

Do We Live in a Hostile or Friendly Universe?

If you read or watch the news regularly, particularly at the moment, you will definitely be tempted to believe that we live in an incredibly hostile universe. You will probably think that everything is getting worse day by day, and that our future well-being is constantly threatened by a whole range of hostile forces such as a 'killer' virus, floods, terrorists and last but not least, far too many people stupidly voting the wrong way in elections.

I suppose the mass media loves to frighten us like this because fear must sell more newspapers. But the terrible danger of all this scary news is that frightened people tend to put up more and more defensive barricades, or even worse, lash out and try and destroy their enemies before their enemies destroy them. More fear creates more violent defences against perceived dangers until the whole world is permanently at war.

Yet I put the question 'Is the world getting better?' into a search box on my computer and I immediately found an article that demonstrated that on virtually all of the key dimensions of human well-being, including poverty, health, literacy and freedom, the world as a whole has improved tremendously over the last 200 years. Even over the last 50 years, there have been some big changes for the better. If you find that hard to believe, I am afraid you have a very poor grasp of world history!

So the world as a whole is definitely getting better, but what about your own personal life? Occasionally, you may feel that the world is really going your way, but most of the time, if you are anything like me, you probably tend to focus more on what is going wrong in your life, rather than what is working really well. I assume you got some refreshing sleep last night and that when you woke up this morning you had a choice of drinks and food to sustain you - let alone a wardrobe full of clothes to choose from. But I would also place a pretty secure bet on the fact that since waking up this morning, you have expressed at least one complaint about your life or the world in which you live – if only under your breath.

We really have never had it so good, at least in the material sense, and yet we do not feel particularly optimistic or fulfilled as we trudge through our daily lives, do we? Is it our world that is the problem, or our own mind? Some Buddhists may insist that all our problems lie in mind and not in the world around us. However, I am prepared to accept that our world is still far from perfect, and that when a virus strikes us down with mega-flu, or when a close friend is diagnosed with cancer, we do have every right to feel pretty downhearted or even afraid for a short while.

Nevertheless, from my own 30 years of awakening and self-healing, I am convinced that if we truly want to be happier in the long run, we all need to make a concerted effort each day of our lives to see the universe as friendly, rather than hostile. One sure way to do this is to be prepared to give up all our egoic judgements about ourselves, other people and the world as a whole. For example, if a friend is diagnosed with any kind of serious illness, our

instant egoic judgement is something like 'How awful! How could a truly loving God allow such a terrible thing to happen to such a wonderful human being!' But if we stop for a moment and ask ourselves whether we can really, really know what is for our friend's highest good, the answer will always be a resounding No!

For example, one of my close friends was diagnosed with a debilitating chronic illness many years ago, and whilst most people might see this as proof that the universe is hostile, she chose to use her illness as a push to follow an awakening/healing path. She now insists that she is glad she was given that illness, because without it, she would not be nearly so happy and fulfilled as she is today.

This simple idea that we cannot ever know what is in our long term best interest is so liberating. Accepting that we do not know, and cannot know, what is for anyone's highest good enables us to resign as general manager of the universe. It also assists us to practise cultivating inner peace and compassion as antidotes to our usual egoic judgements based on fear and anger. From this perspective, any difficult situation in life that pushes us to cultivate inner peace or loving kindness or compassion more urgently may well be a blessing in disguise.

Looking back on my own life, I can now see for example that what my younger-self regarded as the tragedy of never meeting Mr Right was actually the catalyst for an amazing spiritual journey that has brought untold blessings into my life. As a young woman, I was absolutely convinced that falling in love with the right man, marrying him and having his babies would make me blissfully happy ever after. How wrong can one person be??

We can all look back on our lives and see quite clearly how often our younger-self got it all wrong from time to time, and yet we are still convinced that we now know what we need in order to be happy in the future. We not only believe we know what is best for our own perfect future, we also think we know what is best for all our friends and loved ones - who are usually far too stupid to follow our 'wise' advice!

So, instead of constantly getting on my high horse and putting the world to rights, these days, I like to step back and smile at the part of myself who still loves to do this. I also love to sit and open up to the idea that on the soul level, each and every one of us has chosen to learn certain core lessons this lifetime and some of us may even have chosen to experience some pretty traumatic events in our lives in order to learn one crucial lesson; maybe for example a lesson about forgiveness, compassion or healing.

Take one of my top spiritual heroes, Frank Ostaseski who founded a hospice in San Francisco for people dying of AIDS in the 1980s. This guy had a terrible childhood as the son of two alcoholic parents. Then, he was sexually abused by a Catholic priest, but somehow, these traumatic early events in his life did not leave him bitter or twisted. In fact, they played a

role in him becoming an outstanding pioneer in the hospice movement. I bet if you asked him whether we live in a friendly universe, his answer would be an unequivocal 'Yes!!'

So this merry month of March (why should May have all the fun?) may I suggest that you at least play around with the idea that our whole universe is basically friendly, despite so many appearances to the contrary. Could you simply open up to the possibility that Life Itself is longing for you to enjoy the miracle of each present moment. Could you please imagine, just for a moment or two, that God, whether you believe in him or not, longs for you to know that you are always loved beyond your wildest dreams and that you are divinely protected in the midst of even the most challenging times of your life?

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