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Fear, Heartbreak, & Hope: What Wants to Emerge through You?

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15 November 2020

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Will you breathe with me? Take a deep breath in...and let it go. If you feel comfortable doing so, place one or both of your hands on heart center, offering yourself a physical gesture of compassion. And take another deep breath in...and out.

The state of the world has been a lot to handle for a long time now. And with COVID-19 rates rising, and our current president refusing to concede—even in the wake of definitive election results—there is considerable re-traumatization from all the gaslighting, chaos, and anxiety that we've been collectively living with for years.

As I've been reflecting on recent headlines, the framework that keeps coming to mind is the red and green color-coding for the state of our nervous systems from psychologist [Rick Hanson](#), best known for his book [Buddha's Brain \(Hardwiring Happiness, 50\)](#). I've shared this with you previously, and it merits revisiting in light of current events.

Whenever we feel threatened and unsafe, our brains tend to shift us into what Dr. Hanson calls **“red” Reactive Mode**, and our nervous systems respond with some variation of tightness and constriction, often called “fight, flight, or freeze.” In contrast, when we feel protected, centered, and connected, we shift into **“green” Responsive Mode**. When we're relaxed and open, we are more able to concentrate, be creative, and draw from our full set of inner resources, just as, when we're in our reactive mode,

we're more inclined to react, with fights, flights or freezes that often hurt ourselves and others

A number of you have shared with me that you've noticed difficulty concentrating, correlated to the election. That's "red" Reactive Mode. You may also still be experiencing a greater sense of fatigue or malaise than usual. The truth is that even if our current president's flirtations with a coup seem to have little chance of succeeding, the relentless threats to our democratic norms and the unrelenting denial of science around the pandemic are exhausting for us—body, mind, and spirit.

So for such a time as this, it can be helpful to take a step back and reflect on what is happening for us individually and collectively, and equip ourselves freshly with some practices that can help shift ourselves back toward "green" Responsive Mode.

To get a little nerdy about it, when we're in "red" Reactive Mode, our *amygdala* (comprising two almond-shaped clusters of densely packed neurons in the temporal lobes of our brains) take over. The amygdala, which controls our baser animal instincts, has been called the **"have-sex-with-it-or-kill-it" part of our brain** ([Evolving Dharma](#), 35-36). When we are triggered by our amygdala into a "red" Reactive Mode, our nearby "lizard brain"—our brain stem—takes over, and we no longer have access to all those more evolved parts of ourselves that the prefrontal cortex (which initiates our "green" Responsive mode) makes possible: compassion, clarity, concentration, equanimity, and so much more.

Now don't get me wrong, the amygdala can also be really helpful. This evolutionary inheritance can save our life in a high-threat situation. But it can also cause us to exist in a state of ratcheted-up anxiety all the time. So if you've been feeling a bit wrung out lately, it's with good reason.

One way to step away from your "red" Reactive Mode is to take a deep breath: *in...and out*. And if you feel comfortable doing so, try that additional gesture of soothing touch that I mentioned earlier of gently placing your hand or hands on heart center, and offering yourself some kindness and compassion. You've been going through a lot. We've all been going through a lot.

Here's a related quote from the meditation teacher Jack Kornfield: "Tune in to your heart. That is where love, wisdom, grace, and compassion reside. With loving

attention, feel into what matters most to you. **Yes, there are anxious thoughts, and there is grief and trauma, but don't let your heart be colonized by fear**" ([Freedom Amid Challenging Times](#)).

I love that: "Don't let your heart be colonized by fear." Fear will arise from time to time—especially in such a time as this—but we can practice noticing it, loosening around it, and inclining ourselves to let it go (and to shift our nervous system toward the green zone)—instead of grasping on to our fear tightly (which only entrenches us more deeply within the red zone). As the Sufi poet Hafiz has written, **"Fear is the cheapest room in the house / I would like to see you living / In better conditions."** I would like to see us all living in better conditions.

Let me say a little more about fear's powerful impact on us. When we're afraid, fear can feel like the only important thing in the world. So if fear is what's happening, a significant first step is *noticing* that fear. Simple mindfulness: noting: "There is fear." "There is anxiety." "There is tightening in my gut." Or you can even try, "Fear, I see you." **Noticing and naming can give us a little bit of space between being fully caught up and trapped in fear—and *witnessing* what is happening.**

From there, one practice that has been useful for me is inclining my heart and mind toward *spaciousness*: intentionally *zooming out* to put whatever I am experiencing—negative or positive—in a larger context.

If you are open to it, I will show you what I mean with a short guided meditation. If you feel comfortable, I invite you to settle in a little more, right where you are. If it's possible for you in this moment, I invite you to sit up a little straighter—so that you are *relaxed, but alert*. Perhaps put your feet on the floor. Rest your hands in your lap. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. Relax your shoulders. Take a deep breath in and out.

Even though your eyes are closed, in your mind's eye, imagine the room you are currently in. Notice the spaciousness of the room, allowing yourself to feel into the experience of sensing that the room that you are in, however large or small, is *bigger* than you. There is spaciousness.

And now in your mind's eye, zoom out a little more, allowing that sense of spaciousness to grow, imagining the vast, open sky above you, and noticing whatever

else is arising for you—body sensations, feelings, thoughts, moods. Experiment with letting them all float along like clouds in the sky. As the saying goes, *you don't have to believe everything you think*. You don't have to hold on to everything you feel. You can loosen the tightness around your thoughts and feelings, inclining yourself to let them go.

And now, zooming out even further still, picture outer space beyond the sky. So much room and space! Whatever stress is coming up for you, give yourself permission to let go of that responsibility. It's not that you never need to do anything ever. But just in this moment, experiment with what it is like to just sit. Nothing to do, nowhere to go. In this moment, you are safe, inclining yourself toward peacefulness and ease.

Take another deep breath in...and out, perhaps placing your hand on heart center once more. See if your heart is more open in this moment to receive an offer of kindness and self-compassion.

As you are ready, I invite you to return your attention to the room that you are in—and know that this practice of *zooming out* and *inclining your mind and heart toward spaciousness, kindness, and compassion* is always available to you. You can use this practice anytime, wherever you are.

Now, whether for better or worse, I'm not quite ready to leave us there, because here's the thing: even if the pending change in occupants of the White House will very likely result in significant harm reduction in the world, this changing of the guard will by no means solve all the world's problems. And for whatever confluence of reasons, there is one other meditative concept that has been particularly on my mind recently that I wanted to share with you—in addition to Rick Hanson's invitation to notice whether we are in red or green mode.

This additional concept is what the Buddha called the Eight World Winds. As long as we are alive, the Buddha taught, the winds will keep shifting around these eight areas: “pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, and fame and disrepute.” And there's a certain baseline level of sanity that comes from realizing that no matter what you—no matter what we do—there's just no way of living that guarantees you all “pleasure, gain, praise, and fame” with zero “pain, loss, blame, and disrepute.” That's just not how life works. So what might we do?

One significant response is to do the best we can for as long as we can with what we have been given. To say just a little more about what I mean, here's the particular part that I want to leave you with. It's an exercise from the work of the ecological philosopher and activist Joanna Macy that I didn't have space to include last week. There are potentially some useful and significant insights here as we near the beginning of a new year, and seek to discern a new way forward in 2021 and beyond.

Macy recently led a workshop for meditation teachers in training that was centered on three questions that are worth reflecting on, both individually and collectively. First Macy asks, "When I look at what we're doing to the natural world, what *breaks my heart* is...?" Second, Macy asks, "When I see what's happening to human society, what *breaks my heart* is ..." ([Interview](#))?

Notice that both times, she invites us to notice what breaks our heart. Not what makes us furious. Not what makes us outraged. Don't get me wrong— those are both important things to notice as well. Our anger can alert us when our boundaries have been violated, and our outrage can fuel our work for justice. But I don't want us to miss what Macy is getting at here: what *breaks our hearts*?

This question reminds me of a powerful insight from the educator and activist Parker Palmer that, "There are two ways for the heart to break: *apart* into many shards like a fragment grenade, or *open* into greater capacity so we can hold life's inevitable tensions creatively, not destructively" ([Healing the Heart of Democracy](#)). Too many of our fellow citizens have only been shown how to break apart like a grenade, sending shrapnel (either physical or emotional) into anyone at close enough range. We saw that yesterday in D.C. But our invitation is to model a different way—that our hearts can also break open in compassion, allowing the chance that as-yet-imagined possibilities might emerge.

Once we have gotten in touch with what breaks our hearts about the natural world and about society, Joanna Macy's third question is "**If I could access all the power that there is for me coming through the web of life, the one thing I would do for the sake of my world is**" ([Interview](#))? So, in the wake of an election that really will be fully over one day soon—and as we near the beginning of a new year—I invite

you to spend some time with that question in the days to come: *“If I could access all the power that there is for me coming through the web of life, the one thing I would do for the sake of my world is.”*

As part of responding to that question, I’ll leave you with this passage from Joanna Macy’s book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy*:

Active Hope is not wishful thinking. Active Hope is not waiting to be rescued by some savior. Active Hope is waking up to the beauty of life on whose behalf we can act. We belong to this world. The web of life is calling us forth at this time. We’ve come a long way and are here to play our part. With Active Hope we realize that there are adventures in store, strengths to discover, and comrades to link arms with. Active Hope is a readiness to discover the strengths in ourselves and in others; a readiness to discover the reasons for hope and the occasions for love. A readiness to discover the size and strength of our hearts, our quickness of mind, our steadiness of purpose, our own authority, our love for life, the liveliness of our curiosity, the unsuspected deep well of patience and diligence, the keenness of our senses, and our capacity to lead. None of these can be discovered in an armchair or without risk....

There’s a song that wants to sing itself through us. We just have to be available. Maybe the song that is to be sung through us is the most beautiful requiem for an irreplaceable planet or maybe it’s a song of joyous rebirth as we create a new culture that doesn’t destroy its world. But in any case, there’s absolutely no excuse for our making our passionate love for our world dependent on what we think of its degree of health, whether we think it’s going to go on forever... In this moment you’re alive, so you can just dial up the magic of that [that song that wants to sing itself through us] at any time.”

What gives you active hope? In the coming weeks and year, how do you feel led to practice active hope with others in this world? What song wants to sing itself through

you—or through us? As we hold that question in our heart, let's sing together "I Know I Can."