

Trailblazing Interview: Heather Plett

GQ: Hello! This is Grace from GraceQuantock.com and we are here with another Trail Blazer interview. I'm delighted to be joined today by Heather Plett.

Heather is a teacher, writer, coach and facilitator who helps people get deeper connection with themselves, others, the sacred and the Earth. She gathers people in circles both online and off to share stories, ask questions, make art and build community.

She's a practitioner of the Circle Way and the Art of Hosting. And she teaches courses such as the Mandala Discovery and Creative Writing for Self Discovery.

So, thank you very much for joining us today, Heather.

HP: Thank you for having me. I'm delighted to be talking to you today.

GQ: Thank you. So, we were talking a little bit about just before we begun, around holding space. What really drew me to your work was I think a lot of times when we're dealing with something that's painful we have a desire to want to change it or to want to fix it. In some ways, who doesn't want to fix things that hurt?

That's very real. That's very happening. But what do you do? This is where I kind of came to this concept around holding your space, what do you or living with connects to you? So how do you deal with fixing it or not fixing it and yet also not ignoring it and denying it. That's how I arrived at holding space.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on that and also what it is for people who maybe don't know.

HP: Well, the term holding space is really what we do in the space in between kind of, I guess in the spaces between, kind of the messy space. When we hold space - and the concept that I, when I first wrote about it I talked about holding space for other people.

So, when we hold space for other people, we are present for them. We are supportive of them and we do it in a non-judgmental way. We try to fix them. We don't try to rush to solutions. We support them and help them to find their own path through it. But we're willing to sit in that messy space with them.

Now the second post I wrote after that was about holding space for ourselves, too. What you're talking about is perfectly in line with what I'm writing because it really is about being willing to sit in messiness.

We have a great aversion in our culture for avoiding the messiness, the brokenness, the unfinished. We want to polish things. We want to complete them. We want to fix them.

Anytime somebody has a problem, we just feel this rush to need to fix it because, "Who am I as a friend if I can't fix it for them? What value do I have if I can't give them some good advice?"

But what we forget is the real value, the willingness to be simply there and present and in that space with them.

That's what we talk about holding space. It's really sinking into that presence of acceptance. It doesn't mean we always want to be in that messy space. We do emerge out of it every now and then but willingness to learn from that really depth of unfinished spaces.

GQ: Thank you. Pardon me if I'm just sitting here and kind of absorbing this and let it resonates and just thinking, "What a relief not to try to fix everything and everybody all the time."

HP: Yeah.

GQ: It actually reminds me, some people watching me know, I run a small non-profit organization called Healing Boxes which is at healing-boxes.com where we make boxes of healing goodies for people with chronic or serious illness and grief and pain and people who are challenged.

One of the first ways that we have is actually a quote from Henri Nouwen which you know. To me it resonates with what you're saying. I'll just share it with the listeners which is, "When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it's those who instead of giving advice, solution or cure have rather chosen to share our pain, touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand."

"The friend who can be silent with us in moment of despair or confusion and can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares."

And so, my question kind of arises from that would be do you have any thoughts on how we can tolerate that messiness for ourselves and for others?

HP: Yes, that's a beautiful quote, by the way. And I think that tolerating messiness has kind of been my lifelong practice. It's almost a spiritual practice in a sense of simply being willing to be in that place of messiness and doing the internal processing of realizing, "I have no control"; releasing.

It's some of the Buddhist practice around detachment. If for example some of what builds into us is, "How do I release this and recognize that nothing about this situation is within my control and I can still be present in it and accept it and be in a position of love in this place?"

It's not something that's an easy thing to teach. It's something that a person has to physically learn to practice and learn to let go.

For example, some of the things I have done in my life is I have developed some simple mantras that I tell myself when I'm in the messiness.

One of them early on just became a simple saying to myself, "The outcome is not my responsibility." I'm responsible for being present and being faithful to my calling or to my offering to

another friend, etcetera in this moment and I do not control the outcome.

So repeating something like that yourself for example releasing the outcome, releasing the need to control something is a simple act of, like loosening your fingers on something; just letting go, just releasing.

For me, when I really, really internalize learning was when my mom was dying. We sat – my siblings and I sat with her for four days in that space of having absolutely no control of the outcome, knowing that she would die within that week would probably be the end and we didn't know when. We know it would happen and we couldn't control it.

Could we still simply sit there and be present with her and detach from the outcome enough to not get in that place of anxiety, etcetera and just be fully present for her?

Some of the lessons that I learned were from care nurse. I thought, "What a gift to be able to offer this to people as a support system for people who are preparing to die and to their family etcetera." It's such a process of letting and go and releasing the outcome because never do you have any control.

I have learned it through kind of the School of Hard Knocks of having been through many grief stories in my life.

GQ: I can see that this can be a really useful practice maybe for people with chronic illness. Because sometimes, if you're living with pain or grief it can be quite challenging when people try and fix you.

HP: Right.

GQ: Sometimes that can almost feel like a suppression or a denial of the grief. There's something around knowing that in doing what looks like nothing, we're actually doing something very profound, something that's bigger than any kind of business that we can occupy ourselves with. That's more comfortable but wouldn't actually be as deep and resonant and meaningful and as sacred.

But I think we're in a culture which trains us constantly that the best thing is action and the worst thing is not being in control.

HP: And to be honest with you, I think that people living with chronic illness or disability have the opportunity to be profound teachers of this work in the world because they have no choice but to live this practice of acceptance and being in it.

That becomes a gift to you in learning this which everybody needs to learn but some of us being able-bodied or whatever, we think that we can control our lives because we've always, things are falling into place in terms of what we can do, our abilities etcetera.

Just a couple of years ago, I broke my foot and I suddenly realized I am not good at sitting still and accepting this. I had to learn a new lesson in that kind of acceptance and release and simply sitting on the couch and not having the ability to go for a walk whenever I wanted to.

I realized right then, I was been given an opportunity to learn something new and to deepen into my practice and for detachment.

It's finding meaning in what is going on. I can't begin to teach people who are in that situation. I think they can be my teacher or you can be a really powerful gift to the world and teaching us how to live in that place.

GQ: And I think there's something around, if it's happening where are we going to go from here? Because I'm very aware - I'm saying this now because I'm not sure, as you said, you're non-disabled so I don't know if this has come up for you a much - I'm very aware in the disability community, the idea of being a teacher or inspiration can be a hot topic because I've had people come up to me when I'm outside in a wheelchair and kind of go, "You're so inspiring." I'm like, "That's fantastic. What did I inspire you to do?" Is it because I'm smiling and disabled? Because, hey, I'm just living my life.

But what I do, I work with Phoenix Inspire Academy which is living with pain and illness is okay, this happened to you and you didn't choose it. You didn't ask for this to happen and it's here now. You don't have to be a teacher and you don't have to be inspirational. You don't have to do anything.

But, now it's here. Can we use it? Now it has come, what are we going to do with it? Because it's here and there's nothing else. We can't fix it. We can't get rid of it so let's work with it because a lot of us had tried and failed in a ball of fire.

What are we going to do now? Let's work with because just like you said, everybody has to learn this. Everyone has got to live it one time or another. Maybe those of us who had grief or had physical pain or whatever, maybe we actually – as Chris Carr writes, it's like a PhD in Buddha-hood. You have to learn these lessons early and you learn them deeply.

HP: Yeah and I know what you're saying. Don't assume I'm a teacher. Because I'm this doesn't mean I'm living it well.

I don't live with disability but I had a number of intense grief and losses in my life that have been teacher for me, served to really change me.

I have this deep belief that each of us doing our healing work and doing our emotional growth work simply by doing it and being in it and being willing to be broken and messy and striving to find meaning, simply in being that we're serving to heal the world.

So no, we don't have to step into teacher role. What we have to do is be responsible for doing our own work, finding meaning in the place we are right now and be present in it and offer our own healing to the world's healing and it becomes our collective movement in seeking to live well.

GQ: And that resonates so deeply, thank you because I think so often – again, our society which really likes busyness that often if you're not doing something, you're not contributing; you're not of us.

In the UK there's a benefit which used to be called invalidity benefit. That's called incapacity benefit. You're incapacitated, without capability. You're invalid. You're not doing anything. Well, there's a lot to that.

What if, as you say, in dealing with our process and dealing with what's happening in our body and dealing with what others are showing up and just being with that and living with that and working with that, that that can heal the world just because we're taking responsibility for that and doing a process and working with it.

HP: Yeah, there's a beautiful writing by a writer named Charles Eisenstein. It's a book called *The More Beautiful World our Hearts Know is Possible*. He talked really a lot about how we have become disconnected in our lives and in our work. We have tried to replace that spiritual work with materialism, with striving to be ahead, by being busy, etcetera.

That concept of just doing our own healing work as a place to commit our energy; he talks about how in biology, in the science world they have found evidence of these - I don't know. I can't remember if it's amoeba, some kind of organism where they will transform in one part of the world and simultaneously they'll notice the transformation in another part of the world of the same organism.

There's no direct correlation between the two. One is not impacting the other in any way. They're completely disconnected. And yet, the change in one somehow seems to impact the change in another.

And so, he extrapolates to say that in our work, when we are being intentional of holding space for ourselves, being in community with those we live with, being connected to the earth, etcetera simply by doing that; faithful to that, we can impact change around us and shift the course of the world's focus really.

GQ: That brings out to me the idea that sometimes we talk about society and I have in the past, as though it's separate from us, as though it's an organism which is foreign to me.

HP: Right.

GQ: But of course, I'm a part of this and you're a part of it and everybody – you who's watching and listening, you're hugely a part of that. It's fantastic. Wow!

When we change, by definition even by a teenie tiny bit, even one person, society changes which is pretty cool.

HP: It can be so scary to be counter-cultural, to believe in our own – to really be committed to our belief system. For example, being willing not to be busy all the time. That can be extremely counter-cultural where everybody around you values busy. Everybody is rushing around like ants, scurrying around an anthill and you just sit in place and be present with yourself and just stare the trees and enjoy the sunset and just be really present in that.

It feels really counter-cultural and you're not accomplishing anything. You don't have value, etcetera.

However, that's the shift that's needed to be in that presence; to be present, to really take time to sit with a friend and not have to rush into everything or not have to fix things.

Like I said, my dying mom; that was absolutely the only focus we have at that time. That was absolutely necessary. We didn't have to do or be or fix anything. We simply had to sit and be willing to be present.

We need to dare to do those things that are counter-cultural because they do – like we said earlier, they do have a larger impact than we are aware of.

GQ: And so, I wanted to finish on would be to ask – if you could ask the people listening, if there was – and so out of all of these things, if people were absorbing it and processing it and thought “Gosh! I'd like to do something. I'd like an action to take, like the first step to

go forward.” What do you think might be one thing that could be used as a little step just to begin?

HP: I would say give yourself time every day to simply be present and sit – whatever that looks like, whether you have a mindfulness practice, whether you journal, whether you sit.

I happen to be looking at my window right now. There’s gorgeous colors because it’s fall here. So, simply staring at the fall colors and just be really appreciative and in reverence of what you see, that begins to shift your priority system and makes you willing to be present for the world around you.

I believe that committing to a practice like that begins to shift the way you are in relationships because then, you can sit with a friend and in greater presence with them. You can change the way you relate to the neighborhood, etcetera.

GQ: That’s fantastic. I like that.

And if people want to find more with your work, where can they find you online?

HP: Everything I do is at heatherplett.com and Heather Plett, you’ll find me on Facebook, Twitter. I’m pretty much Heather Plett everywhere.’

GQ: That’s fantastic. I will put a link with the video. That’s heatherplett.com or in social media.

Thanks Heather for joining us today, so much. Thank you for listening. Make sure to check out Heather’s work and do check back to gracequantock.com for more TrailBlazer interviews. Thank you and bye, bye.

HP: Thank you.

