

From *Peace is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hanh
(pp 130—134)

“The River”

Once Upon a time there was a beautiful river finding her way among the hills, forests, and meadows. She began by being a joyful stream of water, a spring always dancing and singing as she ran down from the top of the mountain. She was very young at the time, and as she came to the lowland she slowed down. She was thinking about going to the ocean. As she grew up, she learned to look beautiful winding gracefully among the hills and meadows.

One day she noticed the clouds within herself. Clouds of all sorts of colors and forms. She did nothing during these days but chased after clouds. She wanted to possess a cloud, to have one for herself. But clouds float and travel in the sky, and they are always changing their form. Sometimes they look like an overcoat, sometimes like a horse. Because of the nature of impermanence within the clouds, the river suffered very much. Her pleasure, her joy had become just chasing after clouds, one after another, but despair, anger, and hatred became her life.

Then one day a strong wind came and blew away all the clouds in the sky. The sky became completely empty. Our river thought that life was not worth living, for there were no longer any clouds to chase after. She wanted to die. “If there are no clouds, why should I be alive?” but how can a river take her own life?

That night the river had the opportunity to go back to herself for the first time period she had been running for so long after something outside of herself that she had never seen herself. That night was the first opportunity for her to hear her own crying, the sounds of water crashing against the banks of the river. Because she was able to listen to her own voice, she discovered something quite important.

She realized that what she had been looking for was already in herself. She found out that clouds are nothing but water. Clouds are born from water and will return to water. And she found out that she herself is also water.

The next morning when the sun was in the sky, she discovered something beautiful. She saw the blue sky for the first time period she had never noticed it before. She had only been interested in clouds, and she had missed seeing the sky, which is the home of all the clouds. Clouds aren't permanent but the sky is stable period she realized that the immense sky had been within her heart since the very beginning. This great insight brought her peace and happiness. As she saw the vast wonderful blue sky, she knew that her peace and stability would never be lost again.

That afternoon the clouds returned, but this time she did not want to possess any of them. She could see the beauty of each cloud, and she was able to welcome all of them. When a cloud came by she would greet them with loving kindness. When that cloud wanted to go away she would wave to them happily and with loving kindness. Do you

realize that all clouds are her. She didn't have to choose between the clouds and herself. Peace and harmony existed between her and the clouds.

That evening something wonderful happened. When she opened her heart completely to the evening sky she received the image of the full moon—beautiful, round, like a jewel within herself. She had never imagined that she could receive such a beautiful image. There is a beautiful poem in Chinese: “the fresh and beautiful moon is travelling in the utmost empty sky. When the mind rivers of living beings are free, that image of the beautiful moon will reflect in each of us.”

This was the mind of the river at that moment. She received the image of that beautiful moon within her heart, and water, clouds, and moon took each other's hands and practiced walking meditation slowly, slowly to the ocean.

There is nothing to chase after. We can go back to ourselves, enjoy our breathing, our smiling, ourselves, and our beautiful environment.

“Entering the Twenty-First Century”

The word “policy” is very much in use these days. There seems to be a policy for just about everything. I have heard that the so-called developed nations are contemplating garbage policy to send their trash on huge barges to the Third World.

I think that we need a “policy” for dealing with our suffering. We do not want to condone it, but we need to find a way to make use of our suffering, for our good and for the good of others. There has been so much suffering in the 20th century: 2 world wars, concentration camps in Europe, the killing fields of Cambodia, refugees from Vietnam, Central America, and elsewhere fleeing their countries with no place to land. We need to articulate a policy for these kinds of garbage also. We need to use the suffering of the 20th century as compost, so that together we can create flowers for the 21st century.

We see photographs and programs about the atrocities of the Nazis, the gas chambers and the camps, we feel afraid. We may say, “I didn't do it; They did it.” But if we had been there, we may have done the same thing, or we may have been too cowardly to stop it, as was the case for so many. We have to put all these things into our compost pile to fertilize the ground. In Germany today the young people have a kind of complex that they are somehow responsible for the suffering. It is important that these young people and the generation responsible for the war begin anew, and together create a path of mindfulness so that our children in the next century can avoid repeating the same mistakes. The flower of tolerance to see and appreciate cultural diversity is 1 flower we can cultivate for the children of the 21st century. Another flower is the truth of suffering—there has been so much unnecessary suffering in our century. If we are willing to work together and learn together, we can all benefit from the mistakes of our time, and seeing with the eyes of compassion and understanding, we can offer the next century a beautiful garden and a clear path.

Take the hand of your child and invite her to go out and sit with you on the grass. The two of you may want to contemplate the green grass, the little flowers that grow among the grasses, and the sky. Breathing and smiling together—that is peace education. If we know how to appreciate these beautiful things, we will not have to search for anything else. Peace is available in every moment in every breath in every step.

I have enjoyed our journey together. I hope you have enjoyed it too. We shall see each other again.