

Living Beautifully?

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Readings

Matthew 13:44 – Christian scripture

The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Dhammapada 21:1 – Buddhist scripture

If by renouncing a small (or limited) pleasure one derives great bliss, the wise one relinquishes that smaller pleasure in view of the greater one.

from *Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*, by Pema Chodron

...openness arises from the trust that we all have basic goodness and that we can interact with one another in ways that bring that out. Instead of reacting aggressively when we're provoked, endlessly perpetuating the cycle of pain, we trust that we can engage with others from a place of curiosity and caring and in that way contact their innate decency and wisdom.

A friend who works in a department store decided some years ago that she would test her belief that everyone is basically good. She wanted to see if she could find anyone she felt was not a candidate. Every day she encountered friendly people, for sure, but also plenty of rude people, arrogant people, manipulative people, and downright mean-spirited people. In each case she experimented with ways to go beneath their facades, to go past their defenses and contact their good sense, their humor, and their kindness. When we last talked, she hadn't yet met anyone she felt lacked basic goodness, and she's been working at that store for fifteen years.

Sermon

Pema Chodron had me hooked just with her book's title: *Living Beautifully*. How could anyone resist? Who wouldn't want to live beautifully?

Well, I didn't at first notice the continuation of the title, which was in smaller, darker print: ...*with Uncertainty and Change*.

Ah, *Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*!

But you know what? It seems to me that this actually makes the idea of "living beautifully" even more attractive. No punches pulled here, no pretending that the world is anything other than a world filled with plenty of uncertainty and unceasing change. So

no chance that, for Pema Chodron anyway, “living beautifully” would be about finding a way to skirt uncertainty and to eliminate changes (or at least avoid the changes of which we are not so fond). Not at all. For as Pema Chodron writes, it is in any case an “illusion that experiencing constant security and well-being is the ideal state.”

Further, she writes, it is in the grip of that illusion that we do all sorts of things that in the end cause greater, not less, suffering: working too hard, eating or drinking too much, spending way too many hours in front of screens, and so on. And for all this? Again as Pema Chodron writes, “somehow we never quite achieve the state of unwavering satisfaction we’re seeking.”

Then she goes even one step further, asserting that “the cause of our suffering (is) our resistance to the fundamental uncertainty of our situation.” (Which not only is good Buddhist teaching... but I think is exactly right.)

So, yes, this is about “living beautifully” in the world not as we wish it would or could be, but in the world as it is.

Which, the more you think about it, is appealing indeed.

Maybe somehow connected to that “treasure hidden in a field” in Jesus’s parable, some treasure that helps us make sense of our lives, helps us learn how to live.

Further, if living beautifully is not about somehow managing to avoid the suffering that can and does come with the territory of uncertainty and change, then it might also have to do with, as we heard in the reading from the Dhammapada, giving up our attachment to “small (or limited) pleasures” (which after all come and go, are uncertain, subject to change) in service of what the text calls “great bliss” which it seems must be something other than our happiness (happiness which is okay, but that comes and goes with the usual – you guessed it – uncertain and changing nature of our lives).

Living beautifully. Buried treasure that brings great joy. Great bliss.

Sounds wonderful. Yet might sound pretty abstract to begin with.

But Pema Chodron’s book is, once we get into it, eminently practical and down-to-earth. That brief anecdote we heard her relate in this morning’s second reading makes it clear enough that “living beautifully” is something we do not do sitting on a meditation cushion all day long or moving to the woods away from the busyness and confusion of city and suburb, but rather something we can do right where we are, wherever that may be.

Sure, might be a good idea to sit on a cushion now and then to settle our busy monkey-minds, or to get off into nature now and then to restore our souls, but mostly this “living beautifully” can – indeed must – be something we do right in the midst of... everything.

As for this little department store story, it seems to me we can understand it from two perspectives: certainly from the perspective of the woman who works at the store, but also from the perspective of her customers.

Pema Chodron’s friend who works in the store was striving to live beautifully through the way she chose (note that important word “chose”) to interact with her

customers. It would have been so easy (we all know this) for her to react to rude customers with sullenness or by ignoring them, or for her to react to aggressive customers by responding with anger, and so on.

Instead, she *chose* to respond in ways that might “contact their good sense, their humor, and their kindness”. We can imagine what that might look like. As simple as a smile or perhaps asking “How are you doing?” with a tone that suggests she really wants to know. In any case *not* being directly reactive, *not* allowing her proverbial buttons to be pushed.

As for those rude, arrogant, manipulative, even downright mean-spirited people? They are beautiful too, perhaps many of them unaware of their own beauty deep down, yet many of them, maybe most of them, likely struggling or striving to live more beautifully (however they might name this) – and maybe just having a bad day.

We have a view of the woods out our back windows at home. It is a fairly dense woods, each tree in its own way reaching for enough light, each tree in ways we cannot see, sending down roots no doubt tangled every which way with others. Some of the trees have some dead branches, many of the trees are twisted this way and that. “Perfect” with some sort of imagined geometric symmetry? Not so much. But beautiful? You bet.

Beautiful like the beauty of a ninety-five year old face with the lines and wrinkles to show for all those years of sorrow and joy, struggle and ease. Beautiful like the beauty of someone struggling to shake an addiction of one sort or another, including all of the setbacks and pain that can be involved. Beautiful like the beauty of someone seeking to be less reactively angry, and not always getting it right. Beautiful like every customer in that store.

In all this, I’m reminded of wisdom once offered by Buddhist teacher Shunryu Suzuki: “You are perfect just as you are... and you could use a little improvement.”

We could just as well paraphrase, “You are beautiful just as you are... and you could become even more beautiful.”

Well, in her hundred and thirty-nine pages, Pema Chodron offers a variety of perspectives and practices to help us more fully live beautifully with uncertainty and change. With most of what she has to say put in the context of what are called in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition three vows, or three commitments: to not cause harm (by learning “to work with our thoughts and emotions and to refrain from speaking or acting out of confusion”), to helping others (by “keeping our hearts and minds open and to nurturing our compassion with the longing to ease the suffering of the world”), and to “resolve to embrace the world just as it is” (“to see anything and everything as a means by which we can awaken further”).

Do no harm.

Help others.

Embrace the world as it is – which is, remember, filled with uncertainty and always changing.

Tall order? Yes it is! But one step at a time, one day at a time, doing our best to bring mindfulness to every moment with increasing understanding of our own reactivity as well as increasing understanding of and presence with others in the midst of their unique circumstances and sometimes reactivity.

I don't know about you, but perhaps a little like me you begin many or most days with a calendar of commitments or appointments along with a to do list.

A question for you: How often does a day go precisely as you've planned?

Okay then. Me too.

I'm at a ministers' meeting years ago and a phone call comes in – my daughter has had a fall on the playground at school and is on her way to the emergency room. All was well in the end, but my day way turned upside down.

Or this. I arrive at predetermined time and place to meet a friend. No friend. Turns out I had the wrong day.

More simply – we never know how any particular conversation will go, or who we will meet as we walk down the street, or how a news story first thing in the morning will color our whole day, maybe change all of our lives.

But all this is how the world *is*, even though not always how we might have imagined or wished it to be.

So, to put all this one more way: Can we move a little more in synch with how it is, with how a moment or a day or a week or a life is unfolding? Move with something approaching, however inadequately it may feel, with the grace (beauty) of a basketball player who is working a pre-set play... until everything changes and she has to adjust quite literally on the run, moving this way instead of that, making a pass instead of a shot, forgetting the errant pass or shot quickly enough to have learned something but remained present for the next moment and the next as everything on the court keeps changing.

Seems to me, worth giving it a try anyway.

There is, needless to say, much in our lives over which we have little control.

But – and to a certain extent much of this boils down to the “serenity prayer” – we do have more control than we often realize when it comes to how we will react or respond to the changes and uncertainties, to the good news and the bad news, to each person we encounter in the course of our day... resolved in our workplace, in our home, in the midst of daily errands, in the store, at the dump, in the midst of political conversations and turmoil, mindfully resolved to do no harm, to help... in the world as it is... which is at the same time the world as it may become when more and more of us resolve to live more and more beautifully – which means living more and more from what we can call our higher or better, in fact truer, self.

So may it be