



BRIDGING THE HUMAN AND THE DIVINE

By: Robert Strock

DREAMS OF FULFILLMENT

When I was a psychology major in college, I had a recurring dream that I forgot to take my final exams - - - until the last minute. In the dream, I'd rush into the classroom and stare at the teacher, who looked depressed and more like a caricature than a human being. I'd say to myself, "This person is supposed to teach me how to live a fulfilling life?"

I'd walk out of the classroom laughing at the absurdity of it all and never took the exam in the dream. Then I would wake up. Our supposed guide had not found her own source of love, inspiration and tenderness. How could she inspire that in her students?

My psychology studies, like my dream, felt limited since they only partially guided me toward my heart and soul. When it came to a fundamentally healthy individual, most of the field of psychology seemed to develop only half of our human potential. Psychology helps us with personal insight and communication, grounds us in seeing our own ego more clearly, and also finding deeper intimacy. And still, I asked myself over and over, "What other ways are there to find greater happiness and fulfillment?" It was leaving me half empty.

I had a similar experience in my personal therapy. It was helpful in supporting certain aspects of my growth, but I kept feeling like there was more. When I was lucky

enough to find a counselor with an open heart and substantial life experience, I felt inspired. But most of the time, I still felt hungry. Was it possible to find fulfillment or was I living in a dream world?

My longing to find satisfaction motivated me, over a four-decade span, to conduct experiments with human and spiritual potential. When I began the search, I was heartened that these new approaches addressed the central questions that psychology seemed to consider secondary: How do I connect to a higher power and potential? What does it mean to be truly compassionate? Is a lasting peace possible? What can I learn from studying the great masters like Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed and a host of others?

I experimented with a variety of approaches that valued the interconnectedness of life, our relationship to death, and the fulfillment of the human soul. It was a relief to finally address a calling I'd always felt deep inside. However, most of these approaches seemed to minimize the importance of appreciating our humanness. If we were afraid, we were encouraged to have faith or understanding. If we had doubt, we were encouraged to surrender to a higher power. In theory, these approaches acknowledged the importance of the human experience, but in a limited way. They espoused that once you had "developed, evolved, and found faith," you had arrived at peace, lightness, equanimity, understanding and compassion.

I was disturbed that most teachers didn't give rich personal examples of the challenges they faced in their own lives. After all, I thought, we are all human beings, even if we walk a path of faith. Why don't these religious and spiritual teachers expose their humanness by showing us how to integrate the practices into our daily life? Instead, so many have taught their students or followers to idealize the teacher and suppress their suffering.

Thankfully, there have been exceptions. A standout example is Pema Chodron, a highly respected Buddhist nun and teacher, who is clear in valuing the human experience by exposing her own humanness in her talks. At the same time, she teaches the values of heart, compassion, silence, and meditation.

Another exception is the Diamond Logos and Heart approaches introduced by two men, Faisal Muggadam and A.H. Almaas. These systems embody a deep respect for our spiritual nature as well as a deep embrace of the ego. In the same spirit, death and dying teachers, Stephen and Ondrea Levine, have dedicated their lives to helping others feel the essence of their hearts while they suffer in a human way.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS

When we are not concerned with bridging the human and the divine, we might either focus solely on the ego and our feelings, or put all of our attention on our soul and spirit. Either way, we are leaving out the other crucial part of ourselves. I understood this inherently as I attempted to help my clients balance whichever tendency was dominant. I would ask someone who was suffering, “How can you take care of yourself?” This would release their fixation on their feelings.

They would choose a method that they felt would best support them. For example, if they had embraced meditation, they might meditate, pray or do some other contemplative practice. If they lived in a more mainstream world, they might choose a more practical approach. In both cases, they were shifting the focus from suffering to asking for relief.

Consistent with movement towards balance, as I saw clients or friends that were spiritual teachers, ministers and devoted practitioners of certain approaches, I would typically ask them about their greatest challenges and difficult feelings that they were still dealing with. Again, I naturally felt an urge to support finding a balance between the human and the sacred.

My instinctive desire to find balance led me to develop an approach I call “Bridging the Human and the Divine” or “Holding of Opposites.” This involves holding our personal, human feelings, just as they are, while we also dedicate ourselves to a chosen practice to support our spirit. As the Beatles sang, *Whisper words of wisdom--Let It Be*. If we judge ourselves, we are encouraged to be in touch with another side of ourselves that is aware of it and leaves it alone. If we are sad, we do not interfere.

We stay content to simply see things as they are, as we hold two states at the same time.

A common example is: I'm angry with my lover. And, I want to open my heart, not act out, and also discover my needs, which is a prayer and contemplation practice.

INGE

Inge, a step-mom for many years, had a tough time setting limits because of lack of support with her three stepchildren. Her husband, Richard, a kind man and a good provider, was too lenient and accommodating to his three teenagers. They acted out during their custody visits, which lasted anywhere from a week, to a month or more. They refused to do chores, talked back and showed little respect of Inge's home or her rules. The mother, Marjorie, was no help at all, since she had not imbued the children with a healthy sense of respect, responsibility or any other preparations for being in the world. It seemed that both Marjorie and Richard had fallen into a trap common among divorced parents, where they tend to spoil the children because they feel guilty about the divorce.

One day, after years of suffering, Inge said to me, "I'm done setting boundaries."

We both laughed. "Who will set them for you?" I asked.

"I don't know, but I feel hopeless, frustrated and angry, and I know expressing these feelings won't do any good," she said.

"What would help?" I asked her.

Inge looked at me through exhausted eyes and said, "I really don't know." She had just returned from spending three weeks in Germany with her parents. "I had a great time there," she said, "and I feel guilty that I was so inspired away from home". I love my husband but we're not in agreement about how to raise the kids. I sometimes wonder how our life would be without them and I feel guilty for fantasizing that."

"If you followed your most fulfilling vision," I said, "and didn't collapse into self-criticism, how would your life look?"

Her face lit up as she said, "I'd go to seminars and retreats much more often, and when the kids arrived for the summer, I'd spend about half that time in Germany."

Inge was shocked at the enthusiasm she heard in her own voice. For me, this was a tell tale sign that she was speaking from true inspiration and fulfillment. Then she added, "But I'd be guilty and afraid that Richard would be upset with me."

I suggested she try to hold her opposing feelings with the use of her contemplation practice. She created a prayer. "I feel guilty and hopeless while my heart longs for inspiration and joy," she said.

In a few weeks, Inge felt much more alive and was almost ready to approach Richard especially since recently, they had been getting along well. She had left for a weekend when the children were with him and she looked rejuvenated. "I finally see that I can't shape the kids to my view of the world. Neither of their parents, not my husband, nor their mom, wants what I want. I'm sick of swimming against the tide and it's a great relief. But I'm not sure that Richard is okay with my independence."

"That's great," I said with enthusiasm. "Add your fear to your practice of balancing the human with the divine. You could set your intention on recognizing, 'I'm afraid and I'm asking for courage and tenderness with Richard.'"

Inge felt happy because she loved to set a higher or purer intention. I believed she was on her way to finding peace since Richard was as tired of the drama and triangulation with the children's mother, as she was. Now that she had integrated her fear with courage and faith, she felt inspired and passionate instead of collapsing into hopelessness and despair.

After a successful talk with Richard, she reported back to me, "I asked him in a gentle way how he would feel if I went to Germany two to three times a year, using half the time that the kids are with us in the summer. I told him I needed to do some things that would help me grow as a human being and connect with my heart. I assured him he would have more control over the kids with his way, and I'd be not only available when they wanted me, but I would be overjoyed to help. He was happy to say yes, and excited we could end this long power struggle. It was the best conversation Richard and I ever had about the kids and it's hard to say which one of us feels more relieved."

As the years passed, Richard asked Inge for more and more guidance with the children and she took her trips back home mostly guilt-free which helped her find a good balance in her life. As a result, they both felt inspired and connected, which often happens when one partner expresses the truth in a gentle way.

FEAR AND TENDER ACCEPTANCE

When we allow our human feelings to be exactly as they are while we cultivate a heartfelt or spiritual practice, we are holding opposite states. We might decide to pray, to access our wisdom guidance or to see things as they are by meditating or noticing our tone of voice. We will each have endless opportunities to practice. As you discover which practice draws you the most, remember that your job is not to change your emotional state. Below is my personal example of this practice.

Nearly a decade ago, I was significantly challenged to bridge the human and the divine when I needed an organ transplant. I was fortunate enough to receive a kidney from my brother, and acceptance was my number one priority since there was no way I could control what was about to happen.

Just before the operation, I prayed, “May I have the courage and grace to accept whatever the outcome.” I also asked that the new kidney might work. I had no idea whether I was praying to a higher power that lived inside or outside of me. It didn’t matter. My intention and purity of heart were all I had to offer and it felt right to sincerely ask for what I thought I needed.

During a number of years preceding the transplant, I’d prepared for the inevitable by doing various practices and praying with family and friends. I understood I couldn’t make demands or be confident that the transplant would work. I was understandably afraid because the stakes were so high. I didn’t know if I’d have the courage or grace to overcome my fear and other potential kinds of suffering. When I prayed, a guiding voice said, “Of course you’re afraid. You really want this transplant to work. Show me someone who wouldn’t be afraid.” This brought up tears of compassion for my fear and longing, and I was gentle with myself, as if my fear and tenderness were co-mingling.

When the initial surgery was over, while I was still in the hospital, I had two almost-rejection episodes, which dramatically increased my fear levels. I asked the people around me to send me as much trust and faith as they could. Rather than being overly concerned about my fear, I asked my friends and family to be with me and join in my prayers or purified intentions. I wanted them to mirror back to me positive and gentle messages, and they really came through. Their dedication to relax and be of such support was a critical part of my healing.

At one point, when the doctor confirmed that an organ rejection episode had begun, my mother became anxious. She was talking a mile a minute to cover up her obvious anxiety when I looked at her gently, and said, “Mom, I know you’re anxious. I understand, but that isn’t going to help me now. Would you please regroup and see how much you can take care of yourself, so that you can send me the energy I’m asking for?”

My mother, who had a terrific sense of humor, stood up and said with a smile, “Whoops! Looks like it’s time to go to the chapel.” She was not an overly religious person, but I’d shown her that she needed to adjust her attitude. She became soft and receptive, not generally her central style, so this was a moment of miraculous transformation for me and for her. As I think about this, I feel a rush of gratitude for that moment and other similar moments during that difficult period.

I was most touched by my brother, Rich, who gave me a kidney. The joy that he conveyed while he was donating an organ to me, brought me to a brand new height of gratitude. While I was healing, I maintained an ongoing dialogue between my tenderly held fear and a non-demanding request for faith, courage and acceptance of the human and divine inside me. I told myself, “I’m afraid I’ll have to go on dialysis. Anyone would be afraid. I’ll just continue to relax into where I am. It doesn’t have to go away. It is perfectly natural as it is.”

A huge series of exhales would follow and my fear softened the more I held it like this. I followed up by asking, praying for courage, acceptance, faith in my capacities, purifying my intention and if possible, for the kidney to function. I made no

demands since I was aware of my lack of control. At the same time, I felt no inhibitions about asking for trust and ease from others and myself.

This kind of comforting inner dialogue went on hundreds of times as I felt the fear and reached to open my heart without words. It generally requires a lot of practice to be this kind and gentle with our core suffering, but I had the advantage of years of preparation and a terrific support team. People can get discouraged when they think their fear will disappear if only their faith or love is strong enough. In my experience that is an illusion. Rather than expecting to go beyond the human experience, it is far more healing and transformational to accept our humanness as it is. Serena, the case study below, is an example of holding opposing states with no judgments.

SERENA

A woman in her mid-thirties, Serena had done an unusual amount of work on herself for many years. An avid meditator and a caring human being, she had explored a number of spiritual paths and I found her easy to work with. We were discussing an exchange she'd had with her mother, a good person with some aggressive tendencies.

"My mom just told me I was incredibly selfish, because I hardly ever call or visit her" said Serena.

"What do you think about that?" I asked her.

She said, "I feel guilty, ashamed, hurt, defensive and angry. Yesterday I wanted to scream at my mother but I stayed uptight and quiet. My wisdom guidance was asking me to inquire, 'Is she right?' I really *could* spend more time with her. After all, she *is* my mom and I haven't seen her in over a year."

Because Serena was familiar with holding the human and the divine together, I said, "It's inspiring that you have the awareness to inquire into your wisdom when you want to scream at her. I know how gut wrenching that can be. Is it tolerable to keep asking for your truth while you feel angry and resistant at the same time?"

"Yes," she said, her tone reflecting playfulness and some regret. "I really don't know if I'm in balance or not."

“This ‘**not knowing**’ is as good as it gets right now,” I said, “and it requires great impulse control. I bet the emotional part of you would like to scream or visit your mom out of guilt. Can you be okay not knowing for a while, and appreciate your sincerity?”

Serena smiled. “What choice do I have?” she said. “I need to find out if I can be with her from a purer place inside me.”

I explained that the state of not knowing is greatly undervalued in our culture and that it takes maturity to accept that we simply “don’t know” in important areas of our lives. Serena ended the session by saying; “I’ll try to stay soft with myself. I know I’m doing the best I can, even though I don’t know what to do.”

Her statement reflected another level of development - - **maintaining kindness while not knowing**. Serena was well on her way to guiding herself, as her kindness indicated she was holding her conflicted emotions while searching for a deeper contact with her soul.

She arrived at our next session with great clarity. “The reason I stayed away from my mother is that I’ve been fighting and resisting her demanding ways. I withdrew my love from her,” Serena said, “but I just made plans to stay in a hotel when I visit her and it will be a lot easier for me. I’m going to tell her I’m sorry I’ve been so distant, and ask her to let up on her aggression. I will tell her I’ve been resisting her, but I’m not making any big proclamations about the future. I’m clear for now.”

Serena had listened to her needs and she could also relate to the needs of her mother. By facing her emotional reactions honestly and asking for the truth, she was able to move forward.

TAILORING YOUR PRACTICE

If you were in Serena’s situation, you might have made the same choice, or you might have chosen to stay away from your mom, depending on the circumstances. The important lesson here is not the result, but rather about taking the time to find your guidance. There are no set rules or outcomes because each of us has an individual nature and will find unique ways to support ourselves.

There are many ways to tailor a practice to your personal needs. For example, if you feel empty, you could appreciate the emptiness or pray for vitality. When you feel empty, continue to inquire into fulfillment. This intentional back and forth between the human state, and a chosen practice, honors your humanness without obsessively focusing on it or suppressing it. You are focused on both the human and the most essential.

If you're afraid, ask your wisdom how to support courage, or if you're angry, reach inside your heart for a tone that will guide you to your greatest good. Staying with whatever is your practice and at the same time feeling your humanness is the main focus. But don't expect instantaneous results. If you can deepen your tolerance for being in this divide between a sincere inquiry for truth and whatever chaotic state is happening, you are supporting your expanded emotional and spiritual intelligence. You can see that when you compartmentalize by leaving out any part of life, or you indulge in feelings, your energy will become stagnant.

Holding opposite states is effective in helping us avoid exclusion or compartmentalization. The following case study clarifies the importance of bridging the human and the divine.

KELLY

Kelly, a successful psychiatrist who worked with autistic children, was distraught when her sixteen-year-old Irish Setter, Peaty, the love of her life, was diagnosed with cancer. In her session, she said, "I feel so guilty that I can't love Peaty the way he loves me while she's dying. He's been a source of love I could take everywhere with me and I'm considering getting another dog. I think the new dog I just saw at the pound can give me enough love and inspiration to help me see Peaty though his death. I just feel so inadequate and guilty."

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "Here you are in your innocence, wanting to find courage, faith and the ability to help Peaty. How could you feel inadequate or guilty?" When Kelly produced a half-smile, and said "I know the reason I want another dog is to have enough love flowing instead of being drained and in excessive grief, I asked her,

“Can you repeat what you just said over the next week. Can your wisdom help you do this? Try saying, ‘I feel guilty and inadequate even though I’m coming from innocence and love as my motive.’”

Kelly felt my encouragement and trust in her. She laughed as she heard the absurdity of her own judgments along with her pure intentions. When she returned a week later, she said, “I trust myself about half the time and I feel inadequate the rest of the time.”

“That’s perfect,” I encouraged. **“You can’t expect feelings that were rooted in your childhood to just go away.** Of course you’re upset that your dog is dying, and you’re exhausted and grieving. But wanting a new dog is actually coming from your love for Peaty. We’re all struggling to overcome society’s ideas about how to love. In your case, you think you should be more independently able to give. You have the sensibility and good fortune to have found a way to give Peaty all that he needs. The key is not to follow society, but to listen to your wisest guidance, which is the source of love and truth.”

The following week I noticed a dramatic shift in Kelly’s energy. She rescued the new dog from the pound and she had the passion and gratitude to care for Peaty until he passed away. She and I had both learned that when we keep our hearts open, we have a chance to find peace and harmony, even when we suffer. I had seen this before, but never in a love relationship between a woman and her dog in this way.

In the next case study, Rita was also dealing with the death of a loved one - - her father.

RITA

Rita was a woman in her late forties whose father had less than six months to live. “I feel sad,” she told me in a session, “that he didn’t nurture me more. I suppose he did the best he could and I know he did better than his own father did with him. But I feel torn about whether I should discuss our relationship with him before he dies. He was a therapist and he keeps asking me if I have something I need to say to him. But

he asks me in his usual intellectual way. I can't feel his heart and I don't know if he really wants to hear anything from me."

When Rita told me she was a religious woman and had dedicated a good portion of her life to prayer, I asked, "Have you prayed specifically about this issue?"

She looked confused when she said, "I prayed for dad to have a safe passing and as little suffering as possible, but I don't know how to pray for anything else."

I suggested she say something like, "How do I dignify my dad's circumstances and my own feelings of loss and anger? How do I take care of both of us?"

"I never ask God a question like that," she said. "I usually ask for faith, peace or good health." Clearly her relationship to God held great meaning for Rita.

"How about asking a question and telling Him how you feel?" I suggested.

Rita thought for a moment. She said she didn't quite get it, but she was willing to try. She prayed, "God, I'm feeling loss, sadness and anger. As you know, my dad is dying. How do I support my love for myself and for him?"

I asked Rita to listen to what she heard as God's responses, while she consulted with her feelings and instincts. She agreed to try during the coming week.

"I've been praying about my question," she told me during our next session, "but all I hear is a general message about being kind and gentle with my dad and myself."

"How does that feel?"

"It seems right, but I still don't know what to say," she told me.

"Is there a place inside where you might be able to access your own common sense?"

"Yes."

I continued, "Can you take God's lead and ask for more specific guidance? You could start with, 'I want to be kind to both my dad and me, even though I feel angry and sad. Is it best to say something or not?'"

Rita was skeptical but she was also game. A week later, she said, "I want to tell my dad I'm grateful for his love and I wish we'd been softer with each other. I think that's the best way I can approach it, even though I wish he'd been softer with me. But

I keep hearing God telling me that he's dying and the timing is very important. I need to wait until he seems receptive."

Rita had been listening to her own understanding of God while she also consulted her feelings and needs. Several weeks later, she told me, "My dad was receptive so I went for it. I told him I was sad we hadn't been more affectionate and gentle with each other. He was stunned at first, but when he heard my loving tone, he looked down and softly said. 'I understand. I couldn't give that to anyone and I wish I could've done it with you.'

"I thanked him," said Rita, a little teary-eyed, "and he gave my hand a gentle squeeze. I would have liked it to be softer and longer, but I'm really glad I spoke up." Rita had listened to both sides of her inner world and utilized all her potential. I asked if she felt like she could have done more. "I'm happy with how I did it," she said decidedly. "I have no regrets."

Rita had worked diligently to hold her opposites feelings as she dealt with her father dying and her anger at not being raised with tenderness. When we believe that one side of us, either the human or the divine, has more value than the other, we are in danger of compartmentalizing an essential part of life. Holding both parts together like Rita did, allows for a balance where we feel grounded while we access compassion for all concerned. In this state, we can open to our humanness and our profound essential heart at virtually the same time.

FINDING THE BREAKTHROUGH

When my son was very young, we used to read a Star Wars book before he went to bed. The father of the young character, Chewy, said, "I'm so proud of you, son, because in spite of your fear, you kept on trying."

He was describing holding the human and sacred, simultaneously. On one level there is fear, and on the other level, our wisdom guidance supports us to go for courage. We've all had moments when we were afraid of something and gathered our strength to do what was necessary. Then we were able to reach the breakthrough we were seeking. Whether we feared going to school or monsters under the bed, we

gathered our courage to deal with the fear. These experiences showed us that we could use our holding of opposite parts of ourselves to develop a beneficial practice that we can do many times throughout the day.

If you feel lonely, take a breath and allow yourself to feel the loneliness and fear. Then you can ask, “May I find the courage and faith to feel as much connection and courage as much as possible.” It is exquisite to be with things as they are on a human level, and at the same time, recognize that you need help.

Some of us will need to give up ego attachments to believing that we are so “together,” we don’t need help. Others will need to give up ego attachments to being so “un-together or feeling nobody could possibly help me.” Identifying with either extreme kills our motivation to develop the maturity needed to reach beyond our feelings. If we think we are above these issues, we become complacent or overly confident. If we think we can’t be supported, we get frozen in aloneness and hopelessness. Our egos may tell us that we are Special or we are Worthless and Hopeless. Both of these extremes are unbalanced, so holding the opposites stops us from clinging to a fixed position. When our overconfident ego is humbled while we bolster our feelings of inadequacy, we will become deeply passionate and curious.

Which is your tendency? Pause for a moment and consider this. Can you plant a seed to remember this is in the future?

If we choose a contemplation practice, we might decide to be with other people or to relax into the loneliness and feel what is there. We might ask, “Is there anything I can do to support myself while I feel lonely?” This kind of questioning releases the ego from staying frozen. Or we might call a counselor, a respected friend or join a dating service. Perhaps contemplation will show us that obsessing on a past lover is feeding our loneliness or worthlessness. In this case, we pray or find a strong intention to let go and focus on what is possible in the present. There is always a practice to support holding opposites that does not require changing the way we feel.

TENDER CURIOSITY

When I work with clients, I continually return to the question, “How are you now?” I want them to embrace how things are. I might use a first name when I ask this question, such as, “How is Ellen doing right now?” This is a way to support Ellen to feel exactly where she is, and at the same time, to help her recognize that *she* is the one primarily *noticing* her feelings, not only *the one feeling them*. In other words, I encourage Ellen to realize that she can respond to her feelings with contemplation, witnessing or perhaps with prayer, meditation, or creativity. Whichever practice Ellen chooses, I encourage her to be curious about how she is, without trying to pressure herself to change a thing.

For many years, I’ve used this strategy to support dropping into the experience of the moment. It is an internal statement (a “mantra” in spiritual traditions) when you encourage yourself to be present by repeating something like, “May I have the courage to accept myself as I am, with no performing or effort to change.”

It is a great joy when we can witness clearly what is going on. Our tone or attitude of kindness is a critical component here. When we breathe deeply and state our intention to recognize the necessity to be with ourselves as we are, we are not analyzing or looking for reasons or causes. We are simply experiencing our emotions, thoughts and body sensations, and opening to them.

When I ask myself, “How is Robert doing?” a few of my common responses are, “Robert is in a state of fear, loss, peace, tenderness, tension, exhaustion, agitation or disappointment.” I often see a combination or chain of emotions and it’s helpful to notice each individual link. It feels good to fulfill our capacity to be in our present experience without judgment, and without pressure to improve. Sometimes, when we ask how we’re doing, we feel pressure to improve or judge ourselves. Staying with that human tendency, we can say, “Robert is judging himself and pressuring himself to improve.” Since few of us choose to harm ourselves intentionally, the above statement allows us to let go of criticism more easily. We can see a great benefit in connecting to our internal reality without needing to run away from ourselves.

It is a paradox that when we accept ourselves as we are, we are calling on our greatest agent of change. This is because acceptance creates optimal conditions for effortless change. We may have been trained to believe that it leads to complacency or passivity, but the truth is that accepting ourselves without judgment naturally inspires us to engage fully with more assertion from our hearts and intelligence.

No matter how extensively we may have worked on ourselves, few of us can pull off staying connected to and softening into our inner experience. The issue is, how often and how gently can we return to ourselves with acceptance and no judgments on any given day? I don't believe we can ever be reminded too much. Like all other practices, we must be careful of expectations. Dedicating ourselves to a practice does not mean our pain will automatically disappear. That takes time, dedication, and a great deal of patience.

The following poem came to me at a time when I was overflowing with caring and gratitude, while at the same time, I was feeling a great deal of loss and fear.

Holding My Heart

Follow your guidance I say
What stops me this day?
Is it my false wisdom mind?
That makes my open heart hard to find
The subtle contractions to get my own way
Collisions inside and out every day
Gradually I learn the nature of flow
And to realize most suffering need not go
Deep trust and helplessness can coexist
In fact otherwise something is missed
A prayer to soften with what I do not like
Does support the heart to become light
A yearning to love grows no matter the state
Finally, the yearning has no reasons to wait

Faith and pain are true partners in life
Making it clear that they support less strife
To think we have arrived with only bliss
Seems to be surely amiss
Tenderly holding loss, failure or fear
Being graced to be closer to all that is near

COMMON PITFALLS

Assume you feel lonely and frightened and you've utilized every practice you know. You prayed for greater connection. You asked for faith to soothe your loneliness and fear. You contemplated other ways to take care of your loneliness and fear like meditating with relaxed awareness. You've listened to your wisdom guidance that encouraged you to be exactly where you are. You've gone on nature retreats that touched your soul and you listened to your favorite healing music. But the difficult feelings persist. What do you do?

Through life we will all find ourselves in situations where suffering does not instantaneously disappear. In fact, the longer we live, the more obvious it becomes that we will undergo elements of genuine vulnerability until we die. But rather than getting lost in discouragement, it is helpful to give up the unrealistic ideal of a permanent state of one-dimensional peace, joy or fulfillment? When we can become content with being human and innocent, the process becomes the grounded ideal, which is reachable when we stay sincere, open and dedicated to our chosen practice.

When we feel like a failure for not reducing our suffering, we need to explore more deeply. Many unconsciously believe that if we'd worked harder, were more sincere and had practiced enough, we'd have a complete sense of well being. Some people in the religious world unwittingly engage in black and white thinking, like, we *should* be in a state of pure faith, and we *would* be if we were committed enough.

But as we previously discussed, extreme identification with religious or spiritual beliefs will reinforce our shame, failure and internal criticism. I understand that

religions and spiritual teachings do not directly tell us *not* to be human. Many teachers, ministers and religious guides, however, promote a pristine self-image of equanimity, balance, humor and peace. In this context, human trials and tribulations can be trivialized and our view suffering as a lack of faith, holding onto ego, and not trusting God or His teachings.

Such beliefs that suppress humanness are common pitfalls and, I believe, misunderstandings in the “spiritual world.” We can’t remind ourselves too often about these pitfalls that occur when we try to force human suffering to disappear. Ignoring emotional experience is futile, because the feelings will continue to grow in the subconscious. Too many of us leave behind our human experience in order to be true to a belief or a path. Most popular teachings are sincere, but exclusive and absolute ideals of faith, mindfulness, compassion or desire for enlightenment can cause us to suppress our human experience.

The opposite danger is present in the world of psychology, which emphasizes that if we feel our feelings fully, we will get through them and find peace. But it is a misguided belief that we end suffering by diving into the center of it. What about highlighting freedom and resting in our evolving hearts? If you’ve been out of touch with your deepest feelings, going into the pain is an important step. But continuously accessing suffering also puts us in danger of getting fixated. I have seen that a repeated emphasis on feelings alone can cause them to stay as they are, or in some cases, to become amplified.

We need to avoid using feelings as the central part of our identity, especially when they become more important than living our lives more fully. It is easy to misidentify our feelings as coming from the heart when in truth, focusing excessively on them can cause us more suffering when we have a tendency to hold onto grief, fear or anger.

In my experience, there is a point at which the more we go into our feelings, the more we believe they are who we *are*, rather than what we *feel*. This is a critical distinction and of course **there are exceptions to the rule**, when serious traumas and tragedies occur. At these times, we need to place extra attention on letting our

feelings take their natural course. The following case study demonstrates a client holding opposites at a crucial time in her life.

CAROL

Carol, the family breadwinner, was in the middle of a bitter and aggressive divorce. She and her husband of fifteen years, Charles, had two kids who were Carol's first priority. Still, she had decided to leave Charles, largely because of his excessive sense of entitlement in just about every area of their marriage.

Carol had signed a post-nuptial agreement shortly after they married, in which she'd promised Charles approximately two thirds of her three million dollar net worth as a symbol of their love and union. But now that they were separating and each had attorneys, Charles also felt entitled to fifty percent of their remaining property, saying he deserved it, "after all he had put up with."

"I feel like I want to slap him back to reality," Carol told me. "I've already given him so much. I can't believe he's trying to milk more from me. I'm really angry."

"Of course you are," I said. "Who in their right mind wouldn't be?" After I let her fume for several minutes, I asked her, "How do you want to handle your anger?"

"I don't want to do anything that will hurt my kids," she said, "and I don't want to shoot myself in the foot."

"You're smart," I said to her with a smile.

"I want to cause the least amount of pain," she added, "but I can't afford to take care of Charles anymore."

"Could your longing not to cause pain be focused into an intention for harmlessness and fairness?" I asked.

"Absolutely," she said.

"Can you be as angry and frustrated as you are right now, and in the next moment, remind yourself that you want fairness with as little harm as possible? Can you allow both to co-exist, and appreciate them both?"

Carol had worked with holding opposites before, and she gave a half-hearted protest, asking with a smile, "Do I always have to be the mature one?"

“It appears that the answer is yes,” I said. “But it’s important to realize that when you act maturely, you gain a lot.” She knew I was supporting her desire to keep her children’s and her own suffering at a minimum. I told her that I empathized with her feelings of aloneness and that she got no companionship or support from Charles.

A few sessions later, Carol said, “I’ve succeeded pretty well in not acting out with the attorneys and I can appreciate why I’m pissed off. My anger is reminding me to be strong and not give everything away. My desire to be fair is reminding me to ask for harmlessness so I don’t make angry phone calls to Charles. It seems like I constantly face situations and issues where I have to hold my anger and my wish for harmlessness together. I feel more sane when I don’t get carried away on either side.”

Carol explained that even her own attorney was attempting to fan the flames by encouraging her to challenge the post-nuptial agreement. The attorney had said, “That ass deserves to be taken to court.” But she only wanted what was right from the sanest part of herself. “Emotionally,” she said, “I want all my money back because I’m so angry. But I remind myself all day long about how much I want to protect my kids. When I just want to get it over with and I lose my sense of fairness, my anger reminds me of my boundaries and what is truly fair. It’s a good balance.”

Carol was finding her way to a settlement that didn’t require her to sacrifice her dignity or her children’s wellbeing. Her story is a great example of ultimately caring for one’s life by staying in touch with our experience, just as it is, while we remain dedicated to a wisdom practice.

EXERCISE: COMMON FORMS OF SUFFERING

What is the most common form of suffering that recurs in your life? Is it anger, fear, despair, emptiness or grief?

Part One: Write one or two sentences describing the specific circumstances that led to your suffering, such as:

1. I’m angry that my husband is aloof.
2. I feel despair about my financial life.
3. I feel empty and void of meaning.

Part Two: Ask yourself, “Which practices do I want to cultivate while these opposite states are happening?” Be specific. If you choose prayer as your practice, what would the prayer be? For example:

1. I’m asking for as much compassion as possible when I feel angry. I know this will reinforce what I need instead of what I fear.
2. I’m asking for courage and the intelligence to do everything I can, as I feel insecure about my financial condition. I know that will reinforce my security.
3. I’m asking to be fully available to find inspiration when I feel empty and lost. That will reinforce my maximum capacity for purpose and meaning.