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From Exile to Alchemy—Healing Our Relationship to the Heart by Alan Seale



Lately I've been observing how the accepted practice for many of us in westernized cultures is to keep our distance from the heart. There is an underlying belief that letting ourselves get too close to the heart can bring up emotions and deep feelings that, quite frankly, can play havoc with our carefully crafted plans and carefully managed lives. On the surface, it can seem that if we

just keep our emotions in check and remain focused on what our rational mind tells us to do—what decisions to make, how to maintain control over our lives—life will be simpler and less stressful. We move into a kind of "non-feeling" flow, and our days pass into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years, and everything seems to be mostly alright. As long as we fit into the "norm" in our family and community, no one questions our choices or decisions. Everyone agrees to play by the unspoken rules of the "no-true-feelings-allowed" game, or we display superficial feelings, playing "nice." And as long as no one rocks the boat, life appears, at least on the surface, to be "just fine." Until it isn't.

As I write those words, I begin to shudder inside. Perhaps you do, too. As spiritually aware people, surely we have a more enlightened approach than that to our day-to-day existence. Surely we are deeply in touch with our feelings and emotions and allow them full and appropriate expression. Surely we are authentic and honest in our relationships. Surely we recognize how everything is connected to everything else in our lives and in our world and therefore consider the full ramifications of all of our choices, decisions, and actions before moving forward.

Yet perhaps you, like I, also realize how easy it is to fall into that slightly numb pattern and let our lives go on "automatic pilot." In fact, perhaps you, like I, can find at least remnants of the "keep-your-distance-from-the-heart" way of living in your own experience.

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My recent pondering of this topic began when someone said to me that emotions were not appropriate at work—that they just got in the way—and that therefore it was best to just not feel. In that moment, an immediate and deep sadness washed over me, not just for this woman, but for us as a social system. I completely understood what she meant. Feelings and emotions can have a huge impact on how we live—on our relationships, beliefs, decisions, and actions. When we get caught in survival mode in any area of our lives, we may not be able to see any other option than to shut down our feelings and "just do what we have to do" in order to get through the situation.

The more we shut down our feelings, the more disconnected we become from ourselves and from life, and the more we fear going anywhere close to the heart. We think we are protecting ourselves—if we don't feel, then there is no conflict, no pain. No emotions get in the way. We can make the tough decisions, push through to get the results we want, and not have to notice the consequences to others. Without even realizing it, disconnection becomes our habit. One simple choice to bury feelings in order to get through a situation easily leads to another and then to another. A survival pattern is established, and we begin to live in exile from our hearts.

The irony is, of course, that we then fear the very part of us that could actually give us a true sense of power and strength and bring our lives into balance. We break our lives into little pieces and keep those pieces separate from one another. Our assumption is that this practice will keep our relationships clean, avoid messy interactions, and protect us from painful emotions. What we don't realize is that as a result we become weaker and less effective because we have lost touch with our own

wholeness. And when we lose touch with our wholeness, we lose access to our authentic power and strength.

This is true whether for individuals, corporations, or governments. Our authentic power comes from our wholeness and openness, not from our protection. Closing ourselves off from our hearts and keeping the various aspects of our lives or business in little compartments comes at enormous cost. We are designed to live in connection with ourselves and in interdependent relationship with the world around us. We are designed to live in wholeness. Keeping up the protection and continually burying our feelings takes an enormous amount of energy. It robs us of energy we need for creation and manifestation. It robs us of healthy relationships. Every decision and action is tainted by our need for protection. We lose the “whole-picture” awareness and perspective of the heart.

Whether or not we acknowledge it, the truth is that we are whole beings. We can't not be whole—it's how we are made. Yet when we live in exile from the heart, we lose touch with that wholeness. The heart is about integration. It's about healing. It is the alchemical energy center within us that can transmute debilitating emotions to feelings of clarity and truth. It is the center of our wholeness.

It is through the heart that we recognize our oneness with all that is. When we live in exile from the heart, we lose a sense of our interdependent relationship with the world around us. When we are in exile from the heart, we can easily deny that other people's circumstances have anything to do with our own, that other countries' challenges are of any concern to us, that environmental degradation is actually self-degradation. Ancient wisdom teachings as well as fundamental principles of quantum theory tell us that, on an energetic level, there is no separation between another person and us. The health and well-being of one country impacts the health and well-being of another. Anything that happens to the earth happens on some level to all of us. Yet living in exile from the heart, we make choices and decisions that result in ecosystems being destroyed to support our habits and dependencies, peoples being taken advantage of for economic gain, wars based on greed and the pursuit of power. Living in exile from the heart can only create a world where, in the end, everyone loses. However, when our lives are fully integrated through the heart, we seek choices and decisions that serve the good of all and that honor the earth as a part of our body.

It is easy for you and me to say that we as individuals do, in fact, live from the heart and that we do seek choices that serve the greater good—it's our leaders that are living in exile from the heart. Yet you and I elect our government

officials and we vote for business practices through our purchasing power. Nations and corporations are made up of individuals. And each of those individuals has a heart—is a whole being. It is up to each of us—to you and me—to create safe environments where individuals no longer feel that they need protection. It is up to each of us to model heart-centered living. It is up to each of us to lead the way.

So how do we do it? How do we keep from slipping into the “accepted norm” in our societies and losing our heart connection? How do we find this integration within ourselves and become daily role models for the world around us?

One simple tool comes from Doc Childre, founder of The Institute of HeartMath in Boulder Creek, California. In his book, *The HeartMath Solution*, he speaks of two heart-related energy centers in the body. The “low heart” is located around the base of the sternum, while the “high heart” is located in the area of the upper sternum, midway between the center of your chest and the base of the neck.

When the low heart center is activated, we tend to “react” emotionally to what is happening around us rather than “respond” out of clarity and insight. That reaction can lead to excessive sympathy, clinging to particular outcomes, or unhealthy attachments. Much more energy is given to the challenge than to its resolution. Co-dependent patterns are reinforced. Emotional needs set the agenda. These are precisely the kinds of emotions that “get in the way” or create agendas that cause us to make choices and decisions that serve only a few. Rarely do they lead to productive and creative forward movement.

When the high heart is activated, however, it's as if there is a breath of fresh air. Almost immediately the perspective shifts from powerlessness or co-dependence to healthy compassion and appropriate action in service of a greater good. When the high heart is engaged, right away there is more clarity and understanding of the situation, a broader perspective, and a clearer vision of how to move forward in positive ways. Whereas in the low heart, we become even more entrenched in the drama and attached to personal agendas, in the high heart we rise above the drama and personal agendas to recognize emerging opportunities for all.

The “high heart” and “low heart” are the chambers of the alchemical heart. If we are willing to feel whatever our initial emotional response might be and then, in effect, carry that response from the low heart to the high heart

center, we can step back into wholeness. No longer do emotional responses get in the way. No longer do we feel the need for protection. Through the high heart, we live in openness, possibility, creativity, and authentic power. We are able to be compassionately objective and find the way forward. And we can literally make the shift in a matter of seconds. That is the power of the alchemical heart.

You can experience the alchemy of the heart yourself through the following exercise.

EXERCISE: Experiencing the Alchemical Heart

A word of introduction to this exercise: When I speak of high heart or low heart breaths, I am not speaking of a shallow breath as compared to a deeper breath. Instead I am speaking of the energy center that is activated through the intake of the breath. Throughout the exercise, when working with both low heart and high heart, your breath should be as deep and full as you can manage.

Close your eyes and take deep and full breaths, filling your entire body with air. After a few breaths, continue this breathing and imagine the breath coming in through your low-heart center, down around the base of your sternum, mid-way between the center of your chest and your solar plexus, and then going out through the solar plexus. Notice how it feels to activate the low-heart center through your breath. What is your physical and emotional response? Make no judgment about your experience—just allow yourself whatever experience you have.

After a few moments, shift your focus to imagine the breath coming in through your high-heart center in the upper-sternum area mid-way between the center of your chest and the base of your neck, and then going out through the solar plexus. Continue taking deep and full breaths. Just shift where you imagine the air entering—the energy center you are activating. Notice again your physical and emotional response.

For most people, the high-heart breath feels more open and expansive, while breathing in through the low-heart center feels more restrictive. However, if you are accustomed to living in low-heart energy, the low-heart breath may feel more comfortable simply because it is your habit.

Perhaps you have a personal or professional challenge in your life now. Let that challenge come into your awareness and focus your breath once again in the low heart area. Notice what happens in how you feel about your challenge from the low heart. Notice the quality of your breath and whether or not you can find a sense of

inner peace or calm.

After a few moments, while continuing to be with your challenge, shift the focus of your breath to the high heart. Notice what shifts in how you feel about your challenge. Notice the quality of your breath and your sense of inner peace and calm.

Most people experience more clarity and a sense of expansiveness and possibility while focusing on the high heart while the feelings of the low heart are more restrictive and tight. Take a few more moments to go back and forth with your breath between the high and low hearts and continue to heighten your awareness of the difference between them and how they influence your perceptions.

In the next few days, pay attention to how you habitually approach situations in your life. Do you default to a low-heart or high-heart breath? This practice will heighten your awareness so that the next time you find yourself in a challenging situation, rather than running away from the feelings, you can use the alchemical heart to help you transmute the unproductive feelings to a sense of clarity and possibility. The moment you feel yourself being swept up into the drama or wanting to shut your feelings down and just “do what you need to do,” consciously activate your high-heart center while filling your entire body with breath. Breathe all the way to your toes; then exhale through your solar plexus. Continue that breathing pattern for several minutes and you will feel yourself get calmer and your perspective shift. The high heart breath can help you step more fully into your wholeness and access your wisdom as well as your authentic power and strength.

This breathing technique can help you gain clarity and peace in the face of most challenges. It can help you access the authentic power and strength of your wholeness. The next time you are tempted to push your feelings and emotions away in order to get through a situation, pause and breathe through the high heart. Notice how your perspective shifts. I’m not claiming that simply shifting the focus of your breath will solve all of your problems, but I am saying that it can be a powerful place to begin.

In this time in history, we cannot afford to live in exile from the heart, whether as individuals, corporations, or nations. We cannot afford to not live in wholeness. Time is of the essence. We are in crisis in the world on many levels. And crisis is a huge calling card for opportunity. And ending the exile at the corporate or national level begins with each of us standing fully in our

personal wholeness every day.

The heart is the starting point, not the destination. Through the heart we come to our wholeness and recognize the truth of our oneness with all of creation. Claiming our wholeness alone will not make everything right in the world. However, as we are willing to feel and embrace the power of the heart – to step into the alchemical chambers of the heart in our relationships, projects, and negotiations – we access entirely new levels of clarity and understanding about where we must go, who we must be, and what we must do. The wise heart will show us

the way. Then it is up to us to follow through with the action being asked for.

Many blessings,
Alan

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Profile—Claire Molinard: Bearing Witness on the Streets



Claire Molinard is a transformational coach specializing in coaching women towards wholeness. Claire and I first met when she was a student at the International Coach Academy where I lead the Spiritual Coaching Community of Practice. Since then she has attended The Manifestation Wheel workshop and was a part of the inaugural program for Transformational Presence Coaching. Claire has joined me on the faculty of the

International Coach Academy where she also leads one of the Spiritual Coaching Community classes.

Back in the winter Claire told me about a retreat she wanted to participate in - spending several days living on the streets with the homeless people of Washington, DC. While there was a fee to participate in this retreat – actually it was a donation to a Zen Center – one of the stipulations was that she was not allowed to pay the fee herself. She had to ask for the money from others. Quite taken by Claire's commitment and courage to embark upon this journey, I offered some financial support for her journey. And as I wrote my check to the Zen Center, I also knew that sometime in the months following her retreat, I would ask Claire to share her amazing story with our community. Thank you, Claire, for sharing these words, and more importantly for the shift in the mass consciousness to which you contributed through your journey.

Bearing Witness on the Streets by Claire Molinard

"When we go... to bear witness to life on the streets, we're offering ourselves.

Not blankets, not food, not clothes, just ourselves."
Bernie Glassman, Bearing Witness

The time had arrived to plunge into the unknown. Wearing only the clothes on my back and carrying a water bottle and a small bag to collect food, my hair unwashed for the last five days, I joined the Cherry Blossom Street Retreat. Our group consisted of one teacher and eight students – five women and four men from age forty to sixty-seven years old. We had all begun the retreat at home by begging for the cost of the retreat from friends. Having never begged for money before, I realized my feeling of extreme vulnerability was the required and most important first step of entering into the spirit of the retreat.

Beginning that afternoon, we lived and wandered around downtown Washington, DC for three days with no resources, begging for money, searching for food, shelter, and bathrooms. The retreat was a way to practice three tenets of Engaged Buddhism, as defined by the Zen Peacemakers:

- Not-knowing: letting go of fixed ideas about our selves, others and the world
- Bearing witness: opening our hearts and minds to fearlessly witness both joy and suffering
- Loving actions: healing ourselves others and the world, through compassionate action and nonviolence

Sensing that nothing I would imagine could come close to what I was about to experience, I started the retreat with very little expectations or apprehensions. My only conscious anxiety was that I needed to ask someone if they could lend me a phone at some point in the retreat to call my husband and reassure him that I was alive – which I did, eventually. The nine of us had adventures on the three days and three nights we were together and

as I had anticipated, the lessons came for me in the form of the unexpected.

After spending the first few hours of the afternoon connecting as a group, we started focusing on finding dinner and a place to sleep for the night. Rumor had it that food was being distributed at a nearby park that night—soup and sandwiches served from a van by a small local organization. Standing in line, observing the dismayed men and women around me, I felt both sad and reassured as I realized how different and separate I was feeling from the rest of them. Yes, I was standing physically in the same line, but the mental barriers that stood in between them and I seemed so real. All seemed to separate us: I wasn't beaten up by life like most of them seemed to be, I wasn't cursing away or muttering to myself, I didn't have the same wildness in my eyes and above all, I wasn't alone—even here, in the streets, I was with my group.

Why was I here? What was this all for? Remembering my first tenet, "not knowing," I did my best to detach from my thoughts, to absorb and observe it all, and to simply hold the space for whatever was arising in my mind as well as all around me.

A few hours later that night, as I was lying on the thin cardboard that protected my body from the cold concrete, I had in contrast a much more direct experience of homelessness. I was freezing, so cold I couldn't sleep, and all I could think of was that I needed to find something warm to protect me for the following nights. At this moment, I realized later, I probably was sharing a very similar experience with anybody who was trying to sleep on concrete on a cold and windy night.

Experiencing homelessness firsthand, I had to rely on my true nature many times during these three days, as I had nothing else. I'd written in my request for funds, "Poverty is our collective shadow, on a global level ...for three days, I will not be able to close my eyes. I will be embracing their pain as my own." This retreat was indeed an opportunity to go beyond my imagined limits. As Sensei Grover Genro Gauntt, founding teacher of the Zen Peacemaker Order, organizer and teacher of the retreat once said: "A street retreat is the barest poke at renunciation."

The morning after that first sleepless night of freezing to my bones, a lady at the soup kitchen where we had breakfast offered me a blanket. I had the hardest time accepting the gift—I shared with Genro that I felt as if I was taking the blanket away from them.

"After all," I insisted, "She could have given it to someone else that needed it more than I did".

"Them is us," he replied, giving me one of his genuine smiles. His simple and profound teaching sank deeply into my heart and in that moment, I felt a sudden letting go as if something had just dissolved. Maybe it was my resistance to perceiving myself as the same as them? I don't know. I took the blanket and simply felt grateful that what I had wished for all night was manifesting so quickly. So much for the power of intention!

Through the woman's loving action I also understood in that moment my experience of the previous evening at the park: All my feelings of separateness originated merely from the ideas and concepts I was attaching to my own self-image: basically that of a healthy, wealthy, educated and goodhearted young white woman.

As the hours and days passed roaming around the streets, sharing meals with women and men in soup kitchens, these prejudices and limiting boundaries continued to bubble up, demanding my attention. And yet there were times when the boundaries dissolved.

One afternoon we arrived too late for a street food distribution and nothing was left. All of us were hungry and tired. We met this very young man who offered to walk with us to the nearest Safeway supermarket—twenty minutes away—to buy us some food with his food coupons. We were all so touched by his generosity, and yet some of us didn't want to accept his offer for he certainly needed his coupons more than we did. Our teacher reminded us not to interfere with the natural functioning of "bearing witness"—that generosity and compassion arise out of this action—and this young man, who had very little himself, was embodying those qualities for us. I was reminded of what my grandmother used to tell me: "The most generous people are often those who possess the least." I wondered how I was going to apply this teaching in my life. I thought about my constant battle with time, and how, rather than money, time was certainly what I perceived as lacking the most in my life. Maybe being more generous with my time would be a way to cultivate generosity in my own life?

Another example of loving action arising from bearing witness came our way one evening when we didn't know where dinner was going to come from. Out of nowhere a beautiful Indian family appeared. The couple and their two young adult sons were distributing food from their car in a little gloomy square, a hang-out for the homeless and junkies. We found out that they cooked the food in their home and drove twenty miles once a month to come to this dark neighborhood in downtown DC to distribute meals to the homeless. They served us an amazingly fragrant and colorful

meal of homemade Indian food, the best I had ever enjoyed. To quote Bernie Glassman again:

“... Peacemaking is the functioning of bearing witness. Once we listen with our entire body and mind, loving action arises. Loving action is right action. It’s as simple as giving a hand to someone who stumbles or picking up a child who has fallen on the floor. We take such direct, natural actions every day of our lives without considering them special. And they’re not special. Each is simply the best possible response to that situation in that moment.”

The experience was quite surreal. Here I was with eight other fellows as shabby, dirty, and worn-out as I was after two and a half days of aimless walking and barely sleeping – we were actually starting to look like real homeless people – enjoying the most delicious food and feeling in complete harmony with all that was arising around me. This spaced out junkie on the bench was not a bit interested by the food; that old woman sitting alone a few meters away diligently watching over the few bags she possessed; that funky black guy – apparently a regular – grabbing a chapatti on the go as he was riding his bike; that gracious Indian lady who found a nice word or smile for each person she was serving. We were all one. In that moment, the construct made of my concepts and ideas dissolved and all that was left was the direct reality of that moment unfolding, perfect as it was.

I started the retreat feeling different and separate from the “real homeless” and I ended up needing the same basic things as everyone else: food, shelter and basic comfort. I recognized my common humanity by direct interaction with strangers and our common quest for basic survival. I realized my responsibilities towards my fellow human brothers and sisters – that of living my life’s purpose – to promote and restore wholeness and healing through all my actions and relationships.

I learned during this retreat that sitting on the meditation cushion and bearing witness in the street is the same thing – in the same way that I empty myself in meditation, I had to empty myself in going out in the street. I took almost nothing with me, and the more I emptied myself in the street – the more I let go of my ideas and concepts – the more real and full were my experiences and encounters with others. On the streets I found true abundance. I learned that whatever I needed was right here if I used my intention and if I could ask for it.

You may be wondering what this street retreat concept could possibly do or change for the poor. Or you may think that this is only about me, not about the people in the street. After all, what is the point of living like a homeless person for three days, when one knows it’s only for three days? It might even seem like an insult to the poor. I do not and cannot hide from that part of me that wondered the same things.

At the same time, I felt deeply called to be part of this retreat. It was the inner sense that something very meaningful and transformative on a collective consciousness level can occur when even just a few people offer their whole self – bearing witness to a form of suffering that as a mass culture we often refuse to look directly into the eyes – like a part of ourselves that we want to keep away from our awareness.

Here are the gifts that I took home with me:

- When bearing witness, we let ourselves be touched by all the pain and joy of the universe and we let go of our illusion of separateness: “Them is I.”
- Everyone is a smile or a word away from being a friend.
- “Not knowing” is the way to direct seeing, deeper listening, better understanding, more effective doing.

As I intuited before the retreat, I can no longer close my eyes. During those three days, I bore witness to pain and loneliness, madness, anger and distress. I also have never felt so free, connected, open and grateful for all the blessings in my life. I made new friends too – eight fellow travelers on the Buddhist path and a few individual encounters with homeless men and women with whom I had the privilege to connect with one-on-one. What could be better?