

DO NO HARM

Week #2 of a 4-Week Series, "Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change"

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So, how many people have a situation in your life -- whether it's a relationship, work, or health issue -- where you're not sure how things are going to turn out? Anybody have something that's uncertain in your life? And how many people have ever had a time where you had so much change going on in your life that you felt anxious, worried, and a little overwhelmed? Anybody ever have to deal with a lot of change?

So we are in Week #2 of our series on the book by Pema Chödrön called "Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change." This is a really relatable subject, because human beings generally don't like uncertainty or change, because it triggers one of our greatest fears -- and that's the fear of the unknown. And the unknown scares us. The unknown feels unsafe. When life is unpredictable, we feel uncomfortable.

And while uncertainty and change scare us, they're actually a vital part of what makes life so dynamic and interesting and challenging and fun and engaging. I mean, change is what really helps us learn and grow and expand, awaken, and do great things.

Again, Pema Chödrön says we don't have to get rid of certainty and change in order to feel peaceful, joyful, and fulfilled. We can learn how to open our hearts to uncertainty; to develop the courage to stay present; remain open; and trust ourselves in the midst of change.

You know, uncertainty really adds a richness and a wonder to life. Could you imagine if nothing changed? Could you imagine if everything was just certain? I think life would be dull and it would be boring!

So, to live beautifully with uncertainty and change, she says we need to practice three commitments. I'm doing the first one, And it is called **DO NO HARM**.

Do no harm. That kind of sounds surprising: Do no harm? My immediate reaction was, *"Hey, I'm a good person. I don't go around hurting people. Why would this 'no harm' thing be relevant to me?"*

And so, Pema Chödrön says that this is much deeper than we realize. We hurt ourselves in ways we don't realize. We hurt others/our relationships in ways. And particularly speaking negative words about ourselves and speaking negative words about our partner and our relationship, our family, and our world.

You know, we sometimes will use words to judge and have regrets and complaints to put ourselves down. You know, sometimes we say things like, *"I'm such a knucklehead."* *"I'm so clumsy."* We get all these things: *"Things never work out for me."* Or, *"I can never pick the right guy or the girl."*

And we've got so many ways that we harm ourselves, that we actually limit our happiness and our joy ... and not even realizing it. So, on my "stay-cation" that I just got back from, the first week, I noticed something about myself. And that was: every morning I complained about how hot it was. [Congregants laugh] *"My God, it's 110! It's 105! It feels like someone putting a blow dryer in my face or opening an oven door! I burned myself just touching the handle."* Oh, I had a whine and a complaint every single day!

And then I realized, *"Hey, this is not good."* And so, I changed it and decided to say something positive. And my positive affirmation was, *"It's a beautiful day to be alive."* And I think that's accurate and true. And interestingly, I felt better about my focus being more positive and not complaining about it. And I also felt better about myself -- that I chose to take charge and to affirm and not let that cause me harm. Not let that pull down the quality and the kind of day I was having and wanted to have.

You know, a doctor in Kansas City once said to me ... he said, *"So what do you think the worst thing we could do for our health is?"*

And I said, “Smoke?”

And he said, “No; that’s number two. Number one is nothing.” Meaning, not exercising, not moving, not having an active full life. That we harm ourselves by not exercising. We harm ourselves by not moving and having an active life. It stimulates not only the body, but our mind. It excites our energy and our spirit.

And so, you can see that there are ways that we are harming ourselves, not living up to our best, not giving ourselves our best. And we hurt ourselves ... and that is not how we are meant to live. You know, “Do No Harm” is an invitation to be fully empowered, fully responsible, and use our freedom and our abilities to live a healthy and a happy life. Pema Chödrön says every time we refuse to react with negativity or fear or judgment, we become a little freer, a little bit more peaceful, and a little bit more powerful.

And so, the first thing for this first commitment – “Do No Harm” -- It’s to be aware and acknowledge the escape routes that we take in our lives. Because what happens is: when we feel uncertainty, have a level of fear from change, there are certain patterns we like to do to run away from them. She says escape is anything we habitually use to avoid feeling uncertainty, vulnerability, anxiety, or groundlessness.

And she listed them, and it’s a wide range: procrastination; anger; blame; shame; jealousy; compulsively checking our iPhone; too much TV; overworking; overeating; coming home and automatically having two or three drinks before dinner; shutting down; closing off; self-hatred; gossip; aimless chatter; lying; complaining; and particularly, again, negative words and thoughts about ourselves and others.

So, my question for you is: What are your escapes? How do you escape the stress of change and uncertainty in your life?

And so, “Do No Harm” is about **being aware of the escape routes we take and choosing not to follow them; choosing not to have them pull us down**. We acknowledge it, but we refrain from engaging in those types of activities and putting out those types of words.

You know, she said, science is demonstrating that every time we refrain and don’t repress, new neural paths are opening in the brain. It opens a way -- a new way, and a healthier way -- for us to see ourselves and others.

So, the first thing is to acknowledge and be aware of the ways that we escape, or the ways we kind of numb out and check out so we don’t have to deal with the uncomfortable feelings of uncertainty.

The second thing is to **learn about our own triggers**. Everybody’s got a trigger. We get triggered by what somebody says. We get triggered by if someone looks at us in a certain way. We get triggered if somebody doesn’t return our phone call, or criticizes us, or interrupts us, or disagrees with us, or gets credit for something that we worked really hard to accomplish. Or someone giving us the finger when we’re driving on the highway. [Congregants laugh]

And suddenly it’s like, boom! One sentence, and we go boom! And we turn into like a 12-year-old in the way that we react. And it’s like, “*Yeah, I know you are, but what am I?*” [Congregants laugh] I mean, all kinds of childish ways. Anybody ever have something that’s happened, you get triggered and you act like a 12-year-old? Or that might even be more mature than how you act ...

And so, we are intelligent. We are mature adults. And it’s stunning that we let one thing that somebody says literally trigger us. But the good thing is that triggers are clues. They’re clues that reveal pain that we’re still carrying. Unresolved fear. Or negative beliefs.

And one of the things she says is: if we’re really serious about transforming ourselves and using all our energies -- not to hurt ourselves, but to help ourselves -- she said we should create a trigger journal. To literally get to say, “*Okay, I got triggered today on the highway. I got triggered by somebody saying this to me.*” Because it really helps us understand what’s going on.

And so, where there's a strong emotional reaction, she says, do five things:

First is to: **Answer the question, what happened?** And to keep it factual. Like: *"John interrupted me during the meeting."* Not: *"John deliberately humiliated me because he's jealous of me and dislikes me."* [Congregants laugh] Just the facts, ma'am; just the facts!

And then the second one would be: **Ask, what did I feel?** *"I felt anger. I felt embarrassment."* Or, *"I felt shame,"* or *"I felt fear,"* or *"I felt rejection,"* or *"I felt jealousy and abandonment."*

And then the third one would be: **What was the story in my mind that immediately got created?** Like, *"I don't matter."* *"Nobody respects me."* *"They always do this."* *"I have to defend myself."* *"I'm being taken advantage of."*

And then the fourth one is: **What did I want to do?** *"I wanted to attack."* *"I wanted to strangle."* *"I wanted to withdraw."* *"I wanted to send a nasty text."* *"I wanted to improve myself."* *"I wanted to prove myself."* *"I wanted to get even."* *"I wanted to shut down."*

And then the last one is: **What would love do instead?** And this is one of the important things, because it looks at the gap between what happened and the story of what we made up about what happened.

Let's think of this scenario. You get a text from somebody that says, *"We need to talk."* I mean, your mind is, *"Oh, my God."* And then the story comes: *"They must be angry at me. I must have done something wrong. This is terrible!"* And so, now we're already just getting carried away with this drama that we've created in our own heads. And then we go and text them and say, *"What did I do?"* And so all of a sudden we've just created this whole mess of emotion based on a story that we made up in our heads.

How many people ever made up a story? Anybody ever just make up some drama? Somebody said something to you and you're down the road with how they hate your guts and ...? Okay.

And so I always say that we are masters of what I call MSU: Masters of Making Stuff Up. And I will tell you, the stuff we make up causes us more harm than whatever it is that actually happened!

So, I went to see this Matthew McConaughey movie called "Rivals of Amziyah King." Anybody saw the movie? Don't go see the movie; it was a horrible movie. [Congregants laugh] But here was a scene that I liked: these two guys are working on this machine that you really have to be like an expert top-notch on this. And the one guy says -- feeling proud of himself because they fixed this mistake -- said, *"You know, they said I couldn't do it."*

And the other guy says, *"Who said you couldn't do it?"*

And he said, *"Oh, nobody; just the voice in my head that I made up."*

And so, it's illustrating that it's not what happens; it's the story that we tell ourselves. Nobody told him he couldn't do it, but that was the story he made up in his own mind.

Okay, so we've got to notice our triggers and be aware of our triggers. Learn from our triggers.

And the next one is to understand: some of **these things really need to be processed**. And she calls her processing "simmering." And here's the reason why. I mean, it always needs processing. But if you do the right thing and the right step, and do those questions and try and feel ... these things took years and have been embedded in us. And so, she says there's a period of detox. That, you know, you can do all the right things, tell yourself all the right things, but it's going to take time and patience to let these things process. That we literally kind of have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and feel the shame or the guilt or the hurt or the betrayal -- or whatever it was -- that is still in us and that we're holding on to.

And so, this is getting to the point where we realize these things that we're holding on to are really hurting us. And so, we need to make a commitment: Am I willing to do the work? It's nice that we all want it, but am I willing to really put the time and the energy in? Am I willing to do things differently?

Am I willing to acknowledge these repetitive patterns that get me to sometimes say, *"Why is this happening to me again?"* And notice and pay attention so we can dig and actually transform that.

So, she's saying the things that we need to do the most -- the end point is to be able to **refrain**: to know the patterns, know the pain, and refrain from getting triggered and going down that. Because that keeps it alive. It keeps that neural pathway alive of things that actually hurt us and will continue to. And so, it's not enough just to stop the outer response, but it's got to make sure we're working on our inner.

And so, here's some of the things she says that we need to learn. We need to learn that there is a difference between feeling anger and becoming anger. There's a difference between feeling hurt and using your hurt as a weapon. There is a difference between having a thought and believing every thought that comes into your head.

You know, we are not our emotions. We are the awareness experiencing our emotions. You know, anger can move through us without becoming our identity. Fear can move through us without it becoming our decision. You know, pain can move through me without becoming my behavior.

Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor introduced something into the psychology world, and she called it **the 90-second spiritual pause**. Anybody ever heard of it? So, what she's saying is that: when we get angry, there's a certain neural trigger that goes. It's like a chemical reaction that goes. And it lasts 90 seconds.

And so, it's important that we don't say anything in the 90 seconds. This is when we're really triggered. And so, it's the best way to handle it: ninety seconds -- don't send a text. Don't make a phone call. Don't post social media. Don't announce your spiritual truth to someone who doesn't care. Just breathe, feel and observe.

How many people ever get triggered like that and went back and said some things you really regretted later? Anybody ever do that? Anybody ever -- you're having an argument with somebody and then you separate and then you think, *"Okay, I can make this better."* And you go to try and make it better and you actually made it worse?

And so, the fact is: this is how we're built as human beings. These things get triggered, but we need to utilize -- to learn how to use them -- to utilize them to help us, not to hurt us.

And sometimes in these 90 seconds to help ourselves, we can say to ourselves things like, *"God is here, even in this very moment."* Or, *"I don't have to resolve this at this very moment."* Or, *"I can feel this without having to act on it."* Or, *"Let me choose to respond rather than just react."*

You know, 90 seconds: if we are able to keep it for that long, can save us a lot of cleanup and mess and hurt feelings.

And so, the next thing is to ask ourselves: What else can we do to be more at peace during times of uncertainty? And the answer is **meditation**. And that we need to learn, she says, that meditation is really a practice that helps us nurture our natural ability to be alert and in the present moment. That meditation helps us stay centered and grounded in peace and also in times of challenge and uncertainty. That meditation can help us feel loving kindness. Meditation can open us beyond our fixed opinions.

And as beautiful as it is, meditating and finding that peace isn't easy. It's distracting and it takes time. I think everybody in here must meditate, I am sure. And the focal point of our meditation to get us to be in the present moment is ...? Okay, I'll tell you! [Congregants laugh] The breath. The breath! Help a brother out, here! Okay ...

And so, one of the things is that the more we focus on our breath in these times, that it actually brings us not only back to our breath, but to the present moment. And so, the mind tends to wander, and we just have to keep bringing it back, thinking of the breath; thinking of it as home base. And it's also the present moment.

And there's nothing wrong; everybody's mind wanders. That is the normal deal. It's not to get upset or frustrated. It's just keep patiently bringing it back. Keep patiently bringing it back over and over again. And to make sure when it goes south, not only don't get frustrated, don't judge it. I mean, it's just a thought. We are thinking beings. And sometimes when our minds wander, that we just need to say, *"Oh, I'm observing. I'm thinking. There's that thought again."* And you just take a breath and bring it back.

And so, it's a really, really important thing. And sometimes our minds can betray us and take us away. How many people have ever been in a conversation and you were right there, but your mind was in La La Land? Anybody ever have that? So, it's important. And she says, one of the things is -- meditation regularly will help us drop that ongoing conversation that always goes on in our minds.

How many people would acknowledge you talk to yourself? And of the people who didn't raise your hand, I bet you they all said, *"I don't talk to myself."* [Congregants laugh] But the fact is: we all do. And the good thing is: the more we meditate and just observe what's going on -- that we aren't freaked out or controlled by whatever those thoughts might be. And they actually begin to just kind of slide out of our mindset and our consciousness.

I've told you guys several times seven years ago, I went to this meditation -- this 10-day silent retreat. We meditated 11 hours a day. I want to go back again next year. Anybody ever meditate for five minutes and your mind wandered for four-and-a-half? [Congregants laugh] Okay.

Can you imagine how much your mind wanders when you meditate 11 hours a day? But here's the thing. You learn how to have peace. But one of the things you learn is where your mind goes. Where does it wander to? And it's actually eye-opening some of the things and scenarios we keep repeating when our mind wanders: about self-pity, about anger, about all kinds of different things. And that's an important thing. The whole program was actually designed to help you bring your stuff up so you could be more clear and more open and more centered and peaceful.

And so, one of the things she says is that **we need to learn to meditate and find our center through any and every of the inconveniences of the day.** Like, when we're stuck in traffic, do a little meditation just to be present and get centered. When you're hungry and food's not coming from a restaurant or wherever it might be, take a deep breath and just get centered. If it's a windstorm or an argument or you didn't do well in your best project at work, take time to get centered. Take time.

And especially the ones that aren't comfortable. If you just got a big bill and it's really gotten you upset, do a little bit of meditation. You're working for health test results; you know, do a meditation. You got a flat or you've got a dental appointment; get yourself centered. And make it a regular, consistent part of your life.

And so, before we meditate, she says we should do something, and that is: we should **set an intention before we meditate.** And the intention could be like the intention to make friends and make peace with myself. Or to judge myself and others less. Or to let go of my belief of whatever. Or to open my heart to feel the fullness of love. Or to be able to celebrate the beauty of life.

So, even though we're focusing on our breath, there is a higher intention about what we want to achieve through this practice of meditation. You know, it is powerful to follow the breath and get to that place of being present ... but it can also help us with higher levels of awareness and inner peace and feeling filled with love when we put our intention there as a part of the practice.

Does that makes sense, everybody? It is a powerful thing. Before you pray -- before you meditate -- set your intention.

You know, this whole chapter and my talk, and commitment one, is about learning how to refrain from the things, from the words and the actions that do us harm. We begin to realize that every time we don't send an angry text, we get stronger. Every time we pause before criticizing, we get stronger. Every time we feel anger without acting on it, we get stronger. Every time we choose a boundary instead of revenge,

we get stronger. Every time we refuse to attack ourselves, we get stronger. And by doing this, you know what we end up doing? We end up creating a spiritual muscle or developing spiritual maturity or developing spiritual mastery.

Because the truth is: we cannot control everything that happens. We cannot eliminate uncertainty. We cannot stop change. But we can learn to meet it, to feel it, to open it, to embrace it and be present to it.

The first commitment -- if we want help in living beautifully with uncertainty and change -- is to do no harm.

God bless you all!

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