

## The Gaps Between

*Suffering is the itch we feel when we let ourselves fall into the gap between what is and what we want.*

*Pain is inevitable. Suffering is a choice.  
(yoga expression)*

It's August and I'm packing for a trip to Texas with a heavy heart. My mother has dementia and it's progressing at breakneck speed. For awhile, her dementia manifested as a break in her short term memory. She would tell the same story and ask the same questions over and over and over. I staved off the tears by joking that talking to her was like talking to a pothead. But now the holes in her memory have grown. And her ability to navigate her world is also leaving. She gets lost on the way to the library and grocery store, places she used to go on a weekly basis. Even her long-term memory is fading. She struggles to remember the names of old friends and relatives. Sometimes she even has a hard time recalling my name.

And it's not just her memory that's gone. Her vibrancy seems to have escaped as well. She was always on the move. Someone would call and say, "Hey, you wanna go to Canada next week," and she'd say, "Yes! When are we leaving?" Visiting her used to be exhausting because I had to work so hard to keep up with her. Now, she spends her days in her reclining chair, reading the paper and napping with the cat. She rarely does anything or goes anywhere unless someone comes to pick her up. It's as if the executive director of her mind-body system took the elevator up to the top floor, propped her feet on a spacious mahogany desk and took a nap.

My heart can barely hold the pain I feel when I think about her. The sadness in her voice when she can't remember things quakes me to my core. I imagine how frustrated, frightened and vulnerable I would feel were I in her shoes. I want to save her, to say or do something, anything, to ease her pain. And there is nothing I can do but be present to her process and watch her fade away, one memory at a time.

The process of bearing witness is all the harder because I haven't let go of the hope that she could magically say or do something to make me whole. All my life, I longed to feel connected to her, to feel unconditional love streaming from her to me, to really feel that I was part of the tribe that is my family. I was the very tan sheep in a very white family and I think that if my mother had had a wish for me, it would have been, "May she be 'normal.'" And 'normal' never fit. I was a loner who loved to read. I loved riding bikes, playing softball and building forts with my boy friends. But when it came to playing Dr., I always chose girls to play with. For years, I avoided coming out because I was so afraid that she would reject me. When I finally did come out, in my late 20's, we navigated around the issue in a haze of "Don't ask. Don't Tell." She pretended that my partner was my roommate and I didn't press the issue much for fear of rocking the boat. For almost 20 years I have assuaged this pain by living several states away. Mind you, I pay a price for this "safety zone." To live in the Yankee hinterland is an unfathomable choice for a native Texan. It's as if I was born with a homing device that continually tries to beep me back home. And yet, when I do go home, the pain of not fitting in pushes me back to the safety that all those states in between me and Texas provides. The result of this tug of war is sense of spiritual homelessness.

The sages tell me that the real problem lies in my illusion that her inability to fully accept my uniqueness somehow makes me less than whole. This leads to the fantasy that if only she could love

me unconditionally, I would be fine. My suffering, they say, is a choice because rather than accepting reality as it is, I cling to the fantasy of what I wish were reality.

Mind you, somewhere in my brain, I feel great compassion for her because I understand that her inability to accept my vibrant, multicolored and unique self is not about me at all. It's about her own deep rooted fear of not fitting in. But there is great truth to the notion that the greatest distance is the distance between the head and the heart. This distance makes a road trip back to Texas seem like a drive across town.

The sages also say that the more you try to avoid your suffering, the bigger you make it. The answer, it seems, is to keep company with your suffering, to hold that wounded child within in the lap of compassion until the tears finally clear out all the pain. All those tears, they say, will create the space you need to connect with the higher level truth that you are whole and have been always been so. Such an easy task on paper, and yet, in reality, keeping company with suffering is profoundly difficult.

The Zen Buddhists have a saying, "Leap and the net will appear." It occurs to me that I am much more likely to leap when the building is burning down around me. I know that in those moments when I finally have surrendered to my pain and let my tears flow, my pain subsided. I also know that every time I have surrendered to the grieving process in the past, something has shifted in me and I have become more whole. In the midst of this pain, it's hard to remember what it's like to not feel pain. At the same time, the flames are getting harder to ignore. So as I pack, I am preparing to leap. The map I carry in the form of words from artists and mystics who have ridden through their own suffering adds to my burgeoning confidence that I'll land safely. Here are some of the more helpful words I've read of late.

*When the Japanese mend broken objects they aggrandize the damage by filling the cracks with gold, because they believe that when something's suffered damage and has a history it becomes more beautiful. ([Barbara Bloom](#))*

*"The deeper sorrow carves into your being the more joy you can contain." ~ Kahlil Gibran*

*The pain passes, but the beauty remains. ([Pierre-Auguste Renoir](#))*

Perhaps when I emerge on the other side I too will carve a map for intrepid journeyers to follow.

*Originally appeared in Outlook Weekly*