

# NEWS AND TOOLS FOR HAPPINESS, LOVE, AND WISDOM

Volume 16,5 • October 2022

# BURNED OUT, MY FAMILY TOOK A VACATION TO THICH NHAT HANH'S BUDDHIST MONASTERY. THIS IS WHAT WE LEARNED.

© 2022 DIANA HILL, PHD

Instead of taking a cross-country road trip this summer, my partner and I took our kids to Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist monastery in Southern France. Teetering on the verge of <u>parental burnout</u>, we were craving peace, time away from devices, and strategies to handle increasingly uncertain times. It's a stretch to sign up 9- and I2-year-old boys for a week of mindful walking,

silent meals, and sitting meditation, but we were willing to take the leap if it would reconnect us.

My family, like most, has been struggling. My partner works in education, and I am a clinical psychologist. During the pandemic, we have been guiding folks through the same troubles we faced ourselves: overbusyness, anxiety, irritability, and existential worry.

To cope with <u>pandemic stress</u>, we found ourselves working more, becoming even more dependent on technology, and feeling increasingly dissatisfied. We were maxed out by relentless to-dos, we needed to find our ground as a family again. While a Buddhist monastery is not an obvious destination for a family vacation, we knew that returning to Thich Nhat Hanh's <u>Plum Village Monastery</u> was what we needed most.

#### **Greetings**

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are posted at www.wisebrain.org/tools/wise-brain-bulletin.

Michelle Keane edits the Bulletin, and it's designed and laid out by the team at Content Strategy Online.

To subscribe, go to <a href="http://www.wisebrain.org/tools/wise-brain-bulletin">http://www.wisebrain.org/tools/wise-brain-bulletin</a>.

#### Village de Pruniers

Thich Nhat Hanh was a Zen master, author, and peace activist who founded Plum Village in Southern France 40 years ago. Thay (as his students call him) took refuge in Thenac, France after being exiled from Vietnam for speaking out against the war. Thay went on to teach peace on an individual and global level and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr. in 1967. He was central to bringing mindfulness to the West, alongside many Western scholars like Jon Kabat-Zinn and Kristin Neff, both of whom cite him as a root teacher.

Thay passed away in January 2022, and he is greatly missed. He taught that through the phenomenon of continuation, each of us has an effect



▲ My partner and I offering lotuses to each other, New Hamlet, Plum Village

on the world that lasts beyond our physical existence. For this reason, I'll speak of him and his teachings in the present tense.

Thay's teachings are simple and accessible; they make sense to busy modern parents like my partner and me. Well known for saying, "When you wash the dishes, wash the dishes," Thay urges us to be present in each aspect of living. Thay's teaching and practice were about engaged Buddhism, which means taking the stance of mindful awareness and compassion and applying it to all aspects of living, starting with your daily activities and extending it more broadly to living in the world.

Thay's message is particularly applicable to our current reality. His teaching of "No mud, no lotus" guides us to turn toward our suffering with compassion in order to transform it. In the center of each of the three hamlets at Plum Village sits a large lotus pond as a reminder that beautiful things grow out of mud.

My partner and I first visited Plum Village Monastery 22 years ago, when Thich Nhat Hanh was still teaching. I was starting a clinical psychology Ph.D. program, and the experience inspired me to research mindful awareness as an intervention for eating disorders. I now use compassion and mindfulness interventions in every aspect of my work.

Noticing how exhausted and overextended my partner, my kids, and I all felt, I realized that the same teachings that had become essential to my professional life could help revive my family, too. And looking back on our trip, I can say that the lessons we learned at Plum Village helped restore the equilibrium of our family and planted the seeds for a healthier future.

These last few years have been tremendously challenging for all of us, all at once. I imagine that you and your family might be struggling in some of the same ways we are. I also know that not everyone can pack the family off to a monastery in France! So I am sharing what we discovered at Plum Village in the hopes that these six lessons will help you and your family, just as they are helping us.

#### Lesson I: I Have Arrived. I Am Home.

We spend more time at home than ever, but do we really feel at home? Instead of being present, we spend most of our time in our heads: planning, fixing, and judging. There are so many ways the world pulls us out of the present moment, out of our bodies.

At Plum Village, a bell rings every hour, signaling us to pause, come back to our bodies, slow our breath, and be present in this moment. Thich Nhat Hanh is known for his *gathas*, or short phrases you repeat with your breath. The first gatha we learned at Plum Village was

Breathing in, I have arrived.

Breathing out, I am home.

This *gatha* is a reminder that there is a place within you that is protected and centered, and you can return to it whenever you need it. At any moment, you can remind yourself to come home, that you are home.

Stopping and becoming present can become a new habit. This habit cultivates contentment, clarity, and peace in your body. Slowing your breathing has benefits at the cellular level and <u>isfundamental in stress reduction</u>, according to UCSF researcher Elissa Epel. And present-moment

mindfulness can help you <u>deepen relationships</u>, something many of us are craving in our increasingly disconnected and distracted world.

#### How to Come Back Home

- Choose a cue (such as getting in the car, starting a meeting, or a gentle alarm set on your phone) to signal you to stop.
- Pause what you're doing.
- Find your breath.
- Repeat I have arrived, I am home.
- With this presence, go back to your activity.

#### Lesson 2: Happiness Is Here and Now

As an <u>Acceptance and Commitment Therapy</u> practitioner, I teach people to accept and allow for life's suffering so they can act on what matters to them. Daily living, a pandemic, racial trauma, climate change, and war give us plenty of material to work with.

At Plum Village, I learned that cultivating joy and happiness is as important as acceptance in facing our suffering. To cultivate more joy, the nun leading our group, Sister Joyful Effort, gave us homework: we were to look for joyful moments in our day and share them with others.

I noticed the cool shade of aspen trees on a hot walk and the sound of kids giggling during silent meditation. Sharing these joys with my family, enriched them.

In times like these, when so many people are struggling, it can seem saccharine to talk about joy. But it is what gives us the strength to go on. We need to cultivate joy in order to have the capacity to be with the suffering, and the bigger the suffering, the more we need to cultivate joy. Savoring the good things in life builds resilience and increases our satisfaction with life. Paying attention to the joyful moments builds our capacity to be present with pain.

#### How to Cultivate Joy

- Look for small moments of happiness or ease.
- Savor your experience by lingering on it, paying attention to your full sensory experience.
- Hold these moments lightly and with delight.
- Share the joy by telling someone else.

#### Lesson 3: There Is No Need to Hurry

Many of us are caught in a stream of striving, busy-ness, and distraction that leads us to feel increasingly disconnected from each other, nature, and ourselves. Life is moving faster than ever, so we feel like we need to hurry to keep up. The paradox is that the faster we go, the more dissatisfied we feel with what we have, so we rush to get more.

At Plum Village, every activity is a meditation practice: walking, waiting in line for food, and listening to others talk. All are done with full attention. We practiced eating in silence and contemplated the sun, rain, farmer, and plant in each bite. We walked mindfully as a stream of over 700 people through plum orchards and aspen trees. A group of 700 people moves slowly! I said the *gatha* silently with each step, Yes, yes, thank you, thank you.



▲ A message of peace on a retreatant's bag

Slowing down and connecting with yourself and with nature in this way benefits <u>your cognitive</u> <u>functioning and overall well-being</u>. Simple things become very rich. When you stop hurrying through life, you are better able to take in the good that is available to you right now.

As my family adjusted to being at Plum Village, we all struggled with slowing down. My kids whispered "When can I eat?" at meals and "Where are we going?" on walks. Together, we learned to sing this *gatha*:

Happiness is here and now.

I have dropped my worries.

Nowhere to go, nothing to do.

There is no need to hurry.

We soon realized there was nowhere to go, nothing to do but to be here and enjoy the moment.

#### **How to Not Hurry**

- Turn a daily activity such as eating, driving, or walking into a non-hurry practice.
- Carry it out in silence and with your full attention.
- Remind yourself there is nowhere to go, nothing to do, but to be here in this task.
- Savor it!

#### Lesson 4: Ask, Are You Sure?

When I arrived at Plum Village, my mind was a bit of a mess. It was full of emails I hadn't returned, worry about what was to come next, and self-criticism.

With daily practice, I became increasingly aware of my mind and its tricks. I learned to pause and ask, Are you sure? This is similar to the cognitive defusion practice I teach from ACT. The more I asked, Are you sure? the more freedom I gained freedom from my automatic thinking patterns. I began to see my mind as a storytelling machine, and I learned to stay present with reality rather than following its well-worn tracks to worry and judgment.

My mind: I have to get this thing done so I can get on to the next.

Me: Are you sure?

My mind: My kids are annoying people, and they need to be quiet.

Me: Are you sure?

My mind: It's easier to do it myself.
Me: Are you sure?



▲ Thich Nhat Hanh's calligraphy along the walking path

There is a lightness that comes when you realize that your thoughts are not always true. Cognitive defusion is an effective way to soothe difficult emotions and ease distress. You don't have to change your thoughts. Just notice that there is actually some space between you and them.

#### **How to Practice Cognitive Defusion**

- Notice your mind's rules, judgments, and chatter.
- Pause and ask, Are you sure?
- There's no need to challenge your thoughts. Just give them some space.

#### **Lesson 5: Let Your Work Be of Service**

Plum Village is a working monastery, not a spa vacation. The dwellings are campsites or simple buildings. Some families are assigned to care for the garden, others to chop vegetables, and some to clean toilets. Our family was given kitchen cleanup. After dinner, we sanitized plates and bowls for over 300 residents. We took smelly compost to the bin and mopped the floors.

Whatever our task, we were instructed to see this work as a meditation, like all of our other practices. We were invited to enjoy the process of cleaning a floor, consider the people who will eat from clean bowls tomorrow, and feel the community working together as one. According to the Buddhist sutras of the four nutriments, when we tap into motivation and intention in this way, work can become nutrition for us. Motivated to serve a greater good, whether it's scraping plates or writing treatment notes after a client's therapy session, we gain energy from work rather than being depleted by it.



 $\ensuremath{\blacktriangle}$  A monastic pauses during walking meditation to look at the plum or chard

At home, I felt drained most days and was losing my motivation as a therapist and mom. During work meditation at Plum Village, I remembered how to rejuvenate myself: by <u>placing my</u> attention on my values and my aspiration to serve. At the end of our service job, we would sing together:

Happiness is here and now.

I have dropped my worries.

Something to do, somewhere to go.

There's still no need to hurry.

When you hold your aspiration in mind and see the work as an end in itself rather than something to rush through, the simplest tasks become fulfilling in a new way.

#### **How to Practice Working Meditation**

- Before starting work, choose an aspiration (an intention) to focus on.
- Be of service; offer your full effort and attention.
- Focus on process over outcome.
- Sing or hum a tune that motivates you.

#### Lesson 6: Your Future Is Today

When Thich Nhat Hanh died in January 2022, some of his ashes were sent back to be spread at Plum Village. Although we certainly hadn't expected to, my family had the honor of being part of that ceremony. Thay always led his walks with the children and the monks and nuns at Plum Village continued this tradition in the procession to scatter Thay's ashes. My 9- and 12-year-old boys were at the front of the group of 700 people. Each of us received a spoonful of his ashes to spread across the plum orchards, aspen trees, and lotus pond.

I was far behind my kids, and when I caught up with them, I found my younger son crying with one of the nuns. He told me, "I feel like I don't deserve this. I don't deserve to be at the front." The nun told him that he had been given a powerful gift, transmitted from his grandparents to his parents to him, and that was the gift of these teachings, which he would now have the opportunity to share with others.

Sometimes, we get so caught up in whether or not we deserve to have or do something that we forget that we all have this incredible gift: the gift of our actions, and our presence with one another. It's the gift that nun gave me by caring for my son while I helped scatter Thay's ashes. Now my son has this gift in him.

Thich Nhat Hanh's continuation is now in the soil, in plums, in air, in my children, and in my daily actions. In reading this he is also in you. Thay taught that there is "no birth, no death." Our actions today continue into our future, and the actions of the past are present in our experiences today. When we consider climate change, racism, and political division, we can better understand how the world's challenges came about, while also finding comfort in the awareness that we have the power to change the future for our children by how we choose to act now.



▲ Thich Nhat Hanh's Ashes on a Lotus Flower

#### **How to Practice Your Future Now**

- Cultivate habits that will grow the future you want.
- Water the seeds in others that you want to grow.
- Honor your ancestors, teachers, and parents through compassionate action.

#### **Coming Home**

My family went on an extraordinary journey this summer, escaping the constraints of our home life and entering a rare world of profound teachings and warm community. Yet as amazing as our time at Plum Village was, the true test of the lessons will be how we apply them at home. This test began as soon as we arrived at the airport for our flight home. Apparently, everyone in Paris goes on vacation at the same time, on the same weekend, and that was the weekend we were traveling. We stood in a busy security line – hundreds of people walking together, very slowly. I breathed in and said, Yes, yes. Thank you, thank you.

And then I noticed my worry: We're going to miss our flight. Hurry up! All of those familiar habits of mind crept back in pretty quickly. My partner saw what was happening, and he helped me come back to the present and just be with it as it was. There is no need to worry.



We need each other as reminders. And we need practice. We need the repetition of these new ways of being before they will become automatic to us. I believe a different future is possible for us when we tend very carefully and with intention to the present moment.

Opening my computer full of unread emails, I remind myself that my work is my service. Before dinner, we ring a bell to remind ourselves to come back to our bodies.

We have arrived. We are home.

#### - ABOUT THE AUTHOR -



Diana Hill is a clinical psychologist, author, international speaker and host of Your Life in Process podcast. An expert in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, she aims to help the clients and organizations she serves shift from striving to thriving in rich and meaningful lives. You can learn more about her at <a href="https://www.drdianahill.com">www.drdianahill.com</a>.

# SHARING TEA AND DIALOGUE FOR HEALING CONNECTION IN CHALLENGING TIMES

© 2022 KATHLEEN FINK

Unfortunately, we do not intuitively sense how much social isolation undermines our mental and physical health. While connecting has always been basic for our social species (Lieberman, 2013), loneliness had become quite common even before the pandemic made isolating wise (DiJulio, et al., 2018). The wellbeing that humans experience by providing social support (Inagaki, 2018) is spread by acts of generosity (Allen, 2018). But while our hunter gatherer and farming ancestors interacted frequently as a matter of survival, we now spend so much time with devices, that we spend less time in the kind of interaction that helps humans thrive (Turkle, 2015). And as Christina Feldman notes, "Our minds can be tormented by obsession, by guilt, shame, judgment, doubt and confusion, and we write a story of a self that feels separate and apart" (2017). Although loneliness, limited social contacts, and physical isolation are not the same, studies suggest that each of them can be associated with serious harm to our health, and research that took into account many potentially compounding variables found that social isolation shortens lives (Holt-Lundstad et al. 2015).

I had become convinced that bringing sustained caring attention to open hearted respectful face-to-face sharing can support us in ways that truly matter even before I became aware of this research confirming how important connecting is for our species. I decided to combine easily-learned elements of Japanese tea ceremony with



mindful dialogue in the hopes that an accessible and adaptable tea and dialogue practice could bring the many benefits of that kind of deeply felt connection to a wider audience. It was clear to me that we can really use the powerful support of mindful caring connection in these challenging times. But it was equally clear that particular care would be needed to create conditions that provide the safety needed for open honest sharing.

The new tea and dialogue mindfulness practice I have been experimenting with provides an opportunity to slow down and bring nonjudgmental caring awareness to heartfelt interaction. An object or image provides a reminder of our interdependence with nature. The guidelines that Gregory Kramer developed for Insight Dialogue (2007) - Pause, Relax, Open, Attune to Emergence, Listen Deeply and Speak the Truth - support the whole practice. Participants pour tea from thermoses for each other and bow respectfully before drinking in silence while a facilitator provides narrative support by drawing attention to the rich sensory aspects as well as all that nature and humans contributed to making it possible to share tea together. Then, for timed intervals, the participants take turns listening attentively in silence and speaking on a given topic. An additional interval with no separate speaker or listener may be added. A session where "generosity" was the contemplation topic made clear that not only tea, but speaking and listening, can be generous gifts (Fink, 2018, March 25). It is worth noting that the dialogue used for this practice can take many creative forms such as storytelling, movement, making visual images, or musical improvisation.

#### Inspiration For A New Relational Practice

The largely silent sharing of a bowl of tea during Japanese tea ceremony might seem worlds away from the candid verbal exchange of Insight Dialogue (Kramer, 2007). But in very different ways, both of these practices bring sustained attention to interaction that honors dignity as Donna Hicks (2011) defines it, "an internal state of peace that comes with the recognition and acceptance of the value and vulnerability of all living things" (p. 1). Japanese tea ceremony showed me what is possible with social interaction under ideal conditions, while the supportive acceptance of Insight Dialogue helped me encounter, examine and release a false unconscious story that was getting in the way of experiencing greater peace in my everyday life. I began experimenting with a practice that combines elements of both of these practices in the hopes that more people could gain access to their own important benefits.

After considering a number of possible applications, I decided to start by offering tea and dialogue to older adults. The large and growing population in this age group seemed particularly

vulnerable to social isolation and its serious health risks. That proved a fortunate choice. I learned that wise elders often have strengths useful for tea and dialogue practice, and their deep appreciation for the benefits of heartfelt connection was such a joy to experience. Early experiments with the new practice made it clear that words alone cannot convey what the practice has to offer. So I decided to make videos of tea and dialogue with older adults for a creative masters thesis project when I became a student in Lesley University's Mindfulness Studies program.



#### Tea Ceremony Lessons

After studying Japanese tea ceremony for a number of years, the thought occurred that I should add a tea hut to my yard. That seemed like such a crazy idea, I knew I should take it seriously. Saturday morning "tea" lessons provided a welcome opportunity to slow down and pay attention to simple things that are really not so simple - the shifting natural light, the sound of water heating in an iron kettle, the soft expression on a face. In a tranquil space apart from everyday worries, powdered green tea is whisked into a bowl of hot water that is shared with a few guests. That is all. But it takes disciplined practice as well as sustained relaxed attention to perform the many prescribed steps with artless ease while at the same time always keeping the guests' tranquility top of mind. Holding that caring intention while cultivating the acute

embodied awareness the art requires opened my heart while sharpening all of my senses. I became aware of a deeper beauty in imperfect objects, in nature, in all those gathered in the tea room, and in each moment. For all of its formality and aesthetic refinement, this Zen performance art has but a single goal - to provide an experience of tranquility in communion. The warm intimacy of the Japanese tea ceremony feels very real, because it is.

Guests who came to my tea hut always seemed to sense the warm welcome that I fully intended. With everyone focusing on what was happening in the luminous moment, boundaries tended to slip away. No matter what else was happening in my life, sharing tea with many different people over the years never failed to leave me feeling centered and at peace. Without realizing it at the time, I took in so many valuable lessons like the value of living with awareness and gratitude no matter what was happening. I was pleased that the lessons I learned seemed consistent with Noriko Morishita's experience (2002).

More and more, this Zen art began to feel like a time capsule of badly needed wisdom for our troubled times. While I deeply respect those who carefully preserve Japanese tea ceremony with its enacted values of harmony, purity, respect, and tranquility, very few, even in Japan, are willing to learn its many detailed procedures these days (Surak, 2013). But since the lessons of the way of tea seemed so badly needed, I longed to find a simpler way for others to access them.

#### Adding Dialogue

Early in my studies in Lesley
University's Mindfulness Studies
program, I realized there was a
serious road block in the way of
that dream. While a simpler tea
practice would certainly have benefits,
with no need for sustained caring
awareness, access to important tea
wisdom would be lost. Fortunately,
the program introduced me to
Insight Dialogue, (Kramer, 2007),
which also has great power to sustain
awareness while relating with others.



While combining a simple process for sharing tea with mindful dialogue would certainly take the practice far from tea ceremony's flowing peace, I knew that mindful dialogue has its own important benefits.

Gregory Kramer's Insight Dialogue (2007) has three elements, each powerful in its own right; meditative awareness, investigation of a topic capable of imparting wisdom, and our natural human relatedness. The Insight Dialogue guidelines - Pause, Relax, Open, Attune to Emergence, Listen Deeply and Speak the Truth - (Kramer, 2007) support dialogue conducted in pairs or small groups. Listeners attend in silence for a timed interval as a speaker shares what is arising on the contemplation topic. Then a bell sounds and the participants switch roles until all have had a chance to speak, possibly followed by an additional interval of open dialogue.



I listened carefully so others would continue returning the favor, and I found I wanted to listen, including to the unexpected things that I could say. The candid sharing of arising personal impressions was often quite moving and could have the freshness of poetry. With everyone contributing to the calm supportive energy, false unconscious stories created to make sense of painful experiences could surface to the light of day. Then those stories could be examined, and lose their power to control behavior in ways that propagate harm. A particularly common, as well as isolating, false story is what Tara Brach calls the "Trance of Unworthiness" (2021).

Insight Dialogue practice made clear to me that whenever anyone speaks, they can only ever speak what arises for them at the time. I can choose to learn from what they say if that would be useful but what they share cannot affect my inherent dignity. What anyone says does not change the fact that we are all vulnerable, and worthy of compassion. We also have so much

that's of value to offer each other. I found that listening deeply is one of the greatest gifts of all. When I began bringing the energy of Insight Dialogue to all of my interactions, including even stressful conversations, it brought a whole new ease to my life.

#### Tea And Dialogue Practice

As with the two practices that inspired it, tea and dialogue includes measures designed to support the safety needed for candid open sharing. Consideration should be given to what would be safe and comfortable when sharing tea. Besides respecting confidentiality, participants are requested to never comment directly on another's statements, but to speak into the open held space. They are invited to pause often both to discern what would be beneficial to speak and to take in all that is shared including that which goes beyond words. Dialogue topics are chosen with care. "Soothing sounds" worked well with a group of low-vision participants, as did "mini-vacation" with caregivers who had little time for themselves, let alone for a vacation.

The very first time, I experimented with a new tea and dialogue practice, the tea grew cold as I explained what would happen. Thermal carafes easily solved that problem, and I realized I welcomed such mistakes as a way to make the practice better. It helped that I had no doubts about the value of what I was aiming for:



To bring in a bit of the generous formality of Japanese tea ceremony, each person pours tea for the next followed by bowing until all are served. While many kinds of tea may be used, decaffeinated or herbal tea may be advisable for sessions held later in the day. A participant told me that sharing tea first helped her slow down from the intensity of a busy day. As I had hoped, providing narrative support for attending to the warmth, look, smell and taste while drinking tea seemed to create greater embodied awareness that flowed into and supported the dialogue that followed. I used tone of voice to help convey a feeling for Japanese tea ceremony's inclusive peace as I drew attention to the many rich sensory aspects and reminded them of all that went into the tea. That included nature's contributions of the fertile earth, the energy of the sun, and the sustaining waters that flow through the plants and through them. Then there were the contributions of all those who planted, tended, plucked, processed, packaged, transported and sold the tea, as well as the many other people who supported them.

After drinking in silence for a short time, we set aside the tea things and I invited them to arrange themselves for the dialogue portion of the practice. The thoughtful honest feedback they provided after the session felt like a continuation of the candid dialogue, suggesting the use of dialogue topics where honest respectful feedback is desired. During a playful storytelling version of the practice, the participants came up with all kinds of clever and sometimes wacky ideas, resulting in much laughter and the healing support of shared good feelings (Lambert, 2013).



A tea and dialogue <u>session conducted online</u> used "each meeting a one time opportunity," (Wilson, 2012) as the topic. Since each participant needed to make their own tea, I suggested they take time to offer themselves both respect and gratitude. Given how easy it is to forget to pause to acknowledge and recognize the value of such acts of self care, that has its own important advantages. The session had a warm friendliness to it and a quality not unlike the

freedom of children playing. I was very pleased that tea and dialogue seemed to work so well via video conference technology, as that opened up any number of exciting possibilities.

Although mindfulness practice can provide healing support to those who have experienced trauma, adverse reactions can sometimes occur. Particularly given tea and dialogue's face-to-face investigation of experience, I felt better having arranged in advance to have the services of a trained professional available to offer support should such an adverse reaction occur, and I recommend David Treleaven's Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness; Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing as an excellent resource on this important topic.

#### Possible Applications

When I first began experimenting, I discussed my ideas for tea and dialogue with many different people. At a bus stop, a man asked if it could help those with autism. Another asked if it could help with mourning the loss of a family member. Perhaps the practice could benefit those with memory issues as it seemed so much in the moment. Tea and dialogue seemed perfect as a "supportive learning laboratory" for those engaged in the sensitive work of inspiring social change in the field. A few even asked where they could sign up, or how their child might try it. Clearly there was interest, but when I considered who might benefit most from the practice in relation to their own needs, stressed teens and older adults came immediately to mind.



While teens might welcome the opportunity to slow down for supportive face-to-face interaction with their peers in this age of cyberbullying, I could think of a number of good reasons to start by offering the practice to older adults. Elders often complain of feeling invisible at a time in their lives when they tend to lose family and friends. They care about retaining

healthy independence for as long as possible. Online practice showed promise to support those who were isolated because of limited mobility provided they had access to and were comfortable using a computer. Given the increasing cohort of older adults, tea and dialogue might even prove a cost-effective means to help relieve pressure on limited health care resources. And although many work, older adults might have more free time to try a new tea and dialogue practice than busy teens.

#### Practice With Older Adults

I was lucky to secure an internship placement with the Arlington, Massachusetts, U.S. A. Council on Aging where I offered six-week tea and dialogue mindfulness workshops. My internship supervisor, the head of the Council, told me that her greatest concern for those the agency serves was their risk of loneliness and social isolation. Someone she saw participating in various agency-sponsored programs might simply disappear, never to return. Then she would worry because she knew social isolation has been found to be as bad for health as smoking or obesity. I told her I believed that the tea and dialogue practice I was offering could help combat the serious health risks that social isolation poses for older adults. My masters thesis topic had, in effect, found me.

As it turned out, those workshops with older adults were among the most fulfilling experiences of my life. While there are many good reasons to offer mindfulness practices to young people, it is too bad that more do not realize the great joy of offering them to older adults. Their great satisfaction from the empowering sense of purpose they gained from supporting each other was most evident. One participant said, "I care about you all so much." I think we all felt that way. And the wellbeing of their supportive connection proved powerfully generative. A woman told us she



used to love painting clouds. She took up the brush again and brought in a beautiful painting to share with the group. Another invited a new neighbor to lunch when he mentioned having trouble meeting new friends. A self-described, "very shy person," told us she was beginning to realize what she was missing by avoiding others. She was the one to encourage a reluctant participant to join the rest of us in making a video of a <u>creative story telling version</u> of the practice. I could not help but think that if baby boomers took to tea and dialogue like this group did, they might help promote its benefits to the wider community, as baby boomers did with yoga and other health-promoting practices.

#### Creating Videos

I met a videographer who lived nearby who agreed to help create videos of tea and dialogue with older adults. Even if those videos could not be used for a creative thesis, as I hoped, I wanted them in any case to provide a better idea of what tea and dialogue practice has to offer. And while the spontaneous dialogue captured in the raw footage might not be appropriate for a public audience, giving participants veto power over what was included in the final edited videos might solve that problem. I decided to check that out with Gregory Kramer, the developer of Insight Dialogue. He agreed and was further reassured by the fact that Jan Surrey, a practicing clinical psychologist who serves on the Insight Dialogue Teacher's Council, had agreed to support the whole project.



After our team of older adults was complete, I realized that jumping in as producer and director definitely put me outside my comfort zone, but it would be too much fun not to try.

An amazing group of people would be collaborating in "trust emergence mode" on something I deeply believed in that might prove of real benefit. It does not get much better than that. Like

those in my internship workshops, these older adults shared generously and with open honesty. It was clear from their facial expressions that they really wanted to listen to each other, and the interaction was certainly consistent with evidence that older adults can have greater sensitivity to the emotional implications of situations (Stern & Cartensen, 2000).

The video project started with a creative variation of tea and dialogue. A talented artist painted her impressions of our topic as a musician improvised what arose for him using a variety of instruments. Everyone, including the videographer, shared verbal reactions as the process continued over several sessions. The Insight Dialogue guidelines provided powerful support as we explored "the unending sea of blessings," an expression that is used on scrolls that are hung up in Zen temples as well as during Japanese tea ceremony gatherings (Wilson, 2012). The completed painting was then displayed in my tea hut for another tea and spoken dialogue session with older adults exploring the same unending sea of blessings topic. During these sessions, the mood ranged from playful, to serious, to transcendent joy, but there was always deep gratitude for each other, sometimes expressed in explicit statements of appreciation.

The idea of bringing tea and dialogue to my 97-year-old mother came later. That seemed a good way to demonstrate the practice's adaptability. Sally described all that she noticed as we walked along a woodsy road when I was a child. Afterwards, she said, "That was pure blessing."The closeness generated by that session lingered, supporting us both as the pandemic descended, changing all of our lives. I realized that creating videos of tea and dialogue sessions with older family members on topics of mutual interest could be a worthwhile undertaking in its own right; such videos could easily become family treasures.



Since video conveys tone of voice, changing facial expressions and the meaning carried by and through coordinated action, I was hopeful that the vital aliveness and powerful supportive connection we experienced would be clear in the videos. You can judge for yourself, as my final

#### Supporting Research

I was amazed by how much research was available that I could use to create a case for using tea and dialogue to combat older adults' risks from social isolation. The factors involved with the growing seriousness of social isolation for that age group were clear and made an interesting story. Many studies provided evidence of harm from social isolation, and a number of fields were providing insight into the mechanisms involved. From work I had already done in various classes, I knew there was research suggesting benefits from the practice's qualities of dignity, generosity, social connection, and creativity. I was also aware of research on tea and meditative dialogue. In fact, the powdered green tea used for Japanese tea ceremony had been found to sustain considerable calm awareness all by itself. I even found research I could use to justify making videos as nonverbal social clues like tone of voice seem to be important to helping us understand when it is safe to trust.



Information about the specific studies and my analysis of how they provide support for offering tea and dialogue to older adults are included in the published thesis document. As I had hoped, the raw video footage contained ample examples of the ways I argued tea and dialogue can provide healing connection.

#### Conclusion

While solo meditation can offer important benefits in stressful times, I believe that relational mindfulness practices like tea and dialogue may be even more important. Easy access to vast quantities of valuable information can never substitute for all that is exchanged during fully embodied and responsive face-to-face sharing. That kind of intimate interaction can transform our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the world. It can open the way to new ways of being, seeing, feeling and acting and to whole new possibilities in the world. These times call out for making good use of our varying experience, knowledge, and talents to make progress on the complex widespread problems we face. But to work together despite our many differences and our human tendency for out-group rejection, it helps to experience for ourselves the many benefits of honoring and protecting each person's dignity.

I took it as a good sign that older adults, who are so often no strangers to living with existential threats, seemed to genuinely appreciate what tea and dialogue has to offer. But the practice was designed to be both accessible and adaptable and I believe it can provide beneficial support in any number of contexts, including schools, workplaces, and healthcare settings.

While creating safe and supportive conditions for practice matters, it is clear to me that bringing embodied mindful awareness to caring face-to-face interaction can help us make better use of our remarkable gift for healing connection in these times when we can use all the support we can get.

#### References

Allen, S. (2018). The science of generosity: White paper prepared for the John Templeton Foundation by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley. <a href="https://www.templeton.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GGSC-JTF-White-Paper-Generosity-FINAL.pdf">https://www.templeton.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GGSC-JTF-White-Paper-Generosity-FINAL.pdf</a>

Brach, T. (2011, July 1). Awakening from the trance of unworthiness. *Tara Brach.* <a href="https://www.tarabrach.com/inquiring-trance/">https://www.tarabrach.com/inquiring-trance/</a>

DeSteno, D., Breazeal, C., Frank, R. H., Pizzaro, D., Baumann, J., Dickens, L., & Lee, J. J. (2012). Detecting trustworthiness of novel partners in economic exchange. *Psychological Science*, 23(12), 1549-1556. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612448793">https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612448793</a>

DiJulio, B., Hamel, L., Muñana, C., & Brodie, M. (2018). Loneliness and social isolation in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan: An international study. Kaiser Family Foundation.

 $\underline{https://www.kff.org/other/report/loneliness-and-social-isolation-in-the-united-states-the-united-kingdom-and-japan-an-international-survey/}$ 

Kramer, G. (2007). Insight dialogue: The interpersonal path to freedom. Shambhala.

Fink, K. (2018, March 25). Tea & dialogue & generosity. *Radiant Refuge*. <a href="https://radiantrefuge.blog/2018/03/25/tea-dialogue-generosity/">https://radiantrefuge.blog/2018/03/25/tea-dialogue-generosity/</a>

Feldman, C. (2017). Boundless heart: The Buddha's path of kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity. Shambhala. Hicks, D. (2011). Dignity; Its essential role in resolving conflict. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk

factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Sciences*, 10(2), 227-237. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352">https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352</a>

Inagaki, T. (2018). Neural mechanisms of the link between giving social support and health. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1428(1), 33-50. https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.13703

Lambert, N. M. et al. (2013), A boost of positive affect: The perks of sharing positive experiences. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 30(1) 24-43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407512449400

Lieberman, M. D. (2013). Social: Why our brains are wired to connect. Random House.

Morishita, N. (2002). Every day a good day; Fifteen Lessons I learned about happiness from Japanese tea culture. Japanese Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture.

Stern, P. C. & Cartensen, L. C. (Eds.). (2000). The aging mind; Opportunities in cognitive research. National Academy Press.

Surak, K. (2013). Making tea, making Japan: *Cultural nationalism in practice*. Stanford University Press. TEDxHayward. (2014, April 1). *The power* & science of social connection: Emma Seppälä *TEDx* [Video]. Youtube. <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZvUppaDfNs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZvUppaDfNs</a>

Treleaven, D. (2018). Trauma-sensitive mindfulness: Practices for safe and transformative healing. W.W. Norton & Company.

Turkle, S. (2015). Reclaiming conversation: The power of talk in a digital age. Random House.

Wilson, W. S. (2012). The one taste of truth: Zen and the art of drinking tea. Shambhala.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR -



Kathleen Fink uses her writing, photography and mindfulness practice development to foster wider engagement with resources for wellbeing. Her experience with Japanese tea ceremony and other relational mindfulness practices informs her faith in the power of authentic relationships to reach people's hearts as well as their minds. She shares her experiences with tea and dialogue and many other resources for wellbeing in her blog; <a href="https://radiantrefuge.blog/">https://radiantrefuge.blog/</a>.

# EMBRACING UNREST: FROM UNCONSCIOUS THREAT TO CONSCIOUS GROWTH

© 2022 SANDRA PARKER, PHD

Adapted from Embracing Unrest: Harness Vulnerability to Tame Anxiety and Spark Growth (October 2022) with permission from Page Two Books.

"I can't breathe!", says Maya, her eyes wide, frantically scanning the room for an escape. "There's not enough air." As an intern facilitating a panic disorder group I've just come to the most difficult part of the program. Participants are tuning-in to their bodies while evoking panic sensations. They run on the spot until hearts pound, spin in desk chairs until everything is reeling. They inhale deep, rapid breaths until shortness of breath, lightheadedness, and tingling are clear signals of hyperventilation. And now, in spite of more than enough oxygen, Maya wants to escape the room and the feelings in her body.

"She looks at me like I am a lunatic, but I don't budge and neither does she."

I ask if she will let me stay with her and see what might happen if she *doesn't* avoid this unpleasant experience. She is trembling and cold, but she blinks and nods yes. Maya describes her tight chest and dizziness and her impulse to gasp for air. I ask her to notice what is happening inside. "You're not in danger. These are feelings, so can we stay right here in all this discomfort and see what happens?" She looks at me like I'm a lunatic, but I don't budge and neither does she. In this moment Maya turns *toward* her vulnerable experience rather than avoid, distract or tell herself she's going to die. Instead, Maya tunes inward.

A moment passes, then two. Her trembling slows, her body settles. Shoulders drop, her chest

softens with an exhale. She checks her body and shakes her head in disbelief. Lifting her head with a perplexed smile she says, "I'm okay." I smile and nod, but she says again, "No, I really mean it. I am okay! I thought I was going to suffocate. I thought I was going to die, but I really am okay."

#### "That's so weird, but it feels good to be here..."

I urge Maya to keep her inner focus a little longer as her body registers her loving attention. After several quiet minutes, she says in a clear, confident voice, "This is new. That feeling always seemed more than I could manage. I've told myself stories and tried to run away from that feeling for so long. But I don't need to. I don't need to exit the room or what I am feeling. I can stay within myself and make the bad feelings better. That's so weird, but it feels good to be here. Connected. Actually, I feel so much more like me."

That moment was powerful for Maya and an epiphany for me. I was witnessing something profoundly human, not only for people who suffer with panic, but for all of us. In bringing warm interest toward our bodies in vulnerable moments, like Maya did, we come home. We give our bodies the evidence needed to feel safe. Our warm interest soothes uncertainty allowing us to open ourselves to the truth of emotion. It is with surprise and gratitude that we remember our deepest selves and claim the resources we find there.

#### If it feels scary it must be danger, right?

As an intern I had glimpsed a hidden predicament we all share. The very heart of our troubles. In my thirty years of helping people, I have come to recognize how our suffering arises from all the ways we avoid experiencing the vulnerability of our inner lives. We mistake vulnerability for danger. Whether conscious or not, our avoidance of what we feel is at the heart of anxiety, intimacy problems, and depression. Instead, we need to shift our approach. We need to slow down and truly feel our bodies whenever longing and desire bumps against our limits.



#### "We are not the boss of very much at all."

We are always vulnerable with limited control over the things that matter to us. This is a fact of life. It becomes an immediate experience – a feeling – in moments when we want things to be calm, happy, healthy, or predictable and we realize we just can't make it so. We are not the boss of very much at all. Yes, even our feelings are not ours to control. When our heart swells to a beautiful piece of music or quivers in anticipation of a friend's medical news, when it feels like our hearts will break seeing a baby bird fall from its nest, when our hearts fire up with anger when we see someone mistreat an animal, an inner force moves us whether we want it to or not. And in that vulnerable moment a jolt of energy unsettles us.

#### The universal paradox of unrest

Unrest announces the ideal moment to tune-in and spark our growth. And here is our shared predicament: the brain unconsciously misinterprets the nervous system activation triggered by unrest, and reacts as though we are actually in danger. We try to flee from ourselves at that moment and disconnect, distract, shut down, avoid, or get overwhelmed. While unrest is inviting us to come home, to feel and grow, we unknowingly miss the opportunity.



#### "Fear of fear is always at the root."

Unrest is invisible to most of us. It happens fast and we usually react to it without ever registering the feeling. Our reactions fall into two broad patterns: catastrophizing or dismissing. When unrest stirs, some people react to what they misperceive as danger and make up scary stories to make sense of their agitated feeling, just as Maya did in telling herself she would suffocate, or as others do by imagining worst case scenarios like a car accident when someone is late for a meeting. Those people appear to be anxious. In contrast, others may react by tuning out, compartmentalizing and denying their vulnerability. These individuals never think of themselves as anxious, yet they avoid and fail to acknowledge discomfort, which is a form of anxious behavior: "Fear of fear" is at the root of panic disorder. But it is also at the root of what happens to all of us when touched by the truth of our vulnerability. It is the human condition.

We are all wired to move away from unrest.

#### "I'm fine. I've got this."

Aaron's favorite expression is "I've got this!" I can feel the exclamation mark in his voice as he shares that his physician believes his gastrointestinal difficulties are stress-induced. "My doctor doesn't have a clue. I'm not stressed. I exercise, I eat well, I have hobbies, I play guitar. I've got this!" Aaron is the executive director for a large senior care corporation, and he loves his work. However, his work lacks boundaries - he goes to bed with his phone beside him and it is the first thing he grabs when he wakes up. He has no complaints, except for the past few years his gut has been chronically upset with bloating and cramping. Frustratingly, no amount of testing can find an organic cause.



When I meet with Aaron, I notice his fingers tapping and left leg bouncing as he sits in front of me. He says he wants me to give him "a clean bill of psychological health" so that his doctor will stop pressing him to take care of his stress. I ask if he is aware of his bouncing leg and tapping fingers. Aaron blows this off, "I always do that. It doesn't mean anything."

#### "You mean I can be anxious and not even know it?!"

When I ask what it's like to not have a medical diagnosis for these issues, he is visibly annoyed. "I just need a medical treatment for my gut, and everything will be good." "It must be hard not to have certainty or control over your symptoms," I say. "You're used to having answers and solving

problems. It's not easy to be confronted with vulnerability." I explain how his body is talking to him through his nervous system, trying to grab his attention with unrest.

"You mean I can be anxious and not even know it? What?!" I ask if he's noticed any other clues and, upon reflection, he admits he hasn't been sleeping well and that colleagues have mentioned his impatience.

#### "Be the executive director of your own body."

I invite him to be the executive director of his body and really listen to its feedback. This is a new idea for Aaron, whose relationship with his body – if he thinks of it at all – consists not of listening but rather telling it what to do. He dismisses his inner experience so quickly that he has no idea how agitated and tense he really is. Instead, he pushes and ignores and denies what he feels. He blames himself and is hard on others when things don't go as planned. Aaron has no room for uncertainty or limits when he wants something done. He is out of touch with his body's high state of alert. An unsustainable, gut-wrenching place.

#### "My mind is like a dog with a bone."

By contrast, Sophia is a seasoned physiotherapist with an open smile and long, raven hair who comes into my office for help with anxiety. Her voice is low and soft, but her graceful, slim body is braced as she describes her ongoing feeling of overwhelm. "I am too uptight. I haven't slept properly in years. I wake up at night and just can't get back to sleep. My body feels on guard most of the time. I get thinking about certain difficulties in my life and I can't let go; my mind is like a dog with a bone."

#### "Her ideas are more real to her than her actual experience."

I invite Sophia to notice her tension right in the moment. "I've done that. I do all that. Mindfulness and breathing. I meditate and do yoga. Body-awareness stuff is not the help I need." Sophia's ideas about herself are more real to her than her actual experience. She thinks of herself as someone who is tuned-in. But the problem isn't a lack of attention, it's that she only wants to "fix" the anxiety, to "make it go away." And now she has come to me to help her do just that.

Dejectedly, Sophia said, "If this therapy doesn't work, then I'm finally just going to go on

medication. I deserve to feel better than this." "You absolutely deserve to feel better," I say. "And feeling better starts with actually feeling. Without an agenda. With the sole focus of allowing yourself to be in the experience of feeling. Without trying to control what happens inside. Without needing the discomfort to go away."

#### "We expect control and certainty in a world that offers neither."

For Sophia, though she is skilled at focusing awareness, her rejection of uncomfortable feelings in her body prompts her to dismiss my invitation to tune in. Her habit was to pay attention from a safe distance in her head, trying to fix rather than open to sensations that don't feel good. She believes she's experiencing what she feels in her body, but she is not. Sophia is only noticing discomfort and then escaping into impatient stories of it being intolerable. It is no surprise, then, that she also suffers with awful indecision. But she believes this to be unrelated to her disconnection from her body. In fact, she thinks she is connected and just needs her body to stop feeling bad. Sophia is arguing with reality, believing she should feel a particular way. She is trying to create control and certainty in a world that offers neither:

#### Unrest: Your built-in security system.

Where people like Aaron are out of touch with vulnerability and pushing beyond their limits, others like Sophia are distressed and feverishly trying to fix it. But unrest is simply signaling an optimal moment for growth. It's our built-in alert system calling us home to the body. When thrust up against our limits, a deep intelligence inside us spikes unrest to grab our attention. While we are meant to ride waves of emotion and adapt, the nervous arousal of unrest feels threatening and we reflexively disconnect. We push ourselves, compartmentalize and worry. We create misery to avoid discomfort, but we don't have to miss out on these emotions that can bring us into a greater authenticity, resilience, and connection.

#### Quit Bracing Against Growth and Embrace Unrest

British Columbia's health officer, Bonnie Henry, stands at the podium. In the face of bright lights, cameras, microphones, demanding media and the attention of millions, she is giving a briefing in the early days of COVID-19. Dry-mouthed, her low-pitched voice issues the slightest quiver. She takes small breaths while speaking of physical distancing to protect the safety of others, particularly our vulnerable elderly. Then, unexpectedly, mid-sentence, for fourteen seconds, she is completely quiet. Tears rim her eyes and waves of sadness curve through her body. In an internationally reported moment, Bonnie is allowing herself to be touched by the truth of

her emotion. She is touching us all. Profoundly.

Creating a moment to collectively reach for her hand and accept her leadership.

The health minister beside her says kindly, but unnecessarily, "It's okay." Bonnie seems to convey that she already knows this, because it's okay to be human. She gazes back out at her audience, at all of us, and says, "Excuse me." She does not apologize, choke up, sob uncontrollably, or flee the podium. Nor does she flatten herself, speak robotically, or minimize the gravity of her message.



#### "She's like an emotional growth super-hero."

Bonnie embodies the practices that foster emotional maturation. She's like an emotional growth super-hero as she slows down and tunes inward when unrest heralds her point of contact with vulnerability. She gives herself a *full fourteen seconds* while cameras and people wait. She tends to the unrest in her body, exhales, and lightly shakes her head. She keeps her eyes down with an internal focus. She sighs heavily and shrugs her shoulders up and down. Then she looks up and connects with us. We feel her authentic presence. We feel her embrace vulnerability as emotion moves her. And we are held, better able to tolerate our own vulnerability in these uncertain times. We are inspired to be kind, calm, and safe. We almost want to buy her the cape.

#### "You must do the opposite of what comes naturally."

You see the dilemma. The emotion meant to help us grow is signaled by unrest which evokes a reflex to protect ourselves. Without realizing, we disengage from what we feel. Instead of embracing unrest so we can experience emotion and become more ourselves, we escape. We distract, worry, shut down and turn against ourselves. Our hunger to flourish bumps against an impulse to protect, and the unconscious struggle manifests as depression, anxiety, and disconnection from yourself and others. This is the enigma of personal growth: You must do the opposite of what comes naturally. And that is not easy. Rather than brace against, you must embrace unrest in your body when it rouses you.

#### Ask yourself these questions:

Are you free to follow your dreams or hampered by self-doubt?

Can you stay present in the moment, or are you tormented by worry or regret or a frantic

need to keep busy?

Must you have control and certainty in order to cope?

Are you able to tolerate the inevitable ambiguity of life?

Can you ask for help, or does that make you feel weak?

Do you feel hopeless or self-attacking when faced with your human vulnerability?

Does it seem you ought to feel more joy than you do? Can you laugh and cry and feel hope and act assertively to change?

Can you let in the love of others?

Can you connect with the larger world and feel engaged and empowered to make a difference? Do you feel that you settled for just getting by?



The answers to your questions are inside you, heralded by a tiny signal, easy to miss, that holds the key to your growth.

#### "This Being Human Gig is Not Easy."

Experiencing vulnerability is daunting. And that is not your fault! Longing is a beautiful motivating force. We are all infused with our soul's hunger to experience life. But the very act of being alive is vulnerable. We know that at some point we will die so we are charged with a protective energy meant to prevent us from simply flying off a cliff just for the rush. We inherit this tension between longing for experience and limits to experience - between our soul's longing to devour everything and our body's need to keep us safe. This is not pathology. It is not weakness. It's simply human.

#### "Distraction breeds numbness."

However, we have tilted from an even balance of experience and safety. We evolved from forebearers who decided it's better to be safe than sorry. Now we mistake vulnerability for danger. We avoid our inner lives as though our feelings are saber-toothed tigers. Experience

phobia is at the heart of our suffering, creating an epidemic of anxiety and apathy as we rush to distract and numb ourselves so as not to feel.

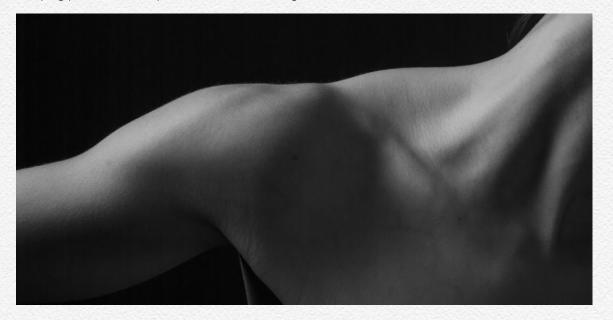
#### Differentiating Unrest, Anxiety and Fear

To embrace unrest, you need to distinguish it from anxiety and fear, but that's not easy because they are *identical in their physiology*. With all three, your muscles tense and your heartrate and breathing speed up. Even in our language, we often use "anxious," "afraid," "scared," "worried," and "fearful" interchangeably. They all activate the same nervous system pathway in your body. They differ, though, in their origin and purpose, and this difference is *everything*.

#### Unrest

Unrest announces our contact with vulnerability. It is an experience of the here and now in our physical body. It is not an idea or a thought. It's a physical reaction inviting us to come home *right now*, so we can feel our longing, face our limits and harness the transforming power of emotion in our growth.

Say, for example, that your right shoulder grips and instead of ignoring it, you pause, paying careful attention to the tense muscles. After a moment of warm interest, your muscles release and you feel your shoulder drop slightly. Your body registers your awareness and settles. This opens a channel within you that allows a wave of sadness to come through. This sadness is carrying you to a truth you have been avoiding.



Perhaps you realize you're working so hard to get everything done but can't do it alone. Maybe you wish you were more efficient and had more time and energy. That we weren't limited by our own humanity. But we are indeed only human. The sadness rises and a heavy pressure pulls

on your sternum. You breathe into the discomfort as it crests and then ebbs. You find a space inside yourself where you matter. You accept yourself in your limits. You feel less alone, more capable of giving yourself patience and compassion. More able to ask for help.

#### Anxiety

Anxiety is something different. It's the avoidant thing you do after unrest stirs you. It's your exit from the immediate physical discomfort of unrest. No one wants to feel a knot in their stomach, braced muscles, shallow breathing, sweaty palms, a dry mouth or a quaking in their legs. In fact, our brain misreads these signals as danger, and we're wired to move away. So, when unrest signals a rise in emotion, we leave the present moment and worry about the future, ruminate about the past, or criticize ourselves. We distract ourselves with swipes,



clicks and a glass of wine. Those exits are anxiety. While unrest tells us about the here and now, anxiety takes us to another place and time. Anxiety lets us fantasize that we can control the outcome (consider the futile "if only" and "what if's" that we often linger upon). Our anxiety lies to us, amplifying the bodily arousal that creates suffering.

#### Fear

Fear is the core emotion that warns us of an immediate threat to life and limb. It directs us to fight or flee. Fear is the ideal response to real, imminent danger. Quickened reactions, strengthened muscles and enhanced lung capacity are lifesaving. In these instances, our reactions are not a problem, too much or "stressful." Throwing a hissing rattlesnake off your desk is a fitting response. Throwing your computer off your desk because it keeps freezing is not. A frozen computer is not a dangerous, it simply stirs unrest.

#### "Your worry is only a story. Anxiety is a lie."

Fear is about the immediate present. If we are afraid of something in the future or the past, we are experiencing anxiety, not fear. Anticipating a dangerous possibility is imagining, not facing, danger. Similarly, recalling a past danger is a memory, not a current threat. We experience true fear only when faced with a physical threat that is right here and right now. This is one of the

hardest things for chronically anxious people to accept: that their worry is a story, a prediction, a possibility, but it is not *danger*.

#### Fear is the emotional truth about immediate danger.

"A car is heading straight for me. Jump!" It must be obeyed for your safety.

#### Anxiety is a lie told to remove you from the discomfort of unrest.

"If I don't win this project bid, I'm going to die!" It must be blocked so you can access the vulnerable truth underneath.

#### Unrest is your contact with vulnerability as emotion rises.

- "I really want this opportunity but can't guarantee it, and that makes me mad and sad."
- "My body is tight because I'm facing longing and limits in our disagreement."
- "I value our relationship and want to speak my truth, but I can't guarantee that my protest won't threaten our bond."

#### "You've Got to Put on Your Boots and Walk"

#### Practices for Emotional Growth

Unlike cognitive understanding, where we "get it" in one lightning bolt of clarity, repeated experiencing (rather than avoiding what we feel) is what changes our neural pathways. The biological impulse to avoid discomfort cannot be transformed with insight. Old programming to ignore, deny, or catastrophize our bodily experience of unrest is not going to simply undo itself based on understanding. We need to do the new thing — approach what we're wired to avoid — and register what we feel as we do so. Your insight lights the path, but you've got to put on your boots and walk. That's the process to change



our brain. Emotional growth is a steady, imperfect, step-by-step process. We need to practice again and again, going over the same steps, tracing and retracing, until the shift anchors itself in the structures of our brains.

#### "Take That Call!"

This is a journey for life, without a perfect endpoint. It is about changing your way of being

with yourself so, more often than not, when unrest calls you approach discomfort and access the power of your emotion. Below are two practices to help you rewire your brain to notice and soothe unrest.

#### Practice: What's your ringtone??

Like a telephone, unrest has a unique ringtone that lets us know it's just for us. Our job is to learn our ringtone so we can quickly notice and respond to the call.

In a few sentences, jot down something that is troubling you. Let yourself be aware of the gap between what you want and your ultimate control over the outcome. Really sense how much you want what you want. Be honest with



yourself about the many forces beyond your control that could contribute to how or when or whether what you want will occur. Pick up your smartphone to video yourself as you focus on your trouble. Center yourself in your video frame so you can see your whole upper body and start your video, as you describe your vulnerable situation. When you have described it fully, turn off the camera and play the video back.

Observe your body in the video. Be curious, and really "listen" for your ringtone: your specific bodily sensations of longing and limits. You have hundreds of muscles, and some will signal more intensely than others.

Which muscles are most active?

Do you tap your toes or clench your butt or bite your lip?

Do you hold your breath?

Does your throat close or do your biceps tighten?

Can you notice a furrowed brow?

Are your fingers fidgety?

Are your shoulders up?

Are you pulling in and making yourself small?

Is your mouth tight or pursed?

Play the video a few times to make sure you have caught all the signals of unrest that you can see. Try to identify your top three sensations of unrest.

That is your ringtone, and now you can take the call. That is success!

#### Practice: Your Sacred Vow to Yourself: Say "I DO" - Identify, Describe, Observe

Identify what you feel, Describe the sensation(s) and Observe them carefully. This is a commitment to yourself, like a wedding vow, to tune inward when you notice unrest. This is a practice because we cannot soothe unrest in our minds. Unrest is not an idea; it is physical and needs our attention as it calls to us. We must "do" this soothing over and over, imperfectly, but with love.

- I. Identify where you feel the sensation, and locate it precisely. Rather than saying "my muscles are tense" identify which ones and where. Not just arms, but biceps versus triceps; not just legs but quads versus hamstrings, not just tight chest, but where and how large an area? Even if all your muscles are tense, you cannot feel them all and experience them all at the same time. Precision is the medicine for neglect!
- 2. Describe what you feel using words that capture the quality of your muscle tension and energy. When you translate the language of the body into verbal language you make a connection between the part of yourself having the experience and the part of yourself observing it.

Words for tension might include:

- bracing
- constricted
- tight
- hard
- heavy
- knotted
- clenched
- pulled-in
- stiff



Words for energy might include:

- agitated
- buzzing
- fidgety
- jittery
- twitchy
- trembly
- quivering
- jumpy
- fluttery.
- 3. Observe one specific sensation with the intention of paying slow, deep attention. Ask yourself: "What does that feel like?" over and over.
  - If your answer is "tense" then ask, "What does 'tense' feel like?"
  - If your answer is "like a shell" then ask, "What does that shell feel like?"
  - If your next answer is "hunching" then ask again for the next level.

Continue this process until you sense a slight release, perhaps 20% reduction in tension, as your body registers your presence and is soothed. Rest there and feel proud of yourself.

Know that you have met yourself with love in the gap between what you long for and what you can 100% secure. That takes courage. Welcome home!

"...we face fewer immediate threats to life than humans who came before, yet more emotional ones."

There has never been a more important time for us to fathom our relationship with vulnerability. We live in remarkably challenging times. As twenty-first-century humans, we face fewer immediate threats to life but more emotional challenges than our predecessors. Massive uncertainties abound in accelerating climate change, relentless social media pressure, pandemic outbreaks, the escalation of totalitarianism, the rise of surveillance capitalism, and the advent of powerful, uncontrolled new technologies. In the face of these large threats, you may become paralyzed with anxiety and despair if you do not yield to the inner experience of unrest and

soothe your body. You are not meant to detach from life, numb out, nor avoid and distract from the pain and beauty of life. You are meant to care deeply without clinging, controlling or being overwhelmed.



"It is time to be moved."

Your vulnerability is your strength, and it will help you grow. Uncertainty and limits are inevitable, painful, and simply part of the human journey. Unrest marks your arrival on the cusp of an unfolding phenomenon of being. That moment of vulnerability does not need to be feared and avoided; it is your friend. You can do the opposite of what comes naturally. When you soothe unrest in your body you can feel waves of emotion crest and ebb. They are carrying you to deeper levels of yourself, helping you access and expand your gifts and capacities.

You deserve to live your most rich and authentic life. And the world needs people who can be themselves, care about others, be moved by the truth, and act in service of the larger whole. Your emotions are the energy that will propel and transform you. It is ok to be moved. Perhaps it's time to wake up, feel your feelings deeply, so you can truly come home?



Sandra Parker, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and author who, over the past thirty years, has helped people recognize and soothe unrest to resolve anxiety, depression, and loss of intimacy. Her practice integrates ideas from developmental psychology, neurobiology, psychodynamic therapy, experiential processes, and mindfulness practices.

In addition to loving her work, she spends joyful time with her hands in the earth gardening, hiking in the woods, bicycling around the city, and can (not often enough) be found curled up on a sofa with a stiff cup of tea and a good book.

She earned her doctoral degree at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, and is a member of the BC Psychological Association, Canadian Psychological Association, and Canadian Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology.

Sandra lives by the ocean in beautiful Vancouver, British Columbia, with her husband and three feisty little dogs, who teach her daily about risking feeling everything. Learn more at <u>EmbracingUnrest.com</u>.

### SKILLFUL MEANS

Your Skillful Means, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Keeping Silence / Taking a "Vow of Silence"

#### **PURPOSE/EFFECTS**

Taking a "vow of silence" is one of the oldest, simplest, and most effective spiritual techniques known. By voluntarily cutting yourself off from communication with others, you quickly remove yourself from the chaos, distraction, judgments, and neuroses of the world around you. By temporarily suspending communications with others, you create a "sacred container" around you, which helps you to go within.

Keeping silence makes you peaceful. It allows you to settle into the now, because language is how our minds focus on past and future. Simply keeping silence can help you to ground, settle, and begin to feel some peace. It allows you to connect more immediately with animals, plants, and the world around you. It can even allow you to connect in a much more genuine way with certain people. Furthermore, keeping silence is incredibly simple and can be practiced by virtually anybody.

Silence is golden.

#### **METHOD**

Summary

Stop communicating with others for a specified amount of time.

Long Version

- I. Decide how long you wish to keep silence. The minimum amount that can have a positive effect is around one hour. A powerful amount is 24 hours. Some monks have taken vows of silence that last for years, or even their entire lifetime! It's all up to you.
- Let people know that you will not communicate
  with them during this time. Keeping silence
  includes forgoing written communications and
  physical gestures. It's not purely focused on
  talking as any type of communication can be
  turbulent and chaotic for people. So, let people
  know that you won't respond until a particular
  time/date.
- 3. Begin your period of silence by closing your eyes, breathing deeply, and getting clear about your reasons for keeping silence. What do you want to get out of this practice period?
- 4. Keep silence. Remember that this means not engaging in any type of communication. If you see other people, you may even wish to look downward so as to avoid eye contact.
- 5. Enjoy this time alone in your sacred container of silence.
- 6. When your period of silence ends, close your eyes again, breathe deeply, and reflect on your experience. Then re-enter the stream of normal life refreshed and aware.

#### **HISTORY**

Monks of many different religious traditions have often used vows of silence to strengthen their connection to God, the Source, the Void, and so on.

In Sanskrit, a religious vow of silence is called mouna, so a person can be said to be "keeping mouna."

Christian monks of various stripes use the practice of silence to deepen their internal connection with Jesus.

<u>Mahatma Gandhi</u> kept formal silence one day each week (although he would sometimes write notes).

#### **CAUTIONS**

Make sure that others know of your vow. Otherwise they may be insulted, angry, etc. that you are not communicating with them.

#### **NOTES**

You can increase the intensity of your silence by enforcing an internal vow of silence as well. This means letting go of verbal thinking for the specified time. While this is an extremely powerful practice, it is also somewhat difficult.

Keeping silence is often combined with other practices, such as keeping silence between periods of meditation, in order to intensify the practice.

#### **EXTERNAL LINKS**

Mauna (silence).

# Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.



May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.

## The Wellspring Institute For Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The Wellspring Institute gathers, organizes, and freely offers information and methods – supported by brain science and the contemplative disciplines – for greater happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. For more information about the Institute, please go to wisebrain.org/wellspring-institute.

If you enjoy receiving the Wise Brain Bulletin, please consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Wellspring Institute. Simply visit WiseBrain.org and click on the Donate button. We thank you.