

Finding Calm in the Political Storm
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Teaching I: Conscience & Responsibility:

Most of us take to heart our responsibility to vote in local and national elections. We educate ourselves about the issues, and we carefully consider the short and long term consequences of our votes. But once we open our hearts and minds to the issues being raised, how do we remain in balance? The BIG election is November 8th, but our society is currently fighting many battles.

The following quote sums up some of our society's issues....

"We have to stop generalizing about 'the American people' as if we were one homogenous lump. I'm also now immune to politicians who say, 'I've traveled the length and breadth of this great land and I KNOW....I've traveled more than any of them, and *I don't know*."

What we're told about this country is way too limited by generalities, sound bites, and even the supposedly enlightened idea that there are two sides to every question. In fact, many questions have three or seven or a dozen sides. Sometimes I think the only real division into two is between people who divide everything into two, and those who don't.

Altogether, if I'd been looking at nothing but the media all these years I would be a much more discouraged person--especially given the notion that only conflict is news, and that objectivity means being evenhandedly negative."

Reading From Gloria Steinem's My Life on the Road, Introduction

As a Psychologist, I work to promote peace in my clients, their romantic relationships, their families, and sometimes even their workplaces. As someone who grew up in a very chaotic home, I am drawn to Peace and would prefer to avoid conflict when possible. And in my mind, for a number of decades, Conflict and Politics were interchangeable.

Years ago, however, I heard a minister give a sermon entitled “Judge not, lest ye be judged?” In this sermon, she asserted that we have a responsibility not only to judge the behaviors of others, but also to do something about it. If I remember correctly, she gave the example of hearing a co-worker tell anti-semitic jokes. She said we don’t have to make a scene, but we do have a responsibility to tell the joker that it’s inappropriate and that we won’t tolerate anti-semitic or racist behavior.

I had been working hard to become *less* judgmental, so I was thrown for a loop. I struggled with her message for many days, but in my heart and in my gut, I knew she was right. Where I’d already *felt* that antisemitic, racist, sexist, and homophobic jokes were wrong, I increased my level of responsibility to address them when I saw them. And I saw lots of examples in political candidates, and voted accordingly.

Years later, Traverse City printed “We are Traverse City” rainbow bumper stickers. The point was to show that our whole community needed to work as one. Once the community determined that the rainbow background could be seen as a symbol of the Gay Pride flag, these stickers were quickly removed from police cars, etc. A friend brought me one of these stickers and asked me to place it on my car, prominently. I said, “You’re a lesbian, and you don’t have one on your car, so why do you want me to put one on my car?” She said, “I could lose my job. It’s not safe for me. You are straight, married with children, and you have your own Psychology practice. It’s safe for you!”

I was rather appalled at my ignorance for how carefully my friend had to live her life. And I thought about how it took both black and White People working together to overcome slavery. I thought about how often Christians in Europe were in the best position to hide Jews during World War II. And I put that sticker on my car. I didn’t think about it much until Karl and I took our daughters to the mall for dinner. We’d been tailgated through the parking lot, and when we parked a huge truck idled behind us. As I got the kids out of the car to head in for dinner, I looked at the men in the truck. They seemed very surprised to see Karl get out of the passenger side, and even more surprised to see our family of four. The fury on their faces

evaporated, and they sped off. It was then that I realized my friend would not have been safe with a “We are Traverse City” sticker on her car. So, my response to the Pulse shooting? Where the suffering of the LGBTQIA community is likely far greater than the pain suffered by the rest of us, I believe that we are all called to stand with the LGBTQIA community. To restore humanity to our society, all humans are relevant and necessary to be a part of the solution.

My next lesson in politics and conflict came from one of the most opinionated people I know. He quoted something by a writer on the opposite side of the political spectrum from him. I was surprised that he even knew this writer existed, so I asked him about it. He told me he regularly read columns from writers he generally disagreed with. When I asked why, he said, “Because I might be Wrong!”

So, as people of faith and Americans we have a right and a responsibility to be a part of the democratic process. The more we educate ourselves, the more we get involved. The more we learn about *just how bad* it is, the more we learn *just how much more work remains to be done*. And that alone can make our knees weak. But when we want to sow Peace, not Hatred, and we want to remain kind and loving people with an open heart, how do we remain upright? How do we remain upright and Upstanding through Election season, let alone during America’s longer battle with hatred—so often expressed through gunfire?

How do we battle Despair? As a Psychologist, I help people fight Despair, with a capital D, on a daily basis. Like most people, I've battled despair at rough times in my life, and I usually find my feet within a few weeks. When my husband Karl was battling Cancer and was in Intensive Care, however, I found myself in a new, Dark Place wherein I had very little control over the course of events. Day after Day I told myself and our daughters, "tomorrow will be better." For approximately 45 days, each day was far worse than the day before it. On December 24th and 25th of 2014 it looked Very Probable that Karl was going to die. On December 25th and 26th I was shocked and more than pleasantly surprised to find him alive when I went to visit him in the hospital.

And Yet. During this time I left behind the me that feels road rage. I felt beauty and an aching appreciation for every sunrise, and every sunset. I stopped fighting with myself about how, when or where I should pray and the whole, blurry day became a prayer. I no longer cared whether or not it's Jesus, God or even The Force that influences the universe. In short, I sometimes behaved better than usual while under duress.

Make no mistake, I did Not look better- I looked awful. I was not enlightened and did not act like it. But, in the worst and most desperate time of my life thus far, I was not a total jerk. This was totally unexpected. It made me wonder how much *More* control I'd had over my thoughts and actions Before I was fighting despair. Did I ever *really* need to even feel road rage?

Fast forward to the current Presidential Race. As I've watched the battle for the Presidency, and listened to the mud being slung, I have felt Despair Once Again raise it's ugly head. Part of it is due to a deeper appreciation for Peace and Beauty than I enjoyed before Karl's illness. Part of it is a deeper need to be of service than before his illness, and part of it is that deep desire to try to leave the world in better shape than I found it when I came into it. That means I have charged myself with the responsibility to be informed, to vote, to be an activist.

I went looking for answers on how to "fight the good fight" with Despair. Psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom said, "Despair is the price one pays for self-awareness. Look deeply into life, and you'll always find despair." Throughout history, and especially in World War II, people have fought despair. Nobel Peace Prize Winner and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel asserts that we have such a responsibility-: "Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have the duty to reject despair."

Mahatma Gandhi: "When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it-- always."

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Victor E. Frankl, argues for “Tragic Optimism.” “In brief it means that one is, and remains, optimistic in spite of the 'tragic triad,' a triad which consists of pain, guilt, and death. It raises the question, How is it possible to say yes to life in spite of all that? How, to pose the question differently, can life retain its potential meaning in spite of its tragic aspects? After all, 'saying yes to life in spite of everything', presupposes that life is potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable. And this in turn presupposes the human capacity to creatively turn life's negative aspects into something positive or constructive. The reason I speak of a tragic optimism, that is, an optimism in the face of tragedy is that human potential at its best always allows for (1) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and (3) deriving from life's transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action.” (Summarized from Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning)

In the “tragic triad, “ Frankl included pain, guilt and death. But he also spoke of a Positive Triad. The positive triad included optimism or hope (he used these rather interchangeably), faith, and love. Frankl argues that optimism, or hope cannot be commanded or ordered. And what is true for hope is also true for the other two components of the triad- faith and love cannot be commanded or ordered either. *We have the responsibility to keep our spiritual larder stocked with hope, faith, and loving compassion. We do this by maintaining awareness— awareness not only of what is important to us, but also to be aware of when we need to **restock** hope faith and love. When we need to go within for strength, and when we need the strength of others to remain in balance. Yes, we are only human, but it is that human-ness, that Humanity that can keep us whole. It is that humanity that can transform our world into a world where there is room for all.*

Reading: from *Dark Nights of the Soul* by Thomas Moore p 134.

"No one gives you a sense of security. You have to get it for yourself, mainly by living your own life with enthusiasm and by learning to love yourself. How will you get to this point of feeling secure and loved? Probably through a real dark night of the soul."

Teaching II: On Balance

How many times have you fallen for "facts" from tv or radio- even from trusted news organizations, only to find there was little to no truth in what was said? Donald Trump was not eliminated from the Presidential race quickly, Y2K was not the end of civilization as we know it, and computers have yet to render us a paperless society. Karl and I used to share an office building with two clever men who jokingly dismissed weather forecasts from the "Weather Tragedy Channel." Predictions of hailstorms and tragedy tend to attract viewers. And yet, we heard a Gloria Steinem quote in which she points out that her 60 years of road trips have resulted in a rich mosaic of experiences with bunches of Americans who are anything but homogenous, and anything but negative.

Why is negativity equated with objectivity? When working on a mental hospital floor, if I reported a patient was disliked by others, that was professional and objective. If I'd reported that a patient was viewed as delightful by others, I would have been accused of being unprofessional. The most complimentary we were allowed to be was to say a patient was "cooperative." But I *don't* equate negativity with objectivity. I believe it makes good sense to weigh our *personal* experiences of America, people of faith, or any other subset **More** heavily than the sound bites, clips and unsubstantiated "facts" presented in the media. Even if they our personal experiences are **more** positive than those presented in the media, this shift will result in our being **More** realistic and **less** troubled. In other words, Please trust your own heart, trust your own gut sense.

One of the reasons that we "fall for" tuning into negative and unbelievable media reports is that we human beings are programmed to want to survive. If a tiger has escaped from the zoo or we may have golf-ball sized hail, we want to know. We want to protect those we love. Recent Psychological research shows that people with a tendency toward cautiousness tend to live longer. A bit of cautiousness is helpful, a little fear can help us stay safe.

And yet, if you think about hatred and aggression, you will find that Fear is always at it's root, and that fear is often accompanied by ignorance. The

root of homophobia and transphobia is a desperate fear, usually in the mistaken notion that gays and transsexuals will approach an unwilling person for sex. Homophobic and Transphobics often fear their own sexual secrets, and they are afraid that members of the LGBTQIA community can guess at these sexual secrets.

The Nazis tried to convince WASPs that Jews, Roma, blacks, and gays were more different from them than similar to them. This dehumanizing propaganda went a long way toward increasing fear of these groups and decreasing hesitation to behave aggressively toward them. We know that Hitler showed a capacity for hatred that had never been seen before. We may never know the actual cause of his fear and hatred of Jews, let alone the other groups he targeted. Most Psychologists describe him as a Narcissistic Psychopath. These qualities appear to have obliterated the fear most of us have of behaving monstrously.

My understanding is that to this day Germans continuously, consistently teach their children about the horrifying mistakes they made, as a nation, under Hitler's guidance. They teach about the mistakes both in their textbooks and in their homes. Of course, one of the mistakes they teach about and continue to work on forgiving themselves for is the mistake of believing a lying Psychopath. But it appears that the Primary mistake they have not forgiven themselves for, the mistake they teach their children not to repeat- is the mistake of giving into the Fear of a violent Mass Murderer rather than fearing the loss of their own humanity. If we lose our Humanity, we are lost- individually and as a nation.

When you find yourself feeling intense dislike or hatred toward a candidate or group, I invite you to look for the fear beneath the enmity. What are you afraid will happen if this person is elected? What actions can you take to make that outcome less likely? I am hopeful that we can *feel* the fear and *behave* humanely and *fight* to keep our humanity, rather than feel the fear, behave inhumanely, and lose our humanity.

I would like to underscore the power of images in fueling our despair. Images can a) influence us more than words, and b)stick with us for a long time--often longer than is comfortable. Yes, it can be necessary for us to

look Evil in the eye, and refuse to look away and pretend we didn't see. But After 911, I had to remind family, friends and clients repeatedly to turn off the images of the twin towers falling again and again and again. Some had watched these images 100s of times. Once seen, it is hard to unsee it. And watching it 100 times does nothing to fix the problem! Please don't punish yourself in this way. And if you do have an ugly image stuck in your head, one solution is to use the media to find beauty. Google "laughing toddlers," ocean sunsets, bunnies in teacups. Heartwarming videos can chase away a lot of ugliness. This is not disrespectful to whomever or whatever we are concerned about. Rather, it allows us to recharge and continue standing strong.

As I mentioned earlier, we have a responsibility to keep our spiritual larder stocked with hope, faith, love and the other qualities that sustain us. And in order to do that, we have to be able to do an honest inventory of our status—a spiritual shopping list if you will. In his book *Peace in Every Step*, spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh teaches “many people are aware of the world’s suffering; their hearts are filled with compassion. They know what needs to be done, and they engage in political, social and environmental work to try to change things. But after a period of intense involvement, they may become discouraged if they lack the strength needed to sustain a life of action. Real strength is not in power, money, or weapons, but in deep, inner peace.” He writes further, “meditation is a point of contact. Sometimes you do not have to go to the place of suffering. You just sit quietly on your cushion, and you can see everything. You can actualize everything, and you can be aware of what is going on in the world. Out of that kind of awareness, compassion and understanding arise naturally and you can stay right in your own country and perform social action.”

Thich Nhat Hanh goes so far as to recommend writing a love letter to your congressman. He points out that “the peace movement often is filled with anger and hatred.” He maintains that practicing mindfulness and seeing with compassion —these acts alone would diminish hatred and aggression.” “Without being peace, we cannot do anything for

peace. If we cannot smile, we cannot help other people smile. if we are not peaceful, then we cannot contribute to the peace movement.”

Similarly, we can fortify the Spirit by surrounding ourselves with reminders of what matters. Our windows allow us to look at the beauty of nature and remember how amazing our natural world is. We keep photos in our homes and in our phones to keep images of our loved ones close to our hearts. We build museums, read history books, and keep mementos to fortify ourselves with reminders of our heritage and our principles. We have art and music to open our hearts and remind us of what matters most to us. Please breathe deeply and allow yourself to fortify your Spirit as we continue to reflect on what truly matters.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today!

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