

The Broken-Hearted Warrior

Everywhere we look, forces of disintegration seem to have the upper hand, with organizations at every level – from schools and religious communities to cities and nations – seemingly unable to function sanely or to foster human development. All across the planet we find a staggering array of symptoms of loss of souls, both in individuals and in the world at large. Our very humanness seems to be under assault and at risk. So many aspects of modern life – the destruction of the environment, the loss of neighbourhood and community, the decline of education, the production of devitalized food, the meaningless work so many people perform, the rise of random violence, the blind allegiance to technological “progress” without consideration of its terrible costs, the fascination with glamour, hype and image, the pervasive political lies and media distortions that masquerade as truth, the descent into growing chaos and poverty among much of the world’s population, the concentration of power in the hands of transnational corporations that have little interest in the common good, and on and on – suggest that humanity has sold its soul in a Faustian exchange for worldly dominion, and that the payment is rapidly coming due.

And if we look within ourselves, we find turmoil and confusion: Our minds and hearts have either grown numb or are running wild. We have lost our bearings.

Perhaps our first impulse is to turn away, close our eyes to the magnitude of suffering all around, and withdraw into our cocoon, turning to relationship as an island of refuge from a world gone mad. This is understandable. We feel overwhelmed.

But there is another impulse, which we may have felt when we were young and our heart first registered the shock of human suffering: We would like to save the world. We would like to do something to make everything right, to clean up the environment, to overcome ignorance and injustice or to help people tormented by poverty or despair. If we stay with this impulse for a moment, before dismissing it as hopelessly romantic or idealistic, we recognize it as the heart’s pure response to the pain of this world.

Yet it soon becomes clear that we cannot readily save anyone, much less ourselves, from this pain. If we are to remain open to life and capable of engaging with our world rather than succumbing to depression or cynicism, we must learn how to live with a broken heart.

It is only through letting our heart break that we discover something unexpected: the heart cannot actually break, it can only break open. What breaks when we are touched by life's pain is the contraction around our heart that we have been carrying for so long. When we feel both our love for this world and the pain of this world - together, at the same time - the heart breaks out of this shell. Then the heart's true character is revealed - as an openness, an acute sensitivity where we feel the world inside us and are not separate from it. This is like removing a bandage and exposing our flesh to the air. There is no way to avoid this rawness, except by living in a state of contraction. To live with a broken-open heart is to experience life full strength.

Facing the condition of our world with an open heart is something like the situation of the man in the Zen story who is chased over the edge of a cliff by a tiger. As he holds on for dear life to some branches growing on the face of the cliff, he notices a mouse gnawing away at their roots. The man sizes up his predicament: hungry tiger above, yawning abyss below, and all support rapidly eroding away. Just as he is about to give himself up for lost, he notices some wild strawberries growing in the branches. Suddenly revived, he reaches out to taste the tiny berries, delighting in their outrageous sweetness.

Like the man in the story, we are tempted to give up when we find no simple remedy for the degenerative forces sweeping across our planet. Yet in moments when we can reach out and celebrate life's beauty, in spite of its pain or sorrow, we discover something sweet indeed – our own wild and beautiful heart.

According to sacred tradition, the heart is not something emotional or sentimental. Hinduism and Buddhism regard it as the pith essence, while Sufism understands it as a divine subtlety that reveals the deepest truths. It is a doorway leading into the core of our being – the living presence of spirit and soul.

When our heart breaks open, it breaks through to this deeper core, we waken from paralysis into a greater depth of soul and, along with that, a deeper love for this world.

To avoid going numb when encountering the pain of the world, we need access to the warrior within, the one who can ask: "What deeper resource is this adversity calling on me to bring forth?" In learning to make use of suffering to cultivate our capacities for strength, vision, love, faith or humour, we forge the vessel of soul and begin to free ourselves from resentment or depression about the state of the world. And we may find that the earth in her plight is calling us to waken like this and that, as we do so, she awakens as well, through us. In this way, the broken-hearted warrior is able to keep on loving in spite of everything.

When the heart breaks open, it marks the beginning of a real love affair with this world. It is a broken-hearted love affair, rather than the conventional kind based on hope and expectation. Only in this fearless love, that can respond to life's pain as well as its beauty, can we be of real help to ourselves or anyone else in this difficult age. The broken-hearted warrior is an essential archetype for our time.