

Dear Sangha Sisters and Brothers,

Once again, I have to apologize for my lapses in getting this weekly message out to you. Of course, it's my work again. This prompts me to wonder if there's a member of the sangha who would like to take on this task and might be a bit more reliable (?) If so, please contact a member of the Council. If not, well, we'll muddle along.

To all of you who've taken action about the situation in Haiti, I thank you deeply. That a people already bearing so much suffering should be visited with such a disaster just breaks the heart. I feel a great deal of admiration and gratitude for the people who got there by whatever means to help or by immediately began to organize assistance. To respond to a catastrophe of this scale with an open heart I think is especially difficult, and it's lovely to see people managing it. Of course, there have been other responses. For instance, like many of you, I heard the theory - it was represented as a fact - that the Haitian people deserve their fate because they sold their souls to satan for liberation from the French. When I understood this wasn't meant as a joke, I felt physically ill. Where even to start to answer?

It's hard to look deeply at such a monstrous thing. I'd be interested in hearing how others have looked at both the disaster itself and some of the difficult responses (and sorry I've missed Sunday gatherings these last couple weeks where this was probably discussed). Myself, I've reflected a bit on empathy.

One thing I thought about was mirror neurons - the neurons that fire both when an animal does something and when it observes that same thing being done by another animal. Neuroscience isn't conclusive about this yet, but there's been a lot of speculation about what these neurons means for human empathy. One way to take it is as a possible explanation for how we feel when we watch another living creature being physically hurt. Most of us feel a real and great discomfort, even if we ourselves are in no danger and don't know the person being hurt at all. To force a person to watch another being tortured is itself a form of torture. If mirror neurons are involved, this would mean that empathy is a natural, hardwired biological condition for us. To inter-be with each other's pain is what comes naturally. It follows that to overcome this natural reaction takes some effort, and studies of how both medical and military people have to work to distance themselves emotionally from witnessing and inflicting physical pain would seem to support that. To witness pain with an open heart, all your mirror neurons firing, is very hard. When faced with a disaster on the scale of Haiti - or the daily sufferings of the world's poor, the carnage of the many wars, etc. - many of us find ourselves distancing almost without being aware of it. I tried to look at what I did inside when I considered Haiti and saw I had several stratagems for avoiding feeling empathy. Blaming the Haitians themselves for the earthquake wasn't one of my tactics, but I could see that it was a continuum.

Upcoming Dharma Discussions - SUNDAY, 7 - 9 PM:

1/31/2010 - Winter Retreat: Joining the Community at Estes Park - Transforming Difficulties, Bringing Practice Home, Part I, facilitated by Lori Zook-Stanley

2/7/2010 - Recitation of the Five Mindfulness Trainings, with Dharma Talk on Training #4, facilitated by Pam Costain

2/14/2010 - Winter Retreat: Joining the Community at Estes Park - Transforming Difficulties, Bringing Practice Home, Part II, facilitated by Jean Kim

2/21/2010 - Dharma Teachers in Our Daily Lives: Primary Romantic Relationship as Dharma Door, facilitated by Judith Lies

2/28/2010 - Winter Retreat: Joining the Community at Estes Park - The Magic of Interbeing, facilitated by Lori Zook-Stanley

3/7/2010 - The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, facilitated by Judith Lies

3/14/2010 - Winter Retreat: Joining the Community at Estes Park - Conclusion, facilitated by Pam Costain

Sangha Council

Pam Costain and Wendy Paulsen are now part of our Sangha Council, along with Judith Lies, Julie Vinar and Hetal Dalal. Kathryn Johnson continues to serve as our Treasurer. Lori Zook-Stanley has rotated off. We offer our deepest gratitude to Lori for her steady, thoughtful and beautiful work during her service. Welcome to the new members, and gratitude to all for their caring work for Blooming Heart.

Attachments

Attached are the minutes from the 1/24/2010 Council meeting, a summary of how decisions are made in our sangha and a summary from Julie of the special Reflections meeting held in December. Julie's document was created in MS Works. I'm traveling at the moment, and trying to work on a Mac, so I'm not able to convert it to PDF. I'll do that and send it around next week for those of you who can't open this version.

Two Requests from the Council for Harmony on Decisions

Coat Project: We have \$126.44 remaining in the funds donated to our Coat Project with People Serving people. Since no additional outerwear is needed this winter, the Council proposes to donate the remaining money to PSP to used in their childcare center in whatever way they feel is most useful. The Council asks for harmony with this recommendation from the Sangha. Please respond to this email with any questions, concerns or opinions you may have by February 4th.

Haiti Donation: The Council recommends that all money received as dana in the month of February be designated for Haiti relief efforts and asks for harmony with this decision. Once again, please respond to this email if you have concerns about this decision.

Coming home to February,

Joyce