

Beneath the Darkness

Beneath our shells of pain and darkness lives a light that transcends description, and all it takes to reunite us is our intention to do so. This light, or love, is who we truly are, and true healing is remembering this simple truth. Haven Traveno

One of the best things about being a therapist is that I get the chance to see – or at least feel – the light that shines beneath my clients’ shells of pain and darkness. I get to experience the love that they truly are, even when they can’t seem to connect to it themselves. And from that space, we can get on with the work of healing, wherever it takes us.

In my office, it’s easy to see or feel people’s inner light. I can step into that part of myself that is grounded, calm, and nurturing and trust that even though things don’t feel ok, that ultimately, it’s all ok. I can sit in my heart center and see and feel my own inner light. I have nothing else to do, no where to go. The business of the outside world stops when I cross the threshold of my office door.

Outside my office, when I’m not in the role of therapist, it’s not always so easy to stay connected to my heart center. I watch the news. I obsess about the never-ending list of things I should be doing. I compare myself with others and almost always find myself lacking in some way. I focus on how things should be rather than on how they are. I try to make things happen. In short, I get lost in some sort of mental spin and lose connection to that sense of trust that everything is OK as it is right now.

The sages say, “The heart is either opening in love or closing in fear.” When I slide out of trust, my heart begins to close in fear. It’s harder to see or feel the other person’s inner light – harder to feel the cosmic connection that we share, harder to connect to the love that is our shared true nature. As a result, I find myself being impatient with the elderly woman in front of me in the grocery store because she’s hobbling along and I have things I *have* to do. I immediately pull down the arm rest between seats on the plane because I’m worried that my seat mate will notice I’m small and feel justified in taking up some of my space. I snap at my partner when she makes a random comment because I think she’s either judging me or trying to control me. The more my heart closes in fear, the faster the little hamster in my brain spins around her wheel making up stories that send alerts to the rest of my system to stop breathing and to either run, fight or freeze.

In those moments when I can catch heart before it closes too much, my experience is different. If I can breathe, smile, and talk to the elderly woman in front of me, and offer her assistance if she needs it, I feel like I have more time rather than less, and I experience the joy of connecting with someone else. And even if she is crabby in return, I can feel compassion for her and hopefully leave her in a better emotional and energetic space than before. When I take a moment to connect with my seat mate on the plane, I am more comfortable because I don’t have to put as much energy into keeping my energetic guard up. When I take a moment to breathe before I react to my partner, I find that I less defensive and what could have been a fight turns into an opportunity for deeper intimacy.

I would much rather live in the spaciousness of my open heart than the constraint of my closing one but somewhere deep in my reptilian brain, I believe that fear will keep me safe. And it does. When I’m riding my bike and a dog starts chasing me, my fear gets the adrenaline going and speeds me to safety. When the driver in front of me slams on his or her brakes, my fear causes me to take

immediate action. When someone threatens me on the street, my fear helps react so that I defend myself and get away. But fear only protects against actual, immediate, life-threatening situations. My fear doesn't help me deal with the economy or global warming. It doesn't help salvage a relationship that's on the rocks or cure my mother's dementia. It offers no help in the face of potential failure, humiliation, abandonment or rejection. To the contrary, it makes things worse. My anxiety squelches my spontaneity, so that I can't really think on my feet, can't creatively respond to the economic crisis, global warming or my mother's dementia. I am more likely to be defensive in response to my partner. Because it blocks my access to creativity, I am more likely to fail, more likely to feel humiliated, more likely to act in ways that lead others to reject me.

The answer? Breathe myself right back into the present moment. When I cross the threshold into my office, I walk into being present – to “just this, here now.” I walk into the truth of a meditation that I've been doing for years: “Yesterday's gone. Tomorrow's not here yet. Right now, I'm fine.” When I ground myself in my breath, I slide back into that state of trust that everything is OK and escape from the pain and darkness that holds me back. My heart opens in love and I know that I am safe, even if I fail, even if make a mistake, even if someone rejects or abandons me.

Originally appeared in Outlook: Everything is Political