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Arlington Street Church
2 December, 2018

On The Spot

American Tibetan Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön, commends to us an ancient teaching with a fabulous new name: On The Spot practice, the “practice of being fully present, feeling your heart, and greeting the next moment with an open mind. [You can be On the Spot] ... at any time: when you wake up in the morning, before a difficult conversation, whenever fear or discomfort arises.”¹

When I was serving our congregation in Provincetown, the tradition began of trying to extend the tourist season into early October with special, themed weekends. Somehow, our very first attempt combined Women’s Weekend, Leather Weekend, and Fantasia Fair, meaning that our little fishing village and artist colony was suddenly, exuberantly brimming with a gender-bending celebration of lesbians, gay men, and crossdressers. It was fabulous. Church that Sunday was amazing.

I had noticed, seated in the midst of a sea of scantily, leather-clad men and extremely tall women, a very blond, very wholesome-looking family. The children, seated between their mother and father, were beautifully dressed and clearly used to being in church. I felt a ping of joy at our diversity.

After the service, the father approached me, and asked if we might speak for a moment. He was visibly upset. My heart sank. I was so happy ... and he was not. I led him into my study and shut the door.

“Reverend,” he began. I braced myself. “I have reason to believe that there was a homosexual in your church this morning.”

I’ll let you imagine some of the responses that went through my mind. Despite years of practicing On The Spot, it was all I could do to keep from blurting out something defensive and offensive. Maybe it was the fruit of spiritual

¹ Pema Chödrön, *Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*

practice, or maybe it was grace; something — something — stopped me from opening my mouth. He continued.

“I’m afraid you’re looking at him.”

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As his coming out poured forth in a flood of anguish, I had just enough spaciousness to realize how differently this conversation might have gone had I stopped him before he was able to finish — if I’d shut down or shot down rather than taken that one, deep breath into my heart and stayed open.

I have never almost-made that mistake again.

An On The Spot practice, writes Pema Chödrön, “is to walk down the street with the intention of staying as awake as possible to whomever we meet. This is training in being emotionally honest with ourselves and becoming more available to others.... We notice if we feel attraction, aversion, or indifference, without adding anything extra like self-judgment. We might feel compassion toward someone who looks depressed, or cheered up by someone who’s smiling to himself. We might feel fear and aversion for another person without even knowing why.... As we pass people, we simply notice whether we open up or shut down....

“[We can practice] this way for even one block of a city street — [notice] where we open up and where we shut down, ... without praise or blame....”² — and see what happens.”

Pema Chödrön continues, “This ... is a beautiful way to claim ... your spiritual warriorship. In other words, it is a way to claim ... your kindness, your strength. Whenever it occurs to you, you can pause briefly, touch in with how you’re feeling, both physically and mentally, and then connect with your heart — even putting your hand on your heart, if you want to. This is a way of extending warmth and acceptance to whatever is going on for you right now.... Whatever it is, you can let it be there just as it is, without labeling it good or bad, without telling yourself you should or shouldn’t be feeling that way. Having connected with what is, with love ... you can go forward with curiosity and courage.”³

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Auburn Sandstrom tells this On the Spot story.

² Pema Chödrön, *Comfortable with Uncertainty*

³ Pema Chödrön, *Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*

“The year is 1992, Ann Arbor, Michigan. I’m curled up in a fetal position on a filthy carpet in a very cluttered apartment. In in horrible withdrawal from a drug ... I’ve been addicted to for several years now.

“In my hand, I have a little piece of paper.... I’ve been folding it and unfolding it, to the point that it’s almost falling apart.

“I am in a state of bald terror.... And [I’ve] never been in a darker or more desperate place.... My husband [is] out running the streets, trying to get ahold of some of the stuff we [need], but I [know] if he [succeeds,] he [is] not going to share.

“And if I could, I would jump out of my own skin and run screaming into the streets to get what I need. But right behind me, sleeping in the bedroom, is my baby boy.

“I had started out fairly auspiciously. I was raised in comfort and privilege.... I had [a] master’s degree.... But ... I started noticing things like poverty and racism and unconscionable injustice. And that people like me were mostly causing it. It was a huge revelation for me.

“I came to the conclusion that the thing I needed to do with ... all the comfort ... I’d had all my life was to destroy it....

“And you know, every time I’ve come to a major faulty conclusion in life, the man comes right after who will help me live it out. And this was no different.

“Man, was he beautiful — a radical revolutionary ... poet from Detroit.

“I was twenty-four, he was forty, and I was smitten, in love ... [with] how he talked, how he looked at the world. And it was so beautiful for a while, until he introduced me to one of his old activist friends, who introduced us to the drug [we were] now addicted to.

“I had tried to ... transform myself. I had wanted to shed my class. I would have shed my race If I could have. But instead of transformation, ... I was [living a] life that was going to lead me to losing the most precious thing I’d ever had, ... which was that baby boy.

“I was emaciated, covered in bruises ... so anxious in such a desperate state ... that I became willing to punch the numbers into the phone.

“The phone number was something my mother had sent me [— not that I’d] been speaking to my parents ... for three, four, five years.

“But she’d managed to get this number to me by mail, and she said, ‘... This is a Christian counselor.... Maybe sometime you could call this person.’

“I punched in the numbers. I heard the phone pick up.

“[A man said], ‘Hello.’

“And I said, ‘Hi, I got this number from my mother. Uh, do you think you could maybe talk to me?’

“I heard him shuffling around in the bed.... You could tell he was pulling some sheets around himself and sitting up. I heard a little radio in the background. He snapped it off, and he became very present.

“He said, ‘Yes, yes, yes. What’s going on?’

“I hadn’t told anybody the truth, including myself, for a long, long time. And I told him I wasn’t feeling so good, and that I was scared....

“Before long, I started telling him other truths, like I might have a drug problem, and I really, really love my husband, and I wouldn’t want you to say anything bad about him, but he has hit me a few times....

“I started telling those truths. And this man didn’t judge me. He just sat with me, ... and listened, and had such a kindness and such a gentleness.

“‘Tell me more.... Oh, that must have hurt.... Oh.’

“... I’d made that call at two in the morning. And he stayed up with me the whole night, just talking, just listening, just being there until the sun rose.

“By then I was feeling calm. The raw panic had passed.... I was feeling like, I can splash my face with water ... I can probably do this day....

“I was very grateful to him.... I said, ‘Hey, you know, I really appreciate you and what you’ve done for me tonight. Aren’t you supposed to be getting me to read some Bible verses or something?’

“He laughed and said, ‘Well, I’m glad this was helpful to you.’

“I said, ‘No, really. You’re very, very good at this. I mean, you’ve seriously done a [very] big thing for me. How long have you been a Christian counselor?’

“There’s a long pause. I hear him shifting. ‘Auburn, please don’t hang up,’ he says. ‘I’ve been trying not to bring this up.’

“‘What?’ I ask.

“‘You won’t hang up?’

“‘No.’

“‘I’m so afraid to tell you this. But the number you called....’ He pauses again. ‘You got the wrong number. [I’m not a Christian counselor. I’m not even Christian, or a counselor.]’

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“[And] I felt this kind of joy,” says Auburn Sandstrom, “like I was shining.... I had gotten to see that there was this completely random love in the universe. That it could be unconditional. And that some of it was for me.

“... I can’t tell you that I got my life totally together [all at once].... But it became possible to get some help and get ... out. And it also became possible as a teetotaling, semi-sane, single parent to raise up that precious ... baby boy into a magnificent ... scholar and athlete, who graduated from Princeton University ... with honors.

“This is what I know. In the [longest,] deepest, [darkest] night of despair, if you can get just one pinhole of light, all of grace rushes in.”⁴

Beloved spiritual companions,

Let’s practice being on the spot —

⁴ Auburn Sandstrom, *A Phone Call*, as told on the Moth stage, 11/21/15

practice coming into the present,
feeling our heart,
and greeting each moment
with an open mind;
practice staying as awake as possible
to whomever and whatever we meet.

May we claim
our spiritual warriorship —
our curiosity and courage,
our kindness and strength,
our acceptance and love.

May we seek to be
sources of light
through which all of grace
rushes in.

Amen.