

LOVE IS A CALLING

Love is a calling. Love is called forth from within us by certain circumstances and special people. When it emerges, it opens us. Love expands us and shapes us, like a pregnancy. We are so much in the habit of doing that we may imagine we are loving when we are doing something for our beloved. And we may imagine we are loving successfully when our doing accomplishes something. Perhaps we are actually given opportunities to be helpless in order for us to remember that behind all our doing, with its successes and failures, is our being- our presence. Loving presence is a return to our true nature. It is the flower hidden within the seed, that emerges magically in the right circumstances. It is the seed in the womb that when nurtured and given the space to grow, demands to be birthed. Loving presence is our very beingness imbued with the love that Life calls forth in exquisite moments.

When you have the privilege of knowing someone who is very ill or dying, you may be challenged to step past the frustration of feeling helpless and the fear of accepting that nothing can be done. Some of you will fight that idea to the end and refuse to admit that there is no way to change things. Some of you will feel, at times, like giving up in despair. This is when loving presence is most needed.

My friend Nancy was 39 years old when she died last week after a long struggle with cancer. She had endured everything from chemotherapy and radiation to multiple surgeries, pain, paralysis, and seizures. In one six week period alone she had three brain surgeries. She was in and out of the hospital many times, leaving it to her husband and friends to mother her two small children. Three weeks before she died she left the hospital for the last time and came home.

Nancy called forth love. You couldn't be around her without feeling it. There were times she was in so much pain and agony that she wanted to die. Mostly, she wanted to live. Even when doctors described her as "dying", she was more alive than most people I've ever known. She sparkled like sunshine. It touched everyone. If she invited you on her journey, you came willingly, gratefully, with awe, with love. She summoned forth awesome depths of love in those of us around her.

I have never felt the gift and challenge of loving presence so much as when I was with Nancy. In the hospital there were many times we'd talk for awhile and then just be together in prolonged deep silence. There was less and less need for conversation, more and more need for simply being. At home, when she could no longer talk we moved into even more profound depths of stillness. Loving presence was all I had to offer. It was not even an offering. It was called forth so simply, so naturally, sometimes painfully, but with such beauty, that it seemed to be Nancy's gift to me.

Loving presence is not a doing. It emerges when we stop doing what usually gets in the way of it. For me, it has meant allowing the habitual questions about what and how and when to subside. It has meant a release from ego-centered thoughts ("maybe I can help") and unnecessary actions. It has demanded a shift from thinking in terms of good

and bad, right and wrong, this and that, to a kind of spacious mind that, like the sky, is merely a background for whatever passes by. And mostly, it has asked me to stop being afraid to love unquestioningly, without comparisons, and without reference to past or future.

The great Tibetan teacher, Patrul Rinpoche, when asked to sum up the teachings about how to become enlightened, offered four instructions:

1. Don't prolong the past.
2. Don't invite the future.
3. Don't fear appearances. And
4. Don't alter your innate wakefulness.

I once shared these in a workshop and was asked, why are they all negative instructions. At the time I answered that it was because there really is nothing to do. Enlightenment is our innate nature, according to Tibetan teachers. I also realize now that the four instructions could be put this way, in the affirmative:

1. Stay present.
2. Stay present.
3. Stay present.
4. Stay present.

The great Indian teacher, Nisargadatta Maharaj, encouraged his students to "be what you are: intelligence and love in action." Wherever you feel most helpless in your life may be the very place calling you to be in loving presence. Whoever you find it hardest to be with may be inviting you to stop your habitual ways and move into a more spacious state of mind. Whenever you feel your heart in pain, it may be the signal that your capacity for love has outgrown the old container and is ready to expand into new dimensions. However you experience the challenge, it is the call to loving presence. It is your calling. Heed it.