

The Path Series #1  
“Clearing A Path to Heartfulness”  
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In her book, Kitchen Table Wisdom, Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen tells the story of Yitzak, a Holocaust survivor. Liberated from a concentration camp in 1945, he had come to America, worked and studied hard, and was now a respected research physicist.

“His first words endeared him to me,” Remen recalls. His Slavic accent reminded her of some of the older people in her family. Two years before, he had been diagnosed with cancer. Now, he had come to a retreat at Commonweal for people with cancer to see if he could engage and possibly defeat this enemy with the power of his mind, the aspect of his being he trusted most profoundly.

At the retreat, Remen explains, we touch people a great deal more than was his custom. Disconcerted at first, he would ask, “Vat is all dis, all dis huggy-huggy. Vat is dis luff the strangers? Vat is dis?” But he let us hug him anyway. After a while he began to hug us back.

The retreats last for a week and by the fourth day, the inner silence, which has been slowly generated by the daily yoga practice, has become very deep and spontaneous insights often arise. Sometimes this silence allows people to find their own truth for the first time.

On the fourth day in the meditation, which begins in the morning session, Yitzak had an experience. It seemed to him that through his closed lids he could see a deep pinkish light, very beautiful and tender. Startled, he realized this light surrounded him and came in some mysterious fashion from his chest. “When he told us about it later,” Remen recalls, “he said it was like being inside a big rose: very touching because his last name meant “little rose” in Polish.”

In the moment, however, he became frightened. He was aware that the light had a direction, it was pouring out of his chest “like big hemorrhage.” It seemed to be coming from his heart and it made him feel vulnerable.

Yitzak had survived the concentration camps. For many years he had lived, as it were, in a world of strangers. A deeply loving person, since his experience as a boy, he had been very cautious in respect to his heart, loving only close people, only family. This way of living had helped him feel safer, had worked for him until now. But there is often fear behind such a wary lifestyle and now for the first time, he had begun to feel some of this. It was uncomfortable for him.

Remen explains, “The retreat staff dealt with his discomfort in the way they deal with everything else ; they did not try to fix it, to explain away his

experience or to interpret it for him. In stead they listened with interest and continued to support him as he tried to work out it's meaning for himself. Over the next few days, he seemed to relax more, to become more open."

In the last session of the retreat, Remen asked Yitzak how things were going. He laughed. "Better," he said, and began to tell us of a walk he had taken on the beach the day before. In his mind, he had talked to God, asking God what all this was about, and had received comfort.

Touched, Remen asked him what God had said. He laughed again. "Ah, Rachel-le, I say to him "God, is it okay to luff strangers?" And God says, "Yitzak, vat is *dis* strangers? *You* make strangers. I don't make strangers. I open hearts." Yitzak paused and looked at Remen through misty eyes, and although he does not say this, she senses that he would add, "Like mine."

Can you think of a time when you experienced this type of heart opening, perhaps when you least expected it? Do you find that, like Yitzak, you've tended to approach life more from your head, or ego, or even your body, than from your heart? Sometimes it takes a serous illness, major life trauma or change, or some event in the wider world to shake us out of thinking and into feeling.

One of the reasons this is hard for us is that living from a feeling orientation involves vulnerability and pain (as Yitzak discovers at the retreat).

Over the years, I have participated in 'Opening the Heart' workshops and all sorts of programs geared towards healing and reorienting one's self to "living from the heart." But it is tough to sustain a heart-centered life in a mostly thinking, often callous world.

The heart can often seem less than adequate to face the challenges of daily living. So, we think and defend and guard the heart behind an electric fence of intelligence, weariness and mistrust.

During the past several years in Pittsburgh, I had been attending some transformative chakra activation yoga classes, kirtan chanting evenings, and sound healings. And I've been meditating more, inviting more quiet into my daily life.

The idea of these "yoga" gatherings is not to see how bendy one can be, but to use breath, stillness, vibrations, chant, and some simple postures to open the chakra pathways, enabling energy to flow, love to flow, joy to flow. When this process is activated, it's a marvelous and healing experience. You can feel truly radiant.

Not surprisingly, what I've discovered is that the meditations and exercises to open and activate the heart chakra (and keep it open) can be the most challenging.

How do our hearts become so defended, so barricaded behind our fears and habits of mind? And what might we be and how might we live if we cleared a

path to the heart (rather than think our way to goal-oriented resolutions)? How can we embrace our vulnerability in those torn places of our imperfectly perfect heart?

If you are unfamiliar with the chakra system, let me give you a brief overview. The seven chakras are non-anatomical in nature. They exist in the energy field known as the etheric body. They are conductors, drawing vital energy up from the earth, circulating through the physical body and releasing it as higher awareness.

Each has a Sanskrit name and each is associated with colors, gemstones, metals, music, positive and negative archetypes, and all sorts of other dimensions.

As we develop our consciousness and refine our sensitivities through various practices, we release old stagnant emotional energy that weighs us down. The more freedom, love, authenticity, and beauty the spirit experiences, the wider the energy field becomes and we have more resources for healing, creativity, and joy.

The system begins at the root chakra at the feet (*mul/ad/hara*, the color red, the place of grounding) , moves up to the sacral chakra (*svad/his thana*, the color orange, the place of pleasure) , then we ascend to the solar plexus chakra (*mani/pura*, the color yellow, the place of self worth), then to the heart chakra (*ana/hata*, the color green, the place of flowing love) and on to the throat chakra (*vish/uddha*, the color turquoise, the place of expression), the brow or third eye chakra ( *ajna*, the color indigo , the place of intuition) and finally the crown chakra (*sahas/rara*, the color violet, the place of transcendence).

The heart chakra (*ana/hata*), the fourth, serves as an essential gateway between the lower three chakras which are grounding to the earth and the upper three which are ascending towards the Divine.

One of the most revelatory concepts I've learned in studying the heart chakra is the importance of being able to hold love in your heart, not let it slip through the cracks when it is not returned or when it grows a bit cold. The color associated with the heart chakra is green and also pink, which lends even more meaning and poignancy to Yitzak's moment of seeing a tender pink light behind his eyes during his meditation.

Deep healing and more peaceful living can come through activate our heart chakras. Consider the color green and its symbolism – freshness, growth, abundance, gratitude. This is where, according to the mystics, the sacred resides within each of us. A strong heart is able to forgive the wounds of the past, find joy in the moment, and clear a path into the world to make it a better place.

Yes, this is a work in progress, the work of a lifetime. And step one of this process is cultivating love for ourselves even when life is less than we wish it

would be; even if we have internalized some un-lovability or a sense of separateness from others... “strangers,” as Yitzak saw it before his chat with God.

In our meditation earlier, you were guided to a place where you might “experience a lightness of being and a sense of resiliency and a knowing that you have enough love in you to heal the entire world.” That may sound like hyperbole and a lot to accomplish right off the bat. So, focus instead on opening the heart to a belief that you have enough love within you to heal yourself.

This part of the meditation is also worth repeating: “Look at yourself in the mirror and acknowledge that you are the love you feel. Take your gentleness out into the world and let it be reflected back at you.”

Most children have a natural capacity for living openheartedly; their innocence has not been obscured by the waxy buildup of ego, shame, and self-consciousness. We surely see that illustrated in the most poignant and touching way in the story, “The Innocent Heart,” that Linda read earlier. “All right, all right, all right,” coos the child gently as she comforts the weeping man.

Ask yourself if you would have traversed that waiting room, approached this grieving man and wiped away his tear. It’s awkward for us. We worry about how we will be perceived when we reach beyond our comfort zones of compassion to “luff a stranger.”

For us grown-ups, it requires work; a process for uncovering the waxy build-up of years of programming and experiences in order to unleash the full power of the heart.

In her book, The New American Spirituality, Elizabeth Lesser, the co-founder of Omega Institute, calls this way of living, “heartfulness,” and she underscores the importance of being intentional. Mining her own experience and journey, Lesser writes: “The goal of heartfulness is an awakened heart, one that feels everything there is to feel: joy and hope, enchantment and aliveness, and also longing, sadness, anger, and pain.

We feel how wonderful it is to be alive, how funny, how tragic. We don’t shut down when the feelings get troublesome; we stay awake, even when it hurts.” Heartfulness work is the cessation of avoidance.”

Lesser astutely notes that “as we work on opening the heart, we will confront, over and over, our fearful habit of closing to pain. This is where mindfulness meditation practice can be such a powerful ally and a wonderful companion as we sail the seas of the heart.

It keeps us focused and less likely to be swept away by waves of elation or despair.” “Mindfulness and heartfulness are a powerful duo on the spiritual path,” Lesser tells us. “A quiet mind without an open heart is a pretty brittle and boring proposition.”

In Hebrew Scripture, in the book of Isaiah, Chapter 40, verse 3, the prophet admonishes us that “Someone is shouting: ‘Clear a path in the wilderness! Make a straight road for the LORD our God.’” Yitzak would be familiar with this verse and with this idea of turning to his God to clear a path in the wilderness of his alienation. He does this very thing at the retreat.

Yet, even though he does not use the yogic terminology, what Yitzak discovers (and we can, too) is that Anahata, the heart chakra, is the truest spiritual gateway to clearing a path in the wilderness of our limitations and pain. The heart knows instinctively how to love without fear. In the deepest heart of the heart chakra, we are unhurt and unstuck.

When we clear a path to this place of love unconditioned by fear, we are free to love and be loved openly and fully without projection or restriction. We fight against believing this because we worry about “leaving ourselves open,” but in truth, it may be because we are afraid of what it might feel like to love this way – vulnerable and unhooked from the outcome of being “huggy-huggy” - giving or getting “luff,” even from “strangers.”

The poet Rilke advises us: “The work of the eyes is done. Now go and do heart-work.” May 2020 be the year we step bravely onto a “heartfulness” path that leads us out of the wilderness – individually, collectively, and globally.

Trust and feel. Breathe and allow. Namaste and Blessed Be.

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