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*The quality of mercy is not strained.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.*  
-from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

In the face of loss and upheaval, a natural response is to pull in, close down, and wait for our wounds to heal. We feel so numb that it seems awkward or strange to give or receive a hug. We may avoid interactions, even supportive ones, because it can feel like too much work to connect. There is a hardening that occurs when times are tough, making it increasingly difficult to take in emotional nourishment even when it's offered, much less being able to offer it to others. We may judge ourselves particularly harshly, mentally berating ourselves for every mistake. Perhaps we direct the judgement outward, second guessing and criticizing the people around us. And the harshness begets more of the same. Add to all of this some rather lean economic times, and suddenly we've got some rather mean times on our hands. Stressed out, anxious, sad, judgmental . . .

Mercy.

We show ourselves mercy when we strive for a balanced life rather than trying to force perfection. We show ourselves mercy when we turn away from words like "idiot" or "dummy" and choose instead "beginner" or "work in progress." We show ourselves mercy when we accept help or compassion from a friend, even if it feels strange at first. We show ourselves mercy when we balance what the world demands of us with what we need for ourselves. We show ourselves mercy when we fire ourselves from the role of judge and jury and forgive ourselves and others for the things we cannot change and mistakes made in the past.

Mercy is essential for personal growth and healing. In difficult times, the ability to show ourselves some mercy can soften us, like water on dry ground. We can allow the nourishment of compassion and connection to reach us. We begin to experiment with ways of being, perhaps try growing in a new direction, knowing that if we do fall, the ground won't be quite so hard beneath us. As I write this on a rainy afternoon in early April, I can look out the window and see the verdant results of a few drops from heaven received by the ground beneath. Life returns and new growth is everywhere. We know that not every single new shoot will become an oak tree, but as I look out my window, clearly the soft green of new growth is winning out over the dried up vegetation from another season.