

Wisdom Circles 2012 March

What Does It Mean To Live With Brokenness?

In the 1987 movie *Adventures in Babysitting*, Chris, played by Elizabeth Shue, agrees to babysit after her boyfriend stands her up. An emergency errand takes her to downtown Chicago, where a flat tire lands Chris and her three charges on a scary adventure. At one point, running away from bad guys, they go through an alley door and find themselves on stage with the band at a blues club. The band leader stops their flight and tells them, “Look young lady, nobody leaves here without singing the blues.” So she does. She has the whole club rocking as she makes up a blues song about what is happening to her at that moment.

It’s true about life. Nobody leaves here without singing the blues. Suffering, misfortune, tragedy and grief are a part of every human life. Nobody leaves here without singing the blues.

The blues came out of the experience of the suffering of a people. They descended from late 19th century field songs, call songs and spirituals with African chord progression and rhythms. There is in this music of lament a note of defiance, perseverance and triumph. As Ralph Ellison wrote about the attitude of the blues, “Ride the horse, don’t let the horse ride you.”

There is a similar kind of music that is even older. The Psalms, the poems collected in the poetry book of the bible, were originally sung. David Rosenberg titled his contemporary translation of the Psalms: *Blues of the Sky*. Many psalms were poems of lamentation, a visceral complaint against ill fortune.

No one leaves here without singing the blues. Why do we suffer? Why can a drunk driver suddenly end the life of one we love, or a child die before his parents? Why can we suddenly be struck with a fatal illness when our life is going along fine? Or frugally saved for retirement just to have a conspiracy of heedless or sociopathic executives crash the world economy as we look helplessly on? Natural disasters destroy homes and lives. People ask the age old question of the blues: Why me? We really want an answer to that question sometimes. But often there isn't one and that is sometimes hard for people to accept.

Elaine Pagels, a historian of early Christian history wrote a book about the development of the concept of original sin. Still she couldn't understand what the psychology behind this concept was until her son and husband died in the same year. Sometimes, she thought, people would rather take on blame rather than accept that terrible things happen for no reason. When we suffer pain and tragedy it is not always our fault. Nobody leaves here without singing the blues.

In his wonderful book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Kushner describes how his son David died at the ages of 15 of old age. During that ordeal the good rabbi doubted his faith. It shook him to his core. He decided that he could not believe in a God that would will these things to happen and therefore gave up the idea that God is all powerful. There is chaos in the world, and randomness and evil. Kushner concludes that while our tragedies and sufferings are not a reflection of our worth as people, we do have a choice about how we respond to them.

“Pain is the price we pay for being alive. Dead cells—our hair, or fingernails—can't feel pain; they can't feel anything. When we understand that, our question will change from, ‘why to we have to feel pain?’ to ‘what do we do with our pain so that it becomes meaningful and not just pointless empty suffering? How can we

turn all the painful experiences of our lives into birth pangs or into growing pains?’ We may not ever understand why we suffer or be able to control the forces that cause our suffering, but we can have a lot to say about what the suffering does to us, and what sort of people we become because of it. Pain makes some people bitter and envious. It makes others sensitive and compassionate. It is the result, not the cause, of pain that makes some experiences of pain meaningful and others empty and destructive.”

Kushner would like nothing more than to have his son back, but the experience of grappling with his loss has turned out to be the most important experience of his life. It made him a better rabbi and a better human being. It helped him realize and concentrate on what was important. We don’t always have a choice about what happens to us but we do have a choice how we will respond. I have talked to many people who have had heartbreaking losses and they have found that within them are great blessings.

Leonard Cohen, the poet and folk singer has said, “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

There are more good things in this world than bad. We are surrounded everywhere by an excruciatingly beautiful natural world, if we would but notice. We are surrounded by love and friendship and we have the privilege and the joy of giving it in return. If our eyes are open to seeing it, we are surrounded by the kindness and mercy from others. Our bodies give us the eyes to see beauty, the ears to hear music, the nose to smell orange blossoms, the tongue to taste delicious food and skin to touch. The bad makes us suffer because it’s exceptional. But the light, shining thru the crack, is ever more beautiful and precious as a result.

With love,
Arvid

Our Spiritual Exercise

Meditation on Compassion

In Buddhism, heaven is not so much a place you go when you die, but states of mind in this life; states of mind that can be cultivated. The states of mind are called the heavenly abodes and there are four of them: loving kindness or universal friendliness, compassion, equanimity, and sympathetic joy.

Briefly, loving kindness is a feeling of well-wishing and friendliness toward everyone. Equanimity is accepting reality just as it is. Sympathetic joy is being happy for another person's good fortune without envy.

Our spiritual exercise this month is to experiment with the meditation meant to cultivate the 'heavenly abode' of compassion. This meditation helps us to be with the inevitable pain and suffering of life without aversion or fear, transforming the energy of that fear and resistance into the positive emotion of compassion.

To do this meditation find a time and place where you can be quiet and undisturbed for about 15 minutes. Find a comfortable seated position with your back straight but not rigid so your breath flows freely. It may help if you close your eyes. You can follow the instructions which follow either by reading them into a recording device, or by opening your eyes from time to time to read the next instruction.

Notice the sensations of the breath in the abdomen, filling and emptying in each breath. Just notice. Don't try to change the breath in any way.

Let the belly soften to receive the whole breath.

Note the very beginning, middle and end of each inhalation and the space between. Do the same for the exhalation.

If the mind wanders, bring it back gently to the sensations that accompany the breath in the abdomen.

Think of someone you know who is suffering. As you think of them notice if there is any change in the sensation of your breathing. Does the stomach and throat tighten? Does the breathing become shallower? Allow the

resistance to dissolve by softening the muscles in the belly as you say to yourself a phrase like, “May your pain and suffering cease.” “May you be at peace.” Keep repeating that phrase and letting any resistance or aversion to that suffering dissolve in the softening of the stomach muscles, opening space in the body to compassionately hold that suffering.

As you repeat this process over and over, notice if the resistance dissolves. Notice if the belly muscles relax. Notice if a feeling of warmth arises in the center of your chest. If it does, send that sensation of compassion to the person. If it doesn't, the process is still working. Simply notice everything that is happening as you repeat the exercise.

Keep doing this for a while. If you wish, you can repeat this process for yourself, for a neutral person, or even an adversary. Experiment a bit if you wish.

At the end of your meditation, send that compassion to all being by repeating to yourself, “May all beings everywhere be free of their suffering. May all beings everywhere be at peace.” Imagine that feeling of compassion enveloping the whole world and all living things in it.

Do this exercise at least three times before your Wisdom Circle session if you can. If you find yourself resisting a repeat of this exercise, that's ok. Just notice what the resistance is about and reflect on it.

Questions to Wrestle With

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Then let it take you on a ride. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into—and break open—your ordinary thoughts. And then come to your Wisdom Circle meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.

1. At a time when your life or your heart has been broken, did you find on the other side of that experience some kind of gift or blessing?

Again Leonard Cohen: "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." Many people have told me that even though they would certainly not have chosen the loss, illness, injury or tragedy, that they experienced something as a result that they see as precious and wonderful. They may be broken but they have also been broken open to new possibilities. Have you experienced something like this in your life?

2. When you have experienced brokenness in your life, what person, place or thing most helped you get through it?

As the poet Maya Angelou says, "Nobody, but nobody, can make it through this world alone." What people helped you get through? What did they say or do that helped the most? What did people say or do that didn't help or made you feel worse, even though it was well-intentioned? What activities gave you peace and solace?

3. Since loss and suffering are a part of every person's life, what strengths, experiences and gifts can you bring to bear the next time you experience brokenness?

4. What gives you hope and strength when you are broken?

Wise Words:

Please remember that you are not expected, nor even encouraged, to engage with each of these quotes or discuss them in your Wisdom Circle. Just read them and see if one catches you—gives you a new way to experience or understand how you might live in a broken world.

Pain is not wrong. Reacting to pain as wrong initiates the trance of unworthiness. The moment we believe something is wrong, our world shrinks and we lose ourselves in the effort to combat the pain.

- Tara Brach

It isn't the things that happen to us in our lives that cause us to suffer, its how we relate to the things that happen to us that causes us to suffer.

- Pema Chodron

Pain is part of being alive, and we need to learn that. Pain does not last forever, nor is it necessarily unbearable, and we need to be taught that.

- Harold Kushner

Compassion literally means to feel with, to suffer with. Everyone is capable of compassion, and yet everyone tends to avoid it because it's uncomfortable. And the avoidance produces psychic numbing -- resistance to experiencing our pain for the world and other beings.

- Joanna Macy

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.

- Helen Keller

You know quite well, deep within you, that there is only a single magic, a single power, a single salvation...and that is called loving. Well, then, love

your suffering. Do not resist it, do not flee from it. It is your aversion that hurts, nothing else.

- Hermann Hesse

I wish I could show you when you are lonely or in darkness the astonishing light of your own being.

- Hafiz of Persia

The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.

- M. Scott Peck

Books

When Bad Things Happen To Good People, Herald Kushner

The Legacy of the Heart: The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood, Wayne Muller

The Book of Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures

Broken Open, Elizabeth Lesser

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous

Man's Search For Meaning, Viktor Frankl: This is the story of Viktor Frankl as he survived the Nazi camps and found that he could choose an attitude in that situation which helped him survive. A deeply powerful book and a classic.

Articles and Blogs

“Help and the Human Condition: What We Can Do To Help” by Victoria Stafford, uuworld.org, Fall 2005

<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/1809.shtml>

www.uuaddictionsministry.org A web site that deals with addiction and recovery from a UU perspective with links to resources.

Movies, Videos, Audios

Babbett's Feast

Adventures in Babysitting

“The Soul In Depression” radio program

<http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2009/depression/>

“The Spirituality of Addiction and Recovery”

<http://being.publicradio.org/programs/recovery/>