



## Finding Balance

*Anne Trench*

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Sometime last fall, during hurricane season to be specific, Michele and I were dyad partners on the topic of equanimity. Toward the end of our session, she mentioned that she had relatives on a small island in the Caribbean completely devastated by Hurricane Maria. Though her loved ones had lost everything, the miracle of having survived was their ballast in a sea of loss. They had equanimity even in the face of disaster. I wanted to know more about them, about Michele, and about her link to this small island and I thought others might as well. Thank you, Michele, for agreeing to be interviewed!

Michele was born and raised in Manitoba, Canada, but her parents are from Dominica, a small part of the easternmost island chain that guards the southern Caribbean from the Atlantic Ocean. Michele's aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends live on Dominica and on neighboring islands.

Michele has visited the island many times over the years. She had planned on another visit in 2018-19 but the reality of hurricane's vast devastation has forced her to reconsider. Hurricane Maria affected 90% of the islands buildings and destroyed about 60% of the buildings. Clean water continues to be limited, electricity spotty, phone lines downed, and cell phone coverage unreliable in certain parts of the island. Damaged and water-logged personal belongings grow moldy in the tropical heat. Until mid-February, her mother's siblings were gathered in her cousin's home in her mother's village of Mero. Soon after the hurricane, cousins got money and supplies to the family by travelling to the island via ferry. Members of her family and community continue to send supplies.

It will take years before the island can be restored to its former glory. Michele worries about those she loves, particularly those who are elderly. Still she has great optimism about the future and the recovery of this beautiful island, where in her dreams, she would live part of every year some day. That hope comes from the Dominican values that her parents instilled in her even as she grew up far away in Canada.



According to Michele, the 75,000 or so residents of Dominica, though poor by our standards, have a culture that we might well envy here. Dominican's, both those on the island and those who have left, look out for each other in even the small crises of life. They are each other's keepers and their circle of concern spreads beyond family and friends to neighbors, acquaintances, and even strangers. They share whatever they have, with open hearts and an ethic of love. The generosity comes naturally from a culture that has found balance.

Michele's own life story shows the influence of that culture. She got her degree in microbiology but decided after a few years that life behind a microscope was not for her; she wanted a more people-focused profession. She went back to school to get her degree in physical therapy in 2004 and began working in a field she loves.

Still Michele sensed that her life was somehow out of balance. She found achievement of her early goals not as satisfying as she expected. Drawing upon the experience of her Dominican relatives and friends, she realized she wanted to try to be “happy with less” -- to find a balance of her mind and her heart. Because she has always been interested in “the other,” she was intrigued when a massage therapist told her about Vipassana meditation. And that’s how she ended up at SIMS taking her first introduction to meditation class in 2014. In her practice, she found a way of living that helped her move toward that sought after balance. In the SIMS sangha, she found a community.

Michele says that her meditation practice has changed the way she does her work as a therapist in significant ways. She deals with people of all ages and all backgrounds, including many refugees and immigrants, and she finds that now she can negotiate the therapist-patient relationship with more skill and compassion. She used to take on and internalize her patient's frustrations. She has learned to listen non-reactively and finds herself reflecting on where the patient’s “rub” came from – family history, trauma, frustration with their own body – all the stuff that often becomes known in a long-term therapeutic relationship.

Michele also uses Buddhist concepts to help her patients grasp the process they are going through. When they start therapy, she tells them to put aside “where they were” before their injury or surgery and begin “where they are now.” As they work through their bodies’ issues, she coaches them to listen to the body and get attuned. “It’s like meditation just on a physical level,” she says. Often her patients have to struggle with aversion, perhaps to a painful exercise, or craving for a way of being in life that may no longer be physically possible. She coaches them through that too. Since she began to meditate, she has come to realize that when it comes to physicality, we are “just along for the ride and often our body is in control.”

And Michele’s Dominican soul has found a home in SIMS. She started coming regularly two years or so ago and says she “loves SIMS,” “loves the way we take apart complex issues of emotion and thought and break them down to understand them.” We have become her spiritual community. She was prompted to start coming because she was sorting out some issues in her work life and knew she needed the help of a community because “you don’t know what you don’t know” and “you can’t really do it completely on your own.” As old issues dissipate, and new ones surface, she’s happy to have found us and we’re happy to have found her. A belated welcome, Michele!