

Enclosing the heart

Thoughts start war if the gate is not closed. Here is another pithy maxim dense with implications and meanings once we get into it.

The release of shadow

The saying points to an inevitable phenomenon for most of us. When there is increasing clarity and freedom and peace there is inevitably a release of some unconscious responses that seem to conflict with this clarity, freedom and peace. This unwelcome release of shadow thoughts coming up from the unconscious can feel distressing to the person who has them. Osuna calls them 'hostile' to life. It can feel like war. The rising up of these thoughts is quite involuntary, and they can take us by surprise – where on earth did *that* come from? Some of these emotionally loaded thoughts have a kind of attacking or an undermining quality. They come up and challenge and throw into disarray this work of conscious loving and growing wisdom.

Key insights in inner conflict

Osuna describes the acute soul suffering in this seeming war declared by 'hostile' thoughts. We come to the painful realisation he says, that we 'secretly love what we most hate'. These thoughts so contrary to our deepest aspirations and yet they hold a strangely powerful attraction. We feel compelled to engage with them again and again as if we love them! Or the reverse, we come to the equally painful insight that we seem to 'secretly hate that which we love most' in the inner life. We find within us deep resistances to the increasing life and freedom that we seek.

In his descriptions of this inner conflict breaking out he details how these thoughts seem to have a life of their own. It seems as if our mental life operates in a strategic way – our thoughts seem to know how to do their worst. Our thoughts appear to strategically target where we are most vulnerable. And what's more, even if we believe that they have quietened, they can keep returning at increasingly subtle levels of consciousness and being at different times. So, Osuna urges - understand the unique strategic operations of your mental life !

The wise counter strategy

But - what is the wise counter strategy here? 'Thoughts start war if the gate is not closed.' What is the practical wisdom of this closing of the gate of the heart that Osuna is referring to?

Closing the gate of the heart would in the first instance be continuing to exercise prudent spiritual discernment with increasing vigilance and increasing subtlety and skilfulness. What we are needing here is enough awareness and inner poise to be able to *recognise* the presence of thoughts and to discern their impact in the soul. To be able to see how each thought operates – watching and recognising the thought process set in motion rather than getting into the content of thought.

Closing the gate of the heart may in practise mean not engaging with the story of a thought nor developing it in any way . It can mean recognising the compelling 'push' and 'pull' of emotional thinking that compellingly tempt us out of inner poise . It can mean recognising the oppressive weighing down or withholding or overwhelming or undermining that is happening . It can mean recognising the subtle sense of dis-ease or foggy confusion that may comes , with even apparently beautiful and spiritual thoughts.

Understanding the suffering from hostile thoughts.

So why is it so critically important to recognise and understand hostile thoughts in a framework of recollection. The critical issue is not that we have these hostile thoughts – they are involuntary and inevitable. But without a framework of understanding of what is going on, spiritual conflicts can cause us much suffering. Osuna even names three particular forms of soul suffering . First we respond with discouragement and we fall into despair. Or we respond with strong indignation and deep offence to the presence of this thought so contrary to our conscious mind. For some people in his experience what creeps in is a fear of madness – of being of unsound mind. But most likely we respond with condemnation that breeds an anger that is turned inward towards the self . The soul suffers most where there is a sowing of a seed of self-hatred.

Recognising hostile 'religious' thoughts

It's also helpful to have, in our framework of understanding, a naming of some particular patterns of thought that spiritual seekers are most likely to encounter. Osuna puts his finger on a number of

them that can have a particularly tempting, compelling quality. For instance, as humility deepens an unconscious distortion of humility can rise up in the form of obsessive thoughts and the activity of an over-scrupulous examination of the soul. Very close to this, as inner light increases shaming thoughts show up as ongoing guilty and self hating thoughts. Or, the very deepening of devotion can release unconscious and quite shocking responses (to the person who has them) of resistance and denigration - traditionally named as blaspheming thoughts.

It takes a great deal of presence and strength of mind to be able to, in the thick of it, maintain that watchful discernment, and we may need to draw on all spiritual resources available to us and the aid of wise, spiritual teachers.

The little 'no' of recollection

To return to the maxim - closing of the gate of the heart takes on a different emphasis in silent meditation.' The wisdom here is to continue to just give ourselves, in the face of all this, to silence, to solitude, where we let go of *all* thoughts. This letting go, letting be, does not mean a repression of these thoughts, but a conscious foreclosing of the activities of the imagination in order to keep open and alert our spiritual perception. Osuna calls this releasing of thoughts as, 'the little no,' of spiritual recollection. It is not a huge waging off into battle with thought, but the simple and clear refusal to engage because you are engaged in something else right now. It is like spiritual prudence herself going to the gate of the heart and firmly closing it saying to each thought: 'No thanks, I'm busy right now'. This 'little no' is, as he says, really an affirmation of inner life. More is being affirmed than denied.

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Understanding this necessary 'closing of the gate' as an affirming act opens up further meanings. Closing is an enclosing of attention in the heart so the inner eye of the heart stays open. It's a necessary enclosing in order that we may be more open to perceiving what Osuna calls 'the angelic operations' also going on in conflict. So, with attention enclosed in the heart we are open to the spiritual movements of being inwardly guided and healed. We are open to inspirings and ignitings of our loving will. We are open to enlightening insights.

So the encouraging thing in all of this is that although inner conflict is inevitable, in this wider process of recollection, each hostile thought that rises in our awareness is potentially a means of grace. Temptations are a means of grace. A hostile thought in silent meditation becomes the opportunity for returning to peace.