

Patience and letting go: the roots of compassionate healing

*“We are traveling with tremendous speed
toward a star in the Milky Way.
A great repose is visible on the face of the earth.
My heart’s a little fast.
Otherwise everything’s fine.”*

*from the First Psalm
by Bertolt Brecht*

I recently finished reading Lonely Hearts of the Cosmos, by Dennis Overbye a history of the scientific quest for the secret of the universe. I drew a huge breath, only then realizing I had somehow, throughout my reading, been holding my breath in suspense. The dedication and unswerving devotion to the task of discovering and mapping the stars, the universes, down to the smallest particles are awesome to me. However, it is the insights born of new conceptions of the Universe that have begun to alter some of the foundations of my inner life. I have discovered some practices to live by that help me live my life more calmly and consciously. One of these is patience which I view as not merely a virtue but rather as essential in living a joyful, contented life. If we take to “heart” the most current information about the magnitude, age and vast scope of the universe(s), we cannot help but see our place in space and time with patient eyes.

I sit here even in this current moment and remind myself to be patient, to notice the inner voices that say, “Hurry, if you don’t find the right words and write as fast as you can, you will never finish it.” I calm this part down, ask this part that is in a hurry to have faith in me, to give me some space and time to create, to let this unfold in its own way and its own time. It listens. I have its attention. I return to the work at hand.

The original theme for this article was an exploration of attachment and the ability to let go, themes which at first glance might seem worlds apart. I refer to the research and literature on attachment most easily found and readable in A General Theory of Love by Thomas Lewis and Developing Mind by Daniel Siegel as well of volumes of research by Allan Schore. In my work as a counselor, my life as a parent, grandparent, partner and friend, I continually see the painful consequences of lack of attunement or secure attachment in individual’s early lives. I see perceptions that have developed over time forming deep, unexplored convictions about personal limitations, negative judgments about self and others and a lack of vision, direction and meaning that clearly originate in part if not altogether in early inadequate attachment with family and caregivers.

Attachment, an inborn system of the brain, evolves in ways that influence and organize motivation, emotion and memory with respect to significant caregivers. This inner system motivates an infant to seek closeness with primary caregivers and establish

communication with them. This creates a relationship that helps the immature brain to use the mature functions of the parent's brain in order to organize its own processes. Secure attachment (attunement) consists of patient, emotionally sensitive responses to a child's signals which serve to acknowledge and amplify positive states and create a safe haven for the child as he/she experiences uncomfortable emotions. These early experiences form a foundation for emotional regulation, social relatedness, memory and cognitive coherence.

This style of parenting particularly focuses on providing sensitive attunement to the child's needs for nourishment, safety, connection, or spaciousness and the timing of those needs. For an infant this includes being nursed in a timely way, being seen with loving eyes, being carried close to the body and touched in gentle, loving ways. The caretaker through patience and "limbic resonance" also tracks the child's cues and intuitively her inner life and movements and needs sensitively, so as to regulate as much as possible the inherent chaos of life. The child optimally is respected, listened to, met and responded to and feels connected and not alone. As the child matures she also needs structured experiences that are appropriate to her need for stimulation.

These qualities and abilities of limbic connection, if sustained over time build a sense of safety, trust and meaning that extend throughout the life of the child naturally building a sense of confidence and resiliency. As a person matures, this expresses itself naturally in deep relationships, the ability to let go to peak experiences, an abundance of creative energy, openness to learning and adventures that can be integrated and shared with others. According to volumes of research, when this secure state is not present for an infant, various forms and levels of dysfunction arise.

This research and information regarding attachment is of great importance for those in the healing profession, therapists, counselors and body workers as well as parents, not only because we do and will encounter the painful consequences of the lack of attunement in others, but also because we are a potential avenue for re-attunement to occur if we can provide attunement and limbic resonance with the client. Because of the nature of the brain and neurons, research now indicates that there is continual revision of neural connections throughout life. "Experience shapes the developing structure of the brain." ¹ Parenting from the Inside out.

This information has begun to be shared in the healing community, especially among therapists. Daily we can see the effects of the various forms of non-optimal attachment. It is obvious that the ability to attune to an infant is not new; after all it is an inborn trait in mammals as we see in, Why Do Dogs Smile and Chimpanzees Cry, a remarkable documentary on wild life, brain research, and emotions in mammals. The loving gaze of a mother toward her child is natural, deep and profound. As Thomas Lewis says in A General Theory of Love, "A child looks to his mother as a piano tuner looks to the sound of pure C." ²

The Chinese philosopher Mencius proclaimed that "... all babies who are smiled at and hugged will know how to love. Spread these virtues through the world, nothing else need be done." ³

However, our current life style, personal experiences of early inadequate parenting, painful relationships throughout life and the fragmented quality of our daily

existence do not lead to a spaciousness and peaceful quality of mind that can provide that “sound of pure C.” Conscious choices and conscious practices are now required in concert with a deep longing for meaning and connection if we are to shift the culture positively toward emotional and cognitive intelligence and the maturing and healing of our culture and the planet.

In the books Growing Up Again, by Clarke and Dawson, Parenting from the Inside Out, by Daniel Siegel and Everyday Blessings by Jon and Myla Kabat Zinn and the work of Richard Schwartz Internal Family Systems we are reminded of the deep work of parenting children, parenting ourselves. We can learn to be attentive and compassionate toward those wounded aspects of our own childhood and those of others. This often requires the help of a healing professional, but once we are on the path of compassionate, curious inquiry the way becomes clearer. We can see a larger picture; we can hold a powerful intention that our “small work” can heal the future generations, what Northwest poet, David Whyte calls, “the dark river” that has been passed down to us. It is up to us, the current generation, to heal that dark river.

There are some simple conscious practices that can lead us toward healing. Mindfulness - non-judging awareness of the present moment - is a good beginning. “You can’t do what you want until you know what you *are* doing,” said Moshe Feldenkrais. With the help of mindfulness, we can step out of the trance. We can begin to notice the early signs of impatience: the energy of the body, holding the breath, constrictions, impatience with the other, impatience with that driver, the computer, the stop signal, impatience with the lack of wisdom in a child or parent, impatience with myself, with the current leaders of the world, with the human race.

As one of my teachers Ron Kurtz, founder of Hakomi and author of Body Centered Psychotherapy, the Hakomi Method says, “May God keep us from hurrying.” The frantic pace of our culture and our minds is one of the major obstacles to healing. When we actually notice the painfulness and tension of hurrying, we can pause: at the grocery counter, while listening to a child’s story, before speaking, and watch for the present moment experience of another without trying to fix them. If we do not slow down, we can’t see ourselves or another; we can’t see the child in front of us or the child within us.

Patience is a muscle that improves with practice and it creates the space that helps us to face, acknowledge and communicate our feelings, honorable messengers that they are, to ourselves and to others, to discover their hidden wisdom. Its origin is in the word *pati* (LL) “capable of suffering.” Prefix compounds of *pati* include “compassion, to suffer *with*.” How fitting, since it would seem that we need patience in order to experience compassion, in order to be loving and present with our feelings. As Geneen Roth, author and workshop leader says, “Awareness is learning to keep yourself company. And then learn to be more compassionate company, as if you were somebody you are fond of and wish to encourage.”⁴

In David Brazier’s book, The Feeling Buddha, he introduces the state of “*nirodha*” the third of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism meaning “banking the fire” this is the practice of creating an internal container for the fire of our experiences so that we can safely cook our difficult, painful experiences and emotions. This way we

avoid creating a forest fire of overwhelming feelings and refrain from dousing the flames, the energy of our lives, altogether. By creating a safe, spacious presence we can listen carefully to the deeper voice of the emotions and discover what they want for us. It seems that patience is one of the essential stones for banking this valuable fire of our emotions.

As Pablo Neruda says in

The Sea and the Bells

If each day falls
Inside each night
There exists a well
Where clarity is enfolded.

We need to sit on the rim
Of the well of darkness
And fish for fallen light
with patience.

To find this quality of mindfulness Neruda speaks of, we often need to connect first with the breath - breath from the center of the body. That deeper breath both calms us and helps us to be in the present, not the past and its grievances. By paying attention to the simple inhaling and exhaling of the breath, the movement of the belly, *that ultimate taking hold and letting go*, we return to equilibrium. We return to the intimacy of the body, the sensations of being alive in the present, not in the remembered (even unconsciously remembered) past and not in the imagined future.

We can come then to a question, what do I bring to this moment that is creating my own suffering? What painful moment, what past suffering is remembered here? Where has some protective or wounded part of my mind taken me? I can choose to face this moment head on, to be present, patient and compassionate with this part of me and share my breath with it, letting my body let go to gravity - another way to be at peace with this moment.

Sometimes we hold on so tightly, we lose the prize - the "present." As Jack Kornfield says in his talks on Insight Meditation, "The sign from the gambling houses in Vegas say, 'You have to be present to win.'" If we look carefully we can see how much we lose in that moment of holding on to the past, to our endless expectations of ourselves, or another, our assumptions, the future, fixing others, fixing other's feelings, old projects, another's approval, "our longing for the perfect."

In his poem, Listening to the Koln Concert, Robert Bly says,

*When men and women come together
How much they have to abandon! Wrens*

*make their nests of fancy threads
and string ends, animals*

*abandon all their money each year
What is it that men and women leave?
Harder than wren's doing, they have
To abandon their longing for the perfect.*

*The inner nest not made by instinct
Will never be quite round
And each has to enter the nest
Made by the other imperfect bird.*

These practices of letting go, mindfulness and breathing lead to a spaciousness and quality of patience that allows us to perceive not only our own minds, but the minds of others, to notice and resonate with their emotional state while maintaining a sense of ourselves. This ability to be with another, termed “mindsight” by Daniel Siegel in his recent book Parenting from the Inside Out, conveys to the other person they have been “seen” and that they are safe, respected and not alone.

In the practice of Hakomi, body centered psychotherapy, we begin by developing a mindful and loving presence, a conscious practice of discovering what delights us or inspires us about being in the presence of the other person. We can then easily express attunement with gentle, loving eye contact, a calm voice, acknowledgment and safe appropriate touch if that is permitted. The other person is always in charge of the spaciousness that they require to feel safe. We let go of our agenda for them, knowing they have a deeper knowing of their own that they can contact when they are mindful. We can teach a client how to be mindful, to look inside without judging. This kind of contingent collaborative communication creates a strong sense of coherence and connection, allowing insights and integration to arise within the person in their own timing. Within this state of relationship, dynamic shifts in old patterns, habits, convictions and attitudes can occur. Because the essential emotional connection is present in the form of safety, nourishment, respect and spaciousness, new healthier neural pathways can form in the brain and the nervous system.

This practice of “mindsight,” involves awareness of the subtle moment to moment gestures, facial expressions and body postures that serve as helpful indicators of emotional states. Hakomi training is focused on this kind of attunement through awareness and verbal acknowledgment of the present moment experience of another. This patient attentiveness helps the client and the therapist stay in the present moment - where healing occurs - and allows awareness of unconscious limiting convictions and attitudes to arise.

We can then offer gentle verbal or non-verbal experiments designed to provide nourishment, comfort, and ease. These experiments assist in uncovering and relieving these old patterns and habits of mind that limit our ability to experience nourishment,

self acceptance and a sense of personal freedom. In this kind of attuned relationship, there is ample space and time for compassionate self study allowing insights to unfold on their own. Patience is essential as we stay present with another while they work through their own dilemmas and find their own way. We so often want to fix them when we just need to be present. We are free to let go to the innate human growth toward wholeness.

Dedication to patient self reflection involves a willingness to see and discard outmoded ways of thinking: the need to be perfect, prejudices about others, convictions about the nature of life. This practice continually provides an avenue for integration and self growth allowing space for new healthier patterns to emerge and new perspectives to form.

As Leonard Cohen sings in Anthem:

Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.

In Hakomi we find healing and freedom by patiently and compassionately discovering our own true nature and our own timing.

By Carol Ladas-Gaskin©

Footnotes

1. p 33, Parenting from the Inside Out, Daniel Siegel
2. p 156, A General Theory of Love, Thomas Lewis
3. p.180, Sailing the Wine Dark Sea, Thomas Cahill

4. p. 31, Bird by Bird, Annie Lamott, quoting Geneen Roth

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