



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Keeping an Open Heart ”

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Centering Thoughts

Open the window in the center of your chest, and let the spirits fly in and out. Rumi

If we open our hearts, we will also find open hearts – it is always mutual. Abbot Leo von Rudloff

Not knowing when the dawn will come, I open every door. Emily Dickenson

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

Antoine de Saint Exupery

Reflection

Sometimes when I watch TV, I see Jane Seymour advertising her open-hearted jewelry collection. Have you seen these ads? Although I’m talking about open hearts today, I’m not talking about jewelry.

However, Seymour published a book to accompany her jewelry titled, not surprisingly, *Open Hearts*. In the book she says, “If your heart is open, love will always find its way in.”

Although I’m not fond of her jewelry, I think she’s right about open hearts. She or her editor also write, “*Open Hearts* reflects life’s joys, heartaches, and inspirations and symbolizes that only when you can love yourself and keep your heart open are you able to give and receive love.” Somewhere in that message I detect a pitch for buying jewelry for yourself, in case no one gives it to you. But enough of pop-jeweler Seymour.

Of more value is an event shared by American-born Tibetan-Buddhist Pema Chödrön from her childhood. When she was about six years old Pema claims she received an essential teaching from an old woman sitting in the sun. Pema, or Deirdre, as she was known during her childhood, was walking by the old woman’s house one day feeling lonely, unloved and mad, kicking anything she could find.

The woman watched Pema and said, “Little girl, don’t you go letting life harden your heart.”

In that moment, Pema received this pithy wisdom: “We can let the circumstances of our lives harden us so that we become increasingly resentful and afraid, or we can let them soften us

and make us kinder and more open to what scares us. We always have this choice.” [From *Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*, by Pema Chödrön and online at www.lionsroar.com/bodhichitta-the-excellence-of-awakened-heart/]

I also believe we have the choice whether to be open-hearted or closed and hard-hearted. Always.

In the story we told earlier [“Wu Wei’s Pot,” by Mark Nepo, in *As Far as the Heart Can See*, p. 103-107, adapted], the Empress approached life with a hard heart. She expected people to obey her commands. She demanded a perfect pot, but even the Master Potter was not in control of the creative process. As he told the Empress, the fire has the last word. Unused to being disobeyed, the Empress became angry and unhappy.

The potter understood that the pot would become what it would become. He understood the clay and the fire made a contribution to the final product. Wu Wei, the potter, allowed the process to unfold as it would, without trying to make it something it could not become.

Wu Wei the potter exemplifies *wu wei*, the term in Buddhist and Taoist tradition. *Wu wei* translates as non-doing or non-action—to do without effort. But that doesn’t mean passivity. The potter worked patiently with the clay until it yielded and was shaped. And he welcomed how the fire enhanced the beauty of the pot he had shaped. Some might say the potter was ‘doing by non-doing,’ in other words, he made his own contribution, but accepted the contribution of the fire. *Wu wei* means not overtly controlling something, but moving with it. The phrase “Go with the flow” expresses well this Tao concept.

At first, the Empress wasn’t going with the flow. She was more like a rock obstructing the flow. But because of her dream, she learned to accept the pot’s beauty and she saw what she could not see before, the beauty in imperfection. She learned to open her heart and see the value of cracks. She learned to drink up the lesson her cracked heart offered her, and she became a better person. By no longer wanting to be called Empress, she became one, or equal, with her people, and she gave up her need to control what could not be controlled.

Our lives are nothing like that of the Empress or Master Potter. But, as Pema Chödrön said, we do have similar choices about whether to be open-hearted or not. Whatever the circumstances of our lives, we can choose to close ourselves off, be mad and kick the dirt, or we can accept them, appreciate them as teachers, gain insight from them, and move beyond them.

I imagine you can think of moments in your life where you were faced with such a choice. Perhaps you face it now. There are way too many of these opportunities in our lives—perhaps a parent’s divorce, job loss, discrimination, ill health, loneliness, sadness, or even political setback, to name a few of the rocks placed in our way. We can allow these rocks to engender disappointment, anger, hate, or fear.

But where does that get us? It can’t change our circumstances. It doesn’t make us happy. It doesn’t solve any problem. It just keeps us stuck, clinging to the rock as if it were a life preserver. But it’s not. It’s a weight that will sink us. If, instead, we let challenging events crack our hearts open we can feel the pain and heal ourselves, allowing us to move forward.

But opening our hearts to pain isn’t easy. Jack Kornfield, another American Buddhist, reminds us, “To open deeply, as genuine spiritual life requires, we need tremendous courage and strength, a kind of warrior spirit. But the place for this warrior strength is in the heart.”

A warrior accepts that we cannot control what happens to us. A warrior learns to relate to challenge, even amidst the fear and pain. A warrior knows that even greater than pain and suffering is the truth that only love heals. An open heart is a loving heart. An open heart is a strong heart, strengthened by experience and resilient through experience.

I believe opening our heart to pain and suffering also helps to empathize more with others. Because we feel our own pain, we can recognize another's pain, and we can offer the compassion and support we would wish for ourselves. We can help each other move past the rocks we cling to.

Our Unitarian Universalist Seventh Principle affirms we are part of an interdependent web of all existence. To be part of a single web of life means we are connected to one another. We are not alone in facing disappointment, grief, or injustice. We form a single community despite the many ways we try to divide and separate ourselves. Buddhist and Taoist teachings also agree that we are one with all things.

So let our hearts be open.

Let our hearts be open to each other.

Let our hearts be open to all that life brings us.

Let us be here for each other, ready to provide a glimpse of light, a drop of water, a sturdy shoulder, or a guiding hand when they are needed.

Let the Spirit of Love and Kindness, the God of Grace, and whatever divine force may hold us, help to keep our hearts open and as one.

Let it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Share a time when what you felt was a painful crack but turned out to be a welcome opening.
2. Who do you find most difficult to love or be kind to? What might be a first step in beginning a relationship or healing the rift between you and that person?
3. What flow do you resist in your life? How can you accept what comes your way more easily?