady ascent, and it is not black and white. There are twists and turns, moments of elation and moments of despair, hardship and celebration, stagnation and epiphany. *Dinner with Buddha* follows Otto through a section of his graph, a portion of his

life, a semester of his spiritual education. His kooky sister, loving daughter, and mysteriously gifted niece wind in and out of the tale, and Rinpoche's humor is always with him, even through his moments of doubt and regret.

In all three novels, Rinpoche is trying to guide Otto into the world of interior spirituality. Raised as a devout Catholic, I discovered the world of meditation, at first, through Thomas Merton and then through exposure to the writings and teaching of the great Eastern masters—Buddhist, Hindu, and Sufi. For me, as a modern American, the right path is a balance of Western and Eastern, a Yin-Yang of appropriate exterior activity and a regular meditation practice, a balance of humor and seriousness that I try to find in both my life and my writing.

I don't write these novels with the expectation that they'll provide definitive answers to the big questions we all have about birth and death and greater meaning. I'm not a preacher, in life or on the page. I think of myself as a fellow explorer, a companion on the journey, and I find that writing these stories helps me probe the caverns and crevices of my own belief system, my own assumptions about our purpose here. Humor—that wonderful tool we have for keeping ourselves sane—is an important part of my own spiritual journey. It undercuts the heaviness of the big questions, softens some of the rough roads. On certain days, in certain parts of the writing, I make myself laugh; if I can do that for the reader, then I see it as just more proof that we're all in this together.