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# Warrior of the Heart

What now seems to you opaque, you will make  
transparent with your blazing heart . . .

R. M. RILKE

AS OUR LOVE FOR ANOTHER PERSON brings our heart into contact with our karma, stirring up feelings of uncertainty, confusion, fear, or vulnerability, it reveals a certain rawness at the core of our experience. Normally we try to manage and manipulate our lives to avoid this feeling, which seems to threaten our security or identity. Yet this rawness is central to our humanity—we simply become more aware of it when we love. Letting ourselves feel it can soften us and loosen up old, rigid patterns. Therefore it is an important key to our growth.

We are raw in two senses: Our experience is, at its core, not only tender and sensitive, but also basically “uncooked.” Because we are the “unfinished animal,” our experience is never fully formed, polished, complete. We are a mix of wildly different impulses and energies, many of which do not fit together smoothly. Our feelings never quite fit into any nice, neat packages or measure up to our ideal image of how we think they should be. To be at ease with ourselves, we need to learn to trust this rawness at the core of our experience, and move freely with it, perhaps even celebrate it.

This means learning to accept our experience *as it is*, instead of trying to make it match some preconceived image. *To*

*be fully present to our experience as it is, without shrinking or turning away from it, is to be a warrior—of the heart.* Being a warrior in this sense does not mean acting aggressively or “toughing it out.” It means prevailing through inner strength rather than through domination, as exemplified in the ancient Eastern dictum “The greatest warrior is one who never has to use his sword.” This approach is more like practicing *aikido*, a nonaggressive martial art that involves moving, almost dancing, *with* what comes to us rather than pitting ourselves *against* it. To be a warrior of the heart means welcoming whatever arises in relationships, no matter how difficult or challenging, as an opportunity to grow stronger, to call forth new inner resources.

Approaching the difficulties of relationship in this warrior spirit—as steps along a path, as movements in a dance, rather than as a nuisance or a threat—cuts through our habitual tendency to contract into an oppositional stance when something threatens us. This can help us relate to ourselves and others in a fuller, more compassionate and wakeful way.

What will allow us to stay present in the face of whatever is going on around us? To draw on our warrior spirit, we need to find a source of strength inside ourselves, by developing a deeper relationship with our own being. In particular, we need to cultivate three essential capacities that enable us to be with what is—awareness, courage, and gentleness.

#### **AWARENESS: CLEARLY SEEING WHAT IS**

The most basic quality of a warrior is awareness. The more awareness we have, the more skillfully we can handle whatever arises. Awareness is by far the most essential, powerful resource we have for effecting change and working with life’s challenges. That is why the samurai in ancient Japan often studied meditation, the practice of mindful awareness—seeing simply and directly what is happening from moment to moment.

Usually when we say, “I am aware that . . .,” we are stating what we know, rather than practicing pure awareness. Aware-

ness is much greater than knowledge or thought. It is the activity of our larger intelligence, which responds immediately to what is, before we draw on any concept to analyze or interpret it. Its basic nature is *clarity*. Certain meditative traditions liken awareness to a mirror, which reflects without bias. It has also been likened to the sun, which illumines whatever it shines upon. Awareness radiates a broad, diffuse light that can reveal what is going on in any situation, beyond any idea we have about it.

Another important feature of awareness is its *fluidity*. Like a zoom lens, it can move back from any state of mind or emotion we are caught in, so that we can gain a larger perspective on what is happening. It can also penetrate situations, zeroing in on their subtlest details.

A third characteristic of awareness is its *stability* and *continuity*. No matter how much our thoughts or emotions carry us away, at any moment we can always return to being present and simply noticing what is happening. No matter how difficult a situation may be, when we face it squarely, letting our awareness shine forth and clarify what is happening, we “find our seat”; that is, we regain balance and confidence. When thoughts take control, they cause us to lose our seat and feel disconnected. When we practice simple awareness, however, we can keep our seat and go forth to meet what is in front of us in a saner way. The classic meditation posture—sitting still with an upright posture—both expresses and supports this stability of awareness.

Cultivating this clear, fluid, and flexible awareness enables us to confront whatever arises. Such an awareness can be practiced right in the midst of our relationships. Let us take a simple example, one that everyone has experienced: My partner has said something that has hurt me and touched off a fight. At first, I am caught up in feeling hurt—my body aches and my mind is swarming with painful thoughts and associations. I don’t like to feel this way, so I start to react against it. Yet my pain is like the famous tar baby in the Uncle Remus tale: The more I struggle with it, the more I become entangled and stuck in it. I start to tell myself stories that only intensify my pain: “She’ll never understand me,” “She likes to attack me, she’s too aggressive,”

"Maybe this relationship is finished," "I don't know how to make her happy." Each of these stories touches off further reactions in me, and the more I get caught up in my reactions, the more I lose touch with what is really happening.

If I plug into the story—"She likes to attack me, that's just the way she is"—I may then do something to get back at her or I may decide to close myself off to her. Yet both these defensive reactions only complicate the situation further because they are not accurate responses to what is really going on. To find out what is going on, I must put aside my stories and bring some fresh awareness to the situation.

To regain awareness, I need to take a step back from the whirlwind of my reactions. Although this may take some practice at first, it is always possible because the nature of awareness is mobile and fluid. Instead of continuing to be tossed around in turbulent thoughts and emotions, I can let my awareness move back from them, like a zoom lens in reverse, and simply acknowledge the whole pain I am feeling. When I can do this, it is as though I step out of a blazing fire that is consuming me, and sit down next to it instead.

Once I create some space for myself, I am no longer trapped in the fire's flames. I can then allow the fire to be there as it is, without having to resist it. I still feel its heat, but it no longer burns me alive. In other words, when I can make space for my hurt to be there, and when I can be present with my awareness "next to it," "on the edge of it," I find my seat. This brings relief. I am no longer stuck in an oppositional struggle. Instead, I have more *clarity*—I can simply recognize that I am hurting, without becoming so embroiled in a drama around it. I have more *freedom* of movement because I am not caught in reacting against the pain. And in taking my seat, I feel more *stability* and strength.

Having made space for my pain and regained my awareness in this way, I can then face the pain more directly. Without trying to "make something out of it," I can sit with it in a spirit of inquiry. Although my mind may provide plenty of stories about why I feel so bad, in truth, *I don't really know* why I am hurting

so much right now or what I need to do next. Instead of trying to figure things out with my mind, I can look into the pain for clues. Letting my awareness penetrate the pain in a gently questioning way, I can inquire into it ("What's really hurting so much right now?") and listen to what the feeling might have to tell me.

As I do this, I begin to see that my partner's words touched a part of me that I have a hard time dealing with, one that I would rather not have to acknowledge at all. So, as it turns out, the real issue isn't that my partner is too aggressive; it's that I feel so vulnerable when anyone sees this part of me. Now that I have penetrated to the core of the matter through mobilizing my awareness, I am no longer in danger of reacting foolishly and making the situation worse. Things can begin to move forward because I am in touch with what is true for me. This also allows me to communicate more effectively. Instead of being defensive and reactive, I can share with her how hard it is to let her see this part of me. When I do this, she softens, and we are back in the flow of our connectedness again. In this way, we can always find a way forward when we regain our awareness and actively bring it to bear on whatever situation we are in.

While becoming aware of what is happening is simple enough, it is of course not always easy to do. This is because we have an investment in maintaining and promoting an old familiar *version* of reality, and this prevents us from seeing what is actually going on. Especially in the area of love, we are blinded by conditioned hopes and fears, by cherished preconceptions, beliefs, and opinions of all kinds, both personal and collective.

We perpetuate these conditioned ways of perceiving the world through repetitive stories we tell ourselves about "the way things are." These kinds of stories are mental fabrications, judgments or interpretations that put what is happening into a familiar framework. Usually we do not recognize these stories as our own invention; instead, we believe that they represent reality. Stories often operate in the background of the mind, as part of an ongoing stream of subconscious gossip that we keep up with ourselves. The less conscious we are of how they control us, the more they keep us locked into old patterns of behavior. The

greatest obstacles in relationships are often our stories about how we think relationships should be. ("If you love someone, you should always keep them happy . . . you should always want to be there . . . you should set aside your anger.") They narrow our options and keep us stuck in very tight boxes.

This dense fabric of entrenched beliefs, stories, and reaction patterns acts as a filter that clouds and obscures the natural clarity and fluidity of awareness. Because this web is so thick and entangling, we need to find ways to catch ourselves in the act of constructing these stories, see through them, and return to a basic, simple awareness of what is immediately happening. We need to discover that we can, at any moment, make a shift from thought to awareness, which is the larger space in which thoughts and stories arise. So, just as practicing a musical instrument allows us to play more fluidly, we must at first intentionally *practice* awareness before it can flow more fluidly and reflect more accurately on its own. In the Zen tradition, this is called "polishing the mirror." With greater consciousness, we can begin to dislodge the stories controlling our behavior, thus developing greater clarity and freedom in our life.

The example I've just given on dealing with pain illustrates how we can begin to practice awareness in the midst of everyday life situations. This is the approach I generally take in my psychotherapy practice. (It is related to the Focusing method, developed by Eugene Gendlin.)<sup>1</sup> An even more thorough, far-reaching method of cultivating awareness and seeing through the whole storytelling function of the mind is the practice of mindfulness meditation. Since it is difficult to practice awareness when we are suddenly beset by the emotional crosscurrents of relationship conflicts, a regular meditation practice can be especially helpful. It can teach us how to step out of the tangle of our emotions and stories, and relate more directly to what is actually happening.

Mindfulness practice involves sitting up straight, following the breath, and noticing our thoughts and perceptions, then letting them go and returning to a state of simple presence. Instead of trying to restrain the conditioned mind or force it to

be a certain way, this practice provides plenty of space in which the mind can play out its dramas. We begin to witness how we are continually making up stories about who we are, what we are doing, and what will happen next. At other times, we discover a wider, deeper quality of ongoing awareness, which is clear, fluid, and continuous like a steady stream flowing underneath all our various states of mind. This contrast helps us make an important distinction—between our immediate experience and our interpretations of that experience. We start to cultivate a healthy skepticism toward the storytelling aspect of mind and develop a more discriminating awareness.

Through this kind of practice we can learn to be more present with whatever is happening in our experience, just as it is, from moment to moment, apart from our beliefs, judgments, and fantasies about it. This helps us connect with our own living wisdom and "keep our seat," so that we do not always get thrown or carried away by the mind's inventions. Drawing on this keener, more flexible kind of awareness can help us avoid becoming bogged down in the heavy emotional dramas that intimate relationships often set in motion.

### COURAGE: CONNECTING WITH WHAT IS

Once we start to develop greater awareness of what is happening in a relationship, however, we may not like what we see. As we see our flaws, our partner's shortcomings, or various imperfections in the relationship itself, difficult feelings arise. Having seen what is, we may doubt that we can handle it, and become tempted to avert our gaze and fall back into unconsciousness.

So it is not enough just to see what is happening; we must also be willing to extend ourselves, to make a connection with it. This means opening ourselves to our experience and *feeling* it, facing it squarely and letting it affect us. Being courageous does not mean that we will not feel afraid. Rather, it is a willingness to stay open to our fear and rawness, without rigidifying or running away. In the meditation posture, an upright spine,

head, and shoulders express this quality of bravery—looking straight ahead without collapsing or curling in on ourselves.

When we practice awareness, we also cultivate courage, for awareness actually contains courage in it. To wake up and confront what is actually happening, rather than just going along with old stories and reaction patterns, *is* an act of bravery. In our example, courage appears when I am willing to “sit on the edge of my pain” and look at it face to face. We can learn to do the same with fear, anger, grief, or any other state of mind. We can move out to the edge of the fear, take our seat there, and inquire into it instead of being controlled by our fear stories (e.g., “If I tell the truth, she’ll leave,” “If she leaves, I can’t go on living.”) and the further panic they generate.

When we connect with our experience, we also cultivate our being—our ability *to be* in the present moment. This allows us to feel our heart. The word *courage* derives from *coeur*, the French word for “heart.” Thus the essence of courage is being willing to feel our heart even in situations that are difficult or painful.

### GENTLENESS: MAKING FRIENDS WITH WHAT IS

In courageously facing what is happening in our relationships, we inevitably come up against feelings we dislike or would rather not have—such as pain, disappointment, fear, insecurity, anger, or jealousy. So it is not enough just to practice courage. To stay connected with our being and to remain fluid and flexible when we come up against obstacles, we must also be gentle with ourselves.

Since real intimacy always leads into unknown territory, we find our way only through trial and error. As we leave behind old, familiar ways of being and move toward new states of balance, falling into one extreme or another is unavoidable along the way. This is how we grow. So we must give ourselves permission to go overboard sometimes. If we attack ourselves for going

off course, we cannot learn from mistakes and use them as part of our path. Therefore cultivating gentleness with ourselves is essential for fostering inner growth and development.

Practicing gentleness does not mean always liking what we see or simply tolerating whatever goes on in a relationship. If we don’t like our feelings, we can make room for our dislike as well. If we’re angry about a situation, we can let our anger be there too. Whatever arises, we can learn to be with it and *let it be* as it is. When we open to our experience as it is, without imposing any blame or manipulation on it, we start to make friends with ourselves. Only then can our defensive structures begin to relax, clearing the way for our larger wisdom to shine through and guide us.

Like courage, gentleness is contained within awareness. For awareness holds no grudge or bias—like the sun, it simply allows us to see what is. If courage is the side of awareness that faces things directly, gentleness is the side that accommodates or makes space for what is there. The act of surrounding whatever we are feeling with awareness, no matter how terrible we *think* it is, is a very friendly thing to do.

### TAKING STEPS FORWARD

Awareness, courage, and gentleness are the basic “weapons” of the warrior of the heart. They cut through our habitual tendencies to fight or flee when we come up against painful or difficult situations. In this way, they allow us to convert whatever challenges we are facing into stepping-stones in our development.

Yet most of us, if we carry these weapons at all, have let them become dull from lack of use. Fortunately, that does not disqualify us from venturing forth on love’s path. For relationships provide many hard surfaces on which to sharpen these abilities. And the sharper they become, the farther we can advance along this path.

We all face certain obstacles that stand in the way of having a healthy, fulfilling relationship. We may doubt that we are lov-

able. We may never feel ready to make a commitment. Or perhaps we can never find the "right one" for us. Typically such impasses cause us to swing between hope—that we will somehow be rescued from our situation—and despair—that we are somehow defective or doomed. Yet telling ourselves stories like "Something is wrong with me, this shouldn't be happening," only keeps us from seeing the immediate stepping-stones right in front of us.

Instead, if we can let our difficulties with intimacy touch us, they will show us what we most need to work on to come into deeper relationship with ourselves and with others. When we let ourselves feel the rawness these difficulties bring up, we start to get in touch with deeper powers—our capacities to be present with whatever is happening and to find a way to work with it. In this way, whatever seems most impossible about relationships, whatever problem, question, or confusion we have—if we see it, feel it, go toward it, *use it—is our path.*

To call upon our warrior spirit and use love's difficulties as path, we can always begin by asking of the difficulty, "What is this pointing to in me that I need to look at?" Every obstacle or challenge that we face contains an implicit question, which can help us find a new direction. *Questions are an invitation to greater awareness.* They point us toward areas of our experience that need our attention. So when we make the question that is implicit in our difficulty explicit, we are inviting our awareness to enter the situation and guide us.

When we address our impasse in this way, we can use it to generate useful "path questions" for ourselves: "What is this difficulty pointing to? What is it trying to teach me? What can I learn from this situation?" The point of asking such questions is not to come up with an immediate answer. When we try too hard to find an answer, our busy conditioned mind takes over and we only become more confused. But if we can take these questions deep inside us, using them to help us explore neglected areas of our experience, they will point us in new directions.

One woman, in considering why her prospective partners

never worked out for her, discovered in herself a strong underground fear of men, as well as a distrust of her own femininity. Thus she realized that her difficulty in finding the right man pointed to some major conflicts about intimacy that she needed to resolve. In her childhood, love had become associated with guilt, debt, and pain. To be loved meant giving herself up. As long as she held that deeply ingrained belief, she was not really ready for the kind of relationship she longed for.

It took courage for this woman to bring these issues to light and deal with them. Yet painful as this was, it felt much better than remaining stuck in hope or despair. For it gave her a direction: She needed to find her own power and resolve her old fears of love before she could truly give herself to a man. Instead of complaining "Why is this happening to me?" she could start to relate to her situation more actively.

Realizing that her impasse with men was helping her take an important step forward in her development also allowed her to be more gentle with herself about her situation. Instead of blaming herself for not having a man, she began to give herself space and time to develop in new ways—to go deep within, face her tendency to give men magical power over her, and eventually find her own light which she could trust. Connecting with herself in this deeper way also helped her appreciate herself as a woman. As she expanded and filled out, she no longer expected men to fill her gaps, and she became more interested in them for who they really were. Consequently, more interesting men started appearing in her life and finding her attractive.

Thus bringing awareness, courage, and gentleness to bear on stuck and impossible areas of relationship ignites the intrinsic wisdom of the heart, which can burn through old patterns of denial and avoidance. If our heart is like a flame, our karmic obstructions are the fuel that this fire needs in order to blaze brightly. Although the burning up of old karma creates great turbulence, it also releases tremendous energy. As our habitual patterns start to break down, we gain access to a fuller spectrum of our human qualities.

So instead of trying to hide the places where we feel raw or

confused, fearing that they will spoil the romance, we can, as warriors, actually invite them to come up and burn in love's fire. This allows us to discover that we have access to greater depth and power than we ever imagined. As the flame of the heart burns brighter, consuming our conditioned patterns, our confusions, and our fears, it generates warmth and lights our way.

We cannot become warriors of the heart overnight. Only through practice in working with love's challenges can our being start to unfold, step by step. This gradual unfolding is the path quality of love. Such a path does not lead anywhere except to the heart of our humanness. Love has no other goal. The path is the goal.

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