

Big Mind at Little Joe's

A Conversation with Philip Whalen



Brian Howlett

Illustrations & Photos by Lyn Bouguereau

On September third Lyn Bouguereau and I drove to San Francisco armed with a tape recorder, sketch book, and camera to take Philip out to lunch. We pulled onto Hartford Street off Seventeenth, and standing on the sidewalk was the abbot of Hartford Street Zen center, Zenshin Whalen Roshi. Cane in hand, his perfectly round shaved head was covered by a familiar cloth cap. It was a hot late-summer day, the tourists were out, and we were a few minutes late. "Is Little Joe's on Broadway all right?" "Sure."

Brian Howlett: Did you see a lot of students this morning?

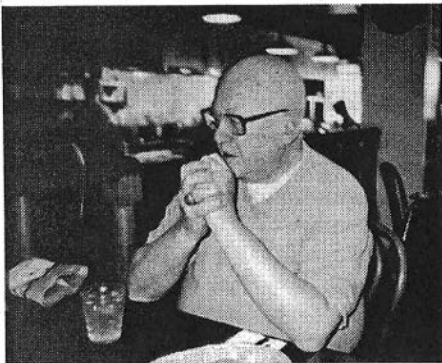
Philip Whalen: Yes, there were all sorts of people there. It's my lecture day. Anybody can come that wants to. Sometimes there's only one or two people. Today the place was almost full. There's no explanation for it except that Mercury had run retrograde or something like that.

BH: (sound of brakes screeching) My brakes sound great!

PW: Do you have an anchor that you can throw out?

BH: Not a lot of hills between here and there.

PW: No.



Lyn Bouguereau: We'll just coast.

PW: Well, there is a hill, actually, but the tunnel goes through it.

BH: Well, that shouldn't impact my brakes, then, when we go through it.

PW: I hope not.

LB: Here's a parking spot.

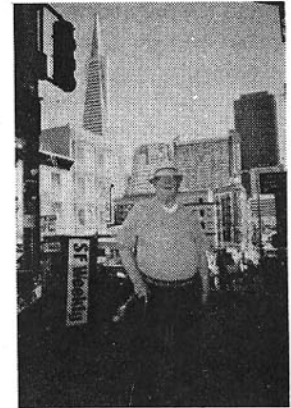
PW: Whoever thought there'd be city street parking?

BH: Don't tell anybody.

PW: I won't.

(Sounds of a baby crying)

PW: A baby is finding out the world is unjust.



(Seated at the restaurant)

PW: Please tell me about the lunch menu. Tell me about everything. I'm very interested in the squid, calamari. I would like to have calamari.

BH: When was the first time you were here? Do you remember?

PW: The first time I was here it wasn't Little Joe's. It was called Mike's Pool Hall. Right in this very space. There was a wall back there and the counter was only about half as long as it is now, a little less than half. They had simple things like minestrone and sandwiches. We used to come here after the bars were closed and have combination Italian sandwiches...And then later on, somehow or another it shut, they moved out, and then all of sudden two years later it opened in the shape of a belly dancing establishment...This squid is delicious. I got into eating squids and octopuses in Japan. Although the first time I ate squid, Gary (Snyder) cooked it because he found out it was something like two bits a pound.

BH: Here in the States or in Japan?

PW: Right here in San Francisco. It was delicious. He just cooked it simply in oil with raw ginger, and scallions. Very simple, very tasty.

BH: Were you ever much of a cook?

PW: Oh, I'd dabble at it.

BH: Are you officially in retirement mode now?

PW: Yes, as of the fifteenth of August.

LB: What does that mean to you?

PW: A rest, I hope.

BH: So the rumor that's been going around is that you used to keep a candy bar under your zafu at Tassajara during sesshin. Is that true? The story was that somebody had burned out, that they couldn't take it any more, and that you handed them a Zagnut bar from underneath your zafu.

PW: It was actually, I remember... little pieces of butterscotch, Callard and Bowser, English butterscotch. I had it in my sleeve. They were about this big. They come in a box and each piece is wrapped in silver paper. They're very good.



BH: You didn't spend any time at Green Gulch did you?

PW: Well, I went out there for sesshin from time to time. I participated in the grand funeral ceremony for Alan Watts. We buried his ashes up there at Green Gulch.

BH: That was a big deal, wasn't it? A lot of people attended.

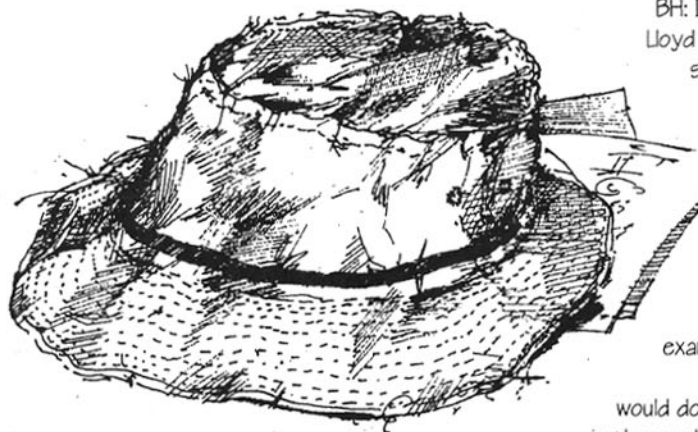
PW: Very large. A number of priests participated. It was quite complicated because that's what Alan wanted, the most grandest kind of ceremony possible. And it certainly was.

BH: Did you know him well?

PW: Yes. I met him back in the fifties with Gary, who at that time was going to hear him lecture at the old Academy for Asian Studies, of which Alan became the president or rector. Subsequently, there were various social occasions where I began meeting him. Then there were a couple of times that he invited Gary and me out to dinner at his house in Mill Valley.

BH: Were you kind of an old geezer at Reed College at that time? Were there a lot of younger people there, or several people on the G.I. Bill?

PW: Oh, there was a fair number on the G.I. Bill. Yes. I suppose we were all thought of as old geezers, I don't know. It was very funny, you know, the ones who were just out of high school and were Freshmen, were marvelously bored and world weary and jaded at 17 and 18 years old.



BH: I was really impressed to read over those interviews again about Lloyd Reynolds. I never had a chance personally to meet him, but he seemed like a really terrific guy.

PW: Yes. Very energetic. Very enthusiastic about printing and calligraphy and about Eighteenth century literature, but also about contemporary poetry, which in his case, was largely William Carlos Williams.

BH: Did he have any knowledge or was he influenced by Buddhist ideas?

PW: He got some from me, at some point.

BH: Because even reading his calligraphy book, a lot of the examples seem like haiku poems.

PW: He got into writing, what he called, weather grams. He would do them up very handsomely and hang them on trees and shrubs in the garden.

BH: I was surprised, too, to read that your interest in Buddhism was so early. That you were reading the Vedas when you were 18, or something like that. Wasn't that pretty unusual?

PW: Sure. I guess. Considering that I was in a very remote part of a lost province in North America.

BH: When were you first exposed to Zen Buddhism?

PW: 1953, I think.

PW: The thing is that Gary had found R. H. Blyth's volume of haiku translations. Most of the first volume is called Japanese Culture and it all deals with Japanese art and Zen... That and Alan Watts' book *What is Zen?* And then of course, meeting Watts... he wrote that funny pamphlet called *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen*. We are referred to in a footnote in the pamphlet.

BH: Did people actually use those terms in those days?

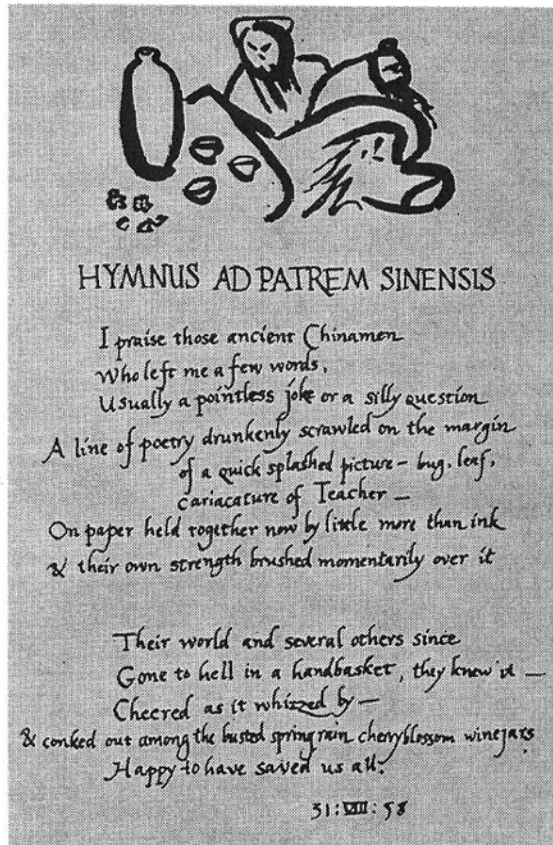
PW: No, he invented that. Between Lawrence and Alan they may have cooked up that title. I don't know how they got it. You'll have to ask Larry (Ferlinghetti).

BH: That was a term beat and square?

PW: Beat and square were terms that had been knocking around since the late forties, but beat, of course, is owed to Mr. Kerouac and the last word, just Zen, was Alan's idea that Zen is universal or it doesn't just exist in books...It's something living...But his idea of square as the antithesis of beat means monastic, traditional. And then there was the real thing that anybody could try to experience. You don't need to do zazen, you don't have to have a teacher, you don't have to sit cross-legged, you don't have to do anything.

BH: That's right. He was kind of anti-meditation practice.

PW: Yeah. He tried when he was younger and had some sort of experience but on the advice of Christmas Humphrys did not pursue it.



Philip Whalen

We talked about his first meeting with Suzuki Roshi.

PW: I was here in town in 1968. Got back from Japan late in '67. Gary and Masa had come back from Kyoto...to start living in the states. Gary phoned one day and said, "Why don't you come over and have breakfast with us on Sunday, and then afterwards we can go hear Suzuki Roshi's lecture." I said, "Okay." I had only seen him once, or met him once very formally ... He did this lecture on this sun-faced Buddha, moon-faced Buddha ... and I thought, "My goodness, where have I been all this time." I knew he was there and had been there for some time, but I thought, "Oh, that's that funny Soto Zen business"...And so I was not paying any attention, and I thought, "What a dumb bunny I turned out to be not to be hanging out in Zen Center over there on Bush Street." Of course, then I didn't do anything more about it until I went back to Japan...in 1969 at which time I started sitting by myself every morning, no matter what, rain or shine.

PW: When I came back here (to Bolinas) in 1971 and did some poetry conferences in the summer. When December came around I thought, "Well, it's time for a sesshin. So I should start sitting every day again." Then, the next month Dick Baker and his wife came up to see various friends...They stopped by to talk to me, and he said, "What are you doing now?" I said, "Well, I'm thinking about moving back to the City (SF) because it's too exciting around here. There's too many parties and too much going on. I would rather be able to read and write and not go to parties all the time." And he said, "Well, why don't you come to the Zen Center and look at it and see if

you could live there."...I showed up the first part of February to see the place and he showed me around. They all looked very quiet and comfortable and pleasant. So I said, "When can I move in?" And he said, "Oh, any time." And I said, "How about next week." I had not the least idea of what I was getting into. Oh, dear.

BH: We should start getting you back, I think.
Is there anything else you'd like to do or see?

PW: No, I thought we'd pack it in.

Filled with stories, pasta, and garlic we drove back to Hartford street. Lyn and Philip in conversation about their favorite episodes and characters from the "X-Files". Driving home I was grateful that Philip was willing to share his big mind with an open heart.



Thanks to Maureen Sweeney for transcribing a less than perfect tape, and to John Tarrant Roshi nine bows.
Permission to reprint Hymnus Ad Patrem Sinensis courtesy of Philip Whalen.