

## **A New and Ancient Story Podcast with Charles Eisenstein**

Episode 04: Francis Weller: Of Grief and Reverence

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CE: Hello everybody, Charles Eisenstein once again. This week we're joined by Francis Weller, who is known for his work in grief and ritual and community. His latest book is called *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*. The title alone speaks deeply to me. I've never experienced his work in person but I've done some grief work, a little bit, with people who have trained with him. And I'm bringing this topic - I think it's really important when I speak of things like a more beautiful world, when I speak of hope, when I speak of possibilities beyond what we conventionally recognize as possible, when I speak about shifting our understanding of what's real - sometimes what happens is that people undergo a kind of spiritual bypass, where the things that actually need to be faced and engaged and healed are kind of left by the wayside because after all, we're moving into this glorious new future. But the problem if we try to do that is that the grief and sorrow, the wounds - they don't just disappear magically. They lay in wait ready to erupt, or slowly leaking toxins into our society, into our psyches. And sooner or later they call for healing, and that's something that's appealed to me quite a lot. So Francis, maybe I'll just ask you to riff on what I just said, and maybe how you got into this.

FW: OK, well, thanks for having me on, Charles. I think one of the most important pieces about grief is that it is really one of the primary ways that the heart remains soft. When we repress grief, when we turn away from it, one of the effects is a certain hardening of the heart. And if we want to enter into a more beautiful world that the heart knows is possible, the heart must remain responsive and reflexive. It has to have some capacity to be responsive to the circumstances of the world, both its beauty and its sorrow. But if we avoid it, if we turn away from it, it begins to congest [inaudible]. There's a beautiful little poem by Denise Levertov where she said, "To speak of sorrow works upon it / moves it from its crouched place barring the way to and from the soul's hall." It's a beautiful little instructive piece there, the [inaudible] don't work with our sorrow, the pathway even to our own experience of it being ensouled becomes congested and blocked. So we have to participate in sorrow. It's one of the ways [inaudible] moral obligation to digest the sorrows of the world, so that we can remain open and turning into the full encounter with life.

CE: Yeah. I think I know what you're talking about. I think I've experienced that if I don't have a safe way, or a way that feels safe to me, to experience sorrow - which, you know, growing up as a man especially in this culture, I haven't had. I haven't had a safe way. You know, in fact, if I showed any sign of sorrow or pretty much any emotion, I would be targeted by bullies or I would be shamed, or it would just create this kind of uncomfortable situation. So I learned to shut it down, to not feel. And so I've had a lifetime of practice in not feeling. And I think that's kind of what you're talking about, about hardening the heart, you know.

FW: Yeah, there's a certain wisdom in shutting down, in part because of the way we have been asked to experience our sorrow, which is in private.

CE: Yeah.

FW: And that isolation in a sense becomes a condition that the psyche recognizes as untenable to processing grief. So there's a certain way that we resist it and we avoid it because the conditions are not ripe for us to really encounter it. I can't tell you the number of times that people have come to grief gatherings who have said, I don't know why I'm here, I'm terrified. But by the time they begin to feel that they are doing it in the context of community or a village, some part of them begins to relax and says, oh my God, the permission has finally been granted. I can now enter that room, whereas I was not able to do that in my own solitude up until now.

CE: So I'm thinking that in other cultures grief was much more public, partly because all of life was a lot more public. People didn't have large contained homes where they lived their lives in isolation from each other. And I'm thinking, and it seems like you're saying that there's some aspect of grief that cannot be fully realized if it's in private.

FW: That's right. Grief requires two things to really be moved. One is containment and one is release. If I'm doing it privately, I'm asked to do two jobs at once, which I cannot do, so I end up becoming an ongoing containment vessel for grief but never really allowed to set it down. The community is the containment, a friend is the containment that allows me to then simply do one job, which is to release it, to set it down, to move into it and to express it. But we can't do it in private. We have to remember that grief has always been a communal process, always always been communal. Only until the very recent time has it become this very interior, private thing that we're asked to carry alone. And as you said before, Charles, almost with a quality of shame attached to it. Like, why aren't you over that? Or, what's wrong with you? You shouldn't be feeling this. So, what I've noticed over the years is that when we have an emotional experience that is not held by others and given that containment, it begins to have an attachment to it that's based on fear and shame. So I rarely see someone having a pure grief experience; they're having a grief terror experience or a grief shame experience, because those other things have become so enmeshed in it. And part of our job as a community when we gather is to begin to take off the fear and take off the shame and simply sit with the sorrows that are around us all the time.

CE: Mm-hmm. So, there's two things I want to explore. One is, when this really deep important aspect of life becomes public, or not necessarily public in the sense that the whole world gets to see it, but public in the sense that it's shared with others, and you're talking about it in community - I can't help but think that once you've opened up this intimate realm of sharing, that other - you can't just have community for grief and not community for other things too, right? [inaudible] a step toward community, which is what so many people are searching for.

FW: Yes. I consider grief a threshold emotion. When we can really enter that room together, it opens up the door to all the other rooms. But again, if that's a place where the heart congeals and tightens, what possibility do I have of really entering into a much deeper, more intimate connection with you, or with a tree or with a creek or with the world? So again, that threshold

place of sorrow is so fundamental to opening up into joy. I remember I walked up to a woman in Africa and I said to her, "You have so much joy." And she turned to me and said, "That's because I cry a lot." It was a profoundly important moment, to see the connection between joy, exuberance, play, laughter - they come through that threshold place of probably the most common experience of human beings.

CE: Yeah. I've actually quoted that story. I've heard you tell it before. Why do you experience so much joy? It's because I cry a lot. Because I think that kind of answers - one way that the discomfort with grief gets expressed is oh, you know, this is getting really heavy, or this is getting really negative, let's not wallow in it. There's this fear that if you enter grief, you're going to get stuck there.

FW: Exactly, Charles. I think there's this sense that grief is somewhat of a dead zone. And that's why I called the title of my book, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, because sorrow is nothing but feral. It's wild. It's so saturated with life force that when we're in it, in some strange way we feel most alive. It's an ironic state. And in a sense, when we're in it, I feel most intimate with all of life. So we have this projection onto sorrow and onto grief as if it is some depressed state. Well, it only becomes that way because of our avoidance. We become *oppressed* by the weight of all the unexpressed grief in our life. And so in a sense, we have the sense that it's a dead state or a negative state that we should avoid at all costs, and we should always focus on being happy. Happy is the new Mecca in our culture, and in consequence we don't know how to befriend and take up what I call an apprenticeship with sorrow, that allows us to enter into a much deeper, more contact-ful and in a sense more compassionate encounter with the world.

CE: Yeah. It's an interesting metaphor, Mecca, because I think that the point of a pilgrimage is not that the destination itself brings you the spiritual experience. It's the journey to that destination, where you have to travel through the desert to get to Mecca.

FW: That's right, that's right.

CE: And if you're just magically transported there and haven't traversed the territory in between, then you haven't actually made a journey.

FW: Well, I often say to the people I'm working with that the work of a mature human being is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other, and to be stretched large by these two things. And what I've seen in some people who just focus on the gratitude is they lack a certain depth of compassion. But I've also seen those people who are caught only in grief begin to turn more bitter and cynical.

CE: Yes.

FW: So they need each other. You know, the more grief I can hold, that's in a sense the more compassion and the more gratitude I can feel. And they are meant to really stretch us large. We're meant to be immense human beings, not simply struggling through life and coping and

enduring. I can't tell you the number of people who I see who have these strong endurance muscles, but what they need is some experience of being held sufficiently so that they can begin to relax and open back up to this kind of rambunctious life that we've been offered.

CE: Yeah. One of my favorite sayings is "Enlightenment is a group process."

FW: That's great.

CE: You know, in the mentality of separation, we think that it's this thing that we're supposed to do under our own power.

FW: Yeah, it's so interesting too, Charles. What I see is that, hidden in our striving for enlightenment or perfection, is a hidden self-hatred, that unless I get myself perfect I'll never be allowed into the circle. There's an underlying anxiety about exclusion, which is that whole separation story, isn't it? We have very little faith that I'm already in.

CE: Well, yeah, in part because we live in a society and among systems that exclude us by their very nature.

FW: Correct.

CE: The economic system is exclusive, [inaudible] exclusionary. Even the world view that holds us in separation to nature, to matter, to other people, you know, it says that we're a separate self in a world of other, that you're a separate individual, that you're a mote of consciousness inside a prison made of flesh, the world outside of ourselves is just a bunch of stuff and the events of our lives are random and arbitrary and so forth. That ideology and everything built on it alienates us from a sense of belonging. If you think that you belong in the world, truly belong in the world and that you're at home in the universe - well, you're just kind of deluded. Because actually it's just a bunch of matter out there, and you're imagining things and projecting meaning and so on and so forth. And so there's this kind of niggling doubt or this niggling discomfort, that even if I'm having an experience of beauty or intimacy or connection, there's this little voice in me: is it real? Is it OK? Can you stay here? Can you trust this?

FW: Yeah. Yeah.

CE: That's a wound. I guess maybe that's something that needs to be grieved.

FW: Well, you know, when I talk about the gates of grief, that's one of the fourth gates. That quality of what we expected and did not receive. We expected to be embedded in a living world and a living cosmology. We expected to get up in the morning and be greeted by dozens of eyes looking back at us wondering what we dreamt last night.

CE: Yeah.

FW: We expected to share grief rituals and celebration rituals of thanksgiving. We expected to share food together. One of the most envious times in my life was when I spent time in Africa and every night at dusk the commons would just swell with people, sharing stories and millet beer and the children would be running around playing, and I didn't know which child belonged to whom because if any child was nursing they could go to any mother with milk. It was astonishing. It was just such an experience of inclusion. And that's when we have happy hour in our culture.

CE: Yeah.

FW: It's as if, we'll give you half price drinks to somehow drown out the sorrow of not being given what I call primary satisfactions.

CE: And children are not allowed in.

FW: Right! You know, the things that we expected that did not materialize is a source of profound grief that we don't even know how to name.

CE: Yeah, this is something that's really big for me. I write about this a lot too. I love the phrase that you just used: the commons swells with people. And so in this society, even if you've been pretty fortunate, you weren't abused as a child and didn't suffer terrible oppression and racism and so on - even if you've had what is considered a good life here in America, there's still this sense of something missing. This longing.

FW: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, we've been granted secondary satisfactions in this culture. Secondary satisfactions like rank, privilege, wealth, material goods, and then the more shadowy side, addictions.

CE: Right.

FW: And you can then never get enough of secondary satisfaction.

CE: That's right, yeah.

FW: But when you're inside primary satisfactions, like being in the village, you're not aching for the new TV. You're not aching for the new car. You're not wondering what's on TV tonight. You're inside of something that satisfies the soul at a primary level. And in that place, we don't need a whole lot other than what we've got right there.

CE: Sometimes when I lead processes in retreats and things, when a really strong sense of intimacy and belonging and connection arises and we're all fused as a group, I'll say, "OK, so who wants to go shopping right now?"

FW: Exactly. Yeah.

CE: I read about it in terms of greed, because one of the primary memes out there is that the problem with the world is greed, and if we could only take down the greedy people and extirpate the greed within ourselves then we would live in a better world, and I say no, the greed is a symptom. And it's exactly what you're saying. It's a, what were you saying, secondary -

FW: Satisfaction.

CE: Secondary satisfactions, yeah. I speak in terms of substitutes for what we really need. And like, how many yachts or sports cars or bank accounts or square foot of housing do you need to meet that unrequited longing for the commons swelling with people, and every child knowing everybody and calling them uncle? How much does it take? An infinite amount, that's how much.

FW: Right, because what you're trying to do is satisfy the emptiness that cannot be satisfied by anything other than the thing that's meant to fill that space.

CE: Yes.

FW: Primary experience of connection, belonging, participation, intimacy - those things, like you said beautifully, when we have it, we're not looking to go shopping. We're not trying to find something to fill it up, because we are full.

CE: I'm - are you still there Francis, can you hear me?

FW: I am, yeah.

CE: Hey, so I love the five gateways of grief. I think I probably can even remember them, because I've been introduced to them a couple of times, but do you want to just name the other ones and maybe say just a little bit about them?

FW: Sure. The first gate is the one that we are most familiar with, which is that everything we love we will lose. And that's a hard one, but we've all experienced deaths in our life - either the death of a partner, a friend, a child. That's a primary experience, a great tear in the soul, to experience that first gate of grief. That also includes illness, the loss of a home, the loss of a pet, these things that we have become so intimately attached to and bonded to. When they disappear, it's a great sorrow. However, that's the only grief in our culture that's formally acknowledged. Someone will say to you, "I'm really sorry for your loss." But about the second gate. The second gate is those parts of us that [inaudible] love. In other words, we are enculturated into a society that deems some parts of us unwelcome. So we have to cleave off anger, or sadness, or even joy or sensuality or imagination. And every time we cleave off a piece of us, it is a denigration to the integrity of the psyche. And those are places of loss [inaudible] simultaneously to somehow judge them and to in a sense despise those parts of us.

And so we're caught in this precarious situation not being able to grieve something because of the contempt, because of the judgment. It's a perpetual state of sorrow.

CE: And you call that a gate to grief because when we recognize that that's happened, then the grief opens up. Is that why you call it a gate to grief?

FW: Oh, absolutely. That's really the essence of my work in my private practice with people. They're coming in there because of various symptoms, whether depression or a marital problem. But underneath it primarily what you're experiencing is loss - a loss of integrity, a loss to their wholeness, a loss to their sense of being able to move in the world and show who they are in their entirety. So that's a [inaudible] experience of grief.

CE: Yeah. OK.

FW: The third gate is the sorrows of the world. Right now we are just being overwhelmed by the news and the information, whether it's the polar caps melting and glaciers disappearing, or another species silenced, or even another language silenced. There's a language going silent every two weeks in the world, which is astonishing, what we're losing.

CE: Yeah. I just wanted to throw in there - the sorrows of the world. And maybe you can touch back on this later, but sometimes it just seems so overwhelming that it's almost a healthy response to shut it down at least some of the time. Otherwise one might feel paralyzed, you know?

FW: And that's primarily because we're asked to carry that privately. I've done many grief rituals now just for the environmental movements. And they come in so weighted down by the weight of those sorrows. But by the time we leave, they realize that there's actually more energy and more aliveness and more vitality in their body, to go back out and do some more, whatever they can, to ease the sorrows of the world. But these things are around us all the time. When I drive to work in the morning I'll see a raccoon or a fox or a squirrel dead by the side of the road all the time, and you're right, it can become overwhelming. But the necessity of facing it - that's really, again, our moral and spiritual obligation is to have some sense of what the world is experiencing right now. But we cannot do that in isolation. That's really [inaudible]. The fourth gate I just mentioned was what we expected and did not receive. And then the last gate is what I call ancestral grief. It's the sorrows that not only come to us from our own personal lineage but also our cultural lineages - what happened here on this continent when our ancestors arrived here, [inaudible] the environment, the importation of slavery - these things still haunt us. These are still sorrows that have not been reconciled and addressed in any really meaningful way, and that's part of what's burning in the cities right now.

CE: Yeah. Yeah, that's something I've also - one of the things that blocks people from really acknowledging what's happened on this continent is that there's no way for them to process the grief of it, and so it just becomes this unbearable guilt or shame that doesn't have an outlet. And so they get defensive, in a way wisely: I'm not going to let in more of this horror than my grief-

processing apparatus can handle. And because the grief-processing apparatus isn't available, there's this inability to recognize the genocide, the slavery. And therefore on the other side then there's no possibility for forgiveness, either. There's no possibility for acknowledgement or forgiveness. And then you trace the story back: who were these Europeans who came over? Most of them were fleeing war, starvation or debt. A huge proportion of them came over as debt peons, where they landed in New England or wherever and had to work for seven years or fourteen years or however long just to pay the cost of their passage.

FW: Right.

CE: And so you have the oppression being passed from one hand to the next to the next. And I think that grief - one of the criticisms of - sometimes I'm involved in conversations that are more political in nature and people will say, well, yes, grief circle, that would be very nice, working on ourselves, but we don't really have time for that now. It's kind of this almost bourgeois indulgence to convene a grief circle when there are people actually suffering much more out there, and while you're having your grief circle in some hotel conference room - I know I'm painting an unfair caricature here, but OK, at a retreat center somewhere - while you're doing that there are people being droned and bombed and working in sweatshops and.... so there's this kind of idea that mirrors the private nature of grief, that says that this is somehow apolitical. But I think it's the opposite. I think that we will not have truly compassionate politics unless we're able to let in the truth, and we can only let in the truth that hurts so much if we have ways to process the grief.

FW: That's precisely correct. Again, that's another threshold place. If we allow the grief to touch us, we become much more intimate with the fact of the world, how it actually expresses itself. You know, if we're just reacting and trying to muscle a change, we are in a sense repeating the same trauma all over again. So what I've found, particularly with a lot of the activists who come to the grief rituals, is how much more spacious they are when they leave. And they come back again and again. They begin to see this as part of their soul maintenance.

CE: Yeah.

FW: This is how they gather and release, gather and release. And if we were really sane, we'd be having grief rituals every month. We would not be gathering this stuff and carrying it around in a U-Haul. We are just trudging this stuff through the world, which I think over time does eat away at our sense of joy, our sense of intimacy, and begins to become more and more into a sense of bitterness and hopelessness.

CE: So, would you mind sharing - well, maybe I'll say one more thing that came to me. For me there's this kind of irrational aspect to grief. Certain things pierce me, and I can't objectively say that they're more horrific than - in fact, I could objectively say that they're less horrific than other things happening on this planet. But for some reason they pierce me, they get inside. Like, recently I found out that in North Carolina, where I've moved to, there are these companies that are basically finding - they're taking old oak trees and any stand of timber that they can find, and



walking up to the farmer or the landowner and saying here's a fat check, and then they take it and they make wood chips out of it, and export the wood chips to the UK to be burned in power plants that then get carbon credits because the wood chips are a renewable resource.

FW: Wow.

CE: And, you know, two hundred year old oaks being woodchipped. And somehow, that's one of the things that just - I mean I just - they have these giant machines that basically take the tree from the top and RRRRRR and in ten seconds they can pulverize a two hundred year old tree.

FW: That reminds me of Wendell Berry, when he said there are no such things as sacred places and non-sacred places. There is only sacred and desecrated places.

CE: Mm-hmm.

FW: And that's an act of desecration. When we have lost some meaningful contact with the world as a sacred presence, this is what we can do. And again, that's a consequence of the heart being closed and cut off from the living essence of life. It's very sad.

CE: You know, just now I realized why that one gets me. It's not only because I feel sorrow for the tree. It's also because there's this indignant part of me that's protesting that basically that whole industry denies an ancient part of myself that knows that every tree is sacred and that the world, as Wendell Berry says, that every place is sacred, and that the trees are beings that deserve respect. And so there's that part of myself that is alive, I think, in every child, that was crushed or abused or oppressed, and named as irrational or emotional or whatever. I feel - yeah, I feel kind of oppressed. I feel like my knowing has been abused or a certain part of myself has been destroyed. Do you know what I'm talking about?

FW: Oh, absolutely. Yes. It hasn't been destroyed, it has been denied. The very fact you're having this response says it's still alive.

CE: Yeah, that's true.

FW: The grief response itself is our intimate connection to the world. Now that's what we have to understand, is that the reason you're feeling this for those trees is because there is a bond between the two of you, and grief is our recognition of that bond. And when that bond is severed or it's violated, what's the proper response? The heart goes into sorrow.

CE: Yeah.

FW: So it's still alive. That's part of what I keep telling people about the grief. This *is* your declaration of love. This *is* the way your heart is responding to what's happening in the world. This is so intimately connected to our love and to our affection and our intimacy with life.

CE: Right now I'm thinking of, you know the Supertramp song, The Logical Song? "When I was young, life was so beautiful, magical, something something, a miracle."

FW: Oh yes. Yeah.

CE: "And the birds in the trees, they were singing so happily, joyfully." I think then he says, "watching me." Like there's this sense that the birds are singing to him, of being in this living, magical universe, and then what happens? "Then they took me away," he says. "They took me away, taught me how to be practical, logical."

FW: Logical, yes.

CE: Yeah. That one really - that's almost an anthem for the grief movement.

FW: Yeah. I like that. That's very, very true. Very true.

CE: Francis, would you say there was a precipitating event or something that unlocked for you the importance of grief?

FW: I think it's more cumulative than precipitating. I've been around a lot of losses, I think. My dad had a massive stroke when I was fifteen. He never spoke again, and in a sense he and I never had a conversation our whole life, and he died a few years after that. But I think what kind of got to me was more of my own [inaudible] in that second gate of losing my own self, living a lot with feelings of shame and worthlessness, not feeling like I belonged in the world, feeling like I was an edge-dweller, trying to be perfect, trying to find a way [inaudible] they might, might tolerate my presence here. And then I did a training with an African teacher named Malidoma Somé and in the midst of it this profound sadness came up, because it was a village training, and this profound sadness came up and I wrote to him and we got together and talked, and I began to understand that this sadness was coming up because I was tasting something that had been deprived me most all my life. And in that time of working with him, we began to do - we worked together for about five years, teaching together and began offering a lot of rituals, and I began to see that my practice as a therapist could do only so much with people. We could begin to touch the grief, we could begin to work with it, but what we really need is the community process. That's really the fundamental context that our psyche is waiting to encounter, in order to fully, in a sense, show up in the world and to fully express all of who we are. So these various threads have come together over many, many years. I never volunteered for the position, but I've certainly ended up on that front line doing this kind of work, which I'm deeply, deeply grateful for. It's a profound process to sit with thirty or so people at a time and begin to hear the various threads of all the different sorrows. And what I say to them ultimately is, this is not your sorrow, it's ours. This is our communal cup, and during our time together we might be able to empty it a little bit to make more room for life, more room for compassion, more room for joy, so that we can actually engage this life, again, in a sense that this is an honor and a privilege to be in this body.

CE: Wow. And I guess another thing I'm wondering - I've spoken to you before, actually, on the phone, and one question I asked you is - sometimes I lead workshops and retreats and often, maybe usually, a really deep intimate group entity forms. And then we all go home, and maybe there's a Facebook group that gets started and some of the energy persists for a while, but eventually life swallows us up again. Sometimes I feel like I can't even do too many of these retreats every year. In fact I don't do too many every year, because it's kind of like falling in love and then the love affair ends abruptly after three days and then - how many times a year can you fall deeply in love and then lose it again without suffering some kind of damage to your soul? So the reason I mention that now is you're doing something similar, maybe, where even a deeper intimacy, something really profound arises, and then everyone goes back home again. Doesn't that engender a new source of grief? Isn't what we really need not just workshops or gatherings, but something that's integrated into normal life, daily life, and how do we do that?

FW: That's a really essential question. If we were sane, like I was saying before, we would have grief rituals in every community, regularly. We would also have thanksgiving rituals regularly. Again, there's the grief and gratitude. What I tell people at the retreats, because this issue always comes up on Sunday, about we're going to leave now. I say, absolutely. But I say we don't live inside of primary satisfaction. We visit it in this culture. We have visitation rights to primary satisfaction. We don't live there, and when we leave, there's an ache, I say, but that ache is now your homing beacon. It's the thing that tells you, that is what I want to head to as often as possible. I want to be near that energy field as often as possible, because that's where I am most alive and that's where I can be most authentic, is in those spaces. So it certainly is sad to [inaudible] that space and then having to leave it. But we've tasted it. It is now a taste I know and I want that. And that wanting, that longing becomes really, like I say, a kind of compass heading. I want to move towards what is alive. I want to move towards what brings me alive, and I can find it. And in fact, when I go home, I'm going to invite my neighbors, I'm going to invite my friends over and we're going to have conversations about this. How do we build this at home? In fact that's kind of how I got started in a lot of this work, was I felt the absence of village. I felt too alone in the world. So I began to actually create villages. We would invite twenty people together at a time to build little, sustainable, non-local villages that were committed to each other's soul lives. And now there's [inaudible] spirit initiation work. I bring [inaudible] in ways that form intimate, bonded communities. We have thirteen of those up and down the whole West Coast. All of my work is designed to create sustainable contexts for connection. Even those people who come to the [inaudible] grief rituals come again and again and again, it's almost like a home body for them. They come back, they know the people, and we go further.

CE: Yeah.

FW: You keep digging the ground deeper by repetition, soulful repetition. It's essential in our life.

CE: One of the criticisms I face sometimes is that when I provide these intimate spaces or these transformative spaces or whatever you call them, and give a glimpse of what's possible for human beingness and relationship and things, that in a way, what if I'm just providing this

temporary high, and the people go back and it almost makes their humdrum lives of complicity with the machine a little bit more tolerable, because they've gotten this uplifting experience? And so there's that kind of criticism, that maybe it even defuses energy that might otherwise go toward creating positive change. But I think that actually - I mean, I've taken that criticism in, but what I find in actual experience is that, like you say, it creates a homing beacon that, the way I put it is that it makes normal seem less normal, and makes what was told us was real seem less real, because we've had an experience otherwise and no longer can we believe that it can't be any other way. These experiences that you're offering are not some exception to normality, but they are a kind of promise of what's possible, that actually makes people less tolerant of the status quo. And changes then happen in their lives that are not necessarily - it's not like they had this experience and vowed to make some kind of change. It's that they went back to their lives changed. And the things that had been - oh, someday I should do such and such, or I should quit that job, or I should - those things that had been theoretical become an undeniable necessity.

FW: That's well said, Charles. What I talk about in terms of the values of grief - one of them I mentioned already, that it keeps the heart soft and reflexive.

CE: Yeah.

FW: That's a way of building compassion. But also, grief is a form of protest. It's a way of saying, I refuse to live numb and small. And so if I am going to engage my grief it means that what I'm experiencing is not acceptable. So rather than finding a way to kind of anaesthetize my discomfort by going to these workshops, it actually has the opposite effect. It brings me alive.

CE: Right.

FW: And my response to the world of what I see, whether it's in the grocery store or on the street or wherever, is to be a little bit more open to responding in a meaningful way, in a helpful way, rather than a deadened way. So it is actually a form of protest. I will not numb and - I often talk about the two primary sins of culture, amnesia and anaesthesia, that we forget and we go numb. And our [inaudible] to remember and to stay alive.

CE: Yeah. One thing I would say is, our system could not work if people were not numb.

FW: Correct.

CE: The only way that we can run the prison system and the court system - I've been reading this stuff about how bail works. In the court system, I'm not sure if you've read about this, but someone gets charged with some minor crime, possession of marijuana or something like that, and because they can't make bail they sit in jail for weeks or months, sometimes even years, waiting to get arraigned. And if they were just tried and found guilty they might serve a five-day jail sentence. But that kind of - no one thinks that that's a good thing, but it's not an intolerable thing. It's not the thing that would make a prosecutor or a judge quit his job and protest,

because they're numb enough to it that it's within their level of acceptability to kind of go along with it and privately say, well, you know, I wish things were different but what can I do about it? This complicity, again, is a target of some activists who think that they can, as you put it, muscle the change, force people by guilting them or shaming them. Shame on you, you're complicit with the system, can't you see what's happening? But the only reason those people are complicit, I think, and can go along with it, is because they're not feeling it. If they felt it they wouldn't be able to do it. They would literally be unable to pass that sentence, you know?

FW: I think we have an entire structure designed towards anaesthesia, to keep us as dissociated from our primary experience of the moment as possible. Partly to tolerate the meager existence that we've been offered. We get game shows and lottery tickets and meaningless jobs. We can't really tolerate those feeling states of being offered such meaningless things unless we were numb. So I agree with what you're saying entirely. We have to come back to life.

CE: So I'm just going to throw in one more thing and then maybe we'll conclude. This comes up a lot of times when I describe those aspects of traditional societies that I think that we could learn from. So the response, the reaction sometimes, aside from the usual "you're romanticizing the past" etc etc, indulging in orientalism and fetishizing the Other and so forth - it's like, come on Charles, they couldn't have been that great, because look at these cultures that do have public ways of holding grief, in Africa for example. Well, these are the same places that have tremendous brutality, warlordism, child soldiery. Some of the most heinous things on earth are happening in the very places that do have grief practices. And I could rebut that criticism, but I think I'll let you do it.

FW: Well, when you impose an economic system and a political system and a hierarchical system based on power on top of an indigenous people, some of those symptoms will certainly fall into place. On the rural level, on the village level, those cultures are still relatively intact. Those practices help keep people bonded to one another. And I certainly don't idealize them. I'm not trying to impersonate them, I'm not trying to import their traditions, I'm trying to look at what [inaudible] make a culture sustainable long term. And there are cultures like the San Bushmen that have been there 75,000 to 125,000 years, intact. How the hell did they do that?

CE: Yeah.

FW: What [inaudible] possible, that's my curiosity. Not how do we become like them, but what are the core structures, what are the core practices, what are the core values that allow a culture to sustain themselves? We've been here 500 years and we're gasping for air. So I look at them: they have healing rituals every week where the entire village gets together and they dance from dusk until dawn to bring healing to their village, so that everyone - they say when one of us is ill, all of us are ill. Now that's a cosmology of inclusion.

CE: Yes.

FW: Rather than, he's sick, that's his problem, not mine. So I'm looking at what are the values, not idealizing any particular people, but what would make it possible for us to come back into some semblance of connectivity and sustainability, not in an economic sense but in a soul sense, in our communities. That's what I'm trying to do.

CE: Yeah. Thank you for that. I look at it in a similar way, that our story, the way I put it is our story isn't working any more.

FW: No.

CE: We no longer, even inside the dominant culture, we no longer have the faith in our ways that we had even thirty or forty years ago.

FW: No.

CE: Where forty years ago few people, even radicals, doubted that technology and science was going to make the world awesome in the future, and that we were on the right path, that we were going to figure it out, create a better and better society, that we had the essential tools to do that in our culture, and that we were more advanced than other cultures. And now that certainty is really dissipating and it's bringing us to humility. A humility is beginning to emerge that says maybe we don't have all the answers, maybe we have to look outside our culture to find threads of a new tapestry. Which of course, as you were saying, doesn't mean to import practices and rip them out of their context and start copying the rituals of Native Americans or whoever. That's still actually a kind of colonialism, I think.

FW: Absolutely.

CE: But to learn from them, to say we're no longer going to your places and telling you how to be human. In fact, we're not really sure how to be human and maybe you have a piece of it that you can teach us.

FW: Yes. What comes to mind is a phrase from John O'Donohue. He said, "What you encounter, recognize or discover depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach. When you approach with reverence, great things decide to approach us." So when we approach our grief with reverence, when we approach other cultures with reverence, something profound can begin to appear in the exchange. But if we approach with either judgment or certainty or the story of domination, we won't encounter much, we won't recognize much, nor will we discover much. We will simply end up in the same place we began.

CE: When we approach with reverence, great things will come to us.

FW: Great things will decide to approach us.

CE: Ah, when we approach with reverence, great things will decide to approach us. That seems to me like a - that's almost an all-encompassing recipe for a different relationship to the world. We could do that with nature as well.

FW: Absolutely.

CE: The trees, the soil, the water.

FW: Yeah, this idea of the reverence of approach has become of my keystones of how I try to move in all circles, because that really is a foundational piece, isn't it? To come to all of our experience, to befriend it. Even the most difficult things we encounter: can I befriend it? Can I approach it with reverence? Can I see it, as Oscar Wilde said, where there is sorrow there is holy ground? Well, how should we approach holy ground? I think reverence is the right attitude, the right approach.

CE: Yeah, as opposed to, why is this happening to me?

FW: Yeah, or how do I fix this or how do I get out of it? How do I avoid it? How do I overcome it? We tend to have this very heroic, muscular approach to our deep emotional lives, and that's not what it wants. That part of our soul life really wants some type of welcome, some type of acknowledgment, and I spend most of my work with people helping them to come into a much more benevolent and compassionate encounter with their own experience. We can't control what comes into our life, but we can have an impact on how we respond to our sorrows. A lot of [inaudible] ironically comes about by the stories we attach to our experience of suffering. Like, somehow I was bad, I was wrong, I'm being punished, I wasn't good enough. Those stories become a whole other source of sorrow and loss. And how do we hold our experience simply with compassion?

CE: Wow. Thank you for those words.

FW: You're welcome.

CE: Yeah. Really, I'm taking those in. And I feel like I need to hear things like that [inaudible]. Like, hearing it once - I guess because it's kind of an antidote not only to the cultural messages that I'm bombarded with all the time, but internalized culture that I bombard myself all the time with. Even with - intellectually I get it, I get what you're saying, but these habits are really deep within me: self-rejecting, self-judging.

FW: Yup.

CE: And trying to fix myself, and conditioning my self-love on whether I've measured up to some kind of standard of goodness.

FW: Yeah, and you can hear underneath all that the anxiety of belonging. Unless I get myself together, unless I polish this stone up really nicely, I won't be let in. And what if that's a given? What if your ticket's already been punched by the very fact that you've taken this shape in the world? And can we act that way? Can we begin to come into connections with other human beings and with the natural world in a way that doesn't feel like somehow I'm an intruder, but actually I'm an integral part to the ongoing extending creation? We need it. One of our deepest griefs is to feel like we're unnecessary, like I'm just an extra in the machinery of culture.

CE: That's what our economy does.

FW: Exactly. Exactly.

CE: In a real way, if you immerse in economic thinking, you are unnecessary, because somebody else could do your role, so we could pay somebody else to do it. You're replaceable. To the extent that you're reduced to a job description and a producer of standardized things, you're replaceable.

FW: Well, one of the most obscene phrases we have in our culture is "you have to earn a living." It's an obscene phrase. It makes it seem like it's up to me to somehow prove my worthiness to have this existence, rather than this is a gift. You often write about and talk about the gift culture, right?

CE: Yeah.

FW: This is it! I mean, this is the gift, that we've been given these breaths, this chance to touch and to see and to feel and to love and to connect. What an amazing gift! I don't have to earn that. The difference between earning a living and seeing that you carry medicine and gift for the culture is a profound one. In our initiation work, we work to see and to really watch how that person's gift is showing up and the way they connect with other people. And then we name that gift and we give them another name to help carry that, again, because we need to feel like my ability to touch someone else may not, quote, "earn me a living" but it could make me alive. It could bring me alive. And that's what we - we want to be asked that: what gift did you bring to the community? Rather than, how do you earn your living?

CE: Yes. Francis, I want to just ask you how people can - I suppose you have a website and if people want to join one of the grief communities or processes that you lead, but also, even as a first step, do you have any - you know what, actually? I hate it when people ask me that. When they ask me, OK, what's the first step that we can take? I say, you already know what that is.

FW: Yeah.

CEL Just having heard this material, having felt the vibration. You know what that first step is. It's not, go into the pattern of carrying out the instructions of an authority figure. So you know what, I'm not going to ask you, actually, what the first step people could take is. But instead I'm



going to ask you, is there one more - and you can tell us your website and stuff like that, but in addition to that, I'd also like you to impregnate us with one more seed crystal, if there's another one on top of all the beautiful things you've said already.

FW: Well, what's coming to mind, Charles, is a poem by Rumi, where he says, "Today, like every other day we wake up empty and scared. Don't open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument. Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground." We have to learn to track beauty. And it's beautiful when we're together, weeping together, when we're crying together, because oftentimes by the end of it we are in such a state of joy together. So there is a profound relationship between beauty and joy and sorrow, and just to be willing to entertain them, to be a good host to whoever comes. That's really, I think, what's being asked of us. It isn't so much trying to figure it out, but to be generous in our attention and generous in our ability to affectionately welcome what comes. It will change things, I promise you. If you can make space for these even difficult guests that arrive, like sorrow, it will change you. And my website is <http://www.wisdombridge.net>. How's that? [laughter]

CE: That's very [inaudible] of you. Thank you. All right. Well, this was such a pleasure. I can't wait to put this up and share all of this with people. So, once again, I've been speaking with Francis Weller.