Presence and Heart Now More Than Ever

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:28:46

I'm zooming in from the Sierras near Lake Tahoe in Truckee, where I'm visiting my six-year-old grandson Desmond and his parents. Trudy and I are up here in the snow, and it's been wonderful and tiring. Six-year-olds have a lot of energy. "Come on, Baba, let's do this and that and this and that." Anyway, it's been great. And now I'm happy to see you all.

If this is your first time coming, our Monday night class has been ongoing for 39 years—30 of them or more on the land at Spirit Rock, and before that, nearby. The format is really simple. It invites you, whoever you are, to come together for us to sit in meditation with a little bit of guidance to start, for 20 or 30 minutes. Then we take a break for five or ten minutes to stretch or relax, and that's usually followed by a talk or teachings, sometimes with dialogue. Tonight will be a little bit different. There'll be a semi-talk and maybe a lot more dialogue. We'll try that.

Let me pause before we meditate. Sometimes people think meditation is an invitation or an approach to have a particular experience or state—even that very basic one of quieting the busy mind, or calming in the midst of anxiety or planning or worry, and then getting some deeper understanding. All those things can happen. But the real point is to come into the reality of the present. This is all we have, actually—this moment. The past is a fiction. The future is a fantasy. Memory and fantasy. What's alive is just now.

To come into this present moment with mindful, loving awareness is to notice the play of our human experience and to discover that we can take our seat with a compassionate and gracious heart, with a freedom that is your birthright and mine, in the midst of all the coming and going of feelings and thoughts and memories and plans and emotions. We take our seat, sometimes beginning quietly with the breath, inviting a sense of calm and ease, noticing the play of experience. We become the mindful, loving witness—mindful, loving awareness itself—spacious and gracious.

With that, I invite you to find a way to sit that's comfortable, at ease. Let your body rest. When you're ready, if you're comfortable doing so, allow your eyes to close gently.

Begin by taking two long breaths. Settle yourself here in the present moment. Let your body relax. Let your eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Maybe roll your head in a little circle to release your neck, then let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax, and let the arms and hands be easy. Feel the whole weight of your body and how it is met by the seat and the earth below. Relax and settle into your seat. Let yourself be fully supported and at ease just where you are. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, ready to receive whatever arises with compassion and kindness.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the experience of this present moment with loving awareness. For those of you who are somewhat experienced in meditation, you might want to begin by simply sensing how the body breathes itself. Feel it as coolness in the nose, swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly—the whole body. It breathes all by itself. As you feel it, invite a sense of calm and ease with each breath. Calm and ease, relaxing with each breath.

This breathing with mindful, loving awareness is not avoiding the world. There's turmoil, difficulty, problems and suffering, concerns we all share. This is a centering of yourself, a quieting of the mind, a softening of the heart, so you can be fully present before you respond to this world—before you respond wisely, with courage and compassion. First, be here. This breath. Steady. Easy.

As you feel the breath, when the attention drifts off, just bring it back gently.

Relax into this breath just now. Feel it, rest in it, swim in it. Let all the other thoughts and worries and plans and sensations rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Feel the ocean wave of the breath—calm and steady. This breath breathing its own rhythm. Rest in the reality of the present as the breath arises.

As you settle and come to an ease, centered, invite the sense of mindful loving awareness to open so that you can notice the waves that rise and fall around the breath. You feel the breath, and then all of a sudden the attention is pulled by a thought—remembering something, imagining, planning, thinking, picturing. When it happens, as soon as you're aware of it (not right away often, but when you are), you can acknowledge it as if with a little bow: remembering, thinking. You are the loving awareness that notices that wave of thoughts arising. Then return back to feel the breath in the middle.

Just as mindful loving awareness can notice the thoughts and words and images, it can also notice the emotions—sadness, excitement, fear, love, longing, desire, frustration. When they arise, as if with a bow, you can acknowledge: oh, sadness; oh, excitement; oh, longing; oh, joy. Let that wave of emotion be felt, let it rise for a time like a wave, and pass away. Then back to a few breaths again. Just here. The reality of the present. This breath and the waves around us.

Notice now too that just as you can be aware of the breath with loving awareness, just as you can notice the rising of thoughts and images, of emotions or sensations in the body—these waves that come and go around the breath—you are not the breath. You are not the thoughts and feelings and sensations. They all come and go. You are the consciousness, the space of awareness, of loving awareness, that notices the breath and the experiences.

Rest in the space of loving awareness, of consciousness itself. Relax. Open. Timeless. Present. Spacious. The breath comes and goes. Waves of experiences arise for a time and pass. And you are the loving witness, the awareness itself.

Loving awareness is vast and open. It allows for all things. The joys and the sorrows arise and pass. The

longing of love. All of it. And here you are, seated like the Buddha herself, himself—the compassionate and loving witness. Spacious. At peace. Rest in the present. Relax. You are the consciousness. You are the awareness itself.

Finally, let this loving awareness be filled with tenderness and compassion. It is love itself—for all that arises, all the beauty and the pain. You rest in the great heart of compassion and the vast consciousness of the awakened heart and mind.

When you're ready, allowing the sense of spacious loving awareness to continue, let your eyes open gently. Feel yourself centered in eternity, which you are—the reality of the present, where all things arise and pass. Look around. Let the sights in with a gracious heart.

Now, before we take our break, which we will in just a minute or two to stretch or relax, a reminder: the word mindfulness means *sati sampajañña* in Pali or Sanskrit. It has two parts—it means mindful presence and mindful response.

You see, we're mostly practicing in the sitting: mindful presence. As you heard, they say in Zen, there are only two things—you sit and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is, the garden of the world. Breathing in, breathing out, we sit first.

I remember teaching at UCLA with Thich Nhat Hanh at a very big conference on Eastern and Western psychology, a couple or a few thousand people. It was time for walking meditation. That particular weekend, or those few days of retreat, the US had commenced bombing somewhere—I forget where, but we're always bombing somebody somewhere. Sad to say, that's part of what we do in this world.

I was wearing a black armband, as were a number of people who came, as a kind of protest to remind people that we didn't stand for bombing, that that wasn't what we wanted. And I said to Thay, to Thich Nhat Hanh, "Well, we could give black armbands to the other thousand people who don't have them when we go out and do our walking meditation across the UCLA campus."

He paused and looked at me and said, "No." He said, "When you walk, just walk. Let your body, your steps, your walking be the peace you want for this earth."

It was a beautiful moment. When you walk, just walk. Be that.

And again, you sit or quiet yourself or even walk slowly. And then you sweep the gardens. I have to say, to use Ram Dass's phrase—boy, oh boy—it sure feels good to sit together with you in these times. So thank you.

Welcome back. Before I start to talk this evening—because often I'll create a kind of crafted talk of teachings and examples and stories in a systematic way, and then we have a conversation afterward—for tonight I want to do something different. I'd like to be able to speak but also to respond to where you are, to what your concerns are, to what themes you wish we could touch on. Perhaps we'll have some dialogue

with this. So I invite you to put into the chat the themes or topics or words—what you're looking for, what you're hoping for, what's going on for you—that we might talk about together.

Let's see what comes up.

How to cope with the stress and anxiety of the current administration. The destruction in the country. Balancing self-care with compassionate action. Stability of heart. Uncertainty. Grief. Fear of sickness. Maintaining sanity while watching destruction. Balancing doom scrolling with head in the sand. Being overwhelmed. Self-care versus activism. How to send love and blessings to all people. Compassion with boundaries. How do I focus on the positive and stay present? Giving my gifts. Watching late-stage capitalism disregard humans. The despair of the news. How to help those with memory issues to remember how to meditate. How to understand that there are other views of what's going on. Remember that spring always follows winter. I do not feel guilty for feeling safe.

Oh, well. This was going to be a couple of hours, but I'm afraid we'll be here all night. Might as well relax.

What I love about hearing from you, even though it's difficult, is somehow the sense that we're in this together.

How do I stay centered? How do I take care of my family? How do I quiet myself and also act in the world? And how to do so with a joyful heart? How do I deal with the struggles? How to avoid or work with feeling overwhelmed?

And if you look at the screen and see the little faces in the squares, or you're on the Facebook live stream or whatever, we're in this together. And it doesn't mean there aren't some conservatives on the screen. There are some really important conservative values, the best of them, that we need. So this isn't a political statement, but it's a Dharma statement.

As Thich Nhat Hanh repeated often: when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person remained centered and calm, it showed the way for everyone to survive. And you know who that one person is. That's how the world is made. It's made from us, from our hearts and our being.

So maybe the first thing is simply that we allow ourselves time to be present, to walk in nature, to turn off the damn news. You know, you kind of know the plot. It's like reading a Shakespearean tragedy in many cases. You know it. Quiet your mind, tend your heart. And also, as you do, perhaps not get into the game of blame, of who's right and wrong.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian activist and author, said: "If only it were so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary simply to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who among us is willing to destroy a piece of our heart?"

In a way, what we're seeing is really a symptom of our humanity. Here we are, twenty-first century, late stage capitalism, which has gotten to the place where there are extreme divides between rich and poor, exploitation. And we're at the time Joanna Macy calls the Great Turning, the great opportunity really for us to reset our lives as human beings.

What's also true about the Great Turning is that it's a birth process. I don't know how many of you have given birth, but I imagine looking at the screen that some of you would raise your hands. And it's messy. It's painful. It's dangerous. It's difficult. We are in some kind of birth process. All the things we see are not just terrible things, but they're also symptoms of our fear as human beings. We're kind of wired to fear the other. And our politics is all about fear. The great commentators about politics said, you know, the whole aim of politics is to frighten the populace into voting for you. That was a hundred years ago, that commentary.

But that's not who we are at heart. That's the small separate self, the body of fear. The Buddhist texts also begin: "Oh nobly born, remember who you are." Remember your fearlessness in the midst of it all. Center yourself.

Thomas Jefferson said something like, "One person with courage is a majority." I used to have on my refrigerator a picture of that Chinese man with the shopping bag standing in front of that line of tanks. Remember that image? After Tiananmen Square, the tanks stopped, and he had his shopping bags.

But how do we do this? We have to stay in the present. Because if you let yourself get drowned by the news and the fears and the thoughts, you'll go swimming and rising and falling in the ocean of grief and fear. And that's not who you are. Meditation invites you to have a very different perspective.

When a butterfly makes a chrysalis, we used to think as kids, and we were told, that it would grow its wings. There's the caterpillar and it had some wings and it comes out and it flies. But now we know all the science shows us something very different. It dissolves. It becomes a gelatinous mass of cells, some of which are related to the old caterpillar, and some other cells which have a beautiful name.

They're called imaginal cells. And these are the cells that picture that they can fly. I mean, what a wild thing for those cells to believe. But honestly, they do. They carry that image, that imagination, that possibility. And apparently there's some struggle there in the chrysalis about who's going to win out. Can we go back to the old caterpillar? I don't think so. And gradually the imaginal cells begin to build the wings of the butterfly.

But it's not easy. Things fall apart. And I say that lightly, but actually there can be tremendous suffering, and we can see it. Part of our practice and our training is the capacity to bear witness to the ocean of tears, as well as the wondrous glory of the world and the universe. The beauty that surrounds us. And nature keeps showing us amazing things. It keeps getting reborn no matter what you do. It will be reborn. It will push through the cracks in the sidewalk. You try to pave it over—baby, it's coming back. It's just what it

does. It renews itself.

So there's a kind of trust that's asked. And there's a story—remember Black Elk? Black Elk was the great medicine man of his people, and he was celebrated. He had this beautiful vision on Harney Peak about the circle of life, and part of the vision was the way his people would again come together and live in the harmony they had before.

In the beautiful biography *Black Elk Speaks*, John Neihardt, who interviewed him and lived with him at the end of his life and became partly his voice—he was with Black Elk. And Black Elk was an old man now at the end of his life, as Neihardt writes. He wanted to go back and visit the top of Harney Peak, where he had been blessed by a vision of the sacred hoop of the world that inspired his whole life and so many people.

So he put on his finest headdress and painted himself as one does to meet the gods, and took a sacred pipe and asked for a blessing, honoring the goodness and beauty of the sacred tree. He walked up to the top of Harney Peak, and Neihardt said it was a clear blue sky. Yet Black Elk had told him that if his life was of any value, the rains would come. This is a very dry part of the Dakotas, but the clouds would part and bring some rain as a blessing from the Great Spirit.

He climbed up. The sky was perfectly clear. There were tourists looking at this old man in his headdress and paint, wondering. And it was in the midst of a season of drought, one of the worst in years. He lay himself on the ground at the top of Harney Peak and made a prayer that if he had lived righteously, the gods would somehow bless him with rain.

And Neihardt said, to his astonishment, some clouds appeared just over that part of the mountain, and a light rain began to fall. Black Elk lay there and smiled and somehow knew—even though he didn't succeed in reweaving the sacred hoop in the way that he intended—that his life was not in vain.

There are some bigger forces than what you know. Bigger than politics, bigger than even climate change, bigger than AI. And these are all huge forces—don't get me wrong. But in another way, they're trivial. They're trivial compared to the forces of the turning of the seasons and the return of life. As Pablo Neruda says, you can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring.

There's another force. And that's what we're asked to remember. Something mysterious and great. To quiet ourselves and align ourselves. And then, of course, to begin to act—but to act not in the way of fear.

I tell that story—I might have told it a month ago—of my beloved friend and colleague Wes Nisker, who died a couple of years ago, visiting Gary Snyder. Gary Snyder, the great environmentalist, now in his nineties, who got the Pulitzer Prize for his environmental writing fifty, sixty years ago with *Earth Household*. Wes said, "Gary, the oceans are rising, the deserts are growing, refugees everywhere, animals going extinct, the ice flows melting. What advice do you have? You've been an environmentalist for more than half a century."

And Gary looked back and said, "Don't feel guilty. Don't feel guilty. If you want to save it, don't save it out of guilt. Don't save it out of fear."

Don't save it out of anger. Because the guilt and the fear and the anger are what has created our human problems. This is the source of it. If you want to save it, save it because you love it. That's the force that makes a difference. That's the power that does so.

So what you do when you meditate is you let yourself sit with heartbreak. How many have heartbreak? Don't bother raising your hands. We know you. How many have felt guilt or fear? And then here's Gary saying, don't save it out of fear, out of confusion and guilt, doom scrolling, all these things which will come in these times.

But the end of Mary Oliver's poem about the last day of the Buddha, where he lies under the two sal trees and his last words as the trees break into blossom—he looks up and he says, "Make of yourself a light." It's usually rendered as "be a lamp unto yourself," but Mary Oliver's better than that. She says, "Make of yourself a light."

So I'm going to pause for a moment. We could get practical in a few minutes. But I'm really talking about the value of learning how to embody that nobility and dignity that is who you are. We human beings go through horrible times—world wars and tremendous human-caused suffering. How will you carry yourself? And what light will you carry? Because you can, you know.

How are you doing? I go to nature to relieve the grief. Do it out of love—such a powerful message, because it's a shared message. We see each other. We're actually holding hands in spirit, even here.

And do you know why you get afraid? Do you know why you get angry and upset? Because you care. Underneath all that—the fear and the anger and all of it—it comes because you care. And in meditation, the invitation is to drop beneath. You can see the anger and the fear and all that. That's being human. Like Solzhenitsyn said, who doesn't have that in their heart? But underneath that for you is to sense that care.

Poetry helps. Arts help. Music helps. A bigger picture. "I feel like I should be doing something and make a difference, but what?" "Do it out of love breaks my heart open."

A couple of days ago, being up in Truckee, there was a big demonstration of people out on the street who were concerned about the firing of USAID and the money that would go to feed children who are hungry or starving, would go to give medicine to those who are sick. And the thing that struck me—Truckee's a small town, I think three or four thousand people—hundreds of people came out, and there were so many creative signs. It was amazing, the creativity. So many people came out for a long time. It took about a day to organize. And it was done by a high school student. He said, we've got to get out there.

And he started calling the other students, and they all started calling their friends and their parents and their cousins. In a day or so, hundreds and hundreds of people in this small town appeared with their

signs of love and their signs of concern. Of course there were signs of frustration and anger too—there were all of them. Part of what struck me was how creative it actually was, when you're standing up. It's here. It's in us.

And you say, well, what should I do? Go out in nature, supported by children and grandchildren. They're rooting for you. Sometimes it's just small things. I think about Italy during the pandemic, how people began to sing to one another from the balconies when they couldn't visit each other. And then they began to bang their pots, remember that? It's really simple. We should have a pot banging day for people who are concerned.

It also helps to have a big picture. If we think about the Great Turning, I remember being on the top of Mount Tamalpais—I've talked about this before. Some years ago, Mount Tam is the 2,500-foot mountain in the middle of Marin County, our local mountain, and it was the day of the passage of the planet Venus across the face of the sun. I drove up because I had read about it, and at the top there were a bunch of amateur astronomers who had brought their telescopes, some with pretty big ones. I got to look through a big telescope, and there was the sun.

If you get to look close at it, first of all, it's kind of wiggly. It's not like a bright orange disc. It's like looking into a fiery, moving, amazing thing, constantly alive. It's astonishing to see how alive it is. The sun is considered a being or a god in so many indigenous cultures—they could be right, you know. This thing was really alive in these ways.

And then at one corner, there was this little dark marble, very tiny compared to the big disc of the sun. As I watched for five minutes, I could see that it moved a tiny bit. I went away and came back, and it had moved a little further. And then I realized—oh, that's Venus. It's about the same size as planet Earth, like us. The same size. And it wends its way around our great star like we do.

There's this vast space and these little tiny marbles going around our star in this wonderful way. And then we get upset. "Sometimes I go about pitying myself," said the Ojibwe, "when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky."

There's something about trusting—Black Elk's vision—that there's something bigger. And then you're called in the darkest times and the most difficult times to remember who you are and to treat one another from that place of dignity and respect, as those who are nobly born. In a way, that's what we've been practicing for, some of us for a very long time.

And it doesn't take a lot, you know. Gestures of kindness. Asking others how you can help, and then tuning and listening: Who is doing things that make a difference? Is there a new underground railroad growing to shelter people who otherwise might be in danger? Would you want to be a stop on that underground railroad, if that was the right thing for you?

We will get through this, and we'll get through it because we do it together.

There's an amazing book called *Bury the Chains* by Adam Hochschild. It's the story primarily of a man named Thomas Clarkson. Thomas Clarkson aligned himself—he might have been a Quaker, or he aligned himself with the Quakers—and he was one of the activists in England fighting against the slave trade. In the 1700s and 1800s, a lot of the wealth of the British Empire came from slaving and then from slave plantations, slave colonies, penal colonies, especially in the Caribbean islands and Central America and all those places where you can grow sugarcane. Sugarcane was the oil of the time, and it brought great wealth.

And they knew, the Quakers especially knew, that this was immoral and it was wrong. And six of them got together in an English tea house and said, "We're going to change this." They all vowed in their own way to make a difference. Clarkson in some way became the head of them, and he rode for thirty years. He rode tens of thousands of miles back and forth across England, meeting especially with the English gentry and the people who had wealth or power or in some way were part of those who ran the society.

He brought with him often an ex-slave, somebody who had been somehow released or able to get to England and who was well spoken, who described what it was like—the middle passage, to be chained in the hold of a ship with hundreds of others and no food, what it was like to be whipped and beaten. And here in the nice parlors of the English gentry, Thomas Clarkson went from place to place to place. Thirty years it took him. And at the end of it, it wasn't just him, of course—it was a movement from the Quakers and others. The English Parliament came together and with the force of their movement, they outlawed slavery. They probably did it in stages, as I remember, to be accurate. First, no more taking of slaves, then no more keeping of slaves.

I'm telling you this because it takes a while, especially in times of huge social change. But you—you are the imaginal cells. You are the ones who are called to hold the vision of a wise society where people respect each other, where we care for the vulnerable, where we understand the universal teachings: hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is you.

One person shared that on Saturday in the city of Berkeley where they live, there was a large demonstration at the Tesla store in southwest Berkeley. There were going to be six or eight hundred people there. And there was anger—people would drive by in Teslas and they would say, "Sell that car, sell that car." But what they wanted to share was that the mood was joy. People were just so happy to be together, all these folks coming out, and it was a joyful occasion. They stopped traffic, blocked the whole street. After a while somebody built a cardboard Tesla, about eight feet wide, eight feet long, carried on sticks covered with aluminum paint, traded back and forth among the people. It was a joyful occasion, and they wanted to reassure everyone about that.

I really appreciate the spirit of it, that it was done, that it's not done out of great fear or great anger. Now, I need to be honest. I bought one of the first Teslas, and I still drive it. People want to give me the bumper sticker: "I bought this before Elon turned into whatever." I really appreciate the concern about Tesla, but

more deeply, it's the concern about what's happening in our government and the kind of things that the Department of Government Efficiency, DOGE, is doing. I was talking to one of my dearest friends who worked for the World Health Organization. And he said, "Do you know what it's like to hold children who haven't had enough to eat?" Because he worked in the refugee camps. He said, "That's what I'm worried about."

So thank you both for the joy. And also somehow it's funny to hear that the old lefties were having a good time—they've got a cause now. May it work, you know. But it's not just them. It's our children. The gathering that happened in Truckee had families and kids and it was also joyful. If we're going to change the world, let's do it out of love, out of joy.

Another person shared that they are an AIDS researcher and have worked for four decades with very vulnerable populations—women at risk for HIV in Africa and sexual and gender minority people. Their group is heartbroken to see these vulnerable populations come under attack.

And we're trying to find a way to make some noise and make the cuts that have been made in PEPFAR and other USAID programs palpable for people in America. And it's been very hard. A lot of our international collaborators who could give us the data to show the impact are afraid. They feel so vulnerable. They're afraid to participate, which is even more heartbreaking.

Of course, we're old friends. I'm glad to see you. I know as a physician that you've given your life to this work of bringing medicine that saves people, that keeps families and mothers and children from dying across many parts of the world, and that your whole team and all the things you do now feels like it's being taken apart, undermined. So that's the tragic part.

And I think your willingness to name it as part of our community, to ask us all to carry it with you so that you're not alone—I invite you to look at all the little squares if you shift your computer so that people can gaze at you and look back and say in their own way with their eyes: we're with you. We hear you. We want to help. So look at that so you feel that's there.

And then also know, as you say, you're doing everything you can to make changes. It isn't the end of the story. We go through a lot of cycles, and this is a destructive one. It may have some tremendous suffering in parts. It may also have lessons we don't even know. It's so mysterious, you know. It really is. And what light can you carry? What spirit can you carry? What helps you? What's the most helpful thing now that you're carrying your lamp in the darkness?

"Well, I think I take a lot of solace in the feelings of solidarity that people are coming from all different backgrounds. There's a Stand Up for Science movement. There's other people who can feel the pain of these destructive acts. So community is really central."

The solidarity, all those people who gaze back at you with their eyes of compassion and also care and respect for all this beautiful work that you've done. And you are one of the imaginal cells, kind of

remembering: okay, we can do this. We can have things fall apart and we will respond and we'll envision and somehow we'll rebuild something. But for right now, it's also very difficult. There's no question about it for the kind of things you're talking about.

I think about Vedran, and I carry his picture sometimes. Vedran Smailović, who is the cellist of Sarajevo. Here he's playing in the bombed-out National Library of Sarajevo. For the three years that Sarajevo was under siege—mortar fire, people couldn't get in and out except for UN helicopters—it was a really terrible time. And Vedran, who'd been in the symphony, would put on his tux and take his little folding chair, and wherever there'd been a mortar fire or a bombed-out building, he would go in the day that followed it and seat himself in the middle of the crater and play beautiful music so the people of Sarajevo wouldn't give up hope.

That's what's asked of us too—to bring our music even in difficult times, to bring art and beauty and care and love more than anything else, even more than the fear and concern.

Anyway, thank you for all your years of service. And I have just one terrible thing to say to you, kiddo: you ain't done yet. And I trust you. You know how to do this. You've done it in really hard places. I know you have. You've gone to the ends of the earth. It's been hot. It's been terrible. People have been sick. You've been the doctor.

You know how to do this. And you're not done yet. You have things to do.

I hope we can be effective. I hope so too.

Let's pause for a moment. The help that can come also arrives in unexpected ways. If we're open, if we show our own humanity, sometimes it's surprising what appears and who joins us. You have to trust this as well. You know that it could happen.

When I graduated from nursing school at age forty, the only job I could get was at a Veterans Affairs hospital. The work was a challenge in every possible way. It didn't help that the veterans teased me relentlessly, asking over and over if I was married. I'm actually a lesbian. My growing discomfort with the question seemed only to egg them on.

Meanwhile, caring for them required a great deal of physical intimacy. While changing a dressing or washing a severely ill patient, I often could tell it had been a long time since that body had been touched with kindness. Gradually, I came to love the crusty old vets and the stubborn guys in detox, many of whom were homeless. Their spirit and resilience in the face of tremendous adversity were a kind of miracle.

Later, I worked on the psychiatric ward where patients could become aggressive and angry, argumentative. Sometimes I didn't feel safe there, especially after it occurred to me that all these troubled veterans were combat trained. Once, a large psychotic man approached me in a threatening manner. Just

as I was starting to worry, an equally large veteran with dementia quietly stepped between us. Several other vets seemed to appear out of nowhere and stood nearby in silence, and I felt safe.

I've retired now, but I still volunteer on that ward twice a week. I feel like I'm visiting my family.

And it is our family. Now, of course, families are weird. In most every other culture, when people are referred to, the honorifics are familial—uncle and auntie. We have wacky uncles too, demented uncles even. We won't use their names, but they're our relatives because we're all family. In the end, we're woven into an inescapable garment of destiny, as Dr. King says.

We can't fix it or change it. We can't change the suffering, but we can bear witness to it with our tears and our hearts. And remember that we're even bigger than the suffering. Then we can reach out our hand, each of us in our own way, to mend the places that we can touch, to care for those in front of us or around us, or to join together in community with others who care.

And that care changes people. Just that alone begins to make a difference. It becomes a kind of movement—the movement of caring. This is compassion. It's really simple. It's not easy.

You look at the dialogues between the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, and they both suffered as much as anybody. Their countries and all that's around them, all the responsibility—the loss of Tibet, the killings in South Africa—they're right in the middle of it. And yet they bring this huge compassion of heart and joy. Why should I let my heart be taken over? Let me bring beauty into the world, and compassion, and love.

And you can do that too.

"Therefore, I look upon everything as a brotherhood and a sisterhood," says Mary Oliver, our modern great poet. "And I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular, and each body a lion of courage and something precious to the earth."

I think of Ajahn Chah's forest monastery when the fighter jets and bombers flew over during those years of the wars in Cambodia and Vietnam. Our province was on the border of Cambodia and Laos. The monastery was a deliberate island of peace.

He said, "I want people to remember what's possible—not to close their eyes or turn away, but to become a light." Make of yourself a light.

So I thank you for tonight. Thank you for what you have shared. Thank you for your good hearts. Thank you for your profound caring and for the sense of community that we have.

I invite you to look at one another. Let's be quiet for a moment and practice a little metta, wishing well for all these faces before us. You know, these are your sisters and brothers, your uncles and aunties. They are.

Offer each one a blessing from your heart—courage, support. We're in this together.

With gratitude, blessings, and love to all.

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