

Entertaining Aliveness As It Is: Curiosity as Healer

by Beata Chapman

HOW CAN EVERY DAY BE A GOOD DAY WHEN YOU HAVE PAIN?

Yun Men said, "I don't ask you about before the fifteenth day; try to say something about after the fifteenth day. Yun Men himself answered for everyone, "Every day is a good day." Sixth Case of the Blue Cliff Record

Commentary:

Inevitably it will go from dawn to sunset; just don't say that the next day is the sixteenth. Days and months seem to flow by.

He cuts off a thousand distinctions, and doesn't let either ordinary or holy pass. He himself answered for everyone, "Every day is a good day." The words "before the fifteenth day" already cut off a thousand distinctions; and the words, "after the fifteenth day" also cut off a thousand distinctions. Just don't say the next day is the sixteenth day. As soon as you make a principle, you fall into a pit.

Darlene Cohen, 20 Mar 2010 at S&D:

Your body is a refuge. It does not head-trip on 'if only I wasn't in pain' or 'if only I had that vicodin.' It does not care, it just gets to work on healing. If you get quiet and connect with the healing part of your body, it will comfort you. Connect with it as a companion, gently saying, 'I know you, we're together again.'

Darlene was fond of saying, "It's all about endorphins!" with great glee. She was a strong believer in knowing what gave her pleasure--capitalizing on every opportunity to entertain joy, thereby generating a continuous flow of endorphins. In this way, Darlene entertained every day as a good day, regardless of circumstances. In her own day-to-day life, she made few distinctions between illness and health, good and bad. She made few principles that divided her experience arbitrarily (like poison and medicine, before my arthritis and after my arthritis, before my cancer and after my cancer, the good days when I don't have as much pain as I thought I had the day before and the bad days when I have more than I thought I had the day before). Thus, she avoided the pit of ordinary and holy (principles) and instead included it all, trusting herself to discern what was poison and what was medicine in her particular case in any particular moment.

What most characterized Darlene for me was her insatiable and incessant curiosity. Even as she was transitioning, she said to me one day, "I'm just curious to see how my mind will meet dying." I watched through her death as her body and mind grappled with this huge transition, her final personal koan. Darlene was, above all, deeply connected on this earth. Leaving happened in layers. She graciously allowed every goodbye, receiving through her wide weave-self tremendous grief and sadness from all of us. She encouraged us to allow that flow, to experience it with curiosity. "What influence did this interaction have on my body?", she would ask. "Did it drain my energy or enhance it?" She became more and more skillful, cutting off what drained her energy and bringing in more of what helped her renew the energy in her hurting, and ultimately dying, body. She freely invited "comfortable bodies" to

be with her, even in sizable groups, expressed fears about how certain encounters that were planned would affect her energy, and pressed into her reserves to express her gratitude for any effort made on her behalf. She used her curious mind to develop skillful means that supported her and simultaneously offered generosity to others.

When we were in the ER at the end of November, 2010, Darlene was so weak her voice was barely audible. Still, she was curious about her experience--she was right in it. She, as she put it, "fed off the energy of all these young doctors and nurses" so that her own energy was refreshed. She was interested in each person, each going on. She mused that when she came in her vitals must have been bad because the nurses seemed alarmed. She wondered what her room upstairs would be like. Out of long periods of quiet with eyes closed would come a question like, "I wonder if my room will have a window?" Her mind was looking for a source of interest and endorphins wherever she was. She was as curious about the ceiling in the room as about the view outside that did turn out to be a beautiful view of San Francisco rooftops, which thrilled her immensely. This was the mind of interest and curiosity she brought to every single person, place, and thing she engaged, regardless, or maybe because of, the dire circumstances she found herself in.

Darlene did not bear life, she entertained aliveness. She encountered it, treated it, met it as a good host meets her guest. Her favorite emotion, poignancy, seemed to manifest through her complete presence with her own and others' pain and suffering, suffused with her complete presence with the inherent nuances of tenderness, flow, and intimacy that she called delight. The two, each held completely in its own place while holding both at the same time, was the poignancy of which she spoke and which so nourished her. She demonstrated how the tender mind of interest and curiosity within a body of stability points us readily toward the wholeness of our lives which is profoundly poignant, especially when pain and suffering are so predominant in our everyday experience. This poignancy, and our capacity to notice it, is food for the soul, always right here. We could say this mind of interest and curiosity, together with body stability, are an endemic source of endorphins.

Darlene said she felt she "owed something" to the people who came to New Year's Eve, 2010. We had met at RRZ to sit the evening together, with a planned Full Moon ceremony at 8:30 p.m. She was completely drained. She woke up when I arrived to put on her robe and finalize plans for the whole group of sitters to come upstairs for the ceremony so she could be part of it. She lay on her red sete, with Tony holding her hand, as the ceremony was chanted and offerings made. The bells and the Sangha's chanting were remarkably beautiful that time. It was poignant, to say the least. At the conclusion, as planned, everyone went silently back downstairs for more zazen.

I went back to check-in upstairs and Darlene was asleep. She awoke when I came in and asked me to sit down at her side. Instantly she was exuberant--thrilled with the ceremony, the Sangha--she was truly moved. She said she felt comfortable with "all the bodies in the zendo" and, she said, "I owe them something for all their effort!" With that, she announced that everyone could come up for a brief visit after zazen. She wanted it to be just so, and so I returned and invited everyone up with specific instructions for relative quiet and 1:1 bedside visits with Darlene. Of course, when everyone got upstairs there was instant laughter, jokes all around, loud talking, and chaos.

Darlene's eyes lit up and became more and more energized, as people sat with her while she lay in bed, visiting one at a time, the way she had wanted. When I expressed concern about the noise level, she laughed and said, "My body is comfortable with all these bodies. It feels good." She was interested in

everyone, curious about what was going on with each and all, and used that energy to keep going when her body was no longer able to generate energy on its own.

It is this mind of interest and curiosity as source of delight beyond pleasure that we will study this season. We will work with sensory experiments in the tradition of Charlotte Selver and her heir Lee Klinger Lesser (www.returntooursenses.com), along with practice questions from our tradition of S&D, to explore how to build our curiosity muscles. Key is coming into alignment with our inner experience of the world through our senses--refining consciousness through consistent practice in returning to our bodies to be interested in the aliveness teeming here. Right here, right now, in intimacy with our senses, with an attitude of tender attention, wonder, and curiosity, how are you alive? What contact is available and what wants to receive contact? What influence does contact have on you? What wants to change? Can you, without planning anything, follow the smallest change that wants to happen? Now, is there any part of you that can widen to receive what is being offered? And rest, is there some extra effort in you that could rest? These are the kinds of questions we will explore as we walk through our various senses and the ways we come into contact with the world, and it with us.

From S&D teachings, the thread weaving through all our work this season is how curiosity and wonder effect our experience pain and pleasure. As we are working with sensory experiments, this is our foundational question--what happens when we meet our aliveness with curiosity and wonder, whether we think it is "good" or "bad," "healthy" or "ill," "positive" or "negative" and so forth. Regardless of how you feel about it, what is it, really? Setting aside our criticism and judgment in favor of curiosity and tender attention, we will each explore how this attitude of curiosity and tender attention influences our internal states of mind and body, including our pain, sense of interconnectedness, and the joy that may be available to us. Is there something in you that can open to receive what is offered more fully? Does a particular experience build or drain your energy? In this clear mind of no preference, is it possible to choose to cut off what drains your energy and enhance what builds it up? Cultivating this mind of alive curiosity and it's companion, tender attention, is our direction this season. We will see what happens! We will know how it is that every day is a good day.

The refuge of sensing--as we meet together this season, let's notice how we receive each other's presence, how we offer our own curiosity to what wants to be offered and how it is to meet in this moment, this way. Let's really hear, feel, see, and taste each other this season so each of us, like what we are experiencing, is fully arrayed in our shimmering uniqueness for the sake of all of us.

The practice of pleasure--is always in the here-and-now. Cultivating one's capacity to receive endemic pleasure is one of the ways to practice immediacy. Sometimes, the greatest pleasure is that which acknowledges and includes the inherent brokenness of all created things. Therefore, this season, we will do sensory experiments (thanks to Lee Lesser) together and share our experiences with those as they relate to our pain and our everyday lives.