

Staying Centered in the Middle of The Storm,
A spiritual perspective on the turmoil of our times

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A couple of months ago my best friend came over for dinner. Trump had just begun his presidency and I was deeply triggered – angry, sad and scared. His first appointees to his cabinet and his continual lying about stupid things, like the size of the crowd at his inauguration, horrified me. Recent news about white supremacists meeting in Washington and a clip of them saying “Heil Trump!” had just aired on CNN. I was ready to jump out of my skin.

Before dinner, as we always do, we held hands in a centering, silent prayer. Suddenly, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I dropped his hand (or to be more accurate, “threw” his hand away from mine!) and yelled, “I can’t center! The world is falling down around our ears! I am too upset!”

Shocked, my friend very kindly said. “Wow, you are really triggered by what’s happening.” “Your damn right I am!” I shouted.

I think that over the past couple of months, many of us, even after decades of spiritual practice have experienced something like this. Although it is perhaps a little embarrassing, I think that this is an important experience to inquire deeper into.

It is a kind of truism in the spiritual community that an important goal of our work is to dissolve the limiting structures, fixations, armoring and defensive strategies that we find ourselves stuck in. The hypothesis is that the more we dissolve these “positions” the deeper we can rest into our fundamental, true nature. Most of us discover as we relax into an experience of quiet presence and calm abiding we feel greater degrees of centeredness, clarity, and an objectivity in our daily life as well. The peace that can arise from this spacious vastness is timeless, formless, and revitalizing of every aspect of our lives.

When it works, this is a fabulous experience that we naturally fall in love with. It opens us to an experience of possibility, peace and freedom and gives us space from our inner conflicts. It allows our troubled minds to rest and gives us access to timeless peace. And it opens our hearts to a deep care for all beings.

The question that I would like to address here is how do we discern the correct balance between this alignment with timeless wisdom and our engagement with the world around us?

Yes, I have found the current state of our world to be emotionally triggering and stimulating. This has also been true for many of my friends and for the people that I work with professionally as a psychotherapist. As I have sat with my reactivity to current events, I have been trying to understand what contribution I can make that will be helpful and beneficial. What will actually contribute to the evolution of humanity and not simply deepen the polarization and misunderstandings that plague us?

There is an old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon in which they are in a sled hurtling over a cliff. As they are falling into the abyss one of them says, "What if nothing matters?" and the other answers "What if everything matters?" How can we hold that each of these questions holds one side of a paradoxical truth?

In order to hold both sides of this paradox I think that it is important to inquire into the interplay of our subjective consciousness and the network of relationship and care that supports our social world.

Over 40 years of spiritual practice I have spent countless hours paying exquisite attention to my subjective experience and observing the patterns of my mind and body. Perhaps you can relate to the painstaking and difficult process of observing your repetitive patterns, discovering the limitations of the particular filter that you are viewing the world through, and the freedom and relaxation that comes from letting an outdated pattern go. The more I dissolve and relax these structures, the more I discover an integrated and coherent consciousness that is not held together by fear, grasping, denial, cognitive distortions, physical tension, or any one of the many defensive strategies that my tricky mind and body gets stuck in.

Do I always have access to this state - clearly no. There certainly are experiences that still trigger me into reactivity, tension, anxiety etc. But, I am also less prone to be thrown off my center and more capable of returning to this coherent, integrated state when I have been thrown off center. And I am certainly much clearer as to what is *actually true* and less apt to believe the "false news" of my personality patterns, fixated old roles and positions.

One of the more interesting things to me about meditation and the process of dissolving these “blockages”, is that there seems to emerge, without any intention or attempt to control my experience, a sense of curiosity and a kind, tender interest in the world around me. This impulse to explore the world feels fundamental. It also feels deeply connected to a sense of embodied security and safety in myself and my surroundings. If I feel threatened, my natural curiosity quickly folds up its tent and gets out of town. Similarly, the deep states of meditative peace and clarity disappear.

Recent psychological research supports the importance of a safe, secure early attachment to caregivers in fostering a child’s ability to explore and grow (Siegel, 2012). Modern neurobiology and trauma research also teaches us that it is critically important to feel safe in ones’ environment to support a coherent, stable nervous system at any age (Ogden, Minton, and Pain, 2006) Although we can become more and more resilient as a result of inner work, and some of us were gifted with very secure early attachments, it seems that we are all vulnerable and that with enough stress, anyone, perhaps even a Buddha, can crack.

The discernment between an experience of curiosity, and an experience of threat with it’s inner response of tension and stubborn determination to survive at all costs, is a critical fork in the road. Although it might seem obvious in retrospect, in the moment, it can be difficult to tell the difference. Particularly if I am highly identified with being “right” about a position that I have taken, it is easy for me to convince myself that I am centered and thinking clearly when a more rigorous examination reveals that I am quite off kilter. A key criteria for me is that, although both states are related to my environment – one is related with tension and tends to take everything personally while the other is spacious, curious and relaxed.

Spaciousness does not mean “spaced out” or lacking in clear, precise thinking and feeling. In fact, it is just the opposite. When I am feeling spacious, I have greater access to clarity, precision and wisdom. Although I may be able to think quickly when I am reactive or feeling threatened, if I look deeper, my “brilliance” is being motivated by a compelling need to defend my point of view rather than a genuine dialogue or curiosity about what is true.

Spiritual practice teaches us something even more profound. Whenever I am thinking of “me” as a fixed identity rather than as a continuously expanding and evolving process, it is actually my subtle or overt response to threat. My so called “personality”, as distinguished from my true nature, is really, simply the inner dialogue that I have created in response to the stresses of my environment. This is both a mental and explicit dialogue and a pre-verbal, implicit and somatic dialogue. When the inside of “me” is truly quiet and open all the way down into the implicit pre-verbal layers of my body/mind, the boundary between the “me” and the “not me” is fluid, playful and porous. When I am really relaxed, what I call “me” is simply a certain kind of organization of my attention that has no inherent substance of its own. My “me-ness” changes constantly with every new context. In other words, I am “No-Thing”. The only thing that doesn’t change is the awareness of awareness itself. The contents of that awareness are always moving. This is the insight of meditators from many traditions observing their experience for thousands of years.

But let us look at this “No-thingness” a little deeper. Although there is no fixed “I” that we can pin down anywhere in this experience, the experience of centeredness certainly has a sense of gravitas and profound presence. There are other qualities as well that we can notice. When we are centered and look at the field of our relationships from the clarity of a relaxed, curiosity and interest, we feel both connected and separate. There is a quality of timelessness and quiet that stays awake and alive inside of us in the middle of our daily life. Another way of saying this is that we are connected to a sense of vertical height and depth of pure being and at the same moment to a horizontal relatedness that is connected to a particular time, particular people and to unique social and cultural contexts. We are in the world, but not of it. It is also noteworthy, although we are not emotionally reactive, we are totally capable of responding instinctually and quickly if there is a genuine danger (like a car bearing down on us or a snake in the grass). When we can really rest into this stance, we are flexible, connected, separate, clear, curious, spontaneous and very present.

Another, critically important quality in this context, is that we have a direct, intuitive knowing of what is right and wrong. Embedded in this deep sense of vertical presence and horizontal connection, is an inherent sense of ethics. This makes sense if we look at presence as a profoundly open heart. When our hearts are open we immediately feel the effect of our actions

on our environment. We “know” when we have lied, been hurtful, unkind, or misattuned. We know this not because of some internalized book of rules that we have learned, but because our attunement and empathy immediately gives us the feedback. When our hearts are open, we instinctively know how to be good parents, good friends, and good citizens of our communities. All spiritual traditions have ethical teachings that are inextricably linked with their spiritual practices.

To be sure we could argue at length about when ethics becomes an outer structure that is imposed rather than an inner structure that is discovered. And, it certainly seems true that our sense of ethics shifts with each context and historical moment and that whenever we have a rigid set of rules we are in danger of violating the spirit of *presence*. Understanding the specific, most centered, ethical response to a situation is a deep and worthy inquiry. But for our purposes here, I would like to simply notice that the deeper our heart and mind opens to our true nature, that there is an immediate, experiential sense of what the Buddhists call “right action”. In other words, when we engage our spiritual practices with sincerity and heart we discover a sense of conscience. This is exemplified in the elegance of this Sufi invocation: “Towards the one, the perfection of love, harmony and beauty” and the many versions of the Metta prayer found in Buddhism: “May all beings be happy. May all Beings be free from suffering and root of suffering. May all being be at peace.”

So now let’s explore what happens when things get more challenging, as they have in the current political climate. Given what we have already discovered about how important a sense of basic trust and safety is in maintaining our curiosity and openness, it is interesting to observe how the perceived or real experience of threat at the political level effects our consciousness.

Let me use myself as a research subject. Here are some initial observations. Both during the campaign and when Trump won the election and became the US President, I felt a sea change in my internal state. I had never experienced a political process that was so rancorous, so mean, and so filled with personal cruelty and bullying. I was scared about the fact that this kind of behavior and the communication norms that were being modeled had received so much support from a large swathe of our country. I felt despair about humanity and worried for our future as a human race. I still

often feel reactive, angry, sad, depressed, and triggered when I see or read the news.

At a meta-level, another thing I noticed, was my reactivity to difference. As my mentor in the group therapy field, Yvonne Agazarian, says, two things seem to be simultaneously true about the human response to difference. Human beings absolutely need difference to “survive, develop and transform”, and too much difference is de-stabilizing and even traumatic (Agazarian, 1997). We both need differences to learn and grow, and we loathe, hate and detest differences when they exceed, what neurobiologist Dan Siegel calls, our “window of tolerance” (Siegel, 2012). We will do whatever we can to defend ourselves from the de-stabilizing effects of actions, points of view and norms that are outside of this window. We will scape-goat them, deny their existence, and defend ourselves with lots of rancor and even violence. Certainly, we have seen all of these things in the mainstream and social media and in political rallies from Trump and his supporters and in response to Trump. Clearly both sides in this polarized dialogue feel deeply threatened and have lost their curiosity about the other and their capacity for a relaxed, open exchange that might lead to real understanding.

How can we find clarity, objectivity and guidance in the middle of this mess? How can we truly learn to listen to each other again?

As spiritual practitioners, I think we have a high and important calling in this regard. My sense is that the most important thing we have to contribute is precisely the atmosphere of relaxed curiosity and inquiry into the truth which is at the heart of our practice. This means overcoming our reactivity and upset and using the resource of our years of spiritual practice with great determination. This also means finding a depth of security and safety in what we know to be true from our spiritual work even when there is a tsunami of stimulation that wants to pull us out of our center and frighten us. This means holding onto our vertical depth with great tenacity as we wade into the fray of our current political and social climate and asking ourselves and each other, again and again, what is actually true here?

Time magazine recently published an interview with Trump titled “The Death of Truth”. I think that we must, patiently, compassionately, and firmly, in little and big ways, not allow this.

Earlier in this inquiry I noticed how curiosity, which I think is the fundamental drive behind our inquiry into truth, pulls up stakes and leaves when there is a sense of threat. Unfortunately, these are times with great threats, both real and imagined. Most importantly in my mind, what is being threatened are 1) norms of communication that are respectful and tolerant of difference, 2) values that are critical for the creation of a safe and sustainable planet for all beings regardless of their religious affiliation, sexual orientation, country of origin, color or gender, and 3) the sustainability of our natural environment and the denial of the findings of science in regards to climate change. These concerns are not partisan issues. They are human issues and lie at the foundation of a culture that cares for the good of the whole and not just the few. It is because these norms and values are being thrown into question that this is not, as my friend Lama Wangdu sometimes says, “just another day in Samsara”. Our individual lives will end sooner or later, but these norms and values are the very core of what will allow us to survive as a human race. They are not ‘personal’. It is vitally important that we stand behind these values and support them. These are the norms and values that can safely guide our human family for generations to come and lead us into a sustainable future. And I believe that they are also values that emerge inside of the human heart if we attend to our experience with mindfulness and sincerity.

I would like to call on all of us to hold a space of safety and deep connection to the people that we might disagree with and continually ‘drain the swamp’ of the pervasive atmosphere of threat and unsafety that is poisoning our collective dialogue. As mindful, awake citizens of the world, committed to the values of compassion and respect, we cannot condone or look the other way when we see actions that we assess as harmful to others or to the planet. I ask that we both stay in deep connection with the people that we disagree with and that we not lose our capacity for wise discernment or critical thinking in a fit of emotional reactivity. We must stay in touch with the sacredness of the beings that are taking these actions, try to sincerely and deeply understand what is motivating their behavior, challenge their behavior (sometimes with great force, as in the case of a hate crime) without ever communicating disrespect for the beings themselves. (We also have to do that for ourselves when we catch ourselves, in the middle of a reactive storm, doing something that we later know is off base!) It takes great clarity and discernment to confront someone skillfully without becoming reactive and rancorous. It takes even more courage to look deeply into the heart of someone we disagree with strongly and see the pain, sense of unsafety, and

fears that are motivating them and to speak from the heart of our own vulnerability, fears and concerns.

It also takes courage to stay present with what is happening and to not flee into a false citadel of “spiritual peace” when harm is occurring. Or the opposite, to charge ahead with a sense of righteousness and passion, when we see something happening that we disagree with before we have even stopped to reflect on the situation. And it takes a wise and awakened mind to discern truth from falsehood.

These are times that will test the depth of our spiritual practice. These are times when we must stay centered in the middle of the storm. I know that I have often fallen short of this mark and been reactive, righteous and inflammatory. Perhaps you have too. Rather than inflaming the situation, I challenge us all to be a cool, healing balm on the inflamed social tissue of our time. We need each other right now. Most importantly, we need each other’s, firm, centered commitment to embody the values of compassion, curiosity and inquiry into what is true. Perhaps there are truths in the heart of someone we disagree with that are important for us to recognize and respect. Certainly, if we are going to survive and thrive as a nation we have to find a way of understanding each other’s pain and fear.

This commitment to truth at every level – both in the vertical heights of our spiritual nature and in the horizontal, democratic values and dialogue that are the foundation of our political and cultural process, is in my opinion, at the heart of the spiritual path.

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