

Be a Tree

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Sitting here on a sun-drenched, crystalline spring-is-on-the-way kind of morning in New York City, it is hard to believe that only 72 hours ago the snow was flying, the wind was blowing and the temps were sub-zero. Notwithstanding the debate about climate change or global warming, it clearly was an erratic winter. With January being like June and March being like January and June from one day to the next, one thing is for certain: nothing is for certain. It seems that unpredictability, in the weather, in the world, in life, is the order of the day. Reflecting back on that last blast (hopefully) of winter and its aftermath, I can't help but wonder: how do we stay centered? How does one stay grounded, prepared for anything, and flexible in the face of so much change?

Now, I'm not sure that I KNOW the right answer to these questions, nor do I necessarily believe there is one answer, but I do know one thing: if all the change that we find ourselves experiencing is on the *outside*, the solution will have to be found on the *inside*. In times of deep turmoil and transition we all need to LOOK INSIDE ourselves and get connected to something that grounds us and holds us steady. The phrase I love for this idea, which I borrow from Dr. Steven Covey (of "7 Habits" fame), is "the changeless core". It is that place inside of you that never wavers, a place of core essence, of peace and calm and KNOWING, that everything will be ok, that you are ok, that all is as it should be. It is the place from which we accept life on its own terms, drop the struggle, drop the complaint and just allow life, nature, people, the weather, and ourselves, to be just as they are. But how do we connect to this elusive place that lies at the center of our being?

As with most challenging spiritual questions the solution is found by seeking out a good teacher. This past weekend, as I retreated to my cozy lair and just watched the parade of snow and sleet and ice and wind float by my window, I noticed something else: a spiritual teacher in action. Holding steady, calm and changeless under the onslaught of Mother Nature's tirade, were the trees. Solemn, uncomplaining and stately. In the space of 24 hours, I watched as a giant oak went from sun-dappled to rain-drenched, to bowed over in the icy wind, to snow-capped, to finally, upon waking on Saturday, fully crystallized with icicles dripping from every branch. Emerging from the underworld of the storm, the tree burst forth as a diamond, a delicate glass-blown Christmas ornament shimmering in the breeze. And through all the transmogrifications, the mighty oak stood its ground, unmoved, unshaken. Peaceful. A perfect role model for *how to be in the world*.

At the time, observing the tree in full regalia, I only thought of how beautiful it looked, how stately. It wasn't until the next day, during my yoga class, that its profound message hit home. Standing before a wall of glass that looked out onto a frozen tundra of ice-laden trees (ok, not exactly a tundra at the intersection of 14th st. and Union Square, but you get the idea), my yoga class was instructed to stand tall and straight, legs hip-width apart, with our hands clasped in prayer at our heart-center.

For a long moment, I stood perfectly still, listening to my breath, gazing out at the icy wonderland, enjoying the delicious contrast of the warm, spacious yoga studio juxtaposed against the burning chill of frost and ice that lay only a few feet away. The instructor then told us to find a tree outside the window and focus on it. Holding, for balance, our gaze on the tree outside, she told us to lift one leg off the ground and place the bottom of our foot against the other leg, against the upper thigh if possible, the higher the better. Then, standing on one leg, breathing deeply from our core, we were told to raise our hands towards the ceiling and spread our arms outward and skyward in full, if awkward mimicry of the trees which held our gaze. “This is ‘tree pose’”, the instructor said, “Your opportunity to balance, hold center and breathe from a place of grounded connection to your inner core”.

“As you hold steady on one leg, breath deeply,” she said, “and think of the nerves and blood vessels coursing through your body, from the tips of your toes to the tips of your fingers. See if you can feel the pulse, the circulation, the essence of life, moving and flowing, at all times and in all circumstances. This is just life, in you, doing its thing, with ease, no matter what is happening all around you.”

Like a tree in a storm, I thought to myself. The perfect teacher, wherein the weather may swirl around in constant agitation and upheaval, but the sap of life just continues to flow, uninterrupted, undisturbed on the inside. Life doing life.

So the next time you feel ungrounded, reactive to others moods or behaviors, when you feel yourself being blown off course by circumstances beyond your control, stop for a moment, stand on one leg, take a deep breath (or two) and ***be a tree!*** It is a powerful practice. Hold steady for as long as you can with one foot pressed against the upper thigh of your other leg. Find a tree to serve as your role model. Bring yourself fully into the present moment...and reconnect to that place in you that is unwavering, steady, still. Allow the tree to show you the way to your *changeless core*, to help you find the way home.

In closing today’s post I want to share a favorite short poem of mine. It is by the wonderful and moving poet, David Whyte...and it goes like this:

Lost

*Stand still. The trees ahead
and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here.
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger.
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers.
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it you may come back again.
saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.*

*No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you.
You are surely lost. Stand still.
The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.*