

Cultivating Gentleness

From Shobi Dobi

Everyone wants to be near a gentle stream, a gentle person, a gentle pet, a gentle sweet clown. If I think of hard times I've been through, it is gentleness I have always wanted. Not people pleasing, sappy sweetness, but honest heartfelt gentleness -- to be hugged, to have someone hold my hand, or to care about me even for a minute with caring gentleness. Gentleness is what the heart seeks.

What inspires this article is a chapter in Swami Chidvilasanada's book *Enthusiasm*. (1) -- the chapter on *The Marvelous Balance of Gentleness*, to paraphrase:

What is the effect of this gentleness on others? When you are able to act with gentleness, your heart opens and your gentleness can remove fear in others. Gentleness encourages you to relax and trust. It promotes a sense of the innate goodness of the world. Gentleness in its true form, from the open heart, can enrich the atmosphere around you and can give everyone you come into contact with greater hope and faith in humanity.

Such a big responsibility for a little old clown! But, isn't that what your clown really does in a hospital. It's not so much that you make sick people laugh, which you do, but it's also holding hands, listening and connecting with the spirit of the body. The gentle clown sees through the eyes to the soul.

It's the clown's vulnerability and abandonment to childlike wonder that draws on the sweetness of mankind. That's what I feel when I see a movie of Charlie Chaplin simply walking down the street or Emmett Kelly sweeping a spotlight under a rug. Clowns can be an instant reminder of that generosity of spirit we all share -- our own vulnerability. As a result there is a balancing that takes place. There is no cognitive effort on the part of the patient. The clown is visual, present and instantaneous.

To be vulnerable takes courage. It takes faith in yourself and in the goodness of the universe to walk through the streets of life open and exposed. However, when your heart is open, you may be vulnerable, but not weak. When love pours out of you in service, it protects you from your own negative destructive thoughts and that of others. I am not referring to physical protection. We all have to watch our backs.

Gentleness can be called a caring clown practice. Putting myself in a patient's shoes (or bed as the case may be) the scenario might go something like this.

You are in ICU. You're not in a lot of pain, but the drugs are making you quite dreamy. The world in and around your body is very slow, even still, there is a buzz in your head from the respirator. It is hard to keep your eyes open and you keep drifting off to sleep. There are little pangs of fear from questions of doubt and worry. "What will my children do? Who will pay the bills? Am I getting the right help? Will the pain come back?"

A clown walks into your room, she says, "Blink twice if you want me to stay?" You blink twice almost automatically. She is quiet and gentle. She has this cute little rabbit puppet. She is holding my hand. How warm she is. What a sweet little rabbit holding and patting my hand, I remember having a bunny like that. How sweet it is, now gentle it is to fall into sleep again.

Would the scenario have worked if a doctor came in? A nurse? A priest? A family member? The clown, not being a medical person or family member, doesn't want or need anything from you. You get gentleness without judgement. We expect nothing in return. Clowns give unconditional gentleness, unconditional hugs, unconditional smiles. Somehow you trust the gentle clown.

This open heart gentleness is more than just moving or speaking gently. It comes from staying in the moment, and staying out of the reactive mind. (The "what if" mind set: What if that happens to me? What if I'm not funny?) The reactive mind sets fear in motion. The quiet mind allows love and grace to pour in. It is the softness and sensitivity of our open hearts that allows our inner wisdom to unfold and our true gentleness to radiate from our beings. It is a rich sweet stillness, a gentle quietness. Everyone who has ever sat by a dying person with an open heart and empty mind knows this stillness.

We have spoken before of Open Heart Listening, but how do we get and keep an open heart?

Stephen Levine's (2) "soft belly" approach is such a good trigger to open the heart. Close your eyes right now and relax your belly! Allow the breath to gently caress the belly into relaxation. Sometimes it takes a while, but with practice like meditation, it becomes a familiar place to go. Softening the belly somehow spreads relaxation slowly through the body and as it does, it relaxes the heart. This is being gentle with yourself. Fear contracts the muscles of the heart and the mind. It is when we are relaxed that our hearts open, our minds still, and we feel the goodness of the universe. It becomes a state of meditation - a state of being. The more often you go there, the easier it is to find the way. "Soft belly" is a great trigger to that state of internal stillness and presence of the open heart. Gentleness is inside all of us, we just have to remember to practice it. Just before you go into a hospital room, stop and remind yourself of "soft belly."

We can't pretend to be gentle or pretend to have an open heart, it won't work. This gentleness is cultivated through practice. It's like a muscle - the more you use it the stronger it gets. What grace it is that we have the opportunity and profession that allows us to practice this open heart gentleness and lets the HEART expand.

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