

2014-02-23 Wholehearted Dedication To The Task At Hand

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So I just came back from teaching retreat yesterday. And at our retreat center. It was wonderful to be there. Very nice retreat to teach. I think part of me is still there. So I don't have anything new to talk about. So I'm going to offer something which is still lingering with me from this last week. That remains meaningful for me and I think meaningful for other people hear this. And it has to do with a story that was printed in an E newsletter by an organization called insight out. So like insight meditation, it's a kind of pine on inside out, because it's by its organization founded by Jacques for da, who did many years of work in the prisons in San Quentin, and then now has gone off to create an organization that Does that kind of work more widely in other prisons and people paroled and so he has his e-newsletter for his organization. And in there he had a story written by one of the one of the prisoners. So I would like to read this story for you. And the story is titled, The Shining fire hydrant. My night was like any other night, it was 8pm time for close, close custody count. All prisons have institutional counts, we're in that count each prisoners body to ensure no one is missing or has escaped. Not being there for a count is considered a serious violation. The officer came to our cell and called my cell mates name. cells in San Quentin are probably smaller. are smaller and probably in most of your bathrooms. If you ever been in one, it's quite something. There's about the space that probably is about, I don't know, between the bunk and the wall that's maybe two and a half feet, you know, just kind of just a narrow passageway and in the end of the far end of the bunk is a metal toilet that has no lid and no seat that just you sit because you can't, you know want to break it out and use it for something and I guess maybe a sink and so there's two bunks toilet in this narrow passageway and you can't sit up in your bed because it's not enough space and you can't sit up in the top bunk bunk because none no space to the ceiling. So this is this is the, you know, you share a room with someone. And so the guard is going down the gangway and looking at each cell, looking through the bars and doing the count. So the officer officer came to ourselves and called my bunkies. My roommates name, after which he, my roommate gave my cellmate gave him the last two digits of his prison number. The same went for me. Half an hour passed. And a neighbor comes to my cell and said they were paging me downstairs. I had not heard them calling for me. I went down to the podium, and the cops said to me, why were you not in your cell phone account? And I told them, I was in myself for account as I have been every day and night for 12 years, and I have numerous neighbors that can verify that it did not matter what I said. The cops told me to not do it again. And I am like, whatever. Two days go by and I find out that the sergeant gave me a write up a violation. I'm thinking, Okay, I am truly not guilty of this. And I have many witnesses who will say the same. However, at the hearing, the cop that counted said he looked in the cell two times, and I was not there. It did not. It did not matter what I said or how many people I had, who would say the same because I was found guilty and given 40 hours of extra work. I said to myself, screw this. I am not going to do the work. This is so unfair. I did nothing wrong. And these guys are wrong about this.

I watched that count cop count me and he did not look up from miscount board once his eyes never left that board. I filed a complaint against the Officer. That is the last thing I wanted to do. But I was not wrong about this. They were. I felt bitter about being ordered to do those 40 hours of extra duty and a phone call. I spoke to my mother about it. And she wondered if I could perhaps just take it. And regardless of the circumstances and the injustice of it, see if I could do what would ultimately be best for me. She said she would accept what I would decide. But if I could, to act respect, respectfully. I reckon if I refuse to do the work, even though it came about unjustly, I would be guilty in their eyes. I chose to do the work anyway. I've always prided myself with doing exceptional work. And I was desperately looking to find my pride in the situation somewhere, no matter what. So, not only did I do the work, I did the best possible job I could do. I was asked to shine up this brass fire hydrant. Though I felt resentful about those 40 hours of extra duty, I set off to shine up this hydrant, and I really got into the job. As a result, this hydrant started shining very brightly. As a sun caught it, I could see my face in it. And I noticed I was smiling from ear to ear. I began to laugh out loud for no reason other than enjoying that moment, and seeing the result of my work by putting all my conscious effort into shining up that fire hydrant. I had become bigger than the unfairness that led me to the assignment. I do not know how long I was at it. But, but when I was done that hydrant it looked like The prettiest thing in the whole prison, kinda like a lighthouse standing proudly in an ocean of concrete, calling out on how to steer on how to move through the place. I realized I was shining too, and it hasn't left me. Many people commented on that hydrant all week, wondering how come that thing gives off so much light all of a sudden? I just smiled. So it's a great story. I read the story last Monday here at IMC because it was a follow up on a series of talks I gave on concentration practice. And I thought this was a nice kind of example of someone who got concentrated going through through them wholeheartedly itself wholehearted wholeheartedly into doing a particular job and just being fully present for them and being able to somehow put aside his attitude, his concerns his preoccupation. They were interfered with wholeheartedness putting aside that letting go a bit and giving himself over, he started shining himself. He became the hydrant he became the beacon. And what's very touching about this story, I think, also is the idea that he was wronged. It was an injustice. What happened to him seemingly, and, and he had to put aside his clinging to justice to being right. In a situation where it's reasonable that he felt that he should be right. But in his in the prison, it was pointless. For him to fight for what was right. He could he would have kept fighting for that he could have ended up in solitary confinement conditions, they're not set up for justice. You know, the prison guards have a tremendous power and they want to keep things in line certain way. And sometimes they abused their power. So he had to let go of something in our ordinary life, many of us are willing to let go of being right, but for a higher cause for his own betterment. And so what about things we cling to which are not right, but about we cling to all kinds of things that interfere with our ability to get hold, give ourselves wholeheartedly to the task at hand to what's needed, what's going on. And so he gave himself wholeheartedly to his fire hydrants. Do you have a fire hydrant? You have something that you're asked to do? Maybe something that you'd rather not do, but you need to do?

You should do it. Maybe you're required to do? Do you have attitudes that get in the way? Do you have ideas of what's right and wrong? Do you have resentments? Do you have regrets? Do you have other things you want to do around But you have to do something. And is there a time in place where you're better off, giving yourself over completely to that one task, but so fully, that you begin smiling. And this is one of the little secrets that you learn from meditation practice, is if you can give yourself over wholeheartedly, to one thing. There's something about the way that the wholeheartedness and the unification the gathering together of our mental and physical forces to work together in harmony, that elicits evokes a strong sense of well being. And what's nice about this well being is not dependent on things going right in the world. It just dependent on the quality of engagement and the quality of

involvement itself and that kind of one pointedness or unified involvement we want to doing so he the And then it says in this beautiful story, he said he became bigger than the situation bigger than the injustice. And this is one of the wonderful things that can happen when we give ourselves over completely to something is that there's something about the quality of the mind or the heart, or tends to become more expansive and open. And we're no longer being defined by the circumstances defined by our identity defined by things defined by our resentment defined by what we're attached to. And this idea of not being defined, but you know, it's our ideas and thoughts about things which limit us more often than not, and the whole heart of giving us off over to something so the definitions of ourselves fall away. The identities we have fall away, is part of what helps expand our sense of self or our sense of the mind the heart, we become bigger than the situation. When I was at Tassajara, there's n minus During there was a wonderful moment where it was described that was the whole year that led up to this moment. In September, I was assigned to work in the kitchen. I had been at the monastery for nine months, and I was asked to go work in the kitchen for the day. And I remember going into the kitchen the first step first day, and the kitchen seemed really big. And I felt really small. And then it turned out I was assigned to the kitchen for a whole year. And the following September, September, I knew it was a day I knew this was gonna be my last day in the kitchen. I was gonna be assigned somewhere else. And so because it was my last day in the kitchen, I kind of looked around the kitchen. It's kind of like I did that very first day a year before. And now, the kitchen felt really small. And I was really big. And I'd spent a year in the kitchen getting used to it, but not only that, I had learned Next year in the kitchen to get myself over wholeheartedly to the kitchen itself. I didn't want to be there at first I was a little bit resentful being there I was there to Zen monastery to meditate and serious meditation practice. And when you work in the kitchen at the monastery, you don't get to meditate as much as everyone else. And I was a new monk there and what do they do sending me now they should send someone who's been here longer and I'm here to meditate. And then you know, I didn't like I didn't want to do some of the work there. I didn't want to cut the carrots. You know, carrots are not very spiritual. And they're, you know, there were like, I don't know how many people 40 people to cook for. So like we got a lot of carrots and onions. In my first month there I was just mostly it was chopped. So I had a lot of carrots to chop onions and stuff and, and I remember that you know that I started tuning into my posture. And I noticed that my posture was is often oriented towards the door

you know, how you know, way out and you know twisted a little bit and I learned to kind of twist myself backside really face the carrot. And then after a while it was two way and I wasn't quite there and kind of chopping with one hand kind of like and not really into it then I would kind of bring myself back and there was really be their whole heart and just just be there, get myself over. And it was my practice that year that I made was how to really be get myself over fully to the task at hand. And after some months I learned to be there with the carrots, my carrots and I became friends. And then I became given more responsibility to get in the kitchen, became a manager of the kitchen and I kind of didn't have to really try so hard to be fully in the kitchen. It's like a job. Was your soul all consuming, I just kind of gave myself over fully to it. And I loved it, it was a wonderful time for me. And I think this contributed to the idea of becoming bigger. And I became much bigger than, than the kitchen. It's possible to become bigger if you feel a sense of bigness, bigger than a lot of things. One of the things that I feel I've become, when I was a new student of Buddhism, Buddhism was really big. And I was really small. And now I hope this sounds okay to say this, but now Buddhism is really small. And I'm really big. You know, I'm saying like, I mean, if I'm not that in relationship to Buddhism, and when I just sit here, I'm just like, I don't know what I am. But, but, you know, Buddhism just seems like a small little thing. And now and nice.

So it's like, well, you know, you should aim for that, you know, this great growth really I put so much projection authority into Buddhism when I was younger, this great world authorities like the great father

figure and Buddhism doesn't really exist. What exists is your heart there exists is your mind, your mind, and the heart of other people. And that heart can become big that heart can become free. That heart can be computed and clarified. And so one of the one of the ways to do this is to give yourself over wholeheartedly to what you're doing. But not to do it naively. You have to have some wisdom about what you give yourself over to. And so I'll give you kind of another story. I kind of wanted to have A sub A sub, like fables of Buddhism, Buddhism has this idea of, of many heavens and Gods Deborah's. And one of the Devo realms is the realms of Brahma on the great gods of the Indian Pantheon. And Brahma being kind of an overlord of his realm as a huge, beautiful palace. And he has a nice palace, he has a great courtroom in the courtroom, he has a great throne. And there's many kind of a little bit more minor Gods minor Brahmas, who live in that realm as well. quirkier gods or something. And Brahma is like but he's the top dog. And so, one day when Brahma was off, roaming around, away from his palace, a little ugly little runt of an imp of a troll, called the yaksha yakka jumped up on Brahmas throne. And you don't do this. You know only one person sits on Brahma stone and that's Brahma himself. Anybody that's very disrespectful to take that seat. That's like you should not do that. Any of you end up there unless you're become Brahma don't sit in Brahmas throne. And so and so the courtiers the other gods got angry. So you have to get down from there. You can't be sitting there. You shouldn't be up there and get down right now. And those court Gods gave themselves over a whole heartedly to be to be angry. And as they did that, the middle Ugly runt of a troll started to grow. And he grew and he got stronger. And he got more beautiful until he was as large radiant beautiful beings sitting there on the throne. And these court gods were kinda like what's going on here? You know, this is getting out of hand. So they went and found Brahma Brahma back at home. There's this thing going on. And we don't know what's going on, but we tried to, you know, fix the situation, but it's just getting worse. And so Brahma said, Oh, I know what's going on. So he went back home and went into his courtroom and stood in front of his throne, and put his hands together and jolly and respect and, and said to this now, beautiful large troll yaksha said to him, I'm so glad this You, I hope you're well. You know, you seem to fit well on the throne. And you know, and I hope you're thriving and doing well and, and so you started offering his respect and he wholeheartedly offered his respect and care and kindness to this troll. And as he did that, the troll began to shrink and get smaller and smaller and smaller, until finally poof, the troll disappeared, at which point yaksha went up and sadness throne. And then he explained to the other gods, and he said, This troll was an anger eating troll. The more you feed it anger, the bigger and stronger it gets. But if you offer it kindness and respect, then it does it doesn't get fed that way and it slowly begins to dissolve and dissolve until finally it's just Is all completely out. So it matters what you give yourself over wholeheartedly to.

And in any situation. But there's a wide range of choices of what you can give yourself over to. So just simply say that a practice is to really be present for what is. And if you give yourself completely over to what is it might be a little bit naive because you might, because there's a wide range of choices of what's happening in this very moment. So what do you give yourself over to is part of the wisdom that's needed in this practice that we do here to have some sense of what to give ourselves to. So if you're giving yourself over to your resentment over to your greed and lust or give yourself over to your, your confusion or your doubt, then you might have a little troll That will get bigger and bigger and bigger and stronger, until a day will come when it's stronger than you watch out. But if you give yourself wholeheartedly over to meeting that role with kindness and respect, a different outcome will happen. And so how can you meet something with kindness and respect. One of the ways we do in this practice is we're willing to be present for it, to see it clearly to recognize that it's there, to see it and be present for it and not be in conflict with it. But also not to give into it, to go along with it. Just to be there, present, see it for what it is. And, you know, and be respectful of it. I think all the forces inside of us weren't our respect. They're there because of causes and can Many causes and conditions have come together to make them be there. I'd like to kind of kind of assume that everyone's doing their best they

can. And given that given the what the best they can doing the best they can, all these things happen to us in our lives, challenges and difficulties we have. And slowly you know, some, some things begin to arise and surface in our psyche and our minds, that maybe aren't really good things to give it give ourselves over to, but they arise because of causes and conditions. We don't take me too personally, we don't have to be alarmed by them. But it's important to practice with them. And to distinguish between how we give ourselves over. I've known people who've done the practice of concentration where they kind of did activities give themselves over hold on to some activities. And, and, because that's what kind of the Buddhist practice they were taught, but they weren't taught to really And notice their attitudes and emotions behind how they gave themselves over to things. And they gave themselves over with anger, the resentment the kind of like ferocity like they didn't realize they were angry when they were doing it. So mindfulness practice is very important to notice how how are you giving yourself over to something? I think what was nice about this story of the prisoner was that he was able to put aside his resentment. I think many of us would have a hard time with that, because, you know, our sense of justice and injustice would have been something very strong. But you know, he did have 12 years to kind of build up some inner strength to be able to do that, some inner context for that. So

So I think it's nice to think that in any given moment, You have a choice, you have choices. And you have a choice about what you what you bring your attention to what you participate in, what you how you're involved in whatever you're doing. Are you involved wholeheartedly in what you're doing? You have one foot out the door. Are you hesitant? Are you there fully for the experience that's there. I know that there are situations in my life that for years, I didn't really want to be present for these things. And I kind of knew I supposed to and I should and so I would kind of like be there and maybe from the outside it looked like I was there. And but I had to learn to be there and let go of the inner life which was not really there for it. And kind of just really be there. You know, if I'm gonna be there, let's be there in a clean and clear away. If that's what's called for what's going on And so how are you they they are wholeheartedly what you're doing. There's something about the wholehearted engagement what we do, which is very, very helpful for ourselves. But the second choice is, what do we give ourselves wholeheartedly to do? Are we giving us what's the attitude? What is the thing we're doing? If we're giving ourselves wholeheartedly over to being angry with our neighbor, and going over and telling our neighbor what we think that has a very different condition that allows a particular troll to grow. And if you give yourself over a horribly to bring in your neighbor, apple pie, that creates very different conditions for yourself, maybe for your neighborhood as well, which which is most conducive, which is most beneficial? What do you get yourself over to do?

So I'll end with a story. Another little story from my life a little bit of a non sequitur perhaps. But many years ago I was with my youngest son in soup, I think was a supermarket. And he was at that age I don't know how old but maybe four or five where it seemed like wanting things was the only purpose to be alive and so we'd be walking through the store and I want that I want that I want that. And so I turned turn and said to him, you know I think that you have been taken over by desire troll. No troll desire troll has gotten in there and he turned to me and looked at me and it's very adult way and said what are you kidding me? What? Like you? Where do you come from?

So I dropped it.

Anyway, watch out for your trolls. Take care of your own trolls, not other people's trolls. So what fire hydrants do you have that you can polish? May you polish the fire hydrants that you are assigned to do a good job. Thank you.