

## **A Caring Heart by Russell Delman**

### **December 16, 2014**

*And the light shines in the darkness...*

This is the season of Light in many traditions. As the days shorten and the outer world becomes darker, our inner light can shine more brightly. Perhaps our potential is moving us toward becoming Beings of light in which love fills our hearts and informs our actions. Imagine a radiant center like a sun in your chest. Is this what the great teachers from Gautama Buddha to Jesus Christ are modeling for us? Yet there are so many examples of the opposite, of violent actions darkening our world. How do we manifest this light amidst such darkness?

Today I also read about a young girl, Malala Yousafzai who stood up for life by fighting for the right of Pakistani girls to go to school. A Taliban gunman shot her in her head. Many caring people from around the world, doctors, nurses, politicians, bus drivers, village elders, worked together to save her. She continues sharing her gifts and her love with the world and recently won the Nobel peace prize. How do we make sense of the brutal darkness that lives in humanity and the light-filled love of which the human heart is capable? What do I mean by 'love'? For me in this context, it is simply a quality of caring that includes goodwill, kindness, deep listening and positive actions toward all of life.

#### **An imagination of the Future**

Imagining the future, I picture a global community in which love is the norm. We extend our generosity beyond our immediate circle towards all. The web of our caring includes the planet, the atmosphere, seas, plants, animals, people and all the rest.

The suffering of others produces a caring response in each of us.

The joy of others is experienced as warmth in our hearts.

In caring for life we spontaneously include the entirety of each situation: our personal needs, the needs of others, the social setting and the environment.

Beauty is deeply valued.

Humor also though not the cynical kind.

Truth is earnestly sought though not as a weapon.

Creativity is encouraged.

The uniqueness of each person is valued.

Children have opportunities to bring their unique gifts into actualization.

Is this a utopian fantasy? What about our biological proclivity toward self-protection and tribal identity? Certainly, it will take time to balance the "fight for survival" impulse in our DNA with its lesser known companion "cooperation for survival". We have both tendencies.

Since going to Rwanda these questions live within me. My long term inquiry into forgiveness, redemption, gratitude, self-responsibility and interconnectivity have been going deeper and wider than ever before. A fundamental question for me, not abstractly but in a profoundly personal way is, who do I exclude from my field of care? Are there any individuals or groups that I do not include in my goodwill, i.e. my love?

#### **The Complexity of Caring: A Personal Example**

Most recently, while guiding a *Gratitude and Forgiveness* retreat, I was investigating this question of exclusion through a process called “Embodied Listening”. I discovered that I carried unacknowledged hostility toward a particular group of people: aggressive, narcissistic young men. I could also sense a deep fear lurking inside that was masked through my judgments and anger toward them. As I continued to listen to the ‘felt-sense’ under the surface, I found a feeling of shame toward myself as a young man.

Though never violent toward women, I carried many of the thoughts and images that were fed to boys of my era and indeed throughout most of human history. Two examples of many, I remember as a 15 year old in prep school, sneaking out for a night away when the man in charge of my dormitory who was colluding with my unauthorized adventure said “don’t come back if you don’t ‘get any’”. Even younger, at 12, I remember the brother-in-law whom I idolized saying in profane language that rather than seeking love, I should “try to have sex with anyone in a skirt”. Messages like this were rampant in my formative years and I internalized them.

I observed that my current commitment to supporting groups that are working for ending violence against women was connected to an unacknowledged sense of connection to the perpetrators. I too objectified women and learned to ignore the person and just see a body. I am grateful to the many sources of consciousness growth, particularly the women’s movement, for helping me to see past this numbing, heartbreaking conditioning. Finally, as a 62 year old relatively conscious man, a husband/father, I could see that my hostility toward this group of young men was connected to the reality that “this was me also”.

Everyone reading this probably agrees that violence against women whether on a university campus or in the Congo is horrendous and we must do everything in our power to end the complex conditions and conditioning that make this possible. **Sexual violence is connected to and an instance of all forms of violence which are in essence the attempt to dominate another through force.** I can imagine living in a world where acts of domination in any form are unthinkable. Human beings are currently far from this state. What steps are needed to heal our collective wounds?

### **Collective Responsibility**

Growing out of this inquiry is my first true sense of collective responsibility. Twenty-five years ago I first heard some of my German students speak of collective guilt over their countries history. Though understanding of their pain, I could not truly see how the “sins of the father were visited upon the child”. Now, something different dawns in my sensibility. My circle of care includes a sense of collective responsibility. As a man I am connected to the actions of all men. As a citizen of the United States I am part of the violent actions of this nation. As a White person I hold particular responsibility for actions against people of color. As a human being I am also responsible for the destruction of the earth perpetrated by my brothers and sisters. **I am part of this whole system, not just the parts I agree with.**

In my recent article on Forgiveness, I wrote about Simon Wiesenthal who as a prisoner of war lost most of his family to the Nazis and was being asked by an SS officer for forgiveness. After the war, Wiesenthal managed to visit the mother of the officer. A question arose for one of the commentators in the back of the book: what about the mothers responsibility? What about ordinary people who knew that something terrible was happening to their neighbors and did nothing? This week, reading the report about the CIA use of torture after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack, I ask the same question of myself: what is my responsibility for these actions? What is ‘right action’ for me now?

At this moment in the United States there are many protests about the unfair treatment of Black people by various law enforcement agencies. We need this kind of collective outrage, as long as it is non-violent. Still,

we must not create more fear and hatred by casting the perpetrators out of our hearts. This is an incredible challenge for angry, hurting people. Our future must include this capacity.

Diverse people of many social groups are wearing tee-shirts that say “I can’t Breathe” in memory of the dying words of a Eric Garner in New York at the hands of a “peace” officer. As one Zen teacher said, “if he can’t breathe than we can not fully and freely breathe either”. Can we accept that we too are part of the system that led to this moment? Without absolving the policeman at all, can we see that he is part of a larger system that includes all of us? The danger and stress that the police live with everyday is included in assessing the whole situation. Extending our field of care to the police officers as we hold them responsible for their actions is essential. Imagine if the protesters could include this sentiment in their hearts.

Similarly, what about people who “side” with the police. Can they also extend their caring to include all those who have been systematically victimized by domination systems, in the case the criminal justice system? Expanding our capacity to shine our light on injustice, to stand tall in its face AND not cast anyone out of our field of caring is the potential future of humanity. This is the hard, at times excruciating work, we all must do.

### **Responsibility vs. Blame**

How do we live with awareness of collective responsibility at a time when we have access to so many of the horrific events from the whole world? It is not helpful to be paralyzed by self-incrimination and guilt. One key distinction for me is the difference between taking responsibility and blaming. In my inner language, responsibility is literally the ability to assume new responses to circumstances. How does my caring for all of life express itself in any particular situation? In addition to bearing-witness, prayer, communicating with others, perhaps sending money, what other actions are called for? To find helpful, non-violent ways of standing up for life is an essential, efficacious enactment of self-responsibility.

Blame is quite different, it has an implicit violence toward the target of the blame, whether self or other. Blaming oneself invites ineffective self-flagellation producing unhelpful guilt, rarely leading to effective action. Blaming others, as Buddha said, “is like picking up a scalding rock and throwing it, we get burned first.” Blaming creates unintended negative consequences that linger in the health and vitality of the person.

Moving beyond blame and ineffective guilt, how do we engender self-responsibility, radically condemning certain behaviors while not closing our hearts to individuals or groups? **Separating the action from the actor seems key to me.** Seeing the systemic, historical, biological and social antecedents of behavior while simultaneously holding each person accountable asks us to walk a courageous tight rope. Honoring the understandable anger of marginalized populations without exiling the perpetrators is our moral task. As the old expression goes, “to understand all is to forgive all”.

As my investigation continues, I see how those sexist, young men do not benefit from my derision or my exiling of them from my heart. They need my clarity, my care and my courage to shine a light on their faulty conditioning. Standing up in this way to the unconsciousness that perpetuates violent dominance is incredibly demanding and this is the potential of humanity.

Similarly, when we exile the other perpetrators of violence in the world today do we help them to heal? Since the terms “healing” and “whole” derive from the same root, I believe that unless all of life is included as part of our collective whole, as part of our field of care, then we are incomplete. How do we include members of ISIS in the human family, understanding their pain and their needs while simultaneously doing all we can to stop their brutal actions. Demonizing the enemy is the classic way of making it possible to

exclude certain people from our caring and to treat them as sub-human. We must learn to evolve further if we are to survive and heal this planet. **Can ALL of life be included in our circle of caring?**

### **How?**

There are no simple answers or formulas. One key is learning to listen deeply to self and others. If we can enter into any important dialogue with a truly open mind, i.e. not assuming to know the truth or the answers and really hold presence (bearing witness) for all elements of the situation then person by person, we will forge our way into this evolving ethos. Through reflection and growing awareness, the painful contractions of our hearts will be sensed and overcome. Assuming responsibility and eliminating “us and them” mentality will help a great deal. In my vision, **we will stop blaming anybody for anything while still holding self-responsibility as a high value.** Extending our self-identity to include all of Life will lead us forward. Kindness will guide our way. From an integrated, Embodied Life perspective doing this requires the ability to sense deeply into our bodies for the contractions and patterns that underlie our thoughts and feelings. To be whole requires integrating bodily sensations, feelings, images/thoughts while simultaneously being permeable to the outer world. This outer world includes what I call “the greater body” which transmits the transcendent or spiritual world. “Embodied Listening” is one path to opening our contracted hearts.

We can feel great encouragement from leaders like the current Dalai Lama, Malala Yousafzai and Pope Francis. Heroes like Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King also pointed in this direction. These capacities need to grow one heart at a time.

I am inspired by the Buddhist concept of Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is an awakening being (Bodhi=awakened or awakening, Sattva= Being) who dedicates her-himself to the awakening and healing of all life. Rather than entering the nirvana of endless bliss and liberation the Bodhisattva vow says: **“I can not be free until all others are free because I am not separate from any part of life”**. This is our direction as human beings.

Today, the great challenges on our planet, both in terms of ecology and human behavior will push us either over the brink or into a new world with love as the basic operating principle. This is our potential. This journey is the most compelling and dynamic trip we can take. For some of us maybe it is the only journey worth taking. In this season of light, we can dedicate ourselves to the hard work of growing a caring heart. Let's move forward in creating the kind of world we wish for our children's children.