

Befriending Ourselves: An Invitation to Love by Kristi Nelson

You are the one you have been waiting for.
~ Byron Katie

Everything flourishes in the nourishment of our appreciation. If we are interested in greater flourishing in our lives, it will surely serve us to surrender the burden of incessant goals, shoulds, aspirations, and the need for accomplishments. We can release the litany of ideas about what we must have and need to fix, who we should be, and whose permission we might require before we can be grateful for who we are. We can even set down many of the confines of how we have learned to identify ourselves in the world. We do not need to do, have, or be anything to be worthy of receiving our own acceptance and kindness. Instead, we can turn towards ourselves, extending the gifts of more merciful appreciation for every aspect of who we are, exactly as we are. All of it. Here. Now. Perfectly imperfect. Imperfectly perfect.

It is hugely human – and culturally encouraged – to want to work on, change, refine, and try to “better” ourselves. But before any efforts toward self-improvement, personal transformation, or transcendence, there is great wisdom in first learning to compassionately accept and attentively appreciate ourselves for the great fullness and truth of who we are and how we got here. We are well-served by relating to ourselves with wide-open eyes and hearts, and with a sweeping and inclusive embrace of the many aspects of ourselves we may have been inclined to disavow or that others have predisposed us to disown. The exiled parts. The pathologized ways of being. The marginalized feelings. The hidden hurts. The judged sensitivities. We discover a gracious capacity for empathy when we learn to lean into our hurt places with the tender curiosity and care of a close friend.

The recognition that the shared human condition is one of vulnerability can offer great relief and peace: the ways in which we experience ourselves as “other,” broken, and/or deficient are sadly more “normal” than not and are often a source of our deepest shared experience and connections with others. Many of us long suffer feeling “other” and then feeling more “other” for feeling other, or feeling bad about ourselves for feeling bad. Fear of not doing enough translates into not being enough. Doing something wrong can make us feel there is something wrong with us or that we are wholly wrong. Judging, compartmentalizing, and begrudging ourselves can lead to more of the same. The practice of intervening in these self-judgments – and in the judgment of our judgments – with unconditional acceptance, appreciation, and compassion is the path of self-befriending.

When we think about befriending ourselves, we can approach the practice as an unfurling experience, a slow and steady unfolding toward unconditional love. We can lean in, listen deeply, attend to ourselves patiently, and hold what is revealed with interest and

curiosity. We can delight in discovering and naming our unique quirks, idiosyncrasies, anomalies, eccentricities. We can offer compassion and tenderness toward that which is challenging. We can practice beholding rather than belittling, befriending rather than begrudging. We can hold ourselves as we want to be held, as we were once held, and as we can sometimes feel ourselves held in the largest embrace of felt-belonging and Oneness.

One way to initiate ourselves into the practice of befriending is to explore and come to know ourselves as if beholding an exquisite newborn. Our essential nature is so much more available to us in the state of infancy. If we can come to treat ourselves with the unconditional tenderness and cherishing that we bring to a new life, we can know ourselves anew. To become - and remain - incarnate is nothing short of miraculous on so many levels. It could take our breath away on a regular basis to revel in our magnificence - yes, even in the midst of our messiness. If we hold our vulnerabilities and sensitivities as sources of rich information about how we deserve and need to be treated, and if we honor ourselves with compassionate care, we can forge an abiding friendship that will deliver blessings into every aspect of our life, and into the lives of others.

It is commonly said that you cannot love others until you love yourself. The experience of love being unavailable to those who do not first love themselves - giving, receiving, embodying - is in truth more likely a matter of degree. But in the big picture of life, why not be available to share love to the greatest degree possible? Hence, learning and leaning into the opportunity to offer love's key ingredients - compassion, kindness, and appreciation - to ourselves is a highly worthwhile focus for learning how to be with others. The committed practice of unconditional self-befriending is the formative ground for the qualities and capacities we will bring to all our circles of relationships, to living out our life in all its manifestations and moments, and to our ability to offer ourselves fully to truly loving the world.