

Julie Forbes, PhD 12/08/2010 Nowhere to run, Nowhere to hide



Awareness practices, including mindfulness meditation, constitute a foundation for the work that Julie Forbes facilitates and underlie her approach to helping people improve their quality of life. She began practicing meditation in 1985 and has completed professional training in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction with Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. and through the Stress Reduction Clinic at El Camino Hospital. She has been teaching Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs since 1997.

The following are notes provided by Julie, with minor edits by Dave.

Nowhere to Run; Nowhere to Hide

*"Nowhere to run
Nowhere to hide
From you, baby
Just can't get away
No matter how I try
I know you're no good for me
But free of you I'll never be"*

- Martha and the Vandellas

Recently, I attended a retreat led by a Tibetan Buddhist nun named Pema Chödrön entitled, *Smile at Fear*. The primary questions she raised for the participants during the weekend were, "What is it that scares you?" and "How will you work with that?" These seem like very appropriate questions to pose.



During the weekend retreat, Pema Chödrön continued by inviting participants to consider the possibility that everything we do, the way we interact, the way we react out of habits, etc., is all related to *not* wanting to feel our fear – it all arises from our attempts to run away from fear. As human beings, we are stuck in an unconscious reaction of trying to run and hide from our fear.

However, there is another option. Awareness practices, such as mindfulness, are a method of being with yourself completely and taking the time to see the underlying challenges, including fear, with kindness and honesty. As Pema Chödrön explained, this

path takes bravery to see yourself completely and not run away. If you touch into the fear rather than turn away, you find tenderness, vulnerability. While, instead, running away from fear causes a hardness; we become out of touch with ourselves and the world. Touching into the fear softens and opens us. It results in greater appreciation, gratitude and compassion. So the question really becomes, “How can I open to life?”¹

What if we use Halloween as a metaphor for meeting the fear that resides within us and make the attempt to open more to life? For example, when we open the door to greet *trick or treaters* on Halloween, we meet ghouls and goblins, devils, ghosts, vampires, witches and skeletons in addition to the super heroes, cartoon and Disney characters. Yet we open the door and we do greet them, whatever they may represent or whoever they may be underneath. For all of the masks and costumes they are wearing, covering up who they really are, they aren't all that scary when we actually meet them at the door.

Perhaps we can learn to greet our own inner fears in this manner? What if we were to open our doors to meet our fears? We might actually meet the disappointment that is hiding under the anger, or the sense of unworthiness hiding under the lethargy, or the pain hiding beneath the restlessness. All of these, too, are masks or costumes covering up our genuine nature.

Pema Chödrön told a related story about a friend of hers who was having a series of bad dreams. Pema's friend spoke about being disturbed by dreams in which she was being chased by monsters. Pema asked her friend, merely out of curiosity, “What did these monsters look like?” Her friend paused and responded that she had never turned to look at them. This question, however, sunk into her psyche and when she had another similar dream, this time she turned around to look at the monsters that were chasing her. What she found was that the monsters she was fleeing from weren't really very scary; instead they more like two-dimensional cartoon characters. After turning to see the “monsters” in this manner, the power they seemed to have over her diminished.

Here is a suggestion to help you face the monsters that reside within you rather than unconsciously running or hiding from them:

1. Slow down, maybe even stop, when you notice that you are reacting out of fear.
2. Instead of keeping busy or falling asleep or distracting yourself so that you can avoid what frightens you, can you instead, take a look at it, very gently and truly see it, acknowledge its presence?
3. Taking the effort to meet your discomfort and fear in this way, over time, although it isn't likely to go away, its power over you may diminish. Out of this effort, you may gradually find more effective ways to respond to these challenges.

As Rumi says in his poem, *The Guest House*

This being human is a guest house
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Or, as a more modern poet describes it:

*"Someone's knockin' at the door
Somebody's ringin' the bell
Someone's knockin' at the door
Somebody's ringin' the bell
Do me a favor,
Open the door and let 'em in"*

~ Paul McCartney ~

If there truly is [nowhere to run; nowhere to hide](#) from the fear that resides deep within each of us, how, then, can we work with challenging states of mind that arise which may sabotage us, many of these manifestations of the deeper fear that resides beneath them, such as wanting what we don't have; anger and hatred; laziness and lethargy; restlessness and anxiety; and doubt?

Most peoples' first reaction to challenging states of mind is to distract themselves. Keeping busy "doing" by working, shopping, watching TV, engaging on the computer,

etc., is a common strategy, as is numbing oneself with substances or sleep. Anything that keeps a person from having to actually “be” with their self and the truth of what they are experiencing during these difficult states. Somehow we often believe if we don’t see and feel something, it doesn’t have an impact upon us. Unfortunately, that is far from the reality – the difficulty is usually still there taking its toll. As the title of a book by Karol Truman points out, *“Feelings buried alive never die.”*

In actuality, the most skillful way to respond to these challenging states is to use them wisely and take the opportunity to learn from them. Here are some suggestions for working with difficult states of mind when they arise¹:

Observe to understand and develop a new relationship

Rather than suppressing or hiding from difficult states, see if you can observe them when they are present. See if you can notice, with a sense of curiosity and inquiry, how you are reacting to these difficult states and, perhaps, getting caught up in them. Just this insight alone is valuable; by understanding better how you relate to a difficult state, from there, you may have the opportunity to develop a new relationship with it, one that serves you better. As a metaphor, Gurdjieff, a 20th Century spiritual teacher who based his work on self-awareness, was known to hold mindful work retreats for students. During one of these retreats a participant was ousted by the others because he was very difficult and generally disliked. After this participant left the site, Gurdjieff actually found this man and paid him to return to the retreat to give the other participants the ability to work with this challenge. Gurdjieff recognized that if he allowed the students to eliminate this thorny issue during their retreat, they would avoid addressing the difficulty and thus would miss the opportunity to learn to relate to it in a more effective way.

Promote the opposite state

If a difficult state of mind is overwhelming, try promoting an opposite state to combat the grip the difficult state has on you. If you can weaken its hold, you then may be able to attend to it more effectively. For example, it is told that the Buddha first taught loving-kindness to monks who had been dwelling and meditating in the forest. These monks were fearful of being attacked by spirits in the forest that didn’t want them there and came to the Buddha to seek his advice. In response, the Buddha taught the monks the practice of loving-kindness, cultivating intentions of kindness and well-being, as an antidote to their fear. The monks returned to the forest and as they chanted phrases of loving-kindness, such as, “may I be peaceful, may I be happy, may I be safe, may I be free of suffering,” they began to feel safe and see their environment as friendly. By practicing loving-kindness, the opposite of fear and anger, the monks were able to quell their fear of the spirits in the forest. Another example from day-to-day life: during those times when you feel lazy or lethargic, by having the will to energize yourself into some more active state (going for a walk, for example), you may be able to weaken the lethargy and, from there, take a closer look at it and your reaction to it.

Let go

With growing awareness, you may develop the ability to let go of the difficult states when you notice they are present, let them pass. However, the ability to let go requires that you first acknowledge the feelings honestly, without engaging in them, without being seduced into a reaction to them. If you, instead, evade acknowledging them honestly, you can slip into a state of denial or avoidance, which are common ways of reacting. Therefore, it is not effective to bypass step 1) of these suggestions; observing and understanding your reactions to these difficult states must first be mastered before you can truly let go of them.

None of these ways of working with challenging states of mind are easy; however, the payoff for the effort is worthwhile. Try these approaches for yourself and let me know how they work for you.

"The best way out of a difficulty is through it."

~ Robert Frost ~

1. Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation, Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, Shambhala (2001)