

THEMES FROM MY LIFE: A THERAPIST'S THOUGHTS ON LEADING A COMPASSIONATE AND JOYFUL LIFE

Barney Greenspan, Ph.D.

When I was in the third grade, many buses in the city in which my family lived had signs, "Blacks To The Back Of The Bus" and public parks with separate designated drinking fountains labeled either for Whites, Blacks, Dogs or Jews. As a Caucasian Jew, I sat in the last row of the bus and drank from the Dog Fountain, an attempt to make a point. We are all interdependent, interconnected and equally deserving of happiness; the possibilities for what we can become are wide open; and that the real enemies are ignorance, greed, hatred and anger.

As a college student, a professor came to class wearing an elegant sport coat, of which he spoke of proudly. The next day he was without the coat, explaining someone stole it from the rack in his office. He shrugged and explained, "That person must have needed the coat more than me." I wondered, how does a person develop such a respectful attitude and unflappable mind-set toward life? Slowly, years later, I realized every loss can make way for other gifts yet unimagined; the barn burnt down and now I can see the moon.

To quote the 8th Century Indian sage, guru and philosopher Shantideva, "It is not what happens to us that truly matters, it is how we react to what happens to us that truly matters." A Zen Master, finding his hut has been robbed, goes running after the thief with a last pot in his hand, "Thief, stop! You forgot this!"

The following 51 concepts, grouped into five overlapping and inter-dependent categories, have evolved during my lifetime from personal and professional experiences. The reader may make a meaningful emotional connection with some of these observations. The aim is to minimize chaos and rigidity, and to eventually become happier and more peaceful while reducing suffering and its causes.

THE ENERGY OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment. My observations are listed below:

- * Catch life as it flows.
- * We are what we are looking for; healing is a transformation of view.
- * Mindfulness leads to concentration, which leads to insight, which leads to understanding, which leads to compassion.
- * Enlightenment is within the reach of all.
- * Boredom is lack of attention.
- * Mindfulness is the attention meeting the moment with balanced awareness.
- * A meaningful life is the pursuit of genuine happiness, truth and virtue.
- * Try to live like a river and be carried by the surprise of your own unfolding.

LOVING KINDNESS

When my mouth is fragrant with right speech, a flower blooms in the garden of my heart.

- * *As for ourselves, so for others.*
- * As we step out of the way, new things are born. No seed ever sees the flower.
- * May I use my abilities to the fullest to serve those who have served me.

- * Liberating others liberates oneself, healing others heals oneself and transforming others transforms oneself.
- * Loving each other does not mean looking at each other, but looking together in the same direction.
- * If you really want to be a rebel, practice kindness.
- * The way we do anything can reflect the way we do everything.
- * The fundamental ingredients of love are curiosity, openness and acceptance.

COMPASSION

Love is the capacity to give joy. Compassion is the power to relieve suffering. The essence of love and compassion is understanding the ability to recognize the suffering of others.

- * Accept yourself as you really are before you can truly change.
- * To receive love and compassion, one must be willing to be open to one's vulnerability.
- * Before we die, we should all experience our wisdom and compassion.
- * The truth is easier to know than to feel, and easier to feel than to live. Knowing the truth is fairly useless; feeling it is profound; living it makes all the difference.
- * You can have anger motivated by compassion, but you cannot have compassion motivated by anger.
- * Compassion is the delicate balancing of an open heart and a quiet mind. The compassionate heart of the enlightened mind has no bounds.

INSIGHT AND WISDOM

Things exist only in dependence upon one another. The power of insight and wisdom comes from generosity, ethical discipline, patience, joyous perseverance, perceiving reality as it is, and the readiness of the mind and the ability to discern and judge well.

- * Listening is the essence of the art of communication.
- * The past is over. Forgiveness means giving-up all hope of a better past.
- * It is better to know nothing than to know what is not so.
- * We have only moments to live.
- * Every moment is a new beginning.
- * Enjoy being here while getting there.
- * Looking at something old in order to learn something new.
- * Reflection is necessary for insight.
- * Much of life cannot be explained, it can only be witnessed.
- * All endings are also beginnings.
- * Grasp the extraordinariness of the ordinary.
- * There is one thing in life that you can always rely on, life being as it is.
- * Things are neither perfect or imperfect, they are what they are.
- * Make the most of time, it waits for no one.
- * Suffering is caused by our wanting things to be different than they are.
- * Do not believe everything you think.

PEACE, BALANCE AND EQUANIMITY

With mindful awareness, we have a chance not only to know ourselves better, and contemplate what is in our mind, but also to manage our thoughts differently, so they no longer rule our lives.

- * Make the glowing hot embers of suffering into a light on your path.
- * The real miracle is to be awake in the present moment.
- * Anxiety comes primarily from our inability to dwell in the present moment.
- * Anxiety is the mood of ignorance, our distorted conceptions of the world.
- * It is not always so.
- * Sometimes things must unfold in their own time.
- * If we could totally pay attention, we would never be upset.
- * To die without regret.
- * Enlightenment, peace and joy will not be granted by someone else.
- * Sometimes, just to be alive is enough.
- * You may not be who you think you are.
- * It is better to do nothing than to waste your time.
- * Happiness is available, please help yourself. It is your life, do not miss it.

In closing, consider this quote from the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882): "Sit in reverie, and watch the changing color of the waves that break upon the ideal seashore of the mind." May we all transform ourselves to better change the earth and its inhabitants. Moreover, share your thoughts on leading a compassionate and joyful life.