

Westside Notes



A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step

2015: The Year of Connection

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This year, I spent the holidays 8,000 miles away from my family. I felt unseasonably gloomy, imagining my loved ones in England enjoying all the traditions: pulling Christmas crackers, eating figgy pudding, and listening to Christmas carols on the BBC (yes, we Brits actually do this stuff.) On Christmas Eve I found myself in a random church on Hollywood Boulevard. As I looked around at the unfamiliar faces, I felt lonely and disconnected. It seemed difficult to get into the holiday spirit so far from home, in the midst of strangers.

The next day, after unwrapping gifts (thank you Santa for my new boots!) I read an article about the science of positive emotions, in which psychologist Barbara Fredrickson talks about why we should rethink our concept of love. I was immediately hooked by Fredrickson's redefinition of love as "positivity resonance," which she says arises when people connect over a shared positive emotion. According to Fredrickson: "when we experience joy or amusement or gratitude together with another person, that moment could equally be described as a brief experience of love." Wow! Fredrickson suggests that the basic essence of love is the same across all human relationships, and that moments of positive connection can be shared between romantic partners, parents and children, and even total strangers.

I was blown away by Fredrickson's research into the physical and mental benefits of shared emotion, and how the human heart is affected by these "micro-moments" of love. Her most recent study found that when our hearts are working most efficiently, our heart rate slows down subtly as we breathe out. The bigger the difference between our heart rate at inhalation and at exhalation, the higher our chances of improved immune function, better cardiovascular health, glucose regulation, and even social skill. Amazingly, the efficiency of the heart was found to actually improve according to the amount of *positivity resonance* that we experience: "our hearts literally become more responsive to our breath as we experience loving feelings towards others." Put simply, sharing a kind word, a joke, or even a smile with somebody is actually good for our health.

So, how can we cultivate more positive social connections in our lives? Sipping my eggnog, I realized that I had known the secret to enjoying happy holidays all along! According to Fredrickson, the answer to cultivating loving feelings lies in the ancient Buddhist practice of "lovingkindness"

meditation. I first learned this practice at UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center. A simple meditation for anyone to try, it involves generating a "friendly feeling" towards oneself and others. Here it is in a nutshell:

- Bring to mind someone close to you by saying: "May this person be safe. May this person be happy, may this person be healthy. May this person live with ease."
- Repeat this process while thinking about another person, or a group of people.
- Repeat this process while bringing to mind someone you have difficulty with.
- Repeat this process while thinking about yourself.

Fredrickson explains how the benefits of lovingkindness go far beyond the time we spend actually sitting to meditate. The meditation can pave the way for more moments of loving connection on a day-to-day basis. We can practice informally, by meeting those we encounter in our daily lives with more openheartedness and friendliness. Fredrickson suggests it can be as simple as thinking to yourself: "I hope good fortune comes your way." We can practice while sitting in traffic, or in line at the bank, and yes, even in a church full of strangers on Hollywood Boulevard! Fredrickson describes her own experience of being separated from loved ones: "I don't have to be lonely because there are friendly people everywhere I go. Of course I feel lonely sometimes without my family, but I don't have to know somebody well to enjoy their company." While the ginger spice cookies I baked on Christmas day had given me plenty of sugar, it turns out the sweetness I really needed was right there at the carol service.

Fredrickson's take home message? The positive emotional experiences we share with others are like nutrients—we need regular doses of them each day in order to remain healthy. So, why not look for more opportunities for connection? While standing in the line for your latte, instead of disconnecting from the moment by turning to your phone, ask yourself "why am I pulling away?" Put the phone away, take a risk, and smile at the person next to you. Your heart will thank you for it.

And thank YOU Dr. Fredrickson for the perfect Christmas gift. May you all have a great 2015! Make it the year of connection.

I highly recommend looking into MARC's programs, or visiting their website which is packed full of free guided meditation audios and other mindfulness resources. Try this lovingkindness meditation: http://marc.ucla.edu/mpeg/05_Loving_Kindness_Meditation.mp3

Also, look out for Barbara Fredrickson's new book, "Positivity", about how positive emotions support human flourishing. Fredrickson is a keynote speaker at this year's Interpersonal Neurobiology Conference at UCLA: "Play, Creativity, Mindfulness & Neuroscience in Psychotherapy."

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