

Tricycle Talks
Episode #71 with Sarah Ruhl
“Finding Beauty in Asymmetry”
March 9, 2022



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. After giving birth to twins, playwright Sarah Ruhl was diagnosed with Bell’s palsy, a paralysis of the seventh cranial nerve that severely limits facial expression, even—and especially—one’s ability to smile. Though most suffering from this condition get better within a year, for Ruhl, the road to recovery has been much slower. In her new memoir, *Smile: The Story of a Face*, Ruhl reflects on her journey of reoccupying her body and reclaiming her capacity for joy.

In today’s episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Sarah to discuss Zen koans, the overlooked beauty of asymmetry and imperfection, and how Tibetan Buddhism brought her back to her Catholic roots.

James Shaheen: So I’m here with playwright and poet Sarah Ruhl. Hi, Sarah. Thanks for being here.

Sarah Ruhl: Hi. So nice to see you.

James Shaheen: Nice to see you again. So we’re here to talk about your book, *Smile: The Story of a Face*. Can you tell us a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Sarah Ruhl: Sure. About 12 years ago, I had a paralysis of the seventh cranial nerve, which is otherwise known as Bell’s palsy, and it makes it really hard to smile. That’s the title, *Smile*. Most people get better really quickly. But for a small minority of people with Bell’s, it’s a really long road to recovery. For me, it was a really long road. The book was written as a reflection on symmetry, loss of symmetry, challenges of a body that surprises you, that you have to adapt to,

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the idea of expression, and also motherhood because I got Bell’s palsy right after giving birth to twins.

James Shaheen: Right, it’s much better now, but initially, it was almost a complete paralysis of the left side of your face. Is that right?

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, it was quite extreme. I think I’ve recovered maybe 70% of movement on that side.

James Shaheen: You write about how Bell’s palsy created a mismatch between your inner and outer landscapes. To quote the book, you write, “To have the face not match the self is a disturbance. But to create a flat inner landscape to match the flattened outer landscape of the face was, in retrospect, a bad alternative.” What has your experience of Bell’s palsy taught you about the relationship between inner and outer expressions?

Sarah Ruhl: Well, I think for a while, when my face was sort of expressionless, or when I could only, in my mind, grimace rather than smile, I think I sunk really into the role of an observer and just stopped trying to make facial expressions. I think I really turtled down into myself. Rather than accepting what my face looked like when it tried to smile, I just tried to be really neutral all the time. I think it affected my inner life as well. I remember using a meditation book by the recently departed amazing Thich Nhat Hanh, and he was saying to smile when you meditate because just producing the smile outside of your face creates joy inside, and I think Buddhists discovered that technology a long time ago, that there’s this relationship between just putting a smile on your face and actually feeling joy. Because I couldn’t do that, or I felt I couldn’t do that. I was in a state of extreme frustration and agitation a lot of the time.



James Shaheen: At a certain point a Tibetan lama tells you, “You can always smile, it’s a choice,” recognizing your situation. You can feel joy, whether you can smile or not, or I suppose it would be allowing your face to do what it needs to do, however imperfectly. So you want to say something about that? I found that very interesting.

Sarah Ruhl: Yes. I mean, I think what I ultimately came to was thinking about the smile in terms of function instead of vanity. What relation is a smile achieving? What relation are you achieving with the attempt to manifest emotions on your face? As opposed to what do you look like? And maybe, too, my life in the theater, there’s a high premium put on what you look like when you manifest facial expressions, although really, the kind of acting I love the most is much more interested in function as well, is much more interested in just the expression of emotion, not how you look when you smile or cry, but the fact that you can smile or cry.

James Shaheen: You also point out that for women, it’s particularly difficult always being told to smile, actually from childhood and well into adulthood. We’re all told to smile before someone snaps a picture. But you’re saying it’s especially burdensome for women to be dealing with this. And you confirm that with a critic, a male critic.

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, there’s this wonderful writer, Jonathan Kalb, who is also in the theater who wrote about having Bell’s palsy, and I finally got up the courage to ask him to lunch. I really wanted to ask him this question about whether he thought it was harder for women or if it was just a human suffering, not gendered, really. And he said, “Yes, I think it’s much worse for women because they’re always being told to kind of smooth things over with their smile.” He said men can look kind of wise and scraggly and serious, and that’s an OK position for them to be in with authority, whereas women often have to show that things are fine when they’re not, in professional situations to smile to kind of smooth over difficulties. There’s a lot of compulsory smiling for women even just walking down the street. Men will tell me to smile.



James Shaheen: You also include pictures in the book, which I really appreciated. There’s this sort of progression of you becoming ever more comfortable, finally, with your face, but one picture shows a picture of Allen Ginsberg with Bell’s palsy just being Alan Ginsberg, nothing added, nothing taken away, no attempt to conceal or hide.

Sarah Ruhl: I love that photo of him. I hadn’t even known he was a Bell’s palsy sufferer until someone told me, and when I saw this picture, he’s smiling, one eye is shut because that often happens with Bell’s palsy. It’s something called synkinesis, where your eye, the muscle sort of attaches to the muscle controlling the smile in a funny way. And, you know, he’s just like, “This is my face. This is my spirit. I’m a poet. I don’t care.” You know, it’s quite wonderful. He doesn’t have a beard covering his smile. And I think if you look at women who have some kind of facial issue that they’re grappling with, like I’ve looked at pictures of Wendy Wasserstein, who had Bell’s palsy before she died, a wonderful playwright, and she’s often holding her face while she’s smiling or looking down, and if you see professional photographs of me the first 5–10 years of having Bell’s palsy, I’ll be half lit. Honestly, it was only for Tricycle magazine that I finally was willing to give a full smile to a photographer. It took me 12 years.

James Shaheen: Those were great pictures.

Sarah Ruhl: I love those.

James Shaheen: You later share your Gordian knot: you write, “The Bell’s palsy won’t go away until I am happy again. But I won’t be happy until the Bell’s palsy goes away.” I found that a very interesting development in the book.



Sarah Ruhl: It's sort of an entrapment. I mean, if I could have thought of it as a koan to jump off of or jump through rather than an entrapping metaphor, I really had to think my way through and out of that conundrum, somehow, to live my way through it.

James Shaheen: Most of us do not have Bell's palsy. But almost everyone has a conflicted relationship with their own body and how they look, even the people we consider to be beautiful, the actors on your stage, for instance. Do you think without Bell's Palsy, you would not have been forced to confront that to the extent that you have? Because most of us just get away with not looking in the mirror when we're not feeling like that, and yet, everybody had become a mirror to you really.

Sarah Ruhl: I don't think I would have thought that much about it were it not for the Bell's palsy. I mean, as someone who writes, I'm much more concerned with the life of the mind than with what I look like. It's not been a sort of obsession or main concern of mine. I think about what actors have to deal with in terms of their face as a canvas, and writers don't have to go through the world that way. Part of what took me so long to think and write about it was that in a way, I thought, "I'm not the sort of person who needs to think about my face. I'm not the sort of person who cares what my face looks like, and therefore, I must not care." But in fact, I did.

James Shaheen: I tell myself that too, that I'm not too particularly concerned. But then you discover reading this book, even if you don't have Bell's palsy, how concerned you actually are if you're honest. You also write about how asymmetry is often associated with villains or the grotesque in literature, for instance, but you suggest that an asymmetrical person can be a protagonist rather than just the antagonist or the villain. I'd like you to read that section if you wouldn't mind. It begins on page 107.



Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, I'm talking about all these cartoon villains like Darth Nihilus and No-Face and the Joker and Doctor Poison, and then I write, “But can an asymmetrical person be a protagonist rather than an antagonist? In a Jungian dictionary, a one-limbed person is closer to God, concealing a mystery or hidden potential and signifying the number one, a God number. But where do we put all the asymmetrical people, the asymmetrical stories? Where do we put the people with one leg, lazy eyes, crooked grins? Do we write plays for them? Do we make theaters for them? If symmetry is beauty, but life is asymmetrical, then how can art imitate life with an expression of formal beauty that is also true?”

James Shaheen: That's really wonderful. So I'll ask you, how does asymmetry show up in your art and the stories you tell? What does it look like to honor the asymmetrical?

Sarah Ruhl: In some ways, I don't know yet. I think I'm still finding out. But in other ways, I think it manifests in my stories as a kind of distrust of Aristotelian thinking, where everything has a clear cause and the structure has a nice arc with a catharsis and a little plateau and then a denouement. I've always thought of my plays as more Ovidian. I think about Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and how the tale unfolds and unfolds and surprising, sudden transformations happen and people turn into beasts and trees and there's no causality. I think that is how the body sometimes functions. You wake up and you're transformed. What happened? It's not a defect of your character that caused it. It's just the body. And I've always, funnily enough, been interested in that kind of storytelling rather than a clear symmetrical arc with a moral lesson.

James Shaheen: You say you immediately got Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Waking up, all of a sudden, you're a bug.

Sarah Ruhl: I remember being so moved by that story when my father was sick with cancer when I was 18 and I was reading that story in college. I felt like everyone around me was reading

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it abstractly, and for me, it felt really emotional, this idea of a person waking up and not recognizing their body, and then the bug is swept away at the end by the carpet lady with so much detritus and the family moves on. I found it so sad.

James Shaheen: You later explore the etymology of the word “disfigure” and the associations between symmetry, beauty, and perceived morality, and so it really does challenge our notion of beauty as symmetry.

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, somehow there’s this slippage in our culture and even in our language between virtue and beauty. Even in Protestant theology, there’s this sense of being the chosen, being the beautiful, chosen by God, and that if you are imperfect, it’s mirroring something in your soul.

James Shaheen: It’s sort of this Calvinist notion also of your success in life mirroring God’s grace.

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, exactly.

James Shaheen: And you talk a lot about grace.

Sarah Ruhl: I love the idea of conjuring grace, something unbidden that comes, and you can’t ask for it to come, but you have to wait for it. I find it moving in Catholic mystics and theologians and people like Simone Weil, this idea of this exquisite surrender toward something you can’t control.

James Shaheen: That’s nice. You’re known primarily as a playwright, and you express yourself through the characters that you create. You can watch them do this and speak to the audience on



stage, and often you're in the dimly lit theater watching everyone on stage. And yet, this book is very personal, very revealing. How was it to all of a sudden be at the center of your own story, rather than express yourself through others, through the characters you create?

Sarah Ruhl: It was an unfamiliar feeling and in some ways strange but also cathartic to not be hiding behind an avatar, not letting someone else do the talking, and having an unmediated relationship to the reader.

James Shaheen: Did that feel risky to you at all? Or scary?

Sarah Ruhl: Yes, completely scary, and as I said, scary to write about my body, what we were saying earlier about how I'm not the sort of person who thinks about my face. In a writer, there's that desire to preserve that fiction: I don't think about my body, I don't think about my face. So to write a whole book about that perception was vulnerable. But I've been so heartened by people who have reached out after reading the book. My goal was really could I reach people who might be suffering with a similar thing, even if it wasn't Bell's palsy? Feeling like there is that reaching out towards diminishes my sense of embarrassment over feeling vulnerable.

James Shaheen: You write about an exercise you have your students do where they practice being the observer and then the observed, yet you yourself resist being the observed, which is why I really asked the question. You write that you've always preferred looking at others to being looked at. So has your experience with Bell's palsy offered any insight into the relationship between the observer and the observed?

Sarah Ruhl: So in the theater exercise, you have someone who's A and someone who's B, and first A looks at B and really studies their face and B has to surrender to being looked at by A, and then you switch it and have B look at A, and if I were leading you in this exercise, I would say,



“Now really memorize the features of this person’s face. Really look at how the light is falling on their face.” When I did this exercise, I found it excruciating to be looked at in silence for that long by a stranger, so I just pretended I was the observer the whole time, and that kind of got me out of the vulnerability of being looked at. I wonder if there is a kind of way out of that clear divide between subject and object, if there is a way to meet each other somewhere in between that space of the observer and the observed so that we don’t feel like we’re only looking or only being looked at.

James Shaheen: It’s sort of interesting when you talk about relationships. For instance, with your sister, you complemented each other or made each other complete. There’s a kind of asymmetry there that allows for a relationship like that, or the one that you discussed with your husband, for instance, to happen.

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, I mean, I think there’s that concept of yin yang, you know, symmetry like that. My sister and I were like that growing up. She was athletic, she was extroverted, she did science; I was introverted, I did the arts, I was more solitary. I think siblings sometimes reify those differences because they’re afraid of intruding on the other sibling’s glory and approval. But I think we can overdo making ourselves yin and yang to each other.

James Shaheen: One of the themes in the book that was really moving to me is empathy, and you write about the lunch you had with the theater critic, Jonathan Kalb, and he himself has Bell’s palsy, as you mentioned, and you talked about the empathy you felt in seeing his face. So could you share a little bit more about that experience and how it helped you to develop compassion for yourself, for your own face?

Sarah Ruhl: It really did. I remember when Jonathan walked into the restaurant, I knew immediately who he was, and I could recognize on his face that he was still going through



something I was going through, and his face was like a mirror. I could see that he was turning away from me when he laughed so as to not show the expression of laughter on his face, which I had done too. For me, I felt like I looked like this strange pirate when I laughed because it was so asymmetrical. We were eating dumpling soup or something. It can be hard to eat when you have Bell's palsy because sometimes the muscles on one side are weaker, so you might drool, or your food might come out. Jonathan's dumpling sort of exploded, and he was like, "Sorry, I'm sorry." I was like, "No, I'm so happy I don't feel self-conscious eating this cucumber in front of you." It took me so long to seek out someone else with Bell's palsy to have lunch with. But there was such solace. I think part of it was seeing Jonathan turn away from me while he laughed and knowing how I felt as the observer. I felt, "No, look at me when you laugh. I don't judge your face." I thought, well, why then am I doing that? So it really changed the way I viewed myself.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I think it's a point at which you realize you had more compassion for others than you might for yourself. Has that changed at all?

Sarah Ruhl: Yes, I hope it has. And I think honestly, writing the book was a sort of healing process in that way and gave me more compassion for myself. I think I blamed myself in weird ways for my illness. I thought, "Oh, I'm not resting enough. I'm not doing enough. I must have done something wrong," rather than thinking, "Well, Sarah, that was kind of a hard knock to have two twins in the NICU and have all this postpartum stuff going on, get celiac disease, get Bell's Palsy, that's a lot of hard knocks in a row." I never really sat down with myself and thought, "You've gone through some hard knocks." I was always just blaming myself for the ways in which my body was disappointing me and keeping me from moving forward in my life. I do think it took writing the book to have a little bit more compassion, and I think it's partly this thing of making sense of, you know, leaving old metaphors behind and making sense of a story that didn't make sense because it had so many constant ruptures, in the same way that Kafka talks about waking up and being a bug. Nothing made sense to me about the story of my face

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betraying me before writing it all down. It just felt like this sudden rupture in my life, and somehow writing it down gave me compassion because I was also making sense of it for myself.

James Shaheen: I think the last time we talked, you said your husband had suggested you write about this. It wasn't something that you were naturally inclined to do. In fact, it might have felt very scary. But with his support, you were able to do this.

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, my husband had said, “You often write about the things that are troubling you, that you can't let go of, the things that are itches that you have to scratch.” And he said, “I know you're thinking about this so much. Why are you not writing about it?” And I thought because it totally resists dramatic structure. What is there to write about? And I think that's why I turned to prose instead of a play.

James Shaheen: Yeah. In fact, you talk about that toward the end of the book. The narrative structure isn't the typical arc you might have in a play. It's too real.

Sarah Ruhl: Right. At one point, I thought, Oh, well, basically, the plot of this book is “A woman slowly gets better.” What kind of story is that?

James Shaheen: Well, it's a wonderful one, really. It is so readable, and I really loved it. It was the second time I read it. One of the themes that runs through this book is prayer. Can you talk a little bit about your relationship to prayer, particularly through times of crisis?

Sarah Ruhl: Well, I grew up Catholic, so when I was little, prayer was the Lord's Prayer. I kind of moved away from Catholicism, which the book also talks about. But I always felt that I couldn't demand something from God or ask something from God in a prayer. It felt really unseemly. So I never liked the idea of prayer as outcome. And then I moved towards Tibetan

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Buddhism away from Catholicism and started doing more meditating. What was funny to me was from a Western understanding, maybe a secular Western understanding, meditation isn't prayer. It's just mindfulness. But for the Tibetan people who I talked to who meditate, it really is prayer. It's quite prayerful, or you have a prayer room. In that sense, I feel like I've come full circle to just a different kind of praying,

James Shaheen: Right, I likewise grew up Catholic, and I was also very hesitant to pray for outcomes. There was always a certain arrogance and then ensuing misery that went with that attachment to the outcome. And also, what if it doesn't happen? Then where am I?

Sarah Ruhl: Yes, what if it doesn't happen? Then you feel guilty because you've shamed God.

James Shaheen: That's so funny. I used to wonder, "I hope God doesn't find out I don't believe in him." So that's a sort of a Catholic neurosis.

Sarah Ruhl: That is a Zen koan in and of itself: I hope God doesn't find out I don't believe in him. That's amazing.

James Shaheen: Right, I was sitting in school thinking this as a 10-year-old.

Sarah Ruhl: And that God was there just to worry about it.

James Shaheen: Right, exactly.

Sarah Ruhl: That's amazing.

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James Shaheen: You write at one point that as you became more Buddhist, you became more Catholic. I had to think about that one. Why don't you say something about that?

Sarah Ruhl: I went to see His Holiness, the Dalai Lama gave a talk where he talked about not encouraging people from other religions to become Tibetan Buddhists all of a sudden. He was sort of saying it's good to pray in your first language. It's good to pray in the religion of your childhood. Basically, we don't need converts. It's not a missionary kind of tack. And I thought a lot about what he said. He wasn't encouraging or discouraging, really, but saying there was something important and sacred about the religion you're born into and that you might be able to find everything you need there if you really look. I think there was something about leaving Catholicism and going to Tibetan Buddhism that made me discover other little treasures in Catholicism that maybe I had overlooked because I saw it as oppressive or patriarchal or traumatizing for children. With some distance and with some coming through another portal, I felt like I could really appreciate Christian mystics or go back to Julian of Norwich or Hildegard von Bingen and appreciate what they were saying.

James Shaheen: For me that was reading *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which I really appreciated. That was wonderful.

Sarah Ruhl: Who is that by?

James Shaheen: It's anonymous. They don't know who wrote it. But it's before the Reformation, so it's within the church. But it's very interesting. I mean, I bet you'd love it.

Sarah Ruhl: I'll have to find it. I'll write it down.

James Shaheen: It sort of took me to Buddhism, frankly.



Sarah Ruhl: Oh, interesting. I mean, I really love too Thomas Merton’s Asian journals, and I feel like that kind of syncretic ethos that he’s proposing in a way in that book and then died before he could really fully sketch it out, I love all those forms of thought.

James Shaheen: Yeah, me too. You trace the significance of the face in Buddhist traditions too, including face-to-face transmission and the Zen concept of original face. I’m wondering how Buddhist understandings of the face influenced you to see your own face.

Sarah Ruhl: I wish I knew more about it, but the little I do know about it comes from that koan, Who were you before you were born? Who were you before your parents were born? What was your original face before your parents were born? That really got me thinking that I had been so busy looking for my old face that I wasn’t thinking about my original face. The distinction between one’s old face, who you were when you were 20, who you were when you were five, seemed quite different from thinking, What was the face before you were born? I found that comforting.

James Shaheen: It seems like it was a part of a journey toward acceptance. At one point you say, “Like it or not, I’m going to die with this face. I may as well fall in love with it.” So what was your experience of learning to fall in love with your face? I believe this was before you began making the improvement with the physical therapist.

Sarah Ruhl: The physical therapy helped for sure, and part of it was not even the improvement but looking at someone as a mirror to do physical exercises. I think it was in a way that looking, that engagement, that was just as therapeutic as whatever improvement I was having with my muscular function. The physical therapist I finally found after 10 years had had Bell’s palsy herself, and so I found it so much less alienating than when I had first gone to a physical



therapist, which was maybe a month after I got Bell’s palsy I saw someone who was like, “Make this face, make this face in the mirror,” and I couldn’t and it looked really strange, sort of like Cosmo in *Singin’ in the Rain*. I remember some random person at the gym took a picture of my face because he thought it looked so strange and was like, “Dude, that’s crazy.”

James Shaheen: I was shocked when I read that. That’s amazing. And you never went back to that place.

Sarah Ruhl: I never went back, and so it took me 10 years to try again. And this woman, there was no mirror in the room, there was her, and she’d say, “Look at me, smile,” and she would smile too. “Smile with teeth, raise your eyebrows,” and she would do it too. And so that was very healing. Even speaking about it, I think for so long, I really didn’t even speak about it, it was just this thing I was going through quite privately, I think was very helpful. And to the point of when I finished the book, I was in the car driving with my daughter, Anna, who was then about maybe 13, and she was listening to me talk to my editor about the book coming out, and afterwards, I said, “Oh, was that interesting to you, that conversation about Bell’s palsy and depression?” And she said, “Oh, it was,” and she said, “I’ve always sort of thought of your face, Mom, as a beautiful house that had a wall suddenly fall down, and you spent all this time trying to build it back up brick by brick, and you couldn’t quite, but when I look at your face, all I see is my home.” And that just killed me. It was so beautiful. My daughter never would have said those words to me had I not gone through a whole process of thinking and writing the book. It would have all been unsaid. So even just saying the unsaid and hearing things like that from other people, or from my daughter, I think helped me fall back in love with my face.

James Shaheen: In particular, with this physical therapist that you were just speaking about, you seem to confront your shame at that point. You also felt a need to protect the other person from



having to care for you. What was the shame like at that point, was just looking at another person in the face and allowing yourself to express whatever your face could express?

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, I think I didn't realize how ashamed I was. I think it was very subterranean, very pushed down. I was making all these unconscious decisions, like “Oh, I just won't smile with teeth, I won't smile back, I won't laugh, I'll chuckle or murmur or turn my head away.” It was sort of my body seeming to make these decisions without excavating why I was making those decisions. So even just looking someone in the face and smiling with teeth and being forced to do that and practice doing that was a big deal for me.

James Shaheen: You say you make these unconscious decisions to restrain yourself or to contain this condition. And then you say you make a decision to reoccupy your body and reclaim your capacity for joy. But I didn't feel that so much as a decision as you simply did. You simply occupied your own body, and this capacity for joy began to return. There was a very interesting transformation, I thought.

Sarah Ruhl: And I think I probably could go further in reoccupying my body, you know. I don't think I'm sort of done.

James Shaheen: Don't you think we all can? I mean, often in meditation, it's coming back to the body or being in the body. We never really quite left it, whatever we think.

Sarah Ruhl: Yes, absolutely. Meditation helps, and if I ever went dancing, that would help. I think also in the phone world, in the virtual world, the Zoom world, there's another sense in which we're not occupying our bodies. We're sort of projecting an idea of our bodies out into the world all the time. And I think it's actually very exhausting. I don't think we've really even caught up to how exhausting it is.

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James Shaheen: Yeah, I was talking to one teacher recently, who said, it’s counterintuitive to understand this, but we spend a lot more energy fleeing from our body than it takes to actually just be there. So I find that interesting. But throughout the book, you also wrestle with anger, and you ask, “How can we use our anger for the cause of justice or to direct the course of our lives so that it does not make us strangers to ourselves and others?” One of our editors just submitted a story about women and anger, the particular relationship they had to anger and not being able to express it without a real penalty in the culture. So it’s just as with a smile. I mean, you’re expected to smile, you’re expected not to be angry. So what have you learned about how to work with your own anger?

Sarah Ruhl: I’m still working on it. But I think I was always taught that it wasn’t good to be angry, that it was quite a frightening thing to be angry. Then when I started doing meditation for the first time in my early 20s, a teacher really told me “Yeah, don’t be angry. It’s terrible. You can burn up your karma by one act that you do in anger.” And I was like, “But really, shouldn’t we be politically enraged?” There was a war at the time, and I was angry about it. And he said, “No, you can do your right action, but you don’t have to be angry about it.” But I do think the expression of anger for women is important because otherwise it just festers and is invisible. In my work in the theater world, I feel like if a woman artist gets angry at something in a collaboration, it’s demeaned as she’s feeling her feelings and she’s emotional, whereas if a male artist gets angry about something in a collaboration, the reaction to it is more, “Oh, there must be something really wrong because he’s angry.” There’s a sense that it’s more justifiable. So I think women do need to find ways of expressing anger that is a political liberation and that’s not diminishing in terms of their ability to be a leader.

James Shaheen: You know, you’re a mother of three. As you said, your pregnancy with the twins is what probably triggered the Bell’s palsy. In describing your relationship to theater and to



motherhood, you take up a line from Ingmar Bergman’s *Fanny and Alexander*, a film I love, and you quote, “It is necessary and not at all shameful to take pleasure in the little world.” And so coming to that place of finding pleasure again, despite all, I was wondering if you could speak to this call to take pleasure in what he refers to as the little world.

Sarah Ruhl: I love it so much, the little world. I think it’s such a great metaphor for both the theater and also for parenting. There are so many joys, so many simple joys in this little world of being with your kids and watching them play, and there’s so much joy in play in the theater world, discovery and joy when people are really playing, and you find at home when you have a four-year-old. I once had this experience with my daughter Hope, where she was really angry about something. I think I’d forced her to go get new shoes. I think she was even younger; she was maybe three or something. And she threw her new shoe in the middle of the street. I said, “Oh, naughty Hopie,” and then she was screaming and crying, and I asked, “What do I want?” And then William was crying. They were both crying. And I said, “What do you guys want? Do you want some m&ms?” I was doing anything to try to get them to be quiet. Williams said “Yes, m&ms.” So he took some m&ms. And then Hope just kept crying and crying. And we got home. I was so frustrated. And I was saying, “Hope, what do you want?” I was like this maniacal director, almost like a Stanislavski demon saying, “What do you want? What do you want?” She was like, “I want to play with you.” And I was like, “Oh, OK.” And she’s like, “I want to play the goo-goo gaga game.” And I was like, “What’s that?” And she said, “Well, you take this key,” and she took out this plastic yellow key. And she said, “You open my heart.” So she said to put the key on her heart and said “Now open, now open the door, and walk in.” And I thought, oh, my God, Hope just taught me everything. She taught me how to play. She taught me that actually, she didn’t want m&ms, she wanted to pretend that I was walking into her heart after I’d been angry with her for throwing her shoe in the road, all of these moments, which are so fleeting.

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Episode #71 with Sarah Ruhl

“Finding Beauty in Asymmetry”

March 9, 2022



James Shaheen: You talk about the small and the mundane, and you also write about the slowness of this particular story, you touched on that a little bit ago, and the way it resists a traditional plot. Yet I loved being in that world of this book. I mean, it was so full, it was so rich, and in fact, I suppose if there's any plot, it was coming back to oneself and acceptance and empathy, empathy for others, because you describe so well, that small world sometimes, when we feel trapped, as you've just described, the very trap itself is in many ways the kind of opening when your daughter said that. “I just want to play.” And it opens up.

Sarah Ruhl: It's really true. And I think so many memoirs, or kind of spiritual memoirs or pilgrims' progresses, do have that plot of kind of wandering away from yourself and coming back to yourself, coming home, as it were, but with a difference. And in a way, it's the great Wizard of Oz story too, leaving your home and coming back.

James Shaheen: You start with a lot of narratives of shame about your face and the pain that it causes you, and it seems that you learn to tell a different story by the end. Is that fair to say?

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah.

James Shaheen: I mean, that's why I think anybody can read this book, whether they have Bell's palsy or not. We've all got something. We've all got a part of ourselves that we turn away from.

Sarah Ruhl: Well, I think in the Zoom generation, you realize how many people hate looking at themselves on screen, and then in the Instagram generation, you find out how many young women are having deep depression problems just from the image of themselves that they're putting out into the world and how it's coming back to them. So I feel like there's a lot of ways in which our culture has a real split between image and self and outer and inner, and I guess that's



the original purpose of yoga in a way, that knitting together of body and mind, of outer and inner, feeling some balance and some knitting together of those two things. When there's a rupture, it needs attending to. My first reaction to the rupture was just to go about my business so that there wouldn't be a rupture. It could just go back to the way things had been. I think writing the book was a way of saying, well, actually, there was a rupture, and I need to knit things back together to move on.

James Shaheen: Eventually you come to embrace imperfection and asymmetry, by the end of the book, anyway, and I was wondering if you could read a passage that begins at the top of page 225.

Sarah Ruhl: Yes. The twins are looking for shells on the beach. They arrange them on the sand. “Which is your favorite?” they ask me. I choose a small iridescent broken shell. “But don't you like this one?” they ask, pointing to a less broken, more perfect bland shell. “No, I like the broken shell,” I say. “It's iridescent.” And I think imperfection is a portal, whereas perfection and symmetry create distance. Our culture values perfect pictures of ourselves, mirage over and above authentic connection, but we meet one another through the imperfect particular of our bodies. Imperfection calls out for affinity, for the beloved to say, “I too am broken, but may I join you?” Symmetry is complete unto itself. Asymmetry calls out to a beloved to complete it. Japanese poetry, which celebrates the hidden, the implied, and impermanence is asymmetrical. I've been practicing writing haiku thinking about the flaw in the weave. Navajo weaving rugs often have a spirit line, an apparent asymmetry that allows the spirit of the weaver to exit the rug. This haiku took me in a sense 10 years to write:

A crooked smile

is better than a crooked heart

Open me to God

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James Shaheen: That’s really nice, Sarah. Thanks. So I was wondering if you can share a little more about how fragility and imperfection invite care.

Sarah Ruhl: I think it’s how we come to really know each other. We don’t get to know each other through telling each other how perfect and wonderful our lives are. I mean, we get to know our friends through hardship. Often, we fall in love, and there’s usually hardship. There’s not just rainbows and dolphins. And you know, I think there are some relations that are overly forged in hardship. It could be too much of that. You want to have a balance. But I do think that when we allow ourselves to be fragile and seen, that’s where real love comes in, real love and acceptance from others. If you’re perfect, what is there to accept? We could all fall in love with a perfect person. That’s easy.

James Shaheen: It’s a mistake looking for that, isn’t it?

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah.

James Shaheen: So you draw from British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. Winnicott talks about the good enough mother, and I thought it was really interesting that you settled on the good enough face. That was really wonderful.

Sarah Ruhl: Yeah, the good enough mother. the good enough parent. I had a student who read the book and then asked me, “What about the good enough writer?” And I thought yes, yes that too, the good enough artist too. all of it.

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James Shaheen: Well, I know you have another appointment to get to, so I'd like to thank you. Sarah Ruhl, *Smile: The Story of a Face*, a wonderful book. I encourage all of our listeners to take a look at it. Anything to sign off with, Sarah?

Sarah Ruhl: Oh, just thank you so much. The conversation was a real gift and getting to know you all. I love your publication so much. It's given me so much to think about and so much joy throughout the years, so it's a real privilege to be here.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much. It's a real privilege to spend time with you. I hope we can do this again sometime. You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Sarah Ruhl. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!