

Volume 54
Number 1, 2022

The Journal of Trans Personal Psychology

Editor's Note		v
The New Image of Humanity	<i>Abraham H. Maslow</i> <i>James Fadiman</i>	1
BEING: In Life, Death, and Love	<i>Frank Ostaseski</i> <i>Tara Brach</i>	
	<i>Irene Sheiner Lazarus</i> <i>(Transcriber)</i>	10
Shamanic Consciousness Embodied in Shamanic Figures Created During the Paleolithic Period in Caves in Southern Europe: Part 5	<i>Gary J. Maier</i> <i>Edmond A. Musholt</i> <i>Lawrence J. Stava</i>	31
Analysis of Spiritual Awakening in a Kundalini Tradition: Psychological Change and Spiritual Growth	<i>Lawrence Edwards</i> <i>Marjorie H. Woollacott</i>	56
Book Reviews		
<i>Introduction to Transpersonal Psychology: Bridging Spirit and Science, Paul F. Cunningham</i>	<i>Roger Walsh</i>	82
<i>Extraordinary Awakenings: When Trauma Leads to Transformation, Steve Taylor</i>	<i>Irene R. Siegel</i>	85
<i>Borderlands of the Spirit: Reflections on a Sacred Science of Mind, John Herlihy</i>	<i>Samuel Bendeck Sotillos</i>	88
<i>The Accidental Immigrant; A Quest for Spirit in a Skeptical Age, Kyriacos C. Markides</i>	<i>Lindy McMullin</i>	92
<i>Psyche Unbound: Essays in Honor of Stanislav Grof, Richard Tarnas and Sean Kelley</i>	<i>Matthew D. Segall</i>	95
Books Our Editors Are Reading (and other media)		97

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The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology is published semi-annually beginning with Volume 1, Number 1, 1969

Current year subscriptions—Volume 54, 2022

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Mental Health Abstract

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Trans *Personal*
Psychology

Editor's Note	v	TABLE OF CONTENTS
The New Image of Humanity <i>ABRAHAM H. MASLOW, JAMES FADIMAN</i>	1	
BEING: In Life, Death, and Love <i>FRANK OSTASESKI, TARA BRACH, IRENE SHEINER LAZARUS (TRANSCRIBER)</i>	10	
Shamanic Consciousness Embodied in Shamanic Figures Created During the Paleolithic Period in Caves in Southern Europe: Part 5 <i>GARY J. MAIER, EDMOND A. MUSHOLT, LAWRENCE J. STAVA</i>	31	
Analysis of Spiritual Awakening in a Kundalini Tradition: Psychological Change and Spiritual Growth <i>LAWRENCE EDWARDS, MARJORIE H. WOOLLACOTT</i>	56	
Book Reviews		
<i>Introduction to Transpersonal Psychology: Bridging Spirit and Science, Paul F. Cunningham</i>	<i>ROGER WALSH</i>	82
<i>Extraordinary Awakenings: When Trauma Leads to Transformation, Steve Taylor</i>	<i>IRENE R. SIEGEL</i>	85
<i>Borderlands of the Spirit: Reflections on a Sacred Science of Mind, John Herlihy</i>	<i>SAMUEL BENDECK SOTILLOS</i>	88
<i>The Accidental Immigrant: A Quest for Spirit in a Skeptical Age. Kyriacos C. Markides</i>	<i>LINDY McMULLIN</i>	92
<i>Psyche Unbound: Essays in Honor of Stanislav Grof, Richard Tarnas and Sean Kelley</i>	<i>MATTHEW D. SEGALL</i>	95
Books Our Editors Are Reading (& Other Media)		97

Editor's Note

The year 2022 is upon us and the COVID 19 Pandemic, while abated somewhat, has certainly not disappeared with new vibrant variants continuing to emerge along with a different kind of viral concern named monkeypox. A war is raging on Ukrainian soil and social unrest as well as climate concerns pervade our planet, along with an array of losses in various forms and from multiple sources. Concentrating only or primarily on such news, however, can be anxiety producing as well as depressive for the individual and for society-at-large. Recognizing such a dilemma, news sites broadcasting "good news" have been forming since the 1990s when the GoodNewsNetwork was launched, others proliferating more recently. Of course, a realistic key is to effect a balance in fully recognizing and acknowledging the challenges and crises, but reaching for a healing space.

Accordingly, in such a spirit we begin this issue with two articles that, while maintaining awareness of the challenges, offer hope and healing to humanity. The first article was originally drafted (but never published) by pioneers of the transpersonal movement: **Abraham Maslow** and **James Fadiman**. Lightly updated by Fadiman, an Editorial Board Member since inception of the Journal in 1969, the article speaks in an uplifting tone to humanity's potential as well as the authors' observations of healing forces both within the individual as well as within society. It is as timely now as it was when first drafted.

The next article is actually a transcription, rendered by our Associate Editor/Clinical **Irene Sheiner Lazarus**, of a recent virtual event offered by clinicians **Frank Ostaseski** and **Tara Brach**, who are healers of humanity on the global stage as well.

In the words of our Associate Editor Lazarus:

Both the Maslow/Fadiman article and this transcription of a recent panel at Upaya Zen Center featuring Frank Ostaseski and Tara Brach offer big doses of hope at a time that many of us and our friends and families and clients so need it. The Maslow/Fadiman article, written in 1969, offers hope in the many new modalities that have been arising on the planet: the increased study of meditation, the number of people working on their own processes of transformation, the arising of hospice, etc.

Just reading from the authors' bios at the end of the Ostaseski/Brach transcription shows us how these hope inspiring trends have continued and multiplied in the fifty years since. Frank Ostaseski, co-founder of the Zen Hospice Project, has accompanied over 1000 people through the dying process and trained thousands of healthcare clinicians and family caregivers around the world. Tara Brach's popular weekly podcast on emotional healing, spiritual awakening and compassion-based activism is downloaded more than three

million times each month. Her *R.A.I.N.* process that she describes in the transcription has helped many in Ukraine.

The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 2022, Vol. 54, No. 1

BEING: In Life, Death, and Love
Upaya Institute and Zen Center
Santa Fe, New Mexico
April 3, 2022

Frank Ostaseski
San Francisco, California

Tara Brach, Ph.D.
Great Falls, Virginia

ABSTRACT: This virtual event was sponsored by Upaya Institute and Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Upaya website (www.upaya.org) describes “a vision of Buddhism that is integrated, interconnected and process oriented and is based in the integration of our spirituality, education, livelihood, service and community into whole cloth.” Tara Brach describes the *RAIN* (an acronym for Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture) process she has practiced and taught for many years, including several very touching examples. Tara notes that this process has helped many in Ukraine as the war rages. Frank Ostaseski talks about awakening in the midst, the process of dying and grief. Both respond to many heart felt questions from the audience, which is made up of people from all around the world.

Keywords: life, love, death, dying, grief, compassion, awakening in the midst

A note from Irene Sheiner Lazarus, Ph.D. (Transcriber): I was awake at 4 a.m. on Monday, April 4, rather anxious about a mammogram and sonogram I was scheduled to retake on the first floor of the Cancer Hospital at the University of North Carolina. I was scared. It was my first health scare since my dear husband had left this world on October 24, not quite six months ago and there was no one in my home to come home to. I saw Frank and Tara’s talk on my iPhone and listened to it with tears my eyes. It brought me much solace. Before I left for the hospital (a dear friend drove me), I emailed Upaya to see if I might transcribe this talk for inclusion in JTP. Roshi Joan responded immediately that Upaya had no objections and bcc’d Frank and Tara to ask their permission. When I came home from the hospital, many hours later, there were emails from both Tara and Frank giving me permission. (I was asked to come back for a biopsy, which turned out to be fine.) The transcription was a grace and a joy. In the many re-readings as we edited the piece, a new sentence would speak deeply to me and provide insight or understanding, or solace.

We did edit a bit as we moved from spoken word to written word. We deleted many contractions unless the sentence seemed to flow better with the contraction;

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likewise for sentences beginning with “And” and “But.” To the extent possible, the reader is encouraged to listen, hear, and experience the session in addition to just reading.

Frank: We want to begin with a little bit of sitting practice, just to settle us into this breath and body, if we could. . . So just find a position in which you can be somewhat comfortable yet alert. . . Feeling the breath deep in the body. . . and I would like to suggest that you fling open all the doors and windows of the senses, the doors of perception. . . of seeing and hearing, of tasting and smelling, of touching. . . and maybe here at the beginning just to bring your attention to the experience of hearing. You can hear the sound of my voice, perhaps the other sounds in the room where you are, or outside the building where you are. . . It takes little effort. . . Just drawing your attention to the experience of hearing. . . and you may notice as you listen that you become aware of the silence as well. . . How big is this silence? . . . Does it have any boundaries? . . . And you might notice that the sounds come and go in the silence, but the silence itself is undisturbed. . . . In a similar way, the other senses can be experienced in the silence, in the spaciousness of silence. . . All arising, changing, passing away. . . but the background of the silence undisturbed. . . So let’s rest here for a moment. . . and relax.

Relaxation is not the goal of meditation but. . . it’s very supportive of mindfulness to have a relaxed body, heart and mind. . . So let’s relax. . . open. . . and allow.

Gong, 3 times.

Frank: Well, I’m very happy to be here with my friend, Tara. It’s good to share this morning with you, this day with you. Maybe, Tara, you could begin and see where it takes us?

Tara: My pleasure. Likewise. It’s a joy to get to co-teach with Frank who is very dear to my heart. I was just looking at the picture of us, last time we taught in Washington, D.C. Really wonderful. And really so grateful for each of you who is here. I am imagining you here. . . every one of you as I don’t get to see you today. Thank you for coming from around the globe. [Meeting was held virtually.]

It feels so important to have a gathering like this to explore silence, to gather together in that wakeful space to hold, with heart. . . all that’s going on in this world at this time. I am so aware of the intensity. I looked at the front pages of the papers today. The violence, all the refugees, the waves of the pandemic, and of course the earth’s suffering. . .

One friend described the last few years, as if she were in a plane, just navigating one storm after another, and it hasn’t been safe and stable enough to land. . . arrive in her life. It can feel that way when we are in reactivity. We are not able to arrive in real life. We can’t contact. We can’t feel intimacy. We are just in motion, reacting. Even when we’re not feeling strong emotion, you might notice there is still that habitual tendency to tense against what’s next. I am sure you have recognized it.

I am thinking of one woman, a mother who sent her son a text message. It said, “Start worrying, details to follow.” That is kind of the way it is. We are armoring for what is next.

As most of you realize, it is an illusion that life ever settles. We know that. There are always stressors. Life is not going the way we think it should go. The seasons keep changing with their creativity and their beauty and their challenges and their losses, and oh my, the losses! They have just been really big in these last few years. So many have been going through it.

To me, the deep inquiry is: How in the midst of all this do we find that refuge, that space of silence and presence, that space of loving awareness that is our true home? How do we find that space of timeless loving so that the losses and the changes and the fears and the anger, whatever is coming up, can be held with a real tenderness, with compassion and wisdom?

I want to highlight one of the major challenging currents many are facing that needs space and holding. You have probably noticed that the more stressed, the more reactive we get, the more anxious or angry we get, and with that, we are conditioned to turn against ourselves. So not only are we angry and anxious, but we don’t like ourselves. We don’t like how we are feeling, how we are acting. This is a really deep conditioning. I have seen during these pandemic years, along with all the uncertainties and the loneliness and the fear, there are these really deep feelings of personal failure.

If I could see you right now I would ask for a hand raise just to sense. . . How many of you are noticing, “I’m falling short on parenting.” Or “I’m falling short on relationships.” Or “I’m falling short at work. I’m not contributing.” I call it *the trance of unworthiness* because it is a trance. It affects our entire reality, this self-aversion and doubt. I first wrote about it in my book *Radical Acceptance*.

After it came out, I remember teaching at a Buddhist University in Boulder, Colorado — Naropa. I was giving a workshop on Radical Acceptance. There was a huge poster of me at the workshop. The caption at the bottom, under my picture was, “Something is wrong with me.” That is the deep belief: *Something is wrong with me*.

So, my friends, we are talking about the ways we leave home, the ways we leave that boundless, formless presence, that deep heart and awareness, and we lock into a very small sense of a self that is separate and angry and fearful and not ok.

I often think the true sickness is really homesickness.

When we are hijacked, when we are in that reactivity, when we are in that trance, what we most need is access to presence. As you know, that is when it is the most difficult. That is when we forget how to come back.

So what I would like to do is to explore a pathway back, a pathway of mindfulness and compassion that is summarized in the acronym *RAIN*. Even if you are not

English speaking, what each of the letters stands for is an easy to remember pathway.

In English, The *R* in *RAIN* stands for *Recognize*: We see what is going on. The *A* is for *Allow*. We *Allow* it to be there. I say to myself, “This belongs just like any other wave in the ocean.” *Recognize* and *allow*. Then we *Investigate*. We deepen our attention. We sense somatically how it is expressing in our body. Really feel it. It is the intimate contact that comes when we investigate. How is it feeling in the body? What are we believing about ourselves? *Nurture* is the self-compassion that comes when we have investigated and intimately contacted the suffering. By nurturing, we offer a natural and tender space that can hold whatever is arising.

When we move through those steps, *Recognize*, *Allow*, *Investigate* and *Nurture*, it opens us back to that formless presence that is our home.

The very beginning of *RAIN* is actually a *Pause*. When you are in reactivity, just *Pause*. Some of you remember Viktor Frankl’s famous line: “Between the stimulus and the response there is a space and in that space is your power and your freedom.” So we *Pause*. We create a little space there.

Then *Recognize* and *Allow*. What is happening right here and can I allow it? This is the foundation of mindful awareness.

I’ll share one experience that has stayed with me that shows the power of these first two steps of *RAIN*, of mindful awareness. This happened at a retreat many years ago. A man was attending who was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. He was a psychologist and a meditator for 15 years. I met with him. His spirit was very spacious and upbeat and I asked him what it was like for him to navigate Alzheimer’s.

He described early on, during the onset of symptoms, he was leading a workshop. He had 100 people or so there and before he started, he went completely blank. He had absolutely no idea why he was there or why others were there. So, here is what he did.

He *paused*. He put his palms together. He started naming what he was aware of.

He said “Confused.”

Then he bowed.

“Afraid.”

He bowed.

“Heart racing.”

He bowed.

“Embarrassed.”

He bowed.

“Breathing.”

He bowed.

This went on a bit and finally he was able to say:

“Relaxing.”

When he spoke next, he said, “I am so sorry.”

But when he looked around he saw that many people had tears in their eyes, and one person said, “No one has ever taught us the dharma, the teachings, like this.”

What had he done? First, he *Paused*. Then he simply started *Recognizing*. Naming his experience. It is so powerful to name it—either aloud or in a mental whisper. Then *Allowing* it. It is like saying “Yes!” to the moment. It is not saying “I love this.” It is not saying “I want this to continue,” but simply acknowledging, this is reality. *Allowing* reality.

It is an important understanding that when we *Allow* what is going on—when we bow or say “Yes,” we are not allowing something external like someone’s abuse, or our own harmful behavior, or even confirming the truth of our thoughts. We are saying “Yes” to the felt experience in the moment. That is the radical *Allowing* in *RAIN*.

OK. Let me tell you about the rest of *RAIN*.

When there is a really strong emotional reaction, that initial mindful awareness can easily get destabilized. That is where we need to deepen with *Investigating* and *Nurturing*.

I can say that during the pandemic, I received many emails from people saying, “*RAIN* saved my life.” In the midst of the fears for their parents, of dealing with real losses, of dealing with children home from school while they tried to work at home; in the midst of great instability, this is what gave them access to an inner refuge.

RAIN is so powerful. I have more recently shared this practice of *RAIN* with those helping refugees in Poland, and with frontline workers still in Ukraine. It can cut through and give some resilience, ease and openheartedness during times of huge stress.

Let me share this pre-pandemic story that motivated me to write about *RAIN*. It is in my book *Radical Compassion*.

My mom had come down to live with us when she was 81 or 82 and quite naturally she needed a lot of help getting settled. I was in a very busy phase so I vacillated between feeling guilty about not showing up enough for my mother and anxious about not showing up enough for my work and my students.

At one point, it was so clear that I needed to do *RAIN*. My mother came into my office, showing me an article from the *New Yorker*. I barely looked up from my computer. I was actually writing a talk on lovingkindness. When I did turn to see her quietly retreat, I realized, “I don’t know how long she’ll be here.” With a deep pang, I stepped away from my computer to practice the *RAIN* meditation.

The *R* of *RAIN* was to recognize the anxiety in my system. Then *Allow*. OK. Just let it be here. This belongs. It is natural.

The *I*, as I *Investigated*, I asked myself, ‘What am I believing?’ There was the belief that I was going to fall short on all fronts. I was going to fail with my mother; I was going to fail with my students. Hence the guilt and anxiety. Then, deep in the *investigation*, I felt that twist in my heart and chest, the pain of guilt, the fear of hurting someone, and in this case, my mother.

Then I did what I often do with *Nurture*. I put my hand on my heart. If you do that for just a moment, even the smallest gesture of kindness begins to soften the armoring. I gently put a hand on my heart and sent the message that I most needed to hear: I told myself to trust, to trust my goodness, to trust my loving.

Through the four steps, there was an enlarging. I was no longer trapped in the identity of a daughter who was guilty for not doing enough. Or a teacher who was going to fall short. I was just resting in a tender, more open space. So I took some moments to simply be aware of the presence that was here; and aware that this was more the truth of who I am than any limiting story of self. This is what I call “After the *RAIN*.” Just like after a real rain is when the earth flowers, we experience the fruit of *RAIN* in the moments of resting in the larger truth of who we are. Resting in loving awareness.

In the days or weeks to come when I was with her, I found I was fully there. I was not plotting when I could go upstairs and work again. I could arrive in our moments together. We would have our big salads in the early evening and when we were walking along the river, we would often hold hands, pause regularly, and take in the wonder.

When she died, it was only three or four years later, and I felt huge grief. But there was no regret because *RAIN* had saved my life moments with my mom.

So it is that we need a way home when we have lost ourselves in painful emotions. We need a simple way to honestly and courageously feel what we are feeling, and to nurture ourselves, to regard this life with kindness. The kindness is so important.

As Jeff Foster writes, “The most potent medicine in this ancient commitment [is] to never abandon yourself, to discover wholeness in the whole mess, to be a loving

mother to your insides, to hold the broken bits with loving awareness, to illuminate the sore places within.”

So often we forget to *Pause* and we forget to bring that intention and care inwardly, and yet it is the beginning of all healing.

The gift is when we come home to the fullness of who we are, to that formless beingness, to the tender awakens of our heartmind. Then we naturally feel our belonging with each other and the kindness ripples out.

Maybe one more story for you that I have carried with me for years.

A lieutenant in the Army was forced to take an anger management course because of his temper. In that course, he received training in mindfulness and empathy.

He went one evening to the supermarket and filled up his cart. He was in a rush as he had to get home soon and fill in more reports. So he filled his cart quickly and got in line.

The woman in front of him in the line had only two items and she had a little girl. She handed the little girl over to the clerk and they were oohing and awing. . .

Well, he just got triggered. He thought, “She is not in the express line like she should be! She is in my line. I am busy and I have so much to do.” Just a head full of steam. Then he remembered, “Oh yes, mindfulness”. . . *Pause*, and he began this process of sensing what was happening. OK. Angry, angry. That’s what is happening. Feeling it in his body, continuing to feel it, and sensing under it, fear. Fear of not getting things done and fear of his world falling apart. Then bringing a gentleness to that. “It’s OK, It’s OK”. Gentle *Nurturing*. More expanded . . . enough to notice that the little girl was cute.

The woman had left, and it was his turn. He said to the clerk that the little girl was adorable. She beamed. She said, “That is actually my child. That was my mom who brought her. My husband was killed in Afghanistan and so my mom brings the babe over twice a day so we have some visiting time.”

Now, while not everyone is suffering in that particular way, life is hard for all of us. Everyone is living with uncertainty and fears. There is the inevitability of losing health and capacities, losing others we love, feeling a sense of failure. You know that anonymous line, ‘Be kind to everyone you meet because everyone is fighting a hard struggle.’”

I often think, What if we could move in this world and *pause* enough to be in touch with ourselves and really take in those we encounter. What if we could, as Ruby Sales puts it, ask inwardly that question, “Where does it hurt? Where does it hurt?” As our world continues in crisis, this is the possibility and the hope. The only thing that will heal us is consciousness — the more humans who cultivate a pathway to this awake, tender heart, the more there can be love in action. Love in action. That is the true medicine.

L.R. Knost [author, feminist and social justice activist] writes, “Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break, and all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention. So, go. Love intentionally. . .Unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.

Thank you friends. Thank you for listening. Thank you for your attention.

And now, Frank and I are really interested in whatever questions you might have.

Frank: It may not be a question. It may just be something you want to speak to that is on your mind or in your heart now.

Anessa: Hello, can you hear me alright? Thank you for taking my question. I am in the process of providing care to my mother who is slowly dying. I find myself so often very overwhelmed in the moments and then they pass like waves. I do what I can with the resources that people like yourselves have so generously offered to us, but I wondered if you had some counsel for when it is really overwhelming? How to navigate?

Frank: Yeah. Oh boy. It is hard, isn't it. It is so hard, Anessa. Sometimes we just have to acknowledge how difficult it is for us and step away. Step away into the other room with ourself and acknowledge support for ourself. These are really practical things we can do.

Tara was explaining earlier, about the man with Alzheimer's. Just naming his experience. That can be incredibly powerful for you. “This is hard. I did not sign up for this. I am really scared.” So naming your experience can be incredibly helpful of course.

There is one more thing I want to say, Anessa. When you go out of the room and come back, one calm person in the room can make all the difference. You can be that calm person. When you move your mom, when you turn her in bed, you lend her your back, your arms and your legs, to turn her. You can also lend her the calmness of your mind; you can open your heart in such a way that she might be inspired to open hers. Then you can be in it together. You can do that Anessa. That lives in you. You can have confidence in your good heart. Yeah.

Tara: Thank you Anessa and Frank, for that response. It is so meaningful to so many of us.

I have a question for you, Anessa, which is what is it that you most wish you could remember or be reminded in those moments? What do you most wish to remember in those moments of overwhelm? What might the most wise and loving part of you whisper in your ear?

Anessa: I guess there are two things that come right away to my heart and mind. One is “This is all OK. This is all normal. This is how it is.” Kind of a breath of that. Ahh. This is OK.

And the other. What did you ask?

Tara: What would you wish you could remember?

Anessa: The light and the love that shines out of my mother, actually. We have had some incredible moments when she . . . and I realize she is OK, she is being held, and it is her process, but she is being held, and I don't have to hold her all the time, or I am part of that holding too. You know, that life is holding us.

Tara: First, I just want to bow because that is a beautiful sharing and teaching for all of us. It may be that in the moments of overwhelm, you just put a hand on your heart, and you can hear that voice, that reminder, 'This belongs. This is just the way this body mind works, to get overwhelmed. It's OK. It is just part of nature.'

Remember that there is a light and a love that is coming through your mom and you, that is holding your mom, that is always here, and to sense and trust in that. Draw on that. It is your wisdom. The more moments you turn to that, the more you will find a refuge that can carry you.

Anessa: Thank you. I can feel the calmness with that. I appreciate that. So thank you both.

Sylvia: This is coming from **Monica** and she asks, "How do you forgive yourself?"

Frank: Oh my. I have to say that I think forgiveness is a fierce practice. It has been in my life, and I am a little suspicious of forgiveness that comes too quickly. For me, forgiveness is the willingness to see the parts of myself, sometimes the very ugly parts of myself, that I would rather not see and to touch them with mercy, to touch those parts of myself with some mercy. To recognize my humanity and my ignorance.

The first thing I do is recognize that it may be a very long and slow process, but it is both a kind and a fierce one. I want to stop there and see what else Tara has to add to this.

Tara: Frank, what you said about being a long process has such truth. I think there is a lot of premature forgiveness of others and ourselves. The pathway is really through the vulnerability of contacting the pain of what is inside us. What helps me is to feel the pain of that and feel under it what has been driving it. There is sometimes a metaphor I find really helpful.

You are walking in the woods and you see a little dog by a tree and you go to pet it, and the dog leaps at you ferociously. Bare teeth, bare fangs, and you go from being friendly to being angry. Then you realize *the dog has a paw in a trap* and something shifts. You may not want to get near it right away because you want to protect yourself and you want to protect others. But your heart shifts, and I think that is the shift that happens when we mindfully feel the conditioned parts of our being, the aversion and aggression and all the things we do not like.

We find under them that we have our leg in a trap, that we have some real pain, some fear, some hurt, and by gradually tending to that, the forgiveness actually unfolds.

So, I hope that is helpful.

Sharon: I didn't ask a question. I cannot imagine why my name appeared.

Frank: Nice to hear your voice, Sharon.

Patricia: I had not raised my hand either that I know of but here I sit. I am kind of wrapped up because I am not feeling well and I am 84 years old and thinking about the challenges of getting old, losing your family, and staying in the game, which I really want to do. So I guess that is my question.

Frank: Tara, why don't you take a shot at this.

Tara: Patricia, I hear less of a question and more of your heart's aspiration to stay true to your life and what is here. I am wondering what is it that might get in the way of that. Is there a belief or a feeling that makes you feel that in some way you want to resign, or you are not going to show up?

Patricia: Laughing. You're right on the money. Poetry has been my kind of go to avocation. I am writing what I keep calling my last book of poetry, compiling it. So I have this argument going on. "Stop talking like that. That's silly. You are making everything too important." And then saying, "Yeah, but. . ." It is interesting and it is a challenge to put all that down, to go ahead with the work and not complicate it with that question.

Tara: So what I am hearing is that there is a bit of doubt that it is valuable, that it is worth putting forth. Is that it?

Patricia: It is that and not so much about my work. But what does have value? What is the point? I think my advancing age really drives that question a lot.

Tara: I think that is a key spiritual question, and that the more frequently and sincerely we ask it, the more awake we will be. It is one of those wisdom impermanence questions: What really matters?

The Zen teachers say the most important thing is remembering the most important thing. Imagine if you just had a minute or two of life left, what would really matter? What would be the quality of heart and awareness and beingness that would most matter? Just asking that question I think will inform any action. I truly honor you for being in this courageous inquiry right now.

Patricia: Thanks so much.

Frank: Thanks, Patricia. Do we have time for one more?

Tara: We talked about you speaking in about a minute.

Frank: OK. Why don't I talk for a little bit and then we'll come back and have some more dialogue with people. Because that is what we really want to do as much as possible.

Tara: Yes. We love hearing from you.

Frank: So awakening in the midst of love and grief. Being in love, death and grief. Wow.

As we venture into this, I think it might be useful to think about the two dimensions of Being. There is action of Being, right? When we love, or being placed in an ambulance, or being with dying. Then there is Being, which is referring to the all inclusive, the endlessly expressive source of all manifestation, the ground of being, right, which is our essential identity which we know through presence as Tara reminded us.

To me, anyway, this dimension of Being is another way of naming or talking about the inseparable unity of reality: to know reality in the midst of this life with all its beauty and horrors. Well, if I am going to know it, I want to be as Real as possible.

That is actually my hope for today, that we be Real together.

To me, to be Real, it indicates having some measure of self-love of what we essentially are, and we want to move toward it, to what is true, what we feel is Real in us. And I think that wholesome wanting, the appreciation of our essence, that is central to our spiritual practice, that is central to awakening in the midst. Without love, our practice is being done for all the wrong reasons.

To me, this love is not selfish. We do not love because it is good for us, or because our preferences matter or because it is a special attainment. It is because we know that being Real means allowing sometimes a lot of unexperienced pain to surface. We need to love being Real in order to go through all the trouble and the discipline of inner work. You cannot be Real if you are pretending to be something other than you are.

How many times have I chosen comfort over truth or find myself living in the idea of who I am instead of in a direct experience of my life? Too many times.

Awakening in the midst. Sometimes it seems impossible to me, and I know that I cannot do it alone. None of us can. We need support, and the support we need, it comes from Being, from reality itself. It is not something external or other than what we are. It comes from who we fundamentally are.

How do we awaken in the midst? I don't know for sure. But it seems that some of it is about getting really interested in being Real, being as clear as possible about what is happening as it is happening, and knowing it as intimately as possible.

Like when I am feeling anxiety or fear or sadness, I am aware of it, not from some distant place, but up close and personal. Honestly, what is this fear like? What is this love like? What is this loss like?

This means that awareness receives and holds the experience without my interference. It knows all parts of it. Awareness knows through intimacy. It is like when you fall in love, right, you want to find out everything you can about them. You want to be completely familiar with them, to be intimate with them.

I think we need to apply that same interest in knowing ourselves. These days when people ask me what my practice is, I say 'it is the practice of intimacy — learning to become intimate with myself and the world'.

Being aware of who we are can only arise from loving being where we are. Love is not a gated community. Everything is allowed in every part of ourselves. Awareness does not exclude anything. It is not in the nature of awareness to resist.

You can have resistance without resisting it.

If we are aware of our experience rather than trying to get rid of it or trying to change it, we create this loving holding environment that allows our experience to unfold, to show itself.

In this same way I think, at least in my experience, the process of dying can open us to Being in a very real way.

There are certain conditions I would say in dying that are conducive, supportive, of awakening in the midst. They are not always seen in that light, recognized as opportunities, but they are. They exist.

The process of dying — it is almost imperceptibly a process of letting go, relinquishing what we know we can no longer control.

I remember this one hospice resident at the Zen hospice; he was a well-known rock musician, actually. One day he was just weeping as he was telling me about his losses, everything he was having to let go of. Then, the next moment he was smiling at the idea he was going to give away his treasured Gibson guitar to his friend. He said, "we are not what we have, and there are no storage units in heaven."

Letting go can be an act of generosity, right? We let go of old grudges and we give ourselves to peace; we let go of fixed views and we give ourselves to not knowing; we let go of self sufficiency and we give ourselves to being cared for; we let go of clinging and we give ourselves to gratitude.

You know, when we are dying, when we are facing long term illness, all the ways we defined ourselves, (I am a mother, I am a father, I am a people person, I am a loner, I'm rich or poor) — these identities are either stripped away or they are gracefully given up, but they are all gone and then who are we?

I remember this woman at the hospice said to me before she died, she said: “If I had known that the silence was this beautiful, I would have spent a lot more time in quiet.”

Letting go is how we prepare for dying. Suzuki, Roshi, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, he said, “Renunciation is not about giving up the things of the world, but accepting that they go away.” Acceptance of impermanence, that is what helps us to learn to die.

Many years ago, I was studying with Elizabeth Kubler Ross, the pioneer in death and dying. She helped so many of us understand what the process was like. She developed those famous five stages of dying — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. I am not sure Elizabeth ever meant them to be such a linear path that others have mistakenly turned them into. Dying certainly does not happen in such a tidy way.

But in my experience, I differ with Elizabeth because acceptance is not the final stage. Acceptance is still a strategy of the personality. There is a sense of me choosing to accept. However, as that small separate sense of self shakes loose in the dying process, there can be a kind of chaos that acceptance born of personality cannot manage. It can be filled with agitation; it can be frightening to some people. But I think it is here in this chaos that something infinitely deeper than acceptance or letting go arises and that is surrender, and that is a process by which we cease all struggle and resistance. Surrender is kind of a gateway to transformation.

I am not sure we can even choose surrender. It is more like surrender takes us. It is more like a cosmic thread or an undertow. It takes us. Certainly, we know there are certain things that can engender surrender. Like our spiritual practice can engender surrender. Our deep faith can engender surrender. But also exhaustion can engender surrender. I have seen this many times with people who are dying. At some point in the dying we are just too exhausted to keep up the fight.

It is in those moments that I have seen ordinary people, people like you and I, develop profound insights at the end of their lives that emerge as something larger, more expansive, more real than the small separate self they have taken themselves to be.

I do not think this is a fairy tale happy ending. I do not believe in those. This regularly occurs for people in the final months, or weeks, or days, or sometimes even moments of their life.

You might say too late, and I might agree. However, the value is not in how long the experience lasted, but that the possibility for transformation exists, and if that possibility exists then, it exists now. We can harness the awareness of death now to appreciate the fact that we are alive, to encourage self-exploration, to clarify our values, to find meaning and to generate really positive action in our world, to palpably touch, to know ourself as Being.

Oh, there is so much more I can say, but what I want to touch on is a little bit on grief. Grieving the death of someone we love, it is like being thrown into a raging river and it is powerful and it pulls us down below the surface to the deep dark places where we can hardly breathe. Frantically we try to escape, you know. Then we feel ourselves pulled further down.

Gradually we are released and step on shore with fresh eyes.

Sadness is just one of the faces of grief, one of its many faces. Grief also manifests as anger, as judgment, regret and guilt, blame and shame. There are periods of numbness when we feel like we are walking through molasses.

I think our task is to sit down with grief to let her show us what she has to teach. No part left out. We are not prepared for the intense feelings that engulf us sometimes, when we least expect them.

Like my friend said, she completely lost it one day in the cereal aisle in her local super market, between the Cheerios and the Raison Bran.

It is our fear of this lack of control that leads us to ideas about managing our grief or getting over our grief. Grief is our common ground. It is curious to me. We never speak about managing our joy or getting over our happiness.

Grief is the normal response to loss. In this pandemic, and this war, and this climate catastrophe that we are in the midst of — it is putting us in touch with the multiple losses that occur daily in our lives. The everyday grief of our lives.

Someone recently said when Roshi Joan and I were teaching together that grief is love that has no place to go. I think our relationship to a particular loss changes over time with attention. It won't always have the same intensity for us. But the response of loss, it may remain and maybe last a lifetime.

We are barely human if we don't grieve. Our resistance to grief only intensifies our pain. Grief challenges our notions of control, it cracks our defensive shell; it shows us how vulnerable we are.

Some people cry oceans of tears. Others feel numb. Men grieve differently than women. There is no right way. There is only your way.

I want to stop speaking now and turn to you and engage with you in the kind of conversation and dialogue with you about what is in your hearts and minds. About being, life, love, dying, grief. We are just able to touch on these things now.

I really want to hear from you. So perhaps we could have people raise their hands.

Noah: We already have forty people who have raised hands.

Alyssa: Hi. Can you hear me?

Frank: Yes, Alyssa, we can hear you.

Alyssa: Thank you so much. This month marks seven years since my only child Jake passed by suicide. Within three years, I had lost my mother and I had a physical disability that worsened, and I had to leave my career. I have no living relatives. My marriage has survived beautifully. We have worked through it. But my fear going into what I call my season of Jake because of Mother's Day, because he was born on my husband's birthday. My fear is that I survive my husband and I want to go on as far as I can but who will take care of me?

While my practice helps me stay in the present moment, during this season I go back to those old questions like you said, what grief can do to a person. I so want to stay in reality, but I struggle with grounding myself. Thank you for your kind intention.

Frank: Alyssa, may I ask you just one question?

Alyssa: Please.

Frank: Tell me something that you miss about Jake.

Alyssa: I miss his giant hug. I am five foot three and he was six foot three. He gave these giant bear hugs and I miss them immensely.

Frank: He is six foot three.

Alyssa: He is. When I was sick he would say "Mama what do you need?" and he would make me a cup of blueberry tea.

Frank: Beautiful, Alyssa. So this relationship with Jake continues, doesn't it?

Alyssa: Yes, yes it does.

Frank: Of course it does. It continues, and if your husband should die before you do, that relationship will continue too. That is important to remember, that even when people die, our relationship with them continues.

Alyssa: (Crying softly). OK.

Frank: That's enough for now. OK?

Alyssa: Yes. Present moment.

Frank: Yeah. But no ideas. Be real. Just be real. As you feel Jake with you right now, that real. Be with that. No ideas. OK?

Alyssa: (Crying softly). Yes. Thank you.

Frank: You are welcome. You are very welcome.

Sarah: Hi. Thank you. So my question is regarding death and dying. I am currently 52 years old and have been struggling with Stage Four cancer for seven years. I have had a pretty good run of it. I have had a really great quality of life. A lot of times I've not forgotten about it but it does not identify who I am. I have three teenage children. Recently I have learned that I have a lot more cancer affecting my lung workings and I have pain and I am just so full of fear. I listened to Tara's talk about pain and resistance and I try to stay with what is and not resist it, but I am afraid of suffering more. I am afraid of dying. I am not so afraid of the dying but I really do not want to leave my kids. One of them is very depressed right now.

Frank: OK, Sarah. We just have to go to the essence right now. OK? So, since you have been listening to Tara, maybe you can just listen a bit more. Maybe she has something she wants to respond to.

Tara: So I guess a question for you, dear, is when the fear comes up, how are you relating to it? Are you feeling like I should not be afraid right now. Something is wrong. Tell me what is happening.

Sarah: I hold my fear like a baby. I just sort of rock her and cuddle her and say it's OK. Her name is Sally. But it still can be... I can hardly even talk about it. As you can tell, it just blows me right out of the track of living. It is huge.

Tara: So let me ask you in this moment, as you feel like you are holding her, and rocking her, what else do you feel she needs in this moment? What would give her more of a sense of space or comfort, just right now. What is it?

Sarah: Just you asking that helped. I don't know.

Tara: And you may not exactly know. This is all about our relationship with fear. The fear is a given. Sometimes I say thank you to my fear. My fear is coming from my love of living.

Sarah: Exactly.

Tara: Yeah. It is just that essence of you, that beingness that loves living. So just know there is a love for living and a love for the relationships. Keep asking what do you need right now. It may not be that there is a small self there that can offer something to her. It is OK to call on something larger. OK? Call on whatever sense of love that you have, sweetie, in this universe. Whatever...love, a formless presence, whatever you have, call on that. Let that help you to hold this little precious being.

Sarah: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Frank: Thank you, Sarah. We have just a little more time. We ask people to go right to essence, if you can.

Sylvia: The husband of my daughter has cancer. It is brain cancer. It is very hard to take care of him. We don't know him. We do not even like him. What to do?

Frank: Well this one strikes home for me because I have had some strokes in the last few years and I am not the same person I was before the strokes. Sometimes I am not easy to be around, at least for the people who love me, and so I am sad about that. Maybe your son-in-law is sad about that as well.

It might be helpful to recognize that in this other person. How sad they might be, how afraid they might be, about not being able to recognize themselves.

You know I had an Aunt Mimi. She was 80 some odd years old and she had severe dementia. When I would go and see her, she didn't recognize me, who I was. She was always chaotic and threw her dress over her head and was difficult to be with. She had been a spinster, they were called in those days. I was always curious about this. So one day, I said, brazenly, "Mimi, all these years you lived by yourself? You never had a beau? You never had a sweetheart? All these years?"

Suddenly, this woman who had been throwing her dress over her head sat up straight in her chair and folded her arms under her and said, "Some questions are just too personal to ask." It reminded me that there is always a whole human being there. There is always a whole human being there, sometimes in a very distressing disguise. But we can find a way of speaking directly to that whole human being, of seeing ourself in them, or them in us. I think that matters greatly and fundamentally changes how we care for them.

Noah: A few more questions?

Frank: Yes, let's keep going until our time runs out. That is how I intend to live my life. To keep going until my time runs out.

Mary: Ah yes. My question has to do with the grief of having several relatives within the last couple of years who have been diagnosed with mental illnesses and sometimes it is very confusing to me to figure out what is right speech and right practice toward people for instance who have bipolar where it can be really tricky.

Tara: I am glad to start because there are several people in active relationships that are close. It is very hard for me to legislate for myself what is going to be right behavior. I more come back into my heart and get in touch with what my deepest intention is. What is it that my heart wants in this relationship? I know deep down I want there to be a loving connection. So I have to go back to that even though I know there are going to be all kinds of filters of interpretation. I start with the sincerity. When I get sincere, I am more discerning and I seem to flow more with what is needed. The other piece is to really sense impact. It doesn't matter how good my intention is when the impact is such that it throws somebody off; that is just an invitation for me to go back to my intention and not be down on myself. Really forgive myself and just experiment. I find that all relationships are an experiment. We are always exploring what it is that will most serve a real heart connection. So I hope those few things give a little bit to work with. Frank, I would love to hear what you have to say.

Frank: I have nothing to add, but I do want to try to include some more people. I do not want to rush us but I feel the hearts of so many people here on line that I want to hear if there is someone else.

Megan: Hi. I am wondering. I have a progressive disease. If I fall with dementia in a wheelchair, perhaps dying with a secondary infection. How do you balance acceptance with hope, because many a practitioner says do not will yourself into a wheelchair. So I get you sit with yourself and your leg is numb and you cannot get off the floor and you accept that, but how do you deal with the fear of what happens next week or the week after?

Tara: What you are asking is so very very touching because so many of us are in situations where we have a story that seems real about how things are going to unfold. For me, acceptance is only an opening, acknowledging just this moment, and hope means not expectation, but just staying open to possibility. The deepest possibility does not have to do with the progression physically. It has to do with how your heart can wake up more and more to have space for whatever unfolds. That is the truth. So what I am encouraging is to be real with what is right here. Sense that hopefulness for the possibility of a freedom, the kind of heart space that is free to be with whatever unfolds and stay open to it unfolding the way you like, too.

Megan: (Soft tears). OK. Thank you.

Tara: Yeah. Bless you, dear.

Carl: Hi. My name is Carl. Can you hear me OK?

Frank: Yes, Carl.

Carl: Well, first of all, I want to say to both of you, I just have such, such emotion of deep gratitude to both of you for the vulnerable sharing of your stories and of your teaching. I just want to say that.

I have been struggling with two questions actually.

Frank: You get one Carl. (A little laughter).

Carl: I only get one? OK. If either of you could go back and live life again, what would that one thing be that you would want to do differently?

Frank: I hope this doesn't sound arrogant. I don't know that I would want to do anything differently, because even all of my mistakes have helped. You know, they create a meeting place with myself and others. My fear has helped. My anger has helped. They have helped me to find a meeting place with others who have experienced something similar. And so, I guess I wish I would have been conscious of that reality that much earlier in my life, but every aspect of my life, even my deepest errors, have been the ground for empathetic connection with others, and I am eternally grateful for that.

Tara: I do not have life regrets. I have more of an ongoing aspiration to live from love and have my moments be an expression of love. So I could have wished for myself more quickly softening into kindness, trusting the goodness inside me and others. Sure, but that is more of an idea. It is more right now just that longing to live from love and under that longing, love of love.

Frank: Yeah. So Tara, I am aware of time, an unusual thing for me, given my strokes. But I want us to close with a meditation by you.

The last thing I want to do is to thank you, Tara, for being a friend first of all and for your great generous kind heart that has shown itself today. Your wise heart. Thank you for being willing to offer that to all of us today. I am immensely grateful to you.

Tara: Thank you. I am feeling that field of loving here. It means the world. It extends, friends, to all of us. There is something incredibly wonderful to create that together.

I am going to close with a brief meditation.

If it helps you to close your eyes or lower your gaze, please do. If there is some adjustment of how your posture is, so you can feel a little more awake in your body and at ease. . .

You might listen to these words.

This is Mark Nepo [transpersonally oriented poet]. He says:

My soul tells me we are broken from the same nameless heart and every living thing wakes with a piece of that original heart aching its way into blossom.

This is why we know each other below our strangeness.

Why when we fall, we lift each other or when in pain, we hold each other.

Why when sudden with joy, we dance together.

Life is the many pieces of that great heart loving itself back together.

It is in these moments to sense that beautiful great formless vast heart space, and as you do, feel into your human body and heart and mind and just sense if there is any place in you that needs to be reminded by love, that needs to feel more accepted, needs some tender attention.

If it helps to put your hand on your heart, just have that intimacy with the life inside you. Sense and imagine that warmth and light, that formless heart space just bathing, really bathing, permeating, whatever part of your being needs inclusion right now. You might feel your breath supporting that. Tender, receptive, and perhaps there is even a message. Perhaps there are some words to

your own human heart from your spiritual heart. Some words of reminder that you want to take with you, and then sensing the quality of the presence that is here; sensing the vastness, the silence behind the sounds, and the stillness that everything is happening in—that exquisite tenderness that expresses the love that is the essence of our being. Sense that heart space, the collective heart space, that each of us is held in.

You might bring to mind and include in that heartspace those who have spoken, shared their realness and those who have not spoken, and include in that heart space those you know, those you do not know. Letting this field of loving presence extend, sensing it as edgeless, boundless, including the humans and the nonhumans everywhere, this earth, our mother, all in this vast shared heartspace.

Feeling our collective prayer, that all beings might be held in loving presence and filled with loving presence, that all beings everywhere touch a natural great peace, that all beings realize the joy of being alive, that there be a growing justice and peace and compassion on our earth, and that all beings everywhere awaken and be free.

Bless you friends.

Namaste.

Frank: We want to thank everyone for your trust and participation today, for your generosity. That helps to draw the truth out from all of us.

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