

The Prophetic Imagination
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So this Christmas I got a book called *A Mind at Home with Itself* by Byron Katie¹. It elucidates what Katie calls, “The Work” a process whereby we take the actions of others that compromise our peace and we turn them around so that peace might return.

The purpose of the work is to interrupt the stories we tell ourselves so that we can have different experiences. Of course, there are situations that are simply unacceptable. If one is being abused, different work is needed before Byron’s work can be useful in these situations. But for the rest of it, this work interrupts a story long enough to write another one, one that leaves room for joy.

Let’s take: *Joe lies to me* as an example of a statement of what feels to us to be true. Byron’s work asks us to turn this statement around in 3 different ways and see what happens for us. The first turnaround is to take on the statement for oneself so, *Joe lies to me* becomes, *I lie to myself*. Sound familiar? Okay, so I lie to myself. That didn’t really disrupt my story about Joe but it did just return to him his humanity, right? It made Joe one of all of us instead of an aberration that we can act out upon.

Next, from *Joe lies to me*; we get: *I lie to Joe*. Now that one takes us up short but how can it not be true too? We all bend the truth in different ways to get our needs met.

Lastly, and this one takes the most out of me, *Joe lies to me* becomes *Joe doesn’t lie to me*.

Now that one burns a bit, doesn’t it? If Joe is lying to me, then why pretend otherwise? Byron Katie tells us that when we press on our judgments this hard, it allows us to break the chains of a story that has no room for change. Breaking old stories leads to growth and compassion. If we can give ourselves the small rest from our stories by reshaping them, we can figure out the next strategy in relation to Joe, which just may be to end the relationship with him. But we cannot get there with integrity when Joe is in charge of our emotions and reactions.

Still, folks have asked me since I have started trying to interrupt my stories with this work: why would you turn around a statement that is true? If someone is lying, they are just lying. Right?

The Work as Byron Katie developed it is a strategy to create enough room so that we can imagine another way forward. It does not mean that it is true that Joe does not lie to me or you, just that we are suspending that truth within an atmosphere that contains both possibilities: lying and not lying, so that we can see more clearly where to go next, so that we can take a teaspoon of the medicine of peace and let it do its good work of showing us a new way.

¹ Byron Katie *A Mind at Home with Itself* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017).

So what happens to all of this when we turn to the current political situation? Can this work help us in something so entrenched that is perverting and destroying the landscape of the values we have spent our lives fighting for?

This is where I am stopped in my tracks. I look left and right and right down the center and I see only hopelessness on all sides. Still, I think there is something here that can be used to offer us all more freedom to create.

Anne Lamott, one of my favorite writers, in her book, [Almost Everything: Notes on Hope](#)² is deeply engaged in the conversation of politics, hate and empathy. She feels viscerally the despair of our current political, media, environmental, educational, medical and justice crises. She looks this square in the face and, like the rest of us, responds by eating until she has a belly ache or binging on the House of Cards series until she has no more hope.

Or maybe, Lamott reflects, it's not the state of the world but our current relationships which are really the problem and if we could just get our daughter or son or partner or best friend to take our advice and do what we are sure is the right thing, all would be right with them and therefore us. Right?!

Lamott writes that when her son became heavily involved in drugs, she worked so hard to save him. She paid his rent, bought him a used car, listened on end to him, advised him on all she knew about addiction. But he got worse. When she was finally able to leave him in jail and not bail him out, his recovery began.

But what about when this same story revolves around the current administration; when we feel powerless to save the environment, education, women, civil and voting rights, to name only a few? How does this work that is meant to bring peace, apply? What is the work we are supposed to do and not do to make a difference? I am pretty sure that binging on ice cream and series is not an effective strategy for peace.

Lamott's first suggestion is to feel it all and then to remember what else is true besides our stories of devastation, like all the bravery and right action that has sprung up since 2016. It is true that the world around us is falling away from decency, but it is also true that in the 2018 midterms we elected Kyrsten Sinema: The first openly bisexual person in the Senate and Arizona's first woman in the Senate;

Ayanna Pressley: Massachusetts's first black woman in Congress; Marsha Blackburn: the first woman elected to the Senate from Tennessee; Jared Polis: the first openly gay man elected governor; Jahana Hayes: Connecticut's first black woman in Congress; Deb Haaland and Sharice Davids: America's first Native American women in Congress; Veronica Escobar and Sylvia Garcia: Texas's first Latinas in Congress; Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar: America's first Muslim women in Congress.

² Anne Lamott, [Almost Everything, Notes on Hope](#) (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018).

Recognizing that we can still change the world, not with hatred, but with rising up on the wings of our own willingness to look deeper, to do more work with ourselves and reactivity, to vote, to insist on cultivating joy and community so that we might all go on with more peace and hope is still a radical act.

Here's the thing about hatred, it makes another into a single story, one we do not allow them escape from, one we continually react to, one that does not have the ingredients in it to bring resolution or hope to any system. Human beings do not live in single stories so when we make them into only one version of self, we strip them from their humanity. The left and the right do this with equal vehemence.

Lamott tells us that we cannot see all angles from where we stand; that there is always more off stage, that is cloaked in shadow, depending on who we are and what stories we are trapped in telling and retelling without variation. Might there be other realities that we cannot measure or discern because the stories we tell lead us to the same insistent deductions over and over again? When we can open our stories, when we can imagine other possibilities, we can get to the work of building and living into them. Simple as that.

Of course, in the face of the demise of democracy, this is tough work. But if we are to save democracy, it is not hatred that will do the trick. Hatred creates the same kind of people no matter what side we are on: those that cannot see the humanity of another.

The results of this are always the same: some kind of violence enacted on ourselves or others. There are stories within stories within stories that become visible when we are willing to let go of the single story we are telling.

I had an experience of shifting a single story that changed me. I met my half-brother only days after my father died. There was a man standing over my dad's casket and I asked who he was and he said, "You'd better sit down." He told me that my dad was married before my mom and had 2 children, the first of whom died at 1 year old and my father blamed himself because he was away and could not help get his son to the doctor's on time.

Dad started drinking then this man who looked at me through my dad's eyes and who took my hand into hands I knew, told me. This man who had become my brother as soon as I looked into his eyes, was my dad's, now our dad's, second son.

I looked at my father in his casket, this man as familiar to me as my own reflection who had suddenly become a stranger. Why couldn't you tell us this when you were alive dad, I begged. Why did you keep your son away from us (your son told me he knew my voice because he'd call the home phone when we were younger and ask for dad all the time saying he was a friend from work)?

I considered my dad, his inability to feel worthy of love, the violence his father enacted on his and his mother's bodies, the sense of needing to prove, over and over again, that he was worthy of kindness. Of course, he was never able to feel good enough and the bottle was where he stuffed that sense of radical failure.

What it meant to be a daughter of my father, Eddie Simmons, shifted for me. The story of my life changed. And I learned to forgive my father and wish he had had more ability to know he was loved, that it would be okay to have another son from another marriage, that he was good enough.

This new brother of mine had always been the outsider, was never accepted by the family who did not know him and that he so wanted to be a part of. He did not trust us. I would call him, send him cards. For over 10 years, I heard nothing back. And then he started to trust me enough to begin responding, which was right after this current administration was elected.

And we had a big fight. We are on different sides. When he heard that I was pro-choice, critical of police brutality against black bodies, concerned about the environment, applauding women who were marching in pink pussy hats, he began telling me why I was wrong. The conversation got heated. All of the love and work and hope we had created was torn down in a matter of 10 minutes. We have not spoken since.

Let's try Byron's work on this one: My brother is shut down and pigheaded, seems like a good start. Then the turnaround: I am shut down and pigheaded. Okay, I can swallow that! Then of course, My brother is not shut down and pigheaded. All of these statements have truth. Allowing them room to breathe, allows me to rewrite the story and to offer something else: empathy, connection and courage. After doing this work, I wrote my brother a Christmas card again this year.

We need a new way to see into the world and one another. If we could see one another as paradoxes, as people who contain more than one way of being human, some of them contradictory, would we spend less time holding one another to the script we have decided is true and more time exploring and contributing to what brings us hope, peace and access to beauty?

What if all truth is a paradox, containing both one source of knowledge and also its antithesis? My brother is a shutdown republican can become, my brother is an open minded republican. Surely there is evidence of both if I decide to look with a more open heart and mind. And to remain in contact with my brother would allow us both to temper our single stories so we might be able to see one another and the world with more empathy.

This I know for sure, when we hate we become haters and share common characteristics with all haters. Who is it you are trying to become?

I know we have a world to save but how can we do it until we save ourselves from what destroys within us? What if we opened enough room in ourselves to imagine a world we could love? What if we started asking different questions and posing different possibilities? I remember studying in Divinity School the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. They lived lives we would call extreme, they stripped themselves of what distracted them so they could

hear the word of God telling them to protect the poor, stand against injustice, and heal the sick. They lived in communities of other prophets practicing the same disciplines, turning their lives toward the same voice of courage and hope which they called god.

The Hebrew prophet Ezekiel spoke about love and faith and justice while the bodies of his countrymen were hung from spikes along the trail of exile his people walked after the destruction of Jerusalem in 597 BCE. Mothers still woke along that horrific road and sang to their children of god and love.

Is God still speaking? I do not think that is the best question. Are we still creating room within and between us to hear the call of love, generosity, hope? What do we need to strip away from ourselves to hear this call more clearly? What possessions, habits, visions are keeping our stories wrapped too tightly so that no light, no other way of seeing can enter? Are we remembering to sing to our loved ones of god and love? How else can the world we love go on?

It is time my friends to awaken our imaginations, to do the work needed to open the stories we tell to include paradox and possibility and so remember humanity, ours and others, and become the prophets of this age, those willing to live more closely to one another, to listen for the next message of love and courage, and to speak with empathy.

I believe in you. I believe in us.

Amen.