

Who's afraid of Simone Weil?

By Manu Bazzano

A personal appreciation of Simone Weil, mystic, activist, and pure phenomenologist.



1

I have been afraid of Simone Weil for over forty years without knowing it. I had only read a quote or two during my philosophy degree in the late 1970s and decided to stay well clear. For a self-styled twenty-two year old student of Nietzsche, I decided she was the very antithesis, and that I wouldn't have anything to do with her. My perception wasn't entirely wrong. And yet. She'd fulminate me for saying this, but although coming from a radically different perspective, her adherence to Life is as uncompromising as Nietzsche's, and doesn't allow for the usual mediations, including the mediation of 'meaning' offered by canonical existential thought. Her meeting with Beauvoir is instructive in this regard.

They were both students at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*. On completion of the certificate in general philosophy, Weil scored the highest mark, and second place went to Beauvoir. In her *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, she recounted how intrigued she was by Weil's great reputation and her outlandish outfits. She approached her and in the course of the conversation, Weil said that what mattered most was the revolution and the feeding of the starving people. Beauvoir retorted that the main thing was to help people find meaning in their existence. Weil glared at her and said: 'It's clear you've never gone hungry'. Their relations ended right there. Her stance reminds me of Levinas who many years later, in response to Buber's sentimental notion of 'I-Thou', said that a starving stomach has no ears and that feeding the hungry is a far worthier enterprise than offering a rarefied dialogical frame.

Simone Weil was simply one of the brightest and most original minds of twentieth century France and lived several lives within her brief existence. She was gone at thirty-four in 1943 in a nursing home in Ashford, Kent. The cause of her death was voluntary starvation. She refused to eat more than the rations given to her compatriots under German occupation. A philosopher who meant every word she wrote, a mystic, a socialist and activist, a deeply unorthodox Christian and a Platonist. What made my rapprochement possible after my initial antagonism?

2

Sarita and I have become A&E veterans over the last four and a half years. We've been there at all times of day and night – very long hours before either me being admitted to hospital or discharged with meds and advice. I fondly remember the hazy cold air of an early autumn morning before dawn, the two of us walking back home in the empty street. The romance of it, the strange cheerfulness of the shipwrecked.

On one particular occasion, my body was shaken for a long time by convulsions and plagued by excruciating pain for what seemed like an eternity. Finally pacified by drugs, I looked around from my stretcher bed. A crowded corridor. A drunken man watched by police routinely falling into slumber and on waking up shouting threatening insults to everybody. An elderly woman talking loudly to herself. A man behind me crying no stop. His voice sounded like a boy's voice, but when I looked I saw a man in his fifties. Two fully mask medics looking like astronauts brought in someone probably affected by Ebola. Medics darting around. I

remember thinking this is a circle of hell. Then out of the blue I recalled the last verse of Hakuin's *Song of Zazen* that states: *This very body is the Buddha, this very Earth is the Lotus Paradise*. I held my beloved's hands and cried the tears of the strangest joy I have ever known. *This* body of ours – frail, subjected to illness, old age and death, is the Buddha. And this very Earth, including this particular circle of hell, is nothing but the Lotus Paradise. I wish I could explain this experience, but I simply can't. Maybe it was quite simply a genuine opening of the heart.

In April 2022 I was diagnosed with cancer. Over the months and years the illness steadily progressed, moving into different parts of the body. All treatments in the book have been implemented, often with gruelling side-effects. Chemo is the harshest weapon in the arsenal. *To heal you they must kill you. The sword of Damocles is above your head* – as a verse in a Lou Reed's song attests. Further complications made things worse. In October 2025, a massive kidney infection made A&E doctors reach for the survival button: an antibiotic so powerful it permanently damaged my audio-vestibular system, upsetting balance and the ability to walk without considerable exertion. My response was stirred by Nietzsche's notion of *Great Health* mentioned in aphorism 382 of *Gay Science*, encouraging us to a creative response to illness, not in order to side-step it but as a way of incorporating pain and suffering into a life-affirming stance. The result was a short Butoh performance videoed by Sarita next to my hospital bed before being discharged. I titled it *CRP 200*, the term for the degree of inflammation in my body.

The cancer is incurable. It can only be slowed down. During the last few months, I have experienced harrowing ongoing pain, sickness, inability to read and think. I learned to pay attention to the subtlest fluctuations in energy levels and degrees of pain and how to make the most of moments of relative ease. As a surprising side effect I began to experience unconditional openness to the love and kindness of many – friends old and new, Zen students, colleagues, neighbours. My heart opening, filled with unbounded joy and gratitude for the magnificence of life and the enigma of life-and-death. It has deepened the love between myself and my life-long companion Sarita. It has brought me to drop almost overnight a few cherished delusions to which, I now realize, I had clung for dear life, creating suffering for myself and others.

At Easter this year I came across a tribute to Weil by the great Elizabeth Hardwick: “Those who live with a breathtaking intensity – she writes – and who die young have a peculiar hold upon the world’s imagination”. She describes her life as “rare and noble”.

I got hold right away of two phenomenal books, *Grace and Gravity* and *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*, the latter one of the best essays ever written, in the sparkling translation by Mary McCarthy. To say that I was hooked, captivated, made prisoner, taken hostage by Simone Weil’s powerful spirit is to bypass the devastation, urgency, and the sheer force that drowned me during those Spring days spent reading these two texts. I imbibed as much as I was able to, for her medicine is strong and must be taken in small doses. What appealed to me right away was that the spiritual discipline she underwent was not geared towards our fashionable narcissism for thinness, the hope of longevity or some packaged ‘Eastern wisdom’ that would add to our clout, but out of true generosity to give herself to others and the world and the unflinching dedication to be true to herself.

I had attended a talk by Marion Steel at the Existential Conference in 2019 but at the time somehow managed to resist it, despite the talk being both philosophically astute and deeply moving. I must have been still afraid. I had yet to know the depths of pain that make some of us readier to open up to other horizons.

Simone Weil was fiercely, compassionately active in the world. Endearingly clumsy fighter with a rifle on her shoulder in the Spanish civil war against the fascists. Voluntary worker in factories where people toiled under the harshest conditions so as to appreciate firsthand the real condition of the poor, and many more such examples. To label her simply as a ‘writer’ sounds very tame indeed. She argued fiercely with and against Trotsky, when she invited him and his revolutionary friends to her parents’ home in Paris. In her own way she was a deeply spiritual Christian (as uncompromising as Kierkegaard) who never tired of castigating the Church for its power and pomp. Several Popes and leading Catholics revered her writings.

I felt very sympathetic to many of her choices. I had joined the ranks of the revolutionary left in Southern Italy, working alongside people from underprivileged backgrounds. After finishing my degree, despite the top marks and a possibility of a career in academia, I started a voluntary descent, my own pilgrimage of poverty, what my Greek colleagues call *katabasis*. Travelling in India, Europe, Southern California and the UK, working for years as dishwasher, cleaner, short-order cook, handyman, as labourer in an industry laundry plant among Jamaican women, as a cook mixing powder, milk and water in giant pots in a psychiatric

hospital, as a pasta maker put on display on a shop window. Not knowing at times where the next meal would come from, sleeping in the corridor of some acquaintance. It was a voluntary exile – from hometown, a derailed marriage, the failed hope of a socialist revolution in Italy, from the quiet desperation of the poor Italian south. It was forfeiting for ten years the aspiration my father had for me, refusing his desire to elevate me from our lower-middle class background. It was difficult and adventurous. It was great education and in my spare hours I would continue to study and write. My life would have been infinitely poorer had I followed the straight and narrow path of a middle class existence.

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A key idea in Weil's writings is *decreation*, one that was taken up later by Canadian poet and classicist Anne Carson. I found this powerful notion and active practice (for it is well beyond an abstract idea) uncannily close to the spirit of Zen. Decreation means undoing the self, stripping away ego and identity, those warily construed protective boundaries that fail to protect us and end up imprisoning us. In the lineage of radical existential Zen I teach, we are tersely urged to 'die on the cushion' – to disappear in meditation so that the ten thousand phenomena can come forth in all their fearsome splendour. Weil's language is Christian and Platonist but conveys something similar and as urgent, as counterintuitive and countertraditional. God, she says, absented himself from the world: "He emptied himself of his divinity; we should empty ourselves of the false divinity with which we were born".

By emptying ourselves we allow God to see, touch, and experience the world. The self always gets in the way – of itself, of God, of the world. By decreation we partake in the renewed making of the world. We have a glimpse of what I call 'God's felt sense'. This renunciation is not deprivation but unbounded wealth. We cannot possess anything except what we renounce. And what must be renounced is above all the desire to be something.

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I read her philosophical stance as pure phenomenology, devoid of the Cartesian fixation to reduce experience to self-centred experience, to an imaginary centre that surveys the psychical landscape. Try imagining walking down a street without you in it. Or, as she says beautifully, "see a landscape as it is when you are not there".

This is very close to what in Zen we call 'entering the ocean', by leaving the home of self-identity. Leaving home is an act of voluntary exile and greater freedom. It is not a dissipation of the self but its attenuation, so that the world can come forward. What is the real self? Clouds, trees, people, stones, rain, animals, the light of dawn, the darkness of night, the living and the dead, sky and stars, these transient human bodies of ours: all phenomena.

Similarly for Simone Weil: to persist in our preposterous claim to self-existence by situating our conspicuous silhouette between the world of phenomena and God is to become what she calls an *unwelcome third*, someone who tactlessly perseveres in staying right in the middle of two lovers or friends involved in intimate conversation.

All of the above goes counter to psychotherapy ideology as it has developed, especially in its cruder forms over the last few decades, with its fixation on me, myself, and I. But it may not be at variance with an existential philosophy and therapy able to embrace a more expansive domain of experience. A practice that does not shun the tragic dimension of life but has the means to sustain its manifestations and *transform* them. Simone Weil's invites us to a place of voluntary exile. Exile has the very same prefix of exit and existential: *ex*. The journey begins with *ex*, the outside – from having been left out in the rain, cast aside from the coveted euphoria of security, its hollow promises, its false certainties.

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The recent \$250 million Hollywood adaptation of the *Odyssey* is a family-oriented entertainment with the same emotional depth, according to classicist Emily Wilson who translated Homer's into English, of a Fourth of July firework display. Simone Weil was well versed in the classics and although lukewarm about the *Odyssey*, had a lot more time for that other great Homer's classic *The Iliad*.

For her, the real protagonist of the epic poem is *force itself* rather than mighty warriors and wily heroes. Force is merciless to both those who believe they can hold it, as it is to its casualties. Nobody can master force. Everyone at some point or other will have to bend to it. Nobody is completely strong or weak, though we are all unaware of this. When in the midst of our little winning streak, we tend to believe that we are especially blessed and able to own our good fortune indefinitely until we are eventually cut to size by life's random circumstances. Abuse of force naturally brings about retribution in a neat geometrical fashion. The shield is shattered. We are bare souls with nothing between us and tears. At the other

end of the spectrum, the victims of force also fully identify with their state of affairs. They give in to affliction, which is as much a dead end as the exultant hubris of the victors. The task for the victors, Simone Weil teaches us, is to moderate force and remain compassionate. It is for me like being a warrior with a tender heart, to hone one's courage not in aggression but by facing up to the tremendous challenges life never fails to impart. As for the victims, the task is to maintain dignity and strength in the face of misfortune and pain. Both of them are invaluable existential lessons.

Manu's latest books are *The Affect Therapy Manifesto* and *The Primacy of Affect: Psychotherapy, Culture, Philosophy*, both published in 2026. For details on events, seminars and Zen retreats please visit www.manubazzano.com