

Silver Linings: A Tidal Wave of Trust

Finding inner peace when faced with forces of nature

By Kathryn Dixon



The catastrophes and casualties from the earthquake and tsunami in Asia have shocked and saddened every nation. How are we supposed to wrap our minds around a disaster so completely devastating?

Yes, we emailed our monetary donations, or helped at the local church or community center, packaging goods to send to Indonesia and other afflicted countries. While such heartfelt responses may have brought some comfort, our relief was short-lived. Deep in our sleepless nights, questions began to surface as we tried in vain to make sense of it all. What could be the higher purpose of such a tragedy? Is there a higher purpose in such a tragedy? How can there be justice in such grave suffering of thousands-millions-of people?

Being fully available to suffering on a scale such as this is unfathomable. Personally, I have known unbearable anguish at the death of one loved one-my own young son; and I cannot conceive that grief multiplied by five, ten, hundreds, thousands and even hundreds of thousands. Here one moment and completely gone the next -utterly incomprehensible.

Much of the intolerable sense of injustice and vulnerability is borne of the naive notion that bad things shouldn't happen to good people. If I just live my life with goodwill to family and friends, then I will never have to suffer. If I am good enough, life won't hurt. Well, it does. And sometimes the pain is so deep it takes your breath away-sometimes so tragic it can even take your mind away. Tragedy is a visitor to every threshold in this world, not limited to people with questionable motives. Life has unexpected moments that defy logic and stultify the heart. This is one of those times. We've had more than a few of them lately.

So can one be compassionate and in peace around radical events such as this? Consider that until one is at peace, authentic compassion cannot happen at all. When I commiserate with the suffering and wailing, how much true compassion do I have to offer in those moments? It could be argued that at such times I may actually add to the chaos and pain rather than help to alleviate it.

Nothing can change the past; it's over. And despite our greatest technological innovations, we have absolutely no guaranteed control over the power of nature. To really open to those brazen facts is the beginning of peace. Consider, too, that it might not be so much the events or circumstances of the past that disrupts our peace and ravages our hearts, but instead our interpretations of the past. How do the stories that loom in our psyches about this disaster actually affect our experience of it? How can we accept the reality of devastation and know peace? Peace appears to be the opposite of devastation- and yet, perhaps borne in the very center of it-the eye of the storm. One of the most powerful and expeditious tools I know of for finding calm in the storm of life is The Work of Byron Katie (www.thework.org). Katie, like most of us, has known pain that defies description, and out of that very pain this simple process of self-inquiry to facilitate self-realization was born.

I invite you to come along for a journey through and beyond suffering. Answer the questions for your own heart as you read this, and see what happens. Be gentle with yourself, and don't push yourself beyond what is true for you. Your answers to these questions just might bring you to a whole new world-a world where suffering is optional.

This should not have happened. Is it true? Well, it did happen.

What do I get when I hold the belief that this shouldn't have happened?

I get to live in a world of radical injustice and victimization. I feel frozen in stark terror and hopeless heartache. I become inconsolable and empty and quite like a ghost myself-inconsequential and feeble. I treat the victims like hapless pawns of a pernicious god who couldn't possibly really have the welfare of Creation in mind. My faith wobbles, my mind spins. I treat that part of the world like it is just too painful to consider for more than a few minutes at a time and distract myself with television or food or surfing the Net-anywhere but "there." I treat myself like I am worthless to the survivors-they are so far away and I'm all caught up in my life here-which necessitates shrouding myself in guilt for my distance and my life of "greater fortune." I also notice that I become worthless to myself because I am quasi-incapacitated by my stories and inner machinations about this tragedy. I fantasize glimmers of the catastrophe in my mind, and then assure myself it has to be "even worse than I can possibly comprehend." I act like my Higher Power must have been asleep at the wheel on December 26th, which makes me wonder what else might be coming in under the radar?? I get to live a life cramped in a semi-conscious cautious hesitation about everything I love. How can I give myself fully to my life's passions and purpose if it could all be gone in a moment without warning?

Can I see a reason to drop the belief that this should not have happened? (And please, do understand that this process is NOT about the volitional dropping of any belief-it's about questioning beliefs.)

Yes, I can see that all of the reactions above could be reasons to drop it, and yet the idea of dropping my resistance seems ludicrous. Besides, if I did let it go, wouldn't that mean I

am heartless myself? (Which brings up a significant question-if I truly care about another's welfare, does that necessitate my suffering when they appear to?)

Can I see a reason to keep the belief that this should not have happened that does not cause pain? No. I can see countless reasons to keep it, and yet, upon investigation I recognize that every one of them hurts, deeply.

Who would I be without the belief that it should not have happened?

Well, as always, the first response to that question is I would relax a little. My ferocious argument with what is in the past would slow down a bit. I wouldn't be so afraid about the future-more quakes, more suffering and illness and so on. Without it, I wouldn't be so hellishly assured of the injustice and victimization in this world. I would feel more life force flowing through my body, and my heart would be able to warm a bit and thaw out of the fear to some degree. I wouldn't hold notions of a cruel and careless god who could be so callous with his creations. Those who perished would just be gone now, not such tragic victims of unspeakable horror; and with that I could feel some gratitude for their having been here on the planet for as long as they were. Even if I never knew them, I would find comfort in knowing that all of them had smiled and laughed, and each had eyes that sparkled sometimes in joy. I would be more present in my own life and more loving to those around me instead of melancholy and agitated. I wouldn't feel guilty for my 'good fortune' of living so far away and not having to deal firsthand with this. I would have a wide-awake and ever-present Higher Power with a Higher Purpose than I currently have the faculties to fathom, but my trust would be implicit and unshaken. I would stop holding back in fear and give myself without reservation to each moment of now-the only gift or "present" that this world really has to offer. I would be living in this gift of presence and open to the miracles that are here now and not lost in sorrows about the past.

The final element in the process of The Work is called the "Turn-Around." This is where (only after plowing the field of your consciousness by asking the preceding four questions) one turns the original statement around in various ways-in this case to the exact opposite. It is always a gift and manifestly truer than the original statement. IT SHOULD HAVE HAPPENED. That sounds sacrilegious, and yet how can I argue with it? It's not like anyone got to vote about it. It's not like there is anything at all that we can really do to keep it from happening again. It happened, and to think that it shouldn't have only compounds the suffering. Not arguing with reality brings a deep experience of peace and a tender, open-hearted surrender to the truth.

Is this about fatalistic compliance to adversity? No. Radical (meaning deep-rooted) acceptance can be the source of the deepest honesty you've ever known-and best of all it comes from within you. When I drop the denial of what is, I am here now in loving compassion, ready to serve in whatever way is called for or that I feel inspired to. And in this, whatever service I render is now motivated by love rather than fear, trust rather than terror. Or, I may just choose to live in love, here now; and open to whatever comes.

One vital element of The Work is the concept of the "three kinds of business." First there is your business (that's you, the one holding Catalyst in your hands right now, or looking into your computer monitor). Next there is the business of other people in your life-your family members, your friends, your co-workers, partners, etc. Lastly there is the business of Higher Power or God, by whatever name you call the true Creative Source of your existence. And even if you don't subscribe to the latter notion, perhaps the word "Universe" or "True Self" as a larger self-context might apply.

The point behind the three kinds of business is that the only time I can ever suffer is when I am out of my own business. When I first heard Byron Katie say that, it occurred to me that I have probably spent my entire existence living outside my own business, and the result, as my history proves, has been suffering.

As soon as I could talk I would do my best to commandeer getting my own perceived needs met, by asking for a bottle, cookies, resisting naps and so on. And, it has never stopped, since-or at least not until I found The Work. It went like this, "My mother should?? My brothers should?? My school should?? My church should?? My employer should?? Men should??" non-stop and ad nauseam.

To exemplify this principle in action, whose business is it if my mother understands me? Not mine. It is her business to understand herself, and if that includes me, great. If it doesn't, well, that's outside the parameters of my own business, and so to concern myself with her understanding of me is to set myself up for some serious pain. If I leave me to go over into my mother's (husband's, daughter's, friend's) business, and mother is over there in her own business, I have abandoned myself in that moment. There is nobody home for me and my own life when I get into someone else's business.

So, let's take the three kinds of business to the tsunami in Asia. Whose business is the suffering over there? Not mine. It sounds so heartless at first glance and yet the truth is I have very little recourse for positive impact. I can't turn back the clock, I can't raise the dead, I don't have lots of money to contribute, and it wouldn't be practical for me to give my daughter to a friend's care and fly over there to see how I can help. To make the tsunami my business is to abandon my daughter, my responsibilities, and my life in order to try to change someone else's. I am also inadvertently empowering the inability of other people to find their way to peace with it all. I can't know what is in their best interest. Not really.

If my experience of the world is a mirror, and I keep ignoring my own confusion and suffering to tend to the needs of the external, guess what shows up in the mirror of my awareness? A world filled with suffering people who want to heal everything except the pain within them. I can't give anyone else what I don't possess. Until I can be at peace within my own heart in this world, which includes tsunamis and terrorists and heartache sometimes, I have nothing of any lasting value to offer anyone else.

However, if I can stay in my own business, take care of the things I can right here in Salt Lake City, like my precious daughter, my business and healing the wounds within me

that still ache, it is then, and only then-from the stable position of living centered in the truth of my own existence-that I have something real and lasting to serve others. Can I just tend to the tsunamis in my own life before I go out and try to tend the way the reflections appear in the world?

So it could be that this disaster is an incredible opportunity to begin in earnest to look inside instead of outside to heal the wounds where they really are. Bodies die, that's a fact; everyone's does. But the awareness that fuels the body is eternal and infinite and immutably compassionate-for me, for Asia, for all that is. Would I abandon that to focus on the devastations of the temporal?

These are not small questions, and while undoubtedly they can rock one's world, the world being rocked-filled with futility, suffering and death-continually breaks my heart. I am willing let that one go and open to a love larger than my limited and transitory perceptions, accepting a peace that passes all understanding.

Kathryn Dixon is a graduate of Byron Katie's certification program and has been a facilitator of "the Work" for nearly a decade. She is the founder of Clarity Coaching, using the principles of The Work of Byron Katie. www.kathyndixon.com.