

TAKE CARE OF ONE ANOTHER

Week #3 of a 4-Week Series, "Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change"

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Taking care of one another. Well, last Friday was the 25th anniversary of 9/11. And I'm sure probably each of you remember where you were on that day. What I want you to focus on tonight is to remember what happened in the weeks afterwards. Because there were neighbors helping neighbors. In fact, some neighbors peeked over the wall and met each other for the first time. There were friends calling to check in. There was cars actually giving each other parking spots or moving out of the way for each other. It was a united United States of America -- an America in which we were taking care of one another.

And, in fact, in the moments immediately after the attacks, there were reports in New York of the helpers who were rushing towards -- not away from -- but towards the disaster. Yes, the police and the fire ... but also there was a priest who worked with a fire department. He went rushing into his firefighters to give them spiritual support and prayer. There was an ad hoc -- I don't know if you all heard this -- this ad hoc fleet of more than 150 marine vessels, ferries, tugboats, private boats. No one organized them; they just started to come and they carried out the largest waterborne evacuation in American history, rescuing half a million people from lower Manhattan in under nine hours.

And there was one woman on one of those vessels that, when she got to safety, she had nowhere to go. Her home was in Manhattan. And so, a family took her in for a couple days. And there were other people on the boats that needed places to stay, and strangers took them into their homes until they could get home safely.

Of course, then there was also our Canadian neighbors to the north, who helped us at that time. Earlier this year, I saw "Come From Away." It's a musical based on the true events in the small Canadian town of Gander, Newfoundland, Canada, during that first week following September 11th. The airspace, of course, immediately in the U.S. closed, and so there were 38 planes flying around carrying close to 7,000 passengers. And they were ordered to land unexpectedly at Gander International Airport, which suddenly doubled the town's population. They went from 10,000 to 17,000.

So, the town people -- they were very quick on, *"You know, we have to make plans on how we're going to prepare to take care of all of these people."* And so the residents, again, made sure there were homes for everybody. They made sure there were showers for everybody. They made sure the babies had food and diapers. They donated their clothing so that people could have clothes to change into, because they couldn't take any of their luggage off the planes. There were townspeople -- a husband and wife in particular -- who made sure all the animals that had been traveling in the holding area, the cargo area of the planes, that they were taking care of. This town of 10,000 people organized a huge cookout for the entire 7,000 guests that suddenly showed up, with the residents donating their grills and their food and drinks.

And as I watched that, and as I saw the story pop again on my social media this week, all I could think of then and last week was: this is the quintessential example of compassionate community ... of how we take care of each other. And this is our inherent goodness -- our inherent goodness that's within us that pushes us to rush toward helping others; to going where help is needed. Because we're expressions of God on earth, and we're connected energetically to one another ... which means, at a soul level, we want to take care of each other.

And yet sometimes we forget, don't we? Or sometimes we hold back. So, what gets in the way of us reaching out and helping? It could be ego -- me-centered. It could be fear. And it could be judgment, which also covers fear and ego.

And in the second section of Pema Chödrön's book, "Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change," which is our series right now, tonight in Part #2 she states, "*Compassion is threatening to the ego.*" So, I take that as: What might I lose if I help another person? What might I be giving up if I'm helping someone else?

So, the commitment to take care of one another comes after the first step in her book, which is to live with change. So last week, last Wednesday, Rev. Maraj spoke about this first step or vow/commitment, which is to relax into change and the uncertainty of life. And that includes making friends with all the uncomfortable feelings; to welcome them; to sit with them instead of pushing them away or pushing them down.

Ultimately, the first commitment or this first step is about building confidence to embrace the storms of life: the ups and downs; the raw, the edgy parts; the in-between; the changes parts; the unknowingness of life.

And then the second step tonight is to be so comfortable with the uncomfortableness that you can now offer solace and compassion to others who may be feeling those big feelings; who may be feeling like they're getting thrown back and forth by life. It's the vow to take care of one another.

So, Pema Chödrön, the author, says that this step is "*a longing to awaken so that we can help others do the same.*" So, what does that say? It says to live beautifully with change. We look at going beyond our own personal comfort zone to alleviate the pain in the world. But to do so, it means that we have to do our own inner work; our own inner healing ... or at least be in the process of it. I don't think we're ever done.

But when we do our own healing work -- when we do our own awakening -- then we can help others do their healing, their transformation, their deepening.

It means opening our hearts, going beyond judgment/fixed opinions. It means going beyond people we don't like, those we may never meet ... and caring for their well-being anyway.

And in the book, Pema Chödrön says that the second step, in essence, is a commitment to take care of one another as if we're inviting them into our living room as our guests. I like what she has written here. She has some very cute and clever little ways of writing things. Because she says:

"The commitment to take care of one another is often described as a vow to invite all sentient beings to be our guests. It means opening our door to everyone, not just to the people we like, or the ones who smell good, or the ones we consider proper. But also to the ones who are confused; to people of all shapes, sizes, and colors; to people speaking all different languages; to people with all different points of view. Making the second commitment means holding a diversity party in our living room all day, every day, until the end of time."

Cultivating an open heart and kindness with bravery to be a helper, just like the folks in Gander. Just like the maritime boats and the people on the other side of Manhattan.

So, this reminder connects us really with last week's World Day of Prayer and our call to action to be love in action; to extend loving kindness and compassion, help and care to other people ... especially to those not like us. To all people.

And when it comes to taking care of and helping other people, It's okay to start small. Sometimes we think we have to save the whole world or help the whole world. But we just have to help our little world. We can get overwhelmed with the big picture, but just start where you are. The important thing is to just start.

So, again, what gets in the way of us reaching out and helping is usually our own fear or ego around it. So that looks like when we close our hearts or our minds to someone else. It can also be what she calls "self-denigration" in that we say, "*Oh, there's nothing I can do,*" or "*I'm not able to help; I can't do much.*"

But sometimes, Pema points out, that what prevents us from really helping and caring for others can also sound like criticism of others: of their choices, of their beliefs, of their customs, of their culture, traditions, their life situations.

And so, when we start to hear ourselves criticizing other people, we move to honesty. We catch ourselves: *"Oh, I thought that about that group or about that person."* Or, *"I could have helped, but I walked away and I didn't do anything."*

And after you get honest with yourself -- you catch yourself, get honest -- then you go to your heart; feel your heart. You put your hand on your heart. And then you take that vow to restart again and move forward to take care of others. So, you're honest with your thoughts, feelings; you feel your heart; you restart. Those are the three steps. That, when you hear yourself -- catch yourself -- having closed your heart and mind to someone, notice it; feel it; and then move forward with a new commitment to keep your heart open.

And Pema Chödrön even suggests that, if there's someone you've placed outside of your heart -- someone you don't want to help; someone you have trouble liking -- then be grateful to them. She writes this. She says, *"These individuals are your own special gurus showing up right on time to keep you honest. It's the troublemakers in your life who cause you to see that you've shut down; that you've armored yourself; that you've hidden your head in the sand."*

And, of course, you don't want to put yourself in harm's way. You want to make sure you have healthy boundaries. And so, in those cases where you want to bless someone and help them with maybe prayer support, but emotionally or physically, it's not safe, she says you can put their name on a piece of paper, even have a photo of them. And then, by looking at that, you do this here on your screen.

She says you say, *"I wish for your deepest well-being."*

I wish for your deepest well-being. And then you return to asking yourself next, here on the screen, too, the next step would be: today (or tonight) ... *"Tonight, how can I embody loving kindness and compassion?"*

So, again, looking at the name or a picture: *"I wish for you deepest well-being ... for your deepest well-being. How can I embody loving kindness and compassion?"*

So, just right now, maybe there's someone you've placed outside of your heart; someone you don't agree with. And just take a moment now to quietly wish them, *"I wish for your deepest well-being."* And now this next one: just quietly saying this together, but we'll say it *"tonight,"* right? *"So tonight, how can I embody loving kindness and compassion?"* Just saying that to yourselves right now: *"Tonight, how can I embody loving kindness and compassion?"*

And if you're in a situation where you're not sure what to do, she suggests just adopting kind of this attitude of, *"Well, I'm not sure how to help in the situation, but I'm just going to experiment and try this."* And then just try something. Just do something.

You know, I suggest that you get quiet and listen ... not listening by forcing yourself to hear something, but to feel where your heart is guiding you, is leading you. Because that's when you're being the ears, the eyes, the hands, the feet of God on earth -- when you listen to that still, small voice within you.

And you know, the actor, Michael J. Fox from *"Family Ties"* and *"Back to the Future,"* he's had Parkinson's disease since he was 29. He's now, I think, 65. He's in his 60s. And he just received earlier this week an Emmy Award -- a humanitarian award at the Emmys. And he said this. He said, *"When circumstances get tough, you show up; you help. And if you can add a little joy while you're doing it, that seems better."*

His foundation has given over \$3 billion to Parkinson's issues, concerns, studies, research. *"When circumstances get tough, you show up; you help. And if you can add a little joy while you're doing it, that seems better."*

So last Friday, my husband, Juan, and I -- we were hiking in Sedona. And I don't know if you've been to where the Seven Pools are, but it's really beautiful. You kind of hike back, and then there's these seven pools naturally just made in the red rock.

And so, when we first started hiking, there were these two young men, probably in their early/mid-30s. One guy had one of those man-buns, and he had a friend with darker skin. And they were kind of a little ways behind us.

And there was this other guy in his 40s on one of those, like, dune buggy-type vehicles. And when Juan and I got to the Seven Pools, this guy in his 40s -- with a beard, with a gun and a holster in his shorts ... I won't tell you what his T-shirt said. [Congregants laugh] He was talking to another couple that happened to be there, and then he kind of started talking to us, too. And he was kind of funny. I mean, you know, he was kind of saying this and that and how much he had paid for the pass. And he was a funny guy.

And so, then Juan and I continued on the hike six or eight minutes. And then it seemed like it might start raining, so we turned back around. And as we were coming back to the Seven Pools, we could hear men's voices. And as I was coming around the corner, I could see that it was the man-bun guy and his friend and the gun guy. And I heard the voices of them talking.

Now, I just want to pause right there. Because I want you just to notice what kind of conversation are you imagining that they're having? Just notice your thought. Don't judge it. Just notice it.

Well, so, when we came around the corner, they were laughing. They were starting to end the conversation that they'd been having for that 10 to 15 minutes. In fact, the bun guy said to the gun guy, *"Thank you so much."*

And the gun guy said, *"Anytime. I hope you enjoy the rest of your hike. I can help you anytime. Glad we had this conversation."* Yeah, yeah. There was laughter. There were smiles.

And then the younger two guys walked away, and he said to his friend, *"Oh, that guy was great. Wasn't that so helpful? He was great."* And everyone was walking away with smiles.

And I had the first thought, which, *"Wow, how interesting. Those are two groups of people I would not think would be having this connection and this conversation; this friendliness, if you will."* And my next thought after that was to share this with all of you as this reminder that we can connect with those who are different than us; that there are ways to see the best in each other.

That's what keeping our hearts open looks like. That's what inviting everyone into your living room looks like. That's what helping someone that's not like you -- that you may not agree with 100% -- looks like.

Chief Seattle said this about a hundred years ago. He said, *"We are all children of the Great Spirit. We all belong to Mother Earth. Our planet is in great trouble. And if we keep carrying old grudges and do not work together, we will all die."*

That's because we're all connected by this invisible energy: this Allness of life, this Spirit of life, this Great Spirit.

Here's what new thought teacher Emilie Cady wrote in her book, *"How I Use Truth."* You can follow along on your screen. She wrote, *"All desires of the little self are merged in the desire for universal good, because we recognize but One in the universe, and ourselves as part of that One."*

And then, last Friday ... because it was starting to rain, so I thought, *"Well, I'm going to do my reading for tonight. And so, I opened it up again. It was the 25th anniversary of 9/11. And I opened up my book -- and the chapter is 'Breathing in Pain, Breathing Out Relief' -- and it starts: 'On September 11th, 2001, the bottom fell out for millions of people. When the two planes flew into the Twin Towers -- the World Trade Center -- life as many of us knew it changed forever. There was a societal experience of groundlessness. The truth of uncertainty and change was very immediate for those living in New York City, for those living all over the United States, and for many people around the world.'"*

And she goes on to talk about how large groups started to form across the country to pray and to meditate. And in the Buddhist community from which she comes, they started practicing Tonglen – Tonglen, meaning “awaken our natural empathy.” And it's a practice to help us touch into the sameness with all beings.

And so, here's what they did. They breathed in fear and anger, and they breathed out love and relief. But breathing in the fear was to really hold the fear of others; to hold their hearts. Those who were in fear, to hold their hearts; to breathe in their fear and to hold that for them, and then to exhale and breathe out love, sending them love and relief and care.

Challenges and situations happen that upend our world. And she writes, *“The pain of the world pierces us to the heart, but we never forget the goodness of being alive.”*

It reminds me of the talk I gave about a month ago on the song, “The Ride is Worth the Fall,” by Cody Johnson. Go back and watch that one. It's about how the pain of the world pierces us to the heart, but we never forget the goodness of being alive. And it's this shared goodness of being alive, our shared compassion, that we come together and realize that, together, everyone's welfare -- everyone's welfare -- is as important as our own. When we help them -- when we help another -- we help ourselves. When we help ourselves, we help the world.

So, start where you are right now. Have a conversation with someone and just listen. Don't give advice, but just listen with an open heart. Be open-hearted and open-minded. Be mindful of “othering” others or “they” over there. Reach out to another person and let them know that someone's thinking of them. Send them a text. Give them a call. Call is really outrageous! Wow. Call or text. Make sure someone knows they're cared about. Volunteer with an organization. Help a friend in need.

Consciously cultivate forgiveness and patience and compassion and then practice it wherever you go. Learn more maybe about a group that you don't know that much about ... Maybe a group that you've even judged. And see how you can help their community. See how you can volunteer with them.

Challenge old beliefs and love more. That's the call: Challenge old beliefs and love more. By staying open to others, you experience and understand your own oneness with all living beings. And this is what Pema Chödrön means when she says to take a vow to care for one another and then to repeat that vow as often as possible.

So, to live beautifully with uncertainty and change, Pema Chödrön teaches us that that first step is to accept and relax into the fact that life is going to “life.” That there's going to be uncertainty; there's going to be change. And big feelings are going to come up around it. Accept it and relax into it, because then that second step allows us to make that commitment to take care of one another ... meaning to consciously choose to help ease the pain of the world by actively caring for each other and by being a presence of love and compassion and support.

This is how you live your life beautifully, even with uncertainty and change. And this is how together we heal the world. That's our soul work for this week, everyone.

Blessings!