

Learning to Face Our Fears

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The secret of life we are all looking for is this—to develop... the power and courage to return to that which we have spent a lifetime hiding from—to rest in the bodily experience of the present moment—even if it is a feeling of being humiliated, of failing, of abandonment, of unfairness. —Charlotte Joko Beck

Ancient Witness: John 14:25-27

It was FDR who said over 80 years ago (1933), “We have nothing to fear by fear itself.” The economy had collapsed. Clouds of war were looming. The country was in pain, and it was going to experience more pain—lots more. That much was unavoidable. But FDR knew that fear itself brings its own kind of suffering and anguish that could be debilitating—paralyzing. And this fear *can* be addressed.

Today I want to talk about how so much of our lives is clouded by fear—fear of what may happen or of what won’t happen—and that this fear causes suffering.

Faith is about the liberation from the captivity of our fear—from suffering—to wholeness, to peace, to happiness. This is God’s desire for each of us. And Jesus, my primary spiritual teacher, worked for healing and wholeness among the people, on a personal individual level, and on a global, universal level. In John’s story, Jesus said, “Peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives.”

Jesus, like other great spiritual teachers, leads us to peace, shalom, wholeness, healing. This was the intent of his teaching. But this is not the kind of peace and wholeness that the world conditions us to expect, which is, in fact, part of the problem.

And then, what does John have Jesus say? “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” The main obstacle to this unique peace and wholeness that he’s talking about is *fear*, a troubled heart.

And therefore, when it comes to our fears, it’s important to speak them out loud.

Sometimes we live with our fears for so long that we don’t realize that they are there doing terrible damage. We’ve gotten used to them. And so sometimes it’s important to become aware of their constant presence if we are going to experience relief—healing.

Don’t do it now, but when you’re alone, listen to your thoughts and speak to yourself about your fears. What are they? What do they feel like? This is what meditation and contemplation can do—help us get in touch with those voices that are constantly chattering away in the background.

Jesse McKinney uses a power wheelchair to move around and has limited speech due to cerebral palsy. He’s also a Zen Buddhist who wrote, *A Mind on Wheels: The Inner Journey*. He said,

I need practical solutions to cope with the suffering in my life. When the reality of not being able to go to the toilet by yourself is a constant concern, you may hope for God’s saving grace; but in the meantime you must figure out how to get on the toilet.

Now, in Buddhism, there’s no promise of heaven and no God to cure a disability. This is similar to some forms of progressive Christianity where there is no intervening God or future heaven. And I’ve found

Buddhism and Christianity can be complementary. The strength of Buddhism is that it is so practical—it has tools to help Christians, like me, reach our goals.

And one of the main points of Buddhism is: thinking that life should be fair and judging that things should or shouldn't happen to you are *causes of suffering*. McKinney wrote,

The first step to ending suffering is separating the pain you feel from the notion that you “shouldn't” have to feel pain.

And so, the first Noble Truth of the Buddha: Life is suffering. Suffering is simply part of life; it's with us all the time, constantly gnawing away. (“Dukkha” is the Buddhist word translated as “suffering,” “anxiety” or “dis-ease.”) You're suffering right now! (Unless you are sitting in Nirvana, which I seriously doubt.) So the first Noble Truth is that we need to recognize this—see it for what it is—and not deny it. Anthony de Mello used to say, “Your life is a mess.” But nobody wants to hear this; people get offended. Furthermore, he says, we don't really want to get out of this mess, this suffering we're in! Yet the more spiritually awakened one becomes, the more one is attuned to one's own suffering and the suffering of others.

“*Pain* is a direct signal from the body or the mind that something is wrong,” writes Harvey Soudaiho Hilbert, a Zen Buddhist psychotherapist and hemiplegic for 35 years. “*Suffering* is our mental response to pain, when we think, ‘I don't want pain!’ So pain is when you hurt; suffering is when you add insult to injury by thinking ‘I shouldn't hurt!’”

So suffering is the *mental response* to pain; you could say that suffering is the *fear of pain*.

“Let not your hearts be troubled.” The problem is the “fear itself.”

It is very unfortunate that so much of the Christian faith through the centuries has been *fear-based*, *promoting* fear of punishment, fear of death, fear of displeasing God, fear making mistakes. But, it seems to me, that the opposite of faith is not doubt; it is fear. And so faith *liberates* us from fear, making us whole.

The second Noble Truth is: Suffering is caused by craving or clinging. *Craving* is when we think that the pain in our lives “should” disappear immediately. And *clinging* is when we think that the good “should” last forever.

And where do these “shoulds” come from? They come from our conditioning. They are, as Jesus would say, what “the world gives.”

Clinging to a reality that was (living in the past). Hoping or craving for a reality that is different (living in the future). Accepting the reality that is (living in the present).

We face our fears of things that *may* happen—we might get sick; we might experience pain; we might lose something or someone dear to us; might die. These things frighten us and so we face them, become aware of them, that they are here sitting with us right now, all the time.

We face our fear of things that *may not* happen—we might not get better; our pain may not go away; etc.

Here's my central point: *Facing fear is a path to wholeness, peace and true happiness*. Yet we usually will only do this as a last resort, when our fears become unavoidable.

And so we see that coming to terms with our fears means embracing the fact that everything and everyone on earth, the earth itself, and the universe that contains it, will change and pass away. As the prophet Isaiah wrote: “All life is as grass... and the grass withers, the flower fade.” (40:6-8)

You will lose your mother and father, maybe your spouse, a sibling or closet friend. You may lose your job, your house, your savings. Some of our losses are unspeakable. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. We all go down to the dust.”

But being aware and accepting that everything changes—the impermanence of life—is a step toward liberation from fear, from a troubled heart, and toward joy and peace, toward an appreciation of the fragile beauty and value in every moment of life.

Mark Epstein, a Buddhist psychotherapist who wrote, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, puts it like this:

You see this glass? For me, this glass is already broken. I enjoy it. I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns. But when the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes it off the table and it shatters, I say “Of course.” When I understand that this glass was already broken, every moment with it is precious.

This is a way for us to touch our unconscious fears that weigh us down—by seeing that everything is “already broken.”

This leads us to the third Noble Truth: “The end of craving and clinging ends suffering.” The Buddhist word for this is “Nirvana.” The word Nirvana means “extinguished.” Nirvana happens when we extinguish the fires of craving and clinging, when the “shoulds” drop away, and what remains is a peaceful center.

Now, ending craving doesn’t mean you can never want things: a better job, a loving companion, a nice home. One can want to be cured of one’s disability. But what isn’t helpful is turning wanting into craving.

Abbie Freedman, a paraplegic due to an injury put it like this:

Wanting a cure is not unhealthy. But craving a cure can make life miserable, keeping one from being in the moment and appreciating what is presently “right” in one’s life. I neither cling to staying paralyzed nor crave a cure.

“Of course we should seek treatment and even a cure,” wrote a leukemia patient given two weeks to live. “But it is important to be realistic. At some point we must regain our balance and see that there is more to life than struggling to ‘get better,’ which can keep us stuck in the past with only an illusion for a future.”

Another Buddhist teacher, Pema Chödrön, emphasizes that fear is a *doorway*, and we can go either way. It can be a trigger to hardness, and we can become out of touch with the world. Or we can go into it. We can touch it, face it, taste it, and feel it. And when one does this one finds softness, vulnerability, tenderness and an open-hearted place.

And so to become fearless, we *go into* our fear. Courage starts with being honest and open with oneself. *To be fearless, we still have fears, but we don’t fear fear, itself.*

Chödrön writes,

No one ever tells us to stop running away from fear. We are very rarely told to move closer, to just be there, to become familiar with fear... The advice we usually get is to sweeten it up, smooth it over, take a pill, or distract ourselves, but by all means make it go away.

We don’t need that kind of encouragement, because dissociating from fear is what we do naturally... We feel it coming and we check out. It’s good to know we do that—not as a way to beat ourselves up, but as a way to develop unconditional compassion. The most heartbreaking thing of all is how we cheat ourselves of the present moment. (When Things Fall Apart, p. 4)

And so here it is, “the secret of life,” according to Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck, is this:

to develop... the power and courage... to rest in the bodily experience of the present moment—even if it is a feeling of being humiliated, of failing, of abandonment, of unfairness.

We hide from experiencing the present by craving a cure, by fearing what has not yet happened, by clinging to the past.

The path to the present, to wholeness, to happiness is to *face our fears* which preoccupy us. “Go to the places that scare you” is the advice of one Buddhist teacher. Go to that place—don’t run and hide from it. Don’t resist it. Go there. Simply experience this place. Let the feeling in; let the thought in; accept it. The more we resist, the more power it has in our lives. “Do not let your heart be troubled.”

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to Commitment: (*When Things Fall Apart*, p. 4-5, Pema Chödrön)

Sometimes we are cornered; everything falls apart, and we run out of options for escape. At times like that, the most profound spiritual truths seem pretty straightforward and ordinary. There’s nowhere to hide. We see it as well as anyone else—better than anyone else. Sooner or later we understand that although we can’t make fear look pretty, it will nevertheless introduce us to all the teaching we’ve ever heard or read.

So the next time you encounter fear, consider yourself lucky. This is where the courage comes in. Usually we think that brave people have no fear. The truth is that they are intimate with fear.