Homage to the 60’s and Looking Forward—
How Love and Freedom are a Lighthouse in Modern Times

Coming of age in the 60’s when inner and outer revolutionary thought and action was in the air, the *zeitgeist* invited new, creative ideas about life. It has become a meme in today’s world to cartoon-ize the “hippies” as misguided idealists without a sense of the “real world.” While elements of this parody are accurate and fun, it would be a great loss if the essential message about **Love and Freedom for All** was lost. This core valuing of unconditional Love for all Beings, along with honoring the essential Freedom of the individual has stayed with me as a lighthouse in the dark.

I first encountered Zen as an 18-year-old university student. It is mysterious to me that after reading one article by Shunyru Suzuki, author of “*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,*” I felt driven to begin a meditation practice that has continued to this day, almost 50 years later. What was it that resonated so deeply in my heart and mind?

At that time in my life, I was experiencing a broken heart from the ending of my first close relationship. In this state of vulnerability and openness, for the first time, I became truly conscious of my inner life and discovered the startling fact that in my day-to-day life, I spent more than 90% of the time lost in my internal dialogue. This realization of the nearly incessant flow of judgment, comparison, memory and planning literally shocked me. Did other people go around talking to themselves like I did?

The central idea in Zen - being Present to one’s experience - fit like a liberating key in the locked door of my self-created jail cell. As Ram Das so creatively expressed in his generational guidebook, “*Be Here Now,*” the path to freedom from societal conditioning begins with the capacity to be present in our own experiencing. Many of us recognized the essential role of presence in creating conditions for Awareness. Being aware allowed a fresh questioning, in freedom, of our inherited values and belief systems. This was the beginning of the sense of “being on a path.”

**Presence > Awareness > The Possibility of Freedom**
The fundamental truth that being Present is a prerequisite for Awareness, and that Awareness is a precondition for Freedom, continues to be a central tenet of my personal journey and The Embodied Life teachings. Still, this emphasis on Presence by itself is not enough. Narcissism, that ever-present trap for human beings, can easily be activated with this emphasis on one’s inner life. The joke about meditators being “navel-gazers” who are lost in themselves has truth in it. When awareness is not practiced in relationship with the world, with a deep and wide ethical basis, it can easily become a closed system of self-reflection. With certain charismatic personalities, this kind of awareness has led whole communities in nasty, un-liberating directions. How many very aware spiritual teachers have succumbed to the magnetism of hedonism and power predicated on self-reflection?

There was another strong impulse during these days that is currently being resurrected in our cultural conversations – a potent concern for social justice. From the transformative wave of feminist thinking, to the call of the civil rights movement, the beginning of ecological awareness to the Vietnam protests, a radical questioning of the social order was taking place.

Often there was a division whereby people attracted to social causes were less interested in the inner work and vice versa. The meditators often gave prayers and thoughts to the outer realm with little interest in activism while the social activists were burning out in anger and effort with few skills in caring for their inner lives. Today, I see a bit less division in these impulses. Still, balancing these directions of attention is essential for people to be healthy, self-actualizing and effective as champions of freedom and love in the world.

**Awareness of Self and World as a Fundamental Unity**

The common separation of inner and outer is both a conceptual and functional error. To think that one’s inner world is not embedded in a social setting and not influenced by politics, the environment and one’s relationships is distorted. Similarly, to work toward social justice, which is essentially working toward freedom from oppression, without attending deeply to one’s own oppressive thoughts, feelings, inner motivations, reaction patterns, etc. is ineffective both in terms of action in the world and in terms of personal health.

Getting intimate with one’s inner life is a potent beginning to authenticity and autonomy. When this is not balanced by attention to one’s physical,
social and political environments, there is a distortion. Every moment of our lives, we are living in ever-changing environments. Awareness requires cognizance of these settings. The ancient dictum “know thyself” cannot be actualized by attending solely to one’s inner world. One cannot really know the self IN oneself but only in relationship. Learning to attend to both the outer and inner world is essential on the path.

Similarly, the earnest attempt to create social changes that attend to the needs of underrepresented and disempowered peoples, without a deep exploration of one’s inner world, will tend to recreate the patterns of the social order in which one’s reaction patterns were formed. It is more like rearranging furniture than transformation. To become free from our conditioning and not to simply recreate old patterns with superficial changes requires radical self-inquiry. How often do revolutionaries railing against oppressive power structures become oppressors themselves when empowered? This seems more the norm than the exception.

Attending to our relationships at all levels confronts us with our self-absorption, denials, and certainties, which can open both our heart and mind. By relationship, I am referring to much more than a relationship with another person. Relationship includes how we relate to the inner world of feelings and reactivity as well as the outer world. It is in relationship that we uncover our capacity for Love – learning to care for our own wounds, our fears and tears, while also learning to care for others. This other can be a partner, a child, a friend, a pet, the earth, or really anything that expands our connection to life beyond a separate self. Learning to care for the places within that need our love, while also caring for our close personal connections, is an essential start. Still, ultimately, even this is not enough.

When our Love is confined to particular beings, we miss a most important opportunity – Love as a state of Being. Rather than a particularized caring, given to some and withheld from others, this attitude and sentiment becomes more universal. All great spiritual teachers from Buddha to Christ to more modern exemplars like the Dalai Lama or Desmond Tutu teach us that this is the direction for humanity. Our evolution as a species has this direction – the universal care for all of life in all its forms. I like the old Greek term Agape better than love because it has less culture bound, with fewer historical and personal associations. Agape stands for the highest Love, in theistic traditions it is God’s love for humanity and humanities love for God.
In non-theistic language, we can simply define it as unconditional Goodwill toward all of life.

Why do I call this the direction for human evolution? It seems obvious that without the universalizing of our care – beyond tribe, gender, race, ethnicity and even anthropocentrism – we will not survive on this planet. Our care for the earth, our protection of the animals and people from all cultures depends on growing this capacity.

Encountering the teachings of Moshe Feldenkrais along with other somatic traditions was a profound gift for my learning. Our bodies are a very reliable doorway to presence because our bodies are always in the present moment. This discovery was a major step on my path back in the early 70’s. The teachings of Feldenkrais led me towards greatly increased awareness as well as a capacity to be more present in many situations. Then, through the gifts of Gestalt Awareness practices and, importantly, Gene Gendlin’s “Focusing,” work I also learned to listen to the “Feeling Body”.

**Feeling Body**

A key element of growing the capacity for universal care is learning to take care of the pain, the tears and fears, living within our own bodies. This begins by being present in our own bodies. Our bodies are not just anatomical structures made of flesh and bones, but are the location for all that we feel. Where else do we experience our feelings?

How does the bodily experience of anxiety differ from excitement and even more from boredom? How does pleasant calmness differentiate from disinterested apathy? These states are physiological as well as mental. I call this the “feeling body.” While housed in the physical body and not separate from it, our feeling body is sensed as a different quality of energy. For example, at this moment, I can sense my physical body in this chair, fingers typing, breath coming and going. With a shift of attention, I sense an excited tingling in my chest connected to expressing these ideas.

This is a radically important observation and the beginning of learning to care for “nature.” People say I want to “get back to nature.” Well, nature is right here in our physical and feeling bodies. As a young man growing up, I received a multitude of messages to ignore my feelings and communications from my body, to be in control at all times. This education is the beginning
of an oppressive relationship to life. I believe it is the foundation for attitudes of dominance and an abusive relationship with “other.”

When people learn to have a caring, listening relationship to their inner life, to take care of their own feelings, they can extend this kindness to others. We are literally teaching our children, particularly male children, the opposite – to be oppressors, beginning with our own bodies. Part of the importance of methods like Focusing, The Embodied Life, and other traditions that honor awareness of the organic messages arising in our embodied experience is the potential of reversing of societies obsession with domination. As Carl Rogers said, “Learning to feel our feelings physiologically and symbolize them accurately is healing”. I see this healing as both individual and societal.

From the beginning of my journey back in the 60’s, I was blessed to be in a cultural milieu, a subculture, in which both Freedom and Love (agape) were deeply valued and practiced. Along with many adolescent mistakes and miss-directions, I am forever grateful for the essential message that has stayed resonant all these years. My hope is that these values from the 60’s can be integrated at a more mature level in the world today.

In our social and political discourse, we have strayed far from these values.

**Imagine** - if those drawn to the inner path, learn to see the physical and social environment as inseparable from their lives.

**Imagine** - if those drawn to the outer path learn to go deep inside, for nurturance and inner wisdom, taking better care of their hurts, fears and frustrations.

**Imagine** - if cultivating authentic freedom and concern for ALL others were shared values!

**Imagine** - the world we could create in 2030 if all these seeds were watered effectively each day. Though I fall short every day, my life path is dedicated to living these values.