

Expressing Our Pain Without Blame

With Miki Kashtan

Nina (not her real name) was beside herself with anguish. For months she was convinced that Simon's (another fictitious name) relationship with his ex-girlfriend still had unfinished business. He acknowledged it, and they talked about it again and again, without any relief in sight. He was responding defensively instead of being able to hear her pain, and they spiraled, repeatedly, to the verge of a breakup neither of them wanted.

When Nina asked for my support in how to navigate this situation, I invited her to take full responsibility for her reactions as an opportunity to grow and stretch in an area of pain. This doesn't mean she won't have pain. It only means that when the pain arises she can choose to own it and be with it rather than attempt to manage it by asking Simon to be or do something different.

This is a deep practice, and one that I imagine can be very liberating for Nina. It's about pulling back, again and again, from blaming and judging and trying to make things different from what they are. It's about cultivating acceptance of life, Simon, and herself, and stretching and stretching to embrace at one and the same time the reality of love and care between the two of them alongside the radical uncertainty of the future.

This practice is one of several core spiritual challenges that we face as human beings. When someone else's actions, especially someone close to us, don't line up with what we most want, we tend to hold that person accountable for our pain. We have been trained to believe that whenever we are in pain someone else is responsible, even at fault. When we then attempt to talk with that person about our pain, they become defensive in response to our blame, and we effectively ensure they can't hear us.

When we are able to take full responsibility for our pain, to see it as our own, as arising from what we tell ourselves and not from someone else's actions, the other person often has much more space to hear our reactions. Simon would be able to hear Nina when she takes responsibility, because her reactions will then be about her and her process of learning and stretching rather than veiled accusations and attempts to make things different. As I pointed out to Nina, the reality is that Simon is choosing her, and choosing her, and choosing her, again and again. I saw more solidity in the relationship than she experienced, despite Simon's continued connection with his ex.

I supported Nina in seeing that her pain in relation to the way he maintains relationships with former lovers is likely to continue. The stretch I invited her to make, and that I invite all of us to make, repeatedly, any time we experience tremendous pain in relation to another's actions, is to resist the temptation to go into right/wrong thinking about the pain. Instead, I suggested that she could surrender to being with the tenderness of the pain. This is not to say that she was going to like Simon's actions. It only means not blaming him.

To my delight, Nina accepted my invitation wholeheartedly. She understood that being able to maintain inner peace when her needs are not satisfied is a source of tremendous freedom. She connected deeply with her longing for security, for the kind of love she wanted as a child, for the comfort of knowing she is wanted. She allowed herself to grieve what had happened to her in the past, and felt stronger as she approached a weekend away with Simon.

A few days later I received an email from her. She and Simon weathered another storm with much more grace. One more time Simon acted in ways that clearly indicated that his ex-girlfriend was still on his mind. Nina was able to stay very present with herself. As in the past, she experienced a lot of hurt. This time, however, she didn't skip over the pain into anger or separation. Instead, she was able to

open her heart and stay present with herself until the pain eventually dissolved. As we had both anticipated, Simon was then able to offer his full presence and very deep empathy. Nina was celebrating that she felt no blame and Simon didn't get defensive.

Over time, as they continue in this more open approach, Nina will likely come to the present moment and its meaning rather than reacting to residual hurt from her past. She will likely become more resilient on account of finding ways to express, fully, what's important to her without blaming. Simon, on the other hand, will likely develop more and more capacity to hear from Nina without disappearing or getting angry. He can then find his own opportunities to learn and grow. He can make deeper sense of his choices, increase his ability to see the effect of his actions, and find freedom to show up as he wants. Just as much as we can interlock our pain with other people, we can also intertwine our freedom.