

The Power of an Open Heart

Many a poet, celebrity, public servant, and gifted orator have encouraged us to embrace our individual power. Seeing ourselves as powerful is, frankly, a stretch because we tend to associate our mental image of power with a person who has money, degrees, and/or great political influence. I must admit to thinking that my own power is quite limited rather than profound and expansive. But while sheltering in place in the midst of intensely chaotic times, I've repeatedly questioned the nature and impact of my individual power. I find myself attracted to the idea that a truly powerful person is one who inhabits a non-judgmental spirit – i.e., an open heart – and possesses the willingness to follow their heart's guidance.

I'm guilty of having a broken, vindictive heart during this time in history that features a deeply deranged man tweeting hate and lies from the White House while throngs of people offer him their highest adulation. I've wished the coronavirus on Trump, believing that the man who has singularly caused so much suffering and death ought to, at the very least, experience extreme discomfort breathing. When my son, 3000 miles away, was diagnosed with Covid-19 in March, I wanted Trump to suffer long and miserably.

But my heart keeps whispering its desire to open, boasting that it has room for deranged and hateful men, assuring me that it has as much room for Derek Chauvin as for George Floyd. It's asking me to trust that granting such a wide embrace is my path to creating and transforming anything.

The open heart that woos me is not sentimental; rather, it is characterized by its constant pursuit of truth – not a fixed or partisan truth that lets some perspectives in and rules others out, but a truth that honors the significance of every person and every

experience. Soundly and unequivocally rebuking a lie while permitting redemption of the liar are the functions of an open heart.

Crucial in this period of resistance is our ability to determine what battles to fight and how best to fight them. While our intellect and emotions give us the reason and strong passion to rightfully declare that black* lives matter, the open heart also declares that the deniers of this truth are human beings. It is this latter declaration that expresses the *full* truth and thereby facilitates enlightenment (heightened understanding), connection (the ability to “see” deeply into someone), and healing (a shared recognition that each person is significant and has value). An open heart will guide us to choose protesting in a manner that affirms those three powerfully transformative elements.

Past disputes in which I decided to listen to the reasoning of someone who refused to accept what I believed to be obvious have resulted in fewer bruised feelings on both sides and a deeper understanding of – and connection to – the other person. I believe that our willingness to see significance in others, regardless of their perspectives and behavior, is the vibrant, connective tissue critical to our national and global healing. “You are significant” is perhaps the most resonant, transformative truth that we can share.

I don’t want to belittle the importance and value of individual protest and mass demonstration. How does an open heart effectively engage in situations where destructive attitudes demand domination of our space? The “anti-maskers,” for example, not only defy the preponderance of science, but they endanger people’s lives. And racist, brutal cops, intent on dehumanizing black and brown people, are a constant threat to many. I’ve had only one close-up encounter with a blatantly racist cop, and I became frightened and submissive. I don’t yet know from personal experience how to demonstrate an open heart in such a situation, though insight can be gained from non-violent activists who have successfully challenged authority. What I do know is that I would accept the blood or antibody-rich plasma from a hateful person if I needed it, and I hope that I would be willing to donate my own life-saving fluids to such a person. So, what’s key for me is to prioritize the humanity of the person I oppose. Accordingly, my

calls for justice, whether in the streets or in phone calls and emails to elected officials, must prioritize the humanity of those who are fervently ignorant and would easily dismiss my humanity.

How do we cultivate an open heart in these ugly times, assuming we even desire to? Practical steps might include seeking out news from well-researched, investigative reporting rather than relying on social media; joining meaningful social groups that facilitate honest and helpful conversation (such as book circles, artistic and hobby groups); becoming involved in activities that connect with nature (like gardening, bird-watching, star-gazing and photography); and watching documentaries that highlight perspectives and lifestyles very different from our own. When judgmental thoughts surface during such activities, we can commit ourselves to examining these thoughts closely through journaling or other types of introspection.

While I find myself resisting the level of non-judgment that is required of an open heart, I feel I must adjust my traditional understanding of power and my personal expression of it. I feel not so much the desire, but the need to walk as one who honors my fundamental connection to all of creation – including people who display reprehensible behavior – and to embrace what matters most. In these utterly unpredictable and precarious times, I am drawn to experience the power of an open heart. I don't anticipate "results" of miraculous, on-the-spot transformations of other people's perspectives, or even my own; I do expect a deepening sense of satisfaction with living according to my heart's desire.

*Note: I have decided not to capitalize any racial designation because I believe the concept of race is a human construct and is divisive. In my mind, capitalizing black, white, brown etc., adds unnecessary emphasis to the factually erroneous concept of "race."

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