

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 13 March, 2016

A Path with Heart

“There is always one more thing to do, one more experience to have, one more person to meet, one more place to go. This, “writes Buddhist teacher Jenna Sundell, “is both the good news and the bad news.”¹

Here in the developed world, we are flooded with information and options: more and more, our access and ability are limited only by our imagination, our tenacity, and – so far – our mortality. Ironically, instead of being made rich by this jackpot, we can feel paralyzed. We know we should do the next best thing, but what to choose, and what to ignore?

Many of us make our way to this beloved spiritual community because we want to live our lives as if we are here on earth to fulfill a divine purpose. For some of us, the path to walk with that purpose is well-marked and well-trod. For others, there is only the faintest hint of a trail; or perhaps, as Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* begins, “Midway upon the journey of our² life, I found myself in dark woods, the right road lost.”

Don Juan Matus, the Mexican Yaqui Indian shaman, instructed his student, Carlos Castaneda, in the way out.

Look at every path closely and deliberately.

Try it as many times as you think necessary.

Then ask yourself and yourself alone one question....

I will tell you what it is:

*Does this path have a heart?*³

¹ Jenna Sundell, *Always One More* (blogpost 12/11/15). Please see jennasundell.com/2015/12/always-one-more/#sthash.EXO6Kuhi.UnDQy1SG.dpuf

² *sic*

³ Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan*

The discipline of this kind of spiritual discernment is not for the faint of heart. When Don Juan says, “try it as many times as you think necessary,” he’s talking about a whole new level of try, try again. One of my all-time favorite conversations was with one of you who came to see me at the peak of his career – he had climbed the ladder to the very top of corporate success, and was literally occupying the corner office, in possession of everything we’re supposed to want. But he found that didn’t want what he was supposed to want. As he said it, he had leaned his ladder against the wrong wall.

In search of the path with heart, against all advice except the insistent prodding of that still, small voice from within, he headed back down. Today, he is one of the happiest people I know – and that’s a different kind of wealth.

Jenna Sundell advises that we clear a space in our lives. Make the time, she says, delete appointments with everyone but yourself, lose the distractions, and plumb the depths of your heart and soul to be sure that your ladder is, indeed, leaning against the right wall; that your path is a path with heart.

How to become so quiet that we can hear that still, small voice is a whole sermon in itself. But here’s a good example, shared by a Christian contemplative teacher.

“I had lived many years in a small protected community,” she says. “Then it came to me that it was time to go back to society to serve. I began an integration, going back and forth. I worked at an AIDS hospice and crisis center. Once a month, I would return to my community, my heart longing for silence. I would stand in line when the gift of food was presented, and feel how each thing there, even the most ordinary, was held in a holy way. This is actually how it is all the time; this is the mystery of grace. I knew it wasn’t just the prayer or meditation that was important. It was the silence, stopping and taking a breath, opening the heart, seeing that the whole planet, and everything on it, is holy.

“I want to bring this beauty with me to everyone I touch,” she concludes. “So I return to silence regularly. I know if I can stop and remember this, life will fulfill its promise to me.”⁴

And here’s one more, as told by a former Hindu swami.

“After my ten years of yoga in India, I came back to teach and marry, and later I became head of a temple. My *samadhi* experiences showed me the bliss of all things. Over time I got busy and ... started to lose it.... I tried to meditate more to get it back... [but] it was not giving me much help.... We had conflict in the temple; and in my marriage we fought, sometimes terribly. Some days I wondered if I ever should have tried to practice in this worldly life.

“One day I was visiting my family and taking care of my young nephew. It was a hard day for the swami and the three-year-old. We messed up the house. He threw a tantrum. Finally, I took him in my arms and just held him. I sang *Sanskrit* melodies. And I realized that’s all the world wants, to be held in spite of it all. The *samadhi* and bliss came back as soon as I opened my heart.”⁵

Returning to silence and opening the heart.... Now we’re in trouble, because we have to receive whatever truth surfaces! And that truth is almost certainly not going to invite us to lie around in bed all day, thumbing through magazines and eating bonbons. Chances are, that truth is going to compel us to take action. Jenna Sundell refers to this as “embracing YES.”

That YES can take us to all kinds of unlikely places. Author Hannah Brencher was amazed where it took her. Here’s her story:

She was looking at people’s shoes across the aisle on the subway when she spotted a pair of beat-up, unlaced construction boots. She followed the boots, laceless hole by laceless hole, all the way up, up to the face of an old, old woman. She was tiny. Wisps of gray hair poked out from a bright red cap. And then Hannah Brencher had an idea.

⁴ As told by Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, p. 258

⁵ Kornfield, *op cit*, p. 223

It was a little crazy, actually; thinking of her mother's letters and how, she says, "an ordinary piece of loose-leaf paper morphs into a love letter when a person puts herself into it," Hannah Brencher decided, then and there, that she would write the woman a letter and give it to her as she exited the train.

She wrote and wrote. But when she looked up, the woman was gone. It didn't matter; she was on to something.

Back on the subway a few days later, she decided to leave the letter she had written to the woman on the train for someone else to find. "[I] folded [it,] and placed it beside me. When I got to my stop, ... the letter [slipped] down onto the seat as I walked away."

More letters, she says, "came marching out of me, ... until soon I had filled up [a] notebook." She began to scatter love letters all over New York City. "I tried to imagine," she continues, "what would make me pick up a letter if I found it on a random ... train ... in a coffee shop ... [or propped on a bathroom sink].... I [wrote], *If you find this letter, then it's for you....* And once I had set each one in its place, I would write even more. And you want to know why? Because it made me feel something."

In the months that followed, Hannah Brencher "slid [letters] into coat pockets in department stores, ... left them in fitting rooms ... [stuck] them into the seats at work when [she] would attend large meetings. "I was," she says, "playing Juliet to the city."

Eventually, she inspired accomplices. She started a website – MoreLoveLetters.com – uploading stories of people who would be uplifted by letters and connecting them with people who are only too happy to write to complete strangers. A spring tide of astonishing stories flooded forth from Hannah Brencher's YES. People expecting nothing more than bills and coupons in their mailboxes found love letters. How great is that?

The friend of one recipient observed, "It's not that the letters heal you. [It's that they] show you you're not alone, and ... you're not struggling for nothing." There emerged for Hannah, she says, "a big idea about human beings: ... that if you give [us] something to do, a mission, [we] will show

up.... [And most] of us are good. I know that's always up for debate, but it feels as if, at the core, we are good.”

She writes, “There was a soldier who has “the dirt of both Afghanistan and Iraq deep in the grooves of his boots.... We mailed him a bundle [of letters]. One day ... sitting on the floor and unable to speak ... he called his sister, crying ... over the letters strangers had sent, cheering [him on. His sister] told me that one small act had renewed her faith in humanity.”⁶

Beloved spiritual companions,

What is the next best thing to do?

Ask, Does this path have a heart?

Seek silence,
stop, breathe,
open the heart,

know that the whole planet, and everything on it, is holy.

It's all the world wants, to be held in spite of it all.

Embrace YES.

Feel it.

This is for you.

Amen.

⁶ Hannah Brencher, *If You Find This Letter*