

"Nothing More Than Feelings"

Reverend Alison Hyder

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Opening Words: by Ralph Waldo Emerson

We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken. The whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether. How many persons we meet in houses, whom we scarcely speak to, yet whom we honor and who honor us! How many we see in the street or sit with in church, whom though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with! Read the language of these wandering eye-beams. The heart knoweth.

Meditation: From "Sound of Silence," Raymond Baughan

Here in the space between us and the world
lies human meaning.

Into the vast uncertainty we call.

The echoes make our music,
sharp equations which can hold the stars,
and marvelous mythologies we trust.

This may be all we need
to lift our love against indifference and pain.

Here in the space between us and each other
lies all the future
of the fragment of the universe
which is our own.

Reading: by Gwynne Gardner, 1998 in "Heron Dance" magazine

When my higher self decided to grab hold of me, I went kicking and screaming to that desolate place. Once there, I felt lonely. Everywhere I looked I saw another example, a validation, of the despair in the world. Dysfunctional relationships, couples together in silent isolation from one another, parents smacking their crying kids, abused pets, wild birds flying alone. Although I'd heard it said many times, I was oblivious to the fact that the world was mirroring my own feelings.

Desolation is indeed a vast place. Wandering through it takes a long enough time to meet up with my own soul. Always waiting for me, patient, arms outstretched in loving acceptance. No judgment, no, "oh, you did it wrong" ... no, "I told you so" ... no, "I didn't want you to do that," a gentle and loving guide who always allows me to unfold in my own way. Taking my hand we review the story of my life to find the lessons and the understanding. And it is from here that I discover that I've made no mistakes (only a less positive choice in some respects), that I am always accepted, always loved, and that I am never alone. With a lighter heart, everywhere I look I see that perfection in others, living their own diverse experiences in the story of their own lives. The world has changed. I see living relationships, birds flying blissfully in pairs and in flocks, harmony and happy expressions. Funny, don't you think, how the world changed just because I thought it should? No, the world hasn't changed. I did! I changed my mind. I changed my view and perceptions and the world was my mirror once again.

Sermon: "Nothing More Than Feelings" - Rev. Alison Hyder

Recently I've been watching the PBS series on "The Secret Life of the Brain." Scientists and psychologists are discovering that the brain is much more specific, and yet flexible, than they had ever

imagined. Even into our 90s the brain continues to grow and adapt, creating new cells and new pathways to help us to function. Scientists can now use Magnetic Resonance Imaging to watch a person think and dream. We have therapies that help people recover from strokes, and medications that address extreme feelings of depression, anxiety, and aggression.

But one of the most wrenching episodes featured a man who could no longer feel any emotions whatsoever. At age 56 he had had a stroke. He could eat and dress himself, and he could do chores. But he no longer had a personality. He couldn't relate to his wife or make much sense of the world, because he had no internal basis of understanding. He couldn't work, because he couldn't interact with other people. He didn't feel fear, or love, or joy, or pain and he couldn't recognize it in others. Most of his memories had vanished because he couldn't summon the emotions that had defined them. He continues to live with his wife, who said that she's had to pretend that her husband has died, because he no longer has the personality or feelings of the man that she had married. He can't give affection or share in her frustrations or laughter. He is like a robot. If you know someone with autism or Alzheimer's, you understand how devastating this is. We humans are emotional creatures. We relate to each other, not with data, not with rituals, but with our feelings.

Most animals depend upon emotions to function. The ability to feel fear is crucial to survival, but animals also need to feel pleasure, desire, and attachment to fulfill their roles in attracting a mate and raising young and helping to pollinate plants. In our own pets, who are freed from these basic tasks, we can observe a more subtle interior life. They express their joy and loneliness, anxiety, grief and affection.

Just like our fellow animals, we too need feelings to survive - to know when to run, when to trust, and why to try something new. But we have gone beyond mere functioning. Instead, we have built a complex society based largely on emotional information. Our feelings are the foundation for community life, for families, for art, exploration, and for addictions, for violence and for courage. Every single thing that we have learned about the universe is ruled first by what we feel.

Everybody knows how our attitudes can affect our perspectives. The reading we heard earlier by Gwynne Gardner is just one example of how subjective the truth is, and how we choose what we will experience. How many times have we judged someone through the lens of our prejudices or expectations, or let our fears rule our actions? If we are feeling self-conscious and insecure, for instance, every person's glance will seem full of judgment or derision. We are so intent on avoiding notice that our vision narrows, making it harder to see and enjoy the magnificence of a storm cloud, or the absurd beauty of a turtle, or a hand stretched out in friendship. When we've been ruffled, simple tasks seem tricky and foreign.

The less we listen to our own emotions, the more we are ruled by others. We allow them to tell us what is good and whom we should hate. We believe the many messages that tell us how we should act, and what is interesting and rewarding and fun. We judge the world by outside standards of beauty and achievement and truth. And seldom do we measure up. We are never cute or clever or rich enough to compete with those glossy images. We learn to devalue our own judgment. But what is even worse, we lose the ability to feel.

That sounds melodramatic, I know, like the zombies in some early science fiction movie: "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," or "Plan 9 from Outer Space." But while we may not look like automatons, in fact we are being bombarded daily by strange beams through space that try to control our behavior and tell us what to buy, and how to vote, and what to believe. We spend less and less time trying to figure it out for ourselves. Personally, I believe that many of the increasing incidents of depression are not just from the impossible standards we've been given, but because we are alienated from our own needs and desires and beliefs. We've become spectators rather than participants. Maybe that's why reality TV is so popular. Instead of watching fictionalized emotions, we think we're experiencing the real thing. But we are still living vicariously. It is passive, safe, and ultimately flat.

Frankly, I think we're just plain bored, emotionally, and experientially. All we're getting are the primary colors in the emotional palette: envy, anger, pleasure, lust. Politicians have stirred us up with pride in our country, with outrage and fear. We can watch athletes learn the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. But at the same time, maybe we are losing the ability to identify and to understand the more subtle moods of, say, cordiality or consternation, of hauteur, vehemence, verve, and pathos. What's the difference between regret, chagrin, and embarrassment? Between guilt and shame? We don't always recognize these feelings in ourselves. So we don't know what we feel. And we are that much less understanding of others.

But Gardner reminds us that the world that we notice is really the world that is inside of us.

We project our own feelings onto others. So the more emotions we can identify in ourselves, the more likely we are correctly to observe and understand them in other people. I won't claim that this will bring about World Peace, but it can certainly contribute to inner serenity, and make for closer and happier relationships. What, after all, are the frequent complaints in troubled relationships? "My partner never talks to me." "He's too emotional." "She doesn't listen." "She's cold." "He's always angry." "My wife doesn't understand me!"

It's not really about who does the dishes and which one's always late, and how you split the earnings. The real issue is how these differences make you feel about yourself and the partnership. We all know this, of course, but that doesn't make it any easier to figure out what is really going on. In one instance, for example, a couple had been together for many years when they got locked into a battle over a refrigerator for their guest cottage. Martha wanted to equip it with regular full-sized appliances, and Joe thought they'd overwhelm the small room. Neither would budge, and their relationship frayed dangerously. They went to see a therapist, where Martha began to understand her anxiety about food. As a young child, her parents had ignored her needs. She was never fed regularly and had to scream for food. So a well-stocked refrigerator was a sign of control and safety and comfort. Once Martha made this connection, her rage at Joe disappeared, and she realized how reactive she was being. And Joe felt compassion and understanding, and left Martha to do what would make her most comfortable. ["The Healing Power of Intimacy," by Bill Thompson, *Natural Health* Nov-Dec 1995]

Feelings are facts. And they need to be treated as such.

Because feelings exist in time, we experience them every bit as much as the jab of a needle or the cold hard feel of a metal chair. Even more. When we're elated or annoyed, we may not be conscious of our surroundings at all, and can sit oblivious to the ache in our back or dampness seeping through our clothes. Think of all the chemical and physiological reactions in the body and the mind associated with emotions: we get a rush of adrenaline, and our bodies tingle. Our hearts race, our faces flush, and our brains start firing synapses. Our bodies remember these sensations. They are physical reactions. Often they create their own pathways in the brain, so that it becomes easier for you to feel that sensation again - whether good or bad. I assure you, that innate physical knowledge is far, far more immediate and true to you than any facts about the circumference of the earth or the cost of your new shoes or which one of you has a degree.

So it's all very well to tell other people how they should react, or what to think about death or logging or Beethoven's 9th symphony. Present all the information and figures you want. But you can't argue with feelings. They may be unfortunate or unhealthy or downright stupid, but they are nevertheless real.

Rachel Davis DuBois said, "It is time we accepted a truth of modern psychology, that people do not act according to what they know, but according to how they feel about what they know." DuBois, I've discovered, was a white Quaker who used her experiences of silent worship to address racism and prejudice. Starting in the 1930s, she designed and popularized dialogue groups in communities and schools that brought people together across diverse lines to talk about their experiences and feelings. DuBois realized that it would take more than knowledge to end racism, and more than legislation. People had to be able to see themselves in the emotions and experiences of other people, and feel, first hand, compassion, laughter, and hope. Within the safety of a structured forum, people could speak from the heart. DuBois' model has been used and adapted ever since. Just last fall, the Provincetown interfaith coalition sponsored an anti-racism study circle. And there are dialogue groups and forums around the world helping people build alliances across conflicts and differences.

In fact, Alcoholics Anonymous, as well as group and couples therapy are modeled on a similar concept. Give people in pain a safe space to speak their own truth, as they have lived and felt it. Affirm and validate their experience so they can move on. And other people will connect to them and deepen their own self-understanding. We change our behavior when we recognize and deal with the underlying feelings. For human beings, that's mostly how it works. Facts and figures may keep us from starting some bad habit, or lead us to pass legislation or design studies, but it's the emotions that really tip the scales in how we will act.

Research has found that we react much more strongly and often to negative qualities and emotions than positive ones. It's part of our survival instinct. We are simply wired, as a species, to avoid negative stimuli and situations. It was necessary to our existence in the wild, and we continue to be motivated largely to control fear and pain. For example, when making a decision humans give more weight to potential losses than gains - to what could go wrong over the possible advantages. Negative experiences color marital satisfaction

and have more impact than do positive ones. Good stuff happens, but we take it for granted. We are threatened by the difficult.

Studies show that we are more likely to find an unusual face in the crowd if it looks angry than if it's smiling. And in the social sphere, one negative personal characteristic influences people's feelings about someone more than a host of positive qualities. How often have we seen that, both in the media, and in our own lives!? We remember the irritating laugh, or the sloppiness, or the moment of anger over displays of sincerity, consideration, honesty and patience. This is true even when we don't know the person. Subjects who examine a description of a person are much more likely to remember the negative adjectives than the positive ones. Politicians use this to their advantage all the time, playing up on our reactions and fright of everything from foreign invasions to lines at the gas pumps. And that's why justice is so very hard to achieve. Change stirs up stronger feelings of fear and insecurity than harmony and compassion. [above research from NIMH Basic Behavioral Science Research for Mental Health, pub 96-3682, 1995, "Emotion and Motivation," www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/baschap1.cfm]

Maybe this trait of ours explains why we tend to dwell on our own personal mistakes and problems and imperfections more than all the good stuff, like our sense of humor, our beautiful hands or shiny hair, the way we dance or balance our checkbook or relate to children. No, all of our blessings are outweighed by our knobby knees and that bitter argument last summer. Because on some deep level, our faults feel like a threat to our own existence. We experience them in our bodies much as we might getting cut off from safety, alone in the wild. If we don't fit in, if we are unacceptable, we could be severed from our social network. And that's a risk to our very lives. We are communal creatures.

Pema Chodron, the Buddhist nun, said, "Life has taught me the wisdom of moving toward what scares me." She wrote [in *Start Where You Are*]:

The reason we're often not there for others - whether our child or our mother or someone who is insulting us or frightens us - is that we're not there for ourselves. There are whole parts of ourselves that are so unwanted that whenever they begin to come up we run away.

Because we escape, we keep missing being right here, being right on the dot. We keep missing the moment we're in. Yet if we can experience the moment we're in, we discover that it's unique, precious, and completely fresh. It never happens twice. One can appreciate and celebrate each moment - there's nothing more sacred. There's nothing more vast or absolute. In fact, there's nothing more!

Only to the degree that we've gotten to know our personal pain, only to the degree that we've related with pain at all, will we be fearless enough, brave enough, and enough of a warrior to be willing to feel the pain of others. To that degree we will be able to take on the pain of others because we will have discovered that their pain and our own pain are not different.

To experience compassion for others, we must also feel it toward ourselves. We must recognize the feelings and impulses within us. Even the ones we hate, the ones that make us uncomfortable or lonely or discouraged. We have to be with them, honor them, and be grateful for how they helped us to cope or what they taught us. They may have been the best we could do at the time. But we are no longer than person. We can change.

The world is our mirror. But to see its reflection, we have to look within, to the truth that lies inside of us. And that's a fact.

Closing Words: "Song II" by John Hall Wheelock

Lift your arms to the stars
And give an immortal shout!
Not all the wells of darkness
Can put your beauty out.

You are armed with love, with love,
Not all the powers of fate
Avail to do you harm -
Nor all the hands of hate.

What of good and evil,
Hell, and Heaven above -
Trample them with love!
Ride over them with love!