

## How Long Will It Take?

"Mr. Owl, how many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Roll Pop?"

"Let's see. One. Two. Three." *Crunch* "Three."

Devotee: "*How long will it take for my heart to feel whole again?*"

Guru: "*As long as it takes.*"

How long will it take to get over this?" This is often one of the first questions we ask when we are struggling with any sort of emotional hardship. For those of us who are grieving the death of a loved one, the dissolution of a significant relationship, the loss of a job, or a major health issue or injury, this question may feel especially salient. The pain that burns deep in our hearts may at times feel unbearable. In the midst of our pain, we want a definitive answer. We go to great lengths to find this answer. And we want the number to be small, something like "three." Unfortunately, the more we seek an answer, the less clarity we get because there is no formula we can use to derive "the" answer. And all that energy we put into finding one fuels even more pain.

A better approach is to take the advice that Rainer Maria Rilke gives in *Letters to a Young Poet*:

*...I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.*

But what does it mean to live the questions?

It means sitting with your pain and keeping company with your grief. This is probably the last thing you want to do when you're hurting. Most of us have learned a thousand ways to check out. We turn on the TV, pickup the phone, crank up the stereo, eat, drink, smoke, starve ourselves, pop a pill, get so busy we don't have time to feel, masturbate or have sex with someone, go shopping, check our e-mail, read or post blogs, surf the internet, shop, or anything else we can think of to avoid feeling. While distraction is useful sometimes, it should be thought of like taking a short vacation from feelings rather than a permanent solution to having them at all. Unfortunately, the only way out of grief is through it. Feelings don't go away just because you avoid them; they just get buried, only to pop up at inconvenient moments like the bloody corpses in George Romero's "Dawn on the Living Dead."

In order to live the questions, in order to sit with your pain and keep company with your grief, you have to be present. You have to really connect to what's happening -- to the sensations that you are experiencing -- in this moment. One of the best ways to do this is to connect with, or watch your breath. It's best to start small. Some folks talk about sitting and meditating for 30 minutes or an hour at a time. That's wonderful if you can do it. If you're in pain and aren't used to meditating, that's probably pretty foreboding. Sitting and observing your breath for 5 minutes is a great first place to start.

Body position is important here. One option is to sit cross-legged on the floor with a pillow under your sitz bones (the bones you can feel when you sit on hard, uncomfortable chairs) so that you are leaning forward a bit with your spine extended so that there's a lot of room in your lungs for air. If sitting cross-legged isn't your thing, you can sit in a chair with your feet well grounded on the floor, leaning slightly forward with your spine lengthened upwards so that your abdomen has room to expand and your lungs have room to take in oxygen. Key here is to not slump over or curve your back like most people do when they work on their computers or sink into the couch when watching TV.

So, once you've got yourself seated in a comfortable position with your spine lengthened, the next step is to watch your breath. You can focus on how it feels coming in and going out of your nostrils, how it feels as it expands your abdomen, or you can follow it in through the nose, all the way through the lungs and again out through the nose. Do whatever works for you. Your whole "job" here, for the next five minutes (or however long you choose to "sit") is to simply watch your breath. It may be helpful to silently say, "in" as you breathe in, and "out" as you breathe out, or to count your breath to help keep you focused on your breath. If you find that your mind is drifting, gently (very gently) pull attention back to your breath. Once you get the knack of focusing on your breath, you can change the mantra to something like, "Just this, here now," or "Yesterday's gone, tomorrow's not here yet. Right now, I'm fine."

Once you feel like you've got breathing down, you can expand your awareness to noticing how you are feeling. The catch here is that you aren't judging your feelings or trying to change them. You are just noticing, sitting with, or being with your feelings in a soft, gentle and compassionate way.

The beauty of this technique is that you can do it anywhere; at your desk, in your living room, in the grocery store, and while you're waiting on red lights. The added bonus is that it doesn't screw up your liver or cost a thing. Inevitably, as you keep company with your feelings, they will change. Take heart in this.

As you work through this, not only will you eventually discover that the experience of pain shifts over time, but that your questions will shift as well. And as you sit with those questions, you will inevitably live into the answers.

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