

READING from James Wright "A Blessing"

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,

Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.

And the eyes of those two Indian ponies

Darken with kindness.

They have come gladly out of the willows

To welcome my friend and me.

We step over the barbed wire into the pasture

Where they have been grazing all day, alone.

They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness

That we have come.

They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.

There is no loneliness like theirs.

At home once more,

They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,

For she has walked over to me

And nuzzled my left hand.

She is black and white,

Her mane falls wild on her forehead,

And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear...

...Suddenly I realize

That if I stepped out of my body I would break

Into blossom.

Draft

REVERENCE FOR HEART
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
December 12, 2010

A couple of months ago someone asked me to give them a koan – a teaching question from Zen tradition in China and Japan. I said I could not do so as I am not trained nor am I qualified to give anyone a classical koan from Zen teachers. She asked me to simply give her a teaching question from my own experience. That was fine. Some of you might have seen it expressed as well on Facebook since a couple of other folks here at the Fellowship had asked later on about koans. This is the teaching question I gave everyone:

“Point to the place where your tender heart begins and ends.”

This teaching question asks us to consider the boundaries of the heart in each of us. The poem by James Wright is one of many possible answers.

Of course one boundary is the physical location of the heart in our body. As an organ in our body, the heart is probably the most important one. If it stops beating, our life span is measured in minutes. If it becomes congested with fatty substances, its ability to move blood – the nourishment of life – is diminished and we suffer accordingly.

Assuredly at a physical level, our care for our heart and all the organs in our body requires a degree of reverence, appreciation and even some awe that the heart has beaten 70 or so times per minute or approximately 36,792,000 heart beats a year times however many years we have lived. That deserves some reverence.

“Point to the place where your tender heart begins and ends.”

As we all know, the heart is also a symbol of romantic love. And for you guys out there, this means that if for some reason you don't get to shop for Christmas by Christmas Eve, you can begin early shopping for Valentines Day. This advice is true for all of us, of course, but I put in a special reminder to those with the Y chromosome who might need special prompting. I was also reminded of heart equaling romance when I was walking around my neighborhood yesterday morning. I walked by a purple chalk drawing on the street that said “Amy (Heart)” then some scuffed over letters. All I can assume is that either there was a disagreement, second thoughts, or the shortest romantic relationship in history.

Classically, the heart was seen as the seat of the soul by the Egyptians and the early Jewish writers of the Hebrew Testament believed that the heart

was the emotional center of the human being. They speak of Pharaoh's 'heart hardening' when he orders the Jewish slaves to be held in Egypt rather than to let them go. Other passages speak to evil being in the hearts of men and we continue to hear such expressions to this very day. Both the Greeks and Romans believed that the heart was the source of emotion and passion.

But why romantic love? Perhaps the first known use of the heart shape comes from the 7th century BC, in the Greek colony city of Cyrene. In that city, at that time, Silphium was a plant so highly prized for its use as birth control that it became extinct. The seeds of Silphium were shaped like hearts, however, making historians believe that the heart shape we know today was based upon this early form of birth control.

That theory makes sense but the equation of heart to love also appears in many other traditions as a symbol of love between people.

In that teaching question, I used the term "tender heart" rather than 'hard heart' as the Jewish writers symbolized Pharaoh's actions in Egypt. A tender heart as metaphor is soft and open and inviting. It is the heart we all hope to have in our relationships with others and especially in our love relationships.

That's another central meaning of James Wright's poem. The lines at the end of that poem speak to love **"For she has walked over to me/And nuzzled my left hand./She is black and white,/Her mane falls wild on her forehead,/And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ears...Suddenly I realize/That if I stepped out of my body I would break/Into blossom."**

We are no longer bound to our physical body. Our heart has opened to the reverence for another being that is so beautiful and lovely that we cannot help but to fall in love or break into blossom.

I have to admit here that I am not a true expert on romantic relationships. I am still learning, making false starts and guessing wrong much of the time. What I have experienced from the wisdom and insights of many people over the years including you is that is pretty much the norm. Love relationships between people are many shades of gray rather than black and white extremes. It's amazing to me sometimes that they ever really work. However I must say that when people stand up to talk about their loving and vibrant relationships, I must smile because you are examples of how they can succeed.

"Point to the place where your tender heart begins and ends." This brings me to my third and final thought about reverence for heart. I have spoken about the purely physical body of the heart and how we must

care for its health. Then I've mentioned that aspect of heart when it comes to the romantic love relationships between people.

As we are well aware, it's the holiday season and this also is a clue for how we can find reverence for heart.

Both Jesus of Nazareth and The Buddha have special days this month. Jesus' birthday is celebrated on the 25th and the Buddha's enlightenment is always honored on the 8th of December.

Each spoke in different ways to an even broader understanding of the heart. Compassion is the natural outcome and experience of a tender heart that has no boundaries. Much of Jesus' ministry was about compassion made real. His decision to rebel against the Jewish purity laws that made most sinful and some in charge was eventually one of the factors that resulted in his death. Compassion for Jesus wasn't a condition of mercy toward inferiors as most commentaries will suggest. Dr. Marcus Borg reminds us in "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time" that the Jewish word for compassion meant womb and nurturing rather than mercy and judgment of others.

The Buddha taught about compassion in similar ways but without the existence of a higher deity.

Jack Kornfield is a Buddhist teacher and psychologist probably familiar to many of you. His recent book "The Wise Heart" addresses an alternative way to understand and experience the heart in reverence.

He tells us that Western psychology has a tendency to see the human mind as limited and having pathology that needs curing. Oftentimes the cure is medication and lengthy therapy. There's nothing inherently wrong with such approaches and they do provide relief and healing. He claims, however, that we have a tremendous capacity to discover our own inherent goodness.

He notes an interesting fact about people. Have you ever been in a group of people or in a room at a party, for example, and one person walks in and their presence takes over the room? Or someone comes into a group situation and they are deeply sad and depressed. Or perhaps someone enters a room with laughter and smiles on their face.

How does that change the tenor of the people already in the room?

Kornfield calls this sacred perception. It speaks to how we use our heart as compassion. So let's imagine I am walking into a room where some of us are meeting about – say finance, always a cheering topic – and I am gloomy. I've had some gloomy moments of late but happily they are being dissolved through meditation practice and looking to the future rather than brooding about the past.

So I walk into the room with a smile on my face and with some dark chocolates just as a backup plan.

Will there hopefully be smiles rather than shared gloom?

I would hope so and also that it wasn't just because dark chocolate made an appearance.

Sacred perception is a technique to perceive the secret goodness that is within all our hearts without exception. Kornfield speaks of working with gang members and prisoners who initially are angry, resentful and having no trust at all. If they are given consistent respect and noble honor, they can begin to relax even a bit into their deepest and lost places of goodness.

Is it a challenge? Yes. Working with prisoners and those who have mental illness, physical pain or other life traumas is not easy. We know this. If we go into a nursing home or a trauma ward at a hospital, the pain we can feel can be overwhelming.

At such times, it is tempting to make the tender heart into a hardened heart in order to protect ourselves from the suffering of others.

You might be tempted to now ask "so what, Alex, we have shopping to do and lights to put up. What's the point?"

Let's return to James Wright's poem A Blessing. I mentioned that he had been in an emotional and spiritual funk for months. He wrote later that this one experience wasn't the only turning point but it did help him to return to life and see what we could call reverence and awe all around him.

The same is true for us as human beings living in a very fast paced society. Right now there are probably pressures on us all as the holidays near. Travel plans, family visits to organize, gifts to purchase, finals to grade, and so much more require our attention.

We might even become a bit surly along the way.

So I'd like to offer you a meditation practice that Jack Kornfield gives us in "The Wise Heart". It's good anytime but perhaps even more so during the holidays. After I offer this meditation time, we'll have a short time of shared silence before conversation.

Please sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes. Imagine waking up on a good day. It could have been this morning or any morning. Then imagine going to work or to shop or other obligations.

Set a clear intention to find the inner nobility of three people you meet in person. Nobility can be experiencing their calm, wisdom, humor, presence of kindness in the midst of chaos.

How does their inherent goodness and tender heart affect you?

If you don't find three people, then just find one person but my guess is that you'll find others where you don't expect them.

Each day try this meditation when you leave your home. See if you can do this practice when you're stressed out or you see people who seem to be also stressed.

Always keep in mind this teaching question for them and for you:
“Point to the place where your tender heart begins and ends.”