

Holiday Time – 2021 - The Illusion of Safety and the Buoy Effect

Safety nets, safety pins, gun safeties, safe houses, safe sex and Safeway. Safeguards are everywhere. You'd think humans had a lock on safety!

But safety is never guaranteed, is it? Somewhere, there's always a piano falling to the sidewalk from some fourth story window. Volcanos or typhoons are ready to steal your thunder and rain on your parade. There's a meteorite with Earth's number on it, a black hole waiting to gobble the Milky Way.



Eons of experience with catastrophes have, however, blessed Earth's lifeforms with adaptive ways to deal with trauma and the inky certainty of death. Mice shake off a near miss with a house cat. Squirrels chatter and quake when released from the talons of a Goshawk, who preens on a branch after dropping the squirrel as the Doberman charged in. Trees, we now understand, communicate alarm to each other, and healing, too. Who knows, perhaps those zephyr winds we enjoy in summer – and the bluster gusts of winter - are choreographed dances generated by the trees themselves, celebrating another day of life while shaking off a pending fall or blight of stress.

Part of Elaine's and my autonomic response to humanity's torrent of crises is to shrink from them: stop consuming so much news, for example. Covering is a natural response to emotional threat. Aware of that tendency, the two of us also practice things that counter fight, flight and freeze responses. Habitual covering of eyes and shielding of hearts perpetuates victimhood, an inward mindset. Countering those tendencies with curative practice creates a buoy effect, moderating stress, nursing old wounds, uprooting unhealthy bias, and fostering an outward mindset. Preen, preen, shake, shake, dance, dance, repeat, repeat.

When overwhelm arises in our awareness (sometimes triggered by an argument) we're visited by muscle tightness, restless sleep, headaches, grumpiness, and social avoidance. Balance is achieved when we voice our upset with each other, without blame. Those kinds of conversation are calming and reassuring. Opening up that way, we can acknowledge that our own deep histories are littered with violence. Applying discipline and tools, we can carefully unpack and examine the baggage, as well as its effects on our beliefs and behavior. *My Grandmother's Hands*, by Resmaa Menakem, helped me jump from psychosomatic to somatic. Body sensations, feelings, are a valve through which I can transform the jagged edge of trauma into a sculpted curve of acceptance and resilience.

The four-alarm fire of the last two years, from COVID to other unchecked viruses like ignorance and malice, called for bigger doses of balance to find resilience. That meant ramping up outdoor activity. To our regular practice of yoga and Qigong, we added daily cycling and walks. Our flexible schedule also permitted almost two months of camping, half of it immersed in the beauty of central Oregon's forests, along rivers that, like the shaking squirrel, the preening hawk and the waving branches, help us rid our nervous system of toxic residue from stress. We lavished for added weeks at Oregon's coast, where the salt air, tides, profuse wildlife and camaraderie generated the necessary endorphins to resolve dis-ease.



From such a restored place, it's easier then to redirect our care and attention to local issues, where we can generate an aura of safety and belonging for others. It happened in a series of Nonviolent Communication classes I've begun with 40 strangers, many of them homeless, some recently out of prison. They've been hired by Church at the Park to serve others like themselves, in "managed, micro-shelter communities." The classes, part of comprehensive "trauma-informed care" training, usher employees into emotional equilibrium with enough resilience to assist others seeking housing, jobs, proper medical care, and dignity.



We all, undoubtedly, know how to create a safe space for ourselves. Whether in meditation, in connected conversations, or wrapped in a blanket in front of a campfire, we also know that safety is an illusion, a temporary state of being. And yet, how important it is for our mental and physical wellbeing, to create that cocoon around us. So in a room with complete strangers, most who've suffered at the hands of poverty and violence, we created trust and safety in less than an hour. It was exhilarating to be in that relaxed, even playful, space with them.

Both of us volunteer for Church at the Park. Earlier in the year, we helped construct some of these 8 x 8 foot micro-shelter dwellings that provide secure temporary lodging.

More recently, we took part in a city-wide fundraising drive that invited citizens to "sponsor" additional micro shelters. In less than two months, 120 of them were sponsored (\$5000 each). How satisfying to experience this collective gift, addressing a problem under which many cities flounder. Salem, whose name derives from the Hebrew *shalom*, is creating a cushion of safety, an eddy of peace, in the big, big river of turbulence, chaos, and doubt. May you find the space and the power to do likewise!



Best to you in '22.....

Love, Tim and Elaine