

Living the Questions with Krista Tippett — #1

Artist: Dustin O'Halloran

Marie Sambilay: Hi, there, *On Being* listeners! I'm Marie Sambilay, one of the audio producers here at On Being Studios. And I'm so excited to share something new that we've been experimenting with. You're used to hearing Krista ask the questions — but she actually loves being on both sides of a conversation. So we recently asked you on Twitter and Facebook to share some of the questions that you've been asking in your own lives. Your responses were beautiful — and, actually, they often reflected what's been on Krista's mind recently. Like this question from Marja, Shawna, and Dorothy: How can we stay present to what's happening in the world without giving in to despair and hopelessness?

[music: "Rain" by Dustin O'Halloran]

Krista Tippett: Yeah, that's a small question. [laughs] I think it's important, first of all, to acknowledge the pain and dismay and distress and despair that just following the news — that being present to what's happening in the world right now — causes. And I don't think this is all that imaginative, but for me, one way I stay grounded is by limiting my exposure to what I'm taking in. And that's not choosing to be uninformed, but I don't actually think we are equipped, even physiologically or mentally, to be delivered catastrophic and confusing news and pictures, 24/7. We are analog creatures in a digital world. So I don't follow what happened in the last 20 minutes, all day long, and I think that's actually, right now, a spiritual discipline.

I listen to the BBC morning news program; not the World Service, but the BBC morning news that was on six hours ago, our time. So I know if any big thing has happened overnight, but I know, also, that whatever happened in the last few hours, I will find out about in due course. And I don't need to feed myself a constant diet of despair.

The other spiritual discipline and way to stay grounded is that however seriously we must take what's happening in the world and what the headlines are reflecting, it is never the full story of our time. It's not the last word on what we're capable of. It's not the whole story of us. And we have to take that other narrative that's not reaching the headline point, which is a very specific bar. Journalism, the way it came down to us from the 20th century, is absolutely focused, utterly and completely, on what is catastrophic, corrupt, and failing. And then, at the same time, there are good people. There are healing initiatives. There is a narrative of healing and of hope and of goodness, and we also just, as a discipline, have to take that in, as well — not instead of, but the both/and of humanity and of our world.

And I think it's only in doing that that we keep flexing and strengthening our hope muscle. Hope is a muscle. It's a choice. It is a vigorous choice, to see what is wrong and what needs healing and needs repair and needs our attention and also to keep our hearts and our imaginations and our energy oriented towards what we want to build, what we want to create, what we're walking towards.

There have been days in the last few weeks where I just didn't know, really, whether it was OK to get out of bed, with what's going on in the world. I remember a conversation Chris and I had, the other morning, with all these kids on the border, and I was just saying, "Part of me wonders, should we be getting on an airplane and just become witnesses, if nothing else?" And I am haunted, just like everybody else, by the inadequacy I feel — and doubting: am I doing enough? So that is true.

And I actually think, with that, it's really important for us to name that and to name it together and to accompany each other, even in this despair and in our wondering about what we can do in our way, in our place, with our energy, even in just a subtle way, to shift things. One thing that I'm really aware of, especially right now, both with the news from Europe and the news from here, is the attention I pay to language and I see how we have lapsed into calling the people on ships that are floating perilously around oceans, or children and parents in detention on our border, how we call them migrants. And what difference it would be, both for the journalists reporting this and the politicians legislating it and for us, consuming it and figuring out what to do, as fellow citizens. I think we have to call ourselves, always, to call them people. So that's something I pay attention to that's in my mind. How can I insert my understanding of the power of language in the places I'm working? And I don't think that's enough, but I think that's what I can do today.

And again, I think, however justifiably granular our despair and confusion might be on any given day, it is so, so critical that we keep orienting ourselves towards the long view, towards the fact that what we are in the midst of is culture shift. It is going to play itself out in generational time. And so, we have to, at the same time that we act and speak and think critically about what's happening in the moment, we have to embody and walk with and towards how we want to live in contrast to that, how we want to live beyond this. We cannot call forth in the world something that we don't embody. And an ability to be able to take joy is — I've been in rooms full of very well-meaning, good people, who are doing good work in the world for whom, I think, the idea that you should have joy, any joy, in a moment like this, would be a betrayal of what is right and just and good; would perhaps be a denial or even a diminishment of people who are in pain right now.

There's a sensibility behind that stance that says that joy is a privilege. And I don't think joy is a privilege. I think freedom can be a privilege; I think luxury and comfort can be a privilege. But joy is a piece of basic human resilience. It's a human birthright. And in fact, one of the paradoxical and amazing things about our species is how people are able to get through the worst, also, with their joy muscle intact. So I think, if we want to call the world not just to justice but to joy and to flourishing, of which joy is a part, we have to find those ways and those places where that is also what we are finding and stirring and keeping alive in others. It's that both/and.

I think spiritual geniuses — I've worked with that phrase of Einstein's over the years — and I think there are so many more spiritual geniuses of the everyday, as there are the famous spiritual geniuses. I think it's a yes/and mentality. It's absolutely to bring clear eyes to what in the world must be better, and to be present to the world and its frailty and its suffering, but also, to see that "and" — to wake up every morning and say, "Yes, yes. That is true. I am present. I see it. I care" — and to see that generative part of the story that you can be part of.