Surrendering and Opening to Hope in Times of Crisis
by Awakin Call Editors

University was about to start and Anna-Zoë Herr had exhausted her last option for arranging living quarters. Where to turn? For weeks, she had searched the inventory of apartments only to find they had already been filled. Her last option was a listing in a rural area far outside the city limits (and far from the university). After an exhausting trip navigating public transportation, Zoë was dismayed to discover that the apartment was once again no longer available. When she got to the bus stop to head back home, she realized the last bus of the day had already left.

“God, just tell me what to do,” she cried, breaking down in tears. “Thy will be done. I just want what you want for me.” After a few moments, the thought came to her, “Go and hitchhike.” Obedient to the command, she stuck out her thumb and was picked up by a man on his way back into town, who said he could give her a ride. They got to chatting and it turned out this man was a plumber and knew of an apartment that would soon be vacated. It was located right next to the university and the landlord was a friend of his. The man drove Zoë straight to the apartment so she could take a look and meet the landlord and she signed the contract right then.

Such surrender – and trust in God and in humankind – manifests in the diverse threads of her life as an artist, sustainability researcher, and spiritual seeker. “Surrendering reminds me that my way is always inferior to the way of life,” she says, as she describes a broken heart that sent her on a 10-month solo adventure of a lifetime hitchhiking through South America at age 19, which experientially confirmed something of humankind’s fundamental kindness.

Zoë’s creative endeavors, primarily painting and photography, are embodied experiences of surrender and trust. The creative process is “a language that speaks to our hearts in a way in which it can listen intently, if we surrender to the process. I try to get to a place of whole-hearted surrender of what I think something should be and allow what wants to come, to emerge.” The output of her surrender has resulted in solo exhibitions of her work throughout the world.

Surrender is also a quality linked to the cultivation of hope in her work as a researcher and public educator on the climate crisis. Confronted with the often-overwhelming data of despair that depicts the current ecological situation, we face an imperative to acknowledge the bleak outlook while at the same time letting go of the inevitability that this be our future—in order to imagine a different one. Imagination is the key to finding hope and shifting the narrative of an us vs. them approach to nature (and to humanity) to an interconnected, interdependent reality, says Zoë. Just as Zoë practices surrender when standing before a blank canvas, there is an invitation for humanity to practice whole-hearted surrender and “allow what wants to come to emerge” and find answers to seemingly unsolvable problems in a new narrative of hope.
Along with her older brother, Zoë was raised in Hamburg, Germany in a loving and deeply spiritual family environment steeped in the practice of Christian Science, a religion and philosophy which emphasizes God as an all-powerful Divine Love and the laws of God as governing a deeper, ordered reality than that which is visible only to the material senses. Her mother, Anette Kreutziger-Herr, was a professor and author of several books, who left academia to become a spiritual healer. Her father was a Christian Science lecturer and teacher.

When Zoë’s father passed four years ago, she grappled with almost unbearable pain and grief and was finding it difficult to find hope. One night, she had a dream in which her father appeared, sitting opposite her. “I came back because you have a question for me,” he said. Zoë was taken aback and then said quickly, “Yes, I do. How do I overcome your death?”

“You don’t overcome my death,” her father replied. “You just love.” Taking this injunction to heart, Zoë’s path deepened towards love, towards hope and imagination even amidst despair. She was healed of depression and expanded into a deeper sense of trust and joy. Her father’s loss led her more powerfully and experimentally to her art and more committed to understanding how we relate to nature. These became more important to her because they were important to her father and immersing herself in them became a way of connecting to and honoring her father.

Even in the face of loss, whether on the global scale or personal, can we each take cues from Zoë to surrender—and trust—and love?

Join us in conversation with this open-hearted spiritual seeker as we explore spiritual practices to kindle the imagination and spark hope to the problems we face in today’s world.

Five Questions with Anna-Zoë Herr

What Makes You Come Alive?

I find that whatever humbles me makes me feel alive. The grand experiences of humility that meet us when we meet our own smallness in the presence of the almost order and beauty of the world around us, make me come alive. In my work, I find the greatest joy when there is a deeper sense of collective purpose, when people feel that they can leapfrog in their lives to a new level through art or spiritual insight, and when we realize that what we think we see in the world and around us, might truly be different. A world where people look less at the appearance to find hope and more to their own hearts.

Pivotal turning point in your life?

On a hike with a friend, one afternoon, I sat silently while my friend slept. I wanted to melt into the landscape and partake in the stillness. Suddenly I noticed a movement in front of me. A little family of mice came to wash themselves and have a drink in a puddle forming about half a meter away from me, then came a bird and then two and three. Next came a family of chipmunks. I remained completely still, and then saw about ten meters away a black bear. He smelled a flower and then hopped uphill and out of my sight. I was almost paralyzed in amazement. I had only sat there for about an hour, but it instantly occurred to me that not only my physical but also my mental stillness, allowed for creation around me to come into the open. It was always there, but when I became still, I was able to
really see what was there. I have come to think about stillness as a prerequisite step for true creation to come into being.

An Act of Kindness You'll Never Forget?

I feel that my life in some sense is a lynnstich of kindnesses, selfless acts and forgiveness that I was honored to witness around me and be the recipient of. Without love, this world could not move forward an inch, and I know I would be nowhere in my life were it not for the grace and generosity of God and the people around me. There are many moments of unforgettable kindness I experienced grand and small that I thought of when pondering this question, but one that comes back to me many times as a reminder of the power of giving, is one that happened to my mother. During a trip to Boston, Mass., she went into a flower shop to get flowers for her husband and struck up a conversation with the florist. Before she bought the bouquet, she asked, "how long will the flowers last?" upon which the florist responded, "if you buy the flowers, they will last a week, but if I gift them to you, they will last forever." No money was exchanged, and the flowers indeed have lasted forever for the story has become a family teaching of the power of kindness and its ripple effects in others lives.

One Thing On Your Bucket List?

Sailing across the Atlantic

One-line Message for the World?

When we surrender who we think we are, we become who we truly are.

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For more inspiration, join this Saturday's Awakin Call with Anna-Zoe Herr! More details and RSVP info here.