Suffering is Not the End of the Story

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 55:20

I was very happy to meditate and to sit together with you. It's such a pleasure amidst all this chaotic and very difficult time. Because even as we take our seat to try to steady and calm ourselves, we're doing so in the middle of multiple crises. The crisis of the pandemic and all that's happening and how it's affecting so many around us. The economic crisis that it's highlighted and made worse. The crisis of racial injustice and economic injustice and the disparity in our culture and country and in the world between rich and poor. The climate crisis, which affects everyone and all creatures on the earth. Now living in California, added to it as if it's not enough, we have these vast forest fires that are part of the usual ecosystem but much larger than usual, partly fueled by climate change itself.

So the question for us—those of us of good hearts who come together with our good hearts, and many of you as meditators over the long time or relatively new—is how do we understand this? And how do we live wisely amidst these crises?

What I'd like to talk about tonight is that suffering is not the end of the story. The difficulty and suffering is part of what we experience, but it's not where the story goes. And more than anything in these teachings, I want them to be a reminder. It's not something you have to take notes about or take an exam at the end or get credits for. It's really an invitation to reflect yourself mindfully and to live as you listen to it just here and now, and sense what resonates in your own heart to be true. The rest you can let go.

When I say suffering is not the end of the story, I think of my very dear friend, epidemiologist and physician Larry Brilliant, who was on the teams in India that worked to eradicate smallpox from the world. With this pandemic, Larry has been very busy working with the head of the CDC and the head of WHO, bringing all that he's learned about pandemics and epidemiology. But back then, when he was working in the last countries, the last places where there was still smallpox in the world, struggling to complete this work, he acknowledged—as we might—that smallpox was one of the greatest forms of suffering that humanity has ever known. Somewhere between 300 and 500 million people died of smallpox in the 20th century alone. If we think of one or two million dying from the COVID pandemic, smallpox was 100 or 500 times as much. It was the leading cause of death. In many years, one third of the Japanese population died in one of the epidemics. Most of the Native Americans, who were unprepared for smallpox, died.

What Larry described was working from village to village with a team of 150,000 people around the world, who all had the leadership and dedication to realize that it was possible to not only stop, but to eradicate this pandemic. He was in a village in a remote place in Bangladesh and saw the last live case of

smallpox on earth—Rahima Banu, a young girl in a Bangladesh village. They managed to vaccinate everyone in that village even though the villagers resisted and struggled against it, because it was their belief that smallpox was a punishment from God. They vaccinated them all. And Larry said, "I looked in the eyes of this young girl who was surviving her smallpox—only half of children did—and I realized I had seen the last case of a virus that was one of the worst on earth for five or ten thousand years of humanity." And he wept.

So suffering is not the end of the story. We can also be witness to the bravery and the possibilities of life. Larry has been working on the eradication of polio and all kinds of other human possibilities following smallpox. But for us, what's important is to understand how we move and navigate and live wisely amidst all these difficulties.

The Buddha taught in his very first teaching, the very first day, the famous Four Noble Truths of suffering and its causes—greed and hatred and ignorance. And then he talked about the liberation of nirvana that he had discovered, and invited those who listened to him to find the same liberation in their hearts. What's important to understand is that after attaining nirvana, the Buddha wandered on foot the dusty roads of India for 45 years, meeting people and saying, "This liberation of heart and mind is possible for you."

Often when we think of nirvana or liberation, we tend to think in transcendent terms. And they're true in a way and quite wonderful—samadhi, jhana states, states of expansion and bliss, dissolving the body into light. These are things that you can do in meditation, that I've learned to do in retreats with various teachers I've practiced with, states of expansiveness and bliss and well-being. But it turns out that there's no enlightened retirement. Even the Buddha had backaches and terrible conflicts in his community between people, and people who tried to kill him. Maybe that just comes with leadership. I don't know, especially with good leadership.

But what he had done was open to a freedom in the mystery of our human life. To say this is possible. This inner peace and well-being, this freedom—freedom from fear and confusion and from the small, separate sense of self, from grasping—this is possible for you.

And we all need this. I think of my dear colleague and friend Sylvia Boorstein, who tells this story when she teaches about her father, who I knew. She was close to him and loved him, and he was in his 90s, on his deathbed. He had cancer and was getting closer and closer to dying, almost dying. She was whispering in his ear, "Dear dad, let go into the light. Let go into the ocean of love that you are. Trust it. Release into it. Let go of this body"—all those beautiful teachings we have for the end of life.

And he opened his eyes. He couldn't quite raise his head, but he opened his eyes. He motioned Sylvia to come close so she could hear his weak voice. And he said, "Sylvia, it's not such a big deal."

She carries this with her, because yes, there's suffering—and that includes aging and death and illness.

These are part of the first noble truth of life, and there are causes for it—greed and hatred and ignorance, and the amount of clinging and attachment that we have. But they're not the end of the story. We usually focus on the suffering or get lost in it. We get caught in the reactivity, the greed, the fear. We dwell in it and we struggle. What are we going to do about it? And we believe it in some deep way.

What if there were another way?

Jerry Flagstead, a physician, describes his initial revulsion to a patient named Frank. Frank was an angry and obese homeless man who had diabetes, was unbathed, and had gangrene on his legs and many open sores. When he did not take his meds for his mental disorder, Frank would flail his arms and spew curses and epithets at all who were around him. Frank was admitted repeatedly to the hospital, and for Dr. Flagstead, Frank was a patient who was hard to love.

One day, Frank was brought into the Richmond Hospital with congestive heart failure. The diagnosis was serious, and Dr. Flagstead tended him as best as he could. Then twenty members of the Down Home Neighborhood Church, in whose basement shelter Frank sometimes slept, arrived. They brought flowers and homemade food. They chanted and sang hymns to Frank, creating a chorus of care and communion. When Dr. Flagstead returned to Frank's room after tending another patient on the ward, he saw that Frank was smiling, bathed in their love. And the doctor realized he had never really seen Frank at all.

What if there were another way to see, even amidst the suffering? To take a breath, to sense the vastness and mystery of life. As the Ojibwa say, "Sometimes I go about pitying myself, when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky."

It is a mystery. We are all made of starlight. The earth and all that's on it came as a planet out of the explosions of the stars in the galaxies. And if you don't think that's a mystery, look at every green leaf, every tree and every blade of grass and every weed—all those green things which contain chlorophyll that you studied in your high school biology class. Here's the cool thing: these plants know how to turn light into sugar. Imagine that. Not only are you congealed stars, but the surface of the earth is covered with beings that know how to turn light into sugar, so that the plants and animals around them—all that feed off this life that streams from the sun—turn into sugar for us.

The point of liberation is not to transcend this world, to find some peaceful bliss, to run away to some cave. The point of liberation is to see the mystery that's here and now—the sense of the sacred, the immanence of life. Like the Buddha wandering the dusty roads of India, we discover that exactly where we are can also be the place of peace and nirvana, of wellbeing.

In the noble truths that were taught, there's suffering. There is, in life. These days, I don't think anybody can deny it. But it doesn't say that life *is* suffering. It says that life *has* suffering. And then it talks about the causes: greed, hatred, ignorance, fear. We don't have to look very far to see how it plays out in our lives, in our communities, and more sadly, in the body politic and in the actions of nations around the world.

But there's a third and fourth noble truth. There's an end to suffering, and a path to the end of it. This path includes wise effort—the effort not to be caught in greed and fear and confusion, but to step out of them, the sense that there's another way of being. And wise concentration—the way of steadying the heart, what we did as we sat together, finding ease with each breath. Not only do we not want to get caught, but we need to learn how to stay present so that we're not completely caught by each fear and confusion that comes by. And then wise mindfulness, which basically means mindful loving awareness that's not identified with each thing that comes and goes—that we become the loving witness, the loving awareness of vastness itself, that sees the world arise and pass as it does for us in this human incarnation, with a sense of spaciousness, not taking it so personally.

Here's another story for you. This is about Whitney, who was caught in the great troubles of her family. Her mother was scheduled for hip surgery. Her father was already suffering from a middle stage of Alzheimer's that the mother was taking care of. She wanted her parents to continue to live in the home where they'd been for years and where Whitney grew up. But as their disabilities got worse, it became clear that they had to move out. Her brothers wouldn't do it. They told Whitney—and this happens so often to the women in the family—"You go take care of it."

So she took leave from work and spent time with her parents to help them in the hospital and get ready. The home was in a shambles. Her father couldn't really care for himself. They had round-the-clock care, but they couldn't afford it for more than a short period of time. Everyone was stressed.

Whitney took a walk up the hillside she'd known since her childhood. She didn't want to lose this family home.

She wanted her parents to stay until the end. And she didn't want to lose her parents. She wept as she walked.

But when she reached the top of the hill, she sat quietly, calmed herself, and looked across the vast Midwestern fields stretching to the horizon. The sky was filled with cumulus clouds bringing shade to so many small houses clustered at the edge of town and beyond. Facing this unbounded vastness, she suddenly felt less alone. She could sense how everything had its rhythms—arriving and departing, flourishing and struggling, coming into being and fading away.

How many people, she wondered, are in the same predicament we are in right now?

As she breathed with more ease, her heart opened further. I'm not the only one with aging parents. It's part of the human journey. And as the space within her opened, she felt more trust. This is the vastness of mindful loving awareness that allows us to steady and quiet our bodies and hearts and minds, to hold a kind of tender and wise perspective—to become the witness, to see the dance of our life from a place of compassion and understanding and connection. She knew connection. She knew she wasn't the only one, that there were thousands of others who were attending their parents that day, and this day as well.

So how do we live in this? How do we live in our lives?

In the last teachings of the Buddha, there's a famous text which records the final year of his teachings. He speaks of a wise society. He says that if a society finds a way to meet in harmony, to discuss their lives in harmony with respect for one another, and to part in harmony, such a society will prosper and not decline. If a society finds ways to listen to the wisdom of the ages, of the elders and all those who've directed humankind toward their best evolution and highest possibility, they will prosper and not decline. If a society cares for the vulnerable among them—the women, the children, those who are sick—they will prosper and not decline. And if a society cares for the sacredness of the environment around them, they will prosper and not decline.

This is part of the teachings of wisdom, the teachings of the liberated heart. It is collective wisdom, because we are interdependent with the world around us.

When I drove down to Southern California yesterday, I left San Francisco, which was very smoky, and drove through the Central Valley to be with my beloved Trudy, my dear wife. The smoke filled the entire Central Valley all the way to the last little range of mountains at the Grapevine, just before you descend into Los Angeles. Almost the entire state, and the Northwest in Portland, covered with smoke from these huge, still-burning and growing fires.

It's really difficult. My daughter is married to a firefighter who's been out on the front lines. My grandson, who's about twenty months old, keeps saying to his mama, "Outside, outside," but they can't go. It's not healthy. They have air purifiers in the house. But then what about all the people who are losing their homes? What about all the children in homes where there aren't air purifiers? What about all the creatures of the forest who are fleeing the fires?

And what can we do? What can each of us do?

If you feel guilty, if you feel ashamed somehow that you're safe when others aren't, that you have privilege when others don't—that's not the answer. The truth is that whatever birth you've taken in this life as a human being, you've been given a particular assignment. And if you have privilege, that is your assignment: to use it, to treasure it, to value it, to respect it, and then to use it in your way to make life beautiful for yourself and others.

For me, I've been going out daily for the last two and a half months with a big sign that says "Time for Racial and Economic Justice—Black Lives Matter." As the cars go by, I stand in the median of a very busy intersection, where I don't see other people near me, and I have my mask on. Some people honk and cheer. Many are quiet. And then once in a while, the angry people go by and shout at me—"Asshole! All lives matter! Stupid asshole, get out of here!"—and worse things than that.

Then today, a car pulled up and someone asked, "Are you getting paid to do this?" I said, "No, I'm doing it because I care." They said, "That's a lie. They must be paying you." I just said, truthfully, "This matters to

me, and anything else you might believe is just propaganda. Do you care about economic justice and racial justice? I do."

So I get all of those things—the coming and going, the praise and the blame.

I'm also involved in a project to bring together all the dharma teachers that I know, all the meditation teachers and yoga teachers, with a group called Yogis and Buddhists United, to help get out the vote across the country. Because there are tens of millions of meditation and yoga practitioners.

And if the teachers of these traditions say, here's how you register to vote, here's how you help register others to vote—because we're interdependent. Every breath you took as we meditated was a breath that's part of the climate change we share. Was the breath perhaps constricted by your mask because of the pandemic? Was the breath taken in the middle of our economic crisis? All of these things are interconnected.

And you are invited to steady your heart. You're invited to see it all with loving awareness, to remember that this loving awareness is who you are, and to find your way to respond.

Going back to the very earliest teachings of the Buddha, it's clear that there was no spiritual bypass to engagement with the world. He stood up against and acted against the racist caste system of India. He invited those who were the lowest caste—the ones who were shunned and pushed to the edges of the village and spat upon—and he said, "You can become monks and nuns in my order and live with dignity and nobility."

And then when the princes and princesses of the royal households came to ordain, because you had to bow to those who had ordained before you, the Buddha had set it up so that prince or princess had to get down and bow to the thief, to the untouchable, to the lowest caste, who would become a noble one wearing the robes of awakening. This goes back to the very beginning—that it's not caste or race or creed or gender or ability that makes you noble. As the Buddha said, not your birth, but that nobility is the nobility of heart, the dignity and compassion that you carry. That's what makes a noble being.

When I was teaching at Naropa Buddhist University in those first years, starting in 1974 and 1975 with Ram Dass and Chogyam Trungpa and two thousand students, it was really quite a wonderful Dharma festival. I remember being at one of our faculty meetings. A dear friend of mine, Mirabai Bush, who's close to Ram Dass and did some books together with him—a wonderful teacher—she was there, and what got brought up was the fact that women were not being treated as well as men on the faculty. I know you're shocked to hear this. They were being paid less, they had less power, they had less influence. Shocking, absolutely shocking.

The answer that was given when it was raised—and remember, this was the seventies, which had its own foment and ferment of feminism in a beautiful way—Chogyam Trungpa and the followers, the teachers, the faculty who were around him said, "In the Dharma, there is no man and no woman. In the Dharma,

we are all equal. There's a oneness, and Dharma is beyond gender and beyond all these forms of discrimination. You're seeing it wrong."

Then I remember Mirabai standing up and saying, "I just need a little clarification here. If there's no gender in the Dharma, then why is it that the eighteen people who run this are all men and the women are all in the back of the bus? What does that mean?"

It was a beautiful moment because it was undeniable what was happening, even though they were trying to hide out and make a spiritual bypass about it all. We know better than that now, in all kinds of ways.

Dear ones, dear friends, you are invited to live from your wisdom. You're invited to a liberated heart. You've taken human incarnation, and who you are is consciousness itself—the vast consciousness that's born in particular ways into your body and another's body. But who you are is the field of consciousness itself, like starlight that makes all things visible. That too is held in the field of consciousness.

And out of consciousness, this mysterious universe has created a universe of duality—of light and dark, beginnings and endings, birth and death, joy and sorrow. Because in the oneness of consciousness, none of that exists. There's only openness and possibility and eternal, timeless peace. But for consciousness to manifest as a world and a universe, it has to divide itself and make a beginning and an end, form and light and dark.

This is what we get: justice and injustice, pleasure and pain. Take a look around. This is human incarnation as it is.

Glennon Doyle says, "You will never change the fact that being human is hard. So you must change your idea that it was ever supposed to be easy."

And here you are, born into the human realm—light and dark, pleasure and pain, birth and death, sickness and health. Sounds like a marriage vow, doesn't it? In sickness and health. This is your vow to become a human being. You're married to the human incarnation of your life. And this is it. It's what Oscar Wilde called the tainted glory of humanity.

To be liberated, to be wise and peaceful and free, is a great power. And the great power is not to be afraid of suffering. Because suffering is only the First Noble Truth.

Zen Master Rinzai says, "One who is wise can enter the realm of hungry ghosts and dumb animals without being molested by them, can go into the three deepest hells as if strolling through a fairground, can play about in the world of fire and water—fire without being burned, water without drowning." How is this so? Because the one with a liberated heart finds that there's nothing that they dislike. If you grasp after something sacred out there and dislike this very world, you will go on floating and sinking in the ocean of birth and death. Confusion arises with the grasping of the heart.

When the heart is still and you grasp after nothing and welcome all, why then need you fear anything?

Do not tire yourself grasping after anything at all. And quite naturally, of itself, you will live in the way.

I remember when I first went to the monastery of Ajahn Chah, my teacher, to live in the forest as a forest monk. I entered with my robe and my bowl. I'd been ordained in the village temple where I lived in the Peace Corps, so my friends could be part of that ordination. I entered and Ajahn Chah looked at me and said, "Welcome. You're welcome to this as a place of peace and a place of practice." I said thank you. And then he looked me in the eye and said, "I hope you're not afraid of suffering."

I was taken aback by that as his first statement. I said, "Why do you say that?" He smiled and said, "There are two kinds of suffering. The suffering that you run away from, that follows you everywhere. And the suffering that you're willing to turn and face—and only there can you find the liberation of the heart."

So when you sit and meditate, you find both the suffering, that part of the story, and the liberation from that suffering, the other part of the story. You sit with your body, and in this frail and strong and magnificent and difficult, hard to attain—as they say—human body and human form, you will feel everything. Pleasure and pain and tension and illness and well-being and strength. And you'll feel it as part of the body of the earth itself.

A story for you. The question is, with loving awareness, how do you touch this body? When you're there with pain or sickness in your own body or someone else's, or you're there with something beautiful happening in your body, how do you hold it and how do you touch it?

Frank Ostaseski, dear friend who helped to start the Zen Center Hospice, tells a story of a resident who was there in a great deal of pain, advanced cancer throughout his body. Frank thought learning meditation might help him. But the stomach cancer he had was so painful. Frank said, "Why don't you turn your kind attention to it and see if you can hold it in compassion." He tried to open to the sensations. It was just too intense for him. And he screamed, "I can't—it's too much. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts."

So Frank told him, "Okay, let's try something else," and put his own hand gently on the man's stomach and said, "How's that?" And the man said, "Oh, oh, it hurts too much. It hurts." And Frank said, "Let's try this," and he put his hands near the man's feet. The man said, "Ah, that's a little better." Then Frank moved up and put his hands a couple of feet above the man's body. And the man said, "Oh, that's lovely actually."

As Frank goes on, this was no magic, no special body work, no esoteric practice—just opening to more and more space. And after a few minutes, with a more relaxed face, the fellow said softly, "Oh, rest in love. Rest in love." After that, whenever he'd get in trouble with his pain, he'd push his morphine pump—which sometimes we might wish we had—and then just repeat to himself, "Rest in love. Rest in love."

This is the liberation of the body. How to be with this amazing human body with loving awareness.

And it's the same for liberation of the heart. The heart bears witness to and carries the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows. When you sit and get quiet, you feel your grief and all the things you've lost

in the pandemic, the connections that you want to have, the economic problems, the worry, the care for others. The heart is carrying all of this—your longing and your hope and your love. What you want to do as you sit quietly is to say to your heart, "Thank you. Thank you for caring so much." And hold it all with compassion.

My dear colleague and friend Yvonne Rand, the great Zen teacher from San Francisco Zen Center, died this last week. There was sent around a beautiful picture of her close to death, with clear eyes and a beautiful face, getting ready for the end of her life. And underneath it, some of her last words. She said, "No form." You can hear her whispering it to her daughter. "No form." Zen, of course, is full of all kinds of forms—sit and bow and ring the bell. She said, "No form. Only a bow of thanks."

What last words to say? Only a bow of thanks. To bear witness with the heart to this mysterious moment—painful, glorious, beautiful, loving, joyful incarnation.

And then there's your mind. The body, not your mind. The mind, maybe. The heart—all held in loving awareness, only love. And then the mind, filled with stories and plans and fears and memories and judgments and hopes and creativity and imagining. And boy, do we believe those stories. But some of them are like assassins. You know that. Some of them are enlightening stories and some are darkening stories. There's every story. The mind has no pride. But depending on what we listen to and follow, everything follows from that. "Mind is the forerunner," says the Buddha, to our joy and our sorrow.

I think of the story that Sylvia Boorstein told me. She was teaching in New York and offering these same teachings of loving-kindness, and a person came up to her and said, "I have to tell you a story, Sylvia. I was mugged. I went out on a walk late at night, somewhere around the East Side. And this guy came up to me—his hair was disheveled, his face looked crazy, and he was carrying a gun. Some guy who knows what he was on, probably high on some drug. This white guy who looked half homeless and half let out of a mental hospital. He held up the gun and said, 'Give me everything.' And I said, 'Here's what I have,' and I handed him my wallet. He said, 'Give me more. Give me your watch.' I took off my watch and gave it to him. Then he brandished the gun in a crazy way and said, 'I'm going to kill you.'

"I looked at him and said, 'You don't have to kill me. You don't have to shoot me. You've got so much. You've got a wallet—there's seven hundred dollars in there, credit cards. You've got my watch. It's a beautiful watch, an Omega, wonderful watch. You got so much. You did really good. You don't have to shoot.'

"And it stopped the man in his tracks. He looked at me: 'I don't have to shoot?'

"And I went on further. I said, 'No, you did good. You have to tell your friends how good you did. Just take this. You did good.'

"And the man muttered, 'I did good. I did good.' He put the gun down, turned around, and walked away."

Now that's a hell of a story, isn't it? I'm not sure I could do that, but there's something magnificent in it. Because we have all these stories that go through our mind about how it should be and who we are and who someone else is. And when we step out of those stories and can see whoever's in front of us—to see the secret beauty of that person too—to be able, as this fellow did, to say "you did good" in the midst of it all. An extraordinary thing. And yet we can do this.

The mind has a hundred channels. It has a fear channel and a hope channel and an economic channel—you know, it's got the Wall Street Journal in there even if you're not a money person. It does worry about money. And it has a relationship channel and this and that kind of channel. And with it comes all kinds of emotions that tag along. Thich Nhat Hanh talks about the mind as being like a field of seeds—seeds of anger and fear and confusion, and seeds of love and understanding.

Which seeds will you water? Which will you believe?

The fear? The confusion? The anger? There's another possibility. The suffering is not the end of the story.

Trudy tells a story—she's writing a book of stories, having learned so many things in her life. A short story she tells is about her mom. Her mom had moved to LA and was in her mid-eighties, maybe eighty-five. Trudy was helping to take care of her mother and daughter when her daughter was about to give birth to the first grandchildren. She went to see her mom one day and her mom said, "I walked a block and a half to go to the bank, and I walked in the bank"—it's kind of like the story I just told you—"and the bank was being robbed. There were two bank robbers in there with guns and everybody was on the floor. I walked right in and the guy looked at me and said, 'Lady, get down on the floor.' And I looked back at him and said, 'You've got to be kidding.' And I turned around and walked out of the bank."

Trudy said, "Mom, you know you could have gotten shot. What made you do that?" And she looked at her daughter and said, "Honey, if I got down on that floor, I don't know if I'd ever be able to get back up again."

There's something so beautiful, both practical and wise—we can choose. Just like Ajahn Chah when we were out on our alms round crossing those little dikes in the rice paddies, and he said to one of the monks or the group of monks with him, "See that big boulder over there? Is that heavy, monks?" Of course the wise monk said, "Yes, it is, master." And he smiled and said, "Not if you don't pick it up." We actually have a choice of what we pick up in our heart and mind, what we carry with us.

And the truth is that even in the course of this hour or so that we've spent together, there have been five billion acts of kindness—someone putting a cool wet cloth on the forehead of a person who's hot, parents cooking their favorite meal for a child, someone getting a drink for someone who's thirsty, respectfully opening a door for someone or stepping out of the way. And even stronger, when the mothers came out, as they did in Portland, as they did in Argentina against the military who'd taken over and disappeared so many people, there's a kind of power in the human heart.

My friend David Bornstein and his colleague Tina Rosenberg have a column in the New York Times called Fixes that's now grown to two hundred other newspapers and journalism organizations called the Solutions Network. Every thing they publish is a beautiful solution that people have found to a human problem—how to get water to remote villages in the desert, how to help crops when there's been a flood of insects or locusts, how to teach children to read in places where there haven't been teachers. They're all stories of triumph and possibility.

This is our possibility and our triumph. Where are we going after all? Where are you going? You know where you're going? Here. Here and now. Remember Ram Dass and his best-selling book from the 1960s called Be Here Now that helped to change the consciousness of the culture. He wrote, "Early in the journey, you wonder how long the journey will take and whether you will make it in this lifetime, your spiritual journey. And later you'll see that where you're going is here. And you will arrive now and know that this is the place of liberation, the place of awakening." It's the place to learn to love, to fulfill who you really are. There's no other place but this moment, the reality of the present.

Spiritual life isn't about focusing on some other place or some goal that you're going to get, but to open. It's said that the question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity—to quiet the mind and tend the heart and open to the mystery of life that we are a part of.

We've been through troubles before. For thousands of years, for generations before this, for thousands of generations. And we know how to do this.

We know that suffering is not the end of the story. And more than that, we must ask: What do we bring to the table of this world in this human incarnation? Do we bring our fear and confusion and contraction from separateness, which just adds to the depression of it all? Or in the midst of it, can we bring an open heart and a quality of love? Can we see that suffering is the beginning of the story and not the end?

When the Dalai Lama wakes in the middle of the night, he starts his morning prayers at three-thirty or four a.m.: *May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge to help all those cross the flood. May I be food for the hungry. May I be medicine for the sick. May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be a lamp in the darkness. As long as earth and sky and galaxies exist, as a bodhisattva may I be this for all beings, until we all awaken together.*

And then the secret from Thomas Merton, which he told to a frustrated activist: Sometimes what you do works and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it brings about its opposite. This is not given to you. What's given to you is your heart's best intention. As you understand this, you get less attached to the results. And more and more you act from the truth and the value and the rightness of the work itself.

So you plant seeds, or you plant the trees—like those that brought a Nobel Prize, fifty-one million trees planted in East Africa, starting one tree at a time. What do you bring to this world table, to this human incarnation? And with what spirit can you offer it?

So you sit, you quiet the mind. You tend the body and the heart in the midst of this human life. And you

become, as Mary Oliver said, a bride married to amazement—to love it all.

I have a poem as a way to end, a recent poem from the poetry journal *Rattle*, entitled "The Fact":

That there's a snake tunneling through the grass doesn't make the parting of the blades any less beautiful. Many things are strange. For example, people yawn when other people yawn. It's contagious. But usually blush or look away when other people cry. All the heavy metal potheads from high school became bankers or lawyers, or in some cases, well-heeled preachers. Meanwhile, David Lee Roth, formerly of Van Halen, could show up at your door to set up your dish TV and you wouldn't even recognize him, now would you? Me, I've seen barbed wire rusting in brittle morning light. I felt a horse's nose wet under my hand and heard it snort like wind lapping a flag. Honest, I've heard a stadium exhale as a ball landed in a glove. And I spent the car ride home trying to find a way to describe that sound. I felt the sorrow in the heart of beauty and beauty inside sorrow. Beauty and sorrow have rubbed together like two sticks, blazed up and burned me. Speaking of the smoke signals made by beauty and sorrow talking over each other, I've heard people laugh when other people laugh. But it would be a lie to say I've never heard anyone laugh as someone cried. I need you to think of poetry as a beautiful lie that hits a bull's eye. I've gazed into a bull's eye, seen the fierce, wounded beauty there. I need you to know that the sky's tilting from the heaviness of all these southbound birds, but will right itself before you have a chance to fact check me on this.

I just love the playfulness of it. Many things are strange. For example, people yawn when other people yawn, but usually blush or look away when other people cry. We are in such a mystery. And I was, as Mary Oliver says of herself, a bride married to amazement.

And our task? To love it all—because this is the end of the story. The end of this story is the loving heart. This is who you are and this is what matters. And maybe the question: What would love have me do today?

What would love have me do today?

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