

The Many Faces of Power*

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January 1, 2017

First Parish in Brookline

As a child, I knew instinctively that everything in life had power. I believed—and still do—that there is amazing power in nature, in things seen and unseen.

Who hasn't experienced the power of nature? The rhythmic peace that comes from listening to the sound of waves against the shore? The hope of a bright sunny day or a perfect fall air?

It is awesome to contemplate the power of our ecosystem, of our bodies, and of life; power that is for the most part out of our control.

I have tried my best to raise my two children with that same knowledge. I remember the day my daughter, Ginger, came home from nursery school crying because a girl in her class told her that plants were not alive and didn't have any feelings. This was Ginger's first introduction to the fact that not everyone thought like we did.

But power doesn't stop with nature. The power that I am talking about is also the power of words, thoughts, actions, and deeds.

Every word, every thought, every choice we make of how we spend our time or how we respond to a situation or treat other people has power that we may never know the impact of.

How many of us haven't been deeply affected by the words or actions of another person and that person never even knew it.

I was going to be a veterinarian until the age of 14 when my mother told me I wasn't nearly smart enough. A passing comment. Not at all out of the norm for her. But a comment that changed the course of my life. Everything has power.

There are many times that power is beautiful, but there are probably equally as many times when it is not. So how do we reconcile the abuses of power that are rampant in our world today?

In my own reckoning, I have come to believe that we have to start with ourselves. Elie Wiesel said: "Ultimately, the only power to which man should aspire is that which he exercises over himself." Speaking as a survivor, Elie said of the holocaust: "They were going to die. They knew it, and their last words were I love you. Even in great pain, their last words were of love... People who could have saved themselves and they ran back in to save others instead. If humanity is capable of that, how can I lose hope in humanity?"

One of the most important things that we can do in recognizing our power is to also become aware of the power of our intention.

* originally delivered in 2006 and shared today with reflections on the power of intention looking back now 10 years later

Intention. The power of intention is everything. It holds the key to the power over ourselves and the power that we consciously choose to bring into our lives and the lives of those around us.

It has become common knowledge that establishing conscious intention before beginning an activity has profound affect upon what happens. Athletes use this technique, public speakers—probably many of you do.

But how often are we unaware of our intention? How often do we repeat the same things over and over but never honestly examine our intentions behind what we are doing?

How much pain have we caused unintentionally? How much joy can we spread with a little intention?

What would happen if we committed ourselves to practicing Thich Nhat Hanh’s hugging meditation, even once a day. One hug... three breaths... with intention... endless power.

Or what if we started each day the way that yogis do their practice, with taking a moment before you even begin, to establish your intention for the day and then to let it go and trust the process.

Big or small, daily or situational, or even simply whenever we can remember—focusing on our intention can change everything.

There is a third element of power that has to be discussed if we are to be honest with ourselves and that is the power of truth.

Everything has power and intention guides that power. So where does truth come into this dance? What is truth anyway? Whose truth am I talking about? The truth I refer to is your truth. Individual truth. My truth. The truth of those sitting next to you.

Certainly, we don’t exist in a vacuum and we have to interact and be in relationships with many who have similar and different truths from ourselves. This is not to say that others don’t have an impact on our truth. Quite the opposite. It is often the words that we happen to hear at just the right time—or the honesty of a friend—that will help to crystallize our truth.

Still, how can we interact and be in relationships and bring our best selves to these relationships without knowing our truth? It is a dance, no doubt, but the first step is accepting what you know to be true. Then, and only then, can we engage in meaningful relationship.

One of my biggest challenges in this process is the issue of knowing the difference between truth and fear. How do we know if what we think, believe, or feel is based on fear or truth? We all know that our lives are greatly impacted by our experiences. So, if we try once, say, to love, or to trust and that trust is broken, how do we know when to trust again?

My guess is that many of us have followed our truth at some times in our lives—maybe you decided to take a particular job or to move to a certain home or to have a child or not—the specifics vary.

And I also guess that there is not one of us sitting here in this sanctuary who has not experienced pain, loss, or disappointment as a result of following what we believed to be our truth.

Yet, when we are the most honest with ourselves, aren't these the very same experiences, though difficult, that are some of the most transformative in our lives? Following our truth is not always easy.

So today I challenge all of us to live our lives remembering that everything has power. Our decisions to be intentional and truthful have the power to change ourselves and those around us in ways that we cannot even imagine.

In closing I share with you the words of author Melody Beattie: “Discover the power of your heart. Much of the journey has held lessons about power. Many of us have experimented with different kinds of power. At times we may have used force, brute strength. Certainly most of us have experimented with power plays—only to find that they aren't the answer either. Along the way, some of us may have gotten hard, cold, rigid, even angry—thinking that this was a way to our own power. Often these attempts don't signal power. They signal fear. True, for many of us, learning to experience, express and release our anger has been an important milestone on our path to power. But the power we're seeking is different from force, coldness, hardness, or power plays. We aren't learning to flex our muscles that way.

“Open to a new kind of power—the power of the heart. Clarity. Compassion. Gentleness. Love. Understanding. Comfort. Forgiveness. Faith. Security with acceptance of ourselves, and all of our emotions. Trust. Commitment to loving ourselves, and to an open heart. That's the power that we're seeking. That's true power, power that lasts, power that creates the life and love we want. In those situations that call for power, we can trust that brute strength, coldness, or rage won't get us what we want. Relax. Stop flexing your muscles. Instead, open your heart. Let your power come gently. Let a new strength flow through you. Defend yourself when necessary, but avoid any actions that take you away from peace and joy. Whatever your situation, relax your body, relax your mind and trust your soul. Your heart will lead the way, not just to love, but also to power. Let it come gently. Let it come freely. Then the power you receive will be true.”

So may it be.