

Welcome Letter – Winter Feast for the Soul, days 11-20

You have completed one-fourth of the 40-day commitment to take care of yourself. Congratulations! How does it feel to have accomplished this?

If you have missed some days or haven't lived up to your expectations of how you should be participating in the Feast, you can take this opportunity to practice feeling compassion for yourself, forgiving yourself.

The theme of these next ten days is self-forgiveness, self-compassion. Many people find it very difficult to forgive themselves or feel any compassion for themselves. After all, in our culture, we are often conditioned to believe that if we forgive or feel compassion, we are being soft – that it takes a hard hand to make us be good.

This has likely been ingrained in you since childhood – our schools, our parenting, our legal system, our religious institutions are all run on this philosophy. This is the reason you are in prison – because we, as a culture, have decided that punishment is the way to teach people not to do things we don't like.

But if you look at your own experience, you will likely discover that punishment doesn't work. What has it done for you? Most likely, it has filled you with difficult emotions --anger, shame, blaming. I believe if we took a different approach to raising our children, an approach of loving kindness, we would have much more success in keeping people from harming each other.

So, you may be wondering, how is this helping me? Here I am, in prison, living in a violent, non-caring hell – and there is nothing I can do about any of it. No one is forgiving me! There is nothing I can do to change my situation or the prison environment. I am mad as hell about the way I have been treated my whole life.

Or you may be feeling a tremendous amount of remorse for things you have done in the past to hurt other people or yourself. You may be feeling guilt or shame; maybe blaming yourself and beating yourself up for past mistakes and wrongdoing.

It is true, none of us by ourselves is going to change the way the world operates. But we do have control over one person – ourselves. If each one of us can learn to be more forgiving of ourselves and treat ourselves with more kindness, that is one more person in the world who is moving out of the destructive mindset that human beings are bad and need to be treated harshly to make us into good people. Once enough of us can get to that place, then our culture will find ways to shift our ways of being.

Even if nothing changes in our culture, you can begin to shift how you feel about yourself – this is an internal shift. Maybe no one else will ever know it or see it. But you will begin to feel differently and that alone will change your experience of life.

I know having compassion for myself, learning to love myself, forgiving myself have been extremely challenging. Years ago, when I was in counseling, my counselor gave me homework: *This week I want you to notice every time you beat yourself up – and then – don't beat yourself up for beating yourself up.* I am still working on that one.

When my son went to prison, I went back into the mode of beating myself up a lot. Every parenting mistake I ever made settled into my awareness – it was as if it hooked me on a fish line and held me tight. I could not let go of the thought that his being in prison is my fault. And there is certainly no lack of support in culture for that belief to keep its grip on me.

His being in prison is probably the biggest challenge I have had in my life. How to be with what he did, to be with the injustice of the “justice” system, how to be with the stigma he now has to live with, how to be with my own mistakes? I have come a long way in the last 5 years, and I still struggle with this.

But there are two things I have done for myself that have helped me to make some peace with this situation.

One is to establish a daily meditation practice. For the first 3 years of his incarceration, I was so miserable I just wanted to die. What use was there to live in this painful, brutal world that I had no ability to change? Even as I write this, I feel tears fill my eyes, my heart closes a bit – it is no easy task to be with the pain of our own lives and the pain of our world and find ways to make peace with it. One phrase that stays in my mind a lot is a quote from Albert Einstein – that the problems of the world cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness in which they arose.

This helps me to know we must rise to a higher vibrational level to come to a new understanding of the problems of our world, so that we can find solutions for them.

And the best way I know to do that is to meditate – every day, no matter what. Does that mean I live in a state of bliss? No way. Meditation for me is extremely challenging – my mind jumps all over the place, my body wants to jump up and get active – after all, I have a million things to get done and sitting here in this one spot for 30 minutes is not helping me to do them – not to mention how agonizing it feels to will myself to sit here, no matter how much I don't want to. That is why I am so committed to working with you to help you develop your own mindfulness-based meditation practice. I know it helps; I know it is probably the hardest thing you will ever do in life – and I know how much more at peace I am when I have a daily practice in place.

The other way I can help raise the vibrational level of our planet is to be in service to other people. I often say that being involved with the Winter Feast Prison In-Reach program has saved my life. It has taken my focus off my own problems. It gives me a bigger perspective about the problems we are facing as a society – it's not just the prison system that needs to be reformed – our whole way of parenting, educating, governing, caring for our health, getting our material needs met – all of it needs to be changed dramatically. When I am in service to others, my life has more meaning. I feel more fulfilled. Interesting that I no longer wish to die; I know I have to live, and live healthfully, because there is work to be done that no one else can do.

And that is true for you too. You are a beautiful soul who came to Earth at this time to contribute some gift that the world needs. Maybe your gift is to help bring awareness to what is happening behind the walled, wired fortresses of prison. Maybe your purpose is to help one other person survive the hell of prison. Maybe you are to become a leader within the prison itself. Maybe through writing or artwork you can make a statement that others need to hear to help them shift their awareness. Whatever it is, I know you have a contribution to make – a valuable one.

And so, we come together to do this work of starting a 40-day meditation practice, that will hopefully continue on through the rest of our lives. A commitment to yourself to live a little more peacefully on this planet. A gift you can give yourself.

One place to start is to start forgiving yourself, being kind to yourself, loving yourself, having deep compassion for the challenging life you live. Please write and let us know what you think about this – how it is for you to hear this, any obstacles for moving in that direction, any successes you have as you move towards being a more gentle, kind person towards the one person you can never get away from – yourself.

We are all holding you in a circle of love and light. Wishing you the best as you move towards the halfway mark in your 40-day commitment to meditating.

Much metta (loving kindness) is sent your way with this letter and this packet. May you find peace within.

In forgiveness,

Maya