

Finding our Best Self in Troubled Times

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Dear Fellow Travelers,

The election of Donald Trump has sent shock waves through many communities, The Embodied Life School included. My friends in Europe are expressing deep concern about this election, its potential international effects and the similar political issues arising in their lands. My intention here is not to offer political strategy but to share ideas for finding our best selves in these times. I am focusing on three main places: **connected community, grounded presence and right speech.**

First, I need to acknowledge my position of privilege in that I am not in immediate danger due to the hateful rhetoric we have been hearing. As a relatively rich, heterosexual, able-bodied, white male, I live every day inoculated against actions stimulated by the language of our president-elect.

Because of this place of relative safety, some might suggest that I cannot really understand the level of fear and potential danger that is the realistic response for people. I can say that people who are in privileged positions **MUST** speak out, even if our voices are somewhat marginalized by a perceived lack of credibility. With uncertainty, I do my best to walk in the shoes of others. Here are some of my hopes and observations.

Connected Community: Coming Home Together

Our support for each other is essential. Many of us are raw, reactive and feeling angry, fearful and lost. We need time to process our grief. It is important to know that you are not alone. Please be gentle with yourself and others, especially during these next potent weeks. Listening well to our inner voices and to each other is a key. Helping others to feel seen and heard is healing for all. More than ever, people of color, women, the poor and those wearing hijab's need to feel our care, they need to feel seen, safe and welcome.

A community of fellow seekers who are working to uncover our best selves is a true jewel. The Embodied Life School supports and encourages each other through our practices of grounded presence, embodiment, good listening and clear speech. Intensifying any practices that support these

qualities is helpful at this time. Creating or joining “listening circles” where listening and speaking from the heart is encouraged and where people can feel heard without judgment invites healing.

We have models in the world of how to deal with difficult situations. I think of the Dalai Lama who has lived through such suffering and maintains humor and joy as his ground of being. He allows himself to feel anger toward the Chinese as he also cultivates forgiveness and well-wishes toward those who have been violent to his people. In addition there are more ordinary people, like you and me, who manage to find their larger view in challenging times. Our practices are tested by troubled times, in a sense, **we practice FOR troubled times.**

Pausing and Presenting: Coming Home

The Embodied Life teachings grow from a basic practice of PAUSING from our train of thought, dropping attention down into our bodies so that we can freshly perceive the sensations, feelings, thoughts and external situation in which we are living. Without this pause, we are locked into old habits of reactivity. It is important to differentiate responsiveness from reactivity. To respond requires that we first “empty the cup” of reactivity. Acknowledging the reactions without being controlled by them is a key. This takes time and patience. It is one of the purposes and benefits of Embodied Meditation. In Zen, this is called “Don’t Know Mind”. We pause, holding our thoughts and feelings with care, without certainty. We can remember that we do not know the future. Our ideas are guesses and are often wrong, we can rest in what is true, the actuality of this moment.

Out of the pause comes the practice of PRESENTING, the intention to be with whatever is alive in us. Holding presence for our fear and anger is healing. This is different from either falling into these emotions or pushing them away, it is a transformative process of being present for and with the moment that creates an organic shift.

The actions we take from this grounded presence are likely to be more whole than those taken when strong emotions dominate. Our practice is not to eliminate feelings but, whenever possible, to be present for them in warm-hearted ways. Sometimes this statement is misinterpreted, as “there is no space for my strong emotions”. In my opinion, there needs to be room to simply yell or sob or let the fear move through our bodies without judgment.

As soon as possible, we return to “presencing”. When we are present in this way, grounded and breathing, there is an inner sense of coming home. Being grounded in our bodies creates a reliable, steady, home-base from which to function in the world.

Right Speech: Words Matter

Our practice also needs to include awareness of our speech- both our inner speech, how we talk to ourselves and outer, how we speak to others.

Human beings live in linguistic environments. Words are essential to human life. They are the air of social discourse. Words shape thinking and actions. One of the best comments about the election that I heard is that “those against Trump took his words literally but not seriously, whereas Trump supporters took his words seriously but not literally”. I hear people arguing “he won’t be that bad”, “he did not mean all those things literally”, “he was playing to his audience”, “he will be different as president, “they were ‘just words’”, etc.

I notice a powerful anger grows in my belly when I hear these excuses. Words matter, words have effects. People choose actions based on the words of others. Hate-filled words paved the way to Auschwitz. We are already living in the putrid air of hatred and divisiveness. Racist and misogynistic words permeate the air that we collectively breathe.

Labeling as Dehumanization

I remember hearing Marshall Rosenberg, the originator of “Non-Violent Communication” say that, as a psychologist, he realized that labeling people into diagnostic categories destroyed the possibility for human relationship. I found this comment both powerful and difficult to understand. Over time, I began to see the radical difference between saying someone “IS a schizophrenic” from describing their schizophrenic behaviors. Labels can be effective as a kind of shorthand, as long as we are diligent in erasing them when connecting with the actual person.

As a Feldenkrais practitioner, I saw that when I related to someone as a quadriplegic rather than as a person who could not use their arms and legs fully, I missed the human being. Moshe Feldenkrais was diligent about this

point, encouraging us to drop the labels and diagnosis (or at least put them in the background) and meet the person.

I hear many of the people most upset by this election, using dehumanizing language to delegitimize the concerns of people who supported Trump. We must be very careful here because this labeling sustains the divisions and builds walls between us. Remember, divide and conquer is the dominant strategy of oppressive forces. We do not want to fall into this trap.

When we call someone a “racist” or a “misogynist”, we take away their humanity. Here is the difficult challenge- we need to stand strongly against racist or misogynistic behaviors and words without reducing that entire human being to that label.

This is more than just words! When we use labels, the “other” loses all moral validity and therefore we delegitimize their humanity. When our anger dehumanizes the other, we all lose. Again, this is a very challenging step for us to make. It takes great courage not to respond to hatred with hatred, not to violently attack or passively withdraw but to Stand Up. **This standing-up is what I call finding our best selves in troubled times.** In our meditation, we develop our capacity to sit through difficult moments so that we can bring that equanimity into everyday life. This is our work and our path. This equanimity is not a passive withdrawal but an active engagement with our world.

Finding our Best Selves

Within the inclusive atmosphere of accepting our various states, we can form the intention of being a “lighthouse in the storm” for our friends and our “enemies”. The lighthouse gives its light to all. To find our grounded presence, to be a welcoming field of good listening to those with other views is our direction. We need to tread mindfully, without judgments for our failures. When we have enough grounded presence- **we can seek to understand before being understood.** As some of us go home for Thanksgiving this is a very, very helpful mantra.

Thoughtful, kind and honest speech, as well as courageous action is essential. We will forget, fall down and then stand up again. We just do our best. It is not easy to be magnanimous AND actively stand up to these divisive forces.

This is our time to deepen our resolve and stand up WITH each other and FOR each other. This is the time to find our best selves over and over.