**JUSTICE, EQUITY, AND COMPASSION IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS, January 11, 2015**

Guided Meditation: Embracing your Inner Criminal—Accepting your Original Innocence.

To introduce today’s theme, I invite you to participate in a guided meditation. Close your eyes and take a deep breath—a deep, slow and intentional breath. Now exhale in the same manner. Continuing to breathe in this conscious manner, I ask you to hold in our mind an image of your highest potential Self—the most wise, spiritually centered, self-actualized version of yourself that you can imagine. Now, in sync with your conscious breath, breathe in the realization that you are safe and secure in the presence of this highest potential self. Next, I invite you to ask your highest potential self to lead you back in time—back to the first experience you had of acting in a manner that (if you would have been an adult) would have been labeled criminal behavior. There is no right or wrong experience. I encourage you to trust and go with the first instance you’re your wise self brings you to. Perhaps, as a young child, you committed theft—maybe you stole a piece of candy from the store or took money from your mother’s purse without telling her. Perhaps, as a young child, you committed assault—maybe you hit one of your siblings, or perhaps you threw a rock at another child—an act of aggravated assault? Perhaps, as a young child, you committed property damage—maybe you broke a window with a baseball and simply ran away, or perhaps you were angry with a sibling and broke their favorite toy as an act of aggression against them. I encourage you to refrain from judging yourself for your actions—but rather to observe the details of your memory from the most wise and experienced perspective of your highest potential self. At the very least, I ask you to witness the event from the perspective of a neutral observer—a spiritual scientist who is revisiting a previous experience. What was the outcome of your experience? Was your behavior discovered? If so, were you punished? How so? If your behavior was not discovered, perhaps your behavior was reinforced and you concluded that such action was a viable way to get what you wanted in this life. No judging. Just become mindful of the details of your experience. Now tune into the feelings and the motivations of your young child—tune into the Original Innocence of your developmentally immature self that committed this youthful crime. Attuned to that State of Original Innocence—and empowered by the perspective of your highest potential self—I now invite you to lovingly physically connect with your young criminal self and your highest self in whatever way that comes to you—perhaps you hold hands, embrace in a group hug, or playfully engage in a dog pile. Whatever way you connect, tune into the sense of complete self-acceptance for the developmental differences in maturity you perceive at each stage of your evolution. Now, bringing this sense of total and complete self-acceptance back with you, I invite you to gently and comfortably bring your attention back to the sanctuary in preparation for today’s message.

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Good Morning! Just a few weeks ago as I was contemplating the topic of criminal behavior, I came across a ‘just-for-fun’ online test titled “What Kind of Criminal Would You Be?” Out of curiosity, I took the test. Of the 5 possibilities—Petty Thief, Cannibal, Sociopath, White Collar Criminal and Murderer—my results claimed I would most likely be a Petty Thief. The description of my test results follows:

“'Petty' can easily be seen as 'small' or 'insignificant', but you'll teach them a new meaning to the word. If you were this type of criminal, if you see something and you want it, it will be yours, one way or the other (and you'd probably make more use of it than the other guy, anyways). You are a ruthless individual who knows that the end justifies the means. Passionate and devoted, you see a goal and go for it, no matter the obstacles, even if those obstacles are rules...”

Aside from the ‘ruthless individual who knows that the end justifies the means’ part, the test had some truth to it. At the budding age of 6 years old I committed my first crime—at least the first one I recall—and yes, my crime was indeed petty theft.

One evening, my parents drove my siblings and I to visit another family at their home. Although my memory is not clear with some of the happenings of the evening, I clearly remember a few important details. I remember that this was my first introduction to Make-Up Artist Barbie Head.

This glamorous toy included a whole set of accessories: brushes, hair clips, and most importantly eye shadow, lip stick and blush to bring out Barbie Head’s natural beauty. My 6-year-old consciousness was overwhelmed with envy.

Apparently I had good taste as, eventually, this became a very popular toy—one that is still sold in stores today and has even achieved the kind popularity that inspires its own ‘Halloween costume!

Making matters more complex, my experience of 6-year-old envy was spiked with a shot of powerlessness. You see, there was a part of my immature consciousness that had drawn the conclusion that this amazing toy being flaunted all its glory before me, was one that my parents would never allow me to have. I instantly rejected my desire as ‘far too vain and glamorous’ for my pious parents. Struggling with wanting something so much while at the same time believing that my parents would never permit me to possess such a thing—I decided to take matters into my own hands. When the opportunity presented itself, I set about the creative feat of stuffing all of the makeup into my 6-year-old underpants. Filled with anxiety and fear, and underpants stuffed with Barbie Head’s make up, I somehow made it home undetected.

The next morning, I had my first experience of what I would call a highly conscious version of Criminal Justice. My mother gathered my siblings and I and shared that she had just gotten off the phone with the mother of the family we had visited the night before. Apparently, the young girl could not find any of Barbie Head’s make up and she had been crying over the loss all morning. She wanted to know if any of us had information that could help her get her make up back.

When my mother shared this with me—in the wise and kind way that she shared it—I experienced deep sadness and remorse. The fear and anxiety I had experienced on the ride home the night before, were the natural result of my awareness that I could get in trouble if my parents discovered my behavior, but not once had I actually thought about the experience of “the other” girl. My mother’s way of being with me—her wise and compassionate response to the crime—naturally inspired in me an experience of empathy for the victim of my crime. I returned the make up, sincerely apologized to the girl, and to my great and completely unanticipated surprise, I have memories of happily playing with my own Barbie Head for many years after that.

On the front page of this month’s newsletter, Rev. Wendy shared that the common thread in all victimization is that somebody has been labeled “the other.” She goes on to explain ‘If we can stick a label (such as criminal) on other people, then we can dehumanize them. When we…dehumanize them we stop listening to them. When we stop listening to them, there is nothing to learn from them. When there is nothing to learn from them, we can decide that they have no value. When the “other” has no value (in other words, no inherent worth), we become justified in doing whatever we want to them. And so the cycle goes.’

…and I’ll take it just a bit further developmentally.

You see, as a 6-year-old petty thief, I did not yet see the girl as “the other.” The more accurate truth is, I did NOT SEE HER at all. Even as I was stuffing her Barbie Head make up into my underpants, the thought of what she might experience did not even occur to me. I accept this about myself. As a therapist I recognize that 6-year-olds are developmentally quite narcissistic by nature. At the same time, when my mother reflected the little girl’s grief to me, while at the same time—and this part is essentially important—while at the same time holding me in such loving regard (free of the energy of accusatory condemnation of my actions) she inspired empathy in me, and I then experienced the natural motivation to do what was in my power to make it right.

Recall that earlier I was unwilling to identify myself with the definition of a Petty Thief that proposed I was a ‘ruthless individual who knows that the end justifies the means.’

Although one could reasonable argue that my behavior suggested otherwise, I was NOT ruthless. I was, however, ignorant and developmentally immature. Paradoxically, although I was indeed guilty of theft, the idea that sparked my crime was conceived in a State of Original Innocence.

And regarding the concept that ‘end justifying the means’, with years of life’s experience behind me now, I have propose that the Truth is quite the opposite—that rather than the end justifying the means, the means actually determine the end result. In other words, over and over again I have experienced that my consciousness—the vibrational energy of the motivations and means that I employ to resolve my problems—actually reliably manifest outcomes of like vibration. Simply put, motivated by shame I create shame, motivated by hate I create hate—and in this case, my mother’s uncorrupted just treatment of me created a Just outcome.

The word Justice has several definitions: (1)-The process or result of using laws to fairly judge and punish crimes and criminals, (2)-The quality of being just, impartial or fair, (3)-Treating people in a way that is considered morally right, reasonable, or proper.

As a therapist, a primary Principle of my practice of Spiritual Psychology that resonates beautifully with definition #3 is this: The issue is not what it appears to be. The issue is the way we’re relating to ourselves as we’re going through the issue—in short, the issue is the way we’ve learned to relate to ourselves in a manner that is anything less than our own personal standard of loving—the golden rule—how we would like to be treated.

Now to Thanksgiving weekend 1993. I’m 26-years-old and, this time I’m the victim of the crime. I (along with my then-husband, my two young sons, and my 12-year-old sister-in-law) was hit by a drunk driver.

We were traveling at the speed limit of 45 miles per hour heading north. The “other” driver, my offender, was travelling an estimated 85-90 miles per hour and couldn’t hold the curve of the road. He slid into our lane and hit us head on—just off center.

Both cars rolled. The impact of the collision drove the dashboard of the car into my left knee—dislocating my left hip, shattering part of my pelvis and fracturing the head of my femur.

My chronically busy life screeched to a halt. Housebound with limited mobility, and now living in the care of my parents with my 3-year old and 10-week old sons now in daycare because I was unable to physically care for them, I was confined to spend my next few months of recovery in quiet solitude. In the stillness of having no one else to talk to (and long before the days of email and texting) I was driven out of boredom into an unintentional meditation practice and I became intimately acquainted with the workings of my mind.

A whirlwind of thoughts presented all sorts of ideas to me. I had been badly injured. I was hurt, I was afraid, and I was angry—so angry that another human being had successfully imposed such a destructive life-altering event (and one that had such overwhelming financial implications) upon my family. Also, for the first time in my life I was very confused about the Will of God. I had been taught that God existed—and that God was Just. Nothing about my experience felt just or fair.

I had been told *some* details about the man who hit us. Like me, he was 26 years old—a repeat offender, driving with a revoked license and no insurance. His blood alcohol was nearly 3 times the legal limit. He spent the first month after the crash in a coma and now, 5 months later, his physical condition allowed him to be sentenced by the court.

Having graduated from my wheelchair, and then several months in crutches, I now limped into a full courtroom. Approximately 10 members of my extended family accompanied me for emotional support—all of whom had proactively participated in caring for me and my loved ones over the past 5 months (to this day, thinking of how lovingly and willingly they served me brings tears of gratitude to my eyes). Due to the complexity of our case, the judge had placed us at the end of the long list of other cases. One by one, the people in the courtroom stood before the judge, received their sentencing, and left the courtroom. Finally, aside from my entourage of loved ones, only two people—an older couple—remained sitting in the room. Realizing these were my offender’s parents, I took in a first impression. Their physical and emotional appearance evidenced that life had been physically hard. They were alone in support of their son.

I had thought about what I might say to the judge. I was of a split mind. Part of me felt pangs of wanting the court to *really comprehend* how profoundly I had suffered and to then ‘teach him a lesson’ by severely punishing him for his actions. I seemed to believe that severe punishment would somehow validate my suffering and make things ‘right.’ Another part of me felt great compassion towards him. I did not believe he set out to cause harm that painful night. He too had suffered severe physical injuries. And my bouts of compassion were consistently interrupted by an accusatory voice that continued to assert, “This is his fault!” This voice was saturated with tones of self-pity and self-righteousness.

The judge called in the ‘criminal’—now an incarcerated prisoner who was being held in a separate room, supervised by security. He entered the room in his orange one piece uniform. When I saw him for the first time, I was taken back by his stature. He was a tall, physically built and statuesque man—much like, I imagine, Monte’s fabulous description (in his past sermon) of his own ‘Greek God’-like form. Only this Greek God was bound in chains—shackles that limited his mobility to a tedious clanking shuffle. The image of the ghost of Jacob Marley in Charles Dickens’ Christmas Carol passed through my mind–the chained and tormented ghost damned to wander the earth forevermore as punishment for his uncaring attitude and actions towards mankind. The contradiction of this man’s actual physical capacity bound by the limitations of the shackles sobered me.

Next, I experienced something very strange and completely unexpected. Perhaps you’ve heard survivors of near death experiences speak of having their entire lives flash before their eyes? Well, this was basically my experience—with one significant difference. I did not witness *only my* 26-year life passing before my eyes—but *our 26 years.* My and my “offender’s” lives both passed before my awareness side by side. I comprehended our respective upbringings, the environments we were raised in, the tones and behaviors of the ways we were parented, the opportunities we were presented with, the ways we were treated by others, and most significantly the options we perceived as available to us as we made personal decisions in response to all of those experiences. I don’t pretend to comprehend how or why I experienced this. However, I will share that the experience was one of pure unadulterated Empathy and Grace—a miracle that instantaneously and profoundly freed me from any previous prejudice I held towards this man.

Although I was not able to successfully put it into words until much later, this experience communicated to me that this man was NOT in need of condemning punishment. I conceived the possibility that there *could be* a higher good for this man other than doing time in prison. I saw he was in need of compassion, loving guidance, clear and rational boundaries. He was in need of further education in the principles of accountability and personal responsibility, by authorities that reliably merited his respect and his trust. He needed to serve time, not necessarily in prison, but in comprehensive rehabilitation in a supportive space that also promoted and secured the safety of society during his rehabilitative process. I perceived that the dangerous and isolating experience of incarceration fell far short of the true need that was presenting itself.

With this option—this future vision—not yet established in our Criminal Justice System, the judge sentenced the man to prison.

I’ve thought about this experience—and this man’s needs I perceived—many times since then—especially when I’ve been triggered by new experiences of being violated by “others” in some way. With each new experience of victimization, my thoughts challenge my vision with ideas such as: “You’re too soft,” or “you’re just a hopelessly weak co-dependent.” Yet, in the midst of these tones of self-doubt a calm and peacefully powerful voice always rises and simply reasserts: “No—this is not so. I was graced with an experience of true empathy that opened to me a vision of a potential future Reality—one that I believe, when successfully instituted, will have a very positive effect upon our world.”

**Statistics**

Incarceration in the United States of America is still one of the main forms of [punishment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punishment), [rehabilitation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rehabilitation_%28penology%29), or both for the commission of criminal [offenses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Offence_%28law%29). The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world.

At the same time, our present methods are not accomplishing the results we set out to achieve. If any other institution in America were as unsuccessful in achieving their purpose as our prisons are, it would be shut down.

**Vision**

Einstein said “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.” He also logically proposed that a problem cannot be solved with the same level of consciousness that created it. I agree.

Earlier, in our guided meditation, I encouraged you to confront and embrace your own inner criminal. I had a purpose and a reason to this process: I wanted us all to remember, accept and compassionately re-connect with our Original Innocence—especially in the context of the paradoxical experience of being guilty of a crime.

In my personal opinion, our current Criminal Justice System resonates with the largely popular (and dramatic dogma) of Original Sin. Crime is to man’s law as sin is to God’s law. When we accept the dogma of Original Sin, we see ourselves as born guilty—a prejudice that blocks our capacity to experience the truth of our Original Innocence.

We are extraordinarily intelligent beings in the process of becoming self-aware and evolving our consciousness’ through a physical experience. From my perspective, the *only* Original Sin even available to us, *is the very act of rejecting our Original Innocence*. And rejecting our Original Innocence disconnects us from our most potent source of personal power. You see, remembering our Original Innocence evokes our powerful capacity for compassion—compassion opens the door to empathy—and empathy informs action that fulfills the true presenting need. Empathy brings about Justice.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama said “True compassion is not just an emotional response, but a firm commitment founded on reason. Therefore, a truly compassionate attitude toward others does not change, even if they behave negatively. Through universal altruism, you develop a feeling of responsibility for others: the wish to help them actively overcome their problems.”

As a society, we are beginning to recognize the difference between punishment and restraint. When people are dangerous to themselves or others, restraining them can be an act of love. But this is altogether different from inflicting pain on them motivated by revenge or to “teach them a lesson,” for the only lessons we teach in such cases is that either (1)-inflicting pain on others is justified or (2)-we are not to be trusted. Human beings learn by example: Generations of research continue to show that the more severely children are punished (especially when associated with the spirit of contempt), the more violent they become, as children and as adults. The same holds true for adults. Based on these logical proposals, the only rational purpose for a prison is to restrain those who are violent from inflicting harm on themselves or others, *while we proactively help them* to change their behavior from that destructive pattern to one that is nonviolent and even constructive, so that they may safely and confidently return restored to the community. I know that this can be done. Although I don’t have time to go into it now, I’ve witnessed and personally participated in several programs that are succeeding with this new approach. (Adapted from <http://www.nytimes.com/> roomfordebate/2012/12/18/prison-could-be-productive/punishment-fails-rehabilitation-works).

One final experience: In 1991, my maternal grandmother, a vibrant and healthy widow who had been living alone for since my grandfather’s death 2 years earlier, was violently murdered in her home. The case went cold and for 23 years the crime remained unsolved. Just a few months ago the police solved the crime—matching fingerprints with those of an inmate being held on death row in Arizona for another elderly woman’s murder. This man showed up on my Grandmother’s doorstep with his wife and their 5-year-old child asking for her help. She invited them in, placed toys out for their child, and the man bludgeoned her to death—in front of his child—and he and his wife stole what valuables they could find to support their drug habit.

When I think of this crime in the context of my vision, at times I still get knocked off my center. However, when I think of this man’s 5-year old child, my heart softens and my spirit re-centers itself on what I know to be true. This young child’s father modeled the destructive power of fear and, reinforced by the mother’s silence and consenting presence at the scene of the crime, demonstrated to the boy that murder was a viable way to get money. Such traumatic experiences then arrest the emotional development within the psyche of the child. This arrested aspect of the child then, must be compassionately and consciously re-parented—the child must become self aware of the parents issues that compelled such an experience, and then must see the other options that are available, in order to heal and move beyond such a trauma. My experiences, both personally and professionally as a psychotherapist, inform me that, were we to be given a true glimpse into the psyche of the established ‘criminal’, we would discover the adult has been suspended in a state of arrested emotional development all along—one that is directly, and even logically, compelling their criminal behavior. Were we to look deep enough, beneath it all, we will find Original Innocence.

Crime is defined as “Activity that is against the law.” Laws are rules made by the people, or the government, in power—they are the binding rules of conduct based on a society’s concepts of right and wrong—what is just and what is not just.

In the words of Freda Adler, “Stripped of ethical rationalizations and philosophical pretensions, a crime is simply anything that a group in power chooses to prohibit.”

When we act punitively towards one another (motivated by dense vibrational energies such as self-righteousness or contempt) in what may very well be a *well-intended* attempt to enforce our rules, we violate our own UU Principles and Commitment to Right Relations. When we do so, not only do we NOT teach the lasting lessons in self-management we are attempting to communicate, we actually reinforce the ‘other’s’ learned lack of respect for our authority—and the rules made by such authorities. Our current Criminal Justice System is based on the exercise of power obtained by the fear of punishment. And although punishment may motivate people to obey orders they are given (at least for as long as the threat of punishment exists), in alignment with the psychological principles of BF Skinner’s Behaviorism, at best it will only teach an obedience to a hovering controlling authority—one that must be sustained in order for the behavior to continue to be reinforced.

I envision of a quantum shift in the consciousness of our Criminal Justice System during my lifetime—an evolution from the consciousness of punitive retribution, to a higher consciousness of compassionate and wise rehabilitation (with restraint in a supportive environment as needed), including early intervention programs within our educational system that serve children who are at high risk, and teaching the skills of emotional intelligence in all schools. Solid research and experience continue to demonstrate that rehabilitation programs for offenders are ultimately more cost-and-resource effective than the punishment of prison. We need a compassionate, yet-powerful, conscious system of rehabilitation and early intervention that teaches the discipline *of self-restraint*—one that enhances a person’s self-respect and corrects, molds, and inspires them to identify, take personal responsibility for, and ultimately perfect their mental faculties and moral character.

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi “Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment.”

Thank you!

Benediction: “People, even more than things, have to be restored, renewed, revived, reclaimed, and redeemed; never throw out anyone. “Audrey Hepburn