

A Beautiful Mind: A Conversation with Gina Sharpe by Tracy Cochran

I arrived at meditation teacher Gina Sharpe's house prepared to talk about what it means to live a beautiful life and more: I wanted to find a good story. The bare facts of Sharpe's life were promising. Born in Jamaica, Sharpe moved to New York when she was eleven. She studied philosophy at Barnard College, worked in movie production (on the iconic 1970s movies *Little Big Man*, *Paper Lion*, and *Alice's Restaurant*), and later became a successful corporate lawyer.

I knew there had to be adventures. Undoubtedly there were villains and mentors, dark times that gave way to light. Best, there was the promise of a moral: In the midst of all her worldly wanderings, Sharpe began to practice meditation with a range of Buddhist teachers, ultimately training to become a Vipassana (or "insight") meditation teacher in the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

As we settled into her light-filled upstairs study, however, I realized that Sharpe was not going to help me do a kind of narrative math, lining up events in her life in an equation that would yield a tidy sum like, say, that practicing corporate law is a less beautiful life than teaching in a maximum security prison for women, among other places.

Spontaneous and playful in her answers and her manner, Sharpe, who co-founded the Manhattan retreat center New York Insight, kept the conversation in the present. As we talked over cups of green tea, I registered that transformations in the heart and mind (in Buddhism the two are not separate) are not a matter of progressing from point to point. They have to do with stopping, with daring to be still and attentive in the present moment. I began to understand how moments of being present can grow by dedicated practice into moments of presence—moments of realizing that who we are in reality is not an isolated individual on an isolated journey but a being who is an inextricable part of a greater whole. And I learned that the more we are able to open to the present moment, the less we are able to rule out, to judge as unspiritual or unbeautiful.

In Buddhism equanimity is considered a sublime emotion, the ground of wisdom and compassion. The Pali word for it is *upekkha*, which means to "look over." (Pali, a vernacular version of Sanskrit, is the language in which the Buddha taught and the language of Theravada Buddhist texts). Sharpe explained that this means observing a scene or a person so clearly that we see their part in the whole. In other words, we see their beauty. After we talked, I discovered that a second Pali word is also used to describe equanimity: *tatramajjhata*. It's a fusion of root words that means "to stand in the middle of all this." Sharpe persuaded me that this is the place to be.

—Tracy Cochran

TRACY COCHRAN

Do you have regrets?

GINA SHARPE

I used to regret having been dedicated to anything else but the Dhamma [or Dharma in Sanskrit] because time is precious. But as I get older and hopefully wiser, I'm more interested in bringing my sights down from an ideal to just as it is right now. I see that beauty can be an ideal that exists elsewhere, or what is here right now. In every single moment, you can stop and simply turn to the moment. It's here. Increasingly, I see that if I move away from the present moment, I'm immediately lost. That's true, however life unfolds. Beauty isn't to be found elsewhere—it's right where you are.

COCHRAN

Can you say more about the choices you made that led you to be sitting here right now?

SHARPE

I don't think of life as a sum of choices. I think of outcomes as a result of each choice. I'm not sure that so called "choices" would have been as wise as what actually happened. We fool ourselves to think that we are making big choices that are going to direct our lives. What's actually happening is that in every moment small, intimate choices present themselves, depending on conditions that previously arose. And appropriate responses can happen if we're present. Those appropriate responses come together to be part of a kaleidoscopic pattern that can later on appear to be a huge choice that we made. Actually, the pattern is always changing, and if we look at it with spaciousness, it's beautiful.

COCHRAN

Most people don't like every piece of their lives. They want to be in full sail. They don't want the doldrums. We grasp this and reject that according to our idea of how things should be.

SHARPE

The basis of a beautiful life is a beautiful mind.

COCHRAN

Can you define that?

SHARPE

A beautiful mind is a mind that integrates everything, whether full sail or no wind. It can be buoyant despite conditions. It's trained to be so. Our minds left untended are not careful. We have to be careful about what grows up in the garden of the mind; careful about what needs tending, feeding, and what needs cutting back. The quality of care is what makes a garden beautiful, as much as the particulars. Similarly, anytime you try to narrow things down to a particular definition—or when we try to make huge decisions—we get bogged down. It's more beautiful to see with care how every small response is made,

and how it makes a kaleidoscopic pattern.

COCHRAN

That takes a really sensitive attention. A lot of people would see your life at a different resolution. They would see you as very successful in worldly terms, then giving it all up to live a simpler life.

SHARPE

There's a theme emerging here, an interest in pinning down what's beautiful and not. But as soon as we get into those polarities, we lose what we're trying to cultivate. Rather, we can trust that if we tend the garden carefully, it will be beautiful.

COCHRAN

I've heard elsewhere that judgment is fatal to attention, to the effort to really observe.

SHARPE

I've felt that in my own life and my own practice. It's as if we decide that we know best instead of letting the universe show us—and a correct choice in this moment may be completely inappropriate in the next moment. Maybe this is why we get lost so often. As soon as we make a judgment, we say to ourselves "ok, that's it." We apply that judgment to everything going forward. It may have been totally correct and appropriate in the moment you made it, but it's not when applied to all the other conditions arising. Because then you're not meeting the situation exactly where it is. That takes equanimity, balance—a truly beautiful state.

COCHRAN

Why is this quality considered to be such an important attribute of an awakened human being?

SHARPE

And probably one of the most confusing. One of the most frequent questions I get from students is, "If I have a balanced, accepting attitude towards everything, won't I become passive?" There is fear about becoming too accepting, and that balance is dull. What's missing is the understanding that balance is completely alive. If it's not alive, it's not balance. Because balance requires constant adjustment.

The Pali word for equanimity is upekkha, which means "to look over." It's interesting because it suggests a larger view, and the larger view comes from being present in every single moment. Presence in every moment clarifies the larger pattern, the kaleidoscopic pattern.

COCHRAN

To be present is to be aware that we are present with the whole of life.

SHARPE

Interestingly, I've found that one way to see the whole of life clearly is to focus on one small point, not trying to take everything in. Somehow just looking at that one point, the whole world emerges. As William Blake said, "seeing the world in a grain of sand." The "looking over" of equanimity can mean looking through that one point to everything, seeing the whole picture by looking closely and carefully at one point.

COCHRAN

So this looking over doesn't mean overlooking.

SHARPE

No. Practicing equanimity we come to a point where we understand what the Taoists call the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows, because a beautiful balance comes into our lives. We see that through the sorrow, we can also have joy, and that without joy, our sorrows would be unbearable. We see that our lives become beautiful when they become balanced—when they are with the way things are rather than the way that small mind thinks it should be.

COCHRAN

I think you are saying that from a balanced perspective, practicing having beautiful mind, being trained as a corporate lawyer can be just what is needed in the moment, sort of like the old expression, "The right tool for the job." What is coming out is that beauty is situational, fluid.

SHARPE

That's exactly right. Our lives are flowing like a river. We can't freeze anything and say "that's beauty." Receiving a dozen red roses doesn't always feel beautiful. It depends on the situation, on the quality of the thoughtfulness, the giving and receiving. A constellation of conditions come together to make a beautiful moment. How do we cultivate that beauty in our lives? We can't cultivate it by deciding we're just going to have beauty around us, beautiful people, beautiful objects, beautiful situations (all according to our idea of beauty). Life isn't like that. Often, when we try to set life up in that way, something else happens. The river overflows or the oil spills over the beautiful water. Whatever we think will happen as we strive to set up conditions in a particular way will never happen precisely in that way because our small minds are incapable of completely knowing conditions. There is always going to be something we forget or one thing we didn't take into account, or something unpredictable happens. Beauty comes from having a mind that is capable of seeing things just as they are in the moment and being able to repose in that. And, of course, it's constantly changing.

COCHRAN

Everything you say seems to rest so much on knowing the wholeness of life—on opening to what some call Presence with a capital "P." Yet how can you instill that wish in students? There is so much torment in young people, especially in young women. They feel that beauty is elsewhere, not in them.

SHARPE

This relates to what we were talking about before. The mind does need to be cultivated. If

the mind isn't cultivated, then what happens is that we accept cultural definitions of beauty, of right and wrong, good and bad. When we accept those definitions, we are trying to freeze what is flowing. It comes back to what we have been talking about from the start. In a single moment, if we are aware of things as they are, rather than projecting how they should be: that is grace, beauty. In a single moment—and in every moment—it's possible to not know how things should be, to not measure or judge things. We get frozen in ideas from the past.

COCHRAN

Our projections about the future are rooted in the past.

SHARPE

Yes. We get stuck on some idea that somebody gave us about something somewhere in our past, whether it was negative or positive. We develop a view and because it's our view we think it is right. Some wind up killing because we get stuck on the idea that our frozen view is right. The understanding of how being present leads to Presence with a capital "P" takes that care we were talking about—being aware of how we drag that past with us. A beautiful mind is a mind in question presently, a mind that is curious and investigates.

COCHRAN

The truth is always in movement. It can't be really grasped.

SHARPE

Yet even the idea that nothing should be solidified becomes untrue when we solidify it.

COCHRAN

Our Western cultural inclination is to go up into the head, into thought.

SHARPE

Yes, we always want to say "that's it, now I understand." But we can never understand anything fully because life is always in motion.

COCHRAN

There's always this tendency to grasp. How hard it is to just be with experience, even after years of practice.

SHARPE

As you say that, can you feel the fear?

COCHRAN

Yes, and I was working with being present with fear last night. In the midst of it, I decided to say a phrase from the Metta (or Lovingkindness) practice: "May I be safe and protected

from danger.” I just repeated it without expectation. It cast this light net of positive expectation and awareness over this negative emotion, which finally dissolved.

SHARPE

You raise an important point. The quality of mind and heart (and they are not really separate) that you bring to this moment is important in addition to being with things as they are. The ability to bring a heart and mind of true well-wishing, compassion, joy, and equanimity to the present moment, brings balance and makes it beautiful.

Paying close attention to the quality of the presence that we bring to the moment is important—especially in our culture, where we’re taught to never be satisfied with ourselves, that there is always more that we can do and be. Instead of generating aspiration, this can generate an inner critic and even self-hatred. A gentle attitude in mind and heart balances—again that word—the precision of presence. Without gentleness and tenderness, precision can become cutting and wounding.

COCHRAN

You can’t skip any steps, can you? You can’t just live in your head and ignore a wounded heart. At a certain point, you can’t carry on.

SHARPE

Have you heard of the Impostor Syndrome?

COCHRAN

No

SHARPE

It’s a Harvard study that revealed that very successful and accomplished people are often unable to internalize the truth of their accomplishments. Many of them feel like impostors, that they aren’t as competent as the rest of the world thinks they are and they think that one day they will be found out. What is that about? I think it’s about intense self-criticism, the inner sense that we’re never good enough.

COCHRAN

There is another side to this. When someone is really present, everyone—and probably even animals—can sense it, even if they couldn’t say what they were sensing. On the other hand, someone can say all the right words yet their listeners—and sometimes the people themselves—can tell that what they’re saying isn’t based on lived experience. I can tell, at least sometimes, when I am not all there, when I’m out of balance.

SHARPE

I think we all can all tell. We lose our balance when we forget that it’s possible to simply respond genuinely from moment to moment.

COCHRAN

We don't think it's enough. We don't trust just being present. We think that somehow we have to be armed with more, with a great idea or a story or some super-readiness.

SHARPE

And we think there is some outer measuring stick by which we should be judged or by which we can judge everything we do. We want to appear clever or intelligent or masterful—appear, appear, appear. The moment we slip into that we've lost authenticity, and authenticity is certainly part of what it means to be beautiful. We do know when we are being met authentically by another human being. We know when we're meeting ourselves authentically.

COCHRAN

It can feel like such a revelation, to treat oneself with compassion.

SHARPE

We would never dream of treating another person the way we treat ourselves. We would consider it horrific. Yet when we think of compassion, we usually think of it in terms of the way we are externally, not internally. We're cruel to ourselves and we lose balance—and beauty.

COCHRAN

As you talk I begin to see that there's another order of beauty, if we only we could see it. There is a subtle process of giving and receiving that's always taking place—a kind of unseen economy. Whether I see it or not, whether I am closed to it because of my own delusion and self-rejection or not, there is another kind of exchange going on in the world and another order of beauty. It's always taking place, whether we choose to consciously participate or not.

SHARPE

This phrase, an unseen or invisible economy, goes back to the first question that you asked me, about whether I had regrets about my life. People in our culture like to plan. But in reality, you do step one and the universe responds by offering up new conditions, and then you respond to the new conditions that arise—which have nothing to do with what you knew about when you planned your steps—and then the universe responds again. This understanding is hard to transmit. There is a whole unseen network of life, a net through which we can't fall, and everything we do shakes this web. Denise Levertov wrote a beautiful poem called "Web." It starts, "Intricate and untraceable, weaving and interweaving ..." and ends, "all praise to the great web." To see how the universe unfolds, that's a beautiful life.

COCHRAN

We are usually oblivious.

SHARPE

Yes, we're too busy wanting everything just the way we want it. We want the answers—as if we could freeze our understanding forever. How awful would that be? I also want to

return to what you were saying about young women not feeling beautiful. In my own practice and life, I see all the ways I have excluded others, and qualities in myself, and so much in life through fear of what is conceived as unbeautiful. In however many years I have left, I want to be more inclusive—so there is nothing I have to turn my eyes away from because there is an idea, a definition in my mind or my conditioning that views it as unbeautiful. There is so much we don't want to look at or feel or include in our experience. Wisdom comes from including it all. The state of mind that we're calling beautiful is not possible if we're busy excluding.

COCHRAN

To be open, I have to be inclusive. That also means keeping the focus very specific.

SHARPE

Unless we completely inhabit ourselves, it's not possible to be completely present. If we're not completely present, we're not inclusive—and when we're not inclusive, that's when we exclude others who have different views, different opinions, different upbringings—difference. In presence, we see the beauty in what was previously unbeautiful—in difference and in likeness. It's all of life. ♦