

*a call to hearten*

1.

It has been snowing this week in the mountains of Colorado. Soft puffs sit on pine branches and cover the rock banks of Blue River behind our home.

2.

Several inches fell again last night. It was a long election night. Early morning, I had to shovel an opening for our small dog Toby to make his way. He is old. His joints do not work well. He needs a small path through the drifting snow to accomplish his daily duties. I found myself wishing someone could shovel me a clear path.

3.

The cold outdoor morning air sharpens the soul even as it freezes the feet.

4.

I have been thinking about feeling frozen these days. So much around us seems caught in endless stuckness.

5.

Last night, election night in America, reminds us that we live in an Age characterized by uncertainty and hardened divisions.

6.

Hardened. Sometimes everything feels like the brittle knot in a wood plank.

7.

I have recently been writing a book I have called *The Centuries Wrap Round Us*. One of the chapters I titled *Knots*.

8.

In part the chapter references the embodied experience of conflict – this inner experience of a knot tightening everything from gut to throat. I had a few of those last night as the votes trickled in county by county by county.

9.

In part the chapter refers to one of my small meditative practices: Carving fallen Aspen branches into handheld talking pieces that can be passed around conversation circles.

10.

The peeling of dried outer bark, the slow shaping of something that is there but not yet fully visible, the sand-smoothing of old wood unleashing the sights, smells, and sounds of the tree's inner rings, these circles of lived years, and of course, navigating the challenge of knots.

11.

For wood carvers, knots hold brittleness and beauty. What we call a knot in the wood represents the place where at some point new life had the courage to branch out but then was cut short.

12.

For a tree, knots hold the memory of birth and wound.  
This hardest part of the wood, knots sit like pools of color  
offering untold beauty.

13.

How do we hold hardness? How do we hold our  
woundedness while freeing beauty?

14.

The chapter *Knots* was also written around the inspiration  
I found in my dear friend, Mahendra Pandey.

15.

Mahendra comes from rural Nepal. At an early age his  
father left their home to take up migrant work in the  
Middle East. Years passed and the family lost all contact.  
Mahendra decided to follow the path of migration, not so  
much for the job and the pay, but to find his father.

16.

Curiously, his story is less about the long years it took to  
find his father than about what he discovered *along the way*  
– how his fellow migrant travelers became a family of  
wisdom and support in his impossible journey. He  
decided to give his life to making the connective tissue of  
solidarity his core mission. Decades later, starting with  
only a few people, Mahendra has now helped shape a  
global movement, *Shramik Sanjal*, the Migrant Laborers  
Network – the largest global organization of migrant  
workers that cuts across continents and touches hundreds  
of thousands of lives.

17.

I once asked Mahendra about his theory of change. He thought a long time before he answered. *I think it is encouragement.*

18.

Mahendra learned to turn hardened into hearten.

19.

Weeks ago, when I was invited to share this Dharma talk with you, I was asked for a title. I sent a haiku I had written. It had been working on me for a while. I was not sure what exactly I might say when I sent the poem. To be honest, after last night's sojourn I was not even certain this morning what I might say. Words are so fragile and inadequate at times like these. But, I have learned that when I am ambushed by a haiku, it is wise to sit with its layers. So, here the title at the midway point of my talk.

21.

*a call to hearten  
let tender tenacity  
walk with fierce patience*

22.

*Courage* traces to the French word for heart – *coeur*. So does hearten.

23.

I think this may be what Mahendra meant. To encourage, to hearten, is not simply to uplift or to cheer up – it is to be alongside another person in a way that replenishes the

courage to walk into uncertainty, into the unfolding mystery.

24.

To hearten (v): To grow with and from our hardened wounds into the healing care of courage, and the courage to care enough to *hold fast* to deeper purpose.

25.

Hold fast. Those the famous words from Langston Hughes – *Hold fast to dreams, for when dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly. Hold fast to dreams, for when dreams go, life is a barren field all covered with snow.*

26.

Hold fast. Persistence. Stick-with-it-ness. Tenacity. A tender tenacity.

27.

For me, a significant element in the persisting with the life of a contemplative has roots in the soil of how we *attend* to the extraordinary moment, this one, this ceaseless Now we inhabit.

28.

Attend (v): From the Latin, *ad tendere* – to stretch; to stretch the mind until one can listen with a soft heart.

29.

Tender tenacity also sits at the contemplative core: To attend to what is while stretching toward what can be.

30.

Martin Luther King, Jr., referenced this as holding the urgent now with the long arc of history that bends toward justice.

31.

How do we attend to, how do we hold the Now and The Long Arc? What is the connective tissue between the two?

32.

I am learning the pathway of fierce patience.

33.

I refer not to patience-as-waiting, though I practice it.

34.

I refer not to patience-as-serenity, though I seek it.

35.

I refer to fierce patience – the practice, the very embodiment of compassion.

36.

I wondered at times in my poem if Tender Tenacity and Fierce Patience might be people – breathing and watching, loving and aggrieved, hurting and healing people.

37.

Maybe that is why the haiku suggested they *walk with each other*.

38.

Let me return for a moment to snow, the cold, and the sharpening of our soul in this national urgent Now.

39.

What I noticed last evening, in this fleeting electoral moment landing as one day in the first quarter of this long century – below our frozen and blistering polarization rivers flow, mostly unnoticed and unacknowledged rivers of suffering.

40.

To these flows of suffering, we must attend.

41.

We know that toxic polarization produces three outcomes that offer the recipe for stuckness and suffering. It seeks to paralyze through fear. It rages on dehumanization. It lives to replicate itself.

42.

We also know something of the antidote – the *practice* of humanizing habits that require us to travel far into ourselves and far beyond our bubbles of relational comfort, precisely because enduring change always requires enduring improbable relationships. So, what do we practice?

43.

*Curiosity* – this stillness of pausing to attend and be curious about my life and the lived experiences of others who are different.

44.

*Dignity* – this commitment to uphold the dignity of every person that crosses my path.

45.

*Courage* – this audacity to speak to and act on my deepest conviction without retreat or blame while choosing reflection over reaction in the face of disagreement, especially when it runs deep.

46.

*Love* – this cultivation of compassion as action offered to the many faces of suffering within and around me.

47.

*Persistence* – this tenacity to stick with people and the longing, this long odyssey pursuing the pathways that help justice and healing meet.

48.

Those five words seem a balm for our days: Curiosity, Dignity, Courage, Love, and Persistence. And now, five words I most appreciate hearing at Upaya, usually the last five spoken. *Thank you for your practice.*

49.

Our journey is now. Our journey is long. Take heart. Take courage. Walk together.



50.

And as a small sending, let me recall the poetic words of Wendell Berry, friend and colleague of Roshi Joan, who wrote a poem that seems apropos for this cold wintry evening.

*suppose we did our work  
like the snow, quietly, quietly  
leaving nothing out*

A half-century written for the Upaya Zen Center  
November 6, 2024  
John Paul Lederach

\*A note for readers – this writing comes in the form of a Century, a writing tradition carried by desert fathers and mothers. It permits me to wander and reflect, writing as meditation, falling somewhere between poetry and prose. I offered this piece in response to the request from dear friends – Mary Myoku Remington and Roshi Joan Halifax, founder and abbot at the Upaya Zen Center. This was written and read on the day after the U.S. elections. You can watch and listen to [this reading on Upaya's website](#).