

WEAPONS IN THE WAR FOR HUMAN KINDNESS

Why David Budbill Sits On A Mountaintop And Writes Poems

by DIANA SCHMITT

IN JUNE 2003 I made a pilgrimage to meet David Budbill at his home in remote Wolcott, Vermont. He and I passed three hours of a sticky, black-fly-ridden Vermont summer day in the cool of his self-built house. When he and his wife, Lois, moved to Wolcott in 1969, theirs was the third new home to have been built in forty years. Humbly designed and centrally heated by a wood stove, the house could be a metaphor for his writing. "It was hard to come up with a simple floor plan," he says, "but very easy to come up with complicated ones. I think about that a lot when I write. I work hard to make it appear as if the words just dribbled off my lower lip."

Budbill was raised in Cleveland, Ohio, the son of a streetcar driver and a minister's daughter. The first person in his family to go to college, he received a bachelor's degree in philosophy and art history from Muskingum College in Ohio, and a master's in theology from Union Theological Seminary in New York. Raised a Methodist, he turned toward Buddhism and Taoism in his twenties, and those traditions continue to influence his work.

When he first moved to Vermont in 1969, he worked on a Christmas-tree farm. It was seasonal labor, which was great for him as a writer, he says: "Every winter I had a writing grant from the federal government. It was called unemployment." In a poem, Budbill writes about the decision to move to Vermont: "I hung in there as long as I could, endured bedlam / on the ship of state as long as possible, and then / on a summer day in 1969, at the age of twenty-nine, / I jumped overboard and swam all the way up here / to Judevine Mountain to where, as Han Shan said, / I thought I might dwell and gaze in freedom." A longtime advocate for better race relations, Budbill still struggles with the irony that he retreated to what he calls "the whitest place in the nation."

But he never retreated entirely from the world. Budbill's poetry addresses the struggle to balance the inward life and the outward life: the quiet and isolation of his mountain home and the energy and dynamism of the city. Though content to spend



DAVID BUDBILL

most of his days alone, writing, meditating, gardening, and playing Japanese bamboo flute, he is also eager to stay in touch with urban life and national politics.

The war with Iraq, in particular, provoked an urgent response from Budbill. He gave speeches at demonstrations. He wrote antiwar poems in which he often compared the president to an ancient Chinese emperor: "The Emperor, / his bullies and henchmen, / terrorize the world every day, / which is why we need / a little poem of kindness, / a small song of peace, / a brief moment of joy." And he devoted his online magazine, the Judevine Mountain Emailite, to discussions about the war. "One of the great things about the electronic age," he says, "is that you can be engaged politically and still live in a place like this."

Budbill has been a freelance writer for almost thirty-five years. He writes with clarity, humor, and honesty. "I've never been a part of the academy or the literati," he says. He is the author of six books of poems, eight plays, a novel, a collection of short stories, a picture book for children, and the libretto for an opera. He has performed his poetry on two CDs, most recently *Songs for a Suffering World: A Prayer for Peace*, a Protest against War (Boxholder Records), with William Parker on acoustic bass and Hamid Drake on drums. Copper Canyon Press will publish his new book of poems, tentatively titled *While We Still Have Feet*, in 2005. For more information, visit his website: www.davidbudbill.com.

Schmitt: When did you become an activist?

Budbill: I was the leader of my college's delegation to the National Turn toward Peace movement in 1961. There were thousands of us out in front of the White House. John F. Kennedy sent coffee and doughnuts out to us. It was a shrewd political move, of course, but it's impossible to imagine George W. Bush doing such a thing.

The goal of the National Turn toward Peace movement was to convince the president to continue the moratorium

on atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. This was a year before the Cuban Missile Crisis. I remember my sign said: NO NUCLEAR TESTING. END POVERTY, HUNGER, AND DISEASE. I mean, if you're going to get together for a weekend to stop atmospheric nuclear testing, you might as well end poverty, hunger, and disease, too, right?

Schmitt: Did you become more shrewd in your political activism as the years wore on?

Budbill: I doubt it. You certainly get more beat up. You just get hammered over and over again.

One of the reasons I came here to Vermont was because Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in 1968, and then Bobby Kennedy was killed. Bobby was so much more radical and genuine and sincere than his brother John. For him to have been killed was just unbearable. Another dream not deferred, but destroyed. Assassinations do work.

Then the Chicago convention came along, and there was anarchy in the streets, cops beating everybody up, and Mayor Daley running the whole show like a dictator, saying, "Fuck you," to Senator Abraham Ribicoff on network television.

Meanwhile I was teaching at an all-black college, living as a white minority in a black community, and looking at America from that perspective. By then any hope of effecting political change on a nationwide scale seemed impossible. I'd started out in 1961 with naive hopes of ending poverty, hunger, and disease, and in seven short years I was ready to bag it, go away, and find a place where the political problems were at least understandable. I wanted to start again at the bottom, at the grass roots.

Schmitt: Do you think a lot of people your age felt that way?

Budbill: Yes, the back-to-the-land movement was, in part, a response to the chaos in the cities. But there's a bitter irony to this, in that the back-to-the-land movement took so many of us well-intentioned white people away from our black brothers and sisters. We back-to-the-landers took off for the hills and turned our backs on all those urban and racial issues.

I came here to Vermont for a number of reasons, but one of them was because I was so discouraged by race relations in America. So what did I do? I escaped to the whitest state in America. I've always been bothered by that. I wrote an essay about it a few years ago called "Hidin' Out in Honky Heaven."

After thirty years of living here, I've become dependent on the kind of quiet and isolation this place offers. It's an important part of my work. But I miss the ethnic and racial diversity of the city, especially New York City. I love New York. I go back there a lot to see my jazz-musician friends. The lack of racial diversity here has always been a painful thing for me. In order to overcome the segregation of Vermont, I've adopted what I call my "personal affirmative-action program."

I don't care what the law says, this is still a segregated country. And if you want to live an integrated life, as a white person, you have to consciously and deliberately establish relationships with black people. You can't just sit around and hope they will show up on your doorstep.

I don't mean you have to befriend people just because they

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are black. But sometimes, when you meet a black person you might like to get to know better, you have to reach out and work at it. Otherwise you'll miss a friendship that you might have had naturally in a country that was truly integrated. You have to make this artificial effort — to begin with, at least — because our lives are artificially segregated.

This is a risky thing to do. You might get rejected. You *will* get rejected. I can see some black people reading this and saying, "Oh, shit, here come the honkies." If I were black, I might say that. But if you want to live an integrated life and fight racism, you've got to take that risk. The black people who might approach you are taking an enormous risk, too. We need to do this. We don't know each other. We are strangers to each other.

Schmitt: You say you also left the city in hopes of starting over politically at a grass-roots level. Have you?

Budbill: Well, after I was here two years, I was elected to the local school board and eventually became chairman. In the six years I was on the school board, we did a lot for our little school. For example, we got rid of a teacher who hit kids with a ruler and made them sit in their seats until they peed. But it took three or four *years* to remove that teacher, and that's one teacher in one tiny school in one tiny town in one tiny state. So much for ending poverty, hunger, and disease in a weekend.

I withdrew from town government years ago. Now I spend all my political energy on things like the *Judevine Mountain Emailite* and writing poems. Are those grass-roots efforts? I don't know.

My reasons for choosing the country over the city actually go back farther than the 1960s. From a young age I had a dream of moving to the country. It was my father's dream first. He was a street kid, a slum kid, who'd never gone past the seventh grade. For him, moving to the country to raise chickens was about freedom. I acted out his dream, which by then had become my own dream, too.

Schmitt: Before you came here, did you idealize the hermit's life?

Budbill: I probably did, but I don't anymore, because I know



too much about it. It's like a spouse. How can you idealize a spouse? They become too real to be an ideal. I appreciate the hermit's life much more now than I did when I knew nothing about it.

But the word *hermit* doesn't really apply to me. I'm too busy and too ambitious to be a real hermit. I think there are genuine hermits out there, but you never hear about them, because they're not busy. They're hiding. Yet their contribution through prayer and meditation is immeasurable.

Schmitt: How can someone living in isolation make a contribution to society?

Budbill: Not everybody should be out on the streets protesting. I have a Buddhist friend who lives near Charlottesville, Virginia. He says, "What I do for peace and justice is split wood." I respect that. To do no harm is a great service to humanity. No one who's seriously involved with religious meditation can dismiss the contribution of the recluse. Catholic monk Thomas Merton talks about the role of the recluse in the introduction to his book *The Wisdom of the Desert*. In fact, Merton is the perfect example of an "engaged recluse."

Romanian philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade said that the recluse's life of prayer actually "defends his or her society from darkness." That's a tough concept for a pragmatic, hurry-up American to get his or her mind around, but it used to be a commonplace idea. Many ancient societies — being less pragmatic and more mystical — understood that monks and nuns and hermits have visions that will benefit the whole society. In order to think this way, you've got to believe in what the old Christians called the Mystical Body of Christ, and what other religions call the Universal Soul, the Tao, or the One. In other words, the idea that we are all one unified being.

Schmitt: You say that you want someone who hasn't read a poem since ninth grade to be able to pick up one of your books and read it cover to cover.

Budbill: I work hard at that. I want to be clear. I want to be accessible. This comes out of my working-class background.

I feel odd about being an artist. I hate pretense. I want to make art that the average person can understand, find meaningful, and enjoy. Since neither of my parents graduated from high school, maybe I'm writing for them.

Schmitt: There's a lot of class consciousness in your writing.

Budbill: There's a lot of it in America. For a so-called classless society, America is full of class consciousness. I think, in many ways, the biggest issue in this country is class.

Schmitt: Why is that?

Budbill: Because of the growing disparity between the rich and the poor. It's not just the current administration — although President Bush and his advisors are certainly aggravating the situation. This has been going on since the Reagan administration and the remodeling of the tax structure, which skewed the distribution of wealth. We are now a country with an overclass and an underclass, although the myth of upward mobility and the middle class still persists. My play *Judevine* is about poor, invisible, backwoods people, the underclass, the forgotten ones.

I grew up hypersensitive to class issues. All my relatives were domestics or union workers. My father's mother worked as John D. Rockefeller's washerwoman when she was a teenager. As a bedridden, ninety-year-old woman, my grandmother would talk about how Rockefeller came out on the streets to pass out nickels to kids, and her face would flush with rage: this arrogant rich man scattering a few crumbs to the peasants while fighting against workers' rights to unionize. A lifetime later, she was still infuriated just thinking about it.

Schmitt: Is there a Vermont class structure based on being "native"?

Budbill: That was a big issue for all the back-to-the-landers. When Nadine, my daughter, was born, I remember asking a neighbor, "Well, she's a native, right?" And he said, "If your cat has kittens in the oven, you don't call 'em biscuits, do you?" In Maine there was an obituary for a woman who'd died at the age of ninety-nine: "Although not a native, Sally lived in Bath, Maine, for the last ninety-eight years."

A wave of gentrification has been rolling northward for more than thirty years here in Vermont. It's different from the back-to-the-landers, who came here to start over and live like the locals. This new wave is swooping in and saying, "How come you don't have this store, or that convenience?" It's more of an occupation, a takeover. The natives feel disenfranchised, ignored, and run over by the new rich set. They feel unseen. They feel they are being treated like scum. And in a lot of cases, they're right.

A journalist friend of mine says these rich newcomers treat Vermont as if it were a "theme park for rural living." In too many places, it has become just that. Although I have to add that it was us back-to-the-landers who started all this more than thirty years ago. Another bitter irony.

Schmitt: How did you develop your interest in ancient Chinese poetry? It seems to be a strong influence on your work.

Budbill: Oh, yes, it's enormous. I never studied literature in college. I learned about the literature of Asia because of my

interest in Asian religions. I discovered Zen Buddhism and Taoism around 1962, while I was living in New York. Reporters often identify me as a Buddhist, but I don't call myself one. I've never rejected Christianity. I have Buddhist friends who so dislike their Christian upbringing that I wonder if they became Buddhists because they love Buddhism or because they hate Christianity.

I've studied Christian theology, and I know more than most people about the dark side of Christianity. In seminary I retitled my copy of our church-history book *The Crimes against Humanity in the Name of Jesus Christ*. When I moved to New York I used to say that I gave up Christianity for the Sunday *New York Times*, or, more likely, for Saint Mattress of the Springs. But I don't hate Christianity. It's where I come from. Maybe I'm a Christian-Buddhist-Taoist. I can't separate them out. What's the point?

The one thing I do reject in all its guises is the organized church. I've learned enough about Buddhism and Taoism to know that their organized churches are just as rigid and hide-bound and doctrinaire as any Christian church. Why jump out of the frying pan into the fire?

Even Zen Buddhism, which claims it's a doctrine-less doctrine, becomes rigid: you should sit this way and walk that way and pay attention to this teacher. That's what I reject: that stiffness and inflexibility.

Schmitt: What have you embraced in its place?

Budbill: In my day-to-day life, I play my shakuhachi — a Japanese bamboo flute. I play long tones, which is a form of meditation in itself. And writing poetry is a form of meditation, too: all that waiting and listening for the voices to call to me. What I've put in the place of religion is the way I live my life now.

I want to add, though, that I have a soft spot in my heart for all those cloistered monks and nuns living in monasteries, no matter what their religion. Their prayer, devotion, and obedience are important to the world. I admire people who can live a monastic life. I, personally, couldn't do it.

Schmitt: What does a day in your life look like?

Budbill: Well, it depends on the season. In the winter, when there's no wood to cut, split, and stack, no garden to tend, no vegetables to put up in the freezer, no mowing to do, none of those outdoor things (except for snow shoveling), I usually get to work about seven in my room, and I'm there until noon. Maybe I start out practicing my flute. Then I write prose or poetry and answer mail (now e-mail). Then I play my flute some more. Toward dark, I do some yoga, and I sit for a while, as long as a stick of incense lasts. And in the evening I play music, or read, or work some more. I do the same thing the next day. It's heaven.

Schmitt: Why do you make so many comparisons between ancient Chinese history and our current politics?

Budbill: They're easy to make. There are so many parallels between then and now. There was a boy emperor in the second or third century in China who was put on the throne by the imperial court to do its bidding, just as Supreme Court Justice Rehnquist and his cronies stole the election for George

W. Bush and propped him up on the throne. And the boy emperor, too, stomped around the world terrorizing everybody and stealing money from the poor and giving it to the rich. It's all right there in Chinese history. That culture is totally foreign to ours, and yet like ours in so many ways. That's what's so interesting to me.

It's a terrible commentary on how little things change. Sometimes I think, *Why keep fighting if it's never going to change?*

Schmitt: But you are fighting. What are you fighting for?

Budbill: I'm fighting for what Superman was fighting for: truth, justice, and the American way! [Laughs.] We have to take back America and reassert *real* American values. It's not right that a small group of white men should have all the money and power. It *is* right to have public libraries and public schools and public transportation and public parks and Social Security. Those are worthwhile services, and the current administration wants to do away with all of them. It wants to privatize all public services, which eliminates any sense of community, of shared effort. In their eyes, there's me, and there's you. But there is never *us*.

I'm also fighting all these political battles so that I can write a poem about growing old, or making love, or growing green beans. The Taoists believe there is no future life, no reincarnation, and that's one of the things that attracted me to their poetry: the melancholy beauty of it. They're always sad about how fleeting each moment is, how *now* is always becoming *then*. The awareness of life's passing makes the now sweeter and more important. Which is what I try to do in my little poems about nature and everyday life: create awareness.

Schmitt: Did the *Judevine Mountain Emailite* come about because of the antiwar movement?

Budbill: No, the *Emailite* started with the impeachment hearings for Bill Clinton. It was just a little newsletter back then, twenty-five people passing notes. When the impeachment process was over, I was going to quit, but people said, "Why don't you just keep going?" Now I've got more than a thousand subscribers on the list.

Journalism is in my blood. When I was in college, a friend and I had a little underground political and literary magazine. And I was a newspaper reporter for a while. So it was natural for me to start a magazine, or in this case a cyberzine.

Schmitt: You devoted an entire issue of the *Judevine Mountain Emailite* to the "new American fascism."

Budbill: I began work on that issue by going to the dictionary for the definition of *fascism*. Fascism is a political movement that exalts nation — and often race — over the rights of the individual and does so in an autocratic and dictatorial way.

Fascism also has to have an enemy to hate. For the Nazis, it was the Jews, the Gypsies, the queers. With an enemy to hate, the government then has an excuse to limit individual freedom in order to "protect" the people from the enemy — or the "evildoers," as George W. Bush calls them.

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