

I almost missed the Forsythia

It's early on a Monday morning in April. I am doing my Qi Gong exercises, looking out the picture window at the small forest that my study faces.

I concentrate – breathing in and out in rhythm with my postures - keeping balance, remembering the movements, drifting between focus and instinct, losing, then finding, then losing again, that space where the mind surrenders and movement enters.

I am fifteen minutes into my practice. Suddenly my eyes no longer see an undifferentiated forest of green, yellow, white and brown. There in the center of my vision is a large forsythia bush in full bloom. It has been there all along, and I have been blind to its presence. Outrageous yellow reaching in all directions, tendrils stretching to the rising sun. This early harbinger of Spring, must be noticed. And I almost didn't.

Nature is not the only place where our focus is so narrow that we miss the essence of the experience before us. There is a Good Samaritan exercise which illustrates how the urgency of time can override intentions and form can trump essence.

In that exercise, each selected trainee is given instruction to go to the building next door where there is an audience waiting to hear the trainee speak on the subject of compassion. Some are told they have plenty of time to reach the building down the block where their lecture will be held. Others are told they are already late and should hurry to reach their destination.

What they are not told is that an actor, disguised as a drunken bum, is on the path between the two buildings. Those trainees who had been told they had plenty of time stopped, gave comfort to the actor, offered money, and reflected a desire to help. Those trainees who were told they were out of time tended to hurry to their destination, ignoring the actor, in order to keep their appointment to lecture on the subject of compassion.

Whether we are talking about Nature's beauty or the human condition, we are so goal oriented, so acculturated to be on time, that we often miss the nuances that enrich life, deepen experiences, and open new possibilities. We reward punctuality, even when the consequences of punctuality reveal the fragile embrace by which we hold on to our core values.

Of course we want to stop and be helpful. We consider ourselves compassionate people. But when there is an urgency to be punctual, that early training overrides our essence in favor of short-term goals. When our priorities become muddled we are at risk of stumbling. Only later do we realize the irony of our decisions and how they have been thwarted from their goal because our anchor values have not been well attached. We need to stop and reorient ourselves, take a deep breath and slowly exhale, reminding ourselves that our values do not change with circumstance, but that circumstance is an opportunity for our values to flourish.

What else have I missed? A smile, a chance encounter, disguised beauty, a cry for help, the silence of friendship, or the strength of a partner? As my exercises finish for the morning, I vow to find all the forsythia in my life – the ones I trample down in my haste to move on and the ones that must be cultivated to be seen. And I vow to slow life down so it can be appreciated instead of scanned.

Maybe, just maybe, I could be the forsythia bush waiting to be discovered
Perhaps I could even be the person on the sidewalk needing compassion.