

Holding our Seats

A sermon by
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(From Miguel Strother) When the Dalai Lama went to Vancouver, British Columbia this past September to raise funds for the Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education, he took part in a series of dialogues with leaders of the business community.

A few months before the Dalai Lama's visit, Jim Gray a natural gas company executive attended a workshop called "Connecting for Change," which brought him face-to-face with leaders who have dedicated themselves to improving society for everyone.

At these sessions, Gray shared ideas with Ken Lyotier the founder of United We Can, a non-profit that buys millions of recyclable bottles from street people.

Gray has had a long and successful business career; Lyotier is a recovering addict. Uncomfortable around Gray and the other business folks, Lyotier felt he didn't fit in, so he left.

But Gray went and found Lyotier on his own turf. It was an area of Vancouver that Gray had never seen before. He had lunch with Lyotier amid conditions that scared the hell out of him.

For that entire afternoon, these two people discussed the importance of creating connections between people like themselves. "We talked about our dreams and anxieties, about challenges and opportunities," Gray recalls. "This is what 'Connecting for Change' is all about.

It is a process for building understanding and maybe even some trust between social activists and business people. Only by genuine conversation and follow through can we build trust." Gray says. "So I'll be back. I am going to learn all that I can about people and life in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, and I'll be back because we I need to be. We all live in this world together."

The next day, Gray, the Gas executive, 60 other business CEOs and a matching number of leaders from Non-Profits gathered for an intimate chat with the Dalai Lama.

The dialogue began the long echo of a shofar – a ram's horn blown like a trumpet, usually during the Jewish high holy days. A delegation of Native People led by Chief Ed John welcomed the Dalai Lama to their land with song and drum.

The Dalai Lama said he was very happy to be part of the dialogue.

Severn Cullis-Suzuki, co-founder of the Environmental Children's Organization, asked the Dalai Lama how he thought people in the room could create the will to engage with each other.

The Dalai Lama said that we all have to understand now that interdependence is more important than ever before in human history.

"Between the business group and social sector, there is a connection," he said. "We all share this earth together. In the past, maybe different sections could work more or less independent and get by with it. Today there is a new reality. We all must work together, particularly business people and social service people. Of course business is a very important part of society. Business is how we do things. But that the business sector should concentrate only on making profits, is not healthy or sustainable. Business people must take responsibility for society and the community. When they do satisfaction with their business improves. Profit is adequate. Society is healthy and business people become respected."

According to some who attended, this meeting of monastic robes, bleeding hearts and bullet-proof business suits, this dialogue has significantly altered the way the business people there view the world.

And although it's easy to dismiss the whole exercise as a "feel good" story. Darcy Winslow, Portland-based global GM for Nike's women's line says that a growing understanding of interconnectedness has some of the biggest businesses in the world changing their behavior.

I want to talk with you today about taking our place and holding our seats in the tension between various portions of the Web of Life of which we are a part.

For several services before Canvass Sunday last week I was talking with you about Five Habits of the Heart that are helpful for growing healthy spirits and healthy democracy.

I've talked with you about:

Habitually understanding we are all in this together.

Habitually slowing down to listen to "others."

Habitually coming together to act as a community instead of acting in isolation.

Today I'm going to talk about about – Habitually working together in a positive way to live with the tension created by our differences – and with the tension created by the gap between our ideals and our reality.

Parker Palmer's (who presents the Five Habits of the Heart) says it's important that we learn to live well amidst the tension : first Because we can't really avoid it – and second because our health, creativity, joy and ultimately our survival are at stake.

In the face of tension our instinctual response frequently is either to fight or to run away.

But around the world people are perishing because of our fighting and violence and the web of life is being seriously injured because of us running away from our responsibility to live in harmony with the earth - So if we humans are going to survive with any beauty and soul left at all, we're going to have to seriously grow in our capacity to deal well with the tensions that swirl around us and within us. And the people who have to grow are you and me. So how might we do that?

The Buddhist Teacher, Pema Chodron has some ideas. She recommends that we learn to deal with tension:

By staying mindful and present in the moment,

By doing the best we can to harm neither ourselves or others

And by doing everything we can to bring health and peace to the world.

She calls this mindful approach "Holding our Seat" – And then she points out that it is really quite a challenge.

When I feel the tension, she says, when I feel anger or fear, I can get as activated as anyone else. So I try to remember four things I've found helpful.

First - I find it helpful if I don't either feed or suppress my turmoil – I just notice it.

Second - I find it helpful if I center and connect with my compassion.

Third - I find it helpful if I understand my challenges in life really are my teachers.

And Fourth - I find it helpful to remember everything flows and changes – not just my good times, but my challenging times too.

So First, if I sit still with my restlessness, fear anger— if I neither act it out nor repress it— I find I am tamed and strengthened. Each time I act out my fear or anger or each time I run away from it, I am weakened. I then become more of a target for other people and more vulnerable to my own negative emotions

So if I just sit and breathe and hold my seat when I want to either run away or retaliate—I start to dissolve a pattern of passivity or aggression that will continue to hurt me as long as I let it.

Second if I center, breathe, experience what I feel and leave myself open to my deeper heart, I can eventually connect with the deeper wisdom and compassion that I already have.

When someone starts to hurt me, there is a strong possibility that they really don't know what they are doing. And there is a corresponding possibility that I might understand that this person is out of control and harming themselves as well as harming me. There is the possibility that even though I might be afraid, I really do not want to hurt this person in return and in fact I really might want to help her or him de-escalate the upset.

The one who harms me probably does not need to be provoked any more and neither do I. If I can hold my seat, connect with my heart and recognize that, in this very moment, millions around the world are burning with the fire of aggression or running away from it and I don't need to add to the chaos, I can be tamed and strengthened and add a little kindness and peace to the world instead of pain.

Third if I understand that life itself is my teacher and constantly provides opportunities for me to evolve and learn how to hold my seat – I can become less and less reactive to everything that happens.

Without the troublemakers who so disturb me—how would I ever get the chance to grow in patience? How would I ever get the chance to know the energy of fear or anger so intimately that it loses its power over me?

There is a Buddhist saying that the teacher is always with us. The teacher is always showing us precisely where we are and encouraging us to relax and open our hearts and minds. The teacher is always encouraging us to not speak and act in the same old stuck ways, always encouraging us also not to repress or dissociate.

So when we start to get agitated, instead of flying off the handle or running away, maybe we can center and breathe and do something different.

Right at the point when I am about to bolt, if I'm lucky, I remember I am disciple being taught how to sit still with the edginess and discomfort of the energy of life. I am a disciple being challenged to hold my seat and open to the situation with as much courage and as much kindness as I can muster.

Of course, I often feel, "I'm not ready for this." So sometimes I run away, and sometimes I kick and scream. But often, I do hold my seat. And gradually, all of these experiences become part of my ability not to cause harm, my ability to understand the pain and confusion of others and my ability to do something positive in the world

For me, one of the problems with trying to discipline myself to deal well with tension is that I get rigid about it. I get uptight about trying to be perfect in my relaxation. I become impatient with my lack of patience

Well, perfection is not going to happen – so this is when it's helpful for me to remember that everything is flowing and that all of reality moves like the water cycle and like a dream.

If I can see my experience as a movie in which I am temporarily in a particular situation and facing a really exciting challenge – which will then morph into another challenge and then into another - I can lighten up considerably.

When I awaken from my dreams, I know that the situations in my dreams are not permanent. Well, neither is life. And that realization helps me cut through the drama.

In the same way, if - instead of acting out of impulse, I can slow down and ask myself:

"Who is this monolithic "Me" that has been so offended?

Who is this other person that I allow to trigger me like this?

What is this praise and blame that can hook me like a fish?

What is going on here that outer things have the power to propel me from hope to fear, from happiness to misery?"

– Then I can begin to let the fear and anger drain from me – and I can engage the world in a fresh, creative way.

Recalling that all life is flowing, helps me be less agitated and helps me loosen my frantic grip and open my mind.

So these four methods for dealing with anger and fear and for learning a little patience have been very helpful for me. They came my way from the Kadampa masters of eleventh-century Tibet. I find their instructions useful and you may too. These same masters advised that we not start practicing right now. They urged us to use these instructions immediately—on this very day.

I will close my sermon today by bragging about my wife Edie – who is not always as gentle as a lamb in tense political situations – but who has done some marvelous work anyway.

One of the issues that is very power-laden for her and for many of us reproductive health care for young people.

In Maine, in connection with the homeless shelter, she started and ran an outpatient recovery program for young mothers and their kids.

But she had a real passion about diminishing the number of young, unwed, teen mothers to begin with.

So over a year, she gathered together a diverse dialogue group with representative from all the non-profits working with teen moms. These representative ran the gamut from Planned Parenthood to Catholic Charities to the Salvation Army.

They held their seats and listened to one another for a long time – and then they went to the Sanford, Maine School Board and requested that a listing of all of their reproductive and health care services – from Planned Parenthood to Catholic Charities to the Salvation Army be printed on the back of the Junior and Senior High student body cards.

Over the year they worked together, that group of people began to know one another and understand one another as people. They experienced their interconnection in the world and their mutual love and care for at risk young women and men.

The school board was impressed. They accepted the group's proposal. High school kids were better served. And a bunch of adults in Sanford, Maine respected themselves and each other just a little bit more.

Let's enter the dialogue folks.

Let's be non-violent.

Let's be brave.

Let's not either fight or run away.

Let's hold our seats in the face of all our differences.

Let's join together and build a world.

PLEASE STAND NOW AND JOIN IN SINGING – This is Peace.

Benediction: Don't tell me who you aren't – Tell me who you are! Don't tell me what you can't do – Tell me what you can do! Don't fight and leave us both a bloody mess. Don't run away and leave us both isolated and incomplete. Don't get overwhelmed and do nothing. Enter the dialogue – Hold your seat – Get humble – Do something!!