

Blowing in the wind

Sandra Kimball finds fear and hope in times of uncertainty

At this time in the world, conditions are fertile for fear, whether real or imagined. We are constantly bombarded with trivia and images of famine, conflicts, wars, epidemics and desecrated nature. Since September 11, many of us are consumed with fear of terrorism, fear over financial problems and fear of traveling. Walls of rigid fundamentalism rise in our neighborhoods where anyone appearing strange is met with suspicion. Fear builds a foundation around the belief that we have no power to change the situation. Pessimism settles in like a lingering bad smell. A thick cloud of despair descends and we lose our way in a complexity of heavy feelings. It is no wonder people become obsessed with their own defenses and that there is a lack of willingness to let in new ways of thinking and being.

When one's internal forecast is habitually set for failure or supports the belief that something bad will happen, fear can be emotionally and physically draining and stop us from living our lives fully. But when the winds of fear are blowing, there are two ways we can feel it. We can either climb out into the open and be still, or we can keep moving. If the call is to keep moving, there are actions you can take to shake off futility.

Turning off the TV

Although it's important to be informed, the news media is designed for calling up emotional responses to every story. Your senses are being bombarded with visual and auditory stimuli to evoke fear. The Internet offers many excellent on-line news sources that focus on giving information in a less intense way. Reading a newspaper is also a way to keep informed in a more discerning way.

Filling up your senses

Spending time in nature has a wonderful calming effect on the mind and body. A spot of green amidst the city streets or a day trip to the sea or mountainside provides an opportunity to bathe your senses in beautiful sights and quiet sounds. Listening to soothing music is also helpful and can make for a pleasant time spent commuting on the train.

Writing it down

Identifying your fears and writing them down creates a separation where they are no longer inherently a part of you. You can enter into a relationship with your fears where you begin to nurture them instead of battle them. By paying attention, you can detect what it is they want from you. You may discover that it is something you are longing or hoping for. Working with them in this way often leads to eliminating them altogether or to a shift in perspective to one of gratitude or insight.

Welcoming stillness

A side effect of establishing a meditation practice is a calm and quiet mind. When we are feeling despair and fear about the state of the world, a helpful meditation is to take a few minutes to visualize the whole world in front of you and from your heart, send the world love. Acknowledging the despair about the state of the world is actually healthy. It enables us to remember that we are part of all of life, reduces dichotomies that divide people, strengthens compassion, and motivates us to bring about change.

Savoring each moment

Recently, I visited a maximum-security prison. Every man there had sentences of ten years or more for murder, rape, acts of terrorism or drug trafficking. When I asked the man I was visiting how he coped, he said, "When I think about the past, it's a nightmare. And looking ahead is a nightmare too. I just try and stay in the moment as much as I can." Perhaps this is the most important determination in eliminating fear.

Most fears are thoughts about what will happen in the future but we don't really know what fate will bring us. If you're feeling the winds of fear, they are calling your attention to what you need and hope for. It can be an opportunity to give yourself over to something you love. **KTO**

For counselling services, contact Sandra Kimball, Counselling Services Kyoto 075-762-6322 / www.internationalcounselling.com or check the website of International Mental Health Professionals Japan for therapists in your area at www.imhpi.org.jp

LETTERS

MY HUSBAND AND I have a six-year-old who is attending a regular Japanese elementary school and who, happily, has been able to make quite a few friends there. The problem is whenever she invites her friends over to our house, their mothers also show up unannounced.

I imagine this is because they are somewhat nervous about letting their children go to a foreign person's house. I would like to say something to them, but I'm not sure what to say. Do you have any ideas? –Concerned in Kobe, by email

I think you'll find that a mother coming along with young children to someone's house is a common occurrence in Japan. And most probably, if your child is invited to their house, it's an unspoken expectation that you will stay as well. In some cultures, the bond of friendship is implicit by leaving young children in the care of another mother. But in others, the bond is affirmed by spending time together in the care of the children. Raising children in a new culture presents a special opportunity to contemplate the assumptions, beliefs and unspoken rules that we bring with us from home. If you feel it is necessary to say something, having a friendly discussion about the customs in your country and then sensitively introducing the possibility of a compromise is a way to open up a new pathway for change in the situation.

DUE TO THE declining health of my parents, I have to go back to America in the next six months. My wife, however, is unwilling to relocate and as a result, we are having some trouble in our marriage. I am between a rock and a hard place, and frankly, I can't figure out how to make everyone happy. Help! –Conflicted in Kyoto, by email

In nearly every cross-cultural relationship, the question of which country to live in arises. Unless you want to consider having a long distance relationship and commute between each other, one person must let go of their end of the rope and both must step into the others shoes. Then the concern can shift from getting what you want or trying to keep everyone happy, to how to make the best of a difficult situation. If you and your wife come to the decision that relocating is inevitable, your wife will be grieving for many losses. Find the Japanese community near your new location that offers friendship, familiar foods, and other things that will remind her of home. Establish ways for her to stay in regular contact with her family and friends by utilizing one of the cheap telephone services and by scheduling trips back to Japan. With patience and consideration, the story of your life together can progress in a positive manner to include the challenges and benefits of any living situation in which you find yourselves.