

Darkness of the Womb: Four Key Steps in Transforming Suffering

~ a talk by Tara Brach presented on January 25, 2017

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Namaste and welcome.

I recently heard a story about a priest who was giving a children's sermon, giving it to the whole congregation. He asked the children if any of them knew what the resurrection was. One very young little boy raised his hand and said, "I know that if you have a resurrection that lasts more than four hours, you are supposed to call the doctor." And it took the congregation ten minutes to settle down so they could continue...

So I don't have a great segue, but a sort of segue... which brings us really to our times right here. I hear a lot from people about the ups and downs of what their heart is experiencing during recent weeks and months. Many sensed a kind of a resurrection of energy and hope over the weekend with the Women's March, and hopefully that hope and energy will last more than four hours. In seeing people from around the world, there was the sense of the global community of care and belonging that really was quite inspiring. Then, of course, the down again of just feeling the enormity of the intense suffering that is happening, especially in this country, around some of the policies that are moving forward.

One of the short talks that I heard at the march was from Van Jones, who has created what is called the Love Army in an effort to combat post-election hatred. I thought what he said was really powerful. He said that, before the march, he had felt like something really beautiful was dying. And then he said: "With this movement, I feel like something beautiful is being reborn."¹ And that really resonated very closely to another talk I heard that was given by a Sikh woman, a lawyer and an activist, Valarie Kaur. She said that we need to stand up for all of our brothers and sisters who are deprived of rights, in whatever way, who are oppressed. And then she

¹ Jones, V. (2017, January 21). Speech presented at The Women's March on Washington, Washington DC.

asked: “What if these times are not the darkness of the tomb, but they are the darkness of the womb?”²

And there was something in that – and very similar to what Van Jones is saying – that we can kind of sense, in a very deep intuitive way, that, whenever there is strong suffering, there is a dialectic. It’s the potential for times of darkness to be a kind of wake-up that really is a rebirthing. We can see it in our own lives, the times we hit the worst, most difficult pain — whether it was a divorce, or a biopsy that turned out malignant, the loss of somebody dear — also, in some way, opened us to another level of what we really cherished. It opened us to a new level of resilience or really sensing the mystery. So there is power and potential in a time of darkness. We can see it through evolution, that great stress requires adaptation and so on. We see it, that it can evolve us.

And I sometimes think the best metaphor is that of a cocoon. If we are in a cocoon, and we don’t keep evolving and developing, the very pressure from the size of the cocoon is suffering. Because we are meant to keep evolving. When we are suffering, it is a sign that we are believing limiting beliefs and we are acting in a way that isn’t aligned with the truth of our connectedness. And we have seen that suffering doesn’t always bring a new day. We have seen how we, in our lives, can get caught in the suffering of addiction or depression, and stay in that prison. And we can see how, in our larger society, there can be cycles of suffering and violence that just go and go and go.

So, I think that there is a really deep inquiry here: What are the conditions and the ways that we can pay attention, so that what is going on right now, whether it is in our personal lives or our broader society, can truly be the *suffering of the womb*? How can each of us be part of letting that be what unfolds — the awakening from suffering — in that way? That will be grounds of our reflection here. What I would like to do is to take four key ways of paying attention — kind of the inner to the outer — that, if we cultivate them, actually allow suffering to be transformative.

The first of the four key areas is to *train ourselves not to believe thoughts that create hatred and separation* — whatever beliefs or thoughts we are having. That doesn’t

² Kaur, V. (2016, December 31). Speech presented at National Moral Revival Poor People’s Campaign Watch Night Service in Metropolitan Church, Washington DC.

mean that there might not be some wise discrimination in them; but, if we are believing the thoughts and beliefs and they are creating separation and hatred, it will not serve us. That is the first one. The second one is to *feel our feelings*. The third one is to *train ourselves to turn towards love*, because we have conditioning, a negativity-bias, that causes us to contract. And the fourth is to act from the heart - *act from the awakening heart*.

The first one really is challenging, because we have such a deep conditioning to live in this cocoon of very habitual thoughts. The negativity-bias that really comes from our more primitive fear ends up creating fear-thoughts and fear-beliefs that usually take the shape of *something is wrong with me* or *something is wrong with you*. That judgment then leads to distance and to hatred. It keeps our personal lives such that we have a hard time feeling real intimacy. And societally, it keeps us at war.

One master was asked to describe the world and his description was: *Lost in thought*. That is where we spend most of our time. If you look back through today and what it was like, you will probably notice that you were living many moments in a sort of inner dialogue — a kind of virtual reality. We spend a lot of time there and, especially when it is highlighted by a lot of judgment and angry or hateful thoughts, that is the whole biochemical mix we are existing in. One of the real effects of going around in these thoughts is that it blocks reality. And if you are entering your day or a situation or interaction with judgment or bias, it torques it. You can't see what is really there.

Many of you might have seen the film *Gorillas in the Mist*, about field biologist, Dian Fossey. The film depicts how she follows in the footsteps of George Schaller, the most famous primate biologist in the world. Schaller returned from the wilds with more intimate and compelling information about gorillas than anybody in past generations had done. He was able to study their tribal structure, family life and mating behaviors, and he attributed it to one simple thing: He didn't carry a gun. He engaged with a kind of respect for these remarkable creatures that they must have detected it, because they let him close enough to really begin to understand their social behavior. He didn't carry a gun. In contrast, most of us habitually "carry a gun" whether we need it or not. In our minds, we have preconceptions and ideas about who and how people are, and we often have a slant that stops us from seeing who is really there.

Sometime last year, I shared a story from Maria Popova of Brainpickings.org. If you haven't heard of the site, the articles are brilliant and insightful. I highly recommend it. In this piece, Maria shares an experience she had one spring day. She is biking and she can tell that another cyclist is coming up behind her. And then that person passes her. Some of you may have had this experience. Even though it might be a perfect stranger, on some level, all of a sudden there is competition. It happens when you are swimming, it happens when you are running, it happens when you are biking. Anyway, she felt that competition and when he overtook her, she felt strangely defeated. Here is what she writes:

“...But, as he cruised past me, I realized the guy was on an electric bike. I felt both a sort of redemption and a great sense of injustice — unfair motorized advantage, very demoralizing to the honest muscle-powered pedaler. But just as I was getting all self-righteously existential, I noticed something else — he had a restaurant's name on his back. He was food delivery guy. He was rushing past me not because he was trying to slight me, or because he had some unfair competitive advantage in life, but because this was his daily strife — this is how this immigrant made his living.

My first response was to shame myself into gratitude for how fortunate I've been — because I too am an immigrant from a pretty poor country and it's some miraculous confluence of choice and chance that has kept me from becoming a food delivery person on an electric bike in order to survive in New York City. And perhaps the guy has a more satisfying life than I do — perhaps he had a good mother and goes home to the love of his life and plays the violin at night. I don't know, and I never will. But the point is that the second I begin comparing my pace to his, my life to his, I'm vacating my own experience of that spring day and ejecting myself into a sort of limbo of life that is neither mine nor his.”³

Beautiful.

Don't believe the thoughts that create separation. They lock us into a dividedness and a separateness and, in a deep way, they fuel more violence. They keep us in that

³ Popova, M. (2016, May 16). On the Soul-Sustaining Necessity of Resisting Self-Comparison and Fighting Cynicism: A Commencement Address [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/05/16/annenberg-commencement/>

cocoon. This applies to thoughts about ourselves, about others that we know, and even others that we don't know.

The expression that I love is: *real but not true*. What that means is, that thoughts are *really* happening. They are real representations in our mind. And we have real feelings, but they aren't the truth any more than an idea of an apple tree is the living, breathing tree.

For example, you could have the thought: *When I am angry and critical, my partner gets defensive and can't hear my message*. That is a real thought. It is not the living truth, but it is a useful thought. That is wise discrimination. But what if you have this thought instead: *When I'm angry and critical, that proves that I am a bad person, that I will never change and I will always drive people away*. Real but not true. It is not useful. It creates separation. All thoughts are real but not true, but some are worth using as a road map. If they create separation, anger, division, and more hatred, don't believe them.

Gandhi says: "Our beliefs create our thoughts. Our thoughts create our emotions. Our emotions create our behaviors. Our behaviors create our character. And our character creates our destiny."

If you keep believing your thoughts that create separation, you are basically solidifying the prison walls, staying in the cocoon.

So how do we let go? How do we not believe our thoughts?

The first step is to set your intention to let it matter — to know that, especially at this time in history, we can't afford to be going around in our personal life and our societal life making enemies of ourselves and each other. We can't afford it, too much is at stake.

Elizabeth Lesser writes, "My prayer to God every day is: *Remove the veil so I might see what is really happening here and not be intoxicated by my stories and my fears.*"⁴

⁴ Lesser, E. (2016). *Marrow: A Love Story*. New York, NY: Harper Wave.

So, when thoughts come up and we sense that we are getting tight, we can ask ourselves: *What am I believing?* If you are suffering, you are believing something that is not true. If you have an argument against reality, you will always lose. You know, your belief is just a belief. So the inquiry is: *What am I believing? What is it like to live in this belief? Is it possible that it is real but not true? Who might I be if I wasn't living inside this belief?*

So, the first key to transforming through suffering: *Don't believe beliefs that create hatred.*

The second is: *Feel your feelings.*

Of course, that is a nice thing to say. You know: *What we resist persists.* Or: *Go ahead and feel your vulnerability.* And it is really, really hard. When our feelings are difficult, we have a huge amount of conditioning to do anything but feel them. One friend was recently saying how powerful it was when his therapist asked him: *What are you running away from?* One sage put it this way: *What are you unwilling to feel?* We run away, and we have different ways of doing that. One common way for many of us to try to avoid vulnerability is to, in some way, simply ignore it or pretend that it is not there. And we get very habituated to that.

I heard a story about a woman who was a top-executive in a New York financial firm. She usually takes a limo to work, but due to bad weather, on this particular day, she decides she will take a bus and catch up on the news. As it turns out, she ends up listening to music instead. So, this woman has a problem — and this is really a vulnerable one — she has a lot of gas and she is not sure what to do about it. She is too embarrassed to release a fart on the crowded bus. But holding it in is really just impossible. The music is really loud, so she decides she is going to fart to the beat of the music so it will be drowned out by the music and no one will be able to hear it. But when she gets to her stop and is leaving the bus, she notices that everyone is looking at her. It was only then that she realized that she was wearing her headphones!

We have our ways of trying to protect ourselves.

Big ways that we try to avoid vulnerability are aggression and judgment. When we feel bad, we try to blame it on something or someone. And this is wired into us for survival. We need to know the cause of what is making us feel bad, and so the cause becomes either “you are doing something wrong” or “I am doing something wrong.” We blame. We also try to dominate. We try to control things so we won’t feel vulnerable.

Desmond Tutu, the 1984 Nobel peace prize winner, Cape Town, South Africa, writes: “There is a story, fairly well-known, about the missionaries when they came to Africa. They had the Bible and we, the natives, had the land. They said, ‘Let us pray!’ and we dutifully shut our eyes. And when we opened them – now they had the land and we had the Bible.”

So, I smile, and it is also tragic. There is a tragedy that happens when we aren’t able to stay with our vulnerability — how we need to dominate and conquer and prove — and we create more separation and more violence.

The second piece is to stay with your feelings. We need to do this both individually and culturally. Why? A lot of people say, “If I am feeling bad, why stay with it?” Our emotions are intelligent and every one of them, if you listen, has a message for us. We need them. Our anger tells us there is an obstacle to something that really matters to us. Our fear tells us that there is something really threatening. Our grief tells us that there is a loss that we need to be able to touch into. They inform us of our unmet needs. Sometimes I think about a child in the womb and the pressure of contractions against the child during labor . . . the feelings the child has to feel. Those feelings are a message to work with those contractions and get out of there.

We need our emotions. They move us. By learning to stay resonant with our emotions, to feel them, we discover the presence — the awareness and space — that is large enough hold them and still have some balance and freedom. There is no way to learn to ride the inner weather-systems unless you practice presence with them. There is a really profound gift in that. In the moments of mindfully being with the emotions, a larger space opens up where you can rest with them. This is why I sometimes use the language of the *fearless heart*. It doesn’t mean there is no fear. It just means we have discovered the heart-space that is big enough for the fear. We don’t suffer from it. It is a current in a larger sea of our *Being-ness*.

So, we learn to practice with and discover that presence. And then, from that presence, we can respond intelligently to what is happening. A lot of our training and practice in these mindfulness and self-compassion classes has to do with being with the emotions we habitually run from. Being with the pain we contract against. One man described reading about this in my book, *Radical Acceptance*. He said: “Your book helped me a lot to cope with pain some days ago when I had a terrible renal colic due to a kidney stone. Once I expel it I will name the stone after you.” It was the greatest tribute I have ever received!

So, this is number two: to feel our feelings, to learn to stay, to have the intention to lean in and to *be with*, not to run away, to keep practicing coming back into our bodies and breathing with and bringing kindness to what is here.

The third key area of attention in transforming suffering is to *turn towards love*. Again, our primitive conditioning is to perceive ourselves as separate. As a separate organism, we try to control, grab on to love, or push others away. We don’t turn towards love with open hands because we feel too threatened. It can feel quite vulnerable and risky to take the chance to turn towards love in a really open, undefended way — to let the light and warmth really wash through us. And yet, the experience of connectedness undoes our conditioning. In those moments when we are with another person and everything falls away, we can just feel the good-heartedness. We can really be there for each other. It is the moments when we just delight in a child’s sense of wonder and think: *Wow! This is what life is worth living for!* It is the moments when someone helps us when we are in trouble, or we help them and we realize: *Wow! We are in it together!* We see the signs that say: “Build Love Not Walls” and there is a sense of an intelligence and humanity around this globe that we are a part of. We need to feel connection.

Anthony de Mello is a catholic theologian, teacher, writer — wonderful, inspiring guy. He describes how he spent decades hating himself . . . years of self-aversion. All of his colleagues and friends kept telling him ways he should change himself. Finally, one friend said, “It is okay. You don’t have to change. I love you just the way you are.” And then he started changing. He needed that radical acceptance — that radical, unconditional loving, that sense of connection, that mirroring — to say:

You are basically okay. And then he was free to kind of shift and he didn't have to keep playing out the old patterns. ⁵

So, in our personal lives, we need to turn towards love. We turn towards love in a meditative way by bringing ourselves compassion and by remembering those who love us. And we activate it with others. In the Buddhist community, we have spiritual friends groups — small groups that meet every few weeks to share about practice and so on. Whether it is through a twelve-step group, or with our friends, or with healers . . . we need to feel connection.

In a personal way and in a societal way, this is the movement towards healing. Speaking about this growing, global movement of caring community, Van Jones put it this way:

“...real love is the strongest stuff in the universe. The Love Army and this movement is built on that mama bear love. That mama bear loves those cubs and that mama bear's not going to let you mess with those cubs. This movement is not going to let you mess with the Muslims, this movement is not going to let you mess with the Dreamers. [...] we are not going to let you mess with women, we are not going to let you mess with the earth, we are not going to let you mess with Black Lives Matter. This movement is based on that kind of love...⁶

We need belonging.

So back to our inquiry: *How does this experience of suffering, instead of being the darkness of the tomb — something being imprisoned in the cocoon — really be the darkness of the womb — something we really can birth out of?* We need to reverse the negativity-bias that has us contract and judge and, on purpose, choose to reflect on where love is. It needs to be part of our spiritual practice. These are the grounds.

I have had many conversations in these last weeks with different communities of care, and it is interesting how, in these transformational movements right now, those who have been activists for decades are, more and more, saying: “I need a way to ground this activism in spirit, in heart, in consciousness.” And those that have been

⁵ de Mello, A. (1984) *The Song of the Bird*. New York: Image Reprints.

⁶ Jones, 2017

sitting on the cushion, not as active, are saying, “I need to bring this heart and this spirit into action.” I think that this is where it becomes a suffering of the womb. It is in this merging of really grounding in spirit — not believing our beliefs, feeling our feelings, turning towards love — that we then reconnect and the act from that love.

So this takes us to the fourth strategy in terms of having suffering really bear fruit, which is to *act from love* — to feel our care and, in some way, act. There are many ways to act. A lot of people feel resistance. They think this means they are supposed to go to a march or write a letter or engage in whatever image they have in their mind about what social activism is. That is not what we are talking about. We are talking about caring and then, from that caring, engaging in some way that helps to bring healing. It de-conditions the tendencies to act in ways that are more regressive, like being obsessed with making ourselves more comfortable, or with proving ourselves, or getting approval. I have seen some of the biggest changes in people who were really depressed because of that kind of self-centeredness — not self-care, that is not self-care — that comes from a feeling of *something is wrong with me*. And moving from self-centeredness to service was where the freedom and healing came. Lama Surya Das writes that he once received the following directive from the Dalai Lama:

“This is not an age where mere self-growth and development or faith or meditation is sufficient. Those must inevitably be balanced by active social engagement, compassionate actions. No one can do it alone. We need each other to become enlightened. We need each other for spiritual realization.”⁷

As we remember connectedness, it is natural to act from our hearts.

Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest and, in his book *Tattoos on the Heart*, he writes about the human tragedies that play out in gang infested neighborhoods in LA. One story he shares is of a woman named Soledad. The mother of four, she was very proud when her oldest son got a diploma and went to the Marines. He came back for a visit and went out to pick up some fast-food. She heard shots on the streets near their home and her son Ronnie died in her arms right outside the door. Soon after,

⁷ Das, S. (2015). *Make Me One with Everything: Buddhist Meditations to Awaken from the Illusion of Separation*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

her oldest son Angel pulled off something few in the ‘hood do. He graduated from high school. He helped Soledad pull through the hell she was living in and, six months after Ronnie’s death, he pled with her to put on some clothes with color, do her hair, and be a mom to her three remaining children. That afternoon while sitting eating a sandwich on their front porch Angel was shot up by kids from a rival gang. Gregory Boyle found Soledad later that day sobbing into a huge bath towel and he writes: “The few of us there found our arms too short to wrap around this kind of pain.”

So, Soledad was locked in this anguish of separation. Boyle spent a lot of time with her over the next couple of years, there with that anguish. At one meeting, he asked how she was doing and she said, “I love the two kids I have, I hurt for the two that are gone.” And then, crying, she admits, “The hurt wins. The hurt wins.”

Then, several months later, she was in the emergency room for some chest pains when a kid with multiple gunshot wounds was rushed in on a gurney to the spot next to her. No curtain was drawn and she witnessed him fighting for his life. She recognized him from the rival gang that killed her boys. She knew that her friends might say, “Pray that he dies.” But that is not what happened. She heard the doctors yelling, “We are losing him,” and something in her cracked open.

“‘I began to cry as I had never cried before,’ she said, ‘and started to pray the hardest I have ever prayed. *Please, please don’t let him die. I don’t want his mom to go through what I have.*’”

And he survived, as she did . . . and so did her capacity for loving. It got ripped open by the grief and, in time, became unimaginably vast.⁸

I love this story because, ultimately, I have this faith that anything that happens to us can be part of what wakes us up. It doesn’t mean that we want painful things to happen to us or anybody else. It just means that we can trust that, if we know how to be in relationship with our life, suffering can be a darkness of the womb.

⁸ Boyle, G. (2011). *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. New York, NY: Free Press.

In Buddhism, this is captured in the prayer of the Bodhisattva, or an awakening being: *May whatever arises serve the awakening of heart and awareness.*

Reflection:

So, what I would like to do, right now, is just walk through these four steps and give you a chance to explore bringing them to a difficult place in your life — where you would like to see some transformation . . . for it to bear fruit in some way. A darkness of the womb. I invite you to take a moment to find a way to sit that is comfortable and to come into stillness and we will just practice together.

We have been moving back and forth between the personal and the societal. These are practices in which we need to train, each of us in our own lives, in order for it to really ripple out into our larger world. And they are practices that can also be explored in groups. For now, I invite you to take a scan of your personal life and sense where you feel like you are caught, in some way, in aversion, hatred or conflict — where there is some distance with another person, something painful going on, some suffering.

If you are not finding someone you know well, it can be more in the societal field. Wherever you feel a sense of conflict, of adversary, of enemy, then that is the place to attend to. And notice that, if you picked a place of conflict, the emotions of anger or fear . . . aversion.

The beginning of any of these practices is just to have the intention that this may be the *darkness of the womb*. And you might even try on the Bodhisattva prayer: *Please, may these circumstances, may these feelings that I am having, may this experience serve to awaken my heart — serve to awaken compassion and wisdom.* That prayer makes you available.

You might sense: *What am I believing? What am I believing — about another person or myself or the world — that is creating or generating the hatred, the anger?*” Sense how it feels to believe that. It may be a belief in badness or evil of another, the wrongness of another . . . may be a belief that you are being rejected, disrespected, misunderstood. It doesn’t mean there aren’t some accurate perceptions that are useful, it just means that, if there is aversion, you are creating the other into

an enemy. How does it feel to believe this? Is it possible to sense that this is *real but not true* and sense whether it is useful?

Check under whatever you are believing or thinking and sense the real vulnerability or feelings that are there. Wherever there is conflict or aversion, what is under that? What is the unmet need? Is it a need for safety? Or concern for other's safety? Is there fear? Is the unmet need one of wanting connection and feeling hurt?

Breathe with whatever you are feeling. Whatever is under there, whatever the expression of aversion, anger, fear, or grief is in your body — just to breathe with it. This is the step of feeling your feelings. There is a kind of willingness. If it helps, you can put your hand on your heart or your cheek, to keep company with what is here. This begins the next step of offering care and it can be very, very powerful. I often put two hands on my heart and just really feel that the most loving place in me is holding and bearing witness to the feelings that need attention. Actively turning towards love — contacting feelings and turning towards love.

And if it is hard to offer yourself love, you might imagine whatever loving beings in your life that you trust and are helpful to you. Imagine they are surrounding you, offering love and care to the place in you that feels most vulnerable. That love might be in the form of acceptance or forgiveness. *I love you just as you are*. Or I sometimes say to myself: *It's okay sweetheart*. Sense that, in the larger community of care that you belong to — known and unknown — and throughout this world, there are hearts that are awakening, that are generous, that are concerned, that love and forgive and are willing to act.

Sensing your own most awake heart . . . the place in you that is holding the woundedness or vulnerability . . . what I sometimes call your future self — that what you are emerging into, becoming, your wisest self — so that you can now witness from your wisest, most loving-self, the situation that you have brought up. And sense the possibilities for creative action. How might you respond to this situation and have some new choices?

Again, just coming back to the starting place of feeling your sincerity. *May this situation . . . may whatever arises . . . serve the awakening of this heart*. And then, widening your view, sensing this heart-space that is including our whole world — so

you can sense our country and all countries on the globe, the earth, all beings. Sense the challenges, the beauty, the mystery and the messiness, the hurt and the pain. Sensing it all in your heart, feel your prayer for all beings: *May whatever darkness there is – the regressive tendencies, the mean-spiritedness, the hurt, the suffering – may it serve awakening. May this be the darkness of the womb. May there be a rebirthing into a world that is filled with compassion.*

We close with a very simple prayer:

In the name of the daybreak
and the eyelids of morning
and the wayfaring moon
and the night when it departs,

I swear I will not dishonor
my soul with hatred,
but offer myself humbly
as a guardian of nature,
as a healer of misery,
as a messenger of wonder,
as an architect of peace.

In the name of the sun and its mirrors
and the day that embraces it
and the cloud veils drawn over it
and the uttermost night
and the male and the female
and the plants bursting with seed
and the crowning seasons
of the firefly and the apple,

I will honor all life
—wherever and in whatever form
it may dwell—on Earth my home,

and in the mansions of the stars.⁹

Namaste and thank you for your attention.

For more talks and meditations, please visit: tarabrach.com.

⁹ Ackerman, D. (2000). School Prayer. In *I Praise My Destroyer* (p. 3). New York, NY: Vintage Books.