

Paying Attention In Troubled Times

With Rachelle Lamb

Let's face it .. these are stressful times. And the more stress people experience, the less resourced they become, especially when faced with difficult challenges. I recently wrote a piece that received a lot of online engagement:

The anxieties that plague us are, for the most part, a sane response to insane situations and circumstances. But we rarely treat them as such. Instead we look for fixes to overcome the sense of powerlessness, despair, or anxiety informing our emotional and mental states. We rush out to buy self-help books, we align our chakras, sign up for programs to still the mind or 'transform' ourselves, take meds, convince ourselves that we're distraught because we must be 'coming from fear'. The assumption is that people who 'come from love' aren't ever agitated .. or angry .. or that they never judge. The assumption is that 'coming from love' is commensurate with wisdom. Well friends, to learn discernment is vital to life itself .. it is to have your wits about you. It's the ability to look head on at what is in front of us and recognize what serves life and what doesn't.

The challenge of our time is to pay attention, to learn how to employ one's mind, to deprogram it from the regime colluding indoctrination it has been subjected to, and to become discerning in a manner that will in fact be of service to life, the earth and those yet to be born. So if you're feeling sad, agitated, angry, confused .. consider that you're not actually messed up and in need of personal development but rather you're in need of a sane culture.

An overwhelming number commented on how powerfully these words spoke to them. And perhaps you might call it a relief to consider that your angst doesn't actually come from you but rather from the world around you .. and that it derives in large part from the manufactured environments that are more hostile than they are kind towards our human souls and bodies. In that sense, we can see that we are not to blame for the afflictions that assault us and how, with that understanding, we might have some compassion for our often poor responses to stressful moments. The more unfortunate news however is we're quite limited when it comes to having significant impact on those external influences. One may not agree with the level of technology in our lives for instance but it's difficult to completely cut oneself off from it let alone put a stop it.

And so as the troubles brew in our midst, there's really no place to go to get away from it all. The meditation pillow, the latest happiness program or the 10 day trip to somewhere warm is short lived. Whatever coping strategies we adopt, we must nevertheless contend with the ever growing challenges of living in a fast paced world that shows no signs of slowing down.

One valuable gift we can give ourselves and each other is our way of speaking and listening. It's more important than ever to consider what comes out of our mouths and how it contributes or interferes with our ability to serve life and care for each other.

Here then is where personal development can come in handy, especially in the context of how we attend to speech and listening. There is great benefit in being willing to bear faithful witness to the heartbreaks in our midst and to be heartbroken by them and speak accordingly. There is great benefit in recognizing that an overwhelming amount of the suffering and challenges that we bear are more collective and cultural than they are personal, even when they register so personally. It's not enough to simply take care of oneself these days, at least not if one cares for the world at large. Cultural repair must be part of our personal work if we are going to attend to the whole.

May heartbreak find a proper place in how we converse with each other about the realities that plague

us. May it not be confused with grievance, blame, despair or give way to the urge to problem solve. May heartbreak instead be understood as mature acknowledgment that things have not gone as we would like and we may have to say goodbye to our dreams of things working out .. just as we would be called to do when a relationship ends, either by death or parting of ways. It just really hurts.

Leonard Cohen said it so well when he wrote,

“What is the appropriate behavior for a man or a woman in the midst of this world, where each person is clinging to his piece of debris? What’s the proper salutation between people as they pass each other in this flood?”

The point of convergence between our inner and outer worlds is our speech and action. What we say and do is no small thing. We are living in a critical time. This is a time to bring greater awareness to our speech and actions and to grant them the respect and discipline they deserve. May it come to pass that the small children living in the world today and those yet to be born one day speak about us, one, two, three generations before them, as people who thought about them with great concern and proceeded accordingly. May it be so.

Poet William Stafford wrote in his poem A Ritual to Read to Each Other:

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe —
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

And so, let’s be clear. Let’s be discerning. Let’s be compassionate. Let’s pay attention.