

Working with Adversity: The Wisdom of Giving Up

Today we're going to talk about working with adversity, an important theme that runs throughout Unconditional Healing. And a sub-theme is the "Wisdom of Giving Up", which sounds like the exact opposite of what to do, right? One of the main principles of Unconditional Healing is how to work with adverse circumstances. It seems we have a lot of preconceptions about how to do that, and much of that is due to a one-dimensional preconception of both illness and health. By one-dimensional, I mean divvying up our world into black and white, good and bad. For example, cancer is "bad", diabetes is "bad", let's make sure to avoid those. Of course another biggie is illness - illness is bad. Let's avoid that.

In that vein, this is probably going on the 45th year of the war on cancer in the United States, first trumpeted during the Nixon administration. Now I'm not sure if we're winning or losing the war, but just the language used is a dead giveaway that it's about aggression, and a dualistic approach to the problem. There's something about going to war that seems to bypass any subtlety and nuance, just blindly find the enemy and stomp them out. Very dualistic, very one-dimensional. Now I know we've made great strides in cancer treatment, more of it centered on prevention and holistic methods, but I'm just using the framing of the battle to make a point.

When I was preparing this talk, the theme arose for me because of a challenging time I was going through myself. I was becoming completely overwhelmed, discouraged, and overwrought. I was trying a new medication and a new diet regimen, and getting worse with lots of pain, discomfort and brain fog. Now I'm used to that, since recovery from my particular illness is both an art and science, but for some reason, I hit bottom. Finally I said, out of immense frustration, "I just can't do this anymore, I give up", and I began to weep.

Now ironically, at that very moment, when I hit bottom and surrendered, something shifted in me. I had the experience of energy releasing and becoming available to me. Energy was being freed up, liberated, if you will, by the act of giving up. So I began to think about it, "What am I actually giving up?" I thought about it quite a bit until it dawned on me. I'm giving up resistance. Ok, but resistance against what exactly? Against myself? Against my hoped for results? Which I can't seem to control anyway. So I really thought that this would make an excellent topic to share, because many of us have come to this same place at one time or another; of being completely at a loss and feeling lost. Of not knowing how to proceed or banging our head against a wall, out of options.

On further reflection, I realized that my main obstacle was the story I was telling myself, feeding myself, about what was going on, and who I was in relation to the story. That by working only with the story, I was dealing with it at arm's length, not really feeling the intensity, the unfiltered energy of the situation. Now we all do this more or less, and invariably the story we tell ourselves has us as the main character, with many supporting actors and extras, like caregivers, doctors, friends, etc. But we're always the star, the big cheese in our own movie, and of course we're the main writer of the script. As such, we have our own pre-determined ending in mind. Usually happy, but not always. From this viewpoint, happy or sad doesn't matter, what matters is that we have a distinct ending in mind. So what I was giving up that moment was telling a story to myself. Instead, I was just relating to the feeling, the feeling of feeling bad, the feeling of feeling hopeless without any commentary, and consequently something did shift.

Now I certainly don't mean to make a solid storyline out of my own situation by implying that if you'll just do A, B or C, everything will be fine. That doesn't work simply because every situation is different, everyone is different. There's no tried and true formula. The reason being that we're giving up a script at this point entirely. We're saying "I don't know what's going to happen, and I'm OK with that". We're acknowledging that we can't control the outcome, we can only control what we do prior to the outcome. Whether it works or not is out of our control, as much as we hate to admit that.

Speaking of stories, I do have an old story, a fable, which graphically makes my point about the effect of stories, of interpretation on our state of mind. Here it is:

A farmer lived with his son on a few acres of land. They were not well off, but they did have one horse, a good horse, with which they were able to plow the fields. One day, while they were repairing its paddock, the horse escaped and ran away. When the neighbors heard about the loss of the horse, they came around to commiserate. The farmer would have none of it.

"What makes you think this is a disaster?" he asked, and he sent them away.

A week later, the horse returned with a wild horse accompanying it. The farmer now had two horses! When the neighbors heard the news, they came around to celebrate, but again, the farmer would have none of it. "What makes you think this is a blessing?" he asked.

A few weeks later, the son was thrown from the new horse while breaking it in and badly broke his hip. He healed up to a point, but although he was still able to help his father, his activities were limited. Again the neighbors came to commiserate, and again the farmer asked, "What makes you think this is a disaster?"

The next month, an army came through. Short on troops, the officers conscripted every able young man they could find and forced them at gunpoint to join their war. But the army had no use for anyone with a broken hip.

I love that story and refer to it often because it is so profound and there are many lessons contained within that parable. First is the obvious resistance of the farmer toward telling himself a story, one shared by all his friends. We can see that the storyline kept changing anyway, as life has a habit of doing for us, to us. The farmer avoided either extreme. Had he bought into any one story, it would have invited a roller coaster of emotions as the story alternated back and forth.

Second, we can't assess the meaning of events in our life in real-time. We can only do it from the perspective of looking back, and even then it's not clear. We literally do not know whether something is a blessing or a curse as it is happening, although that doesn't seem to stop us from trying to pin it down into one or the other category anyway.

Third, and for me, most compelling, is that what we call objective reality is really a state of mind. What we call Heaven is a state of mind and what we call Hell is also a state of mind. They're completely subjective states which we create for ourselves. When we recognize that this is the case, it frees up all this pent up energy that goes into creating the script, the story-line of our lives. And make no mistake, it takes a lot of maintenance to keep the story-line going. It's actually a form of resistance, a resistance to experiencing life on its own terms, without a filter.

This is especially relevant when we're ill because our energy is already limited, we hardly have any additional energy to devote to the manufacturing of stories that we tell ourselves to feel better or worse. So what I took out of all this, the guideline if you will, is that when we're undergoing adverse circumstances, it's vitally important to go beyond the storyline to the fundamental energy that is being expressed. Sounds good but how does that actually work in real life?

Well, much as we do during meditation practice, it means we commit to exploring every facet of our lives, both "good" and "bad" equally. We're not necessarily picking and choosing, "oh, this emotion, (let's say, elation), is good, I'll grasp on to that one. But that one, (let's say, disappointment), that's bad, I'm going to reject that one". Again, I'm not even talking about the actual illness or challenge we face here, we can be unequivocal about wanting to cure our cancer. No, I'm talking about our relationship to our illness, what we think and feel about it.

By picking and choosing what we're willing to feel, we're automatically setting ourselves up to experience our own heaven and hell realms. If we're feeling "discouraged", that emotion has every right to exist and to be felt fully, as the emotion of elation. Feeling discouragement is painful, so we avoid it, but in doing so, we give it power. If we're willing to let it be, if we're willing to let it arise without a story, then it typically stays awhile and then dissolves. But if we avoid it, if we're not willing to look at it, then that just gives it power over us, and it's likely to return again and again and again.

When I was going through this particularly intense period recently, the question that arose in my mind was, "Who exactly is feeling overwhelmed?" I realized that my version of "me" was completely a creation of my own choosing. Was I going to relate to myself entirely as someone who is ill, and take that as my main focus, my main self-identity? Or was I going to relate to myself as a full human being who happened to be ill. It was entirely up to me.

I realized that what I was also giving up was a sense of struggle, a sense of resistance to what was happening; the main building blocks of this struggle being tied to a story that I told myself. Now this doesn't mean I gave up in the conventional sense, not at all. I wasn't giving up the will to live; the will to continue, it wasn't that at all. That would be just continuing the story mode.

Instead, I was giving up the struggle to elicit a particular outcome, a particular result. It doesn't mean we don't have goals or that we stop working toward a resolution of what ails us. It just means that we accept that the result is out of our hands, we can only have an effect on those activities right up to the result and no further. The funny part is, this is the actual definition of ego, i.e. that which struggles. So by giving up struggle, we're surrendering our ego, our own sense of self-importance.

By doing so, we free up a self-existing energy, the type of energy that enables us to work more efficiently and see more clearly. This helps us on a very practical level when working with doctors and other medical professionals, as well as friends, family and caregivers. We're less subject to wishful thinking because our feet are firmly on the ground, and our emotions are less likely to be bouncing off the walls. Plus we're more centered in the present moment, which is the only place from which to heal.

The real benefit of giving up the struggle though, is that we can relax, possibly for the first time, even if we're in pain. We come to realize that a part of us is unconditionally healthy, in spite of the fact that our cancer is still active, or our diabetes chronic, or our life seems to be falling apart. We might even come to realize that what we call "health" is so much more than just the state of our physical being. It includes our mental, emotional and spiritual states of mind, and these elements are just as important, if not more so, than our physical being alone. While we certainly should strive to take care of our physical health, to view it as the sole criteria for health is the wrong end of the stick. Ironically, that attitude actually creates the environment for becoming sick. Conversely if we view health unconditionally, as something inherent to us as a human being, not only does this create an excellent environment from which to heal, but also a platform for leading a fulfilling and satisfying life.