

Adjacent opportunities (17.2)

Of earthquakes and emergent action

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When the world literally crumbles underfoot, and everything collapses into the dust, trapping and killing thousands, is your first instinct to say, "Thank goodness, that didn't happen here!" Or let me travel halfway around the world to see how I might be able to help.

When the email arrived that Lina was about to get on a plane to fly to Nepal to bring her nursing skills to the dying and injured, the choice seemed unbelievable, at first. As her meditation instructor, I was expected to bring her back to her practice. But here she was, unhesitatingly, taking her practice directly into the rubble and applying it with the enlightenment of a guru.

Once on the ground in Nepal, the tragedy demanded nothing but attention, focus, compassion, gentleness, intelligence, and fearlessness. All those things we discussed that emerged while sitting on the cushion, were now going into the world with extraordinary impact.

My concern was with Lina's safety. Upon her arrival there was an aftershock that rivaled the initial quake. We all waited anxiously to hear she was all right. Our anxiety was a product of simply not knowing, a resonance of our own fear. She, however, was now in the thick of it, undeterred by the ground moving beneath her. She had a job to do, and with all the bravery and courageousness (courage coming from the root, from the heart) she set out to bring relief to the suffering of those around her.

I have read about people chasing off to assist when disaster strikes; Doctors without Borders, elite search and rescue teams from major US cities, Red Cross, the United Nations, et al, dropping their daily routines and willingly placing themselves in extraordinary and dangerous conditions.

One of the outcomes of sitting on the cushion is that we learn and develop a willingness to meet the world as it shows-up; without accepting or rejecting it, without our fixed ideas and prejudices getting in the way of that meeting. It's a practice that doesn't happen overnight. It often takes years of study, contemplation and meditation. Lina got it. She probably didn't realize she got it. She was simply willing to take that meeting.

The work we do in this world is up to us. We can choose to create work that is of benefit to others, or we can take the viewpoint, as one administrator high-up in the California Economic Development Agency suggested, that it doesn't matter what kind of work we create, as long as it's work. I think it does matter.

I think that what emerges out of the inherent interaction of doing work that benefits others creates greater benefit. It is true that emergence is neither good nor bad. It simply is. But what emerges colors our experience going forward. It influences our next choice and our next choice after that.

I have often equated emergence with karma. Two living agents interact and out of that encounter emerges something greater than the sum of their parts and not wholly contained in either. To a certain degree one could describe karma similarly. We act and that action influences actions that follow and seeds actions that will follow those.

When Lina entered into the collapsing fray of Nepal's fragile infrastructure, something greater emerged for her and those who benefited from her tender assistance. Lives changed by catastrophe, lives that felt shattered and disintegrated became more resilient. Out of that renewed resilience, possibilities emerge that couldn't have been imaged before, but now are ready to become manifest.

It matters what we do. How we are. How we interact. Call it emergence, call it karma. The properties of how we meet the world defines not only our experience of it, but how we change it simply by interacting with what shows up. It is this interdependence that we tend to forget when we live lives cut off from others. But just as uncertainly, complexity, and breath exist, like it or not, we are an interdependent agent of this living planet. We can choose to live and die as a rugged individualist, but we do so only in our own minds.

When Lina walked off that plane in Katmandu, it could have been Timbuktu, or even Kalamazoo. She chose to recognize her innate connection to the world. The good news is that Lina is not alone. More and more people are starting to realize that the quest of the atomists. That we operate in separation from others, is what kills both the organism and the organization, the individual and its society.

Sitting with Lina after she returned from Nepal, I was looking at a woman who was barely recognizable to the woman who had left. Oh her appearance hadn't changed significantly, but her confidence, sense of place in the world, her fearlessness in

meeting that world, and her gentleness toward all those with whom she interacted, especially those that had felt the force of that great earthquake and been shifted off their foundations by it, could see the difference.

Now she was facing a choice; move forward from this new place, or be reabsorbed into the daily routines she had left a few weeks earlier. We both knew what her choice would be. She had emerged from her chrysalis and would not return. She was already planning a trip back to help the village she and her colleagues had adopted.

How we choose to interact with this world of which we are a part is up to us. We can ignore our responsibility to ourselves, others and the society that has emerged and hold fast in our ignorance. Or we can decide that there is a difference to be made and act upon that. It's not an impossible leap from where we are now. But only a step away. It begins with that first beneficial interaction we make toward someone else. The co-laws of emergence and karma will follow suit.

Thank you dear Lina, for being a model from whom all of us can learn. That modeling doesn't require us to board the next plane to meet the next point of pain in the world. It does mean, however, that we can start benefiting others by connecting to the needs of the next person we meet.