

Sharon Salzberg  
Week 4, *Real Happiness At Work*  
February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014  
“Integrity & Open Space”

The last two qualities that we're going to discuss that are intrinsic to the development of real happiness at work are: first, meaning; and then a quality of open space. Open space could also be described as fluid intelligence or flexibility of attention. So meaning is what we find in work, even if our work is not tremendously mission driven. Sometimes, of course, it is; and our work is more like a passion. It's an expression of the ways we find our deepest happiness, anyway—a sense of connection, of service, of making a real difference in this world, or contributing something, or doing our part to contribute something that is really going to—as far as we can see—really make for a better world, a better society.

And so sometimes we have that opportunity where the work itself is that way. But even without that—even if we find our work somewhat repetitious or not maybe our deepest passion, not reflective of our deepest passion—still we can find tremendous meaning through bringing the forces of concentration, mindfulness and loving kindness and compassion into our day-to-day encounters.

I can remember this one time when I checked into a hotel in San Francisco, and I have asthma; so it was very important for me to have a non-smoking room and my friends had already checked in sometime ago. I was flying in from somewhere. I was getting to be kind of late and when I got to the hotel they said they had no non-smoking rooms left. And I said, "That's impossible for me, I'm not going to be able to stay. This is really a drag. You know, my understanding was that I was having a non-smoking room." And they said, "No, it's just not possible." So I went to find my friends and tell them that I had to leave. I was going to start looking for another hotel even though it was kind of late.

And they were still at dinner in the dining room in the restaurant so I sat down with them and I said, "I'm leaving because I just can't stay here." And the waitress happened to overhear me and she turned to me in some distress and said, "Why are you leaving?" So I told her the whole story and she got her manager—who was the manager of the restaurant, who had nothing to do with the rooms and those assignments—and I told him the story and he said, "I'll see what I can do."

So I went back to the front desk, the registration desk, and low and behold there was like some magnificent suite they had—that was non-smoking—that had been being saved for some prospective guest who was not showing up. But they gave me the suite at the same rate at which I was going to have my non-suite room. And so I went in to the suite and there were like flowers and fruit baskets and champagne and this whole thing for the

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person who never showed up and they were available to me. And so I got to stay there for many days. I was in town for some Dalai Lama teachings and it was kind of this extraordinary stay.

And I think about that waitress who actually—it wasn't her job, it wasn't in her job description, had nothing to do with her in doing her thing well, exercising her craft well. But she heard that someone was in distress and she reached out, and then she went and got her supervisor—whose job it also was not to assign rooms—and he reached out to somebody who was a stranger because of my quality of distress. And so just that way they really changed my entire experience of not only the day but probably of the teachings. You know, several days, and just that kind of interaction taking the time, going the extra mile, stepping outside of the confines of what you're doing and really paying attention to how you're doing it.

And to really extend yourself to have that degree of compassion not only changes someone's day or week or month or longer, but it changes the way you relate to your own work. So realizing that every encounter, every time you converse with somebody, you have the opportunity to be extending loving kindness and compassion; or, for someone to get off the phone feeling a whole lot worse about who they are, and what they want out of life, and whether they deserve to be alive at all. There's a lot of power in the way that we relate.

So really look at how much compassion you can bring to bear, whatever it is that you might be doing. And so too with mindfulness, especially if we find something boring, as we very well might if it's quite repetitious or routine. We look at the quality of boredom and itself it's quite interesting. Sometimes we say that boredom comes from the half-hearted attention. If we're doing something for the billionth time, we're unlikely to be fully present—to have that sense of a beginner's mind—to really be paying attention in that moment to the texture, the flavor, the nuance of an experience.

And also in our culture we're not often trained to subtlety, usually. We count on intensity in order to feel alive, both intense highs and intense lows. And here you are just doing this kind of ordinary thing—no great pleasure and no great pain—and you're doing it for the billionth time. It's very likely there's not going to be much of a sense of connection in that moment, much of a sense of fulfillment.

But we're also not taught if we feel that boredom, we feel that lack of fulfillment, to look at the quality of our own attention as being part of the reason. So we tend to be very

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object driven. If you're eating an apple and you're not really paying attention, because it's the billionth apple you've eaten; and you don't really taste it, you don't really appreciate it. It's not often a moment of reflection where we think, “Oh, maybe I should bring myself fully into the moment and be here doing this completely.” More likely we start to think, “If only I had a banana then I would be happy.” And then maybe we get the banana and eat it in exactly the same way and then we go on from there. We're not very happy with that and we think, “The problem in my life is it's so prosaic, it's so ordinary. If I had a mango, then I would be happy.”

And we end up caught up in the common train of postponement and lack of fulfillment, and not really understanding why. I think in his last poem or close to his last poem, at any rate, Robert Frost wrote, “Life is an interminable chain of longing.” But why does it have to be that way? And if we cut that cycle of lack of fulfillment due to lack of attention, leading to just more longing; then we have a very different way of approaching our ordinary experience.

So bring yourself fully into the moment when you feel bored rather than thinking, “Oh that means I've got to go do something, I've got to do something else.” Really bring yourself into your body, into the moment: feel your feet against the ground, feel your breath, feel the paper that you're holding, feel the cup that you're holding, whatever it might be. Listen to the conversation that's going on instead of thinking of, “Oh God, I've got 50 e-mails to write.” And remember that you'll have to do that again and again and again. It's not like a one-shot breakthrough.

So we bring compassion into every encounter that we can. We bring mindfulness and greater awareness into every instance, especially when we feel bored; which is like the wakeup call to really invest more fully in the moment. And if we do that, then what develops is this capacity called open awareness, or open space—or fluid intelligence is another way of describing it—where we fulfill our tasks. We do what we have to do completely and well, with some skill, but we also have kind of a big picture perspective. We realize maybe we're doing something. We're teaching somebody something or trying to help in some way. And we may not get the answer immediately, right in this moment.

It may not all break through and give us this tremendous sense of fulfillment but we can admit what we don't know. And how many times—when we do an action trying to help—it's really like planting a seed and we don't know all the conditions? And we don't know when and where that seed will flower or bear fruit, but it can and it very well might. So we need to let go. We need to really offer what we can offer, and also let go of

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the need for immediate results and having that sense of expectation. We have a sense of creativity with open awareness or fluid intelligence.

I love this story that I read somewhere about these guys who are washing windows—in I think it was—Tennessee. And one day they were assigned to wash the windows in this children's hospital. So they all dressed up in Spiderman costumes, and they got up on the scaffolding, and they washed the windows. But, for the kids in the hospital it was like Spiderman was coming to visit. And so like you could see these photos of these kids, and their parents and nurses like crowded around the windows; and the kids are beaming and they're so excited and you think, "Well look at that." They were doing their regular job and they have that kind of big picture perspective like, "Wow, let's do it this way. So not only are we washing the windows, we're giving the gift of this tremendous joy to the kids."

There's also the quality of being able to fail, right? And to recognize that almost every endeavor, just like our meditation practice, is not going to be, "Okay there's this period of struggle and then there's this clear shot and everything is perfectly fine from then on." The greatest lesson is the one we started with: the ability to begin again so that we do something less than perfectly but we learn something from that. And then the next time we make an attempt, which might be in a somewhat different fashion, we take that learning and we're able to have a bigger perspective and more creativity.

And it happens again and it happens again: this very deep patience, which doesn't mean you're complacent about ineptness. It means that you really have that kind of fluid intelligence—that ability to take that which is good out of the situation that may not have been perfect, and be able to learn from that; and keep applying all of those kinds of lessons to this tremendous, open, spacious, big picture of work and of life.

So I want to go back to that very first meditation that we did, where we sat and rested the attention gently on the feeling of the breath. And I want you to pay particular attention to that moment when you have been distracted—that very precious moment when we practice letting go gently and practice beginning again—because this is going to be the skill that will really allow us to have that sense of open awareness.

Notice if you're harsh with yourself, if you condemn yourself. See if you can soften that. Recognize that this is inevitable—we're always having to start over. It doesn't mean that you did something wrong, that you can't do this. We practice letting go—and with

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tremendous compassion for ourselves and joy in the possibility of renewal—we start over, we begin again.

It's just one breath, and then the next, and a chance to be really different when we need to let go and begin again. And when you feel ready, you can open your eyes. Thank you for watching. And may you be able to continue your practice, and experience the very real fruits of this kind of happiness.