

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

The Unattended and Surrender

1/6/24

It's probably a safe guess that most human beings have experienced things in their lives, long ago or more recently, that they have left unattended and unresolved. And that there is a range of consciousness of this - we may be aware of it, or we may be largely unaware of it. I would offer that to whatever degree these things are conscious or not, there is likely a valid reason for it, one that might be respected, that there may well be a wisdom and intelligence there that involves the ability to move on with life, or perhaps even to survive.

Having said that, it appears that that same wisdom may be involved in moving us toward the point when we are ready to turn toward these difficult things, instead of continuing to turn away. If we have a life practice, it is to our advantage. It's likely we can activate the means to move toward healing and resolution.

It's likely we cannot avoid, forever, the pain of facing something that was once too painful to feel, and as we can turn toward it and engage, we lessen our suffering. And along the way, we might develop a willingness and acceptance, a trust and faith, an ability to surrender, that makes a difference in the rest of our life, strengthens us.

Our reading, *The Unbroken*, says this so well. If there is such an abandoned place in you and your heart is reaching out even a little, in reciting it you may feel something, a calling perhaps? Answering the call may be painful and scary, but maybe there's no more avoiding it, maybe now you feel supported enough to move toward that dark place, toward healing.

From that reading:

"There is a brokenness, out of which comes the unbroken. A shattering out of which blooms the unshatterable. There is a sorrow, beyond all grief, which leads to joy. And a fragility, out of whose depths emerges strength."

"There is a hollow space, too vast for words, through which we pass with each loss, out of whose darkness we are sanctioned into being. There is a cry deeper than all sound whose serrated edges cut the heart, as we break open to the place inside which is unbreakable and whole, while learning to sing."

This turning-toward might be called attending-to. What promotes our attending-to can promote healing, resolution. The inattention, our turning away from, has perhaps for a long time promoted our unhappiness, our isolation. But this doesn't have to be forever.

We may have unattended sorrow, unattended anger or fear, unattended trauma - recent or long past. Unless resolved, we're likely hurting from our losses or traumas. They're in our lives. There can be real pain associated with these, and added pain from our clinging to thoughts associated with them. We may not even know that the added pain is optional, we may not feel it's optional, when it's become a way of life.

But there is a way through - not around, but through.

There is little if anything involved here that is not part of the practice we are encouraged to do on a daily or moment-to-moment basis. Just maybe applied in a slightly different way, maybe more deeply.

Gratitude is no less important here than anywhere. We might feel grateful for any ability we can muster to not turn away from difficulties, and to be present for the many gifts of life. We do have the ability to lean into our dark places.

In 2005 an influential book I read was Stephan Levine's *Unattended Sorrow* and I revisited it lately. It's about healing from loss and in that, it's been helpful to many experiencing grief related to big losses. And his writing is helpful in attending to the smaller, more regular losses that life presents. Life is always changing, things coming and going, and we so often try to hold on. We can hold on to our grief.

Sometimes it's helpful to hear words that may give us a fresh perspective, motivation to not turn away. The losses that you presently feel may not be large, but the words can be helpful nonetheless, encouragement to move toward something we're avoiding and shed some healing light of awareness onto it.

Delving into this, I realize more what a wide and deep area this is for humanity. I would hope to convey a little about how we might journey within ourselves to realize some of what Rashani (author of *The Unbroken*) and Stephan and Ondrea Levine have realized in their experience and life's work. Levine speaks much of the heart, which I have found to be at the center of our possibilities for lightening our suffering.

These are his words:

"Trying to protect ourselves from pain limits us and pushes away all that we love, leaving us feeling isolated. But if we gently explore layer after layer of our clinging to our pain, we beckon love to accompany us on the path to healing. We are not alone in our feelings of isolation. We are a part of the worldwide community of loss. If sequestered pain made a sound, the atmosphere would be loudly humming all the time.

We close around our pain by refusing it mercy, by resisting the softening and letting go that might give it a little more space to breathe.”

“If we listen for unattended sorrow as we might for a cry from a crib in the next room, we can hear it calling to us to have mercy on ourselves and move forward with a heartfelt examination of our lingering disappointment and distress, instead of turning our back on it. When we turn away from our sorrow we intensify our pain and close off parts of ourselves.”

“Tapping the resources of the heart - the power to forgive, the strength to love, the trust to look deeper into what limits us, and the path towards peace - allows us to settle unfinished business, to tie the loose end of relationships, the unforgiven and unforgiving detritus that is carried from relationship to relationship, from job to job, from friend to friend, or from thought to thought. We release the grief that’s been held hard in the body. When we reenter the body and mind through the heart - via a developing mindfulness and forgiveness, kindness and silence - we add day after day to a life of appreciation.”

Again, we have the gift of this practice - that healing power of awareness, awareness of believed thoughts and getting a larger space around them, seeing those thoughts as just that, thoughts, getting space around emotions and the pain we feel, much of which may be in the body - as physical pain, tension, contraction. Allowing ourselves to really feel what is being expressed by the body can offer us a helpful grounding.

We do the best we can. We practice as best we can. Sometimes we may need more than we can accomplish with the practice, and need extra help. Nothing wrong with this. There are healing therapies, modalities, techniques that can be effective adjuncts to our practice.

Let us have mercy for ourselves, and mercy for all our fellow human beings in our shared pain.