

Dear friends,

I am feeling excited writing to you my first ever newsletter. For those of you who are not yet aware, my first ever personal website was created in June this year and this is the url:

www.breathingwithme.com.

And for those of you who subscribed to receive updates from me, I have been wanting to send you a newsletter for the past few months and I did not know what to write, until now. What I have in mind are two poems and one story, and let's begin.

This is the first poem that I would like to introduce to you:

Let This Darkness Be a Bell Tower

Written by Rainer Maria Rilke

Translated by Joanna Macy

Quiet friend who has come so far,

feel how your breathing makes more space around you.

Let this darkness be a bell tower

and you the bell. As you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.

Move back and forth into the change.

What is it like, such intensity of pain?

If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night,

be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,

the meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,

say to the silent earth: I flow.

To the rushing water, speak: I am.

Sonnets to Orpheus II, 29

When I first read this poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, I felt a deep resonance. I wondered how on earth can the author know what I feel with such accuracy and poignancy. I was curious enough to google the author and realised that this was written by a man born 100 years earlier than me.

And now, one century later, sitting in the darkness that still prevails, I wish to let this sensitive poet know how his words have deeply touched me, another sensitive soul who happens to be at the beginning of her own poetic journey, and how she felt understood and strengthened by these beautiful words.

And I wish to let him know that the pace of the world has accelerated to such a point that it feels almost impossible to stop without a hard collision. The world is now at our fingertips and we just need to keep scrolling to be engaged. And yet under the illusion of instant and constant connections we are still lonely, and perhaps even lonelier than ever. We are now more resourced, educated and protected; and we feel the anxiety within us with more awareness; and we are angered by news headlines of cruelty and wars, and the everyday violence that is happening in almost every part of the world and regarded as a normal part of living.

However somewhere deep under the loneliness, anxiety and anger lies an enormous potential to live a life with connectedness, compassion and joy. So many of us aspire to live deeply and to create more space around us. Like a bell that rings in the bell tower, what batters us can become our strength when we are free to move back and forth, anchored securely in the very centre of our being and embracing the full intensity of the pain we are feeling. And this is no easy feat for a human being, when we have to do this alone. As determined as we are, we might feel tired and discouraged, at those difficult moments when it feels as though the whole world has ceased to hear us.

And I am one of those determined and tired souls. Having tried hard enough and long enough, I surrender with humility that I can not do this alone. And here begins my story of making a shared space where I can practise with other like minded friends and be witnessed exactly as I am. It is a shelter of companionship that I can turn to again and again.

In June this year, I sent out an invitation to a few friends who might be interested to join me in the breathing space that I want to create. And I must have been blessed. I have been practising with one of these friends since June and two of them since September. And as I write, more friends are slowly joining us from different parts of the world.

I didn't know what to expect at the beginning of this story and I am humbled by what has unfolded in the last 5 months:

Let This Kindness Be a Bell Tower

By Mabel Cai Lei

Quiet friends who have come a long way,
Feel how our connections have deepened
In the silence we share.

Let this kindness be a bell tower,
And we the bells. As we ring,
We welcome and celebrate all that is here
In the light of a new kind of love
Free from expectations, judgements
And unwanted advice that sits right at the tip of our tongues.

Week after week we come together

And let ourselves be seen a little more and more.
What has besieged us since the birth of our consciousness
Is beginning to loosen its tight grips.

Be warned!
Our love for ourselves will inevitably grow
And as we feel freer to breathe,
Our body will be filled with more air,
We may feel nauseous and even lose our balance.

Into the pitch black of darkness we fall.
Let these invisible threads that connect us all
Shimmer and grow thicker, and be woven into
The loving hammock that catch us
And then rock us from side to side.

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I wrote this poem as an echo to Rainer Maria Rilke's poem, as I celebrate this continued testament of the human spirit to ring with love, even in the face of fear.

And fear, the twin sister of love, is the exact reason we come together for support. Shortly after I started practising regularly with my friend, I experienced an intense period of difficulty in my personal life in July. And this space provided me with the comfort and safety that I needed. Accompanying the deep gratitude for this friend who kept showing up and breathed with me with her lamp of loving kindness, there was an almost equally deep sense of shame. With the tilting of the scale in the space we created together, I felt ashamed that it seemed that I needed the support more than she did. Unlike being supported by a teacher or a therapist, it feels almost threatening to be supported like this in a peer group, where I am not expected to pay anything back for what I received. And that is my fear and my shame of being a burden and getting the care that I don't deserve.

Thankfully, self-compassion and my commitment to this space allowed me to come back again and again and be supported, despite my suffering, despite my shame. And gradually I surrender to the fact that suffering is the very reason that I created this space, and I am receiving exactly what was intended from it.

And now a few months later, I only have gratitude to myself for having created this space and meeting my needs of companionship and support, and love to this friend who has been there with me and supporting me, by simply being herself.

And as more friends come and join us, I am learning that each of them is my teacher of love, in their unique ways. And I must have been a teacher of love for them too, in my unique way. As we each receive and give as we are, common humanity is no longer an abstract concept for me. The bells of courage, compassion and connections ring for me long after each session ends, as I continue to live my messy life with a smile that comes up on my face more and more often.

And this is the beginning of my story of making space. Dear friend, if you are still reading, join me if you can, and be part of the story, our story, of making space and being a student and a teacher of love.

<https://www.breathingwithme.com/invite.html>

And with this, I will conclude this lengthy newsletter and let the intention of love take over, on this day of Deepavali in Singapore when the triumph of light over darkness is celebrated.



With self-compassion and everything else that is human,  
Mabel Cai Lei

12 Nov 2023