

Dorothy and the Locked Door

We're all looking for something. Most human beings feel a kind of incompleteness and are looking for something that will fill up the hole they feel. Even those who say, "I'm not looking; I'm content with my life," are looking also, in their own way. And so people come to this or that church, to Zen centers or yoga centers, to personal growth workshops—with the hope of finding this missing piece.

Let me tell you about a little girl named Dorothy. Dorothy did not live in Kansas, but in San Diego, in an enormous old Victorian house. Her family had lived there for generations. Everybody had his or her own room, and there were extra rooms and cubbyholes everywhere, as well as an attic and a basement. When Dorothy was still a tiny girl, she learned that there was something odd about the house: up on the top floor of that old Victorian mansion there was a locked room. As far back as people could remember, the room had always been locked. There was a rumor that once it had been unlocked, but no one knew what was in the room. The lock on the door to the room was strange, and no one had ever been able to find a way to open it. The windows to the room were blocked somehow, too. Once Dorothy had climbed up a ladder on the outside of the house and tried to peer inside. But she could see nothing.

Most of the family just got used to the room with its locked door. They knew it was there, but they didn't want to concern themselves. So it was just not mentioned. Dorothy was different, however. From the time that she was small, she was obsessed with that room and what was in there. She felt that she *had* to get it unlocked.

In most ways, Dorothy lived her life like a normal little girl. She grew; she had pigtails; she became a teenager; she got the latest hairdo; she had her best girlfriend, her best boyfriend; she got excited about the newest makeup and the latest hit song. She was pretty normal. But she never lost her obsession with the locked room. In a way, it dominated her life. Sometimes she would go up and sit in front of the room and just look at that door and wonder about it.

As Dorothy got a bit older, she sensed that the room had some connection with what was missing in her life. So she began various trainings and practices in the hope of finding the secret to opening the door. She tried out lots of different things: she went to this and that center, and this and that teacher, searching for the formula to unlock the door. She went to workshops; she got herself rebirthed; she tried hypnosis. She did everything; yet nothing unlocked the door for her. Her searching went on for years, all through college and into graduate school. She developed techniques to put herself into various mental states, but she was still unable to open the door.

Then one day when she came home, the house was deserted. She went upstairs to the top floor and sat in front of the locked door. Using one of her esoteric practices, she went into a deep state of meditation. On an impulse, she reached out a hand and pushed on the door—and it began to open. She was terrified. In all the long years of trying to unlock the door, nothing like this had ever happened. Dorothy was frightened and excited at the same time. Trembling, she made herself go through the door. And found...Disappointment and confusion. Dorothy found herself not in a strange, new, wonderful space in the mysterious room, but right back on the first floor of that old Victorian house, in the midst of all the old, familiar things. She had the same view, she was in the same location with the usual furniture; everything was just as it always had been. Disappointed and puzzled at the same time, some hours later she climbed the stairs to the top floor and went to the mysterious room. The door was still locked. Dorothy had opened the door—and she hadn't opened it.

Life went on. Dorothy got married. She had a couple of children. She still lived in the Victorian house, with her family. She was a good wife and mother. Still, she never gave up her obsession. In fact, her one experience of opening the door motivated her even more. She spent a lot of time on the top floor in front of the locked door, sitting cross-legged, trying to open the door. She'd done it once before, she could do it again. And sure enough, after years of trying, it happened again: she pushed on the door, and it opened. She thought excitedly to herself, "This will be the time!" She went through the door—and again found herself back on the first floor of that same old Victorian house, living with her husband and children. She raced up the stairs to the mysterious room, and what did she find? The door was locked.

What can you do? A locked door is a locked door. Dorothy continued her life. The kids grew. She acquired a few gray hairs. Dorothy still spent a lot of time sitting in front of the locked door, however. She was a fairly good wife and mother, but her attention was still mostly on the locked room. And she was a persistent, diligent person; she didn't give up easily. From time to time, she would manage to open the door and move through it, but always she ended up on the first floor, right back where she lived. All the while, the house was slowly filling up with stuff. The family members seemed to accumulate more and more things, and the extra rooms became storerooms for junk. The house became so stuffed that there was no room for guests at all and hardly enough space for the family themselves. There was no room in the house for anything but Dorothy, her husband, and her children—which was just as well, because they were all so concerned about themselves that they could hardly think about taking care of anything else.

Gradually, Dorothy's obsession wore down. Her struggle to open that door began to get a bit old. Instead of spending so much time up in front of the door, she spent a bit more time with her children and her grandchildren, and taking care of the house: getting the floors refinished, redoing the drapes, and so on. The house was not in bad shape, but it had been a little neglected, because Dorothy had been busy sitting in front of the door. Her attention slowly shifted back into taking care of the everyday things that needed to be taken care of. It was a slow process. Occasionally she would go up to the top floor and look at the door, but if she opened it, she knew what she'd find. Very slowly, discouragement and disappointment settled in. More and more, she forgot about anything except just living her life, taking care of things, moment to moment. And then one day she was up on the top floor and she happened to look over at the door that was locked. Wow! It was wide open! Inside, in plain sight, was a comfortable guest room. There was a fine bed and a dresser and all of the small items that would make a guest comfortable.

Seeing this wonderful, spacious guest room, Dorothy realized what had become of the rest of the house. She saw how crowded and cramped everything was and how difficult it was to move around freely in the house. With that realization, change began. Without her doing much of anything, the rooms in that old Victorian mansion began to unstuff themselves. There began to be room for more and more things and people in the house. Space appeared. It was as if all the stuff was insubstantial, ghostly junk. It wasn't really there, after all. The house returned to what it had been all along. In fact, there had always been plenty of space for guests, and Dorothy now realized that the door had never been locked in the first place; it was always open. Only her rigid pushing had kept it shut.

This is our basic illusion about practice: that the door is locked. The illusion is inevitable: we all have it, to some degree. As long as we think the door is shut, it *is* shut. To try to open it, we do everything. We go to this or that center; we do workshops; we try this or that. Ultimately we find that the door was never shut.

Yet Dorothy's life of vain effort was perfect for her. That's what she had to do. In fact, that's what we all have to do. We have to give our practice everything we have, in order to realize that from the very beginning, there's nothing but perfection. The room is open, the house is open, if we don't clutter it with our phantom junk. But there's no way to know this until we know it.

A form of Christian spiritual discipline is the practice of the presence of God. As Christians, we are

looking for that radiance in all things that mystics call the face of God. That radiance is not hidden in some far-off place, but is here and now, right under our noses. Likewise, Dorothy realized that what she had been seeking all her life was simply her life itself: the people, the house, the rooms. All were the face of God.

But we don't see that. If we really saw it, we wouldn't torture ourselves and each other as we do. We're unkind; we're manipulative; we're dishonest. If we saw that this very life we lead is the face of God itself, we would not be able to behave in such ways—not because of any commandment or prohibition, but just because we see what life is.

It's not that practice—sitting in front of the door—is useless. But much of what we call practice—chasing after ideals or enlightenment—is illusion. It doesn't open the door. Until we see this fact as clearly as the taste of our oatmeal in the morning, we will have to go through many byways and twistings, disappointments and illnesses—the teachers of our lives. All of these struggles are part of learning about the door. If we practice well, sooner or later the puzzle gets clearer, and the door is more often open.

STUDENT : It seems that Dorothy could have wasted less time if she had done her sitting in the kitchen, in the middle of her family and daily tasks, instead of retreating to the top floor of the house, away from everything.

JOKO : We always search where we *think* the answer is, until we're ready to see. We do what we do until we don't do it anymore. That's neither bad nor good; it's just how things are. We have to wear out our illusions. If we tell ourselves, “The way to open that door is to spend more time with my kids,” this, too, becomes just another obsessive idea. Spending time with our kids in order to become enlightened will probably not make us better parents, in any case.

STUDENT: Isn't practice about opening the heart? Isn't that what Dorothy was trying to do, really?

JOKO: Yes, that's one way to describe it. And she discovered that...?

STUDENT: Her heart was always open.

JOKO : Right. The parents we can't stand, the partner who wounded us, the irritating friend: there's nothing wrong with them, unless we think so. Until we're ready to see this, however, we won't see it.

STUDENT: If the story is about a guest room, then Dorothy never even thought about having guests over.

JOKO: That's right. She wouldn't even think about it.

We think, “I should be nicer, kinder, more hospitable.” But if we're caught within our illusions, we can't be truly hospitable. We may go through the motions, but being truly hospitable means simply being ourselves, as we are. We can't welcome someone else if we haven't welcomed ourselves first.

STUDENT : When we're caught up in our personal melodrama as Dorothy was, we're not truly available to others. When we see through our personal melodrama, we are able to see others' needs more objectively, and respond to them.

JOKO : Yes. We've all had the experience of being so upset that we're simply unable to hear about someone else's troubles. We don't have room for that; all of our space is taken up with our own stuff.

We haven't got any "guest room."

Yet we can't simply say, "I won't be obsessed," and will it to happen. Then, we still think there's a hole in our life, that we've got to unlock the door and discover what's on the other side.

STUDENT: My practice has been a series of disappointments. I imagine, "This workshop will do it for me." I attend the workshop, and while it may be useful in some way, ultimately it's disillusioning. I find it very difficult simply to stay with my disappointment, to feel my vulnerability. Instead, I cover it over in some way, and tell myself, "I'll just try harder. I'll find another workshop."

STUDENT : I feel that I have wasted much time and energy, precious moments of my life—complaining about my parents or the conditions of my life—all in the effort to unlock the door.

JOKO : It's of no use to look back and say, "I should have been different." At any given moment, we are the way we are, and we see what we're able to see. For that reason, guilt is always inappropriate.

STUDENT: It seems as though we have to go through a certain amount of suffering. We have to be crucified before we'll surrender.

JOKO: Without overdramatizing the point, that's true. We are very stubborn. That's okay, too.

STUDENT: Was Dorothy able to enjoy her life? It bothers me that one has to struggle for so long.

JOKO : Yes, I imagine that she sometimes enjoyed her life, even before she saw what it was. We all enjoy our lives at times. But beneath the enjoyment and gratification is anxiety. We're still looking for something behind that door, and we're afraid we'll never find it. We think, "If I had this or that, I'd be happy." Momentary enjoyment does not eliminate this underlying unease. There's no shortcut. We must finally see who we are and what that room is, behind the door.

STUDENT : With me, the underlying feeling is fear. It's a faint undercurrent to everything I do. Most of my life I haven't been fully conscious of it; it was just there, running my life.

JOKO: In sitting, we bring our attention to that faint undercurrent. That means to notice our thoughts and the subtle contractions in our body. For Dorothy, this happened when her obsession with the locked door began to weaken, and she began to pay more attention to the condition of the rest of the house. Her hopes began to die.

STUDENT: We just have to take care of our immediate tasks.

JOKO: Right. And taking care of what needs to be taken care of brings us back to what we are at this moment.

In the story about Dorothy, what do you make of the cluttered rooms in the house?

STUDENT: Attachments. Thoughts about lots of things. Memories.

JOKO: Memories, fantasies, hopes.

STUDENT : It seems that when we have immediate tasks to do, we tend to focus instead on the fear or anxiety or whatever—the locked door—and forget to pay attention to the task at hand. In a way, the fear (or whatever) is irrelevant. There's the task to do, and we just need to do it, fear or no fear. I

struggle with my life because instead of just doing what needs to be done, I fight the underlying fear; I try to unlock the door.

JOKO: Right. Paradoxically, the only way to unlock the door is to forget the door.

Students often complain to me that when they sit, something interferes with their awareness: “ I get spacey.” “ I get so nervous. I just can’ t sit still.” Underlying these complaints is the thought that in order to sit effectively, we have to get rid of all unpleasantness; the locked door has to be unlocked, so we can get to the good stuff.

If we’ re spacey, we’ re spacey. If we’ re nervous, we’ re nervous. That’ s the reality of our life at the moment. Good sitting means simply to be present to that: to *be* the spaciness or the nervousness.

People go to great lengths to eliminate troublesome feelings. “ I’ m tense; I have to do a workshop to relax.” So they do the workshop, and it makes them relaxed—but for how long? Wanting the tension relieved is like looking at the locked door, trying to figure out how to open it. If we’ re obsessed with opening the door, we may find techniques to open it momentarily; but then we find ourselves right back in our lives, just as they were, living in the same old house. Instead of obsessing about the locked door, we need to be going about our lives, which means cleaning up the house, taking care of the baby, going to work, whatever.

STUDENT : A friend and I were just talking about how hard a year we have both had. Throughout our twenties and thirties, we both had hope that things were going to get better for us. Now, in our forties, we’ ve come to the sinking realization that that’ s not going to happen: our lives are not going to get better!

JOKO : Paradoxically, this painful disillusionment with the future helps us to appreciate life as it is. Only when we give up the hope that things will get fixed can we come to the realization that things are fine as they are.

STUDENT : Recently I’ ve had a similar realization. For years I have been telling myself that my life will be better when I have saved up enough money to go into semiretirement. I’ ll have more time for volunteer work; I’ ll be able to sit more consistently, do more reading, and so on. Now I’ m beginning to realize that what I need to do is right here at work. If I’ m trying to get something finished, and someone comes in and distracts me, that’ s just what I need to do at that moment. What I ought to be doing is just what I’ m doing.

JOKO : In closing, let’ s ask ourselves, “ How am I trying to unlock the door as opposed to simply living my life? ” We’ re all trying to unlock the door, to find the key or formula. We’ re looking for the perfect teacher, the perfect partner, the perfect job, and so on. To notice that we’ re trying to unlock the door is immensely valuable; it helps us to see what our lives really are.
