

health & wellbeing

Did It Hurt to Listen?

BY JOHN CALVI

The State House was full of civility. The press reports said so.

But there were many insults. And if you listened to or saw or read these insults, they probably left a stain somewhere in you. It would be hard to be called an abomination, morally sick, the downfall of civilization, unfit, and mentally ill without having some sense of insult and slander.

So what did you do with words that hurt? What's happening now that you listened to those words?

For almost twenty years, I have been helping people to get well from trauma. I've been working with tortured refugees, sexually abused women, and people with AIDS. I have some ideas on getting clean and clear from the words that go deep and hurt.

What we do with words that hurt is part family history, the patterns in conflict we see growing up. A child sees how insults are shaped, their sources and meaning. A child also sees some options for response or non-response and the consequences. But as children, we do this learning without much conscious intent. We may learn things that do not help or are not healthy.

The other part of what we do with words that hurt depends on having a sense of our own goodness or not. I don't mean self-esteem, which relates more to the outward

idea of how we fit in to the village. I mean the clear inner sense that at our essence, we are good, and that this goodness has power. This sense of goodness accumulates from the give and take of kindness and from the rules we decide are important and should be kept. It might have a spiritual frame, or might be modeled after the person whose light we're most drawn to.

The big picture

The first thing to ask: "Is there any part of this I can laugh at? Can I see any of the absurdity and laugh at it?" If we can do this, then it's generally a sign that we have found some way to accommodate the pain these words bring. It's as though we've made some understanding with parts of the process. This would exclude sarcasm, which is part anger and part fear. Real humor would show some sense of knowing truth about yourself and others. It could have a bite to it, but its power would be to reveal honesty more than to be used as offense.

If we have no humor possible around these hurtful words, then possibly the echoes of earlier hurt are very strong within us and leave no room for humor or understanding. This could give us a narrow view of our choices and ourselves.

The next part is this: "Can you remember the first times when you were oppressed for being gay?" Autobiographical memory teaches us the obstacles we faced and the moves

we made because of them. Can we connect the dots between the times we were separated for difference and the ways we responded over the years? Who were the allies? Where was safe space? What did we tell ourselves about the oppressors and ourselves?

There are frames we can put around hurt to consider its meaning. First is the personal or emotional, choices made about friends and honesty. Do you remember how it felt then and know how it feels now? How does this make up some of who you are? Where was there hurt along the way? What did you do with that hurt?

The second frame is professional and political, more obvious choices and strategies we make to keep our power in the world: income, living and work places, laws, and generally keeping worldly options open. What do you know about the choices you made (and make) for strength and dignity along the way? What has that meant in your knowledge of power and its uses?

There is also the spiritual aspect to consider. The great teachers of shedding oppression – Gandhi, King, Buddha, Jesus, and Audre Lord, among others – understood their struggle was connected to things greater than themselves. This gave them the rare perspective to not take insults quite so personally.

They understood that light would always naturally gather some dark. They understood they were to break unjust rules and then stand there and talk about it until all hell broke loose. Hell breaking loose all around was the first part of the reorganization, part of the reach toward something better.

If you have the long view, the noise of insults might appear to be just so much stat-

ic. However, if you are still ringing with the hurt of early oppression, there might not be much room for that bigger view. You know the person who has been out since before there were clubs to join, has gone on to make a life, help others to do the same, and has the scars to show for it? This is where that person becomes an

most and let them know what's going on.

Watch for the usual signs of deep stress – uncomfortable changes in sleep, dream life, appetite, digestion, elimination, fear, anger, and fatigue. Give yourself all you need to relax deeply whenever possible.

Watch for things that rest

John Calvi will be conducting a workshop in March to help folks "Process the Hate." FMI: 388-2633 or info@vtfreetomarry.org

elder in our tribe. This is not a matter of age really, but of passionate work and living and reflective attentiveness.

Dealing day to day

There are some practical ways to process all the hate surrounding us amidst the gay marriage debate.

Talk to close friends about all you heard and how it felt. Can you remember details or general impressions? And what are your feelings right now? Can you say when you've felt this way before?

Can you learn how to get angry, let it rip, and then move out of it by watching very carefully where the peak is? Can you get playful with anger – keeping in mind it's a stepping stone, not a homestead?

What are your sources of hugs and kisses in all their varieties? Be in close touch with the loved ones you trust

the body, bring delight and joy to the emotions, and free the mind, and put these things in to regular use. Suffering is neither efficient nor attractive.

Stay honest with all your feelings.

At the very least, I'd like to suggest we sit down with a cup of tea over by the window. Let's watch the snow fall slowly. Let's quietly go over where we've been, where we are, and know our paths. When people are trying to say who we are with insults, it's time to remind ourselves deliberately and consciously that we know what is and is not true. ▼

John Calvi is the composer of "The Ones Who Aren't Here" first recorded by Meg Christian at Carnegie Hall in 1982, and later by Suede on her first album, Easily Suede (1988).

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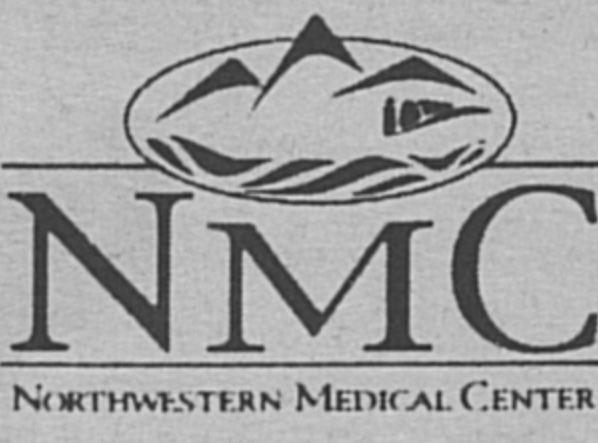
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