

Tending to Our Heart's Wisdom

Throughout history the heart has been valued as our moral compass, the residence of our soul, the source of all knowledge, and the knower of true love. It has many dimensions, some of which we'll explore in this article. It is the only organ that when removed, or stops beating, we die instantly. It is the place we are most vulnerable. Not only because we die when our heart isn't working, but feeling love makes us susceptible to having our heart broken, to experiencing pain and suffering. It can be messy! Yet having an open heart and feeling love is also the source of our enthusiasm, passion and joy! Our ability to feel awe and wonder.

This article explores the power of our heart as related to the needs of today's leaders.

“When you touch your heart or let your heart be touched you begin to discover that it's bottomless, that it's huge, vast and limitless.”

~ Pema Chodron

THE HEART AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH AND COURAGE



The heart is our source of real strength. An open heart provides us with courage. How fascinating that the root of the word “courage” is the French word, *corage*, meaning heart. Consistent with various other Latin sources, we can easily infer the heart as being a source of inner strength. It is this strength that dispels fear and enables us to speak honestly, engage in ‘courageous conversations’ and show up more fully. The strength of our heart provides us with the wherewithal to take risks, forge new paths and innovate.

THE HEART AS A SOURCE OF MEANING AND WHOLEHEARTED ENGAGEMENT

Another aspect of our heart intelligence has to do with “sincere passion”: The passion underlying our wholehearted engagement. This is a type of passion that informs our sense of purpose and enables us to engage with the world enthusiastically: To pursue that which we most care about... and to care about what we're engaged with.

Think about what it's like to engage with someone or something in a ‘heartfelt’ way. When we experience ourselves or others being heartfelt there is a sense of real caring involved. This tends to be contagious and creates resonance. When someone genuinely and passionately cares about something, it invites us to care about it too!

It's important to know what speaks to our hearts. What touches it? What moves it? Only when our heart is open can we know what we truly want. Only then can we access our deeper truth; to both experience our truth more fully and to discern what speaks to it.

“The power of the heart is to be connected to who you are at the deepest level.”

~ Eckhart Tolle

THE HEART AS A SOURCE OF OUR TRUE IDENTITY

We know who we truly are deep in our heart, and yet the quest to discover ourselves is often obscured. In a world that values the intellect over the heart, our hearts are relegated to the domain of romantic love and other areas where it's permissible for rationality to take a back seat. We tend to defer our sense of identity and self-image to mental constructs that create stories about who we are. Real as they may seem, they are delusions. Our true self, our real identity, lies in the depths of our heart. It is here that we can know and embrace our deeper truth – the beauty of being both completely ordinary and exquisitely unique. This deep self-knowledge opens our eyes to seeing our life's purpose in new and enriching ways.

THE HEART AS A SOURCE OF COMPASSION AND WARMTH

Empathy, kindness, and other connecting emotions that underlie relationships and cooperation are capacities of the heart. These are basic emotions we were born with and learned to suppress to protect our vulnerable hearts from pain and hurt. Our ability to love and be loved is a natural birthright. Yet, as we step into the world we learn to fear – fear of failure, fear of losing security, etc – and we often lose touch with our heart's resources.

Reclaiming these resources brings us into contact with our social nature. We attune to a heartfelt realization that we are social beings living in communal settings. We become more sensitive to others, we come into contact with a genuine desire to help others and offer goodwill. This orientation exudes from us in the form of warmth and other welcoming qualities that positively affect others, often even diffusing their defenses and melting their protective guards. As we'll see later in this article, engaging from a heartfelt place results in an energetic exchange with a palpable and altering affect on others.

Before leaving this section, we need to recognize the critical importance of how the same capacity to



extend compassion to others enables us to extend compassion to ourselves. Among the many benefits associated with self-compassion is a lighter effect of our inner critic and other self-judging, self-criticizing forces. As we become freed from these forces, not only do we feel emancipated to engage with life in a more robust way, we also find ourselves extending more support and positive regard to others. In essence, we find ourselves in a virtuous circle.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEART

The heart speaks to us through our emotions. When we pause and tune into our heart we realize that at almost any moment we are experiencing an emotional state. We tend to be unaccustomed to reading our emotional states. At best we tend to be familiar with a narrow

range of emotions, such as anger, anxiety, and annoyance. Increasing our fluency in these matters yields high returns. Being able to read our emotions – and by natural extension becoming more curious about the emotions of others – presents us with more choices and skillfulness in regulating our own reactions and in responding to those of others.

A SCIENTIFIC SIDENOTE



Modern science is validating what ancient wisdom traditions have known for thousands of years: that the heart is a powerful source

of intelligence and power. Recent advances in science show how the heart plays a role in decision-making, learning, reducing fear, and creating bonds and connections with others.

Known in neurocardiology circles as the “heart brain” there is evidence that the heart continuously sends influential signals to the higher centers of the brain involved in perception, cognition, and emotional processing. The heart is an information-processing system with its own nervous system of 40,000 neurons. Contrary to common understanding that decisions are made in the cerebral cortex of the brain, we now know that the heart can also make decisions independent of the brain.

Even more fascinating is the heart’s ability to communicate with the brain, with other parts of the body and with others via its *electromagnetic field*. The heart’s magnetic field is approximately 5000 times stronger than the brain’s magnetic field and can be detected from several feet away. Some studies show it can extend out and touch others up to 25 feet away! Further, it has been shown that in the presence of this electromagnetic field, one’s brain waves can actually synchronize to another’s heart. This has huge implications for how we affect one another. Similar to the discovery of mirror neurons in the brain and how they impact emotional intelligence, understanding heart entrainment sheds new light on how we influence one another. Heartfelt communication can’t be faked. Behavioral techniques for inspiring and influencing others pale in comparison to the power of a true open heart.

A final scientific note on the power of the heart involves hormones produced by this crucial organ. New discoveries in the past decade suggest that the heart constantly communicates with areas in the brain associated with emotions, (such as the thalamus, the hypothalamus and amygdala), which all respond to emotional input from the heart. These heart-brain

interactions in turn send signals for the body to produce oxytocin (known as the “bonding”, “bliss”, “trust” or “love” hormone) and dopamine (known as the “pleasure” hormone). Oxytocin helps reduce fear, generates behavior that enhances interconnectedness (such as increasing eye-contact), and increases generosity; while dopamine plays an important role in learning, prioritizing and motivation.* These hormones can help manage stress, focus on the positive and stay resilient.

In short, living and leading with an open heart enables us to both create a more generative environment and have a more positive experience of life.

HEART-AWAKENING PRACTICES

An open-hearted way of engaging with life is not a mode we’re accustomed to, especially in today’s high-stress fast-paced world. Luckily it can be cultivated in simple ways. A few minutes of regular practice each day can produce big results!



These four practices can be done in short spurts of time to bring you into greater contact with your heart’s intelligence:

1. Practice Gratitude.

First and foremost this involves slowing down and quieting our minds so we can focus our full attention on the object of our appreciation. Whether it is a person we’re with, a flower in our vicinity, a piece of food we’re preparing to eat, or something else, we want to notice more of it than we habitually might. As we drop into being in full presence we are able to receive and take in more of what is there to be seen, heard, smelled, felt etc. We naturally find ourselves appreciating it more. With greater appreciation, as our heart continues to open more and more, we might discover a sense of reverence – of deep gratitude for the existence of this person or thing. While all this happens you will likely notice a palpable difference in your heart: A sense of something moving, becoming more alive, bigger and/or warmer in your physical heart. Remembering this, next time you prepare to take a bite or sip of something, walk past a beautiful flower, hear birds singing, or see someone you love, take a pause and use it as an opportunity to practice gratitude.

2. Spend Time in Nature.

Learn to see and connect with the beauty that is everywhere. When we realize that we are indeed surrounded by beauty, even in the most mundane of places, our hearts begin to stir. A casual walk from one meeting to another can be an opportunity to receive a heart-lifting moment. A short walk to the coffee house, walking the dog, a “walk and talk” meeting (with a little silence thrown in for good measure) can enable us to take in our surroundings; it can activate a felt sense of connectedness to the world around us.

3. Adopt a Heart-Opening Meditation Practice.

Quieting our mind and simply bringing our attention to the physical location of our heart can be quite

transformative. With each breath notice the rise and fall of your chest. See if you can feel your heart beating. Notice what happens when you allow your attention to linger on the location where the heart resides – and especially in the middle of your chest – the energetic location of our heart. Notice what it feels like when your heart is attended to. Watch how it comes alive.

4. Attune to ‘What Makes Your Heart Sing.’

What does your heart long for? Ask it! Simply asking and caring about your heart’s desire will enliven your heart while revealing critically important information.

“When we answer the call of our own heart, we awaken the heart of the world.”

- *Marianne Williamson*

FURTHER RESOURCES

Resources for learning more about the Heart’s Intelligence:

1. *HeartMath Institute: www.heartmath.org/about-us/
2. Angeles Arrien’s book - Living In Gratitude: A Journey That Will Change Your Life. tinyurl.com/pqld87l
3. Deep Coaching Institute: www.deepcoachinginstitute.com/about/philosophy/
4. David Whyte’s book – The Heart Aroused: Poetry and Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America. tinyurl.com/paf8law
5. The Enneagram Institute’s Perspective on the Virtues of the Heart: www.enneagraminstitute.com/the-virtues-reorienting-the-human-heart/
6. Parker Palmer’s 5 Habits of the Heart: www.couragerenewal.org/habitsoftheheart/

About Ipek Serifsoy, PhD



For the past 20 years Ipek has been an executive coach and organizational consultant for leaders and their teams in large companies. In addition to her own coaching and consulting practice she is also the President of The Deep Coaching Institute, an advanced coach training school. Prior to her work developing leaders, Ipek was an investment banker on Wall Street for almost 10 years after which she made a career transition to her current work. This transition was facilitated by a year-long sabbatical during which she attended New York Theological Seminary. Ipek completed both her Masters in Psychology and her PhD in Organizational Systems at Saybrook University. She lives in Mill Valley with her husband and daughter.

“*The most beautiful thing we can experience
is the mysterious.
It is the source of all true art and science.*”
- Albert Einstein

The Leader’s Muse Chronicles is an offspring of Ipek’s doctoral dissertation, married together with her fieldwork as an executive coach and organizational consultant, her work with The Deep Coaching Institute, and Women’s Leadership Circles. It brings together the feminine, creativity, artistry, spirituality, nature, psychology, communication, and the Enneagram to help us find joy and wellness that restores our soul, that frees us to operate from our ‘best self.’ Its purpose is to help us have a richer, more satisfying experience of life, and engage with the world around us in more intelligent and compassionate ways.



Gratitude to [Regan McNeill-Ural](#) for her design expertise and talent.

Ipek Serifsoy, PhD
Mill Valley, CA 94941
www.isconsultingco.com
ipek@isconsultingco.com

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