

Embracing Emotional Freedom as Spiritual Practice

Sermon by Blanca I. Rodríguez

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As many of you know, I've spent the last five years preparing for ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister; seminary school plus two years of chaplaincy training, during which time I read dozens and dozens of required books on UU theology, history and polity. After having read so much about Unitarian Universalism, one thing that struck me about our liberal and creedless faith is that we do, to borrow from our roots in Christianity, have a 'holy trinity' of sorts. That holy trinity is free use of reason, freedom of conscience, and democracy as a way of governance. As a cradle Catholic who rejected many of Catholicism's dogmas as against reason and its patriarchy as oppressive, it's easy to see how discovering Unitarian Universalism in my 30s felt like a homecoming.

While I truly cherish free use of reason and conscience, I must admit that much of my spiritual development has hinged on *trust* — trust in a particular freedom. How free am I to trust being fully open, without judgment or shame, to all my emotions: the, again borrowing from Christianity metaphorically, Easter Day-type such as awe, joy, gratitude and hope, *and* the Good Friday or dark night of the soul-type of terror, grief, despair, and shame? In my own spiritual life and work as a chaplain, I embrace the freedom and surrender involved in being fully open to the dark nights of spiritual and emotional distress, trusting their power to be spiritual guides, as Rumi's poem the Guest House affirms, and trusting that these are parts of my humanity that I cannot reject. As a matter of self-respect, there is no part of my emotional life that I should reject as 'not me.'

This, then, is what I want to talk about today: embracing emotional freedom as a path to spiritual wholeness.

Trusting the freedom and doing the work of feeling and expressing difficult emotions is hardly easy. It means embracing what we fear will break us, such acute suffering as deep grief, trauma, core disappointments, life-threatening illness, and crises of identity or faith. It means embracing the acute pain, knowing that we may never understand the pain with our use of reason, but trusting that we have a significant capacity to withstand, and even transcend, it, emerging from the acute pain with greater spiritual wisdom, resiliency, hope and meaning.

By spirituality, I mean the innate capacity and urge in humans to seek and express meaning and purpose in our lives and to maintain authentic connection to self, to others, to the cosmos, and to the sacred or meaningful. Such spiritual connections arise, of course, from moments of awe, joy and gratitude, but also, albeit through a much harder path, from moments of deep pain and despair. A core purpose of spirituality, then, is to cultivate a relationship with our life in which our joys and gratitude can co-exist in a knitted-together way with our difficult challenges and sorrows, so that we can feel whole, with no parts left out.

This works for me. For much of my adulthood, I've suffered from generalized anxiety and depression. Knowing that childhood and young adult traumas and other life challenges

contributed to my anxiety and depression gave me some measure of comfort. What I feared, however, more than anxiety attacks and depression, for which medication was very helpful for me, were the inexplicable feelings of deep pain and grief that were emotionally and spiritually crushing. There were never any thoughts, images or memories associated with this pain.

I tried to reason my way through them. Perhaps I had blocked some early trauma memory, and my body was now feeling the terror. I prayed that I'd be able to recapture the memory and face it. No memories ever came. Later, I suspected that this pain was linked to times, perhaps pre-verbal and pre-memory, when I couldn't express to anyone how terribly afraid I felt. But, still, I couldn't reason my way out of the pain. I finally took a leap of faith and *trusted* that what I needed was simply to feel and absorb the pain, befriend it as an insistent guest in my inner world, and surrender fully to its intensity. I trusted that I would remain grounded. I'd feel the pain, *but not be permanently fused with it*. And, I trusted that this painful work would be to some good end.

Trust...*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* defines it rather movingly as a "resting of the mind on the integrity, veracity, justice, friendship or other sound principle of another person or thing." This resonates for me, and I hope for you. When I trust surrendering to difficult emotions, I rest my mind and heart in their veracity, their realness. My relationship with them is one of integrity — accepting them as part of my true and whole self, without shame. I befriend them as spiritual guides with their own non-rational wisdom. Surrendering to them is ultimately liberating.

Zen Buddhism tells an apropos story. A young monk became disillusioned with Zen when he heard his master scream in pain and fear as thieves murdered him. The monk contemplated leaving Zen training, concluding that if his master screamed in the face of pain or death, Zen must be a fraud. Another teacher taught the monk something of what Zen is truly about: "Fool!" exclaimed the teacher, "the object of Zen is not to kill all feelings and become anesthetized to pain and fear. The object of Zen is to free us to scream loudly and fully when it is time to scream!"

To not feel our difficult emotions is to diminish our reality, our humanity, and our ability to be compassionate with others. When we exercise the freedom and the discipline to feel, with integrity, our difficult emotions, our hearts become more spacious, more spacious than our minds can ever be, and we can heal. There is another Zen Buddhism story that embodies this in a lovely way.

Zen Master Soyen Shaku, who lived from 1859 to 1919, walked daily through his town accompanied by a student. On one occasion he heard loud wailing coming from a house. He went inside to investigate and asked why everyone was crying. "We are mourning the death of our child," he was told. Immediately, Master Shaku took a seat among the family and began to weep with them. On the way back to the temple, the student asked whether Master Shaku knew this family. "No," answered Shaku. "Then why did you cry with them? Why, Master, aren't you above such things?" asked the student. The Master replied, "I cry to share their sorrow. I cry because this is what keeps me human."

Sometimes, this being in the deep, dark pit with our difficult emotions can be transformational, as was the case for the Greek hero Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*. As some of you might recall, the *Iliad* begins with the murderous rage of Achilles, a rage that caused countless deaths over ten years of war with the Trojans. To be brief, Achilles savagely kills the Trojan hero Hektor, son of King Priam, in revenge for Hektor's killing of Achilles' beloved friend Patroklos in battle. His vengeance still raw, Achilles then seeks to mutilate Hektor's body by tying it to a horse and dragging it on the ground. He adamantly refuses to return Hektor's body to the Trojans.

Aided by the Gods, who are distressed at Achilles' unrestrained vengeance, King Priam makes his way to Achilles' camp and tent to plead for return of Hektor's body so that Hektor may receive the proper funeral rites and be aided in his spirit's transition to Hades. In complete humility and brokenness from grief, Priam enters Achilles' tent, drops to the ground to grasp Achilles' knees, and kisses the hands that slaughtered every one of his 50 sons, including the noble and God-like Hektor.

The heart-broken Priam speaks movingly of his grief and reminds Achilles of the love between Achilles and his father, and how glad must that father be to know that Achilles is alive and to have the hope to see Achilles again. From Book 24, I read, "So [Priam] spoke and stirred in the other a passion of grieving for his own father... and the two remembered... and wept.... Achilles wept now for his own father, now again for Patroklos. The sound of their mourning moved in the house." In being touched by Priam's grief through the empathy in touching his own longing for his father's love and feeling his own grief at Patroklos' death, Achilles' rage subsides, and he, i.e., Homer, acknowledges that life is mingled with blessings and good fortune and sorrows and evil. It is the inability to knit these together that makes humans feel empty and lost. Achilles agrees to return Hektor's body to Priam, saying, "I know you Priam, in my heart."

Achilles is moved by empathy and compassion for Priam and compassion for his own suffering to agree to return Hektor's body to Priam. He breaks bread with Priam, the sacred act of communion. He then orders that Hektor's body be washed, anointed and dressed in a great cloak and tunic, and then gently lifts Hektor's body and lays it on a litter and into a smooth-polished wagon. As he does so, Achilles involuntarily lets out a groan of sorrow for his friend Patroklos. Achilles suspends the war for eleven days to allow for Hektor's funeral, and so ends the *Iliad*. It starts with rage and ends with empathy and compassion.

This transformational stuff doesn't just happen in myths or great works of literature. It happens in everyday life. Earlier this year in my work as a hospital chaplain, I was asked to provide spiritual support to the mother of a 22-year-old man who tragically killed himself after arguing with his girlfriend. The mother blamed the girlfriend for the suicide. While distraught with grief, the mom began to yell that she wanted to kill the girlfriend. She kept repeating that she was afraid of what she might do and afraid that she was going crazy.

As the chaplain, my role was to be a caring and non-judging witness. I needed to create a safe holding container for this mother's inconsolable pain *and* murderous rage, while tolerating my own sorrow for her and her son, my helplessness, and my worry for her emotional and spiritual wellbeing. To have integrity about my work, and be open to my own spiritual growth, I had to allow myself to be touched by her pain, but not fused with it. I had to trust in the process of this

mother making herself vulnerable enough to feel and express her dark emotions to a stranger, me, even as I reckoned that it would be a long, long time before she could ever re-connect with hope and meaning.

Later in this visit, however, this mother decided to donate her son's organs, so that, in her words, "some good could come out of this tragedy." Then, she bore witness to the grief of the girlfriend's parents, who loved her son dearly. They felt grief and also guilt about their daughter's link to the suicide. As a mother, she was able to empathize with these parents. She then expressed compassion for the girlfriend — yes, the girlfriend — saying, "You know, I feel sorry for this girl.... She doesn't know what it's like to love someone so much and dedicate your life to him and that that is what makes you a better and happier person. Through my son, I got that. She might never get that ever in her life...the kind of love I had for my son."

In trusting and connecting to the depth and breadth of her raw emotions and her freedom to express and reveal these to a stranger, this mother created the spiritual conditions by which she could move from inconsolable grief, to murderous rage, to empathy for others, to compassion for the girlfriend, to an act of compassion to strangers in need of human organs, and finally to meaning-making and planting the seeds for her future healing. I felt myself to be witnessing the miraculously mysterious way in which we humans can heal our brokenness. These are the moments when we chaplains say, "God was in the room," whether we believe in God or not, and when we feel awe and reverence at being able to see simultaneously the beauty and the brokenness in another human being.

What all this says to me about spirituality is that, as writer Scott Russell Sanders states, "The likeliest path to the ultimate ground leads through... local ground." That is, the ultimate, the sacred, is found when we fully orient ourselves to the local ground of each of our uniquely particular stories. When we do that kind of heart to heart listening, we are doing religion. Let us recall that the word religion comes from the Latin word *legare*, which means to connect or bind together, plus *re*, which means again. We do religion when we re-connect with others and ourselves.

What does this kind of spiritual discipline mean for the world at large? As you can appreciate from the stories you've heard, this kind of emotional and spiritual work in feeling and expressing all our emotions moves in two directions at once. To quote theologian Douglas Christie, "Moving in we go to unhealed parts of our soul and moving outward calls for willingness to live beyond oneself on behalf of others."

It is a truth in all religious traditions that we must take responsibility to heal our own wounds first as best we can before we can participate in the healing of the world. By so doing we can encounter our inner and outer resources. We gain spiritual insight and the inner and outer resiliency to participate in our mutual responsibility to care for others and the cosmos. By doing this work, we can know the hearts of others and be moved by compassion to do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason.

Amen.