

Some Things Just Hurt

This is an unusual, and unusually difficult, holiday season. It can be difficult to hear messages of gratitude, love, or joy when we're not able to experience these things like we normally do because of the pandemic.

Now, there are those who assert that if we only had a positive attitude, if we only focused our minds only on positive thoughts, everything would feel fine and there would be no pain at all.



I challenge this. It's inevitable that by simply living a life, there will be times of adversity – like now. It's not because of our attitude that times like these are uncomfortable or heartbreaking. Some things just hurt.

Perhaps surprisingly, I find this truth to be liberating. When I first encountered the Buddha's revolutionary statement that there is suffering in the world—in an Asian philosophy class in college—I felt instantly comforted. In fact, the comfort was unlike anything I'd experienced before.

No one was trying to make sense of my pain or rationalize it, and no one was reassuring me that things would get better soon or reminding me to only look at the bright side—all things we are conditioned to say and believe in the face of suffering. For the first time, I felt permission and freedom to feel whatever I was going to feel. I wasn't doing it wrong, and neither are you.

Of course, we don't want to let our suffering, and the suffering intrinsic to being a human being, define and overtake us either. Therein lies our work. So how do we do it?

For a start, it helps to recognize that for many of us, a dominant cultural attitude toward pain is that it's something to be avoided, denied, "treated." As a result, it can be particularly tough for people—including me—to acknowledge painful emotions. Simply recognizing and accepting suffering is a huge first step.

At the same time, it's a very simple one. The fact that some things just hurt doesn't include a prescription of how precisely we should feel in those times when we suffer. The most radical

part of this piece of wisdom is its simplicity; it is merely recognition of what is.

Second, we can remember that this truth, that some things just hurt, is universal. That means that no matter what, we are not alone.

When I'm in some kind of pain, I've found that one of the worst components of what I experience is feeling that I'm all alone, my nose pressed up against the window, looking into the space where everyone else has gathered, to enjoy a moment or comfort one another. I'm somehow excluded, unaccounted for, and no one even notices I'm outside. It's the worst and most habitual "add-on" to suffering that I experience. And I've been experiencing it since my childhood.

But this is not actually true. Everyone hurts. And most everyone is hurting now. I encourage you to try reaching out to someone, or allowing someone to reach out to you. Take one small step to allow whatever helping hands are coming toward you to reach you, or to extend a helping hand to someone else in some way.

Or, create—with words or images or whatever way you pay attention. Listen. Take one small step toward the unknown, toward acting without depending on an immediate result.

Finally, as Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "So you must not be frightened . . . if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; if a restiveness, like light and cloud-shadows, passes over your hands and over all you do. You must think that something is happening with you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall."

I've come to see that even in the worst circumstances, life has not forgotten me. It has not forgotten us. No matter how despairing or cut off we can feel at any given time, we are not actually severed from the essential flow of life or from one another. If we get quiet for a while and pay careful attention, this is what we can realize.

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Ten Percent Weekly
November 29, 2020