

A dialogue on longing



Gretel McEwen and Robin Shoet

The house is quiet, people sleeping, dreaming in the dark. This is a good moment to collect my thoughts on longing and turn them into words on a page..

I read in the community magazine a request from Robin for dialogues on longing – something inner sang out, wanted to do that, resonated. Something darker, more afraid, in me, hesitated – felt that should I dare to bring my longings into the light that I would be shamed, or even worse that the longings would be destroyed....

I rang Robin, made a time and brought these conflicting feelings to his doorstep. The dialogue began in a safe place – what had brought me here? Why was I interested in longing? My beginning thought was a curiosity about the difference between longing and dreaming. Dreaming is often the first step of a new adventure, idea, creative process. It is a looking forward to the future, away from now – full of hope, excitement, possibility. A good feeling. Longing is not this. It can be about the future, often is, but is repetitive, not creative. The same longing comes back again and again, its associated thoughts track round and round – going nowhere. Robin suggested that longing could be about the past too and my thoughts turned to grief – mourning the loss of someone, a way of life, work – looking into the past and remembering. So how was longing different from grieving? Again the same sense of repetition is associated with longing, the same circular thoughts, the 'going nowhere', the 'not moving on or through', just a longing that something had been different, could have been changed, regret.

Robin – 'So longing is in the future or in the past, it is certainly not in the present. I see longing as an addiction.'

I am shocked. Stopped. Searching. Protecting. Defended. Denying. Holding on.....then the first reluctant exploration. If longing is an addiction then there must be a pay-off. Addiction is about gratification, hard to relinquish. What would I have to give up to give up longings? The power of magical thinking – the inner response is clear, swift and surprising but I recognise the truth of it. The longings are about making what I want to happen and they have within them 'spells'. If I hold on to the longing, keep thinking the circular thoughts, read the signs, commit my night time dreaming to weaving a happy outcome, then I have the power to create what I want....The shadow in me wants this, holds on fast, is roaring protest. I will not let go of the

magic. Robin sees this as wanting to get my own way in my mind, says he can identify with this and then delivers another one liner to me that I did not immediately understand.

Robin – 'I am beginning to see that longing in some instances could be an expression of rage.'

Can't relate to that. Can't feel a glimmer of rage. Don't get it. He enlarges:

Robin – 'Rage at what is happening now, that you can't control or be happy with what is happening now. This is what I have discovered for myself, see if it is relevant for you.'

I begin to understand. Unable to control what is happening now, I move away in my thoughts to the past or the future. Now is too painful, too difficult, I am powerless. Still not sure about the rage. He says that might just be about him, and comes back to me.

Robin – 'So what do you long for?'

I am terrified. How can I name, share, say the words into the room. My longings are by nature secrets that will not survive the light and I feel I will not survive the telling. I am balanced on a very risky edge – no pressure to share what I do not want to share, yet I have to do this if I am to understand more. O.K. 'I long for a love affair' – appalled, embarrassed, shamed, relieved. As I own the uppermost longing I know that it is not going to happen, not real, that my long and deep married relationship is not to be risked for a mere longing. The longing and the reality ride together as parallel thoughts –the wishful child and the wiser adult. And I recognise that my longings spring from the powerlessness of childhood, the inability to control what happened in the now and the powerful need to have what I wanted.

Robin – 'Byron Katie has a lovely expression which I think sums up some of what we have been talking about when she says how 'I can have what I want' is very different from 'I want what I have'. The first creates a future scenario which has the possibility of stress built in, in the same way as longing. The second is happy with what is, the present.'

My thoughts return to this dialogue often. In the days immediately following I found myself falling into the familiar thought patterns of longing and that I could quickly leave them. Now the longings are only shadows of themselves and memories of a place that feels somehow dark, ineffectual, not somewhere to dwell.

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