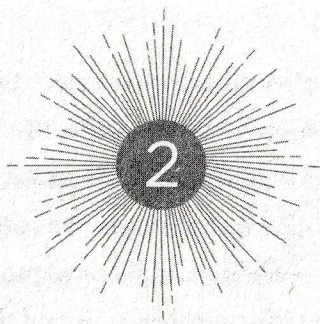


South Africa not knowing if I would  
eted a Kuan Yin ceremony with the  
with absolutely everything. I watched  
ieking, and felt the sun on my skin.  
e rocks, still damp from the flash of  
people. I am people.

on the land of the Lenape people, a  
elf have no direct relationship, I lie  
their ground. All ground. I look up  
South Africa. I watch the trees, the  
s. I see birds. Smaller birds fly low,  
. In the far distance, near the thin  
ning a perfect V. As I turn my head  
, they break into a new shape, an  
perfect in its imperfect wave. They  
a different bird at the head. I wonder  
when. I consider the neighbor and  
oo. We are, right now, both of us  
boons.

n. It's not even a map. It's more like  
now what that means anymore? For  
an't remember: *there used to be paper*  
ction that showed relative distances  
, land, water, roads, and anything  
e you the information you need to  
ok is like a wordy key. You need to  
er the keys around and within you.  
But I can join you on the way. We



## Domination

### *Fueling the Fire of Not Belonging*

#### Separation Begets Domination: Letting Go of the Need to Be Right

*There are limits to the politics of anger and the currency of resentment.*

—GIBRÀN RIVERA

When I was first diagnosed with cancer, George W. Bush was president. I felt constantly enraged by US policies, the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and especially the response to Hurricane Katrina, which highlighted the deep-rooted racism of our society and government. I did not have a computer at home. Phones were not smart. I did not get news alerts in my inbox. Social media was not yet a thing. Yet, I read the paper every morning, consumed *The Nation*

every week, and experienced anger and upset all the time. I attended protests and donated money but felt ineffective and filled with negativity. Much of my ire was directed at the president. I had an outsized rage toward him, his statements, his policies, and his existence. I did not want to carry these feelings while trying to heal my body; I also did not want to ignore what was happening in the world.

One weekend, I attended a people of color meditation group and talked about the anger I had toward the president. Someone suggested doing *metta* practice for him. *Metta* is often translated as “loving-kindness.” It is the capacity for love, kindness, and care that always accompanies awareness. When we are aware (don’t worry, we will explore what this means throughout this book), a deep sense of caring also arises. One way *metta* can be practiced and cultivated is by directing loving energy toward oneself and others. In the formal practice, there are categories of people that include ourselves, strangers, those we love, as well as those we find difficult to love. George W. Bush fell into the last.

Wisdom teachings everywhere acknowledge the benefits to oneself in cultivating good will and the dangers of allowing ill will to fester within. As Nelson Mandela said, “Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.” All great spiritual traditions mention kindness and forgiveness toward all beings. “All beings” includes our adversaries. You are also “all beings.” Formal *metta* practice always starts with self-*metta*. As part of my cancer self-care, I had been doing *metta* only for myself for many months already. Also, I recognized that there was grief at the root of my rage at the president, and I had been tending to that as well. Often, when we feel upset about something it’s because we care about it: our anger and rage are signs of our deep concern and grief. We can also

feel anger if we don’t feel seen, appreciated, or loved. Normally, I would not tell someone to do *metta* for others before they had tended to themselves, particularly where there’s anger or resentment. I was in touch with the sadness at the core of my detestation and was tending to it—I was ready to expand my care.

At that point, I had been studying Buddhism for over a decade, investigating its teachings of non-separation and interconnectedness. I directly experienced moments of oneness that dissolved illusory barriers. I understood that love is at the core of all existence. Over the years, I had worked with a go-to list of “difficult people” (one of the categories toward whom we direct loving-kindness) knowing that on a fundamental level I was intimately connected to absolutely everyone. I knew (like it or not) I was not separate from George W. Bush and all the Bushes, and all the people like the Bushes. President Bush was still a stretch.

Often, *metta* is practiced by repeating phrases of well-wishing (*may you be happy, may you be peaceful, may you be well, may you be free*) over and over toward oneself and others. I wanted to try doing *metta* for the president but I did not feel those phrases would feel genuine. I needed a practice that would really connect me to him, so I made up my own. Every morning, at the end of my regular sitting period, I imagined what it would be like to be George W. Bush. I started in the womb and pieced together the trajectory of his life from what I knew. I imagined growing up in the family he did, attending the schools he did, and inhabiting the social realities he did. For ten minutes almost every day for weeks, I practiced not being separate from George W. Bush, being in the story of his life from conception to present day. I contemplated with kindness and curiosity what it was to exist as him. I considered how it would be to have the same experiences, knowing

rationally that if I did, I would be him. If I lived his life, I would think the same thoughts, make the same decisions, be that same person. Then one morning, it came to me: *Oh, I would be George W. Bush.* Suddenly, I did not know this only on a mental level. This came to me as an insight: not as a thought, but as a deep knowing. I really understood that I belong to him, too. If I think any differently, I am in the delusion of separation. When I don't understand this, I am in the dynamic of domination.

Separation begets domination. In feeling separate from someone, especially someone with whom I disagree, there's a lack of care or connection to their experience. That separation can lead to the arrogance of assuming I do not belong to them and even that I am somehow better than them. Before my George W. Bush *metta* practice, I knew conceptually that someone's circumstances make them who they are. Yet, underneath there was an assumption that I would somehow be different if I were that person. It's an absurd idea when stated that way, but isn't that what we believe? We think someone with a completely different set of life circumstances, references, and realities, should think, act, and be different than they are; they should be how we want them to be, *and* we assume we would be different if we were them. We become enraged when they can't see things our way. We are frustrated by their inability to change their perspective to what we think is right. This is an *attitude* of domination—a belief of superiority. We even (maybe mostly) do this with people whom we love. Through this practice, rather than insist he be different, when I sensed George W. Bush's life, I felt immense gratitude to have lived mine and not his.

I had a hard time deciding to open this chapter this way. Years ago, when I had this insight, I experienced an all-encompassing

sense of relief. When I consider this insight now, I feel a sense of dread in asking others to consider this perspective. *What am I doing?* With all that has happened through history, with all that's going on in the world, do I need to start a conversation about domination by evoking loving-kindness toward someone who is likely guilty of war crimes? Maybe focusing on individuals distracts us from the real problem—systems (practices, laws, institutions) that are used to carry out oppression. Preaching kindness and forgiveness toward a rich retired white guy feels absurd as Black people are killed through state-sanctioned violence, imprisonment, and ongoing terror. I'm talking about feeling non-separation from individuals as children are ripped from their families and placed in filthy cages. I am calling for a connection to the sacred in everyone while people vilify Muslims and bombs are dropped on weddings and markets.

I became so overwhelmed by these considerations, I retreated to the womb-like warmth of a saltwater bath to soothe my unease (there are moments I highly recommend meditating in the bathtub—or simply take a bath). But I would rather feel this unease than succumb to the delusion of not writing this. This discomfort is one of my edges of belonging. And it's where I clearly see the domination at the heart of separation at work in me. It can be confusing to know intellectually I am not separate from others and then slip into a separative consciousness that leads me to belittle or feel superior to them. I would rather continue to explore the discomfort of contending with these paradoxes than defer to the arrogance of domination that assumes I would behave any differently if I were burdened with someone else's deluded life. This does not mean accepting injustice. As I've heard Buddhist teacher Dawa Tarchin Phillips say: *It's about taking a stand, not taking a side.* There's only one side—belonging. It

doesn't mean *not* standing up for what is right and just. Belonging includes challenging others and demanding change. But domination is *not* the same as disruption or defense. I aspire to non-harm always, and I can't dictate when a person might need to defend their family or community through resistance. Violence (including death) is a part of life, and sometimes resisting oppression might require aggression. How and when to use force against oppression is not a theme of this book. Knowing that we are not separate from or inherently better than anyone we oppose is.

Years after this presidential insight, I attended a weeklong silent retreat. A *metta* session was offered every afternoon. Each day, I included my ex as my difficult person—as I had done for hundreds of meditations over the years. By then I was happily married, healthy, and in a job I liked. I had no longing for that old relationship. But I still held on to the resentment about all the ways I felt wronged (which were a multitude). During the question period, I decided to ask the teacher, James Baraz, about this.

"I've been doing *metta* for my difficult person for a long time. I have gotten to the point where I truly do wish him well. I want him to be happy. But there's a part of me that's still resentful for all the hurt and pain in that relationship. I keep going over what happened and, well, I feel I was right."

James looked straight at me. He waited a beat then said, "You *are* right."

I breathed a deep sigh. "Thank you."

By constantly ruminating on my experiences with my ex, I was in an obsessive need to be superior. I *was* right. I couldn't let that simply be. By constantly reliving the past, I expended my (precious) energy on my need to be better than. This is adopting and

internalizing the dynamic of domination. I get to feel good about myself for seeing things clearly, for behaving more virtuously, for being separate. Rather than appreciate my capacity for wisdom (and use it to work toward change), I obsess over others—their perspective, speech, and actions. I did not need my ex to be different than reality dictated for him up to that moment. I don't expect George W. Bush (or any politician) to have had a different life. I save my energy for the present moment, for using my wisdom and compassion to take a stand (and address what has been screwed up by people's actions—distinguishing right from wrong, pointing out injustice, making steps to oppose and transform what I long to change).

That person, those people, these groups, systems, and structures would be different if the causes and conditions were other than what they are. Currently, this is the way things are. I do not need to be in contention with reality, wishing for a different past. If I want to change things, I start right now with what is closest to me. I do this knowing the truth of belonging which means I continually root out the ways I feel separate, the ways I dominate others. If we succumb to the delusion of separation, we will repeat the same mistakes. To transform these delusions, we need to understand how each one of us got here. We got here through these bodies.

### Not Belonging as an Embodied Habit

Some years ago, I was visiting Ethiopia with my husband. We took a six-day road trip with my mom and sister to the historic cities of Lalibela and Gondar: hours of driving in highlands dotted with small rural farming communities, thatched roof houses in the