

Principles and Freedom

This little story appeared in my local church Sunday bulletin. A man got on a city bus with his three children, sat down, and stared blankly out the window. In just a few moments, his children were running around the bus, being loud and unruly, and bothering other passengers. The other people couldn't believe that the man could be so oblivious to his children's behavior. Eyes began to narrow and harden, and you could just read the thoughts of these folks as they looked on with disapproval. "What a terrible father. Those children need some discipline. I have the right to ride the bus without being disturbed like this."

At some point, someone spoke to the man. "Can't you see your children are being a nuisance?" The father came out of his daze and replied, "Oh, I am sorry. My wife just died and we are coming from the funeral home where I have been making arrangements for her burial. I must have just been lost in my mind."

Can't you just see the shock in the eyes of the other passengers, followed immediately by a softening of eyes and hearts and an outpouring of sympathy and compassion? How a little bit of information can have such a powerful effect on how one thinks and feels. How just a few words of someone's story can move us from judgment and separation to solidarity and connection with a fellow human being.

I would like to superimpose a fantasy on this story and see where it takes us.

Imagine some of the people on this bus practice Reiki. In the evening, as they treat themselves before going to sleep, they each take a few moments to review their day. The first person recalls the experience of her heart suddenly opening with a rush of sympathy and compassion. She remembers reaching out for one of the children, holding him on her lap and consciously giving him Reiki as she held him. She was aware of the flow of energy through her to the little boy and how connected it felt to her open heart. A good day with Reiki.

The second person focuses on the experience of being irritated and judgmental before hearing the man's explanation. With some reflection, he comes to the conclusion that in the same situation, most people would have reacted with the same justifiable irritation. He then decides to send this family some Reiki to support them in their tragedy.

The third person also reflects on her irritation and judgmental-ness in the situation. While she acknowledges that her initial reaction seems normal and defensible, she looks back on this experience in the light of the Reiki Principle, Just for today, do not anger. She sees that she is, in fact, free to react in the "normal" way, with irritation, but she couldn't imagine how to be in the situation without anger or irritation. She wonders what this Principle is trying to call out of her and how she could work on this.

These are three possible reflections of perhaps many more. Each has its own quality and perspective, its own teaching and possible gift. I find myself more drawn to the third person's reflections and the questions it raises.

The concept of freedom raises interesting questions. How free are we really? Most of us reading this magazine may feel ourselves to be very free: we can choose where we live, whom to associate with, where to put our energy, what dreams to pursue. We can choose our own philosophy of life, how to understand life and make sense out of it. We like to focus on our

freedoms, and we feel constrained when we feel not free, as if one of our basic rights is being violated.

We could also look at how not free we actually are. Our perceptions and attitudes are shaped by family, culture, education, teachers, mentors, guides, and popular culture as expressed through mainstream media. Many of us like to think we are such free thinkers, following our own drummer, our inner truth, yet we are hardly aware of our unconscious and the power it has over us, how much it might limit our true freedom.

Through the awareness that comes from our healing processes and personal development over the years, we may feel that we have made great strides in understanding ourselves, that we are becoming more and more free to be ourselves. But even with these great leaps of self-understanding, how free are we *not* to react in a habitual way when we feel threatened or stressed? How free, for example, were these three fictional Reiki practitioners not to be irritated and angered by the unruly children? How free are we not to get angry, not to worry, to honor our parents, teachers, and elders, to be honest and present in our work, to be grateful to every living thing?

In their essence, most major spiritual paths point to a greater freedom, the freedom to take any life situation and hold it with a soft and open heart and with gratitude. Is this what the Principles are calling us to? If it is, how ever will we get there? Perhaps we just need to have more determination in our commitment to these Principles. In the above story, it would mean going way beyond the justification of our feelings. It would mean not identifying with those feelings of irritation and our personal rights in the situation. It could mean recalling our experience of Reiki treatment and identifying with that place of radical trust, forgiveness, and compassion that sometimes comes upon us in treatment. I can't say that I know how to do this. I may have some small understanding and some commitment to this level of freedom. I must look at how determined I am to realize this level of freedom in myself. And then of course, I must practice.

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