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Giving the View

In Buddhism, if someone offers a teaching that inspires a new perspective, it's called "giving the view." We say, "So-and-so gave me the view." I know it's funny English; it must be a literal translation from something that makes perfect sense in East Asia. But I love this expression, because it is exactly what I feel about the gift of insight: in a moment of clarity, I have been given the view.

Psychotherapist and philosopher Piero Ferrucci wrote a beautiful book called *The Power of Kindness: The Unexpected Benefits of Leading a Compassionate Life*. He tells a story that gave me the view. He writes, "Every evening ... a woman I know, let's call her Dorothea ... hears her neighbors' baby girl crying in the apartment next to hers. The parents put the child to sleep alone in the dark. The baby cries for a long time while the parents watch television. The baby's desperate crying expresses all her [misery], her solitude. What should Dorothea do? She is uncertain. Speaking to the parents might make things worse. She decides to sing. Just as she can hear the baby, the bay can hear her. Every evening, when they put the baby to bed, Dorothea sings her sweet lullabies, talks to her through the thin walls, consoles and comforts her. [Like magic,] the baby hears the invisible, friendly voice, stops crying, and falls peacefully asleep,"¹ and Dorothea, too, is consoled. Like magic, I am given the view: we, too, can choose to meet anguish with kindness, and sing through the wall.

Recently, some of us had the opportunity to spend an evening with my friend and teacher, Sylvia Boorstein. Sylvia spoke of the spiritual practice of stopping; the wisdom of pausing in the headlong rush of our lives to restore our perspective, to take the larger view of our lives, and, if we're lucky, to be given the view. Spiritual practice, she said, is about widening – and I would add deepening – our view.

And then she told this story: Two days after the presidential election, having

1 Piero Ferrucci, *The Power of Kindness*, p. 22

slept almost not at all for two nights from her exhilaration at the outcome, Sylvia stopped in at a fabric store she has matronized for many years, to leave off her newly-finished needlepoint to be backed and framed. Diane, the shopkeeper, was in her familiar place behind the desk, but, in their exchange of greetings, it became immediately apparent that Sylvia was ecstatic and Diane was not. Diane, in fact, proceeded to tell Sylvia that she was so upset by Barack Obama's victory, she had closed the shop the day before. How could Sylvia possibly be happy, she wondered; had she not read those terrible things on the internet about the president-elect, and did she not realize his sinister associations? The sleep-deprived Sylvia, thrown completely off-center, responded, "But do you know about Mr. McCain's associations?" As it came out of her mouth, she knew she had made a terrible mistake. "Diane," she said, "I have to go. We'll talk later."

Sylvia left the shop and got into the car and thought about going right back in to apologize, but she was too whipped-up. On the twenty minute car ride home, she calmed down, and, once back at home, she phoned Diane to apologize.

It gets better, but let me just pause to say out loud what many of you may be thinking: *Why should Sylvia apologize?* Sylvia was the customer, after all, and Diane started it; wrong on two counts, completely inappropriate behavior for a business owner.

Let's answer with another question, this one from *A Course in Miracles*. Here is is: *Would you rather be happy, or would you rather be right?* Would you rather be on good terms with other people, as much as possible, or do you want to create enemies over political differences? Do we have to shut down, or can we open up to the possibility of friendliness with those whose views differ from ours, that we might have an opportunity to share something of our understandings, and, even, to learn something from theirs? Might we just give one another the view?

Sylvia had to apologize because she is highly committed to, and values, perhaps, above all, right relations.

So she called Diane at the store, but Diane didn't answer the phone. What if I've upset her so much, Sylvia wondered, that she had to lock up and close the shop again? Sylvia really got herself into a state. But she forged ahead, and when the answering machine beeped, she launched into her apology. First, the Nine Magic Words That Could Change The World: *I'm Sorry. I Made a Mistake. Please Forgive Me.* Diane, she said, we've known each other for a long time, and our relationship is important to

me. I'm sorry I didn't hear that you were frightened. I should have comforted you and assured you. Maybe after a month or two you'll feel better about the election results.

My cousin in San Francisco, she continued, also votes differently from me, and I always wish that she and I could sit down and talk about it. But she doesn't want to discuss politics. I'm going away for a few weeks, now, but maybe when I get back, you might be willing to go out for coffee with me, and we could sit down and you could tell me your thoughts and I'll tell you my thoughts. Again, I want to say to you that I'm very sorry.

There's more, but let's just look at this apology, which is probably as close to enlightenment as any apology is ever going to get. First, again, there are the Nine Magic Words That Can Change The World. You can say them with me this time, to commit them to heart: I'm Sorry. I Made a Mistake. Please Forgive Me. Second, there is the assurance that their relationship is important to Sylvia, and she chooses the relationship over being right. Third, there is complete owning of Sylvia's part of the derailment. My very favorite piece in this apology is, "I'm sorry I didn't hear that you were frightened." How extraordinary to see that, when someone is belligerent – which, by the way, has the same root as the word *bellicose*, from the Latin word for war-like or war-mongering – when someone is belligerent, what underlies so much bad behavior is fear. In other words, do we pound on the wall, or do we sing through it? And fourth, finally, there is the invitation to reconciliation. Let's sit down together. The clear message is, I know we can work this out.

Here's the end of the story, so far: Twenty minutes later, Diane called back; she had been with another customer. Sylvia, thank you so much for calling. You're right; I'm frightened. I'm sorry; we shouldn't have spoken like that to one another. Let's get you a new needlepoint to start, and we'll sit with our needlepoint, and you tell me what you think, and I'll tell you what I think. I'll tell you what frightens me, and you can tell me what frightens you. That would mean a lot to me.

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Here is a model for moving from being enemies to being people with different opinions. It all starts with spiritual practice. I cannot say this strongly enough: if we are going to live in peace – if we are going to be happy, peaceful, and free – we are called to the practice of taking the larger view. The practice, in three simple steps – simple, but not easy! – is

First, stop.

Second, compose the mind.

And third: take the view.

Stop, breathe, find your breath, breathe, follow your breath, breathe. Quiet your mind. Wait for the roiling pool to quiet. Let the mud settle to the bottom, and the surface to become a mirror. And look – look widely and deeply, and see what the view has to offer. You might want to ask yourself, “What's *really* going on?” Keep asking, until the truth – the whole truth, from whatever broken place – emerges.

As we practice, just as Sylvia Boorstein has given us the view, we can, in turn, give it to others.

When people ask me, “When is the best time for spiritual practice? When should I meditate? What time of day is best for prayer?” I answer, always; all the time! Barring that, there is a profound benefit to choosing a regular time in your day for your spiritual practice. Perhaps, before we leap out of bed in the morning, we can stop, compose our mind, and take the view. Perhaps, as we lie down to sleep, we can stop, compose our mind, and take the view. Perhaps on our commute, or before meals, or after a phone call, or between appointments, and perhaps – just maybe – we can learn to do it in the heat of the moment, when we have accidentally stepped off the path or been thrown off track.

Observant Jews, as you know, are required to *daven Mincha* – to say their prayers – three times a day. Sylvia Boorstein tells the story of two Jewish-owned businesses that were locked in a terrible conflict. They had spent hours and hours with mediators at the negotiating table, and things could have been going better, when, suddenly, it was time for afternoon prayers. The men all stood, faced east, and *davened* together. When their prayers were concluded, the men sat down to resume negotiations. But somehow, after *Mincha*, it felt different. They had been reminded – stop, compose the mind, take the view – reminded that they were actually playing for the same team.

My spiritual companions, may we seek to remember that we are always playing for the same team. Stop, compose the mind, and take the view. Say, “I’m sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me.” Especially, let us remember that underlying so much bad behavior – others', as well as our own – is fear. Let us choose to meet anguish with kindness, and sing through the wall. It takes practice, spiritual practice, and so let us begin. It could – we can – change the world.