

Hearts Broken Closed and Hearts Broken Open: Living in These Troubled Times

Dear Friends,

As we look around the world at this time, there are many, many examples of the energies of divisiveness that is ruled by the dictum "divide and conquer". Each day a new example of unconscionable violence, one more horrific than the last, seems to assault our collective consciousness.

Simultaneously, through many diverse, often small communities, the forces of inclusiveness and unconditional love for the human family and for Life itself are also rising. It is essential that we do not fall into the realm of fear and separation as we open our hearts to the suffering of the world.

We are surrounded by belligerent voices suggesting that "they" are coming to get "us" and that our fear and violence is both necessary and right. Invariably, one group's hopes and dreams of "right living" are another group's worst fears. Whether conservative or liberal, religious fanatic or atheist, the world that one group sees as undeniably "good" is the other group's Hell.

Seeing this, some people argue for a flat land of moral equivalence where all views are equally valid. This position is just as destructive as the other beliefs. Moral distinctions are essential yet the old dichotomy of "right and wrong" leads us into stifling judgments in which the sacred, inviolable humanity of the other is denied. Authentic, effective speech and non-violent action, as elusive as they can be, are required for our collective healing. As Desmond Tutu reminds us: *"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor"*.

How can we truly value and understand the human forces driving each person and every group belief system, while simultaneously standing up for Life? Standing our moral ground without discounting the humanity of those opposed to our views in real world situations requires great inner strength, grounded courage and, also, a capacity to stand in the "other's" shoes.

Throughout Europe, there are major battles being fought about the right relationship to the refugees who are seeking safe, secure homes. Most of these people are just like us: parents seeking a good life for their children and hungry people seeking food and a better life. IN ADDITION, the people who feel threatened by the vast numbers of people wanting to enter their towns and cities are not "wrong", they are truly frightened for their security and way of life. After all, there are likely a small percentage of people joining the authentic refugees who seek to express their view of "right living" through violence to their adopted country. All of these possibilities must be included.

Due to the particular karmic circumstances, we in the United States are once again confronted with the lingering history of violent racism and, in the atmosphere of national divisiveness; the forces of "us vs. them" are fueled with fear and rage. Almost every day we now witness the reality that has been under the surface, hidden for so long for many of us: systemic racism is alive and well in the "land of the free and home of the brave". We now also see the bottled up rage exploding toward often-innocent public servants.

Our hearts are torn, what can we do?

How can we bear witness to all of these killings and the ensuing rage, hatred and fear without being lost in violent reactivity or paralysis?

What is a Truly Human response to these situations?

Broken Closed, Broken Open

As I look at all this, my heart beats with great uncertainty and a very clear sense of Not-Knowing. I am rarely on the front lines of these conflicts. In the relative safety of my world, I humbly offer the following observations and questions:

Hearts break in two ways - they break closed or they break open.

When our pain grows with a sense of hopelessness, our hearts break closed with despair.

When our pain grows with a sense of powerlessness, our hearts break closed with rage.

Hearts break open when we see that the "other" is none other than ourselves and see the actual human being living within and behind the beliefs, fears, hurt and even actions of the other.

For most of us, it is much easier to empathize with the victims of injustice than the perpetrators. Yet, our deep work is *to stand up against the sin while loving the sinner*. Unless we open our hearts to the suffering of all, we are part of the divisiveness. What a true spiritual challenge! Can we see those people who are perpetrating horrific acts as hurting human beings who long for the same things that we all do: to feel at home in this world, safe, secure, loved, with a sense of respect and meaningfulness? Please do not read this as absolving people for their actions. As we hold people accountable for their behavior, our human hearts beg us to not lose sight of our connectedness to each other.

As we see with compassionate eyes, can we also stand up to the explicit and perhaps more nefarious, systemic racism living in our culture? We are a part of this bias even if we are unclear on how we perpetuate it or how to be an active force for countering it. Seeing this clearly is truly a beginning. Honoring "Black Lives Matter" is not a diminution of other lives, rather a highlighting of the greatest lingering tragedy in our national consciousness.

Most of the people reading this message carry, in our birth circumstances, implicit privilege that many of our sisters and brothers do not have. Acknowledging our inherited advantages as white, relatively economically secure people is a powerful step. It is new for me to take this reality from my intellectual understanding into my heart. Now, I notice how I always **expect** to be treated respectfully and am shocked when this basic human right is withheld. I **naturally assume** the right to ask a waiter in a restaurant or a worker in a store for sometimes special service. I usually see a policeman as a protector and potential ally. These are not the reality of many in my country.

In another example, my parents' income, allowed me to receive an education that most cannot afford. This is not equal opportunity for all. Public schools in poor neighborhoods are not up to the standards of public schools in wealthy neighborhoods. Rather than receiving less financial support, with fewer experienced teachers, as is often the case, these schools need much greater resources than those in affluent areas. These are examples of assumed white privilege that also hint at the institutional racism thriving in our country.

As we see the truth that "driving while Black" is dangerous in the United States (statistics clearly show that African-American drivers are much more likely to be pulled over by police for minor infractions and are approached with greater forcefulness), our consciousness of the problem

grows. We can also see that policing poor neighborhoods is inherently more dangerous than walking through wealthier areas. Fearful police make less reliable choices. Acknowledging all this is an essential step toward societal change. Clearly, we do not need to be anti-police or paint them with a broad stroke to face the reality of our social constructs. We can be against ignorance (literally "ignoring what is true"), without being against human beings!

Widening Our Field of Care

Together we carry the suffering that is all around us. Our responses and actions will be unique to our personal circumstances. Know that you are not alone in navigating these troubling times and asking these overwhelming questions. Together we can be the arms, legs, ears and voices of an awakening, aware, and embodied impulse to care for Life in all forms.

We can start by deeply examining the boundaries of our field of care. Who is excluded from your/my care due to your fear, anger or hatred? A first step is acknowledging this boundary. As we learn to see the human being living "in there" we can add wider perspectives to our conversations with our natural social groups who likely share many of our views. In addition to inviting our friends to widen their field of care, maybe we can begin to seek out conversation with people who seem "other" on the surface. This can be scary, yet also profoundly moving, as I discovered on a recent plane trip.

Sitting next to me was an American businessman who held very strong, politically conservative views about the causes of violence in the world. This was actually my first meeting with a Trump supporter. I immediately noticed both fear and aggression arising in me, wanting to teach him a thing or two! Thankfully, I was conscious enough to notice the part of me that wanted to argue politics. While this might have felt temporarily satisfying, there is no doubt that this level of dialogue would not be helpful to either of us. Clarifying my intention, main goal became to listen respectfully, with an open heart, to his deeper concerns, views, etc. I questioned him gently to go deeper so that I could really "get" him. Amazingly, he really appreciated my listening. He was surprised to hear my perspectives. I did not seem to change his views at all, yet his tone and quality was radically different. He really did listen when I spoke. I believe that slow yet authentic change can happen when meetings like this occur.

Similarly, recently in Jerusalem at the Dome of the Rock, a member of the Muslim group responsible for monitoring the grounds became furious with one of our group members who were praying in a way that was not allowed. Again, I had the opportunity to be a wholehearted listener, stifling the part of me that wanted to "make my point" or show him another view. Clearly, he was not ready for that kind of dialogue. He needed me to hear his outrage at Israeli authorities, foreign visitors, etc. Yet, he did change. His manner softened, he smiled and invited me to stay longer, though he still wanted the others in the group to leave. Human connection is healing, sometimes one heart at a time.

For many years, I have resonated deeply with the Buddhist image of Avalokiteshvara. Often female or androgynous, she expresses unconditional compassion for all suffering in the world. With 10,000 ears, she hears all cries and with 10,000 arms, she takes action to help. I think of this Being as living both outside of human beings and within. Outside of us, she can hear our cries and offer care to our aching hearts. Inside, she becomes a model for living a life filled with compassion for all struggling beings.

May we each become sanctuaries of peace, unconditional love, listening and healing.

May we continue to learn, forgive and collectively expand our capacity for seeing the other in ourselves and ourselves in the other.

Sending Blessings.....Russell

10,000 ears hear our cries

10,000 arms are here to help

Where is (s)he?

HERE HERE, growing in our hearts.....