

Spring Blossoms: On Trust, Faith and Vulnerability in Times of Crisis

By Linda Myoki Lehrhaupt

As I sit at my desk, my eyes fall on the vase holding branches of plum and peach blossoms. It sits on my altar in front of a large window looking onto the fields of our farm in southwest France. I can see that the blossoms are beginning to open. It's just extraordinary. I have never spent the month of March here, and so I never had the opportunity of watching the land wake up from winter to now, the beginning of spring.

There's not only the blooming of the flowers, but the birds are singing day and night. They fly from bush to bush and tree to tree; nests are appearing everywhere. Yesterday I heard frogs in the pond, loudly beginning their mating ritual. What is pleasant to begin with becomes irritating as the day wears on. And yet I try not to resist these sounds of awakening to spring. It's the call of nature. It belongs to the life of this season

Spring offers up the promise of joy, hope and inspiration. These qualities can be nourished even in the darkest of seasons, including this one: It is early April 2022, and the warfare continues in the Ukraine. There too spring has arrived, and with new life there is also the death of thousands on both sides of the conflict. But Spring, with its strong drive toward life, mirrors qualities that can inspire us, if we allow them, in these troubled, threatening times.

The first of these qualities is trust. Trust is embodied and expressed in the myriad spring blossoms responding to the warmth of the sun. It's almost as if they're saying, "It's

time,” as they allow their buds to unfold. There is no second guessing or retreat once they start to open. They commit completely to this process.

The second quality is vulnerability. There is a great deal of uncertainty around the bursting forth of new shoots and flowers. Last year, just as all the peach trees and plum blossoms emerged, a severe frost descended. The blossoms died and there was very little fruit as the season progressed.

So there is the trust of opening to the sun’s warmth and the vulnerability to frost. Both present year after year, millennium after millennium, from the beginning of life on this earth. So too for human lives. We live with vulnerability as the fabric of our lives.

Béne Brown, a social science researcher, has written beautifully on the quality of vulnerability. In an interview with Krista Tippett she says,

Vulnerability is courage. It's about the willingness to show up and be seen in our lives. And in those moments when we show up, I think those are the most powerful moments of our lives. Even if they don't go well, I think they define who we are.

The blossoms don’t know whether they will be bathed by bright sun or chilled by freezing winds. We don't know either what is really going to happen in the future, no matter how many forecasts there are. Is it going to go well for us, or are we going to be hit by difficult circumstances and danger, which can impact our lives in ways we cannot know?

Faith is the third quality in the unfolding process of Spring. Sharon Salzberg, author of the book *Faith: Trusting Your Open Deepest Experience*, writes about it in this way:

Faith enables us, despite our fear, to get as close as possible to the truth of the present moment so that we can offer our hearts fully to it with integrity. We might and often must hope and plan and arrange and try. But faith enables us to be fully engaged while also realizing that we are not in control, that no strategy can ever put us in control of the unfolding of events. Faith gives us a willingness to engage life, which means the unknown and not to shrink back from it.

Sharon goes on to speak of the origin of the word courage; its energy expressed in Spring as a driving force to give birth, bloom and flourish.

The English word courage has the same etymological root as the French Kura, which means heart. To have courage, just as to have faith is to be full of heart. With courage, we openly acknowledge what we can't control, make wise choices about what we can affect, and move forward into the uncultivated terrain of the next moment.

I was deeply touched when I read what Sharon wrote about courage: it reminded me of the opening lines of what is commonly known as the Serenity Prayer, an adaptation from an original prayer written by American Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

I first saw this quote on a small wooden placard in my mother's bedroom about 46 years ago. After I read it, I asked myself, "What is Mom doing with this?" We were not a religious household. But when I reflect back now, the clarity, heart and courage of that quote brings tears to my eyes.

My mother was dying of cancer at age 62. As a fiery 26-year-old determined to save her, I had explored all sorts of treatment possibilities, staying up night after night to do research. I even wanted to put Mom on a plane to Japan because I read out about a method that seemed hopeful for breast cancer patients.

And my mother would gently say each time I proposed something, "No, dear. I'm doing what the doctor says. It's enough. I'm O.K. with this"

She was serene with her choice.

I was not. I was scared and very frightened, and I didn't want to lose my Mom, which I did two years later.

In those days, I did not understand that what I thought was my mother's timidity or giving in, was in fact true courage. I, on the other hand, thought I was brave and did not see that it was bravado in the face of what I thought was defeat.

There is a story of an ancient Zen teacher, a student of Guishan Lingyou, that for me express the qualities of faith, vulnerability and trust.

Lingyun Zhiqin (Reiun Shigon) had been practicing Zen for thirty years. Once while walking in the mountains, he rested and his eyes fell on peach trees. At that moment, he says, he experienced deep realization.

In gratitude, he wrote the following poem; and gave it to Guishan.

*For thirty years, I have been looking for the sword,
How many times have the leaves fallen and the branches grown anew?
Since once seeing the peach blossoms,
Up to the present, I never had any more doubts.*

Okumura Roshi, a contemporary Zen Master and Dogen Scholar, says Lingyun refers to the story of someone who loses his sword while riding in a boat and then marks the side of the boat. When asked why he is making the mark, the swordsman says he will look for the sword when he reaches land.

Lingyun had been searching for thirty years but "he did not realize," says Okumara, "that the Way was right there where he was walking, where the blossoms bloom, the leaves fall, the branches grow, and the new leaves appear."

It could have just as well been me who wrote Lingyun's words. I began Zen practice some months after my mother died. I was introduced to it by Peter Matthiessen's book *The Snow Leopard*, the story of his journey with Biologist George Schaller into the Himalaya to study the blue sheep and perhaps to catch a glimpse of the snow leopard, a rarely sighted animal, even today. For many years I too searched, struggled, and fought my way through

dark, rugged landscapes searching for my own elusive goal. How often had I seen how the leaves fall and tree branches break? How often have I seen the spring and the summer, the winter and the fall, shifting and changing?

Lingyun says that when he saw the peach blossoms, there was no doubt any more. What kind of doubt does he mean? Is it the kind that hounded me as I tried everything I could and still my mother died? Is it the doubt that continued to call me back to the meditation center despite my physical pain and racing mind on the cushion because it was one of the only places where I felt home?

I am writing these words in early April 2022. Throughout Europe there is tremendous despair and fear flowing from the war between the Ukraine and Russia. Europeans are experiencing a sense of vulnerability that they have not known since World War II. Using Germany, where I have also lived for over 40 years, as an example, researchers recently did a survey which showed that only 16% of the population are hopeful about the future. This is the lowest figure since World War II.

In response to the Ukrainian crisis, Germany has moved from downsizing its army to allocating 100 billion Euros to rebuild its military, with the support of the Green Party, known previously for its call for demilitarization. Further, Germany had been consistently closing down its nuclear reactors. Now it is speaking of powering them up again (Germany is dependent for 45% of its oil and gas on Russia, and the prices have exploded to shocking levels). I don't pretend to know what is the right course of action. But knee-jerk reactions driven by fear can only create more fear and spiral downward.

At the same time there is a huge outpouring of caring and taking care from countries throughout Europe. We are experiencing one of the greatest demonstrations of solidarity in Europe's history. Citizens from all over are driving to the Ukrainian border to offer people a

home and refuge. My next-door neighbor in Germany is offering a house he planned to convert to 30 Ukrainians until they find more permanent housing. A foundation in Poland started by the late Zen teacher Malgosia Braunek Roshi is collecting donations and buying medical supplies to send to hospitals in the Ukraine. These are only two of thousands of examples as people and organizations open their arms to offer shelter.

At the same time, there is also a great fear of what might happen if Russia decides to use a nuclear bomb to try to drive the Ukrainians to their knees. When I heard this being discussed in the news, I had a visceral memory of my own brush with nuclear disaster in the 1979 partial meltdown of the reactor at Three-Mile Island in Pennsylvania.

Three Mile Island was less than 100 miles from where I was in New York City. I remember being at work on the 24th floor of the Time-Life Building. Part of me wanted to run out the door, grab my daughter and drive up to Canada. But another part knew it wouldn't have helped, especially if the wind was blowing that way. "What should I do?" I kept asking myself

Today many of us here are living with the same fear. What should we do? And this evolves into an even deeper soul-searching question: What do we do when we don't know what to do?

The Three Tenets of the Zen Peacemaker Order, first articulated by Bernie Glassman Roshi, provide a framework for exploring this question with integrity and heart. He writes:

There are three basic tenets of the Peacemaker Order. The first is not knowing—being in the state of not knowing, letting go of fixed ideas. The second is bearing witness—totally immersing oneself in the situations that one is involved in. And the third is healing oneself and others, out of the ingredients that come up from bearing witness.

Wendy Egyoku Roshi, who received dharma transmission from Glassman Roshi and is the Head Teacher and Priest at Zen Center of Los Angeles, writes of bearing witness in this way:

...Bearing witness recognizes our intimate life's connectedness, and so we practice listening without judgment. The key quality here is non-judging: we do not evaluate or pick and choose or give in to our fixed positions, but rather we are open and learning. In each moment we are actively stopping, and accepting without judgment, whatever is arising. We acknowledge and deeply accept the multitude of facets of any given situation. In this way we are in intimate relationship to the joys and suffering of another.

When we can look with the eyes of Lingyun, when we can feel the courage that Béne Brown talks about, when we can embody the faith that Sharon Salzberg speaks of as willing to show up for what's there, we bear witness and embody trust that is not conditional. But please know I am not suggesting in any way that this is easy, and it is certainly not something accomplished by just talking about it. I have been practicing Zen for 43 years, and as a dharma brother of mine said many years ago, " I am only just beginning to get a taste of it."

The practice of Zazen (sitting meditation in Zen) is the embodiment of bearing witness. Zazen on the cushion and zazen as we walk, breathe, smell, taste, touch in our daily lives. Roshi Joan Halifax, founder of Upaya Zen Center, writes of practice:

...It is being fully with things as they are. Not turning away from anything, what Roshi Bernie calls: Bearing Witness. Being thorough in all things in our day to day/moment to moment life. Fundamentally, being what we are doing, and resting precisely, warmly, and simply in the inclusive field of awareness as each moment unfolds. Free like a cloud, flowing like water, still and upright like a mountain.

It is so easy to get carried away by our fear, by our anger. I know this intimately . Recently something happened that upset me greatly, especially my sense of justice. I was angry. I was fearful. I wanted retribution. But rather than throwing that outward, which in this case was not appropriate, I chose to be with the pain and let it wash through me. It was

not easy, but practicing bearing witness in this way helped me to own my own pain and greatly helped me through the situation and to act responsibly.

I have heard that some of the best mediators are Quakers. They have worked in deeply-troubled sites in the world for over three centuries, says Stephen Mehta, "from the colonization of North America, through the American War of Independence and the Crimean War, to the Nigerian civil war, the independence of Zimbabwe and conflicts in today's headlines. Their work is largely behind the scenes and often not reported."

They are able to hold the complexity of the warring sides. I recently heard one of them say how important it was not to take sides, otherwise no one would trust him even as each party is trying to get him on their side. They listen deeply and the action that arises out of that can be healing, if only to prolong a cease-fire. I believe that their way of conflict resolution includes the aspects of trust, bearing witness and hope that I have spoken about it. And this allows a spaciousness in the presence of unmitigating tension.

It was the release of my own agenda to convince my mother to "do something," that finally created a peaceful and loving space where my own healing took place even though she died. Lunch had arrived in her hospital room, but all she could eat was applesauce. I lifted the spoon many times in the next two hours and brought it near her mouth. Each time she allowed me to feed her, I felt like I was receiving a blessing. The times between her eating stretched for many minutes, and life slowed to her rhythm. I lost all sense of time. At the same time, I lost all sense of ambition. The situation was asking me to be present, to be the bearer of the spoon. Nothing more. Every mouthful was an expression of trust, faith and bearing witness. This was boundless love that requested my sensitivity to her needs. I experienced a deep peace that up to this point had eluded me.

When I speak of faith, I do not mean blind faith. I do not mean turning away and pretending that everything is going to be okay. It is the faith expressed in being completely present, without ambition or an agenda. It is bearing witness: to look, see, hear, touch, taste, smell, echoing words of the *Heart Sutra*, the teaching of Great Liberation. And it is trust, extending hands to Ukrainian refugee as they cross the border, soliders carrying children in their arms. Taking care of what needs to be done Step by step, spoon by spoon.

I welcome comments. Please feel free to contact me. I will do my best to respond as soon as I can: (LindaLehrhaupt@aol.com)