

Faith of the Heart

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My friend Lauren was one of the more successful business consultants in the area. She had a knack for business strategy and knowing when to make the right moves at the right times. As a result she made a lot of people a lot of money. By all accounts, she was a successful business woman who earned a comfortable living. At least that was the case from the outside.

What folks didn't know was that most of the time Lauren was miserable. It seemed that the more her professional life thrived, her personal life fell apart. It was a struggle for her to keep her life in balance. There is a phenomenon I like to call the "curse of the competent." It is what happens when people at your job learn that you can do a something really well, and so they keep going to you over and over again to do more and more projects for them. Soon Lauren's workload was skyrocketing to insurmountable levels. It was a lot of pressure to be the person at your company who is responsible for making sure there is enough income coming in. Lauren found that she had the weight of her company

on her shoulders. Each time she would be successful with a project, two more would find their way onto her desk. The curse of the competent was at work!

To the outside world, Lauren was successful, very successful, at the work she was doing. Her personal life too seemed to be humming along fairly well. True she had divorced her daughter's father a few years ago, but Lauren was a beautiful woman. She had long wavy brown hair, and an attractive figure. Although Lauren often worried about her weight as she went further into middle age, to the rest of world she had a lot going for her. But inside Lauren felt differently. Yes she attracted her share of male suitors; some were more serious than others.

Having reentered the dating field, Lauren felt like she was in high school all over again. It felt like there were a million fish in the sea. She was free from her marriage, which had been very painful in its parting. It is worth pointing out that this story is some twenty years old. The internet was a relatively new thing at the time. While online dating was not unheard of, sites like eharmony, match, or cupid.com did not exist back then. For the most part, Lauren was meeting these guys the old fashioned way; through work or through mutual friends.

On fellow she dated for about six months. Things were going along pretty well, and she was getting excited that this guy might be the one to get serious with. One day she realized that she had left a file for work over at his house the previous weekend. Lauren was in the neighborhood, and so she swung by to pick it up. When she got there Lauren was surprised to find a woman come to the door. Just by the look of the two of them, she could tell what had transpired. While technically she and this guy had not claimed to be exclusive, Lauren left in tears with her heart broken.

So from the outside work looks great; dating life looks great. Everything is coming up Lauren. Ah but there was one person who had an inside view of these situations, and she knew that it was not so. Lauren knew that there was a big disparity between what she presented on the outside and what she felt on the inside. They were worlds apart, and she was the only one who knew it. We all have this to a certain extent. Few of us truly wear our emotions on our sleeve. There is for all of us some distance between what we feel and what we express. For Lauren that distance was starting to feel like the Grand Canyon. Trying to keep it all together required Herculean will. And for a long time she did. But one day something happened that spelled the end of this illusion for Lauren.

It was a small thing at first. Lauren would get up in the morning, and notice that her right eye would twitch; just a little muscle spasm. As middle aged ailments go, this was hardly one that rose to the level of concern. By the time she was done with breakfast, all would be well. Then after a week or so her eye twitch was lasting all morning. It was getting more intense too. Sometimes it was hard for her to see out of that eye. Pretty soon she was going the whole day with her right eye twitching. It wasn't painful per se, but it was definitely annoying and distracting. Furthermore, she couldn't figure out a way to stop it. Aspirin and Aleve did nothing. Neither did caffeine or alcohol. Self-medicating didn't work, so finally Lauren went to the doctor.

The doctor prescribed a mild muscle relaxer. Those felt pretty good. Her eye twitched less often and less intensely, but it was still noticeable. What was really noticeable was that the muscle relaxers took away Lauren's edge. She was less productive at work. She was more emotional, and cried for no reason in embarrassing social circumstances. She felt like she was starting to lose it. So she eased up off the muscle relaxers. Within a week her symptoms had returned to what they had been. Then one afternoon, right in the middle of giving a high-powered presentation to a client, BOTH of Lauren's eyes started to twitch!

It was becoming harder and harder to see. Being the pro she was, Lauren got through it, but went home early that day.

That weekend she was having coffee with one her girlfriends. Lauren started talking and then everything spilled out of her: her fears and insecurities at work, her grief over having lost a guy she really liked, and even the escalating problems with her twitchy eye. Her friend listened, and provided sympathy. There wasn't much her friend could really do for her of course. She could join Lauren in cursing out that two-timing jerk of a boyfriend she had. Her girlfriend could share Lauren's own lamentations about work. "But you know," her friend said, "maybe you should try yoga. It might help with your eye thing. The whole body is connected."

So Lauren tried yoga for awhile. After about a month of contorting her body in ways she could not achieve even when she was ten years younger, she was on the verge of giving up. That is when Lauren first heard about Zen meditation. She started going to the local Zen center for meditation classes. It met on Sunday morning. This meant she ultimately had to choose between adopting her new spiritual practice or continuing at the Unitarian Church in Ann Arbor. Sadly in this case Zen won out.

Meditation did not come easy for Lauren. She was a doer. She was someone on the go. Sitting and paying attention to her breathing was boring. It required more patience than she was willing to give it at first. She stayed with it though; because a funny thing happened. Her eyes stopped twitching. After a number of months she recognized that she felt better about herself. She did not feel like this divided person having to keep it together for everyone else while masking her suffering.

Within the midst of her active life she found a faith of the heart. Of course it was motivated by a somewhat selfish need: to get her eyes to stop twitching long enough for her to see straight! But what she found was some relaxation. And when Lauren started to relax, she started to see clearly; both literally and figuratively. Gradually her inner and outer life came more in sync. She was more expressive, and didn't care so much about being the one who "kept it together" for the sake of others. She was more real with her friends and family. Sometimes that got Lauren into trouble, but not as often as she thought it would. Most of the time people responded well to this new and improved Lauren who was raw and vulnerable with people. The funny thing was she felt better about herself. Her neurotic life began to find some sanity.

I don't mean to over sell this. It was not the case that Lauren began to meditate and all of sudden she magically didn't suffer

anymore. She did of course. She would have her heart broken by guys again. She would struggle in her relationships with her teenage daughter and her ex-husband. But she had some resources now. Lauren was not all on her own. She had found some inner peace through the practice of mindfully watching her breath.

Mindfulness practice is a faith of the heart. So often it gets identified with a sort of aloof form of modern-day cynicism, but it isn't. If you practice watching your breath, then soon you find yourself paying attention to other parts of your body. Usually it is pain in one's back from sitting up right for so long. But eventually the mind wanders and by the time you remember that you were supposed to be following your breath, you realize that you were thinking about that project at work, or how you prefer your Mom's meatloaf recipe to your wife's recipe – "How can I ever break it to her?" And then you start to notice guilt over preferring one meatloaf recipe over another. "I told her not to put ketchup on it!" But you don't want to hurt your wife's feelings...And so now feelings and emotions arise as well. Take at any one thing: your breath for example. Pay attention to that. And pretty soon you find that if you pull at one strand hard enough, all of the others come with it. Soon you are paying attention to not only your breath, but your body as well. Not only your head and your brain,

but your mind comes along too. And not just rational thoughts, but stories and memories of friends and enemies alike. And if you are remembering your loved ones then you are feeling something and your heart is moved. So that meditation becomes not just about one thing, but about everything. It is not about removing oneself from the world, but rather plunging headlong into reality. So often what we surround ourselves with, TV, friends, books, work, all of that is often a distraction from what we are feeling and experiencing in the present moment.

A faith of the heart does not permanently turn away from the world, but does not allow the world to be a distraction. Thich Nhat Hanh in our reading this morning does an excellent job of showing us how peace is not just something out there in the world of geopolitics. Peace is a state of being that we can experience within our own skin. While he often talks about sitting meditation, Thich Nhat Hanh is particularly interested in how we can bring mindful awareness of the present moment to all activities of daily life. One of his favorite practices is smiling. It sounds dumb at first, but from what I hear there is a certain “fake it to make it” thing going on here. Practitioners of this smiling meditation say that if you walk around smiling all of the time, even if you are absolutely miserable and depressed, that eventually your inner emotions start to line up with your outward expression. As Lauren learned,

it takes tremendous effort to keep our outward expressions and our inward feelings apart from each other. They want to be aligned, and it creates tremendous stress and angst within us when they are not. A faith of the heart is an authentic faith that finds peace within the soul. Because as Thich Nhat Hanh says, peace within us helps create peace within our relationships. That creates peace within the relationships of others. And like a stone thrown into a pond that ripples all the way to the shore, that inner peace expressed in a smile can reach an entire nation.

That certainly happened with Lauren and me. Her peace, her faith of the heart, had a tremendous impact on me. You see I know Lauren's story so well because she was one of my first, and truth be told my favorite, Zen teacher when I first started meditating. Lauren is one of those down to earth people who would often use her own experiences in her talks. And as I said, she was a very open person who spoke frankly of her experiences. Actually I cleaned up some of the stuff about her ex-boyfriend; she would be much more forthcoming with her students. But I suppose that is what a true faith of the heart gives you; enough peace and confidence that you don't care if someone else thinks less of you because of your mistakes and experiences.

I don't know what your personal spiritual habits happen to be. It might be nothing. It might be trips to the art museum or the golf course. It might be music or smiling even when you don't feel like smiling. It might be 20 minutes of meditation twice a day; or muttering to the God of your childhood in desperate earnestness that the account comes through and the tests are negative. Whatever that spiritual activity is, try to make it an actual practice. Do it regularly; as often as you can. Taking just a small break from the distractions that fill our days can bring peace to the soul. It can cultivate a faith of heart.

May we all be grounded in a practice that calls forth from us the best of each of us. May that peace be the fruit of our diving deep and surfacing. Amen Blessed Be.