

*Life As It Is*

Episode #15 with Valerie Brown

“Making Peace with Our Longing to Belong”

October 26, 2022



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**James Shaheen:** Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. For twenty years, Valerie Brown worked as a lawyer lobbyist, persuading politicians on Capitol Hill. But after a chance encounter with Buddhist teachings, she began searching for a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. Eventually, she quit her job and became ordained as a dharma teacher in the Plum Village tradition. In her new book, *Hope Leans Forward: Braving Your Way toward Simplicity, Awakening, and Peace*, Brown shares her journey through personal loss and how she has grappled with the question, “Where is hope now?”

In today’s episode of *Life As It Is*, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I sit down with Valerie to talk about the distinction between active and passive hope, her unique blend of Buddhist and Quaker traditions, and how she has learned to listen to her soul’s voice.

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**James Shaheen:** So I'm here with dharma teacher Valerie Brown and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Valerie. Hi, Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Hi.

**Valerie Brown:** Hi.

**James Shaheen:** Good to see you. So Valerie, we're here to talk about your new book, *Hope Leans Forward: Braving Your Way toward Simplicity, Awakening, and Peace*. You write that the book is a response to the question, "Where is hope now?," which is a deeply personal one for you. Can you share more about how this question has shown up in your own life?

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**Valerie Brown:** Yeah, thank you so much for the question, James. The truth is that this is not a book I wanted to write. This is a book that I could not *not* write. It's a book that grew out of a cascade of personal losses, deaths, a hurricane that swept through my house last year, suicide, death of people close in my family, divorce, many, many cascading events. And I felt that at some point, this cascade of events, these complications, were leading me to transform them in some way, to speak about them in some way, to make good use of the suffering that was coming my way. That is where this book grew out of. In answering the question, "Where is hope now? What does hope look like? What is hope?" That's the journey that I took in the book.

**James Shaheen:** You write that after these losses, you were called to awaken to a basic truth, and to quote you, "Whether hope is there or not, I must live my deeply held values of simplicity, awakening, and peace and let that be my guide." Can you say more about this truth and how it has helped guide you?

**Valerie Brown:** So for a long time, perhaps like many people, I had this belief that hope was like this flimsy thing. Emily Dickinson writes about hope as a thing with feathers. It feels ephemeral. It's here, it's not there, it's in between. And it was through these life complications that I just described that I realized—and particularly with a divorce, hoping, wishing, clinging, that it was going to work out, and it did until it didn't. But it was through this cascade of complications in my life that I realized there's another way to look at hope. Actually, part of this was looking at hope as a skill, an action, a verb, that there is a muscular quality to hope. There is an active quality to hope. There's a cognitive part of hope in which I find myself grounded in what is happening right now, the present moment, and yet also the capacity to see, to be purposeful about cultivating the future, something better.

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**James Shaheen:** You build upon the work of environmental activist Joanna Macy in distinguishing between active and passive hope, which you just alluded to. Can you walk us through this distinction and how we can cultivate active hope?

**Valerie Brown:** I love the work of Joanna Macy, as well as Rebecca Solnit and Roshi Joan Halifax. All of these people speak in varying degrees about the skillfulness in hope. There is the cultivation of many resources in active hope. There is courage, there is adaptability, there is persistence and a kind of resourcefulness. There is a patience and a readiness when someone is cultivating this active capacity of hope. And yet there's also what Vaclav Havel talked about: there's something that just makes sense about it. We are moving in this direction as opposed to a kind of passive “things happen, God's fate, bad luck” kind of way of looking at the world. And I don't want to leave the audience with this idea that this is an individualistic journey. It is not. We cannot do this alone as individuals. We need a community, what the Irish poet John O'Donohue has called an *anam cara*, a soul friend, at least someone that has our back.

**James Shaheen:** It's funny, I mentioned this recently in an interview with someone else, but some time ago, I interviewed Joanna Macy and I think in reference to passive hope, she said, "I'm a Buddhist. I don't do hope. I'm in love with what is." I really love that quote.

**Valerie Brown:** I adore that, and I would resonate with Roshi Bernie Glassman, who said something like, "Hope is wonderful. Expectation is the problem." It's the stickiness, the attachment to these expectations. And we're human, so we have expectations. So part of it is an awareness of these expectations and the attachment and the stickiness.

**James Shaheen:** You mentioned Roshi Joan Halifax, and you draw from her principle of wise hope "born of radical uncertainty rooted in the unknown and the unknowable." Can you say more

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about this space of unknowing? Often hope can seem like an attempt to escape the unknown or a wish for things to be other than what they are. So what makes wise hope different?

**Valerie Brown:** So first, I just want to extend a deep bow of gratitude to Roshi Joan Halifax and to the Upaya Zen Center community. It was there that I finished writing the book. The community nurtured me when I was literally on the verge of collapse with so many life complications that had happened. Roshi Joan and the community took me in and nurtured me for months. What Roshi is pointing to, this great elder, as well as Joanna Macy, this great elder in the Buddhist community, is uncertainty, impermanence. Hope emerges out of uncertainty. Life is impermanent. So with this, we cultivate these habits of hope, what I've spoken about before, this courage and resilience and resourcefulness and adaptability. These habits are like anchors. They help us become more resourceful. They are not guarantees. And so it is the practice, the skillful practice, *upaya*, or skillful means. It's the skillful practice, and it is the practice that helps us to move into the space of wisdom.

**Sharon Salzberg:** I really relate so deeply to your description of the book. I had a book like that once I wrote called *Faith*. I had to write it. I was compelled to write it. And it also strikes me that faith and hope in common English usage are used synonymously, even though they might mean very different things, and they each don't necessarily mean what we think they mean. It took going so deep in order to write it, so I really want to honor you for that process and for creating the book. So in the book, you cite the cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien, who found that in many shamanic societies, if you complained to a shaman about being depressed, they would ask one of four questions: "When did you stop dancing? When did you stop singing? When did you stop being enchanted by stories? And when did you stop being comforted by the sweet territory of silence?" Can you share a little bit more about these questions and how they relate to your understanding of hope?

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**Valerie Brown:** A deep bow to the work of this amazing person Angeles Arrien. Sitting behind me is one of her books on gratitude. What comes to me about these questions that she has asked is an image that I remember I recall from one of her teachings, and that is that every day when we wake up, we have two guardians at our side: there's death, and then on the other side, there's this kind of destiny. How do we wish to move in the world? And that signals a kind of agency, and it signals a kind of choice. What I think Angeles Arrien is pointing to, and many other wise people, is the reality of our times. This is not normal what we're living through right now. It's not normal. It's not normal that Pakistan is one third underwater. That's not normal. And because things are so not normal, it requires of us a beautiful aspiration to live our life with compassionate action, engaged, eyes open.

**Sharon Salzberg:** In the book, you draw from both Buddhist and Quaker traditions, and you often refer to your “soul's voice,” which is language we don't necessarily hear in Buddhist circles. I mean, hope itself is a little tricky, you know, but soul is something else altogether. So what do you mean when you use the term "soul"? I'm very curious about how you blend Buddhist and Quaker practice in your own life.

**Valerie Brown:** I began thinking about some of this through being a longtime student of Thich Nhat Hanh, Thay, and of course, Thay has written at least two books, if not more, on this kind of interfaith dialogue. *Living Buddha, Living Christ* is, for example, one of his books. So he has taught us that these faiths are deeply interconnected and rooted within each other. So when I think about soul, the equivalent to me is one's buddhanature, that we each have a buddhanature. And I don't mean anything highfalutin by that. I mean that we have within us a capacity to be awake, to wake up to life as it is in this moment, like I'm sitting here talking to you, I feel my feet on the floor, and I have a beautiful warm blanket on my lap. I'm awake to what's happening right here, right now. That is an awakened state that is tapping into our buddhanature right here and right now. So we don't have to go into the future to find that. That's here now, and that is

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available to every person, no matter their circumstance. We don't have to study the sutras for 50 years; we can benefit right now. The other wise teacher in my life has been the Quaker writer and activist Parker Palmer. I had the great good fortune to study with Parker, and he was the dean of students at a place called Pendle Hill, which is a Quaker retreat and study center outside of Philadelphia. He was there for about 12 years, and I've been a teacher at Pendle Hill for about 15 years. What Parker says, I think, is very true, and that is that it doesn't so much matter what we call this thing called soul. There are many faith traditions and ways to describe it: buddhanature, big self, inner teacher, inner light. The name itself is not as important as that we touch into that sense of our innermost being, our inner wisdom, the guide that is always there. And from a Quakerly perspective, we say that however one defines God, there is that of God in every person. There is that awakened capacity in every person.

**Sharon Salzberg:** I was very curious about the fact that you close each chapter with a list of queries, which is a Quaker practice, because there's something in my mind that says if you're allowed to ask questions, then the very allowance is a sign of respect and self-respect, and it's a very beautiful perspective on human nature.

**Valerie Brown:** I love that. So within the Quaker community, queries are the heart and soul of Quaker faith and practice. A query is not a question. From a kind of shorthand perspective, you could call it a question, but it really isn't a question. A query is a way of pointing toward the soul. There is no particular right or wrong. It's not about answering. It is more an invitation, a movement toward an inner dialogue. A question goes with that there is an answer, and it almost points to a kind of cognitive capacity. The query invites a deeper reflection and often one that is done with a community. For a Quaker, a query might invite silence. It might invite listening. It might invite letter writing or a walk in the woods or looking up at the sky. So it invites many different forms of listening.

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**Sharon Salzberg:** Can you give us an example of how it might actually look?

**Valerie Brown:** One of the queries that has been a touchstone for me and a kind of North Star in my daily life—when I wake up in the morning, I look at my phone, and there's messages. I have a temptation to start scrolling through. There is a query that comes into my mind, an invitation to listen in a deeper way. The query is: What is it that only you can do? I don't mean that in a narcissistic way. There's a lovely story that Thay told. Thay was asked a very lovely question, "Why do you spend your time growing lettuce when you're the Zen master? You write these beautiful books. You've written 100 books. You should be writing books and poetry and doing calligraphy. But you're growing lettuce." Thay said, "Well, the way I grow lettuce is the way I write books. The way I grow lettuce is the way I do calligraphy." There's this thread of love, attentiveness, care, presence that connects growing the lettuce and doing calligraphy. This is the invitation that's embedded in a query: How do we connect the inwardness of our lives to the outwardness of our actions? This is embedded in a query.

**James Shaheen:** You know, I wonder, when I was reading about the queries, if they're somehow obliquely related to not knowing. In other words, you open the mind with a query and allow something to be known rather than trying to know.

**Sharon Salzberg:** It also reminds me of how there's a certain use of questioning that is just about pivoting. You're not actually seeking a particular answer, and there's no sense of there's a right answer and a wrong answer. But instead of maybe looking at, you know, a material object as the source of final happiness or something like that, you kind of turn your attention toward your inner world rather than just the new model of whatever and in a way ask, "What do I need right now in order to be happy?" Something like that. And it's the very pivot that is the point because then there's both space and there's possibility, rather than, "Well, if I wait three months, I can get an even better iPhone."

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**Valerie Brown:** It's deeply frustrating to folks, and I have to say, I have made a huge pivot and shift in my life. For most of my life, I was a lobbyist lawyer, very type A. It was in meeting Thay in 1995 and the community and starting the practice that through the community and the practice over the years—the wanting the ready answer, the quick fix, getting paid good money to have the right answer, and seeing the world as a problem to solve and people to be fixed. That paradigm shift was not something I did alone. It was done within the context of these communities. And so holding silence, being in silence, being with what is unresolved or unfinished, sitting with that, all of that through the Quakers, and through the Buddhist communities.

**James Shaheen:** Valerie, throughout the book, you share your search for a sense of home and your struggles with substituting a career for a sense of community and connection. Can you share more about this search and the obstacles you encountered along the way?

**Valerie Brown:** Part of writing the book was the vulnerability of saying these things out loud—as a Dharma teacher, there's a kind of expectation that you have a happy life, and it's all buttoned up—and sort of getting out of my own way. But that sense of belonging has been a part of a lifelong search. Part of it has been my own historical biography as a Black person growing up with a lot of trauma: my mother passing away when I was 16 and becoming an independent student at age 18, meaning I had no parental supervision and no parental support. My father was not around. I worked at Burger King during the day and went to city university at night. And so this idea of a home and belonging was something that I craved and had actually craved my whole life. I realized that belonging begins with me and that actually, rather than making me this oddball person out there, I share that with many, many other people, particularly many other people who have marginalized historical life experiences, who have lost that sense of belonging through death. So that sense of belonging and wanting to belong, that actually connects me with

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a lot of other people who also have that sense of belonging, wanting to belong, needing to belong, and what does that really look like and mean?

**James Shaheen:** You mentioned your father in the book and how you reconciled in many ways so you could live with yourself, I think. Would you like to say something about that?

**Valerie Brown:** One of the most profound moments of my life was coming to understand my father. He was a tough person. He was born in Jamaica and lived a very hard life and a very successful life by his own terms. The relationship with him was very hard. There was a fair amount of violence and abuse that I had with him, and after my first marriage came to an end, I realized it probably has something to do with him, and it might be a good idea if I wrote him a letter and had a chat with him. I had not spoken to him in years. So I did. I wrote him the letter. I said, "I'd like to come and see you. I'd like to have a chat with you." And he said, "Yes, come." I arrived, and I asked him a very simple question. I asked him, "Why did you do the things to me that you did? Why did you beat me up? Why did you walk out on us?" And he said, "I did the best I could." And it was as though a light bulb went off in my whole body. I realized that was the truth. This imperfect person did the best they could, and the best they could was pretty bad. My job here is to transform this thing that I didn't want but that I got and to live it in a different way. I realized that was part of my life journey. And so that's been a large part of what I've been about. How do I transform the mud into lotus, the hatred and the violence into a tenderness and compassion? It's certainly not what he wanted. It's not what he inherited in his life. So how do I break this cycle of ancestral violence and hatred? And I can do that. I realize he was a very imperfect person. He had a lot of violence in his life. It's very much like what Thy speaks about in the poem, "Please Call Me by My True Names," the causes and conditions of his life that brought him to this violence, and I have a chance and opportunity to transform that. He did the best he could. And it's true. I can transform this into something else.

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**James Shaheen:** How did you finally find a home, or how did you encounter Buddhist community?

**Valerie Brown:** It happened by mistake.

**James Shaheen:** Sounds like Sharon.

**Valerie Brown:** Like so many things, the Buddhist community was complete circumstance. So I was deeply ensconced in my big lawyer job, big shot lawyer lobbyist. At the time, we were living on the Upper West Side right down the street from a wonderful church, Riverside Church, and I was in my brother's apartment, and he opened up the New York Times. He said, "You know, there's this guy that's down the street, this Zen person. You may want to go down there and listen. He's giving this talk." This "Zen guy" was Thich Nhat Hanh. My brother, knowing I was this hyped-out overstressed type A, muscle-bound lawyer lobbyist person, said, "Why don't you go down there and check this out?" So I did. I walked in there, and everything that they said was the opposite of how I was living my life. I walked out of there, and I thought, "This guy's nuts, man." But I realized he obviously touched a deep truth that was already there in me. And so that began the journey. That was in 1995. I started going to every retreat I could with Thich Nhat Hanh, studying with the community. When the monasteries opened in the United States, I started going. All of that then led to 2018 when I was ordained as a dharma teacher in Plum Village. And, not to be melodramatic, I felt at that moment when I received lamp transmission that my life was complete. I had transformed. Not that I'm done, but I transformed a lot. And people saw it. I felt, "This feels complete."

**Sharon Salzberg:** You described in the book a number of times where you found a sense of home and belonging in nature, and you write that the soul seems to speak loudest through nature. I wonder if you can share more about your practice of listening to nature.

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**Valerie Brown:** Oh, this is such a good question.

**Sharon Salzberg:** And I wonder if you're a native New Yorker, because there's something in what you said where I thought, “There's that accent.”

**Valerie Brown:** Yeah, there you go. Not only did I grow up in New York, but I grew up in Bushwick, Brooklyn, the People's Republic, so you can blame it all, it all started there. So I grew up in Brooklyn. There was a tree, one tree on my street, a nose-against-the-bark kind of tree. The tree was so old and so muscular that it picked up the concrete, and it's like, wow, how could something do that? In any event, what I'm pointing to is that a seed was there a long time ago. But one of the most profound experiences I've had in nature was one day doing walking meditation in the forest at Blue Cliff Monastery, the monastery founded by Thich Nhat Hanh outside of New York City. No bells and whistles, we were just doing a walking meditation in the woods, and we came to the spot. It was fall. We just stood there, and I looked at the leaves falling over the branches and the way the water was running downhill and the moss covering the rocks. And in that moment, I felt that this is perfection. This is exactly how it should be. The leaf should lay like that. The rock should fall like that. Such a profound moment of connectedness, belonging, and being at home and that the natural world was speaking and was there and supporting me. Going from growing up in an environment that was steel, concrete, and brick to being able to be in relationship with the moss and the water running downhill and the breeze, that felt like such a deep truth and such a deep beauty. I'm profoundly grateful for that moment.

**James Shaheen:** Valerie, you talk about nature, listening to nature, and nature speaking. And it's a type of listening that is very different from how you listened as a lawyer. When you started truly listening, you say that something shifted in you. Clients started to say, "Gee, you don't seem like a lawyer." What do you think it was that was changing?

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**Valerie Brown** As a lobbyist, the job is to get people—in this case, politicians—to do something they otherwise would not do on their own. It's the art of persuasion, to influence folks to do stuff that they otherwise wouldn't do or they may not be inclined to do. That is the job of a lobbyist. There's other things, but that's a big part of it. And so there's a kind of muscle energy in that, and I was very much connected to that muscle power: got to get it done. We've got to have the outcome that is advantageous to the client. Very goal-oriented. You can hear that, right? But then it was through the practice of being with what is, all of the practices, the concentration, the kind of equanimity, all of these things that I began to shift from the goal of trying to influence the other person to trying to genuinely understand the other person. And so things slowed down a lot. I began to focus on my feet on the floor. I began to focus on the way my clothes were laying against my skin. I began to focus on the moment-to-moment eye contact with the person, the people who were surrounding us in the halls while I was trying to do the persuading, the micro-moments. And then after generating this sincere sense of understanding and interest in the person, I would not open my mouth to say a word until that was a sincere and genuine sense of interest in the other person, understanding in the other person. And so the whole art of persuasion changed from "Let's get the goal of whatever that is," the energy of that, which was taking me forward to what's happening right now? Who is this person? What is most important to this person? What's happening in your life? Tell me about that. Why do you feel the way you do? And it was out of that that the space between us changed. It opened up a space that was non-transactional, and it led to a deeper understanding. It was through that understanding that I think created a sense of trust and reliability and this person is a resource, and based on that we can get some work done. It was a huge paradigm shift. And so I became this lobbyist lawyer that was very relational, and then I realized, "I'm not sure I want to keep doing this." People would say to me all the time, like, "Gee, you don't seem like a lawyer." I would say under my breath, "What the heck is going on with you?"

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**James Shaheen:** It did lead to your resigning from your position as a lawyer. You write about living with purpose, and in fact, a lot of people are grappling with the question of whether their work is truly fulfilling right now, so much so that this time period has been labeled the Great Resignation. So how did you know it was the right time to leave? Because you led us up to this point where you were thinking, "What am I doing?" What was the turning point? When did you leave?

**Valerie Brown:** You know, there's a part of me that says that I could have stayed. And I could have. There was something that happened that was kind of ordinary and kind of special that pointed to the way to me that whether I was ready or not, I needed to leave. I was in a really stressed out time at my job going back and forth to Washington, flying here and there, representing very powerful organizations that wanted results. And so like many other people in a stressed out situation, I decided to take myself on a vacation. I went to one of my favorite places. I went to New Mexico. I went hiking. I climbed to the top of a very big hill. I took off my backpack, sitting back against a log, looking up at the sky, uncurling my cheese sandwich, and I had a jaw-dropping moment. It was probably the first time in my life that I actually fully noticed the clouds in the sky and the clouds moving in slow motion, that I had been still enough, collected enough, present enough, unbusy enough to fully take it in. And that beautiful poem by Gregory Orr, "Has the moon been up there all this time?" It's like, has this been up there all this time? How did I not notice? Where was I? I realized I was alienated from the natural world and I was alienated from myself. And that was like a bell. It was a wake-up call. It was like, OK, here you go. That led me on a path of "Yeah, it's time to go. Who are you going to be now?" That led me to a lot of different places.

**Sharon Salzberg:** One of the themes that's come up again and again in our conversations here and certainly in the book is the importance of community and maybe particularly community where we can be vulnerable with each other. You write that community calls you toward

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recognizing the shadow side of yourself. What do you mean by that, and what can being in community teach us about ourselves? Too much, probably.

**Valerie Brown:** Too much is right. They said one Buddha is not enough. The next Buddha is the sangha. We do need a community. We cannot do it alone. We need an anam cara. We need people who get us, and particularly at this time, where so many people, including myself, feel very isolated. There is this epidemic, right? We're in an epidemic of loneliness. Loneliness is the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It is a public health catastrophe. All of this is true. We need community. We can be lulled into the idea that in community you find people who are just like you and that everything is going to be fine. But the truth is that in community, we meet people who are very different, and that brings out the shadow and the light and everything in between, and we have an opportunity to see our habits: the positive ones and the not-so-positive ones. That is the gift of community. We're with people who are honest enough, who care enough to help us live into our better selves. I can say that I've been incredibly grateful to have many communities, including the Plum Village community, I have a deep, deep bow of appreciation and gratitude to the Plum Village community and a deep respect for the Quaker community and particularly Pendle Hill. These are communities of immense integrity. And I have to say, I've also been part of the Georgetown University Jesuit community and the Kundalini yoga community. I've been a Kundalini student for the last 22 years.

**James Shaheen:** That's a lot of community. You just spoke about loneliness, and you write about your own experience of loneliness. You mentioned that you've developed practices of "making peace with the longing to belong." Can you say more about this? How did you come to terms with your own loneliness? Community is central and important, but ultimately, how did you deal with it? Because sometimes we can be in the midst of community and still feel alone.

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**Valerie Brown:** Yeah, I do think, particularly as a Black person, that cultivating self-respect, self-love, self-appreciation is a habit. It is a practice that I cultivate on a daily basis. And so that self-love, self-respect is the foundation for accepting myself and for holding myself in kind regard. This is incredibly important, not having to look outside of myself for the sense of completeness but being able to accept, as hard as it is, some of the things about myself, which can be my sense of distance and arrogance and bitterness, the way I've held onto injustice in the world and how that has affected me, that I can bring even that and hold that with a sense of tenderness. That, to me, is welcoming all parts of myself. So the part of myself that has been cast aside, welcome that back in. Say, "This did happen. This is also who I am." And that very act of doing that feels quite tender. It also feels very real and very honest, and it feels like belonging and a movement toward wholeness, not as in perfection, but as in welcoming, bringing in the parts that have been marred and discarded. This feels very important to me. This belongs here, yes, this is true. It's like when my father said, "I did the best I could." That's welcoming back. That's saying, "Yeah, that's true. I'm not discarding that." And my sense of clarity around that has come from the many years with Thay, that we welcome in all of these parts of ourselves. And this has been a practice over a long period of time. And I am grateful to my father, who's helped me to realize that, and many other people.

**Sharon Salzberg:** I would imagine, you also write about your miscarriages, which is a topic that's often not talked about openly due to shame or cultural taboo. I wonder if you can share a little bit more about the rituals and pilgrimages that you participated in to help heal after this experience.

**Valerie Brown:** Thank you for that. You know, in all the interviews I've ever done, no one has ever asked me about that. I think this is part of the cultural taboo within the United States in particular. And I know, of course, that these miscarriages unite me with millions of other people who have had this experience. But it was through going to Japan and walking the very ancient

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pilgrimage route, the 88 temples of Shikoku, and going to Mount Koya and walking into the cemetery and seeing the Jizos, the bodhisattvas of the water babies, the children, the infants who died in miscarriage, who were lost, and how openly the people nurtured each other and grieved and cried and knitted hats for these little Jizos and celebrated. This was not "Let's go to the basement of a hospital and talk about our feelings," which I think that there's value in that, but it was openly a part of the culture. I felt, wow, I can breathe now. This can be openly shared. That came as a complete surprise to me. I certainly didn't expect that at all. I didn't know that that existed until I had my feet on the ground and I was there in Mount Koya. So the long and short of it is that capacity to be seen in one's own suffering and grief, to be held without trying to be fixed, to be witnessed, to bear witness, and how beautiful it is to bear witness to another person's suffering without trying to fix the suffering. That is a powerful, powerful thing.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you for that. You're about to go on a month-long pilgrimage on El Camino de Santiago in Spain, which is a trip you've made many times. Can you tell us about it and what it means to you?

**Valerie Brown:** The pilgrimage is one of the deepest unknowings that I have experienced. Just on a straight-up day-to-day physiological level, we don't know what is around the corner, and so by its nature, it catalyzes trust. It catalyzes trust and hope and a willingness to let go and to let the road show you the path on one level. The preparation for the pilgrimage is hugely important, and one of the things that just came to me this week for the first time: forgiveness. Who do I need to say "I'm sorry" to? I want to offer my expression of apology. Who do I need to do that to to prepare myself for this walk? I decided, yes, I'm going to reach out to a couple of people that I've been distant to and say, "Hey, I just wanted to reconnect. I'm walking across Portugal and Spain for the next few weeks, and you're in my heart right now." These practices that prepare us on this very sacred journey with a very sacred purpose to a sacred destination, I think, are usually soul-amplifying. The other thing I would say is that the Camino de Santiago is a 1,200-year-old

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journey, one of the three great pilgrimages of the world. When pilgrims would meet each other along the way, they would greet each other in Latin. One would say, "Ultreia," meaning "Keep going," and the other would reply, "Et suseia," "Keep going higher," or "More of the beyond." This has been something that's been in my heart: to keep going, to keep going with all that is happening in this very not normal world, to keep going and cultivating hope, to keep going in cultivating these beautiful aspirations of compassionate action, not just for ourselves, but for the communities that we live in, for the world that we want.

**James Shaheen:** Valerie, thank you so much. It's been a great pleasure for Sharon and me. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of Valerie's book, *Hope Leans Forward*, out November 8 and available for preorder now. We like to close the podcast with a short practice, so I'll hand this over to Valerie.

**Valerie Brown:** Thank you, James. So I invite us all to share this beautiful and simple practice offered by the Plum Village community and Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Thay's written more than 100 books, and almost all of them contain this very basic practice of mindful breathing. So I invite us to come into a posture that is comfortable and attentive, whatever that looks like for you, perhaps balancing the head over the shoulders and the shoulders over the hips and the knees over the feet. You can sit or stand or lie down. From whatever position you are in, bringing your awareness to the body and to the breath.

So as you breathe in, feeling the cool air come in, and as you breathe out, feeling the warmth of your own breath's body. Breathing in, knowing that you are breathing in. Breathing out, being aware that you are breathing out.

Breathing in, following the in-breath all the way through, and breathing out following the out-breath all the way through.

Breathing in, releasing tension, and breathing out, releasing any tension, any holding, any gripping in the body.

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Breathing in, feeling a sense of calm and ease to the body, to the mind, and breathing out, enjoying the sense of calm and ease in the body, in the mind.

Taking another deep breath in, taking a deep breath out, and transitioning in any way that's comfortable for you. Thank you.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you, Valerie. Thank you, Sharon.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Thank you both. Thank you, Valerie, so much. It's wonderful to meet you again.

**Valerie Brown:** It's great to reconnect. This has been great.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, for Sharon and me too. You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Valerie Brown. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. *Life As It Is* and *Tricycle Talks* are produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!