

Embracing the Great Fullness of Life by Kristi Nelson

We all have our ideas about how life should go. Ideas painted within us as hopes, longings, opinions. Those painted around us as cultural norms, trajectories, “worthwhile” goals. We have ideas in mind about most everything — how our bodies should work, how love should work, how the world should work. Politics. Sleep. Weather. What we want and do not want. Ideas that make things bad or good, yes or no. And while these concepts can offer us valuable guidance about how we might approach life, they can also obscure and conflict with the vast majority of what is actually unfolding – and is bound to unfold – in our moment-to-moment, unpredictable lives and world.

We can be quite unaware of how strongly attached we are to our ideas about life until things do not transpire as we had “in mind.” Because of our sometimes less-than-conscious expectations, assumptions, opinions, and entitlement, our lived experience ends up becoming an affront to our ideas about how things were supposed to go, especially when life hands us something we did not expect and would never have chosen. And so we experience dissonance. Disappointment. Stress. Overwhelm. Devastation. The greater the degree our mental picture of how life should be is in discord with how life actually unfolds, the greater we experience spiritual, psychological, and mental suffering — suffering that ultimately comes from resisting and wanting to control the great fullness of life. The truth. The mystery. A greater fullness than any of us can comprehend or control.

Life is everything and inherently includes everything. This is the great fullness. Life is not about “or” — it is about “and.” It is magic and messy. It is heartwarming and heartbreaking. It is delight and disappointment. Grace and grief. Exquisite and excruciating, often at the exact same time. And it is paradoxical. The more squarely we embrace death, the more fully alive we can become. The more we let go, the more we often receive. Life is everything. How can we make the space to better see, hold, and work with this wonderfully challenging, complex, and simple truth?

Persian poet Jelaluddin Rumi’s poem *The Guest House* offers us a powerful, radical instruction — show unconditional hospitality for all that arrives. Not just another idea, this approach to life honors the truth of all that is mysterious, all that we cannot anticipate and control, and all that continues to arrive in our lives uninvited but beckoning for attention. Embracing the great fullness of life asks us to attend to everything that is present, everything that shows up unexpectedly, and even everything we might be inclined to push away. We commit to leave nothing out. Greeted with open arms, attended with open eyes, and honored with an open heart, even the most unwanted visitors can find their place of belonging at the table of what is true. Heartbreak. Pain. Disappointment. Despair. Rumi says, “Welcome...them all.”

We cannot attempt to stuff the unwelcome aspects of life — ours or others’ — behind

closed doors without an eventual crushing fall. Life is too big, too mysterious, too much beyond our choosing and our control to compartmentalize. Forces far greater than us are at work, and the results — while not necessarily “in our name” — belong to us and our interconnected world nonetheless. Oppression. Degradation. Injustice. Violence. Keeping our eyes wide open to see all that there is to see and accepting what is in our line of sight liberates us to better act and respond with agency. To accept that something is true does not mean that it is acceptable. We can perhaps only respond most effectively once we fully see and take into our hearts what is actually happening. Valuable energy and creativity can be lost in resisting what is actually “so” — energy that might be used in more empowered ways if we practice making room for holding the whole truth. What is happening is happening regardless of what we think about it, and our response is often the only thing over which we have control. The more we are in touch with the actual great fullness of life, the more we can respond with great fullness of heart.

There is no truly grateful living without room at the table for the great fullness of life to show up and be seated. Acknowledged. Accepted. Heeded. Rumi says, “Be grateful for whatever comes.” The gifts of full awareness and inclusion are plentiful and await us if we are welcoming and curious. This is how we transform. From everything that happens, we can learn, grow, see opportunities, and move toward greater empathy, agency, and possibility for ourselves and others. From everything fully seen and acknowledged, we can seek gratefulness and gain wisdom. As life invariably reminds us, and Rumi is here to say, it is often precisely from that which is most difficult that we are cleared out “...for some new delight.”

Living our lives such that all our experiences belong equally to us wakes us up to greater capacity for love and for living a wholehearted, more actualized and impactful life. Embracing and surrendering to the great fullness of life supports us to live our lives more gratefully. And grateful living makes the whole, wild, great fullness of life a beckoning terrain of practice.