



Life May Itself Be A Koan, by Rachel Naomi Remen

Consider the Zen practice of the koan, the question or problem proposed by Zen masters to each other or by masters to students. The koan is a dilemma, a mystery which the rational mind cannot solve. The key to the resolution of a koan is a shift in the being of the student which allows for a new understanding of the question itself.Â

In presenting a koan, the teacher engages the student with mystery in a highly personal way. By putting the habitual mind into a place of stuckness, a sort of fruitful darkness, we may inadvertently step back into that fertile and pregnant place of not-knowing called in Zen "beginner's mind". [...]

The resolution of a koan requires a certain trust of mystery, a faith that there is an answer which will come in time. When the answer and the seeker have grown toward one another the answer seems to emerge by itself. The resolution of a koan is usually obvious; it has been staring us in the face all along, but we have never seen it before. Once glimpsed, it is difficult to believe that we ever saw things another way, and indeed we will never see things in the old way again. Our eyes have been changed by the way in which we have met with the unknown.Â

Like good science, the resolution of a koan requires a trust in the larger pattern which underlies the happening that the mind does not understand, and the understanding which is gained is often accompanied by a deep appreciation of the elegance of that pattern, the intelligence of the nature of things. A sense of wonder. An appreciation of the very mystery which has frustrated us. A sense of belonging to it.Â

Many of the problems Life poses us are seemingly without solutions, much like the koans the Zen teacher presents to the student. Yet meaning and wisdom emerge from one of Life's stories much in the way that the resolution of a koan emerges. Awaiting this meaning is almost like awaiting a birth. After we live a story or hear a story we become pregnant with its meaning. Sometimes the pregnancy may take weeks or even years. Often over time, pregnant with one story, we may give birth to many meanings, each one deeper than the one before. Most of the best stories I have ever lived or been told are like this.Â

Certainly suffering and illness are koans. Life may itself be a koan. Those people who are able to meet with life the way a Zen student meets with a koan will be moved along a spiritual trajectory by events

which reduce others to bitterness and defeat. Not only their physical body but the quality of their soul may be changed in the encounter.Â

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