



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

love is a radical act

One thing has become abundantly clear to me over the years: I am my best, most effective, and most powerful self when I come from an open-hearted place of love.

When I am coming from an open-hearted place I am able to see clearly, listen carefully to others, understand the complexities of a situation, think creatively, and work with others to find a beneficial course of action.

When I am thrown off balance by anxiety, anger, or fear my mind clouds, my vision narrows, and my ability to really listen to others diminishes. I am more apt to see things in black and white and become rigid and simplistic in my thinking. Rather than a creative solution I resort to slogans, stereotypes, and narrow, ineffective actions. Negative emotions increase and while I don't become violent, violent thoughts can certainly cross my mind.

Groups, communities, representative bodies and leaders respond in a similar way. When clouded by fear and anger, they become reactive, domineering, and oppressive. Responses focus on suppression and coercion. They may quell a situation but they do not eradicate the cause.

When leaders come from a place of compassion, they think clearly, listen to all sides, really understand the complex nature of the problem, and come up with creative short-term and long-term solutions. Be it on local, national, or international levels, until we understand the reasons the fear, pain, anger, and hopelessness that drives violence, we will never be able to stop it. We will just be playing whack-a-mole on a major, escalating, and very dangerous scale.

The world can seem pretty chaotic and threatening—everything from economic uncertainty to terrorism to global warming. Every day we face a choice: do we respond to the threats (real and imagined) around us with fear and reactivity or do we respond with acceptance of what is and a willingness to try and understand and work together to solve the problems.

Every day I decide whether I will polarize or compromise, demonize or try to understand others, think only about what I want/need or work so that everyone has basic needs met. When I polarize, demonize, and guard what I have, my heart closes, fear escalates, I feel isolated and no matter what I have it doesn't

seem like enough. When I imagine compromising, understanding others, and finding a way to address the needs of everyone, my heart opens, the fear dissipates, life is meaningful and I feel part of a larger whole.

We must all feel free and we must all feel safe in order for our country or our world to work. That will only happen if we can see, hear and appreciate each other's stories, pain, and fears and work together to solve the problems.

For me the choice is easy: I choose love, compassion, and community over fear, hatred, and isolation. It is a matter of pure self-interest, I feel better when I work for peaceful, safe, just, and healthy communities. I want to feed the values of love, kindness, tolerance, compassion, generosity, and forgiveness because I feel better when I do and I believe the world will be a better place if these values are strengthened. It is an easy choice but difficult to follow.

The notion of love as a political force is not new, but I like the way Bell Hooks, an American scholar and activist, says it: "Without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism." She reminds us "Martin Luther King believed that love is 'ultimately the only answer' to the problems facing this nation and the entire planet." She goes on to say "to speak of love is to guarantee that one will be dismissed or considered naïve." But in fact *love is a radical act!* "The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate others and ourselves. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom." (*All About Love*, p.250)

Times are tough for sure and there are some pretty scary things out there, but we can refuse to allow fear, anger, and worry to control us as individuals and as a nation. We can face the problems and work towards solutions that will not be perfect, will not be exactly what anyone wants, but will focus on the good of the many, the good of the whole. 🙏

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