

Learning To Stay

Louise Ranck

March 26, 2017 Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster

Stay with me, Jesus said. Remain here with me. Watch, and pray.

And the disciples fell asleep.

My read of this story—and maybe yours, too—has often stirred vague feelings of judgement toward these sleepy guys in the garden. Oh, you stupid, inadequate, disappointing disciples! How could you desert Jesus in *this* hour?

And it's easy for me to read irritation into Jesus's response to his companions. "Can't you stick it out with me a single hour?"

But I am more and more sure that Jesus loved his chosen ones. He knew them well. He had lived with these 11 men and his other devoted followers for three years. He knew their promise. He knew their faults. He knew their genuine and inconsistent human hearts. He had invested his hopes in them.

He may well have been irritated and disappointed with them in this moment, but I believe, no matter what words the Gospel writers put his mouth, that Jesus looked at his messy, falling-short, fallen-asleep disciples with deep, deep compassion.

We see the disciples checking out from their Teacher's agony and from their own anxiety by falling asleep. We see that they are like we are. We find it hard to stay "awake" in the middle of our pain, too.

As Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron puts it, "We should never underestimate our inclination to bolt when we hurt."

Chodron, Pema. [The Places That Scare You: a guide to fearlessness in difficult times](#). Shambhala Publications, Boston, MA, 2001, p 34

Consider Jesus's companions in this moment of the story. Their world was flying apart. They had to be scared silly. Their leader was in grave danger, and for all they knew, their lives were at risk, too, from the religious establishment who were out to bring Jesus down.

They might have still been smarting from Jesus's rebuke a few hours earlier when they acted in ugly ways to the woman who came uninvited to their meal to anoint Jesus with her tears, her expensive oil, and her love. When Jesus named *her* as the one whose care for him would be remembered, perhaps their confidence at being Jesus's truest, most clear-hearted followers had been shaken.

And beyond the immediate anxiety of the moment, maybe they were wondering—if Jesus died, what would become of the New Vision of how to live faithfully that he had been so carefully building.

Painful stuff to hold. Challenging stuff to STAY with.

Science is kind to us in explaining why staying with difficult feelings and situations, and distressing aspects of our selves is so hard for us. All living beings, we are told, are biologically wired to seek pleasure, and to avoid pain.

To choose to stand open to painful circumstances and to painful feelings and to our own wretched internal messes, to allow them, to embrace them—these are not natural human reactions.

We fear what is difficult to face. We fear that our uncomfortable feelings will overwhelm us. We fear that our deep imperfections make us ineligible for membership in human society.

So, often as not, we box up our fears, and send them into exile.

I'm fond of the story of a person who was so flummoxed by her bank account that, when the figures in her record booklet were too muddled to make sense of anymore, she would just close that account and open a new one. (I get this.)

We all have ways to hide out from the unwelcome exiles lodged in our inner lives that are lots more consequential, of course, than ditching a checking account.

We latch on to
this or that comfort,
this or that distraction,
this or that sedative or stimulant,
this or that excitement,
this or that alternative pain,
or that breathlessly full schedule.

Or we send our Pain Train onto a different track, directing all of our jumpy, demanding inner discomfort outward. It may trickle out as from a drip irrigation hose, or it may come blasting out in firehose fashion, flattening whatever is in its way with little regard for whom it injures.

Anything but staying with the hard stuff.

Here's a way to picture how it is to avoid staying with what's hard. You're at the seashore for a week of vacation. But your job for the week is to take this [pink!] beach ball out into the surf and keep it under the water. All day. Every day. (The ball is your exiled fear.)

You dare not let it up because it will hurt, or annihilate you, or disqualify you, and that will be scary. So there you stand, hour after hour, struggling to keep this slippery ball under the surface. You could be having pizza or playing skee ball on the boardwalk, or riding that gorgeous big wave going by. But you are not. You are trapped by your own fear.

(Just to note, the beach ball is likely not enjoying this arrangement very much, either. It has places to go, games to play. All that repressed energy—waiting to live!)

[Pink beach ball bounces out into the middle aisle!]

And there is Jesus, standing in the waves beside our stuck, unhappy selves. He loves his chosen ones—us. He knows us well. He knows our promise. He knows our faults. He knows our genuine and inconsistent hearts. He has invested his hope in us. He looks at us—messy, falling-short, fallen-alseep, so-human us—with deep, deep compassion.

Jesus, if we would let him, could teach us how to stay with what scares us.

How do we start? How do we call back the box of exiled fears and open it?
And . . . *why* do it?

Master scholar and teacher Joseph Campbell offers this idea: “Mythology tells us that where you stumble, [where your strongest resistance is], there your treasure is.”

When we can welcome the exiles home, invite them in, listen to them, give them supper and a warm bed, we find that they bring gifts.

Our uncomfortable feelings, our painful situations, our misguided and shameful actions, all of these bring us missing pieces of our story, pieces of insight, pieces of wisdom for living. They restore crucial parts of our being to us, setting our energy free to create and to love.

When we say, as Jesus would say, “I see you, come in” to the unwanted parts of ourselves, the frightened and vulnerable parts of our being begin to relax into the safety we offer, to trust, to let themselves be known. We move closer to wholeness.

(Brach, Tara. *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*. Bantam Books, NY, NY, 2003, p 76)

What’s more, when we give unconditional friendliness to our “under the water” selves, we also awaken compassion and understanding for every other being who struggles.

Jesus did not have to stay on his sorrowful, agonizing path to betrayal and death. When one of his companions slashed an ear off the High Priest's servant, Jesus said to him, Don't you realize that right now I could call to my Father, and twelve companies of angels would be here to defend me?

(Quick math - a company of soldiers is 6,000 men. Twelves companies of angels would be how many angels?)

Jesus could have called 72,000 angels, or more, to his side, and no Pharisees or Saducees or High Priests or Roman authorities could have touched him.

But he didn't.

As he had before, when his call moved him toward Jerusalem and the inevitable confrontation with the religious authorities, Jesus set his face like a flint, and plunged without hesitation into emotional and physical anguish that match anything we could imagine.

What I see here in the garden is Jesus taking hold of his identity as Beloved Son. I see him crying out to the One Who Called Him, the one who had chosen him to inaugurate a new kingdom built on Love, the one whom he trusted enough to call "Abba," "my own Father."

I see his trust stretching to believe that he could endure what was to come, and that all the kingdom-casting he had done would not vanish, that this was not to be the end of the story.

"Please," he said to his Father, "not what I want. What do *you* want?"

And I see Jesus, as though his hours in the garden were a crucible, becoming God as suffering servant, God who is earning our trust by suffering as we suffer. Compassion, which means to suffer together — compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals.

(Chodron, Pema. [The Places That Scare You](#). Shambhala Publications, Boston, MA, 2007, p 64

A friend who is in an excruciatingly unwelcome situation told me that she recently found herself weeping beside a cross. "If Jesus could do what he did, then maybe I can get through this, too," she said. Yes. This is a doorway that Jesus opened for us by choosing to Stay.

Jesus had committed himself, body, mind and spirit, to establishing a kingdom of Love. This kingdom would not be built on rigidity, control, judgement, false gods, and the repression of the fullness of our humanity.

This kingdom would invite the exiled ones home. Home to a safe space full of compassion for our humanness, a space for healing and learning, a space for finding abundant life, and then showing others the way to abundant life, too.

This commitment carried Jesus into his betrayal, through his trial, and onto his cross.

We can trust, as Jesus did, that our story won't end here, in fear and pain and despair. Because we've read ahead in the Gospels, we know that there is new life beyond this dark week when it seemed that evil would lay the winning hand.

Listen again to what Jesus tells his disciples:

"The shepherd will be struck down; helter skelter the sheep will be scattered. But after I am raised up, I, your Shepherd, will go ahead of you, leading the way to Galilee."

And, "Simon, when you have come through the time of testing, turn to your companions and give them a fresh start."

As Jesus claimed his identity as Beloved Son, he invites us to know that we are Beloved, too, and as beloved ones, we have what we need to Stay, and to move toward new life.

Hear these words from Jan Richardson:

BELOVED is Where We Begin

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
This is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path

there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.

Richardson, Jan. Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons Wanton
Gospeller Press, Orlando, Fl, 2015, p 96

[BELOVED banner is stretched out on the platform]

