

Conscious Being

Reading One: Unharmable

From Chapter 2 of Conscious Being

My First Teacher

When I was 20 years old, I met a remarkable woman, named Mary Helen Brownell. Meeting her completely changed the course of my life. Mary Helen was the most compassionate human being I had ever encountered and she became my first spiritual teacher. By the time I met her, I had already built many layers of armor around my heart in order to feel safe in this world. Some difficult childhood and adolescent experiences had made me believe that I needed to carefully protect myself against further hurt. Mary Helen was able to see right through my emotional defenses, to the core of who I really was, beneath my protective facade. Because of her, and the trust I felt in her, I was able to open my heart and love again. My heartbreaking stories became a catalyst for breaking my heart open to a new way of being.

Mary Helen was born in Dallas, in 1923, into a wealthy family. She had a sheltered upbringing, living with her family in an affluent part of town. She told me that she did not realize that people of color existed, apart from the family driver, until she went to college. She married and had children at a young age, doing her best to conform to the traditional lifestyle that was expected of her. For Mary Helen, however, there was a deep yearning to follow her inner knowing and forge her own path. As with many enlightened beings, her early life was spent struggling with her "demons" and her ego.

After many years of trying to conform to an inauthentic expression of her life, she sank into a period of deep unhappiness and turned to drugs and alcohol and lived a life riddled with many addictions until 1957, when she became involved in the recovery movement. After several more years of struggling with her addictions, and spending time in and out of mental institutions, she was finally able to get and stay sober from 1967 until her passing in July of 1998.

In the 1970s Mary Helen became a counselor at a treatment program that served soldiers who were coming home from the Vietnam War. She spent hundreds, if not thousands, of hours sitting with men who had returned home suffering from severe war trauma. Her own personal struggle with addictions had prepared her well for this work. She was able to understand that the difficulties these traumatized men were experiencing were a direct result of them losing the ability to connect with the essential truth of who they really were, at the level of spirit. A large part of her work entailed addressing what stood in the way of her clients realizing the truth of their being. Mary Helen devoted the rest of her life to helping people recover from addictions. It was through her counseling work that I met her, at the time in my life when I was struggling with my own addictions. She helped me get sober, and literally saved my life. And for that, I am eternally grateful. She also taught me how to access my inner wisdom and love again.

An Act of Compassion

In her later life, Mary Helen was a student of Eastern philosophy, studying the writings of Paramahansa Yogananda, Swami Sivananda, and other Indian spiritual masters. She became a devotee of Sathya Sai Baba and took many

trips to India, making pilgrimages there for many years. One of my most memorable moments with Mary Helen occurred when I accompanied her on one of those trips, back in 1992. On that trip, I saw a deeply touching example of her everyday compassion. We were at the Los Angeles airport, at the beginning of our journey. Due to one of Mary Helen's health issues, we needed to wait for medical clearance, which meant a 24-hour delay. The rest of our group had taken an earlier flight, and we decided to make the most of our delay-time at the airport, finding ways to entertain ourselves. Suddenly, a young mother and her baby became the focus of our attention. The baby was crying at full volume, while its mother, unable to control the screaming, became increasingly frustrated and agitated. Her unsuccessful attempts to console the baby led to her yelling and verbally abusing the child. Everybody within an earshot now had their attention focused on the unfolding scene. People were visibly horrified at what they were witnessing. I watched Mary Helen as she stood up, walked over to the young mother, and said, "Hi, it seems like you need some help. I was a young mother myself once, and I know how difficult it can be. Let me help you." Mary Helen gently took the baby out of the woman's arms and sat down next to her. While Mary Helen soothed the baby, the mother became tearful, obviously relieved to have help in her moment of need. I was aware of how everything shifted the moment Mary Helen had chosen to meet the situation with love, rather than judgment or resistance. The tension that had built up was immediately dissolved by her act of compassion. I do not know for sure whether that was the first response Mary Helen had to the alarming situation, but it was what she chose to express, from her place of loving openheartedness. After half an hour or so, Mary Helen stood up and walked back to me. No words were exchanged about what had happened. No words were necessary. But I knew that what I had just witnessed was a beautiful example of what it means to live an awakened life.

The above story is in sharp contrast to another mother-and- baby incident I recently witnessed as I was walking down Market Street in San Francisco. I saw a woman with her child, in a stroller, hurriedly pushing it down a flight of stairs, to a public transport station. She seemed to be putting the child's safety at risk. A passerby started shouting at her, "What kind of a mother are you? Are you crazy? You're endangering your child!" As I watched this scene, my mind flashed back to the incident at the Los Angeles airport with Mary Helen, and her very different response to a similar situation. Mary Helen had chosen "How may I help you?" rather than "How can I judge you?"

The moment-to-moment choices we make in our daily interactions with one another are what create the kind of world in which we live. By choosing to express compassion and understanding in the face of another's pain or struggle, rather than judgment or impatience, we change the emotional climate of the world. Every situation is an opportunity to open up or to close off. One of my favorite definitions of a spiritual experience is "a profound alteration in our reaction to life." Actually, I would change that to "a profound alteration in our response to life."

Mary Helen's Seven Spiritual Truths

What I learned from being in the presence of Mary Helen formed the foundation of my spiritual understanding. I have summarized what she taught me in the following seven principles. These spiritual truths are the basis of what I consider to be essential guidance for awakened living.

1) There's nothing wrong with you

Mary Helen used to say to me, in her beautiful southern accent, "Darlin', you're so precious." She said it to me so many times that one day I started to actually believe it. She literally loved me into a new way of seeing myself and a new way of being. Until we can look at someone and see the perfection that is at their core, we are not seeing them clearly. As humans, we all carry some unhealed emotional wounds within us. We all have some perceived weaknesses along with our strengths and gifts. However, if we identify ourselves or others with limitations or unresolved issues— rather than with the essential goodness and wholeness that is within each of us— then we are only seeing at a superficial level.

One example of this is that in traditional recovery programs, people are asked to repeatedly affirm their identity as being their addiction. I would like to suggest that it might be more beneficial and healing for people in recovery to repeatedly affirm their inherent perfection. I am not suggesting that anyone be in denial about their addictive behavior. It is a vital step to acknowledge and name that which we wish to change about ourselves. But I do want to point to the higher truth of our essential identity, which is our inherent wholeness. Another common practice is to focus on "defects of character" which need to be removed. I would like to offer a different perspective. It has been said that defects are simply assets with the volume turned up too high. In those terms, the conversation shifts to balancing traits rather than removing "defects." In my experience, this is not only a gentler relationship to self, but a far more effective one. Repeating a negative affirmation, sometimes for years on end and continually referring to oneself as a disease or seeing oneself as defective, has the potential for producing a destructive impact on one's self-image and life. I am grateful to be part of

the creation of a new paradigm in treatment where this positive focus is becoming more accepted and celebrated.

The gift of any spiritual teacher is that he or she knows, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that perfection is at the core of each and every person. A spiritual teacher is anyone who has absolutely come to know their own true identity as pure love, light, and wholeness. Living an awakened life means knowing that our essential wholeness can never be lost, even though it might be covered over or seemingly forgotten. Our wholeness, the source of unconditional love within, is always available to be revealed to us as the ultimate truth of who and what we are.

2) There's only one of us here

There is a lot of talk these days about oneness. Many people have explored the idea that everything is interconnected; that at some level, humanity is all one. All that exists is one. But how many of us really know that—and live it? And how do we live from oneness? I have a practice I find useful when I am feeling afraid, shut down, or resistant. Rather than seeing the other as doing the thing that irritates me, I say to myself, “Isn’t it interesting that I’m doing that?” I recognize that if we are one, then I’m doing the thing that irritates me. I invite you to try this yourself for the next 24 hours. See every single person you encounter as yourself. Think of yourself and the other as “us” or “we” rather than seeing a separate “you” or “they.” Notice what happens, and how it changes your response to both seemingly negative and positive behaviors in others. What happens to your emotional and physical state? What happens to your world view? What happens to how you experience life?

3) The only prayer is thank you

Prayer is often seen as asking for something or asking for something to be removed. But, in many ways, the act of asking affirms lack consciousness. If we ask for something, we affirm that we are not already whole and complete and that getting something is needed. Asking for something to be removed is affirming that there is something wrong with what is. It may seem insignificant, but when we simply shift from “please” to “thank you,” everything changes. When we shift our perspective to gratitude, infinite possibilities open up in our lives.

When we are in touch with the wholeness and fullness of who we truly are—when we see things from the mystical level described in more detail in a following chapter, there is nothing left to seek, externally or internally. We are already all that we need to be. This moment, right now, contains everything we need. The intention is to stop seeking happiness. Seeking is the antithesis of happiness, because we already have and we already are everything we believe we need.

The more we tap into our natural gratitude, the more life seems to give us for which to be grateful. As a practice, I invite you to infuse your day with gratitude—for both the “good” and the so-called “bad.” It is easy enough to be grateful for seeing the beautiful smile of a child, or for receiving a gift, but what about finding gratitude in being stuck in traffic? Or losing something you value? What happens when you start saying yes to all of your experiences, trusting that all of it is as it “should” be? Say thank you in order to come into alignment with what is, and live in gratitude. One practice of this principle involves repeating, “Thank you, God,” or “Thank you,

Universe,” out loud throughout the day regarding every situation in your life.

4) God is within you

Mary Helen often said to me: “You know, God is within you, and when you listen carefully, that inner voice will guide you. There’s no power outside you that you need to surrender to.” Now, given that the context was said in Dallas, back in the 1980s, this was a revolutionary idea at the time. The general consensus in that particular culture was that God was a man who lived in the sky. For Mary Helen to declare that this all-powerful force, the source of all creation, was inside us was groundbreaking. It took me a while to get comfortable saying this one. People usually misunderstand the notion in saying, “I am God.” They interpret it through the ego. She was not saying, “I’m God, and you are not.” Rather, she was acknowledging that everyone on the planet is an expression of the source energy from which all of life emanates. And because of that, we all have direct access to the love, intelligence, and guidance of that source, from within.

In my current state of consciousness, I would modify this by saying that we are this power, rather than saying God is within us. We are each a perfect expression of the one power and one presence. This may seem like semantics, but saying that God is within us implies that there is a separate God that is within you like a “wiener in a bun,” as my friend and teacher Rev. Dr. Paul Hasselbeck so brilliantly states.

The Rumi quote—“You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop” illustrates this beautifully.

5) Nothing outside of you needs to change

Nothing outside of us needs to change in order for us to be happy. The world is unfolding perfectly, moment to moment. If we feel resistance or unhappiness about anything, all we need to change is our view or our relationship to it in order to be at peace. I am not suggesting that anyone be in denial about what they feel, or that they should not take any action they feel called to take. What I am pointing to is the higher truth that our happiness is not dependent on anything outside ourselves needing to change. Happiness is always available to us right now. Most of us recognize how futile it is to attempt to change others. But, we are also always choosing how we see others, and how we view the world in general. Interestingly, when we change our perspective about a person who irritates us, or a challenging circumstance, then that person or circumstance often seems to change before our very eyes. A Course in Miracles states: "The greatest capacity we have for changing the world is to change our mind about the world."

One aspect of what we are talking about here is making friends with impermanence. Building sandcastles is a good metaphor here. Anyone who has ever built a sandcastle knows that the tide eventually comes in and washes it away. But that does not take away our desire to build it, or our enjoyment in doing so. In the same way, we honor our desire and need to live our lives—to build a career, have relationships, and plan for our future—while also realizing that none of these things ultimately bring us lasting happiness. In the end, it all gets washed away by the tides of life. The only thing that does not get erased is our oneness with source, our identity as source.

6) Everyone is perfect, just as they are

When I first met Mary Helen, I would often go to her feeling frustrated about the way people around me were behaving. In my 20-year-old perspective, I believed the person I was having a problem with “should” be acting differently. Mary Helen would respond with “Well, if you had their life experience, you would be exactly as they are. They’re being the perfect ” (filling in the blank with the name of the person with whom I was upset). Seeing things through her eyes taught me how to adjust the lens through which I was looking. Once I cleared my own vision, I too could see that they were being the perfect version of themselves. My judgment gradually gave way to more compassion and understanding, for myself and for others. Another simple, yet powerful tool she offered was to imagine a cord connecting me to everyone I knew. Then, I was to imagine a large pair of scissors gently cutting the cord that connected us. I did this every night before I went to sleep for many months. This allowed me to disengage from my seeming entanglements with others. It allowed me to gently shift the focus of attention to myself and my own spiritual journey.

7) We’re not here to get good...only to become real

One of Mary Helen’s favorite readings was the following excerpt from *The Velveteen Rabbit*, by Margery Williams:

“What is REAL?” asked the Velveteen Rabbit, one day. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "But, when you are Real, you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," asked the Rabbit, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse.

"You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges, or who have been carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, your eyes drop out, and you get loose in your joints, and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all because once you are Real, you can't be ugly—except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose you are real?" asked the Rabbit. And then he wished he hadn't said that for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled. "The boy's uncle made me real," he said. "That was many years ago. But once you are real, you cannot become unreal again. It lasts for always."

Many people in the world believe they have the "right" way to do things. Many religions teach that their way is the way. And, if we can just follow

these rules and be “good,” we will find happiness (or at least get into heaven). Mary Helen so beautifully taught me, mostly by example, that becoming real is far more important than being “good.” She was a perfect example of the principles of authenticity and vulnerability, which have become the foundation of my life’s work.

As Brené Brown stated in her groundbreaking book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*: “Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It’s about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.”

Authenticity grows and is shared. When we have found a safe place to bring all of ourselves into the room, including things we have felt shame about and feelings and experiences that lie in the shadow, ultimately we experience more connection, stronger relationships, and a more fully grounded sense of self. When we can really be ourselves, without worrying about how it looks or seems, that joy is palpable and contagious. That’s the power of authenticity. As with all of these gifts, what we feed will grow. As we go deeper into conscious awareness, we develop more courage to let others truly see us. It gets easier; it becomes our normal way of being.

It has been said, “The spiritual life is not a theory; we have to live it.” The above seven spiritual concepts may sound simple—and they are. However, it is only when we live them in our everyday lives that they make any lasting difference. In those moments when we are in reaction to something that someone just said or did... can we remember that “there’s only one of us here,” or that “she’s being the perfect Susan,” or that “nothing outside of me needs to change?” When we are feeling lost or confused...can we trust that if we sit quietly and go within, we might just find the answer we are

seeking? When we are suffering from the effects of our own self-judgment and criticism, what might happen if we remember that “there’s nothing wrong with me?”

My invitation for you as you move throughout your day is to shine as much light of awareness as you can onto the moment-to-moment choices you are making. It has been said that heaven and hell are states that exist within you. They are both available to everybody, at any given moment. The state you find yourself in is dependent on the myriad daily choices you make. You have the power to change the lens through which you view the world—and therefore to change your experience of the world, which always exists within your consciousness.

I believe this is what Jesus was referring to when He said: “Be in this world, but not of it.”