

“LET IT GO, MAKE ROOM FOR MORE”

OPENING WORDS

I was in a 10th floor apartment building in New York’s Greenwich Village. With me were twenty-five or thirty people I had never met (except for Sandy, of course). We sat on cushions on an elevated platform in a room that I can no longer describe in specifics, other than to say that the feeling in the room was one of peace. I was still nervous, not knowing what to expect. The workshop co- leader, a cheerful woman in her sixties gently touched a pair of Tibetan disc chimes together signaling the beginning of the session. Little did I know that I was about to meet the most important spiritual mentor in my life.

The year was 1983, I was 27 years old. I had moved to Meriden a couple of years earlier and Sandy and I were still trying to figure out what this relationship that was now rapidly developing into something far more serious than either of us had expected was all about. We had been watching with growing alarm as friends of ours were increasingly being diagnosed with this mysterious illness they were just beginning to refer to as “AIDS”. The cause had yet to be discovered, tests and successful treatments were years away. Growing alarm? Perhaps a bit of an understatement . . . we were scared out of our wits . . . although we didn’t talk about it . . . much, but every cough, every newly discovered freckle (real or imagined), every slightly elevated fever was a cause for apprehension. Could this be it? Our Minister at the Metropolitan Community Church in Hartford, Rev. JT Atkinson, had suggested this workshop to Sandy a year earlier and he had attended,

returning home glowing with a new outlook on life – and had wanted to go through the workshop again now that a year had elapsed since he first took it. I had been reluctant . . . what he had been able to explain to me seemed rather touchy-feely-newage-weird and I didn't know if I was willing to part with \$110 (no small sum of money for me in those days) to subject myself to what sounded like a potential brainwashing session. But then again, if JT recommended it, it couldn't be all that dangerous.

It just changed my life.

For the next two days I experienced meditation, something I had never done before – I explored parts of myself I never knew existed, considered ideas I could not have imagined . . . that not only were feelings of failure, imperfection, lack, confinement, loss, insecurity and emptiness inescapable parts of life, inextricably paired with feeling successful, accomplished, abundant, free, fulfilled, secure, and full – but that you could learn to love those “bad” feelings . . . that in fact they weren't “bad” feelings at all – just two sides of the same feeling, and that it was impossible to experience one without the other.

I'm still learning.

“Let Go and Live”, as June Graham-Spencer and her husband Jim called their workshop, was a turning point for me in how I look at the world. I can honestly say that I probably would not be here today were it not for what I experienced that weekend. What I wish to share with you today is a bit of what I learned, or should I say rather, “was exposed to” some thirty years ago – not that I am an expert, but as Jim and June would often say, “The best way to learn something is to teach it.

“LETTING GO OF ‘OUCH’”

At the risk of repeating myself I will preface what I am going to say with this . . . I am by no means an expert at this practice of letting go. When I take the time to meditate, something I would like to say I practice more than I do, I suffer like most of us with what Rev. Jan refers to as “monkey brain” – that tendency for everything else I’m dealing with in life, at work, at home, things that have happened I’m still processing and a myriad of tasks yet undone – to creep in and take over what should be, (excuse me, June, “COULD BE”, an experience of “here and now”.) Do I know that if I am struggling with that dreaded feeling of “not-good-enough” it is only my resistance to accepting it as a friend that is preventing me from appreciating the many ways that I am beyond good enough in so many ways? Sure . . . but if you remind me of this when I am in the throes of resistance – when whatever stupid mistake I just made or inadequacy to complete a task has me mercilessly beating on myself – don’t be surprised if the look you get back from me at that moment is, shall we say, not one of flowing acceptance. Sandy can vouch for this.

Still, what I have learned and am still learning from this practice has been life changing, and so I share it with you this morning.

Dualism, the belief that everything can be divided into good and evil, benevolent and malignant, is a concept that is so steeped in our culture to make the case that there is a different way of looking at the world sounds ludicrous to most people. It certainly did to me when June first suggested that there might be something to love about feeling deprived or invalidated. And I promise you that much of what I say here today

will bring up reactions of disbelief . . . or perhaps something stronger. What I would ask you to do for just the next twenty minutes or so, is to try to be aware of those thoughts and replace them with “How could my life be different if this was so?”

There are two sides to everything. There would be no day without night, no cold without warm, no wet without dry. At this time of year most of us would probably say that we could do just fine without winter’s cold, thank you very much. But would the first warm breezes of spring be as luscious, the first flowers poking up on the lawn as delicate and beautiful, the first buds bursting into leaves on the trees as wondrous were they not contrasted with what has just come before?

Many traditions, particularly eastern traditions such as Buddhism teach that the secret to happiness lies in accepting life in its own terms – and the unity of opposites. Feelings are much the same. They come in pairs and rather than being “opposites” as we often think of them, they are more like polarities. They define each other as yin and yang – inhale and exhale – necessary for each other’s existence.

Whether we are aware of it or not, all of our behavior is based on feelings. We react, not to situations, but to the feelings those situations generate. When someone points you out in a group of people as the person who did something wonderful for them lauding you with appreciation, you might react with pride and a sense of validation for having been recognized and appreciated. On the other hand, you might react with embarrassment for having attention brought to yourself, be offended that a private act of kindness was divulged to others, or concerned about what other people are thinking

– perhaps judging you for getting involved. Same situation, same stimulus, two different reactions. When awarded second prize in a cooking competition some might be overcome with disappointment at not taking the blue ribbon, while the third place winner might feel elated at being considered worthy of recognition next to such an accomplished chef, and someone who did not win a prize at all might leave the competition thrilled with the new ideas learned, eager to try them out for tomorrow’s dinner. We see this in sports all the time. How many people in the world will ever be “good enough” to play in the World Series, Superbowl, Stanley Cup finals, or Wimbledon? And yet how often do those who “lose” that final contest go away broken and crestfallen – so crushed at not having grabbed the gold ring that they cannot appreciate the joy of having been on the merry-go-round in the first place.

We all do it. Perhaps not on such a grand stage – but in little ways, every day.

In your order of service today there are two strips of paper – one with a list of “feelings” that most of us would describe as being “good”, the other with feelings we are more likely to struggle with. Take a look at that one for just a minute or two, and pick one of the feelings one you find the most difficult to deal with. What does that feel like to you?

{PAUSE}

Now take a moment to look at the other strip, the one with the more popular feelings on it. Find the one with the corresponding number . . . the feeling you are friendly with. Can you see how they are related, and how they represent two poles of the same feeling rather than something utterly different? If the answer is no, don’t worry.

Stick with me for a moment.

One of the concepts I learned from June was that “what we resist, persists”. When faced with a feeling we would rather not experience we can choose to resist it, or accept it for what it is and move on. And I had the hardest time believing this at first, until the reality of its truth kept being demonstrated to me over and over again, and I realized that, in the words of an old song, “I just can’t fight those feelings anymore” – because if I do I will find a way of creating more ways to feel empty in my world of incredible abundance, more ways to experience feeling foolish when I really am a pretty accomplished person, more opportunities to feel purposeless, inferior, misunderstood, incomplete, and disconnected . . .

Did I ever tell you about my old friend “disconnected”? Ohhhhh . . . just ask Sandy about that one!

And it’s pretty silly when you think about it . . . here I am, blessed with a relationship so many people only dream about, and countless friends who know me in many cases better than I know myself, who are there for me and would do just about anything for me . . . and yet when faced with the fear of disconnection I can go into the pits of resistance and all I can feel is alone and isolated.

Or rather, all I can feel is the RESISTANCE to feeling alone and isolated.

And yet, how can I appreciate the wonderful connections in my life without experiencing disconnection? How often do we spend so much time focusing on the cup being empty that we miss the opportunities to fill it? We spend so much time fighting, ignoring, or running away from

the feeling we don't like – and then cannot figure out why its feeling-pair twin is so elusive.

Let's try a little exercise, shall we. We're going to do a brief meditation, but first let's take a minute to do something with that feeling – the “unpopular” one we chose a few minutes ago. What I would like you to do is to choose a character . . . an avatar if you will . . . something you can picture in your mind's eye to represent the feeling you chose. Try to make it something approachable. One person who struggled with feeling trapped and confined struggled with this exercise until he realized that his picture of a tiny crushing cavern with no way out was probably too severe – and he replaced it with a little guy running around holding a wire cage around himself. Take a moment and pick your avatar.

{{ Guided Meditation}}

- Breathing in and out
- Find a place that is calm and comfortable
- Welcome your character
- Talk to it
- See it become its twin
- Bid it farewell
- Refocus on breath

{{End}}

For each of the feeling pairs there are many wonderful meditations to work with, and what I have found over the last 30 years of practice is the more I work with the feelings I resist, the more I am able to appreciate the ones I enjoy. I spend less time stuck, more time flowing.

The glass half empty or half full? The room too cold, or brisk and refreshing? The prize not all that I hoped for, or a symbol of accomplishment and inspiration to learn more and stretch myself to be more than I had imagined.

Every moment a choice . . . hold on to the resistance . . . or let go, and live in the moment.