

The Gem in the Mountain:
Reflections on the Inner Child and the Will to Liberation
Offered by the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia
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I loved the movie *Inside Out*. It simply but brilliantly showed the ways that the human body/mind works – the interplay of emotions that results in our responses to the world. It was a film just right for kids to learn about emotional intelligence. For that matter, it was just right for adults to get a little bit of emotional intelligence too. A little emotional intelligence would do the world a world of good.

I sometimes think that the best emotional intelligence has to do with reclaiming the inner child. Now, just bear with me. I know that this idea has its own dangers, and it can be and sound self-serving in the worst sort of way. However, I suggest that our inner child is not a little cream puff, not a devouring and needy beast, not the unformed and primitive self. It is the part of our being that feels deeply, that remembers how to trust, that is playful and creative, that dares, is vulnerable, and that lives in the present and not so much the past or the future. It is the aspect of ourselves that we need whole, hale, and hearty if we hope to be resilient and to thrive. The inner child is the aspect of ourselves that existed before life, experience, what have you broke our hearts.

I am not sure if this is true in other societies, but in the US, among middle class white people, there is a sort of denial that such heartbreak will happen. There is almost an expectation that we will go from childhood to adulthood along a smooth trajectory. People don't expect tragedy or suffering and it's not just that it's not expected – but few are really prepared. Understanding how to process, to think about, to feel our way through such events isn't taught in school, not seen on TV, and, too often, not part of Sunday School.

In *Inside Out* the whole inner self is portrayed as a collective of feelings and memories that operate together from a central control panel. The psychological theory that it was based on is called Internal Family Systems – which essentially means that inside each of us is a household of feelings – each attempting in insightful as well as incredibly misguided ways to protect us. The task of the maturing human being is to figure out how to help the members of the household get along and even pull in the same direction. This is often easier said than done.

Childhood is supposed to be the time when all the software for resilience and well-being is installed and the kinks, mostly, worked out. I know that there really are people for whom this happens. I know that there are people who'll spend the upcoming holidays with their families of origin and this will be joyful, safe, and loving. But I also know that there are countless people for whom this simply isn't true. And when the software and well-being aren't installed in childhood, there's some catching up to do. But it's entirely possible. And for all of us for whom that is the case and for any one whose passage through life is paved with broken rocks and seemingly impassable boulders, these thoughts have been knocking around my mind.

There are so many ways that our hearts can be broken. The ways can be personal and intimate, physical, social, and even global.

Some of these are immediate and arose in our families (neglect, abuse, dysfunction), some are the hard experiences of growing up in social conflict, in war time, in poverty or ghettoization (oppression and limiting, shaming, violence, and the threat of violence), some are embedded in our world – in the tragedies that damage our societies and our planet (the greed that runs amok in our world and the wounding of our world through human excess), the theft of the miracles of this world by reducing them to resources). Of course, at the most basic, is the fact of

our physical vulnerability and mortality. Simply to be human and aware is to need a capacity to rise to each new day and certainly it is better to arise in hope. But that's the challenge.

The story line of *Inside Out* revolves around Riley's first day in a new school, in a new city. The events at school plummet her into depression and the members of her emotional team – the characters around her control panel – have the hardest time finding their way – or rather her way – back to balance and a sense of well-being. The art of finding well-being, as the movie unfolds, and as I believe, is to figure out how to blend these characters or parts to shape a whole person. You can't have joy without sadness, safety without some fear or disgust.

This is about resilience. As we make our way through challenges that range from the first day of school to a terrorist attack, we need to understand and build our capacity for resilience. Resilience isn't the capacity to see the bright side of whatever happens, it's not the ability to buck up and push on regardless, it's not the ability to practice denial or forgetfulness. Human beings routinely make those choices – choices to ignore one or more aspects of themselves.

We avoid sadness – avoid anger – and, one of the most damaging, I believe, is when we leave behind the spark, the humor, the sense of surprise, and the vulnerability that is so much part of our young selves.

I read Eve Ensler's book, *I Am an Emotional Creature* this week. In the book, she talks about the ways that girls are shut down and how much we lose because we try to shut down that part of human being. I watched her TED talk about the book and when she began to talk about our girl nature – she said – everybody is born with one – both girls and boys. But it's taken from us or drummed out of us at a certain point.

Ensler wrote to the girl within us all: I know we make you feel stupid, as if being a teenager meant you were temporarily deranged. We have become accustomed to muting you, judging you, discounting you, sometimes even forcing you to betray what you see and know and feel. You scare us. You remind us of what we have been forced to shut down or abandon in ourselves in order to fit in. You ask us by your being to question, to wake up, to re-perceive. Sometimes I think we tell you we are protecting you when really we are protecting ourselves.

Then Ensler wrote a declaration of sorts for that girl:

I am an emotional creature.

I love that I do not take things lightly.

Everything is intense to me.

The way I walk in the street.

The way I hear bad news.

The way it's unbearable when I lose.

I am an emotional creature.

I am connected to everything and everyone.

This is not extreme.

This is What we would all be if the big door inside us flew open.

Don't tell me not to cry

To be reasonable.

I am an emotional creature.

It's how the earth got made.

How the wind continues to pollinate.

You don't tell the Atlantic Ocean to behave.

I am an emotional creature.

Why would you want to shut me down or turn me off?

I am your remaining memory.

Memory is one of the most potent realities in *Inside Out*. There are short term memories and long term memories and, as Joy mentioned earlier, there are core memories. All of these – but particularly the core memories -- shape our character. And all the events of our lives are stored somewhere within us – though some are nearly impossible to consciously recall – like the infant scene we saw earlier – they remain powerful and operating within us – beyond our seeing. And others come to us through the stories of our families, communities, our people and still have tremendous power.

I saw such a remarkable example on Wednesday this week. The Black Lives Matter Team met to watch the documentary film *The Color of Fear*. The film follows eight men - black, white, Japanese, Chinese, and Latino, as they spend a weekend together talking about race. It followed well on the heels of the service last Sunday about working toward Intercultural Competency. The format of the group was simple: just talk about your experience of race.

One of the men – a white man, David, kept telling the two black men that they were holding themselves back in life and that, if they would just stop thinking about race they'd discover that everything was easier than they think. He explained that he never thought about race – it was irrelevant to him. The two Black men, Viktor and Loren, explained that that was a luxury they did not have. To fail to think about and be aware of race would be to leave themselves open to attack. David was unconvinced. They described the anxiety of needing to be especially nice around white people, the way that they have to move carefully in a white world so as not to trigger the anxieties of white people. David was unconvinced. They described the fear of moving through an all-white neighborhood and although the film was made ten years ago – this is an anxiety we have seen played out in the murder of Trayvon Martin – a young, unarmed black teenager on his way back home. As they began to talk about the fear and the various things that had happened to them, David was suddenly moved – his compassion was awakened. He kept listening and he wept for the very real and ever present suffering of these men of color.

It wasn't evidence of facts that awoke David. It was the simple person to person intimacy of their conversation – a conversation not about ideas but about feelings.

As I watched the film I thought that the awareness of and vigilance about race was at the very least, the result of core memory; but it might be its very own presence in the control room of the emotional team for many black American people. It struck me how early that race awareness has to be installed in order to allow any black person to have a chance of passing unscathed through white territories. It reminded me of Emmett Till a 14 year old black Chicagoan who let that awareness rest for only a moment on a street in Mississippi in 1955 and it cost him his life.

I believe that in communities that have experienced dramatic and prolonged oppression there's a collective memory that forms part of the core of consciousness. I had a mild experience of that growing up as a Jewish kid in a Christian neighborhood in the 60s. The holocaust and the centuries of oppression that had come before it were key cultural transmissions from my parents. More dramatically, all the systematic terrorism and aggression against black persons in the south and the persistent aggressions and forms of economic, social, and political power wielded against people of color would leave a tremendous weight of long term and profound memory that forms and deforms any black soul. But it also forms and deforms any white soul as well – leaving scars that we may overlook consciously or simply don't look at – in much the same way that we think our race is not really a visible reality in the world. The interesting thing during this hard conversation between the men in the Color of Fear, is that once the white man allowed himself to feel – to feel for the men of color he was sitting with – he suddenly remembered his abusive father's intense racism and the violent lessons through which he learned from his father about how to see race and how to play and keep his role in the culture of race. These were deep

lessons – lessons he learned by shutting away the boy he had been and becoming a well-behaved maintainer of the status quo.

Just as he awakened to compassion for his friends of color, he was awakened to compassion for himself as a boy with hope and heart that had been crushed and who had been forgotten.

It was a miraculous transformation. He was ready to go out and change the world, as he, himself, had been changed. Beyond the red teary eyes – you could see that, instead of arrogance, there was solidarity, instead of judgment, there was love, and instead of cool smugness there was energy, purpose and passion.

The source of this energy, purpose, and passion is that reclaimed child – the one who does not take things lightly, for whom everything is intense, who is connected with everything and everyone.

It's not easy to reclaim that child – and it's never reclaimed in isolation. How to set about to do this is a multi-million dollar industry. But here's one key I know for sure – that young life force yearns to be heard, seen, recognized. Just as Riley needed to really see and acknowledge her loneliness and to remember that her parents would welcome her, in order to turn back home. Just like Viktor and Loren needed to be recognized and heard in their suffering as men of color – in order to find a moment of peace and just like David needed to crack open his shell of defense and begin to feel in order to feel within himself. Each one of us and all of us need that vital core to be witnessed to. We have to begin with ourselves. To ask for the insights, wisdom, and even the sadness of that vital core. “Hey, internal child, younger self, what do you want, what do you need?”

Doubtless this is daunting. But nothing in this life was guaranteed to be easy. I have to remind myself of that regularly. But it's worth it because there is a freedom just beyond that recognition of struggle. And, as the struggle is acknowledged, there is a surge of energy – a release of life force – of the creative force that turns the planets and changes hearts. The 14th century Sufi poet Rumi wrote

There is a life-force within your soul, seek that life.

There is a gem in the mountain of your body, seek that mine.

O traveler, if you are in search of That

Don't look outside, look inside yourself and seek That.

This aloneness is worth more than a thousand lives.

This freedom is worth more than all the lands on earth.

To be one with the truth for just a moment,

Is worth more than the world and life itself.”

I might argue that to be one with the truth for just a moment – is to live right into life itself.

In the book Big Magic, Elizabeth Gilbert wrote about a teacher and poet, a writer named Jack Gilbert who wrote, “We must risk delight. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world.”

He wrote that in a poem, and to a student in one of his classes, he said, “Do you have the courage to bring forth the treasures that are hidden within you?”

In response Elizabeth Gilbert wrote, “The universe buries strange jewels deep within us all, and then stands back to see if we can find them. The hunt to uncover those jewels— that's creative living. The courage to go on that hunt in the first place— that's what separates a mundane existence from a more enchanted one.”

For some of us, the hunt for those jewels may have come easily from our earliest days. For others, that hunt will be deep and hard and need to be revisited again and again. For others, it may be even harder and require the witness of a world and the ongoing witness of community.

But if you do take this journey, pilgrim, you will find yourself not only more whole, not only more healed, not only supported by those you take the journey with – as you would be supported by family – but you will find yourself blessed with an ageless wisdom –for that is the wisdom of the child, profound compassion (for that is the depth of love of the child), with a world transforming courage – for that courage abounds in our earliest steps, our first ventures, a liberating freedom, and the spirit to touch the world with a truly creative love.

By this, you can transform yourselves and our world. Let us make it so.