

“Our Hope in the Wilderness”

by Chad Frost

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In today's scripture, we see God breathe life into dry bones on the floor of a desert valley. In so doing, something broken and decaying is regenerated into a new beginning.

We see signs of a similar rebirth all around us as the days are growing longer and warmer. Yet, despite the coming of spring (and with it, Easter), we also find ourselves in somewhat dark and uncertain times. In many ways it feels as though we're wandering through the wilderness we have discussed the last several weeks, searching for signs of hope.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...”

One sign of hope that I've witnessed in our recent challenges is the power of love and kindness to dispel fear and anxiety. Our communities have come together to support one another with kind actions and cooperation. Donations have been collected and made to those most vulnerable to this crisis. In a time when even the simplest of daily tasks, like getting food from the market, have taken on a feeling of danger, family and friends have stepped in to help one another. The challenges and danger are real, but rather than hiding away in fear, I see so many stepping up to embrace one another with love.

Lovingkindness meditation is a practice in which we recognize, receive, and send feelings of love and kindness within and out into the world. I believe it would be beneficial to try it together today for a few minutes.

Loving-Kindness Meditation Instructions (adapted from a Loving-Kindness Heartscape Meditation by Jon Kabat-Zinn offered on Mindful.org; Full script and 47-minute audio available at: <https://www.mindful.org/this-loving-kindness-meditation-is-a-radical-act-of-love/>)

- Find a stable but comfortable position, either in a sitting posture or lying down, whatever you prefer. Close your eyes or let your gaze blur and settle a few feet in front of you without focusing on anything in particular.
- As you feel ready, bring your awareness to the breath and the body as a whole. Feel the chest rise and fall as it rides the waves of the breath. Stay with this sensation as the breath goes in and out.
- When you feel comfortable resting with the flowing of your breathing in this way, begin picturing in your mind's eye, to whatever degree you find it possible, someone in your life who loves or loved you unconditionally. It might be a family member, a dear friend, or even a companion animal. Maybe an image of Jesus appears in your mind's eye. For everyone it will be different. It does not matter who comes to mind as long as you have felt loved unconditionally by them.
- Do not be discouraged if you do not feel particularly worthy or deserving of such unconditional love. The relevant fact is that you *are* loved and their love is for you, just as you are. If you encounter some difficulty in bringing such a person to mind in this moment, then vividly imagine someone you care about treating you in a kind and loving way.
- Whoever has come to mind, focus on the sensation of receiving their unconditional love and kindness. Picture their love and kindness toward you as a warm and radiant aura.

Imagine that aura washing over your heart, pulsating with the steady rhythm of your breath. Bask in the warmth of it as it continues to wash over you.

- Imagine their love and kindness pooling and gathering in your heart. Rest with the feeling of their love emanating through you and building up inside you. Ground yourself in this feeling of warm unconditional love.
- At your own pace, silently whisper in your mind over and over again: “May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live with ease.”

Additional Instructions for Extending Loving-Kindness

- Again, bring your focus to the love and kindness flowing from the individual in your mind’s eye. Picture it filling you like a vessel and overflowing from you. Before you were receiving their love and kindness, but as it overflows from within your heart, you too are now a source of it.
- Bring to mind a person who is dear to you. Vividly imagine them before you and guide the overflowing love and kindness from your heart toward them. Picture it surrounding and embracing them in the warmth and radiance you experienced.
- At your own pace, silently whisper in your mind over and over again: “May she be safe. May she be happy. May she be healthy. May she live with ease.”
- When you are feeling ready, bring your attention back to your breath and sit a moment with the sensation of having received and shared love and kindness. When it feels right, open your eyes.

With this practice, you can continue extending the aura of love and kindness out further and further. You might do so by next extending it in the following order (to the extent that you are comfortable and able to do so):

- A neutral person—someone you see in your daily life, but do not know well who doesn’t inspire any particular feelings within you
- A challenging person—perhaps someone whose personality doesn’t always mesh well with yours
- Increasingly larger groups of people—your neighborhood, your town, our state, our country, other countries, and so on
- All sentient beings

Like any mindfulness practice, it isn’t a race. Some might find significant benefit from working with directing loving kindness toward themselves for several sessions, or to a few people closest to them. Others might find it challenging to direct it toward themselves and might instead focus on all of humanity. Just like with any mindfulness practice, we should not criticize ourselves—if we ever feel stuck when trying to expand that aura of love and kindness, just make note of it and move on as you’re able.

Like the act of praying, the words and methods that develop for you over time can vary because we’re all different people with different lived experiences. The key thing is expanding that feeling of love and kindness mindfully and compassionately.

When we find ourselves in challenging times like this, where fear seems to be lurking or rampaging through our minds, let us look to our hearts. As the spirit has breathed life into old bones to bring new life, let us breathe love and kindness into our hearts and out into the world.

With all this love, fear stands no chance.