



When My Life Is In Danger, by Christina Feldman

A few years ago, an elderly monk arrived in India after fleeing from prison in Tibet. Meeting with the Dalai Lama, he recounted the years he had been imprisoned, the hardship and beatings he had endured, the hunger and loneliness he had lived with, and the torture he had faced.

At one point the Dalai Lama asked him, “Was there ever a time you felt your life was truly in danger?”

The old monk answered, “In truth, the only time I truly felt at risk was when I felt in danger of losing compassion for my jailers.”

Hearing stories like this, we are often left feeling skeptical and bewildered. We may be tempted to idealize both those who are compassionate and the quality of compassion itself. We imagine these people as saints, possessed of powers inaccessible to us. Yet stories of great suffering are often stories of ordinary people who have found greatness of heart. To discover an awakened heart within ourselves, it is crucial not to idealize or romanticize compassion. Our compassion simply grows out of our willingness to meet pain rather than to flee from it.

We may never find ourselves in situations of such peril that our lives are endangered; yet anguish and pain are undeniable aspects of our lives. None of us can build walls around our hearts that are invulnerable to being breached by life. Facing the sorrow we meet in this life, we have a choice: Our hearts can close, our minds recoil, our bodies contract, and we can experience the heart that lives in a state of painful refusal. We can also dive deeply within ourselves to nurture the courage, balance, patience, and wisdom that enable us to care.

If we do so, we will find that compassion is not a state. It is a way of engaging with the fragile and unpredictable world. Its domain is not only the world of those you love and care for, but equally the world of those who threaten us, disturb us, and cause us harm. It is the world of the countless beings we never meet who are facing an unendurable life.

The ultimate journey of a human being is to discover how much our hearts can encompass. Our capacity to cause suffering as well as to heal suffering live side by side within us. If we choose to develop the capacity to heal, which is the challenge of every human life, we will find our hearts can encompass a great deal, and we can learn to heal “rather than increase” the schisms that divide us from one another.

