



Cheri, Thay, and friends at the 2003 retreat for police in Green Lake, Wisconsin

Good evening, everybody. Thanks for being here. I'm really happy to be spending the time with you.

There are a couple of things I'm really passionate about right now. One is building bridges, particularly between police officers and the communities they serve, because there's never been more of an "us and them" mentality, ever. It's very, very challenging, and there is so much going on. Looking at various policies, the major public safety tool I'm interested in is building neighborhood capacity, because this is what creates public safety. Getting creative with the tools we use is important.

The other thing is—and we see it in the political arena and on down—that "compassion" is a dirty word, associated with weakness of some kind, which couldn't be further from the truth. You have to be a much stronger warrior to be compassionate than you do to be physically aggressive with somebody. In learning how to be compassionate, you have to really open up your heart. You can't walk around with an armored heart and yet to do the work; it armors your heart. There's sort of a "Catch-22." Learning how to balance compassion with equanimity is a real passion of mine.

Another real passion is working with white people around race awareness—particularly in the criminal justice system, where the racism is so obvious, so institutionalized—and building coordinated community efforts around creating public safety. The person who sums it up well is Cornel West, who said, "Justice is what love looks like in public." It's the model I aspire to have, and it drives what I do—that definition of justice.

Something I've found about mindfulness is that it was a tool that provided me with some emotional resiliency to deal with some of the things that had happened to me over the course of my career. It also inspired me to always have the intention in front of me as a street cop to bring no further harm to the situation I was responding to, even if it meant sometimes using force to prevent people from harming each other. But when things turned around for me, and what was very interesting, is that after my first retreat I came back and I really couldn't understand what they'd done

# Restoring Peace and Safety

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in my absence. Everybody had gotten so much kinder, even the people I was arresting. This was a real huge message to me, and it started the process.

## Gifts of Mindfulness

A real danger about the popularity of mindfulness is misunderstanding what it is. It isn't just a relaxation tool and it isn't just a medical model. There's an entire ethical framework that goes along with it. If you separate the two, there is a lot of danger. Most of the values that are inherent in mindfulness have to do with non-harming in some way. You can be an advocate for peace and justice and still go to war with people on a daily basis with the words you use. We've all seen it.

When I teach mindfulness, I start by having a big flip chart with a white piece of paper, and I put a little red dot in the middle and I say, "What do you see here?" And everybody says, "I see

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a red dot.” And I say, “That’s the problem. That’s where we live. We live in the red dot rather than the white space.” In mindfulness, what I’ve found is a tool that helped me to live in that white space in a remarkable way.

One thing that helped me in terms of my work is that in the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition, there is a big emphasis on building Sangha and looking at Sangha as an organism rather than an organization. So I started looking at everything I was part of as community, whether it was my family, my workplace, organizations that I was on the board of, anything that I was doing became, “Okay, this is a Sangha, this is a community.” And how do we build this? It led to my starting to see myself as an effect of a lot of the things that went on around me rather than the empowerment of seeing myself as a cause. In other words, it drives me crazy these days when I go to meetings and people walk out and say, “That was really a shitty meeting,” and I say, “Well, were you there? [Laughter] You were part of helping create that meeting.”

How we witness violence, exploitation, in all of its manifestations—how we bear witness to it—is such an opportunity to transform things. The skills mindfulness leads to—one of the major ones—is pausing and refraining. The ability to put space between your thoughts and your words and your thoughts and your actions is huge in terms of transformation. But the biggest gift of mindfulness has been understanding that my mind is not an accurate reflection of the world, that it is a result, that my perceptions are so conditioned they don't match reality, and that the truth has many sides.

When I try to get people to understand this, I do this exercise: I'll have three people leave the room and I'll say to everybody else, “Build me a structure, but it's got to be a structure that can be put back together in two minutes. Use what's in the room.” Then I'll have the three people come in one at a time and stand in exactly the same spots and say, “What do you see?” The most interesting time I've ever done this, these were the three responses:

“I see George Washington on the Potomac River.”

“I see chaos and homelessness.”

“I see art and sculpture.”

Then my question is: Who's right? Who's wrong? I don't know.

You know the bumper sticker, “Don't believe everything you think”? Until you have an experience of this, it's hard to take in other viewpoints in a way that matters. It's hard to be present to another human being until you truly understand from your heart that your mind is not an accurate reflection of the world and that it's created over and over again in this moment. I've seen absolutely

horrendous things individuals do to each other that systematically happen as a result of poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia. As a cop, something that started happening for me is that all of those things got covered up with anger and with a numbing of the heart, an armoring of the heart. You can't respond to people from that place. So mindfulness was a tool to undo all of this for me and it was an incremental process over time.

Once I got to be the captain of personnel and training and had my own team, I could do something as simple as going around and saying, “Hey? What's the biggest frustration?” It was always gossip. You wouldn't believe how police gossip passes. It's like being back in high school except everybody has a gun. [Laughter] It's really scary. So I asked, “What if we make an agreement that if we have a complaint, we'll take it to the person we have it with or somebody who can do something about it?” I said, “Hey, I'm not gonna be around [because we were all in different buildings], so you have to hold yourselves accountable and each other accountable. I don't want to even engage in it unless that's something you're willing to do.” They did. Then they brought it to the recruits as a way of being with each other, and it was the most pleasant team experience I ever had in my life.

One thing mindfulness brought me in terms of creating community is to look at whatever community I'm a part of. There are unconscious, unwritten rules people are socialized to. We have the Tea Party of the right, but we also have the Tea Party of the left. We have fundamentalists everywhere, and there's a certain socialization that goes on with it. I know what it was in my arena, and mindfulness taught me to bring those unwritten and unspoken rules into the conscious arena for discussion. It's how you change the ethics of any given organization.

Even in terms of race, one thing I do when I work with organizations is to have them identify every decision-making point in the organization where race could be a factor in their decision-making. When I was associated with probation and parole, they said to me, “We just get what people give us. We're not responsible for that.” I sat down, and we made a list of four pages of things they're all involved in where race could be a factor in their decision-making.

Much of this is about awareness, about being a good curator of the museum of our past, taking care not only of our individual seeds but also of those collective seeds that we are all socialized to, and then being a good gardener of our store consciousnesses. If we are aware, we can make conscious decisions about what behaviors we keep and don't keep, and then life gets much more interesting and much more fun—and much sadder. You can't have one without the other, and the pain to me is something I now know how to use to tenderize my heart, while it used to be something