
Nena Cares for Her Brother

*When you let go, where does it go?
When there is nowhere to go, what then?
When a mountain walks along a stream,
Bathe your feet in the cool waters.*

KOAN

Nena's beloved brother had great promise as an intellectual and was the star of her family, but he did not realize his potential. He had a lifelong heroin addiction that was destroying him. He was basically Nena's dependent. Seeking help for him, she constantly asked therapists, family members, and friends, "What should I do? What should I do?"

Many people advised her by saying, "Cut him out of your life."

Was that the answer?

A Zen koan asks of us: "Move a mountain.
What is the mountain?"

A householder's life is lived in the midst of familial relationships, and for Nena, it was her challenging relationship with her troubled brother. She was terribly angry about her brother's wasted potential, called on to clean up his messes and not getting any credit from his friends for basically keeping him alive. Trying to help her brother was like moving a mountain, trying to get him to do something that he himself would or could not do. Her struggle was a long, hard slog up and down the mountain of self-doubt, anger, resentment, and fear. *What if I make a mistake? What if I don't find the right thing to do?* She knew that her bond with him was unbreakable, so the advice to cut him out of her life did not ring true to her. In her dogged determination to help her brother, Nena faced the mountain of herself.

What do you do when there are no solutions?

In Zen practice, you are called upon to do the hardest thing in the midst of suffering: sit like an immovable mountain. Sit still in the deep of yourself and listen. It takes endurance and great patience to sit unmovable in the midst of suffering without answers. Sometimes when we sit in meditation we fall asleep immediately. Sometimes thoughts churn up the mud and muck of our worries and anxieties like a rushing river. How in the world, you might ask, do I listen to myself in the midst of chaos when I can barely stay attentive?

My root teacher often said, "Poco a poco, little by little." Little by little, resistances wear down, hard edges soften, the self empties out. Nena experienced a gradual wearing down of the

solid edges of inner conflict. She learned the wisdom of letting her brother be who he was and not trying to save him or change him. *Letting go* and *cutting out* are not the same. Nena gradually let go of the idea of what is an acceptable life. She set limits on her own rescuing behavior and came to peace in their relationship. Her brother noticed the change, too. She came to enjoy the fruits of mountain moving—peace, acceptance, and a way of caring for herself and her brother that was a blessing to both.

The more you listen to mountains, the more you meet the mountain within. It is amazing what you can hear: the subtle sounds, the nuanced echoes, the infinite possibilities that mountains give birth to. You learn that you do not need to fill the open space and silence of the mountain. Each breath is a breath of emptying; each step is a step of emptying. Leave aside your ideas and concepts; leave aside wanting things to be a certain way. Give up your need to fix another person or situation; let go of control.

My root teacher, whose name, Taizan, means *Great Mountain*, would often say, “Be unattached in the midst of attachments.” As householders we delve into this teaching daily. What does unattached look like? Rigid and uptight? Unsentimental? Cold and uncaring, above the fray? Are you fashioning yourself into your idea of what an unattached person should be in the midst of the daily rough and tumble? My teacher said, “Be who you are, not who you think you should be, but who you truly are.” What do you need to unlearn?

Nena’s body-wisdom told her that cutting out her brother from her life was not the answer. There was no need to override herself with others’ opinions and advice, or with her own self-judgments and habitual self-criticism. No matter the difficulties of the living relationship with her brother, the essential

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connection could never be severed. She could not un-brother him.
This is the heart of moving mountains: to plunge into the intimacy
of connection and be led by the heart song.

What action arises from emptying out and listening deeply?
This unqualified experience, a response unique to you yourself,
can only be known by you.

Listen!

Listen!

*How do you bear witness to the unbearable? Can you trust in not
knowing what to do, out of which your own wisdom can arise?*