

A Selfless Respect for Reality

by Roshi Joan Halifax

In her book *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Iris Murdoch defined humility as a “selfless respect for reality.” She writes that “our picture of ourselves has become too grand.” This I discovered from sitting at the bedsides of dying people, volunteering in the prison system, and protesting war and environmental devastation. Engaging in the world in this spirit showed me how serious the costs of suffering can be for all, and how important it is for us to have a selfless respect for reality.

Thinking about our current global situation, I recall the work of Kazimierz Dąbrowski, the Polish psychiatrist and psychologist who proposed a theory of personality development called positive disintegration. This is a transformational approach to psychological growth based on the idea that crises are important for our personal maturation. Dąbrowski’s concept is similar to a tenet of systems theory: living systems that break down can reorganize at a higher and more robust level—if they learn from the break-down experience.

Working as an anthropologist in Mali and Mexico, I also observed positive disintegration as a core dynamic in “rites of passage.” These are ceremonies of initiation that mark important life transitions, and are intended to deepen and strengthen the process of maturation.

Years later, I was to hear the Vietnamese teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh echo this wisdom as he spoke of the suffering he experienced while being in the midst of the war in Vietnam and then later on as a refugee. He would say: “No mud, no lotus.”

The pandemic, the ravages of the climate catastrophe felt in so many quarters, and the terrible social, racial, and political churn we are witnessing, have given us a vivid chance to look at how we live as individuals and also as a society. It is essential that we acknowledge we share a common planet with all beings. As humans we have a responsibility to take care of our common home and each other.

Many of us have also discovered that our practice is being intimate with exactly where we are and where the world is, tough though this can be. We have to be in it and let ourselves be worked by it. We have to not turn away from suffering but turn toward it with wise hope supporting us.

Rebecca Solnit has written: “the unknown need not be turned into the known through false divination, or the projection of grim political or ideological narratives; it’s a celebration of darkness. Afraid of the darkness of the unknown, the spaces in which we see only dimly, we often choose the darkness of closed eyes, of obliviousness.”

Keats coined the term ‘negative capability’ in a letter he wrote to his brothers George and

Tom in 1817. Inspired by Shakespeare's work, he describes it as "being in uncertainties and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Negative capability pertains to the ability to live within the penetralium of unknown.

This is what we are asked to do now: Be with Not Knowing, Bear Witness, and then engage in Compassionate Action. A deep bow to my teachers Roshis Bernie Glassman and Jishu Angyo Holmes, who lived the Three Tenets and shared them as a powerful path of practice.