

A Therapist's Musings on Being and Therapy

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November 2, 2015

Road Rage and Rorschach: Notes from the driver's seat

Stress makes impacts on the way we experience everything. It can demonize who or what we already see in a negative light. Our emotionally charged projection of inner stress onto others can manifest as road rage, for example.

Harry is a mild mannered individual whom I saw for the first time following an incident where police were called to the scene when he tried to open the car door of a young woman who had passed him dangerously and crowded him out of an intended parking space. What started out as a relaxed drive to a shopping plaza, took a nightmarish turn. Having a daughter of his own, his rage quickly turned to shame and disgust with himself for having frightened a young woman, even if her novice driving abilities were terrible. He also recognized how out of control he had spun, his negative emotions getting the best of him, with serious consequences to follow—assault charges, court dates, guilt over having traumatized a child, and so forth.

Articles on road rage abound, citing particular vehicular experiences that tend to trigger acts of aggression or violence on the road. Cutting in front, tailgating, someone racing you as a red light turns green, someone driving “too slowly” in front of you, someone passing in front of you dangerously. . .all of these can be triggers. But these are all surface triggers. Surface triggers tend to symbolize deeper ones, even when those trigger “sharks” swimming in the deep unconscious are not on one’s mind at the time.

Incidents like Harry’s don’t happen in a vacuum. In order to better understand the context in which this situation unfolded, I asked Harry about his present life, and more specifically, in what areas of his life he might be experiencing a lot of stress or heightened emotions. He had no trouble launching into a tale of misery on the work front.

Harry provided IT support two days a week from home and three days at the office. On office days he had to commute on heavily trafficked highways and winding side roads. Both at the office as well as at home, he felt increasingly micromanaged due to a recent acquisition of his company by a larger one. Now more layers of managers prodded and poked at everything he did. In Big Brother-esque fashion, the faces of his managers, some international or across the United States, popped onto his computer screen via Skype-like programs unannounced. It felt like someone barging in to his office without knocking on the door.

He felt the space around him shrinking just as demands for his time and attention were growing. Harry felt as though he were treated without due consideration. In fact, the micromanagement was interpreted by him as a denigration of his intelligence. Although both intelligent and expert in his field, he had never gone to college and felt sensitive about the possibility that others might think of him as stupid. Last, but not least of his worries concerned the future. Layoffs were a whisper around the office and the general morale had fallen to a low point. He woke up every day wondering when his employment would be terminated.

In sum, Harry felt his future was in danger; he felt belittled and demeaned as if his managers thought him stupid. He felt treated without consideration, and his personal space was infringed upon. In addition, one of his adult children had moved home to rethink career options while trying to buy a house, and though happy to help, Harry felt this was taking up space and time he badly needed to decompress with his wife during and after the busy work week.

When I asked Harry to describe what the offending driver (whom during the incident he had not observed to be a young woman—she was behind him) had “done” to him, he said she “was stupid and inconsiderate,” that she had “got into (his) space,” that she had put him “in danger.”

I then asked him to compare the language he used to describe his work stress with the language he used to describe his road rage incident. Harry noted the almost perfect similarity. His amplified negative response to the young driver’s inexperienced and impatient maneuvering was a testimony to how much these work issues bothered him on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. Though these negative experiences were generated by working conditions, they had virtually taken over his life. Treated as if stupid, given no consideration, endangered, and crowded were symbolic links between the major stressor in Harry’s life and the road rage incident.

Road rage is a highly amplified response, in most cases, to a fairly insignificant occurrence, like taking a baseball bat to a mosquito. Metaphorically speaking, someone getting ahead of you on the road (of life), or getting all the good parking spaces, or having a faster, more expensive car with status—something you could never afford—or slowing you down, or preventing you from having a smooth journey from point A to point B, or someone making you late, or insulting you, etc. can have a profound effect. It is profound because it occurs on the surface of things, in the present, but also uncovers layers of past or contextually painful experiences. They link symbolically. Our brains recognize similarities. Our responses to similar situations are also similar to each other.

By overreacting to an adolescent driver cutting ahead of him into a parking space, Harry had actually received a gift of useful and important information, even if it came via a good swift kick, so to speak: Harry had now arrived at a point of stress-saturation that made it impossible for him to manage his behavior in slightly disturbing situations. In this road rage incident, Harry’s reaction was far more dangerous than the inconvenience to which he was reacting in the first place.

I encouraged Harry to try a different evaluation of himself. Instead of beating himself up, I encouraged him to step back psychologically and find some compassion for, and kindness toward himself. This unfortunate event could function as transformative if he intended to address his stress in positive ways: Muscle up to a greater level of assertion at work and express his needs for more space, consideration, autonomy and trust; at home to allocate time for himself and his wife even if it meant declining some other opportunities with his adult child or with friends. Perhaps failing to have enough of a voice in important aspects of Harry’s life had resulted in having too much of a voice in an inappropriate context.

Recently, I was driving one early morning behind a red Dodge Charger that was tail gaiting the car in front of him. I felt like doing the same thing to the Charger. The chatter in my head was nearly audible: *Why don’t you get a taste of your own medicine!* I am a sucker for the underdog—duh! A behavioral health therapist. Instantly, I felt an eye-for-an-eye, bumper-for-a-bumper primitive urge to exact justice for the beleaguered driver two cars in front of me. I slowed down, because, as they say in dialectical behavior therapy, doing the opposite action

changes one's experience dramatically. In this case I disconnected from the drama unfolding in front of me. And I extended empathy toward the tail-gaiter who probably has difficulty feeling important so tries to push and shove to the head of the line or to intimidate others to prop himself up psychologically.

Our vehicles enfold and contain us as we drive. Like a room, cars provide a context in which we move around, exert ourselves in a variety of ways. Cars can be status symbols, a trusted way to get to work or tote precious children, even a place to live or to escape from the drudgery of life. A new car can signal a rise in lifestyle, an accomplishment, something to take pride in, or just a way to get from one place to the other faster.

The Rorschach inkblots are used as a projective psychological testing tool. The ten inkblots, which are almost symmetrical "pictures," right to left, are shown to subjects who tell what they see. Their responses reveal elements of personality, cognition, emotional tone, interpersonal perceptions and so forth, and are interpreted by the tester on a number of variables, such as form, movement, shading, texture, color, etc. Like the Rorschach or the I Ching, whose hexagrams can be interpreted differently by different readers, the roadways on which we drive our cars become unintentional projective frameworks for our personalities and emotional statuses. Drive consciously. Elucidate your priorities: For example, get there faster or safer? Better yet, drive collaboratively. Ask yourself whether your driving experience parallels your life experience at this time.

October 19, 2015

Thought Torque

There are a number of driving forces for the engines of our lives. I have already written about the powers of impulsivity and compulsivity, for example. Our behaviors can appear as instantaneous, ill-conceived and reactive. Or we can be driven by a repetitive urgency to act in certain ways that are non-productive.

The following anecdote will, at first, come across as a non sequitur, but I recently bought a new car. Bigger than my last incredibly efficient one, the new CRV made me become increasingly aware of how I used my foot on the gas pedal and the brake, as well as how closely I drove behind the car in front of me, and my sense of pacing. In order to generate more miles per gallon in the newer car, I had to change the way I drove. And the way we drive our cars has some parallels for how we drive the engines of our lives. For example, the amount of gas you use to get from point A to point B in your car may be analogous to the amount of human energy you output to reach a given goal. When you output more gas, or more human energy than you need to use, then you are "driving" inefficiently. You could be saving energy and still getting where you want to go.

Have you ever noticed that when people try to drive ahead of you on the road, they may endanger themselves or other drivers, only to pass one single vehicle? They remain stuck in the same slow-moving traffic and not really getting to their exit any faster? They are expressing their impatience by jamming down on the accelerator and then the brake pedal, swerving in and out of lanes, and sending their stress out onto the road, forcing other drivers to monitor their safety even more. Perhaps they have the illusion of getting ahead, when in fact they are, to sound hackneyed here, spinning their wheels for naught.

Awareness, in and of itself, when brought to bear on any action, constitutes the minimal requirement for refining that action. By accelerating only when I needed to, and allowing my vehicle to drive on its own momentum when possible, and keeping a good distance between the front of my car and the back of the one ahead, I was hyper-miling, getting more distance for less gas. And in the process my inner world attuned and slowed down. I accepted the ebbs and flows of the traffic. I did not experience myself as rushing. Rushing creates stress, releasing our fight or flight hormones including adrenaline. But rushing and acceleration do not usually yield productive results in a car or in life. Because speed can be a real enemy of awareness, more accidents may occur. And that really slows things down, not only in the moment but into the future due to damages that require healing, repairing or re-doing.

As a result of my recent driving experiences I developed a thought, like a little mantra: 'Drive efficiently and you'll get where you need to go in the right amount of time and in the right frame of mind.'

For me this is a powerful thought because if I say it to myself before getting into my car, then it organizes my mental attitude, my emotional output, and my actions. Thoughts like these, that we develop consciously, as well as resident thoughts that we have harbored for so long we don't even realize they are there, all constitute powerful driving forces. Sometimes, the torque of a thought really twists the way we experience our lives and strongly influences the way we act. The popular notion of the Law of Attraction is not really so mysterious as it seems. The notion is that what we think attracts what appears or becomes manifested in our lives. In short, like attracts like. As an example, if I think, "He loves me," then I attract the love I want. Whereas, if I think, "He'll never love me," then I am sending that powerful thought out there into the world around me and creating that outcome.

Maybe a more accurate description than like attracts like, is that like resonates or harmonizes with like. As some people point out, the identical attracting ends of two magnets actually repel each other.

But I think it works this way: Thoughts are like magnets, in the sense that thoughts harness or organize our bodily sensations, physical and facial expressions, kinds of emotions, and behaviors.

One of my clients, let's call her Sally, frequently has a thought, similar to the example above: "I'll never find someone who will love me." She reached this conclusion after a divorce

and the breakup of a subsequent relationship. Needless to say she felt sad, hurt and disappointed, but her narrative of never finding someone else, in this big world, to love and be loved by again, amplified and globalized these feelings.

In addition, the thought of “never finding someone,” remained highly compelling and it seemed obvious from her emotional tone, her malaise and her isolating behavior, that the thought was organizing the way she lived her life. If you think you will never find someone then you might as well not even look. And when you are out with friends, or otherwise within reach of opportunity, your head and eyes are downcast, your chest collapsed, and your interest in the world around you is diminished. You might as well have put a fence around yourself with a big sign on it saying: Keep Out. No one else wants me so you won't either. Even events that happen serendipitously get interpreted according to the narrative. So Sally is approached by Tom, let's say. Tom is interested in Sally, but since Sally already believes her narrative (no one would want/love her), she interprets Tom's approach to her as his indirect way of getting to her friend, Paula, who sits next to her. In Sally's mind, since no one would want her, Tom must want Paula.

Some of my clients with OCD, experience a variety of painful thoughts that repeat with tortuous frequency. Compromises to health often trigger the obsessive thinking of OCD, followed by compulsive behaviors that arise as ineffective attempts to reduce anxiety. So when Wendy had some mild symptoms of an infection, the four-day wait to receive her lab results taxed her emotional well-being. She called her doctor's office several times every day and spent hours exploring possibilities on the internet. She felt sweaty and panicked and had a hard time concentrating on her job, let alone getting a good night's sleep. Her mental narrative produced the worst case scenario, an aggressive cancer. No matter how much reassurance her parents and close friends tried to provide, the obsessive thoughts kept getting triggered into consciousness.

Among treatment strategies for OCD are cognitive behavioral techniques, including questioning the rationality of plaguing thoughts such as Wendy's--that she had cancer from such little data as her fairly mild symptoms, which had already declined after the administration of antibiotics.

In my opinion, Wendy's thought of having cancer is not entirely irrational. It certainly exists in the universe of possibilities. A lot of cancers are not felt dramatically until they are already advanced, and sometimes the occurrence of lung cancer, say for someone who has never smoked, is an unexplained terrible fluke. But given the examination by her doctor, the workability of the antibiotics, and the explanation of the lab tests as a means to cover all bases, cancer was the least likely explanation, not the most probable. Anxiety tends to prompt exaggeration. Anxiety also jumps to conclusions without much evidence. And this occurs because a high level of nervous system over-stimulation is assumed, by our minds, to co-occur with something really bad. As an example, if you see a mosquito biting you, you know a

mosquito bit you. You feel mildly irritated as you failed to swat it away. The level of feeling/sensation/reaction are mild, so your thoughts are mild also. But if you got badly stung by an unseen critter, your fear may rise to a level that matches “poisonous viper.” And this is the meaning of “like attracts like.” The thought of the worst-case scenario harmonizes with the high level of anxiety.

It is somewhat comforting to remind yourself that the worst case scenario, while possible, is the most extreme possibility and therefore the least probable of any explanation. Disturbing thoughts, marshalled by emotional intensity, make it seem as though the least probable worst-case-scenario is the explanation.

Sometimes people experience panic attacks, or high levels of anxiety, as coming “out of the blue.” And that experience results from our mind/brain’s ability to have almost invisible thoughts occurring just out of the realm of consciousness. We can feel just as anxious waking up in the morning, without a specific thought, as we can feel anxious waking up because we know we have to give a presentation to two hundred experts. But if one really explores, the “out of the blue anxiety” may refer to a general dread of going in to work for a micromanaging boss who typically has one jumping through hoops, and never getting it right, of course. Or, that the morning brings care-taking responsibilities for an ill mother who doesn’t realize she is interrupting at any moment to ask for something. Lucinda, a lovely person, said, “My life no longer feels like mine,” in sadly describing such a care-taking experience. It wasn’t that her mother did anything so terrible; it was simply Lucinda’s inability, in that context, to have uninterrupted time for tasks, to make plans, and just to be in her own head.

A woman who felt anxious bringing up the fact that she wanted to spend more time with her boyfriend, consciously tried to adopt a more positive thought process. Rather than thinking, “I’m the least important thing on his list,” she decided to think, “If I ask him, I wonder what will happen next?” An attitude of wonderment attracts an openness or receptivity to a number of different possibilities. This thought allowed for more behavioral options rather than inhibiting them. “I wonder what will happen next,” attracted positive feelings and a sense of curiosity.

Another woman, Becca, spoke of her fear of having a C-section because her baby was breach. Well-meaning doctors, family, and friends had all given their opinions which amplified her anxiety. She explained that by cultivating the thought, “I’m open to whatever happens,” she was able to relax her quite a bit. Just as she felt released from the extreme version of her fear, the baby turned head down.

Our thoughts can free us or harness us. Fear is not, as many people think, a bad emotion. It is necessary to our survival when relevant. Fear, like every emotion or sensation, provides us with valuable information about the status of our physical, emotional, and social well-being. Fear itself is not problematic. It is only problematic when fears drive what we do

without mediation by inquiry and the application of our thoughts, additional feelings, and sense of rightness or fit in a given situation.

As an example, one of my clients, Alessandra, a woman in her sixties, experiences instances of myoclonic twitches in her arms and legs in response to triggered sensations of fear or being under threat. She had a childhood fraught with trauma. Recently, however, during a difficult interaction with someone, she found a moment to ask herself, "Maybe I can choose not to have the shakes." And then, "I choose not to shake." Rather than accepting her myoclonic reactions as inevitable results from triggered feelings of threat, she began to think of them as optional. Even the body and the brain can be freed from old habits of response.

Alessandra shared one other example of how a change in her thinking allowed her to convert the feelings accompanied by thoughts of unworthiness into happiness. She had initially thought poorly of herself when she was not writing poems during the week. But having signed up for a poetry writing class one day a week, she was maintaining some writing. She changed her thoughts to: "At least I signed up for a class and all I have to do is to get myself there and, voila, I will be writing a poem every week." That made her smile. The changed experience from the thought, "I'm not writing during the week on my own. . .ugh," to "Wow, I'm writing a poem a week," was highly significant.

My conversation with Alessandra reminded me of the interpersonal nature of thoughts. I had been thinking about 'thinking' and about the power of thoughts. As part of our conversation I told her about my inquiry. Taking the prompt, she was able to recognize, and share her own changing thoughts and thought patterns. This conversation was elaborative for me, but therapeutic for her, because it introduced her to a way of describing the self-interventions she had begun using to good effect. Once we know what we know, we can be more mindful of reusing what works!

Four ways to describe aspects of thoughts are: 1) Thoughts are non-dimensional objects. 2) Thoughts can be shorthand, or capsule summaries for a more complex group of thoughts, feelings, memories, experiences. 3) Thoughts are symbolic, interpretive. And, 4) Thoughts are nodes in a matrix of associations.

The topics that unfold from each one of these aspects have more scope than what I will write here, but therapeutically, it can be useful to focus on each of these aspects of thought at appropriate occasions. When Marla tortures herself with thoughts like, "I'm so awkward," it can be helpful to remember that this is a thought, not an indelible truth. Like a non-dimensional object, a wisp of dandelion fluff, try blowing it away. Better in the wind than in Marla's mind. Examples of the second aspect of thought abound and wreak havoc. When Bart's impatient and frustrated and his feelings are hurt, he frequently finds himself saying things like, "I'm done." Or, "I can't do this anymore." Or, "I'd rather be dead." Like that proverbial roller coaster ride, in ten minutes, after a conciliatory comment from his wife, Bart now is not "done" any more. He

“can do it,” and he certainly is glad to be on the receiving end of more positive feelings flowing between himself and his wife.

A self-intervention for people that think a lot like Bart, is to substitute, or attach to the dire thought, this one: “Just for now.” Those three words are very very powerful. Like a dousing rod they find and attract water. The words, “just for now,” immediately encircle a dire thought (and the emotions that accompany it), with a helpful context. The dire thought is only one tree in the whole forest. It is only one moment within the full hour. It is one experience among the many that include happy ones. The horrific thought is not intractable, it is changeable. Just for now. . .I feel like I’m done. Just for now. . .I feel bereft. I am enraged. . .but just for now. Not forever.

Thoughts can be symbolic. They exist or come to mind in the moment, but, again, like powerful magnets, they can attract the intensity of emotions that surrounded traumatic times in the past when a similar thought or set of feelings dominated. If I have the thought now that “my boss thinks I’m stupid,” and become enraged, it may be that the well cap blew off, and all of the suffering and humiliation I felt as a child when my father repeatedly told me I was stupid in front of his friends, emerges as if it were happening now. I can barely contain myself from punching my boss in the face. I am now adult, not a simpering child incapable of doing anything more than hiding under my bed, emerging only later to be told I had to apologize for my stupidity because it embarrassed my father.

One of my clients who had had a traumatic past, is now aware that his awful rages emerge whenever he thinks someone is taking advantage of him. The present experiences symbolizes the past ones, or occur over the top of them like overtones. The hard part, therapeutically, is differentiating them emotionally. Bart reminds himself, “The past is in the past.” Or, “Focus on the facts in the moment. That’s all. Narrow my lens.”

Finally, thoughts exist like the hub of a wheel, the node in a matrix, or the center circle in a roundabout/traffic circle—pick your metaphor. Thoughts attach to other thoughts. Some say, “All roads lead to Rome.” As an example, I can start with one negative thought like, “My boss hates me,” and before you know it, the following thought-links attach themselves: He’s going to fire me when I tell him the project isn’t finished. I will never get another job at this level of pay and with this flexibility. I may get unemployment but it won’t pay my mortgage and then I will lose my house. I won’t be able to afford living in that town and my son will have to go to school somewhere else in a poorer town where the services won’t be as good and because of me he will suffer. My ex won’t help me with more child support and my father will be furious with me because he told me to spend more time focused on work instead of on my children. I will be such a wreck that I will overeat and none of my interview clothes will fit. What the heck, I will be such an emotional wreck, and it’s been so long that I have interviewed, that I will be awkward and have nothing good to say about myself, especially why I was fired. So no one will hire me, my unemployment insurance will run out. . .etc.”

So much for the torque of these magnificent non-dimensional objects of consciousness, capable of flying us to the moon or running us into the ground!

October 12, 2015

The Beauty of Complaining:

As babies we cry out our discomfort. Every vibrant cell in our bodies is developing with astounding rapidity. Sounds begin to take on organizing edges. Colors and shapes cluster daily into more identifiable objects in our surroundings. We cry when we are hungry, sleepy, isolated, in pain or other discomfort. Our cries begin as vocalizations and then acquire the moisture of our tears.

There would be no evolutionary point to crying if it did not harness the ministrations of a caretaker, usually a parent. As parents we love our babies and respond to their desperate cries for us. We are the fountains of their lives and we love them in compensation for sleepless nights, torn nipples, and a great curtailment of the lives we lived before their sudden, body quaking arrival.

Babies actively attach to us as we do to them. Their cries are proactive, greedy and abundant. Babies start building their tribe from the moment they emerge from their protected life in the interior of mother's body. I am in you and you are in me. We have shared blood or shared sand running through the hour glass, and we nourish each other, literally at first, and later more symbolically.

We are symbiotically attached to start, and when we separate, the distance between us is not as far as it would seem. Our skins, our minds, even our thoughts and intentions, remain partially permeable as well as mutually influential. Boundaries between us are fluid, contextually embedded, fragile, uncertainly drawn at best; sometimes hard won, heavily protected, or ignored. In therapy we talk about boundaries a lot because we have to keep redrawing them with other people on the Etch-a-sketch of our lives.

There are many theories about the uses of crying. In an article in the UK's 'The Guardian,' by Mark Honigsbaum, in April of 2013, he writes that Charles Darwin scratched his head when trying to account for the evolutionary purpose of crying and, as Honigsbaum quotes Darwin: "We must look at weeping as an incidental result, as purposeless as the secretion of tears from a blow outside the eye." (From Darwin, 1872).

Since then, many theorists have weighed in on the significance of crying, but I believe that Dr. Oren Hasson of Tel Aviv University, a long time researcher on crying, comes closer. He is quoted in an online article as saying, "Crying is a highly evolved behavior. Tears give clues and reliable information about submission, needs and social attachments between one another. "

From another segment in 'The Guardian' article, Honigsbaum writes about the views of a Dutch psychologist, Ad Vingerhoets, who has researched human crying for 20 years. According to Vingerhoets, "Tears are highly symbolic. They signal helplessness, especially during childhood when humans are at their most vulnerable."

Honigsbaum goes on to say, "Vingerhoets is not the only thinker to point to the social significance of tears. The psychiatrist John Bowlby long ago highlighted the role of crying in engendering attachment between mother and child, while the British neurologist Michael Trimble recently linked crying to the human capacity for empathy – hence our propensity to weep during inspiring music."

Crying is both vocal and visually readable to another. We cry tears of joy and laughter, tears of sorrow, tears of frustration, and tears of empathy. But fundamentally the cry of one human being aspires to the comfort of another. As babies mature into children, adolescents and adults, crying matures as well, and we develop a nuanced set of expressions of our pain and our complaints. As our consciousness matures we develop parts of mind, corresponding to the increasing sophistication of the brain which has the capacity to operate in many modes, some that produce distinctions in consciousness. Therefore, like dreaming—part of our mind produces the dream, part of our mind observes the dream, and part of our mind can analyze the dream—we can cry by ourselves because we have developed a relationship with ourselves. We talk to ourselves, as it were, in a constant stream of mental chatter, and sometimes that talk covers painful topics. What starts as a baby's means to solicit the comfort of another, may morph to an adult's need for comfort from someone other than oneself, or even from oneself. We call that self-soothing, the ability to apply a healing balm of self-talk that is reassuring and encouraging, subpart to subpart of consciousness.

Complaining is a scaled down version of crying, in my view; just a developmentally more articulate and specific iteration of the same evolutionarily programmed ability to call out for connection, rapport, and comfort. When two or more people ventilate their pain—from creaky arthritic knees to empty nests, to employment woes, to break-up blues—there are many beneficial experiences that ensue. We feel heard, salved with sympathy, comforted, and we experience ourselves as alone no more. Our individual woes get normalized by shared similar experiences. The wagons of our tribe encircle and hold us.

Although we often hear that no one likes a complainer, let's distinguish the making of a serious or worrisome complaint from whining. Whiners or complainers find fault with lots of things—the rolls are too hard, the fish is undercooked, the cleaner left a stain in the shirt, and everyone at the office is so boring, and on and on. Exposure to that kind of negativity feels demoralizing. But it is very different when one is on the receiving end of a confidential complaint. When we function as the person who listens, understands, beams the light of attention on the other person, comforts, cares and offers help, we have the experience of being trusted and appreciated. Or we are the grateful recipients of such offerings when we share our

own suffering. To bear witness, alone, means to dignify a complaint. To have another human being witness our sorrow or moral outrage is also healing. To cry out is to have a voice. And we feel empowered and accompanied when we give voice to what moves us.

A client recommended a book to me by Gretchen Rubin, called 'The Happiness Project.' In it, on page 100, Rubin remarks, "Experts say that denying bad feelings intensifies them; acknowledging bad feelings allows good feelings to return."

In both parenting and communication literature, we find that what works well between people—couples, parents and their children, coworkers, etc., is validating an individual's negative feelings, even when that acknowledgement is not followed by that individual's desired outcome. As an example, your child doesn't want to go to school. The feeling is acknowledged: "You don't want to go to school. Sometimes it is hard to honor your responsibilities when you don't feel like it." Or, "I know it must feel very intimidating to let your boss know you couldn't finish the project. It will take your courage to do the right thing."

"Dr. Oren Hasson of TAU's Department of Zoology shows that tears still signal physiological distress, but they also function as an evolution-based mechanism to bring people closer together."

In looking up the origins of the word, "complaint," it comes from 14th century Old French and means lamentation or grief. Surely the losses, the frustrations, the failures, and the struggles we endure belong to our collective humanity.

One of my favorite poems about grief, written by the late Irish poet who lived in New England, Galway Kinnell, goes:

Those we love from the first
can't be put aside or forgotten,
after they die they still must be cried
out of existence, tears must make
their erratic runs down the face,
over the fullnesses, into
the craters, confirming,
the absent will not be present,
ever again. Then the lost one
can fling itself outward, its million
moments of presence can scatter
through consciousness freely, like snow
collected overnight on a spruce bough
that in midmorning bursts
into glittering dust in the sunshine.

— Galway Kinnell (for educational use)

Sometimes, we even complain to our dead even when they have gone from this plane of existence, because we do not detach from those we love, even when they are gone. I am in you and you are in me.

Come on, let's have a good hour to complain among friends, and then we will smile and watch the foliage. The swamp maples have already turned red and there are hundreds of colors to follow.

October 5, 2015

The role of Gratification in Motivation—Impulsivity, Compulsivity, and Intentional Behavior

Gratification is a self-reinforcing constellation of feelings, bodily sensations, brain neurochemistry and thoughts that perpetuate repeat behaviors. And because what promotes gratification in some people is different than what promotes gratification in others, there's a high probability of disputes between partners in a couple, friends, or parents and their children. Conflicts arise around doing chores, pursuing joint activities, and how to live life more productively or satisfyingly in general.

As an example, some women (and some men of course) feel gratified when they clean their houses and their houses get clean. When Sandy, a client of mine, says with emphasis, "I felt so good when I got my closet sorted out and I had six big bags for Goodwill," I can see her breathing, her facial expression and her body broadcasting her gratification. She really means that she felt good. When Barbara tells me she felt a "real sense of accomplishment," when her kitchen floor sparkled and the Tupperware was sorted into sizes, I understand that she was aligned with her mission—the goal of cleaning up and organizing the kitchen aligned with her full body sense of gratification. But her teenage son and daughter could care less if dishes pile up in the sink all the way to the ceiling or if every item of clothing owned is simmering somewhere on the floors of their rooms.

Children typically don't get immediate gratification from fulfilling the chores their parents ask them to do; they don't "feel" great when they see the grass green and even after mowing nor do the sparkling countertops, clear of detritus and grease, make their nervous systems sing.

Children typically don't "feel" a rewarding sense of ownership over these household jobs, although they might feel gratified by the social capital they earn when showing off their nice lawns and clean houses to friends. Or, as many parents have discovered, adolescents may feel gratified by an allowance or special permission to attend a concert, or unfettered use of their multiple electronic gadgets, which is why pairing an inherently ungratifying chore with a gratifying reward may work wonders toward getting one's children to make a contribution to

family life. Work environments pay people to do work which is an extension of the same thing. It is the hallmark of a great job/career/profession to have followed your bliss into something for which you feel somewhat passionate as well as have the opportunity to express some skills or expertise; and for which you are additionally rewarded by a good paycheck.

The feeling of gratification is not trivial. It is a highly dominating force in human life. It is linked to motivation and to satisfaction in a complex set of experiences 'on the ground' and in a complex set of neurotransmitter actions in several areas of the brain. It is metronomically synced to inertia—we swing away from inertia when we feel the gratification that comes with motivation; and we swing back into a state of gratifying inertia as a default mode of experience in the absence of some kind of rev. Gratifying motivation is what moves us off the couch and into the tomato garden to harvest the fruits before they over ripen. Motivation might be thought of as "seeking behavior." Whether foraging for edible mushrooms in the woods or lifting weights at the gym or inventing a medical device or painting a masterpiece, seeking the accomplishment of something feels good internally and is generally associated with the activity of the neurotransmitter, dopamine. When we want something or seek it, we tend to go after it.

There are other motivators besides what feels gratifying, and we often bring these into play when the felt-sense of gratification, or that dopamine squirt, is not there. As an example, you come home tired and cranky, wanting nothing more than to eat some buttered popcorn and watch TV. This is the most likely action pursuant to a long, brain or body-tapping day. You might even have some ambitious thoughts but if you are tired or for other reasons are low on energy, then that low energy state demands gratification in a big way. However, if you have committed to a friend in need that you would meet for coffee and a long talk, you jump in and out of the shower, change your clothes, set your mind, and get back in the car toward your promised destination. This loyalty to your commitment is a great big override. You are overriding what your brain and body seek by applying a higher order principle that rules your behavior. Deeply held values, moral/ethical obligations, one's sense of integrity have override capability for many people.

Another overriding possibility is fear. Even when doing nothing is most gratifying, if you are afraid of an authority, of someone's great displeasure, of failing at work or at school, that fear might override your inertia. Guilt is another powerful emotion, as is shame, and these emotions and their associated thoughts also make it possible to override inertia.

Unfortunately, for some people, such as those who are severely depressed, inertia is overpowering. When someone's sense of helplessness and hopelessness live within the context of a low energy state, it becomes exceedingly difficult to mobilize. "Wanting" and "seeking" behaviors get chosen by the brain through a process of disinhibiting them and inhibiting other courses of action/non-action.

The third, and most learned or practiced override for an individual is discipline. Humans who are masterful at something, train themselves to override inertia in the service of a higher

goal. Supreme athletes or musicians or yogis or brilliant physicists, as examples, have trained themselves to think and behave in ways that service an overarching goal or ambition even when, in the moment, what would feel most gratifying would be to do something more lighthearted. Often disciplined people utilize routines, rituals, and cognitive affirmations like, “It’s just what I do,” to reinforce their actions.

The fourth override comes from community. Particularly when we are low on energy, simply being around others whose energy is lifted, can help to lift ours. It is possible to get a second wind from others, and to steer a straighter course when one or more other people help us to do a task that would otherwise seem too daunting. That’s why we hire exercise trainers, go to therapists, attend twelve-step meetings, have friends help us move or solve math problems. It’s why the crew on a boat, when rowing in sync can move farther and faster than can each separate rower added to the others. Others not only help to keep us accountable to our goals, but literally and psychologically fuel us when we are low on personal fuel.

Impulsive people often lead disorganized, chaotic lives. Behaviors can occur without the backing of plans and procedures. Even when the person “knows” that such behaviors are problematic, they seem unable to use logic or reason prior to executing actions that bring negative consequences. Some drug abusers lead lives of chaos, an epidemic example. There is no lack of intelligence involved in disinhibiting seeking behavior directed toward a high; everyone knows heroin can be lethal, and heroin abusers typically know peers that have had a fatal encounters with heroin. The families of impulsive people are often stressed out by constantly having to expect the unexpected. We do not tend to do well with the inconsistency of others, let alone the uncertainty of life circumstances. In contrast, we feel relaxed around people who are predictable in their relaxed or positive energy.

In an online article in the Psychiatric Times, authors Heather A. Berlin, PhD, MPH and Eric Hollander, MD, suggest that, although many times impulsive and compulsive behaviors share common features, for the most part impulsive behaviors which are reactive to internal or external stimuli, tend to produce a pleasurable arousal. On the other hand, compulsive behaviors are repetitive and typically are produced by individuals attempting to relieve their anxiety. These compulsive behaviors, as opposed to impulsive ones, are often perceived by the doer as *dystonic*, meaning that the doer feels he or she *has* to repeat the compulsive behavior, like checking and rechecking the burners on the stove to make sure they are off, even when those behaviors are also experienced as inconvenient and upsetting.

But a felt sense of urgency underlies both behaviors that derive from impulse control problems as well as those that are compulsively driven. Immediate gratification may be sought by following a disinhibited impulse and a different kind of gratification sought by the reduction of anxiety.

Although it goes well beyond the scope of this article to discuss treatments for compulsive and impulse control disorders, these treatments are typically difficult because of

the “natural” alignment between impulses or compulsive urges and the felt sense of gratification and/or motivation. When something seems rewarding, in anticipatory behaviors or in the satiation of a desire, it is experienced as a constellation of physiological and brain sensations, thoughts and feelings that make sense together. Treatment behaviors will feel counterintuitive or misaligned. I call those treatment behaviors and their cognitive propellers “overrides.” Their felt-sense goes against the system and must be practiced multiple times until new neural pathways and new behavioral repertoires develop into a new sense of alignment.

In many cases, treatment involves a *slowing down*. Speed is the enemy of awareness and reflection. And we must bring a deeper level of awareness to the moment when we are at risk of impulsive or compulsive behaviors. To have ultimate freedom psychologically, we have to be available to actively *choose* our behaviors and actions. Impulsive and compulsive behaviors do not feel chosen. They are fast and reactive rather than slow and proactive.

In Twelve Step programs, there is a useful directive: Do the next right thing. The power in it lies in slowing down inner process so that a real decision is made about how to move forward on an issue.

The powerful Nike logo, “Just do it,” works well if one is getting ready for a half-marathon, or a presentation to two thousand people, but does not work well if your teenaged son is about to bash the neighbors’ mailboxes while riding by in a van full of buddies on a bender.

Think about the kinds of things that are inherently motivating and rewarding to you. And compare those to your list of thoughtful ambitions that do not tend to get realized as often as you would like. What do you need to change in order to align those more completely? What can you do to generate more oomph toward your most heartfelt goals and aspirations? Are you utilizing your support system? Or do you need to reach out and develop one?

September 28, 2015

The Yes Cure

Many parents tell me, when speaking disappointedly of young adults that are having a difficult time gaining traction in life, that their child never understood the word “no.” But in reality, oppositional people understand the word “no,” exceptionally well. Because essentially they are always saying “no” to everything asked of them by anyone. You ask an oppositional person to pick up his toys and he says, “No.” Can he wait till after dinner for a cookie and he says “no.”

Eventually, walking around in a world to which you say ‘no,’ will isolate you and set you apart from everyone else and create lots of social stress and distress. Many children carry this

tendency into adolescence and even into adulthood.

It's possible that oppositional individuals have difficulty managing the urgency with which they want something. They can't delay their gratification easily. Perhaps some have difficulty shifting gears, like from watching TV to putting the dishes in the dishwasher. Playing a video game is highly gratifying and a change in brain state may be difficult. Other vulnerability factors that maintain inertia like fatigue, chronic pain, boredom, and depression can function as barriers to saying "yes."

An additional lack of understanding of shared responsibility can contribute to someone's saying "no." Entitled folks believe they are due. While it makes sense that others do things for them, they see little incentive in doing something for others. They are uninformed about the idea of cleaning up after oneself in order to leave things at a standard of cleanliness for others. Our embeddedness in social realms—families, school classes, friendship circles, etc.—is lost on them. "Someone else will do it," they assume. "Why me?" They have not learned, "Why not me?"

Old fashioned values of a strong work ethic, of leaving something better than how you found it, of living lightly on the earth, contribute to building character-driven personhood. They are profoundly more positively affecting than punishing someone for not making a contribution. Obeying authority is necessary at times, just because. . .but contributing meaningfully and graciously because one believes in it is just plain a better and more satisfying way to live.

Of course there can exist more complicating life themes that plague an individual and trigger lots of "no's." For example, when asked to do something outside the realm of what the person was planning, that individual may get triggered into a sense of being controlled or bossed around. He or she enters a power struggle in which, by saying "no," he or she wins. Such victories are hollow, of course. One can win the battle of not doing what one's spouse asked one to do, but ultimately the pleasing sense of partnership and cooperation is at stake, and the relationship, over time, may suffer too many lethal blows.

People who often say "no," almost reflexively, are reacting. Someone who was forced to do things they didn't want to do and to whom few choices were given, may have a hard time with being asked to do anything as adults. They are reacting to a request rather than being proactive and taking ownership of co-decisions. As an example, a child who was forced to exercise against their will may find it hard to "own" the desire to workout at a gym as an adult. The pain of past interpersonal hardships confuses the present.

I say, 'To have a good 'yes,' you have to have a good 'no.' By which I mean that you are actually making real, considered decisions. Reactive yeses and reactive no's can be toxic, or at the very least half-hearted.

But there is a cure for the chronic nay-sayer. It is the "yes," cure: For one week say "yes" to everything you are asked or invited to do, whether or not your instinct is, "I don't want to do it." It is an interesting experiment to see what "yes" brings to you as opposed to what "no" denies you. One of my favorite poem quotes is from ee cummings: "Yes is a world, and in this world skillfully curled, live all worlds."

September 5, 2015

The Difference Between Addictive/Compulsive Behavior and Positive Routines and Habits

The differences are significant. Compulsive behaviors or addictive actions usually start with a great sense of urgency, and this sense of urgency propels maladaptive behaviors even in the face of obvious negative consequences.

In contrast, positive routines/rituals or habits support life and are not maladaptive. In our language the word, "dependency," is often applied to an understanding of addiction, but it can also mean a benign reliance on a self-supporting behavior like going to the gym. A maladaptive dependence on exercising results in self-abuse. It can actually endanger physical and mental health, take too much time away from other meaningful uses of one's time and energy as well as negatively impacting one's relationships.

Many people see the positive contribution of a solid work ethic to their workplace and colleagues, and derive high self-esteem as well as fulfillment of a sense of identity. Working hard and making a contribution gifts one with a sense of purpose and promotes a sense of belonging to goals bigger than one can achieve in isolation. But workaholics overwork. When compulsivity pushes one into a red zone, this creates deficiency rather than abundance. One loses energy, credibility, and accountability. One's health begins to collapse. One's relationships decay. And often the results of workaholicism are far less than one would expect from the quantity of effort so that the balance of investment and fruition gets off kilter.

While of course most people enjoy sex, sex addicts experience a sense of urgency to have sex. Some sex addicts, who are married or in committed relationships, behave as if it's an emergency when their partner won't have sex with them. Their insistence often drives partners to experience a loss of their own desire in what has become a battlefield.

In the grips of an addiction, people feel they cannot get along without the substance or behaviors to which their addiction drives them. Many feel out of control. The compulsive behavior wins even when the individual tells themselves they are not going to succumb. Most people who behave compulsively have moments of awareness in which they realize that these behaviors are hindering their lives to a degree that the feel-good moment of pleasure does not compensate for their guilt, or the catastrophe that follows, or the malaise or anxiety that sets in. In the moment, an addictive behavior—whether taking a drug, seeking sex multiple times a day, gambling, over exercising, over eating, cutting—satisfies something that is unsettled. If there were nothing feel-good about an addictive behavior then no one would do it.

Recently, a client of mine was accused of being a compulsive over-analyzer, and of trading a binge-eating addiction for an addiction to therapy. Having known this person for eight years I disagreed. When a person is analytical—and I very much enjoy using my brain in this way—ideas may be dissected and turned in different directions to consider other thoughts or contexts in which these ideas take on greater meaning or import, as well as to explore different perspectives on the same theory or idea. To express one's curiosity, to question and to explore cognitively and emotionally is the internal equivalent, if you will, of journeying to a foreign country and trying to understand what one is seeing, hearing and experiencing. These journeys feel exciting, inspiring and uplifting.

Compulsive over-analyzers are most often stopped in their tracks, stuck in the mud and find it difficult if not impossible to make decisions and to move forward into action mode. Analysis paralysis is a likely result of over-analysis. But a serious level of thoughtfulness and self-reflection, in general, brings about a richness of experience and decision-making that is usually effective and rewarding. Others trust us when we take things into consideration in a highly thoughtful and analytical way, assessing the various possible impacts of choices we might make. Compulsive over-analyzers try to do this exhaustively, which is virtually impossible. We simply do not have the capability to predict every possible reaction or response someone else or even a country might have as a result of a particular decision. Serious analyzers know when enough is enough, whereas compulsive people have a very difficult time with the notion of "good enough," or "thorough enough."

Resourcefulness is one hallmark of successful humans, in whatever way you think of success. Resourceful people rely on their own past experiences, on consulting knowledgeable and/or supportive others. They seek information from research forums or centers of reliable data and they work with specialists more expert than they are in particular areas. We consult lawyers when we need to address wills, divorces, law suits, real estate transactions. We consult doctors who specialize in medical problems we are experiencing. We go to trainers when we want to know how to exercise our muscles in healthy ways. We learn to play the violin from

accomplished violinists. And we visit therapists when we want to work through or explore our possibilities with someone who will help to light the way without inserting their own agenda. For as long as a resource is helpful to us we will utilize it. Being resourceful is absolutely adaptive and definitively not compulsive or addictive.

Over time, there is a kind of transfer between a person and his or her resources. We learn strategies and techniques, we internalize a way of thinking or coping; we develop greater mastery over problematic areas in our lives. The phrase “internalization of the therapist” is one example. It means to have incorporated ways of exploring, coping with, and healing from the slings and arrows of life in the therapist’s voice as imagined. Essentially, when we incorporate the kindness and empathy of another human being, we utilize this as a sub-part of ourselves. Resourceful people may start out seeking resources external to themselves, but when those resources are internalized—like good habits of walking or practicing an art form, or drawing blood as a phlebotomist, or machining an instrument—then resourcefulness becomes internal as well as external. This is how the student may become the teacher, the patient may become the healer, and the novice become the master.

Cleaving

Yesterday in Brooklyn, NY I saw young mothers strolling their own children, and Jamaican women strolling other women’s children. Mothers and nannies walked, did errands, negotiated cease fires between siblings, bartered lollipops for patience, tickled and explained the teaming stimuli of the surround.

I thought of the ease with which people, beginning as strangers to each other, proceed to bend and twist, adapting like a tree to the turns and swallows of the river alongside its bank, reaching toward the nourishing light. We reach beyond our strangeness and otherness toward familiarity, love and intimacy. We want to insinuate ourselves into family, village or social group.

Our particulars present themselves like exquisite phrases of poetry to be savored—the exotic not-me of you; the beautiful not-you of me. There is a strangeness to everything beautiful. Its power to compel our curiosity and wonder both attracts and scares us.

Our skins

Our skins do not constitute the great divide, but rather the great connect. Our skins breathe us into one another when we come close enough to talk, to touch, to share a coffee or

a confidence or to watch the flowers brush against the scrubbed pillar of a gated driveway between brownstones.

Skin deep is plenty of 'deep;' deep as the heart, deep as the connection between my daughter and her new baby. Each cry of the baby speaks to my daughter's breasts and her milk rains down. The baby's noises penetrate my daughter's sleep and mine, a room away with the door open. These are sounds of thriving, of adjusting, of digesting endlessly it seems—the milk train stopping at its tiny stations in Minna's body, imbuing her blood with both sustenance and waste--emptying with our great anticipation into her diaper.

We read the diaper for its hieroglyphics: how well did she eat? Did she get enough? How profitably did her body work its alchemy?

What is it like for the black women changing the diapers of the white babies in their care? And did the children from their own loins remain at home with grandmothers or aunts awaiting money or opportunity?

The first act of diversity

A mother bearing a child is the first act of diversity. Before a child you are your universe. After a child you occupy a di-verse.

On Facebook my daughter wrote: "My sweet little hedgehog. She pooped in my arms today and I started sobbing with joy. This intense desire for someone else's happiness and comfort ...it's utterly insane and transformative. Or maybe I just need another nap."

I know the root of the word 'diverse' does not, in fact, come from 'di' and 'verse,' but I take poetic license to bring these meanings together. A verse is a metric line, and two lines together harmonize, elaborate or contradict each other.

I think of the book, 'The Help,' and of the brilliant portrayal of the love between a slave and the girl she raises. Theirs is a bond built skin to skin and eyes to eyes. The very marrow of the girl is her nanny's wisdom. The intimacy and importance of their relationship thrives in a context hostile to its fulfillment in adulthood.

Think of the word, 'cleave.' It means to join and to sever. It means itself and its opposite. The intimacy of the slave-mother and her master's child joins them initially and severs them later.

Let the DNA decide who's a stranger

Recently a client of mine took her theatrically minded daughter—whose DNA is half Middle Eastern—to a casting company in Boston where she learned that the Hollywood look right now for female protagonists is one of slightly indeterminate ethnicity. My client's

daughter might look Native American, or Latina, or from the Middle East, or even slightly Asian with her dark almond eyes. Ethnic is in!

Anyone who is not me is you and you are a stranger until I know you. I fear you will bite me. I am wired to protect myself. "But to know you is to love you," said one of my clients. I know what she means. As a therapist I sit across from human beings whom I come to love. The more I know someone the more I love them. The more I love them the more beautiful they become. And as they become more beautiful they become more strange. Strangely infinite, strangely fascinating. Like "cleave," what is deeply familiar is also deeply, strangely particular.

I am too old to feel afraid of asking anyone a question and to ask if it is a polite enough question or if it is all right to seek information and insight about a topic not typically discussed in a person's family, culture or country of origin. I am no longer afraid to ask when I am ignorant or uninformed. I am curious. Curiosity, like love, is a bridge over the rivers of experience that run between me and not-me. If I learn how you make sense of your world and you learn of my sincerity, then our understanding holds us like we would a baby in the most essential di-versity.

When enough bridges cross the river between us, our banks will be joined as will our collective DNA. We will all be mutts and mongrels, and, as in the case of dogs, stronger and hardier because of it. We will have our legacies and ancestry documented in millions of digital bytes on Snapchat and Facebook and recorded for posterity. Our mixed backgrounds of race, nationality, culture, and so forth will constitute the ingenuity and curiosity and love from which we are all born. We will not erase race or religious belief out of hate or fear, nor aim for some kind of false purity of race or soul. Our particulars will constitute aspects of interest and will tell part of our stories. Increasingly we are globe dwellers, living in concentricity rather than behind battle lines, though the world is full of those now, and they are all losing battles.

The DNA of villages

When my daughter fell apart last night, crying with weakness and fatigue and sore nipples and the overwhelming love she feels for this tiny daughter who takes up all the room in the apartment, the City, her world, she said, "I can't imagine doing this alone."

To Hilary Clinton's "village," we cannot tell the story of our humanity alone. Not in our homes, not in our cities and towns, not in our synagogues, churches and mosques, nor in our countries nor our world. There is me and there is not-me.

We do not need to speak of diversity as if it needs to be built or made room for. Diversity is already the composite nature of the bricks that make our world. We need to see ourselves as diverse because we are, and to love ourselves for it.

Recently some friends and I took our kayaks down the Bearcamp River into Ossipee Lake in New Hampshire. The bigger, stiller body of the lake had already warmed quite a bit in early

July, inviting our own bodies into it for swimming and cooling off. The less inviting icy cold river twisted and bent, hosting a number of tiny beaches below campsites where pop-up tents, RVs and trailers sheltered lots of folks over the July 4th weekend. From the Native American center, strains of music played by a wooden flute melded into Latin pop and Country Western.

Everywhere, we steered around flotillas of river rafts, some housing caches of beer and wine as well as children, adolescents and grandparents tied together by ropes and laughter. No one revolted against the goose bump raising cold of the river. Whether blue-lipped or numbed, everyone loved the river because that was where they were; no choice to be made about the river being cold. The river that carries you is the one you have to love. This life in many verses is the music we make.

As we kayaked by the rafters, making jokes about our poor steering and debating the likelihood of rain, we all said “Happy Fourth!” Even those for whom English is an additional language. I don’t think any of us were so much celebrating independence as a nation from Britain as we were stirring around in our “melting pot,” chillin’ out; not boiling in the cauldron we’ve made for ourselves out of a hatred that comes from fear: fear that you are not me, not like me, are against me.

Here’s where I meander like the river and then land

Once I saw the parents of a young woman who was dating a man twice her age. They drove for four hours to my office to convince me of his evil motives so that I would “help” their daughter break up with him. They contrived for him to lose his job. But when I met with their daughter—a young woman with an educational and career trajectory for her life—it seemed clear that this relationship was part of her love story. And she had not been harmed. Her parents refused a meeting with all parties present. After all, it is hard to demonize someone with a human face. It is hard to demonize someone skin to skin, eyes to eyes.

I know a woman named Rozzie, who is proudly “all Italian.” Also a genealogy fan, she recently sent a tube of saliva to Ancestry.com for DNA analysis. Full-blooded Italian grandparents notwithstanding, she delightedly reported some rogue DNA from Germany and Great Britain and Jewish regions in Eastern Europe with a small percentage of “unknown.” “Give me the pizza with everything in it,” she laughed.

Skin does not divide but joins us. We will tie our rafts together and choose each other because on this planet we are whom we have to choose. The literature of Bearcamp River is one of interwoven stories while rafting camp to camp on Independence Day. Minna’s first stanza cries out before there is an “I” to sing it. She cries at the moment she is cord-cut and held at the same time. Cleaved. Di-versed.

July 26, 2015

Willingly Wear Your Smallness

We are small in the scheme of things. We have one slice of the pizza pie of influences in a situation. Not to say one slice can't have impact, influence, purpose and power. But there are other forces at work in the world.

When those forces align with ours there is greater impact in a unified direction. And when those other forces collide with ours the possibilities of chaos, or movement in an entirely different direction than we wanted, may occur. When we have the experience of an injustice done, or of a failure to correct one, we become aware of our smallness. Cultivating awareness, and believing in the power of doing what feels most morally aligned, does not necessarily imply that, in the bigger scheme of things, we will see things turn out the way we believe they should. Still, recycling one bag of bottles does help. Doing one kindness radiates positive energy where it was needed. Helping a friend think through a problem offers attention, encouragement and support.

Often we feel guilty, or experience the “wouldacouldashoulda’s” if a tragedy occurs to someone we love. Someone’s daughter dies of an overdose. A child gets hit by a car. A husband went undiagnosed with a heart condition and is now brain-dead. A fire burns down a house with the family dog in it due to old wiring. These are beyond terrible events and they rock the very existence of all of those who experience its earth shattering grief and loss. The very fabric of one’s life is ripped apart and it will take a lot of time and healing to continue living in the day, with these events as a backdrop. “Survivor guilt” is a term used to describe the guilt people feel in having survived something that a relative did not survive. Survivors feel unjustly favored in some way. Or family members, lovers and friends blame themselves for not being there to save the situation, not taking enough precautions, not reading the signs well enough, and so forth.

The sad truth is that we humans are not all seeing, all knowing, and capable of anything and everything. We are limited. We are small. To be humbled by that smallness, in a gracious way, is necessary for understanding how things happen—how accidents and tragedies occur. They occur because of a confluence of forces. When things happen for the betterment unexpectedly, we call this serendipity. When things happen on a tragic level, but not caused by evil such as the 9/11 attack on the world trade center—an act of terror—they are accidental occurrences. Often many forces collide to produce tragic accidents in spite of the good will of many people. Things break. People have moments of distraction. We take breaks from vigils to take care of our own needs.

Feelings of guilt belong to criminal/malicious/mean actions. If you intentionally hurt someone, then feeling guilty about that is helpful to you because it leads you to make amends

or to change the way you deal with your own anger or revengeful feelings. But if you feel guilt for non-criminal acts, then your idea about the tragedy is off-kilter and self-blaming. We are not at fault for bad things happening, even on our watch, because we cannot be all-seeing and all-knowing. We cannot be fast enough always to prevent a disaster.

When one of my daughters was about three she was jumping on our couch. I stood across from her with a coffee table between us. I told her if she jumped she could fall and hit herself on the coffee table. In that instance she jumped and fell, my fingertips an inch from her. She gashed her upper eyelid, which at the time was so swollen and bloody I thought she had lost her eye. We were ultimately lucky that the gash healed and formed a delicate and somewhat interesting scar. Her actual eye and eyesight were fine. She was fine, but I was shaken to the core. It was a humbling experience to be there, within an inch of my child, and unable to stop an actually *anticipated* accident from happening. She was too fast and too impulsive or I was too slow and uncoordinated.

In a more lethal situation in my therapy practice, a client in solid recovery, had a slip and died of an overdose. I thought I had helped. I thought NA had helped. But slips are common, and the drug he was taking lethal. A colleague's client jumped from a window in an inpatient unit with 24 hour staffing, and died. No matter what we do, we humans are fallible. We are neither all-seeing, all-knowing, or fully capable of providing all of the forces at work in the world. Sometimes we lose. Sometimes our smallness seems overwhelming. Sometimes we are truly helpless to change a situation even as we see it unfolding.

It is the acceptance of our smallness, graciously and without prejudice, that helps us to heal when a terrible accident or tragedy befalls someone we love. When you work to be your best self in life you must include owning your smallness in the face of things larger than you alone. We are human. We are small. We know how to try really really hard. And sometimes our one slice in the pizza pie of life is too small to overturn a disaster.

Week of July 19, 2015

Reaction versus Response

Sometimes the slightest circling of a conversation around an emotional scar can set off a cascade of seemingly uncontrollable feelings, memories, images and behaviors. This is reactivity. While we react reflexively and unintentionally on visceral, kinesthetic and emotional levels, we can learn to 1) become aware that we are reacting, rather than responding, to something in the present; 2) that our reaction is amplified to a degree that is out of proportion to the current situation and 3) that we have the capacity to manage the behaviors that follow our physiological and emotional reactivity, at least to some degree.

The biggest problem with our reactivity is that it does our ‘thinking’ for us. Reactivity makes a lot of assumptions, and often if not usually, these assumptions are false. We interpret current reality incorrectly. We read situations happening in the now as if they were worse situations, like ones that happened in the past. Past and present conflate, seeming indistinguishable to us. And there’s a reason: Our minds/brains recognize similarities, and if something in the present is similar in some way to something that has occurred in the past, *for which we need to be protected*, all of our fight-or-flight mechanisms gear up, grab firearms, and thrust themselves into action. It is evolutionarily helpful for our survival to recognize potential danger. Unfortunately, if our brains identify potential danger frequently, where it does not exist in the present, we will experience cumulative stress.

Adrenaline production happens instantaneously as a stress response, creating that fight or flight set of sensations, like shallow and rapid breathing, tensed muscles, including shoulders hunched up around our ears, a queasy stomach, cold sweaty palms, a sense of restlessness, and a surge of energy. After the initial surge comes Cortisol, a steroidal output that somewhat mitigates the adrenaline by maintaining a fluid balance and keeping blood pressure within normal bounds.

A similarity, recognized by our unconscious brain, does not mean that the situation in the present is literally the same as the one in the past, but sometimes it *feels* that way. The fight-or-flight reaction means the volume is turned up, thinking is turned down, and our behavior will not always represent that of our finest hour. We need our survival responses for emergency situations that pose threats to ourselves and those we protect. We need a more measured response for the complicated interpersonal situations that frequently occur in our lives. And to address those more subtle or nuanced situations we have to be able to manage our emotional output, physical sensations, and communicate well.

On one hand it is beneficial to trust our feelings, because our feelings are barometers or “readouts” on how we are responding to a current situation. But feelings and thoughts, which often co-occur as we try to understand what is going on in our world, are NOT the same thing.

How we feel, and what we think about the situation prompting those feelings, are distinct. I can feel hurt and saddened as a reaction to something you said. So my feelings are real. I am indeed really sad and hurt. But I may have assumed you meant something hurtful when in fact you did not. So my thoughts about what has happened between us, and what actually happened may be different. I need to clarify with you what is going down. Then my feelings may change as I understand you with greater accuracy.

As an example, Suzette had prepared a full dinner for her family on Friday night. Her daughter, and two granddaughters were hungry, so before Larry arrived home they sat down to eat in a casual style, serving bowls on the table for everyone to help themselves to the portions they wanted. She had postponed the meal long enough to include Larry even though he would arrive after they had begun eating dinner. Suzette grew up in a large family and by custom

everyone had dinners together most nights, with rare exceptions. When Larry came in, hot, tired and stressed, he kissed Suzette and marched straight upstairs to shower. When he reappeared he got his Friday night drink, the one bourbon a week that marked the end of the work week and the beginning of the weekend. Suzette felt peeved that he had not forgone his drink, or at least sat with the family while having it. Instead he sat apart, and then, as the serving bowls were cleared, scooped a spoon into one or two of them as he stood at the kitchen counter. An argument ensued about his doing that.

Later, when Suzette and Larry talked about their fight, each described a completely different narrative about what had happened. The raw facts were that Larry had not sat down with the family. But he had felt like a stray dog coming into a happy room of “the girls.” He felt like an unwanted intruder and attempted to “stay out of the way.” On the other hand, Suzette had left a place setting out for him and assumed that he would see that as an invitation. True, she had not gotten up and hugged him or said, “Please come to the table.” But she had assumed he really needed a shower and didn’t want to interrupt that much deserved cleansing. Her story was that he had deliberately separated himself, sitting apart like the king of the castle, deigning to speak to his minions from the couch or the counter, while they all had to crane their heads to interact with him. Suzette felt rejected and put down after spending time creating a meal for the whole family. To her he was scoffing at her efforts and inflexible with changing his routine in order to sit with his family. In both cases, the pain Larry and Suzette felt, harkened back to Larry’s shy childhood and his thoughtful approach to conversation which often left him too slow to get in on a response before someone else talked. For Suzette, she grew up with an angry father whose feelings took precedence over hers. She felt disallowed to maintain her feelings when she had to take care of her father and his.

Reactions, as opposed to responses, occur when my feelings are intensively activated to a point where I am no longer able to think slowly enough to understand my situation. While it is beneficial to react without thinking if jumping out of the way of an oncoming car or a charging bull, but it is not helpful to punch someone in the face because of a comment that made me “see red.”

In order to respond, not react, to a perceived insult I have to 1) Take the hit. 2) Spend a few moments gauging how I feel about what happened, and 3) Feel-out the proportion of anger to insult. How bad was it? Am I feeling way more intensely about this than the situation warrants? Only after that can I then make a decision about an appropriate action to take. Besides punching the person in the face, there are many other possibilities. I can express that the comment hurt and angered me. I can ask for clarification. I can consider whether there is some truth to the comment or justification behind it. I can decide that I want to change my relationship with this person. I can request to be treated to/spoken to differently, and so forth.

Responses are elaborate and specific to a situation whereas **reactions are blunt**. Like the difference between gross motor skills and fine motor skills. Gross motor movements get us around. Fine motor skills are highly nuanced and require subtle coordination. Responses are proactive rather than reactive. They are particular rather than generic. Responding involves complex processes in which we look at the present with fresh eyes. That requires a conscious determination to NOT make assumptions in non-emergency situations.

So responses, as opposed to reactions, are freshly constructed in a mindful present where our feelings, thoughts and actions are freely chosen, not predetermined by past traumas, experiences or assumptions. Responses are creative rather than canned or automatic, they are in-the-moment as opposed to stale. But our responses also represent the output of our highest selves. Responses express how we want to utilize our feelings and bodily sensations in the service of higher order communication and action. If I want to express myself, for example, as an honest but kind person in my dealings with others, then these values will get reflected in the way in which I address an interpersonal situation during which I felt put down.

Speed is the enemy of awareness. Reactivity is speedy. Responsiveness is slower. In order to respond, as opposed to react, we have to slow down. That's why the adage, "Count to ten," works. There is no magic to the actual counting to ten, the magic lies in putting a spacer between strong emotion and the action that ensues from it. Whether the spacer includes taking a breath, walking around wringing your hands, counting to ten, saying an affirmation to yourself like, "I can handle this," to calling a support person, to going out for a run, to playing calming or positively stimulating music, it still functions to slow us down. And as we slow down awareness has room to maneuver. We can feel our feelings but think about how we want to productively handle a situation.

Week of July 4, 2015

The Sober Olympians: A rebuttal of Gabrielle Glaser's article, "The False Gospel of Alcoholics Anonymous", in the April 2015 Atlantic Monthly

Letter from Lisa Friedlander, MA, MSW, MFA, LICSW

Olympians in life—athletes, artists, a Mother Theresa, sober addicts--are not born. They are made. In Gabrielle Glaser's article on the "false gospel of AA," she is asking why AA does *not* work, and ultimately concluding that it does not work as a treatment for alcoholism and alcohol use disorders because she thinks it lacks a scientific basis and because it does not have high retention rates beyond one year.

The problem is that Glaser's question about what works for alcohol use disorders presupposes that sobriety constitutes the entirety of the problem. The scope of the problem is much larger and more complex. And secondly, what she calls 'scientific' is also problematic

because the retention rate for a one year period does not, in fact, indicate whether or not AA is effective. A better question would be, *for people who do stay in AA, does it help?* If people quit AA prematurely, then they did not ‘work’ the program. And, as I will discuss, the ‘gospel’ or ‘tenets’ of AA were designed as directives for leading a meaningful and sober life. Engaging in a concerted process in a motivational context, to the degree one needs to achieve results, achieves results. These 12 steps were never touted as scientific, nor do they have to be in order to encourage positive results in the same way that religious doctrines and practices do not have to be true in order to encourage positive behavior and provide comfort to believers.

As a practicing psychotherapist for the past 30 years who has seen clients for a long time in their recovery process, I will introduce Ron, an AA veteran of 25 years who still has a sponsor and sponsees, goes to meetings several times a week and every few years joins a small group of men who work through the 12 steps slowly. That work includes self-reflection, journaling, and discussion within a confidential and non-judgmental atmosphere. Sadly, last year Ron’s son died from an overdose of heroin. Ron did not turn to drink. Although Ron’s wife had died years before, he called his best friend to share the heart-wrenching news. Within half an hour three men in his AA family appeared at Ron’s house despite the 1 AM hour. They held him, cried with him, made him cups of tea, tucked him into bed, and organized friends and food to be delivered to him for several weeks on a daily basis, helped him plan the funeral and continued to oversee his healing. All three men grew up in blue collar families where people didn’t talk much about their feelings, secrets and lies stayed behind doors, and men definitely didn’t cry.

I have a hundred stories from the beautiful people in recovery who have moved me and inspired me in our work together. They have hearts the size of continents. They are non-defensive. They are reflective. They are validating to others and non-judgmental. They listen. They set boundaries and respect the boundaries of others. They try new things, see new places, meet new people yet appreciate the small things. They are *highly developed humans*, who are also sober, the AA equivalent of Tibetan monks. After all, as Glaser says in her article, “an estimated 18 million Americans suffer from alcohol use disorder.”

But she never asks what this really means; what are the implications. The implications are many—poor health, malfunctioning memory, impaired relationships, a danger to self and others on all of the roads of life, inconsistent work history, stunted emotional growth and failure to develop more productive coping mechanisms to deal with the inevitable slings and arrows life hurls our way. To really ask, ‘what works to intervene with alcohol use disorders?’ one has to rightsize, and in Glaser’s case, expand the scope of the problem. In short, alcoholic drinking is a problem because the life of an alcoholic is hugely problematic. How to build a life as a sober person is not well enough answered by a drug that reduces cravings. And Glaser focuses most of her claim about what is and is not scientific based on the drug, Naltrexone, which has proved to be somewhat effective in reducing cravings for alcohol in rats and in some people. I submit that the conditions for sobriety must change from the pre-sobriety conditions

to enhance the likelihood that the problems will not recur. Sobriety is only a prerequisite for more global, and necessary change.

It is not impossible to stop drinking “cold turkey.” In AA there is a term for people who have gotten themselves sober without going through the experiences that AA provides, but still act out the problematic behaviors of an alcoholic: the dry drunk. When dry drunk, individuals may act edgy, restless, angry. They may continue to lie, cheat, steal, be highly self-absorbed and lack the ability to lower defenses enough to have real conversations that would enhance friendships and salient interpersonal relationships.

The question from my clinician’s chair, is ‘*Why does AA work so well?*’ After 30 years of question-asking, pondering, and observing, I have a working theory. I will dispute the *basis* upon which Glaser declares AA a failure--retention rates and non-scientific tenets.

The most important two reasons AA works has far less to do with its tenets—true or false--than its provision of a fairly ubiquitous as well as enriched plan first, and second, a strong and available community of intention--buttresses. We humans need strategies with which to flesh out our intentions and to practice the behaviors and ways of thinking that we value most highly.

K. Anders Ericsson (born 1947) is a Swedish psychologist, currently at Florida State University, who is an eminent scholar in the field of expertise and mastery. “According to this influential theory, expert performance is viewed as an extreme case of skill acquisition (Proctor & Dutta, 1995; Richman, Gobet, Staszewski & Simon, 1996; VanLehn, 1996) and as the final result of the gradual improvement of performance during extended experience in a domain.” (from an excerpt of Anderson, 2000, on his website at Florida State University).

To summarize Anderson’s description of mastery, I propose the following equation: Practicing + Tweaking = Peaking. If you continue to practice *being a person* who is sober—one day at a time, and every day, for at least 10 years--while incorporating suggestions from sponsors and friends as you continue your journey and improve your mastery, eventually you arrive at “peaking.”

Glaser speaks of Naltrexone as “scientific,” a psycho-pharmaceutical that reduces cravings for alcohol by flooding receptor sites in the brain that would otherwise receive endorphins generated by alcohol consumption. Studies on rats show craving reduction during Naltrexone use, and resurgence of alcohol consumption when the drug intervention is terminated. And while rats and humans share some aspects in common, rats have no human ability to override cravings for values-based or goal-oriented reasons such as duty, responsibility, love, devotion, accountability, consideration for others, serving purposes larger than our personal ones, and so forth.

Glaser’s argument falls into the proverbial apples-versus-oranges problem. A chemical versus a way of life simply have no basis upon which to be compared meaningfully. Naltrexone

may reduce cravings for alcohol, but AA offers a how-to for building masterful human beings who are sober.

In a Harvard Business Review article on mastery, Anderson's point is reiterated:

"By now it will be clear that it takes time to become an expert. Our research shows that even the most gifted performers need a minimum of ten years (or 10,000 hours) of intense training before they win international competitions. In some fields the apprenticeship is longer: It now takes most elite musicians 15 to 25 years of steady practice, on average, before they succeed at the international level."

To become an expert in living soberly takes the same amount of time and practice as it does to do anything really well. People devoted to sobriety put in time—they attend meetings, go on commitments, and spend time talking with sponsors—often on a daily basis. They attend retreats and conferences devoted to twelve steps, socialize and talk casually among peers who reinforce ways to maintain sobriety through hard times. AA participants are often very resourceful. When they experience a problem they consult peers and experts. Because they are highly aware of dependency and co-dependency, they take advice and counsel into consideration and make up their own minds.

When someone says, "AA does not work for me," having attended meetings for only two months, that would be like someone saying they would never become a violinist by taking lessons for two months. It is nothing short of ridiculous. When people attend AA and continue to talk the "gospel," as Glaser calls it, they are basically downloading psychologically powerful software that helps them maintain their sobriety while becoming masterful at being people. Personhood develops around sobriety rather than sobriety existing in a receptor-site vacuum. While Naltrexone may certainly help change some internal conditions for sober living, other treatments or interventions are necessary to change external conditions. Naltrexone might reduce cravings but it does not intervene with lying, cheating, stealing, and disappointing yourself and others.

It absolutely matters very little whether AA's tenets are true or not, in the same way it does not matter much whether the Paleo diet, the South Beach diet, the Mediterranean Diet, Jenny Craig or Weight Watchers is true, or whether one is truer and more scientifically based than the others. The important thing is that all of these nutritional plans work because they are better than eating junk food and, like AA, they provide a blueprint for buttressing and organizing one's intentions to get healthier and lose weight. Working any program, like going to any church in any faith, is simply a way to organize one's life, a plan around which one's discipline advances one's cause. If you stop exercising then your muscles atrophy. If you stop eating healthy food you gain weight, or advance cholesterol, or ingest too much sugar for your pancreas to handle. If you were a pianist who stopped practicing the piano your dexterity would decline. If you were a runner who stopped running your speed would diminish. To be an Olympian in one's own life is no accident of birth, it is accomplished through hard work—

repetitive, retentive, and with increasing mastery because of the input of others who are more practiced and more expert than oneself, and who will in AA, out of the goodness of their hearts, encourage you and talk to you at any time of night or day.

Let's talk about retention rates. I find it odd that anyone would find AA at fault in lower retention rates than would be desirable. Let's face it, in the Western world we find ourselves growing more obese, more plagued with heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and Type II diabetes. For sure, when we go to our doctors they tell us to lose weight, quit smoking, exercise more, drink less, and so on. But retention rates are low for keeping ourselves healthy. Every year people join gyms in January and many people stop going after a month or two. People go on multiple diets for a while and then quit. Diabetics reduce sugar intake for some period of time and then stop at a bakery. You get the point. Perhaps this is because, as Daniel Kahneman says, in his book Thinking, Fast and Slow, in default mode we have lazy brains. When we really want to achieve something and can't count on our own insular discipline alone, we join others in community. Their energy, their support, their encouragement and mentorship help to move us in the direction we want to head. Rats don't care about the direction toward which they are headed beyond survival.

As a therapist, I support a multi-pronged approach to treatment and have nothing against the use of pharmaceutical agents to support clients' intentions. But there is simply no way in which what Naltrexone produces and what concerted participation in AA produces is the same thing. Would you rather take Naltrexone for 10 years, or immerse yourself in AA for that long? There are no pharmaceutical side effects to AA. Not to mention, Naltrexone doesn't come in a box with a powerful support network, nor does it instruct you in your ability to think through the consequences of your actions before you take them or to be highly resourceful—a characteristic I have noticed in long time AA participants, and it certainly doesn't direct you to "do the next right thing."

As a last point, drugs change brain chemistry quickly, but I have noticed that long-term AA participants don't usually crave alcohol any more. Though anecdotal, my observation may indicate that our brain biochemistry will change over time due to repeated installation of positive psychological downloads, in the same way that Tibetan monks have brains that are happier than those of the rest of us due to their lifelong years of meditation practice. We live in a fast-food culture where we seek results instantaneously. From that standpoint, Glaser finds what is effective a pharmaceutical. While that may reduce some aspect of alcohol use disorder, it still comes from a pathology-based perspective. AA, in my opinion, like other methods of advancement in life, espouses a more optimization-based perspective. Work AA and you're a healthier, happier person who is sober. Take Naltrexone as your sole intervention and you might be lucky enough to drink one glass of wine at dinner without wanting another that night, and maybe not. Hip hip hoorah.

Week of June 21, 2015

Getting stuff done: Harnessing momentum

Momentum is what keeps things going. Starting anything is difficult because of the “threshold phenomenon.” Whatever you are going to do, you were not already doing it a moment ago, so you have to start. You roll up your sleeves to wash the dishes, open the books to do homework, oil the chainsaw to cut down a tree, pack your clean clothes and toiletries to head off to the gym for a workout. Once you have started—and that’s the hardest part—your intentions exist in the material world; they have moved from your mind into your life. Now, what is required to keep on keepin’ on? To go back to the gym week after week, to continue to make that quilt or write that memoir or declutter the entire house. How easily we can get derailed. The kids get sick, the neighbor asks for brownies for the school bake sale, an invitation to a wedding falls on the weekend we had planned to hunker down with the books.

In order to get things done, and most particularly for longer projects, we need: Time + energy + presence of mind + continuity. And additionally, community connectedness with likeminded others.

Years ago, in responding to my encouragement to clear some time so she could do something for herself, one woman, let’s call her Carol, said, “So, Lisa, I finally had three hours to myself and I stood there shaking my hands and thinking, ‘Now what do I do? What do I do?’ I almost couldn’t wait for my precious three hours to be over.”

We both laughed. Of course it is not enough to make time for yourself. You also have to know what you would like to do with that time. Carol had been so busy caring for multiple generations in her life that she had little idea what would generate a sense of satisfaction, pleasure or meaning to do. The three hours felt as shapeless as a potato sack.

The gift of three hours, all to oneself, feels entirely different when you can pick up a “thread” that you have temporarily put down. Say you are in the middle of making a quilt, writing an essay, working on constructing a cabinet, planting and caring for a garden, learning a language, baking muffins, putting together an event, or just enjoy dancing to your favorite music in the living room while the music blasts away, etc. Then you have something to go back to without a lot of reorientation. You say to yourself, “OK. Great. I have three hours tomorrow morning so I can do. . .” You already have a notion of what to pick up. But if you have never done anything for yourself, then you are dealing with a lot of other issues like, “What would I do if I *had* the time?” And, “What are the hurdles I need to overcome in order to pursue that?”

It’s clear that we need, not only time, but presence of mind, and some continuity or threads in our personal self-to-self lives. For people who have grown up in environments that are invalidating, overly critical or abusive and neglectful, the problem of “what I like, what are my own feelings and intentions,” can be difficult, and this is another subject. But assuming that one has some balance between devoting oneself to others and to oneself, and that one does

have areas of personal interest, then we return to the question of momentum—the keeping-goingness of a pursuit.

So, we need time and energy. **Energy** implies covering basics like eating nutritious calories and getting the requisite sleep so that we can have presence of mind, or some ability to focus on the pursuit at hand. And **continuity** is about managing the time we have allocated to our pursuits. For example, if you decide that your pursuit is going to the gym to get stronger and more fit, then it helps a lot to allocate specific times during the week when that will happen. You take a SPIN class Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays at 6 PM. Or you hit the gym Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday at 7 AM. Personally, I don't always have regular times when I do something like work out, but I do write down my activity times in my calendar so that I am always aware of them. Every time I open my calendar I get prompted over and over again, which is like downloading the same “software” repeatedly. This helps me to be more accountable to myself in fulfilling my goal.

Immersion can sometimes substitute for continuity I learned recently, while at an author panel for three emerging novelists who talked about their writing process. All three agreed that writing a book is a big project and sometimes “binge writing” worked out better than a commitment to writing five hundred to one thousand words a day (one thousand words on a computer translates to about four double-spaced typewritten pages). An immersion such as writing for eight hours solidly or, over the course of a weekend, writing a lot had the effect of allowing the writers to lose themselves in the material, to be so absorbed and present that their characters and storylines developed without their forgetting anything and having to reorient themselves to the material.

Because we humans have competing intentions, we often find ourselves wanting to do the dishes left over in the sink and also to sit on the couch and grab the remote after a long day of work. Often the remote wins out. If I walk in the door after a day of work tired, I am likely to feel somewhat “wired.” I have not yet completely downshifted into home mode. I can use the tailwind of the drive home in my car to drive the **one-more-thing strategy**. The one-more-thing strategy takes from physics the notion of momentum. When you have already put something in motion it takes friction to slow it down. If I walk in the door and head straight to the sink of dishes, I can use the entry momentum to get the dishes done AND THEN sit on the couch and reach for the remote. If I also imagine myself doing the dishes as soon as I walk in the door after work, that will be, like looking in my calendar, the software download to keep my operating principle humming along.

To keep momentum going we want to **reduce friction**. Another way to describe that is to lower the threshold that stands between my intention to do something and my actually doing it. Sitting on the couch the second I come home from work raises the threshold between me and doing the dishes dramatically. To do the dishes I would have to unseat myself, turn my attention away from the compelling TV drama all the way to the boring and cluttered sink, and

cross some expanse to get there. By going directly to the sink at the moment I enter the house I will have **lowered the threshold** between my intentions and my actions. Intention and action will more likely marry each other. If my intention is to eat healthfully and prepare myself a salad and some cooked veggies and a protein, I can lower the threshold by making sure I am not already starving, exhausted and facing a fragrant pizza and box of cupcakes “for the kids.” I can also lower the threshold to eat more healthfully by batch cooking ahead of time and having good food already semi-prepared. And finally, I can drastically lower any threshold by making something a habit, an auto-pilot maneuver. The **willingness to be boring**, at least for a while, can be helpful. The more complicated we make things, the harder they are to execute. More choices make for more confusion. Too many ways of creating a meal, too many decisions or runs to the grocery store, will elevate a threshold. While variety is the spice of life, it is not, at least initially, going to help us develop the habit of getting stuff done the way we want to get it done.

Here’s a checklist of items that may be helpful in addressing momentum issues:

Intention—clearly conceptualize what you are desiring to accomplish. If you cannot define it clearly it will be harder to actualize it. For example, what does “eat more healthfully” specifically mean to you? Is it a number of points or calories, is it portion control, is it a low-sugar diet, a vegetarian diet, etc.?

Physical condition—are you tired or hungry, are you in pain or feeling comfortable, do you have energy? Fatigue, hunger, and pain are major competitors for our attention and they are very demanding: ‘I need sleep;’ ‘Feed me;’ ‘Where’s the Tylenol?’ Before you move to action, try to take care of your basic bodily needs so that they are not causing friction or competing for your time and attention. Sometimes we have to push through pain, but that takes a lot of will power and for most people that is very difficult.

Affect—Are you optimistic and cheerful, down, angry, frustrated, sad or disappointed? When we feel good anything seems possible. When we are angry or frustrated or sad, this is preoccupying and causes friction which bogs down our momentum. Sometimes a change of scenery, reading an inspirational quote, or getting support from a friend or family member can help shift our emotional experience, as can taking a walk and moving our bodies.

Thought process—Thoughts are powerful at greasing a wheel or causing friction. If you think you can do something then you propel your momentum along. If you assume you will fail you will grossly bog down your momentum. If your thoughts are too wide-ranging then your focus will not be pointed enough.

Practical considerations—We live in the real world which is different from the wonderful world of our imaginations. We need our imaginations to conceive of possibilities heretofore thought impossible. But in the moment, we want to assess what's reasonable, so we don't set ourselves up for failure. A first "long walk" for a couch potato might reasonably be a mile, not ten. Is what we are about to embark upon affordable? Do we have the time to do it correctly?

Tools- To track process and progress toward daily and longer term goals it is great to have a journal, a graph, or some other way (like a Fit Bit) to let you know when you are on track. It is also motivating. Visual reminders of our successes are helpful in keeping the momentum going. Tools can also be things you need for the job—you need a good pair of sneakers to support athletic training for many things. You need the right foods to cook. You need books or other materials to research your paper.

Support System—Beyond anything else, having people who support your efforts and boost your enthusiasm when it flails, is a great thing. When you connect with people who can put wind in your sails, who can inspire you, who can talk you out of your own negative thoughts, then you will most likely maintain your momentum. Isolation works against almost anything, when it occurs too often or for too prolonged a period. Whether an introvert or an extrovert, most of us humans need each other. Get connected to a positive grid of people and your own powers will rise. You thrive from the electrical output of others and they from you.

Week of May 24, 2015

On Motivation: Why Can't I do What I Want To Do?

How frustrating. We want to clean out the garage, mow the lawn, get to the gym, start our diet, plan the vacation, visit our uncle in the hospital, prepare for work, learn Spanish or do the laundry. But we don't! We just want to sit around in our sweat pants eating ice cream and dancing our thumbs over the remote. So which is it? Get to what we want to do because we know it is goal oriented and productive? Or laze around because it is creature-comfort enjoyable?

Because we humans are complex, we can want to do multiple activities or nothings at the same time and those motivations vie for supremacy. Motivations can be drives. We feel motivated to eat when hungry, to have sex when desirous, to seek comfort when we are hurting, and so forth. These drives are associated with the most basic necessities of human survival on the species level, and individual survival in the case of food. But unlike other less-evolved animals, we human beings feel motivated by more than what instincts have programmed so deeply in our DNA. And therefore we often struggle with our motivation sagging well below what we would ideally like to accomplish, be it cleaning out an overstuffed

closet, meeting friends for dinner, planting flowers in the backyard, designing a new brake system for a ten speed bike or writing a novel.

Higher order motivations can be based on many foundations—values and principles, obligations, ambitions of a professional or interpersonal nature, and the practical requirements of living like showing up at one’s job.

Not only do we have competing claims on our attention and energy but there is a correlation between how much energy we have at any given moment and how difficult it will be to motivate ourselves to accomplish something of higher purpose/lower creature comfort status. As an example, when we feel tired or depressed or flustered or confused or inattentive or fearful, it is difficult to move our energy in the direction we think would be positive, healthy, or uplifting for us.

Motivation has a visceral, palpable component. It involves our bodies. We experience a high level of motivation as we would a concoction: two parts excitement, one part determination, another part focus, and the feeling of gathering one’s forces. And, according to Alfred Bandura, some “self-efficacy,” which means the confidence we have in our ability to reach a certain goal. Which one is the most motivating, and what does that look like in the brain? It might, according to some neuroscientists, look like what gives us the biggest dopamine squirt.

When motivation is experienced as less physiologically excitatory, then we need additional wind in our sails like: conviction, clearing a space (visually removing clutter, literally making space for your activity, and mentally clearing space by writing down your list, journaling out any anger or other distracting emotional issue, taking a short walk to get out of disturbing ‘scenery,’ and so forth), stable habits of action (like going to the gym on the same days at the same time four times a week or keeping the menu very similar), setting up of rewards-for-action (lunch with a friend after two hours of data analysis or purging the basement); accountability buddies who nudge, prod, check-in or get pushy; additional resources to accompany or contain you (your favorite music blasting, a friendly witness, someone or a group of kindred spirits to contribute energy to you).

Excitatory states are high energy moments. When we feel energetic more seems possible than we our energy is lower. Most of us know when we are most and least energetic during any given day. This is called our chronobiology, our inner clock. Generally speaking our melatonin production goes up between 1 and 3 PM—siesta time—and at night when we go to sleep. It is easier to feel motivated for high priority items when your energy is highest. Many successful people attest to experiencing their highest energy and ability to concentrate in the morning and so that is when they take care of their priorities.

In Prochaska’s model of change, used for motivational interviewing purposes with clients who are considering sobriety rather problem-drinking or quitting smoking, he talks about how we move from resistance or lack of readiness to change, through a series of stages

to get to a point where we take action. The stages are: pre-contemplation (no intention of changing within the next 6 months), contemplation (getting ready), preparation (readying to take action within roughly a month), action (making at least some necessary changes to reduce disease or dysfunction), maintenance (changes have been made including relapse prevention strategies), and termination.

“Termination is the stage in which individuals are not tempted; they have 100% self-efficacy. Whether depressed, anxious, bored, lonely, angry, or stressed, individuals in this stage are sure they will not return to unhealthy habits as a way of coping. It is as if their new behavior has become an automatic habit.”

If you really want to accomplish something, whether it be a 20 mile walk, building a shed, or learning a software program, start with assessing how excited about it you are, and how confident that it is within your power to achieve. Next, ask yourself how much energy you have in your to-do tank. If a lot, you might be good to go. If lower than you need attend to your basics for fuel—good sleep, nutritious food, some positive affirmations—and then, if you need to bring out the big guns, build in your reward systems, your accountability buddies or your hands-on helpers. Sometimes it’s not as easy as the Nike focus would have us believe! ‘Just do it’ is a fabulous slogan. When we have core habits, for ambitions that are continuous, like going to the gym or writing a book or finishing a quilt, then ‘just do it’ means, to me, rolling it out. Just like getting up in the morning for walk, the things that we JUST DO, are things that have become second nature. We roll them out without a lot of thought because they have become our tried and true habits of behavior that support us in our daily kinds of endeavors.

Week of May 3, 2015

Mother’s Day Magic

Evolution is nothing less than revolution after revolution, however molecular the stroke of paint, flesh or imagination to vitalize a new canvas. Each bud, smile, cloud, finger whorl is a particular in the stream of common energy we inhabit.

On this Mother’s Day I stop to listen to women in the kitchen preparing poached salmon, eggs, strawberry waffles; cutting honey dew, cantaloupe and watermelons. The colors and juices, the exquisite textures of foodstuffs from our planet form a bouquet of chatter, the sounds of implements, the smells of heating ovens and air flowing through the finally-opened New England windows. Ecstasy spirits me as I sit quietly, sunlight springing open the tiny fists of new leaves on the oaks and maples outside my window. Filled with love and gratitude to all mothers and to the mothers within us all, I hope this day brings fulfillment in the expression of care for others. If you have ever birthed, raised, mentored, helped, cared for someone selflessly, even for a brief time, you have planted your feet firmly in the boots of motherhood.

Mothering is a frontline, in the trenches mode of operating. Becoming a mother (father)—biologically, adoptively, fosteringly, informally, etc. is the most humanizing experience on the planet. To conceive of putting another being before oneself, even to the point of sacrificing oneself for that other being—to giving one’s life—now that is mind-boggling. And it makes gratuitous violence difficult to understand. Not impossible, but difficult.

While so much has been written about mothers and mothering, and so many metaphors already tendered, it is difficult to find anything new to say. But this morning, I think about mothers as shapers of other humans. All babies come into the world as a particular expression of DNA, and in a particular human and geographical environment. There will be many influences along the path of living, but mothers are shapers, sculpting the way babies cling and are clung too, pointing to things, moving trajectories away from hot stoves and toward a soft blanket full of toys. Shaping thought. Shaping a sense of principle. And being shaped by the stretching experiences of motherhood.

Whether you are male or female or creatively gendered, think of the ways you are a mother; remember the mothering that has helped to shape the ‘you’ that you are. How will you express the mother-love within you today? To yourself and beyond you to others.

Week of April 27 2015

Fear Not Fear

One of my clients came in upset because a dear friend had accused her of making “fear based” decisions, and suggested that only from love do good decisions issue. My client wanted to know if there were any legitimate place for fear within us.

We need to honor and value all of our emotions. We are exquisitely equipped to register almost any kind of experience that happens in our world. Fear, in certain contexts, is absolutely the most appropriate emotion and the one most necessary for survival. If you see a hungry tiger closing the gap between you, then fear communicates itself to your brain and your body in precise and sensitized ways. Your mind becomes clear, your senses sharpened, your muscles strong and ready for whatever needs to happen. How many times have I heard worried parents say, “My child is afraid of nothing, like darting in front of a moving car or climbing to the top of the refrigerator.” They worry about the apparent lack of capacity, on the part of their child, to instantly analyze a situation and appropriately navigate it. Fear in some contexts represents the appropriate emotional registry. Of course, very young children appear to have no fear in situations that are unfamiliar. When they acquire more familiarity and learning—such as that a stove burner gets too hot to touch—then fear emerges in response to getting too close. As the Persian poet Rumi says about all emotions in his famous poem, “The Guest House,” (from the third stanza) “Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest

honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. . .The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. . .Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.” In a Freudian slip I previously typed this as “sent as a guide from within.”

All emotions inform us about our responses to the interpersonal and environmental contexts in which we live and operate. Fear is not, de facto, a negative emotion, but it can function negatively in our lives such as when a nine year old, gung ho to play basketball, is too fearful to try out for the school team; or when a hard worker who deserves a promotion fears asking her boss about it; or when a person’s fear of potential rejection drives him from one potential serious relationship to another without ever jumping in with both feet.

The freedom to feel our feelings, all of our panoply of feelings, and to observe the contexts or circumstances in which we feel them, as well as to choose whether or not to act upon them describes the utmost in the strength and flexibility of which we humans are capable.

If we put any emotion, including fear, anger and jealousy into one box and label it “negative,” then we restrict both our fullness and our flexibility. Often, in very wonderful books, we read that everything we do should come from love, and nothing from fear, as if these two emotions are diametrically opposed, fear being bad and love being good. But that is overly simplified. Love for ourselves and our children can certainly live within a context of the fear that we or our children might be harmed.

Our own ability to feel fear makes us able to recognize and experience the fear of another person, as well as an animal. As our mirror neurons activate when we see fear in our child’s eyes or in the shivering of a dog we rescued, we can adjust our behavior to encourage relaxation, trust, and decompression in the other being. While fear drives a lot of interpersonal fights, as well as wars between factions or countries, the recognition of its power informs us in many ways. We can work to reduce fear where it is unfounded and we can become ambassadors of understanding, empathy and good will.

After all, just watch the ocean. There is no bad or good about waves. Sometimes the sea is breathtakingly quiet as silk, other times it ripples with dappled sunlight, and sometimes the waves sweep high and crash onto the shore. If you are in a small water craft you might prefer a quieter sea than a turbulent one, so you sync your desire to your reading of the ocean’s behavior, but a calm ocean is not positive while a huge wavy one is negative. Just ask an expert surfer.

Speaking of which, one aspect of fear borders excitement. There is adrenalin rush fear when someone sky dives or sings a major opera role for the first time. Fear and excitement accompany soon to be life partners on their wedding day, a young politician standing at the podium and speaking to a large crowd or the first time. When we accept an award, meet a famous person, sign closing documents on a first home, we feel a bit fearful and excited at the same time.

The word emotion (e-motion) means movement outward. Emotions are motivating. Feelings get us to move (sometimes to collapse or be paralyzed) and can take control over the engines of our lives. Unbridled anger can lead to violence whereas righteous anger can lead to overturning unjust governmental policies. Untamed passion for work can lead to workaholism, excessive frustration can result in giving up and avoidance of challenges. We humans are built with capacities for emotional overrides. Overrides can be other emotions, or our deeply held principles and values, or our considerations for others, or our developed discipline, or our respect for civility or law and order, and so forth. When fear stands in our way and the volume of it is turned up well beyond what the situation calls for, then we have to work on overriding it, or understanding our situation in a way more conducive to freedom of action.

Do not fear your fear. Instead, ask yourself what it tells you about your situation and how you are facing it.

Week of April 20, 2015

“I thought I already dealt with this!”: Walking up the spiral staircase

Rages of an alcoholic father, the death of an ill mother, the molestation by a neighbor, the date rape, the unmitigated bullying by uninformed seventh graders, the deaths of friends and killing of enemies in Viet Nam . . . all the traumatic ravages of childhood, adolescence and even adulthood prove difficult to “work through” in some complete way. And this often makes people feel as though they have somehow failed to properly address the psychological wounds that derive from such tumultuous and even tortuous experiences; and further, to arrive at a place of complete freedom from the difficult past. In general, when a current or present life encounter, conversation, or event, brings up intense feelings or memories or flashbacks that come from past traumatic experiences, we call this a “triggering event.” When someone is “triggered,” it is like falling out of time into a deep and dark well of overwhelming feelings, and isolation. While everyone around the triggered person is eating a sandwich, laughing over a shared joke, or making plans to attend a Red Sox game, he or she experiences a sense of isolation and out-of-touchness. The world, in Alfred Margulies’ words, seems “strange.” The traumatized person does not feel at home in the world.

“One wants to return to the mindless flow of everyday, thoughtless life and a selfless feeling of being alive. We cannot assimilate trauma and so the center does not hold and the world breaks and we fall away, like Icarus. Our connection with our own bodies can break. Even our bodies feels strange, like they do not belong to us. Our body does not feel like home. No wonder cutting or burning. In those moments the person comes back to his or her body. Healing would mean remembering in a whole new way.” (partly quoted and partly paraphrased from Margulies talk in Boston, Fairmont Hotel, March 28, 2015)

Most of us, if lucky enough not to have been traumatized, have still lived through some excruciatingly painful times in our lives. We sustained physical injuries, the deaths of people we've loved deeply, the heart ache of a relationship breaking up, illness, job loss, financial stress, dealing with children who are in trouble, failures, rejections, and so forth.

In the normal course of unfolding life, if we are lucky enough to grow old, eventually we face our mortality. In his excellent new book, 'Being Mortal,' Atul Gawande, a surgeon and writer from Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, reminds us that no matter how old we are, we want to feel at home in our bodies, at home in our residences, and at home in the world: In speaking of his mother-in-law, who, though lucky enough to move into an excellently appointed retirement community where she has a little apartment with a full kitchen, says that she became withdrawn and depressed. When Atul tried to understand Alice's misgivings, she said, "It just isn't home." Gawande reflects, "To Alice, Longwood House was a mere facsimile of home. And having a place that genuinely feels like your home can seem as essential to a person as water to a fish." (Pg. 66)

In therapy, clients often find that past experiences or issues resurface from time to time, and initially, there is the feeling of somehow having failed to completely deal with the event or issue. But in life, we continually move upward on a spiral staircase, circling, over and over again, but from a higher vantage point, the stuff that is visible on the ground level. Daniel Kahneman, in his book 'Thinking, Fast and Slow,' talks about the "experiencing self" and the "remembering self." Our experiencing selves are here, moment to moment, taking stock of what is happening. But our remembering selves are putting together the stories of our lives, and sometimes rewriting them based on our level of experience, wisdom, and perspective. How we experience, say, the divorce of our parents in childhood, adolescence, and later in adulthood on the brink of our own marriages, differs because we understand and feel its impact differently.

Ongoing experiences in life, thoughts and feelings we have about those, and the integration of more knowledge creates a richer contextualization of the primary experiences. When we remember an event, and re-remember it, one might almost say that the memory is different. Memory incorporates both vivid/etched components (especially when trauma makes flashbacks of the original even possible) and also the context and perspective that we bring to it. Margulies, in his wonderful paper, describes the case of a Viet Nam vet who had "finished off" a villager in front of his two sons. Time had caught up to him as now he, himself, had two grown sons and he identified with the villager. The significance of the past event unfolds over time. Old experiences acquire new significance and, with traumatic past experiences, can cause the familiar world to be broken apart such that we feel we are no longer part of it. We fall away into the strange."

In the therapy room, or in self-reflection, it is useful to develop an awareness of what “landing” you are standing on. Developmentally, what is going on in your life? What are your goals? What has most meaning? Who are your important people? As you look down onto the ground floor, what aspect of your past memory or even trauma holds meaning for you? How can it inform you now, from your current vantage point? What does your consciousness and what does your heart need to do with this now? Do you need to identify the strengths you achieved as a result of the difficult past? Do you need to forgive someone or yourself? Do you need to understand what happened in a larger context? Do you have to release shame that is borrowed and doesn’t belong to you and your actions? Do you need to get unstuck from a thought or judgment that has plagued you since that event or situation? Do you need to be free to trust again, to love again, or to allow yourself some sweet vulnerability?

In this beautiful poem by Sandra Cisneros, the narrative voice is that of a woman who had been subject to maltreatment as a child:

Mariela

One day you forget his bitter smell
and one day you forget your shame.
You remember how your small cry
rose like a blackbird from the corn,
when you picked yourself up from the earth
how the clouds moved on.

(emailed to me during April poetry month by Knopf poetry online)

As the narrator stands on the current platform of her own spiral staircase she remembers, not so much the horror of her childhood trauma and the details that held it in place in her consciousness. Instead she remembers her own small voice rising. She remembers that, instead of lying there destroyed, she picked herself up. Clouds moved on, which suggests that the narrator, too, has moved to a place from which her perspective has changed. She is no longer re-living the original trauma. Like clouds, she too is moving to a different place in the sky of her life.

Week of March 30, 2015

Gestures of Love: Conflict resolution through generosity

There are lots of helpful books and articles about conflict resolution: How to fight fairly and how to get to a win-win solution are among the useful concepts one will find. Sometimes,

however, conflicts between intimate parties occur around diametrically opposite positions where there is little opportunity for a middle ground. In smaller conflicts, two people can achieve a win-win by compromising—they will buy Mikey a bike but a less expensive one; she will choose the movie this week but in two more weeks he will choose, and so forth.

Two examples of life-changing conflicts occur when, for example, one person wants to have a baby and the other does not want any children—biological or adoptive; and one in which one person decidedly wants to get married and the other does not want to get legally married. When each person feels so deeply entrenched in his or her position, listening to the other person can feel threatening. Often one partner will try to convince the other of the rightness of their position. But these are not theoretical questions; they are highly personal.

Let's take the second example, with my fictionally named couple, Bob and Susan, who have lived together for twenty years. They are currently in their sixties, although Bob is retired and Susan plans on working for another year or two. Bob never married and Susan's husband divorced her long before she ever met Bob. Her children are grown and there are grandchildren. From a warm and fuzzy standpoint, Bob thoroughly embraces Susan's children and grandchildren, independently doing things with them, and feeling connected with them as well as with Susan's large extended family. He is as much a part of Susan's family as anyone could be. But when the subject of marriage comes up every few years, Bob has an anxiety attack so massive that Susan backs down. Bob and Susan split the costs of their living situation and Bob even pays more when the need arises.

To explore their conflict of interest, I invited them to have a "gentle" session devoted to understanding more deeply each of their views on marriage. Instead of either of them "selling" a point of view, I wanted them to have an experience of listening, understanding, and possibly empathizing with the other. Since "getting married," has only a rudimentarily common meaning, it was clear that for Susan and for Bob the personal meaning of getting married differed dramatically. At the very least, the meaning of marrying Bob was positive for Susan while the meaning of marrying Susan was negative for Bob. How did each see the notion of getting married? Were either or both of them influenced in their thinking about marriage by past experiences? By imaginary fears?

For Bob, who experienced himself as in control of his life for sixty plus years, marriage represented a giving up of that control. Because he had never been married, he imagined feeling trapped in a cage if he married, even though he planned to live with Susan until either he or she died. He had been generous with his money, and upon Susan's retirement was prepared to be more so, but he had kept a careful count of it, and imagined that he would somehow lose control over his money and be doubly responsible. Precisely because the relationship was so important to him, he feared rocking the boat—the relationship the way it was—since it was staying afloat and doing all right the way it was.

For Susan, getting married felt meaningful to her in several positive ways. As a devout person it would mean living according to her faith. Marriage would validate her worthiness as Bob's chosen life partner and make it a public declaration of their commitment to one another. It would also save her from some social embarrassment, and it would make her feel that some fairness was brought to a situation in which she had done it "his way" for twenty years and now the time had come for them to live in marriage—her way. And lastly, it would give her a sense of unity. She wanted to experience that everything they had was theirs, not his or hers.

Bob and Susan did not see eye-to-eye about getting married. Rather, each had arrived at their story about getting married via different routes—psychological and experiential. Neither was right or wrong in their view. It would have been invalidating for me to suggest that one person had a better view than the other. Rather, the question was, would Bob agree to marry Susan as a gesture of love, a willingness to make her happy by overriding his fear of all the negative consequences he imagined?

When asked if Bob felt responsible to Susan, including taking care of her medically and financially if her time became short, he said "yes." And in consulting an important advisor in their lives, who asked Bob, "If you or Susan only had two more years to live would you marry her," he said "yes" without hesitation. In his answer to that question, all of the negative images he had of marriage disappeared. In a context where he recognized, and experienced, the brevity of life, making Susan happy rose to the forefront as a more important goal than avoiding marriage.

Interestingly, I worked with a couple on opposite sides of the fence regarding children. They ended up staying together without having a child. Though it seemed a terrible loss to the partner who wanted one, the love each had for the other—already in existence—made the vision of a future child with some possible as-yet-unknown person not as valuable an option. It is difficult to terminate a loving relationship for an unknown possibility, even if one wants it desperately. And it is heart wrenching to grieve the loss of a deeply treasured dream. But because these two clung to each other, they recognized the power and profundity of their love. It was sturdy enough to survive such a huge loss for one partner, while the other had to live with the heart-aching recognition of so disappointing someone important.

Week of March 23, 2015

The Magic Question:

In the psychological literature, Linda Metcalf, PhD, a purveyor of Solution Focused Therapy, developed the Miracle Question. It goes like this: *"Suppose tonight, while you slept, a miracle occurred. When you awake tomorrow, what would be some of the things you would notice that would tell you life had suddenly gotten better?"*

This is a good start in defining the trajectory of therapy for a client. It is important to untangle the knots in one's life, but also to develop one's vision of the life worth living. How would you be spending your time? Who would be in, and who out of your life? How would you be using yourself in the world? What would daily life look like?

In addition to The Miracle Question, I developed the idea of The Magic Question, which is given to each person in a couple, to help each one focus on their own contribution to the relationship. The magic question goes like this: "If you were to describe to someone what makes you an amazing wife, (or husband, girlfriend, boyfriend, partner, significant other, etc.) what would you say?"

Many people take their relationship for granted, or mistakenly assume that just being oneself in relationship is enough to make the relationship sing. But just like a garden that goes untended, relationships can sag on the vine too. When you have a green thumb, you know how to tend your garden to get the best results, and if you are an amazing partner, you are doing a lot more than letting nature take its course and hoping for the best.

In session, I often hear one partner say something like, "It shouldn't be this much work." They say it as if work is a bad thing. According to Freud, the most important things in life, what gives a sense of purpose to life and contributes to happiness, are love and work (leiben und arbeiten). Well, crafting a beautiful relationship requires attentiveness. Imagine that your relationship is like a baby: You monitor the baby for changing states or comfort/discomfort and you tend to your baby when the baby is uncomfortable. You offer feeding, comforting, cleaning up, stimulating, enjoyment, attention, living exchanges. You do not hurt or abandon your baby and you spend a lot of thoughtful energy and time growing that baby into its unique, and later mature self. Creating those capacities for your relationship takes time, patience, thoughtful consideration and love also and that beautiful work never stops. It is good, honorable work, and hard work pays off when both people commit to that.

So ask yourself what is amazing about you as someone's partner. If nothing comes to mind, have faith that you can work on becoming a better partner. If lots of things come to mind, you are on the right track and your relationship will flourish to the extent that you are an amazing partner.

Week of March 16, 2015

The Adventure of Balance:

An initial thought about balance is of something static, unshakable, and anchored. But, like one of those magic hummingbirds, poised midair with breathtaking accuracy between madly beating wings, balance of any kind is dynamic rather than static. Try standing on one leg, the other raised like a ballerina or a yoga master. You can feel your standing foot and leg

making hundreds of small adjustments, and all of these subtle movements are the brilliant result of moment-to-moment responsiveness to your body's position relative to the floor.

So balance is always at the edge of tipping, and at the edge of tipping is balance. Movement rather than stagnation defines balancing, which is active and ongoing. When we talk about a tipping point we are recognizing the preponderance of some force that moves us or something in one direction or another. Chi walking is an example of trying to balance on each and every footstep rather than stepping-falling with each step. Your center of gravity is underneath you. But even as you are totally balanced on each foot discretely, all of the muscles and tendons and bones in your feet, ankles and legs are quivering like a humming bird's wings, to keep you from falling down.

There are many essays written about balance and leading a balanced life, but I want to focus in on the fact that, whether we do it well or poorly, we are balancing and rebalancing ourselves all the time. Balance is, in my view, not something to achieve, but a 'doing,' in and of itself. Balance is a dynamic dance going on at multiple locations from the microscopic to the life-sized. The balancing dance does not stop until we have danced that last dance.

An interesting question concerns *HOW* we do the dance of balance. You can balance a late night of drinking and brawling with sleeping for twenty four hours and drinking Gatorade. You can balance intense mental computation sitting behind a computer with a beautiful walk in a flower-dotted field. Our bodies and minds have a vital interest in functioning optimally and that requires continual regulating and re-regulating of our complicated systems. We get read-outs continually: We are tired, we are hungry, we are bored, we are overly stimulated, we are lonely, we are claustrophobic, our heads ache, or we desire downtime. Yet we respond, not only in a direct way to these read-outs, but to higher order principles or demands on our time and energy. We do not take naps when we are obligated to perform work at work. We go to the obligatory birthday party because this is a close relative even though our minds/bodies say staying home with a book and some popcorn would be preferred.

If you hold in your mind's eye the image of a see-saw, there are two ends stretched apart and supported by a fulcrum. The weight on Side A must be balanced by the weight on Side B in order for the ends to remain outstretched horizontal to the ground. When one side becomes heavier, it sinks to the ground and elevates the opposite end. If one of the two fictitious sitters is at the extreme end of her seat, then the other sitter (assuming an equal weight) must also sit at the extreme end of his seat. If one of the sitters were to perch close to the fulcrum, then the other sitter merely has to sit equally close to the fulcrum to balance the load. In a larger sense, the further out we go in our behavior, the more it takes to compensate for that behavior. If we overwork—sitting at one extreme end of the seesaw—then we will have to make a big compensation in order to re-regulate ourselves. That big compensation might include behavior about which we would not feel happy, like over-eating, or over-indulging in mindless television consumption.

What we can understand is that the dance of balance is more delicate if we subscribe to the Greek golden mean, everything in moderation. Perhaps life is less exciting that way, but it is ultimately more doable.

Here's a quote by Thomas Merton that hinges happiness to balance:

“Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance, order, rhythm and harmony.”

Some others who have recently written about balance, like Jasmin Tanjeloff, LMHC, says balance means, “you have a handle on the various elements in your life and don't feel that your heart or mind are being pulled too hard in any direction. More often than not, you feel calm, grounded, clear-headed, and motivated.” She suggests that there is internal balance and external balance and recommends, for achieving internal balance, challenging and resting your mind, giving and receiving love, and maintaining your body with healthy eating and exercise and resting to complement that. For external balance she speaks of “pushing” to achieve work goals and also smelling the roses, taking time both to be with friends and on your own, have fun but not too much, and fulfill obligations to family while setting appropriate boundaries.

In Mark's Daily Apple, another online resource, he suggests that true balance is not a matter of manically juggling a whole lot of responsibilities, but of stepping back from the whole shebang for a while and re-centering around the core of one's being. In his own words: “When I see the word balance on a yoga/health/fitness/natural-living magazine cover, I always imagine one of those plate spinners – the performers who enthrall crowds by tending to any number of plates they spin on long sticks. The idea of course is to spend just enough time and attention on each plate to keep it moving but not so much to lose track of another and see it shatter on the floor. Meanwhile, the person at the center of this game is darting back and forth with keen, jittery attention. It's always struck me as a manic and exhausting exercise. While it may be entertaining to watch, is it any way to live? It seems like many people approach balance this way – as an act, a feat, a trick they cultivate.”

In putting away the multiple challenges Mark suggests: “Put away the calendar. Drop the magazine questionnaires. Go for a long walk. What would it take for *you* to feel balanced? Forget how the responsibilities line up. Just suspend them for a while. (Trust me, they won't go away.) Imagine feeling a genuine sense of equilibrium in your life. Maybe you've found it – made it happen. Maybe you feel it sometimes. Maybe you used to feel it. Maybe it's never felt in your grasp. Can you put yourself in that place? How has the scenery changed?”

Royale Scuderi, another online presence, in the field of creative strategies for achieving greater happiness, mentions the all-important “saying no” to the non-essential. Also to spending some quality time alone as well as with people with whom one has important relationships.

In my own career, there have been times I have said “yes” to things that yielded way more stress than satisfaction. At the time, it popped into my head that there are some **distractions masquerading as opportunities**. Try to be aware of those. While saying “yes” to life, when it is meaningful but scary or challenging, is a great attitude and a willingness to grow and develop, but sometimes we are asked to participate in something that we need to consider more fully. Give yourself time to do that before answering. If it is right for you then it is right. If not, you can politely decline.

Dance on. . . shimmy, shake, rattle and roll, leap and land. . . balance on the edge of sunrise!

Week of March 2 2015

(Fictional) Letter to my ex-husband from a no longer co-dependent woman:

This is a fictional letter I drafted to honor the many men and women with whom I have worked over the years, who have felt frustrated, sad, disappointed or enraged when trying to explain to an addicted life partner why they just have to leave the relationship.

Perhaps everyone wants to feel understood. A woman leaving an alcoholic, drug addicted, sex addicted or rage addicted husband has loved that man for a long time and tolerated behavior that has undermined, scared, cheated and nearly defeated her. Perhaps she has tried for five years, ten years, or twenty years, to influence her partner into positive change and hasn't been able to. At some point managing him or the havoc he has wreaked, has become her project, to the exclusion of the other interests she once had in life. Every day or week or month she is in recovery mode herself, trying to get her nervous system back together, trying to repair her life emotionally or those of the children, or the bank account, or to stitch up the negative social consequences of whatever chaos has occurred. She has been accused of being a “controller,” a “mother,” or a “bitch.” And in the unproductive dialogues that go on and on both partners feel as though they are being swallowed up in a swamp of pain.

Two people create any dynamic that involves them both. Women (or men as the case may be) often appear controlling when the other partner lives an out-of-control life. That same person may act like the parent in the relationship and the other partner acts like a child. Neither feels pleased with these roles.

One quick digression on the notion of control: In general, to control oneself is a huge ability. To control one's aim as a sharpshooter, one's pacing as a marathon runner, one's attention as a neurosurgeon, one's patience as a parent, one's anger on a busy highway, one's vocabulary in a dispute requires expert mastery. To control oneself means to exercise a high level of skillfulness. When someone is described as “controlling,” the idea is that that person moves the locus of control from themselves to others. But in short, we are basically always trying to control ourselves. As an example, a “controlling” husband who demands his wife stay

home instead of go out with her friends is really trying to control his own insecurity and fear of abandonment. A mother who rigidly controls her adolescent's attendance at any overnight with a friend is really trying to control her own fear of harm coming to her child. A friend who tries overly much to control what someone else says about her to others is really trying to control her fear of social alienation. A person who has to rigidly control the order in their environment is really trying to control the stress to his nervous system that any chaos causes.

Back to the addict—codependent relationship. The most difficult piece of understanding, for an addict, as well as for a codependent partner, is that when a codependent partner leaves that relationship it is really about the freedom that the codependent craves, and not about punishing the “bad boy or girl” steeped in the addiction.

If you imagine a relationship between two people as like a garden, then optimally each of the two plants will thrive. Person A supplies some of the culture of the soil, some of the sunlight and breeze and room in which Person B can grow. And Person B supplies some of the soil culture, some of the sunlight and some of the water and other nutrients that promote Person A in his or her thriving.

When a codependent gets desperate and miserable, it is like a plant who is failing to thrive in an environment or culture where the addict is symptomatic. To “control” his or her environment the codependent must either ask the addict to change, or leave that environment in search of a more nutritious one, or at least one absent of toxicity.

Before this fictional letter—giving voice to codependents who have to leave--I want to acknowledge the deep gratitude and love I have for all of the brave men and women—addicts in recovery—with whom I have worked over the years. The depth of their understanding and empathy for others, their generosity and helpfulness, their insights, and their commitment to community and the dropping of defensiveness is truly remarkable. These folks buoy my optimism in our individual and collective humanity. It is always possible to grow and heal and many people work at it every day no matter what.

Now the letter:

“Even if you do not understand me now or never will, it is like this--grain by grain the sand erodes the dunes on the beach, until they give way, and the house that had been supported before now hangs over the edge ready to fall into the ocean. There is that last grain, that last straw on the proverbial camel's back, that last time you need a bail-out or scream in my face or assure me it won't happen again, or call me a 'C,' or tell me I'll never find anyone that's as good a guy as you or you get into a crash or urinate on the couch in a blackout, or embarrass me in front of my friends.

There's that last moment when my life up to this point flashes across my mind and I can see my future going nowhere, just caught in this seemingly endless spiral of fear and disaster

and breaking the surface just enough to grab more air, to continue for another day. I feel like a soldier in the trenches, in the middle of a mine field. At any moment missiles might blow us away, or a mine blow up. The air is dark, clouded, I have to keep my helmet on. There is no letting my hair down, no safety anywhere to be had. I am a bundle of worry, my eyes and ears and skin like the finest tuned antennae, picking up information about you and your mood and your state of mind. Sometimes it feels like waves of nausea. Sometimes my bowels won't hold. I find my tongue tingling, my limbs quivering. Sometimes I can't breathe. My neck and back stiffen up. My shoulders hug my ears. I am listening for you, watching for you, smelling your breath, tiptoeing around, trying to start over, forget, erase a day, a week, most of last month.

At this moment, I will not accept imprisonment in this life any more. I want my freedom. I want to live a life where my first concern is not about how to protect myself, or the children, or the car and house or the bank account or my sanity. I will no longer live in isolation with the curtains drawn around my misery.

I once loved you so much. I saw so much potential in us. I saw us together until we died, having fun, building a life, climbing over the inevitable hurdles life would bring.

When we got married I took our vows seriously. “. . .In sickness and in health until death do us part.” But I never thought that meant that I would shrivel up into some living-dead.

I stood on the altar a happy and hopeful person making promises I intended to keep. And for a long time I convinced myself that if I just loved you more, if I just tried hard enough, if I changed myself, if I expected less, if my acceptance were boundless, that this would somehow make things right. But then I began to shrink. I stopped going out with my friends because you got angry. I stopped asking you for help around the house because you put me off and accused me of nagging. I stopped talking about improving “us” because you blamed me for your (drinking, raging, drugging, gambling, inappropriate flirting, etc.) and called me names. I stopped asking for us to spend time together because you had other things to do, like drinking with your friends after work. I stopped talking about the future—vacations, the kids’ education, what we would do when we retired—because you forgot about those conversations after a black out and dropped the thread. I stopped asking family and friends over because you embarrassed me in front of them and then I had to fend off their criticisms of you. I continued to shrink until I no longer shared anything about us and our family at work. Soon I had little desire to go out. I continued to shrink until I was so small I barely recognized myself. And then I died. My light went out. My only hope was to survive another day, living in the shadow of your addiction.

Some nights I lay awake on the end of your unanswered phone, my stomach quaking, my skin slippery with the cold sweat of dread. At 2:17 AM you had not arrived. At 4:25 AM I would get up, go to the bathroom and wash my face, drink some water and count how many hours till it would be light. Wonder if I should call the police. You were a missing person, yet

again. I feared the worst: you had crashed your car and killed yourself or someone else. You were in jail. You had blacked out and frozen to death in the back alley of a bar. And then I felt rage roar up in me like an unquenchable fire. You had stolen another night of sleep from me and my dry red eyes and the dark hollows underneath were the tokens of my depletion. It would require a lot of me to normalize things for the kids, to cover your tracks so as not to frighten them. "Daddy had to work overnight, but he'll be back while you're in school." And then I felt guilty at my rage. You were the one who was sick. The risk was to your life. You needed help and here I was thinking about myself. I doubted my own importance in the scheme of our lives. I walked around with the guilt of a criminal, a criminal who wanted to stake a claim on some peace of mind, some consistency in life, some expectation of your comings and goings.

Sometimes you were a happy drunk, in love with the world and with me. But it was as if you were speaking to me from a hot air balloon high above me. We were not on the same plane, not speaking the same language, our wave lengths disconnected. You were unreachable. Someone's feet had to be on the ground. Mine.

You keep trying to reassure me that you are a good guy. You love us, you would do anything for us. I know your essence, your good essence. And it is concealed, clouded, and invisible as I am. You tell me over and over again that you have been punished enough, that by leaving you I am playing the part of judge and executioner; that you have a disease, and this time you promise. . . . Your words used to feel like stabs to my heart and my head would spin. But now I know: My leaving you is not about *you*. It is actually about *me*. I am not punishing you. I am saving myself.

I am not willing, for even one more day, to try to squeeze into the rooms of our lives that you occupied so fully that I was pushed out. What we did, where we went, with whom we socialized, the disappointing situations, the dreams and hopes crumbling around us, the deconstruction of our lives revolved around you. The kids and I got caught up in the tornado of it, were lifted, swirled and dropped down in a broken heap.

Alcohol became your mistress, the third character in our marriage. You dreamt of her, you partied hard with her, you stayed out late with her, you made dates with her behind my back, you spent our money on her, and you loved her so much that you neglected me. She had a hold on you more powerful than mine. She had a hold on you more powerful than your core.

Today I forgive myself for ending our marriage. And I feel grateful that I relearned to love myself. I always saw the beauty in you and I still do. And yet there was a point of no return for me. Even someone as determined and persistent as I am needs to know when to quit. If in the past I said, "*I can't* do this anymore," today I say, "*I will* not do this anymore." I am a person too. I am willing to feel the loss of our family as we hoped it would be. I feel accepting of unknown future chapters of life and of the possibility that I will live them alone. I

have learned that I can love you and feel compassion for you without doing anything about it. Just feel it and leave it alone. No managing, no rescuing, no controlling the damage.

I wish you well. And if it helps you in your own healing, I offer this reflection from my heart.

Week of February 16, 2015

I speak 'Apples' and you speak 'Oranges:' Why some conversations turn ugly fast

Everyone knows that effective communication is important. Complex language is the prerogative of human beings and allows us to articulate everything from a blunt command to a multi-layered poem of profound emotional depth and nuanced musicality. Communication involves both what we say and how we say it. As communicators, our language is encased in rich contexts and meta-contexts of tone of voice, facial expression, gestures and body language. Indeed, tone of voice, alone, can make a statement mean its opposite. For example, if I say, "Now, *she's* really *sweet!*" after a woman has sideswiped me and pushed into a checkout line ahead of me, and I emphasize the words 'she' and 'sweet' in a cartoonish way, you know I am basically saying, "what a rude person."

We can also communicate when, in context of a conversation, we stay silent. Silence can mean agreement or it can mean I am not committed to your idea or can indicate avoidance. But when we are talking with one another, there are some fundamental 'moments' in a piece of communication that tend to make it work better than not. The common phrase in psychological and communication literature, "active listening," refers to preferred behavior for a listener. This combination of verbal and nonverbal behavior indicates to the speaker that they have been heard, understood, and responded to concerning their topic of choice. Only, after that, will the active listener switch roles into the speaker with his/her own agenda.

When a listener does not respond to the topic that the speaker initiates, then the speaker will often experience a myriad of emotions from not feeling heard, to dismissed, to feeling invisible or unimportant. Here are several common examples of conversations in which the speaker initiates with APPLES and the listener responds with ORANGES:

Example 1: Suzy says (Apples), "I have felt so so stressed lately, working over the top hours and the kids have been complaining about the cold and they are cranky and tired too. We really need a vacation in the sun and some quality family time together free of worries." And Sam says (Oranges), "We don't have the money. We need to save for our first, last and security deposit."

While vacations are activities that comprise a number of aspects such as a desire for recreation, a lot of logistics, and money to finance it, these aspects are not all the initiated topic in the above opening conversation.

Example 2: Adam says (Apples), "This Sunday my mother wants to have us come over for her signature turkey dinner. She says she misses us." And Judy says (Oranges), "The Patriots are on and I have to catch the game."

Judy is not directly addressing Adam's topic. She is turning the tables and proposing her own topic. There is only one Sunday every week, but this discussion is not going anywhere positive the way it starts out.

Example 3: Nora says, "I've had such a long day, my back is killing me." Bob says, "Don't think you're the only one who works hard and has a sore back."

This conversation is an immediate and dire failure. Her topic is presented to Bob in a way that suggests she wants some compassion and comfort of some kind and he shifts the topic to his long day and stress. There is a disconnect rather than a connection made between these two people that will more than likely amplify each of their fatigued and irritable states. At the end of a long day this start to a conversation will present a real challenge to overcome.

Example 4: Betty says to her father, "I want you around when I'm older. You are overweight, wrinkly, and not taking care of yourself. You can't go six hours without a whiskey." He says, "Well, your mother doesn't care if I'm around so I'm drinking myself to death."

Imagine the blast that Betty feels. She has declared how much she loves her father and worries about the dire impact his addiction and poor self-care will have on her life, and he does not respond with any kind of recognition of her emotional pain. He makes a completely other comment that has to do with his emotional agenda regarding Betty's mother. The disconnect here would have to feel profoundly uncaring and likely enraging to Betty.

Example 5: Tom says to his wife, who has recently acted rudely to his mother, "It makes me feel really terrible when you treat my mother rudely. I really dislike being in the middle and I think it's not good for our baby. I'd really appreciate it if you could act civilly toward her even if you don't like her." Tom's wife, Sarah, retorts, "Your mother is a complete bitch. How dare she come in here to my house and go through my things that she elects herself to clean up. I expect an apology from her otherwise she can rot in Hell before she comes here again."

Clearly Tom cannot possibly have felt heard or comforted by his wife. She was simply triggered by his well-stated complaint into her own emotional turmoil concerning her relationship with her mother-in-law. How could Tom not have difficulty managing his hurt feelings, frustration, and anger at his wife?

In a recent New York Times article, I learned about “robo-journalism.” Highly sophisticated software can literally gorge upon, analyze and regurgitate content in a human-like way for newspapers, companies, marketing campaigns, web sites and so on. The computer-generated writing can even capture different styles—humorous, sports-like, etc. As of yet, however, interpersonal communication involves a back and forth, a reading of body language and context as well as verbal language per se. So while we are still ahead with wet ware instead of software in our heads, let’s focus on how to bring these apples to oranges conversations into something productive.

First, understand and separate the two roles of initial speaker and listener. Then differentiate and understand the two agendas, and lastly, introduce a validating framework in which both can have the experience of feeling heard and responded to in a positive manner.

In the first example, Suzy is the initial speaker and Sam is the listener. Suzy’s agenda seeks relief from stress and her vision of that is a vacation. Sam’s agenda is saving money for a move to a new apartment. For this communication to be effective, Sam must accept his role as listener and save his own financial agenda for after he adequately responds to Suzy’s agenda. A validating framework, simply stated, goes like this: listen, replay, and respond. Then, and only then, open up the conversation to your own agenda.

So, the conversation might go like this: Suzy says, “I have felt so so stressed lately, working over the top hours and the kids have been complaining about the cold and they are cranky and tired too. We really need a vacation in the sun and some quality family time together free of worries.” Sam says, “I hear you. You’ve worked very long hours and you have that furrow between your brows. And I completely understand how a timeout from the cold and stress looks inviting right now. Let’s talk more about how we can make that happen. I know you want to take a vacation. Can we consider the options we have for some fun family time in light of the other things we are also trying to accomplish, like saving for our new apartment?”

Hopefully Suzy feels heard and validated and comforted by Sam’s desire to respond positively to her agenda. But he is also seeking consideration for his agenda in a way that will be effective in urging Suzy to look at the whole picture, the context in which the vacation would occur and what it would mean within the broader set of family goals.

In Example number 2 Judy is making an almighty mistake—discounting her partner’s mother without so much as a nod! In most cultures insulting someone’s mother is like a federal crime. It would have been easy and dexterous to say something like, “Adam your mother is so

sweet and I would love to have one of her great turkey dinners. I wonder if we might offer to go next week instead because of the Patriot's game. Or maybe we could invite her over here because we have the big screen TV and I can help with potatoes and salad."

In this situation it seems clear that there are multiple options for satisfying everyone in this situation. Some considerate conversation and a bit of cooperative compromise, and voila!

Nora, in Example 3, wants some comfort and sympathy because her back is sore and no doubt she has worked hard. Her comment has triggered Tom's thought about how hard he works and brought up some negative feelings he has about that. So he dives right in on his own woes as if he is in competition for the sympathy award and generates enough heartache for the both of them on top of their stressed backs.

There are many ways in which Bob could respond, but one example, an example that lets him bring in his own agenda right away, might go like this: "Oh, Nora, I'm so sorry to hear that. I guess we're the crippled couple tonight, with my body practically falling apart too. Let's take a hot shower and relax and maybe order some takeout so we can try to distress and get more comfortable."

Of the examples above, number 4 is the most dramatic and emotionally wounding. A daughter who loves her father and is worried about his self-abuse and untimely death, has the courage to confront him. He shows no ability to respond to her in a loving way. Instead he goes off about the emotional pain in his marriage to the daughter's mother. Here's all the father would have had to say to show that he had listened and was validating: Honey, that was courageous of you, and appreciate how much you care. I just want you to know that, no matter what I do, I love you so much." He crossed a boundary with his daughter by complaining about his wife. That is not his daughter's business and he added another burden to her instead of relieving and comforting her.

In the last example, again about a mother, the emotional intensity each person feels is high. Still, without sacrificing her own view, Sarah could speak much more effectively to Tom. Again, the principle is the same: Listen and show you understand, and then state how your view impacts the situation. Sarah might have responded, "Tom, I understand. She *is* your mother and you feel uncomfortable in the middle. I want to respect your wishes and take your feelings into consideration, but I must let you know how difficult this is for me because I feel your mother treated me poorly and that is a lot for me to overcome."

In this conversation nothing is completely settled, but so far each person has expressed his or her feelings without offending the other person. They have created some room to further elaborate how they will approach the next encounter with Tom's mother.

Think about how you communicate. Do you feel such an urgency to get your point across that you don't take time to truly tune in and listen to the first speaker? Try taking a breath after listening to someone and then replay some version of what you heard to them,

just to get it straight in your own mind while letting them know you gave them the gift of your beautiful attention.

If you are the initiating speaker, do not sideswipe your listener, taking them by surprise on a serious topic without setting the stage. You can set the stage with comments like, “I’d like to speak with you about something upsetting to me. . .ideas for a vacation. . .something I believe we need to work out, etc. When would be a good time to talk? I was thinking of this evening after work. Does that sound OK to you?”

Week of February 9, 2015

We, the Sorrow Keepers: Big grief, little grief

“You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.”—Chinese Proverb

When someone you love dies, whether or not anticipated, your loss can feel like a tidal wave, an irrevocable slam, a monumental happening around which it is difficult to wrap your mind. The epicenter of grief is where the fault lines of the heart separate and quake. Often we feel it impossible to make sense of what has just happened to us. It is as if we understand the information intellectually, but it takes longer to absorb at a cellular level.

And then, when we have digested the reality of loss, we might feel surprised or caught unaware by the inevitable aftershocks of grief; and beyond even the aftershocks, those smaller bee stings of grief.

Not only do we find it difficult to understand the depth and breadth of what has happened in our lives and what the loss will mean over time, but we are confused about how our own experience of loss will go. Will we proceed through some specific, orderly stages of grieving? Will we sweep everything under the rug for later? Or will we be flooded by grief and unable to emerge? Our experience of loss is often compounded by our confusing ability to feel multiple things at roughly the same time. It is typical, for example, for someone who has taken care of an ill loved one, to feel, alongside the loss, a sense of relief. Caretaking is hard work, often painstaking, often requiring a lot of patience. Caretakers often have to witness the pain of a loved one without the ability to take the pain away, and have to experience how hard it is to remain patient and understanding while feeling exhausted.

The work of caretaking may be punctuated by 911 calls and unexpected turns for the worse as well as by frustrations and disappointments. Often caretakers feel deprived of any balance in their own lives. When one has no capacity to take care of oneself this may lead to compassion fatigue and even serious illness. Good people often feel guilty about experiencing a sense of relief when their caretaking is over. Feeling guilty is the result of a mistaken

emotional arithmetic in which one imagines that relief subtracts from love and loss. In fact love, loss, relief, and other feelings add together like different flowers in a sometimes confusing, but also beautiful bouquet of human experience.

It is helpful to recognize that guilt belongs with criminality. If we are guilty for malicious actions, then that feeling is appropriate. But guilt does not appropriately accompany our human limitations. We cannot make the dying come back to life. We have limits to how energetic and cheery we can be when we are tired and tried.

Sadness and depression often get confused with one another. While one may experience both, sadness is an activated state. A depressed brain on a SPECT scan is less metabolically active than a normal brain. My guess is that an actively grieving brain looks different than a depressed brain. There is an aliveness to emotional pain, an intensity that is absent in depression—often described as a kind of numbness or blunting of affect.

In Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's well known book on death and dying, first published in 1969, she introduced a theory that there are five stages of grief (acronym DABDA): denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Originally her theory applied to a person facing her own mortality, but later extended to anyone facing a catastrophic situation.

Although this remains a good working model, most people's journey through grief is individualized. These feelings and behaviors are not necessarily experienced in this order, if at all, nor are they finalized, once and for all, upon first experience.

We are complicated beings and have multiple scripts about what is happening in our lives and how our various roles intersect with these events. Indeed, we often re-experience events, including losses. We may see and understand things retrospectively in altered ways, as informed by ongoing experiences and maturation.

If the big grief is that tidal wave, our epicenter, our hive of pain, then what happens after the arrangements have all been made, after the funeral has come and gone, the kind people thanked, the will read, and the closets cleaned out--the material of a life sorted, tossed, given, sold or saved?

Then there is life without that person present: the cold and empty place beside you in the bed, the silent phone at six every evening, the driveway shoveling that she or he used to do now in your hands, the place setting you put on the table out of habit, but now in error, the low whisper you heard without finding the speaker present behind the sitting room door, the shoulder you used to rest your head on, the presence of the one to whom you would share the news or the complaint or the appreciation.

There are all the well-wishers with sympathy and condolences asking how you are. Not to mention each birthday, each holiday and festival, each happy occasion you shared and will share no more. These are all the bee stings of grief, and, at the risk of mixing metaphors, all the places where the fabric of your former life has been torn.

As time goes on we miss those whom we loved. They appear in our dreams, in our photographs, in letters, in shared stories. We talk to them at the graveside or in the car. We write to them from our hearts. Their absence fills our basket of sorrows.

But we hold another basket alongside. This is the basket of joys. We have the capacity to feel both great loss and great delight and to hold our baskets side by side, both cradled with honor in our arms: Our basket of sorrows; our basket of joys.

To live well and happily, we must make sure to fill our basket of joys and honor our basket of sorrows. They are not mutually exclusive. They exist side by side and each informs the other.

In the beautiful book by John Green, and movie of the title, 'The Fault in Our Stars,' there is a scene in which a young woman with cancer fears that her death in the future will mean the end of life for her parents. Her mother comforts her by saying something like, "We will go on. We are people who know how to live with pain."

Life is not over for us when a loved one dies. We will live with the pain of missing them. But the emphasis is on LIVE. That is our choice: to really live, with pain, and to fill our basket of joys, or to let the loss of another swallow our whole lives, mounting one loss on top of another and another.

From, 'Letter with No Address' by Donald Hall:

Always the weather,
writing its book of the world,
returns you to me.
Ordinary days were best,
when we worked over poems
in our separate rooms.
I remember watching you gaze
out the January window
into the garden of snow
and ice, your face rapt
as you imagined burgundy lilies.

Your presence in this house
is almost as enormous
and painful as your absence.
Driving home from Tilton,
I remember how you cherished

that vista with its center
the red door of a farmhouse
against green fields.

And from Mary Oliver's famous nature poem, 'Wild geese' :

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Week of February 2, 2015

The Mother Load:

Bernardino Luini (1480-1532) detail from Mary and Christ child



Recently I asked several clients, who were experiencing anger, resentment, frustration or disappointment in their life partners, to list the positive traits their partners possessed. As a second part of this exercise, I asked them to note whether each trait belonged more in a "personal" category or an "interpersonal" category. In other words, was the positive trait more a description of a partner's self-minded characteristic, or an other-minded characteristic?

As an example of one of the lists, the woman listed her husband's positive traits as: Independent, capable, curious, studious, good problem solver, able, strong, intelligent, industrious, principled, dependable, honest, courageous at trying new things, enduring, responsible, ambitious, frugal, dedicated, conservationist, efficient, disciplined, can-do person, knowledgeable.

When it came to part two, she identified every single one of the traits as her husband's personal ones. She could admire these traits, and even cheer them from a distance, so to speak, but they were not strictly interpersonally enjoyed by her in a direct-impact kind of way.

As a third part of the exercise, I asked these clients to make a list of the "missing" traits; the characteristics they "wished" were in greater supply. Almost all the clients who wrote down the stuff-in-short-supply list, thought of traits like: loving, caring, affectionate, encouraging, supportive, compassionate, understanding, attentive, remembered things they said, notices and anticipates needs, kind, warm, thoughtful, generous of heart, protective, expresses positive feelings, openness.

Do you see what I see in this list? M.O.T.H.E.R. All of the words are interpersonally relevant, are relational in nature, other-minded rather than self-minded.

Perhaps, we all want a mother in our lives. And when our own mothers--whomever they might have been if we were lucky enough to have that kind of unconditional love--have gone, or are too old to provide that proverbial soft shoulder, then we seek that mother in our partners.

The mother archetype is the mythic idea of the Great Mother, a goddess who is represented in all cultures and religions. She bears life, nourishes life, and protects life. She not only loves us but enjoys us. Erik Erikson, in his theory of the stages of human development, relates psychosocial development during the first year of life to the infant's task of developing a favorable balance of *basic trust versus mistrust*. The infant's apparent question, "Can I trust again?" builds on the infant's biological preoccupation with, "Will I be fed again?" Consistent, trustworthy parental care enables infants to attain a favorable balance of trust over mistrust, which, in turn, helps ensure that the strength of *hope* will become a fundamental quality of the person in later stages of the life cycle. Parents who relate to their infants and children in a consistent and trustworthy manner promote their offspring's sense of faith in life itself. Such trust also undergirds religious faith. (found on the internet at: exhumator.com)

Erikson contended that the developmental stages of human life correspond to societal institutions and this early stage of trust versus mistrust in the mother figure corresponds to the comfort people hope to find in their religious institutions and practices.

In our intimate lives, our partners must know us in our particulars. We are not generic, but idiosyncratic and interesting. Regardless of gender, of sexual orientation, of our age or nationality, we hunger for the big love that we associate with what mothering provides. And when we adults come together to share our lives, we want to find in the other, some expression of that maternal nourishment that made us thrive when we were young and dependent.

Of course, no one wants a mother hen—pecking, prying, intruding, or controlling—in the other partner. It is not the caricature of the mother we want, but the unconditional regard for our beings.

When you think of your own good qualities, be mindful of the ones that connect you to others in loving ways. Developing those is powerful in raising our own quality of life as well as that of others.

The director of the Solstice MFA program, Meg Kearney, said, “If you ever have to choose between being intelligent or being kind, in your feedback on another person’s writing, err on the side of kindness.” In our relationships with others, regardless of context, erring on the side of kindness and concern, rather than criticism, generally works for the best.

Week of January 26, 2015

Letters to the Self

In Lily King’s novel *Euphoria*, tracing a period of time in the lives of three anthropologists, drawn from the lives of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, the Gregory Bateson character, Bankson, writes in a letter to his mother: “I find I am more and more interested in this question of subjectivity, of the limited lens of the anthropologist, than I am in the traditions and habits of the Kiona. Perhaps all science is merely self-investigation.” (pg. 83)

And so, too, in writing about anything, the particulars of self-expression shape what goes on the page. Our particular experiences in life, our memories, our assumptions and beliefs about how things work, our ability to think through things, our openness to new information and experiences, our knowledge in different areas all combine in complicated ways to construct our filter. Writing has the capacity to increase our conscious awareness of what moves us, what triggers intense emotion in our hearts and guts, and to help us slow down our sense of urgency so that we can process a course of action appropriate to whatever issues and problems churn within us.

Annie Dillard, an author of *The Writing Life*, says: “The line of words fingers your own heart. It invades arteries, and enters the heart on a flood of breath; it presses the moving rims of thick valves; it palpates the dark muscle strong as horses, feeling for something, it knows not what. A queer picture beds in the muscle like a worm encysted—some film of feeling, some song forgotten, a scene in a dark bedroom, a corner of the woodlot, a terrible dining room, that exalting sidewalk; these fragments are heavy with meaning. The line of words peels them back, dissects them out. Will the bared tissue burn? Do you want to expose these scenes to the light? You may locate them and leave them, or poke the spot hard till the sore bleeds on your finger, and write with that blood. If the sore spot is not fatal, if it does not grow and block something, you can use its power for many years, until the heart resorbs it.” (pg. 20)

What I find compelling about this quote is that it emphasizes how the mere action of sitting down and committing pen to paper is something like utilizing a digging tool for an archeologist, unearthing important remnants of a life or lives that might usefully inform us for the future. As Anais Nin wrote, “We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.”

James Pennebaker is one of the foremost researchers on the psychological benefits of writing/journaling. In his book, ‘Opening Up,’ he writes: “. . . actively holding back or inhibiting our thoughts and feelings can be hard work. Over time, the work of inhibition gradually undermines the body’s defenses. Like other stressors, inhibition can affect immune function, the action of the heart and vascular systems, and even the biochemical workings of the brain and nervous systems. In short, excessive holding back of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can place people at risk for both major and minor diseases. . .there appears to be something akin to an urge to confess. Not disclosing our thoughts and feelings can be unhealthy. Divulging them can be healthy.” (pg 2)

Pennebaker emphasizes that opening oneself up to what emerges during a writing process can help us psychologically as well as physically. William Faulkner wrote, “If a story is in you it has got to come out,” and all of us have our stories.

In therapy, one of the benefits of telling and retelling our stories is that we may find the capacity to rewrite our stories in ways that benefit us in the moment and into the future. Our old scripts get stale. We can easily get stuck in the mud of our lives, thinking that there is nowhere to turn, no way to get out of the rut, nothing new to do. Most of the time the “mud” sticks together in fear. Fear binds and sucks us in like quicksand. It is suffocating.

As some examples, if your story is something like this: “Nothing I do ever results in getting a promotion,” then your feelings of hopelessness and depression as well as low energy and smoldering resentment, are likely to constellate around that. A new story might run something like this: “I know what I am good at. I will run with that until I see a way ahead, either at this company or at another one. I will develop myself and a better context will develop in my mind.”

Another example might be: “I’ve been out on dates with six people and nothing has worked out. There is no one out there for me. I may as well give up and be alone for the rest of my life.” The story here, if it bogs you down enough, will mean that you don’t have to face your anxiety about rejection. You don’t have to put out any more effort. But you will also be alone. A truer story is: “The world is a big place. The universe is abundant. There is love all around me. I can create lots of opportunities to meet people with an open mind and a welcoming heart.”

Another story is: “I always make things awkward between me and other people. I just need to leave. . .this job. . .this state. . .this group of friends, etc.” And an alternative story is: “I made things awkward. Tomorrow I need to go back in there and do better; set things on a better path.”

Our stories are lenses through which we filter and describe our experiences. Our stories are our *takes* on things. Our stories are more representative of *how* things happen for us, than *what* has happened. In tragic situations, we often spend a lot of time sorting and sifting through the experience in order to make sense of it, to understand its meaning, to put it in some perspective and to know what we are dealing with, even if the result or outcome is the same.

In a recent internet column by Tara Parker-Pope, a number of research studies on the emotional benefits of writing are cited. She writes, “Researchers are studying whether the power of writing — and then rewriting — your personal story can lead to behavioral changes and improve happiness. The concept is based on the idea that we all have a personal narrative that shapes our view of the world and ourselves. But sometimes our inner voice doesn’t get it completely right.

Some researchers believe that by writing and then editing our own stories, we can change our perceptions of ourselves and identify obstacles that stand in the way of better health. . . One research study asked married couples to write about a conflict as a neutral observer. Among 120 couples, those who explored their problems through writing showed greater improvement in marital happiness than those who did not write about their problems. These writing interventions can really nudge people from a self-defeating way of thinking into a more optimistic cycle that reinforces itself,” said Timothy D. Wilson, a University of Virginia psychology professor and lead author of the Duke study.

Dr. Wilson, whose book “Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By,” was released in paperback this month, believes that while writing doesn’t solve every problem, it can definitely help people cope. ‘Writing forces people to reconstrue whatever is troubling them and find new meaning in it,’ he said.”

One of my favorite poems is called ‘The Guest House,’ by the famous Persian poet, Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. Here is a translation by Coleman Barks, one of the most famous of Rumi’s translators:

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house

empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing, a
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Who is a guest in your emotional house today? This week? What is the story? How does your story keep you suffering? How can your story be rewritten to liberate you from its limitations? Try writing your story. Try rewriting your story with more movement and possibility.

“The worst thing you write is better than the best thing you did not write.” (quote from the internet)

“There is nothing to writing. You just sit down at a typewriter and bleed.” Ernest Hemingway

Week of January 19, 2015

Emotional Truces: Ceasefires on the frontlines

Floating icebergs between people, entrenched in the depths of shared history, often rear their jagged heads and maintain a series of ongoing struggles over little things. Each of the small conflicts ultimately refers back to the great pain, the emotional slander, the stab in the back, or the betrayal that one or both parties feel they suffered at the hands/mind/heart of the other. Between couples the iceberg may have been the breakup, the affair, the gambling, the emotional or physical abuse, the exploitation, the neglect, the just-not-caring enough. Children because of parents may have felt mercilessly criticized, ignored, abused, that parents were unavailable due to addictions, or witnessed parental tumult that traumatized and modeled instability in relationships.

In order to adapt well, and perhaps even to forgive, one has to be able to understand and to script these difficult insults and assaults in ways that promote oneself: to see others' weaknesses as belonging to them and not attached to one's own worthiness and lovability. It is

also valuable to understand how one's most important strengths and humanity have been powerfully shaped by these experiences. We learn from masters how to do and be our highest selves, and this is fast and efficient. But we also learn from hardship and struggle what we must bring to those situations in order, not only to survive, but to create beauty in ourselves, our relationships and our world. Yes, our emotional guerrilla warfare becomes our means to survive—we learn how to navigate a treacherous landscape full of ambushes and stuff you don't see coming—but beyond that, we can press our footsteps into the sand and behold a sunset, the sweet stars, and invent: how to make someone smile, how to cure cancer, how to paint or score a symphony, how to build a skyscraper or a car.

It can take a long time, if at all, for someone to re-script their narrative to the better. A better narrative is one that gives us emotional freedom and the ability to make real choices that are not confined by the need to maintain our prisons of resentment, victimization, or revenge fantasies. As long as we must hold our line in opposition to another, we maintain and bolster that floating iceberg of obstinate anger and a stubborn clinging to the "rightness" of our point of view.

Declaring/offering an emotional truce or a ceasefire is one way to cross party lines and have some dialogue or participate in a joint endeavor with an emotionally important other person. This might look like a divorced couple attending their son's wedding ceremony. Despite their enmity one parent says to the other, "Despite our differences, let us both be here wholeheartedly for our son and his lovely bride. This is their special day and let's join in our celebration of this young couple with only love in our hearts." It might look, for a parent and an estranged adult child, "I acknowledge that we have not been able to resolve some painful history between us. While it makes me very sad, I understand that you are not ready to delve into this with me. I hope we can declare a truce on this Christmas Day so that you and your brother and sister and I can have a pleasant day, one day without all of that unspoken tension."

What a truce is NOT is a means to minimize the pain we have caused someone else to suffer. A truce must first acknowledge the emotional wound or lack of resolution of the interpersonal business, and then suggest a calm period. To insult someone and then say, "Truce?" as if what happened was nothing, is tantamount to sweeping a floating iceberg under a rug. Not happenin'.

Even in war times there have been some famous ceasefires during which sworn enemies, obeying the dictates of their nation, commander, or beliefs, have temporarily found common ground.

There was apparently a program in Boston called "Operation Ceasefire,"--I believe in the nineties-- which resulted in a dramatic reduction in youth homicide until the program was no longer funded and violence climbed.

When we face our demons, both inner and outer, then they often appear more human than we feared. Human faced enough to be, well, just like us. Here is a description of a World War I ceasefire on Christmas eve of 1914:

“Of the British and German soldiers who faced each other across the muddy fields of [Flanders](#) on Christmas Eve in 1914, even those who no longer believed the optimistic predictions of a short war would have been shocked to learn that it would drag on for another four years — and that it would ultimately see the staggering [totals](#) of 8½ million dead and 21 million wounded.

Despite the constant machine gun fire and artillery bombardments of the western front, and even though in some places front-line troops were a mere 60 yards away from the enemy's lines, soldiers on both sides received gift boxes containing food and tobacco prepared by their governments that Christmas. The Germans, who had a direct land link to their home country (British soldiers in Belgium were separated from London by sixty miles and the English Channel), also managed to send small Christmas trees and candles to troops at the front. And, notwithstanding the fact that a Christmas cease-fire proposed by Pope Benedict XV had already been rejected by both sides as "impossible," on Christmas Eve the "law of unanticipated consequences went to work," as Stanley Weintraub, author of *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*, described it:

The Germans set trees on trench parapets and lit the candles. Then, they began singing carols, and though their language was unfamiliar to their enemies, the tunes were not. After a few trees were shot at, the British became more curious than belligerent and crawled forward to watch and listen. And after a while, they began to sing. By Christmas morning, the "no man's land" between the trenches was filled with fraternizing soldiers, sharing rations and gifts, singing and (more solemnly) burying their dead between the lines. Soon they were even playing soccer, mostly with improvised balls.”

(from: <http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/truce.asp>)

As in this World War I Christmas ceasefire, when the reasons for fighting are temporarily put in the background, and in the foreground peace reigns, an openness to new experiences and enlightenment can occur. Continual fighting is a kind of being stuck. Little sustainable progress can be made within a win-lose paradigm. But look what can be created when there is a ceasefire.

If you feel stuck in the trenches of an unresolved conflict, ask yourself why you need to hold onto your anger or resentment? Why do you guard your story of personal insult so zealously? Ask yourself what you lose by holding onto your distance. What is important is not so much whether you make peace or maintain your emotional cutoff, but whether it continues



to serve you in your life of greater freedom and happiness. When we refresh old questions, what made sense to us ten years ago might not make sense any more. Everyone has heard one story of sisters who haven't spoken for twenty years and at some point no one remembers why.

Week of January 12, 2015

[“Science is organized knowledge. Wisdom is organized life.”](#)

Immanuel Kant

At Stanford University researchers have discovered that every day microglia “hoover” out debris from our brains. That is, until their immune like cleaning power is compromised by a nefarious molecule, “a receptor protein called EP2, which has a strong potential to cause inflammation when activated by binding to a substance called prostaglandin E2, or PGE2.”

A teenager tells me she can't seem to put away her clean laundry so it piles up in the basket and on the dresser and she trips over it on the way to her bed in the dark. A parent worries that his son will lose his scholarship because of his poor time management in getting papers written and test material adequately studied. A man doesn't return phone calls and loses business opportunities; another woman on a diet does not pack her snacks and lunch and ends up eating donuts and fast foods on the run.

Entropy, or disorder, is what the universe does. Dust accumulates on the window sill and the baseboards, dead skin leaves its ghostly appearance inside our socks, the bills and notices pile up inexplicably on our desks and kitchen counters, and our personal encounters writhe with failures to come through and miscommunications.

Order is the temporary triumph of our labors. We move dust from the sills and it clumps into disorder inside the vacuum cleaner, the trash bag, and ultimately the landfill. We are simply moving it around the universe. But order feels good, in our small niches of existence. I like it when you pick me up on time. You like it when I remember your birthday with a card and gift on the day you were born eons ago.

Organizing things often brings a clearing of physical or mental or visual space in which recognition emerges. One client said, “Whenever my wife and I do a cleaning-out project something good happens. We were cleaning out boxes in the basement and found some books. One box had an old book and in it a birthday card to my wife from when she turned 30, from a favorite aunt who had slipped a fifty dollar bill in it.”

On another note, when is disorder in one arena of life a sign of more important order elsewhere in our lives? Say you have company over and have done a great job of preparing a multi-pot meal. Your guests leave and you feel exhausted. There are pots and pans piled up in the sink. Your partner in life has headed to bed, admittedly tired, and you are staring at the

chaos of cutlery and cookware and feeling determined to leave things orderly before heading to bed. So you stay up on aching feet, and get everything clean, waking early the next day for your daughter's soccer game, but not quite with it. Your partner, on the other hand, chose self-care which represents a powerful piece of organization in life—getting enough sleep, eating nutritious foods, getting exercise for your body—and the entropy in the kitchen played second fiddle.

When people organize some things in life rigidly—such as someone on a strict diet—the sacrifice is variety in favor of ease. The wheel is greased to accomplish anything when we lower the amount of effort and time we have to spend on something. If you have a food plan and limited options which you accept, then you take a lot of thinking out of the equation when preparing or eating a meal. Some people call this black and white thinking, an all or nothing mentality. If one wants to exist in a so-called gray area, then one's repertoire of behaviors and options expands. Variety is interesting and fun and nuanced. But to work on a project (like a diet) in a gray area actually requires more work (effort, concentration, numbers of decisions to make and quantities of choices to sort through). It is more disorderly and entropic to eat that way and therefore less likely to make a beeline for the Greek ideas of moderation in all things. But if one happily accepts that way of eating, then it can feel joyful and spontaneous.

Within our persons we organize around our missions. Like stars forming a constellation, the forces at work outside and inside of us, shape how we think, what we feel, the way we move, the sensations we experience and what we notice as most pronounced versus what we let slip into the infinite background of possibility.

As Adam Frank said in his piece on NPR:

“The forward march of chaos — from your newly tidied desk to the eventual mess it will return to — that is the *second law of thermodynamics* and the forward movement of time.

That brings us back to the good news and the bad news. Yes, your efforts to tidy up that desk are doomed to failure. But in that very act of trying you embody life's most essential victory.

Even the effort of your cells doing their moment-to-moment work, purging their innards of poisons, allows life to create astonishing islands of order. Each of our bodies, each of our lives, represents a triumph. Life *is* order and structure hammered out, for just a time, to give the blind universe its sight.

Yes, in time, our lives must give way to entropy's demand for chaos. But with every act of creation — from the songs we write for collected voices to the meals we bake for our families — we turn back the tide. And for this, we can only imagine, the universe must be grateful.”

Adam Frank September 10, 2013 NPR

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/13.7/2013/09/10/220988227/life-gives-sight-to-a-chaotic-universe>

So ask yourself, what is your mission? To whom does your order and disorder matter? Who is most affected by the chaos and order of your life? Where are you scattering your dust? Where are you letting it accumulate? Where in your life do you create order—that sparkle of clarity in the haze, of light, as Adam Frank says, in the darkness.

Week of December 29 2014

The above-and-beyond principle

I went to one of the small local grocery stores that still exist in the New Hampshire town next to where I live. It feels pleasant and important to support the local businesses in the area, and the owners of this particular market try hard to cater to the tastes of their shoppers-- somewhat more diverse than would be the case because of the presence of the university. Three days after Christmas my house still bulged with welcome and hungry guests and the quiche required thirty six eggs.

At the register two fresh-faced, clean-clothed young men stood, one ringing in the groceries and one bagging them. When I found the broken egg in one of the cartons, the cashier simply put it to the side and continued on. Neither young man offered to go back and exchange the dozen eggs. I waited for a few moments and at the end of the process I said, "I will go back and get another carton of eggs." When I returned with the eggs and another package of cheese, they finished ringing me out and I left, having exchanged the usual pleasantries on my way.

It seemed bothersome that neither young man had offered to retrieve a fresh carton of eggs. At Market Basket cashiers get trained in basic customer service etiquette and would have done just that. But in this small store perhaps the owners or managers didn't think any such training necessary. Those people who treat others averagely will get the same return or worse, whereas people who go above and beyond to be helpful, kind and considerate, mostly get more than average treatment. I went away feeling annoyed. I could have gone away feeling delighted, both by their theoretical helpfulness and because I would have lavished them with gratitude. Average gets what average gives.

Related to this is the notion of turning our highways of life into highways of opportunity rather than of barriers, resistance and stuck-ness. While those two young men could have turned the boring checkout highway into an opportunity to have an above average exchange of interpersonal energy, I could have more smoothly used their lack of help as a way for me to get

more exercise. And I did use it as a reminder that every exchange between people represents an opportunity to make something more important or meaningful happen in that moment.

Sometimes, turning the highway of mundane life into opportunity involves a real paradigm shift. A paradigm represents a context with its own culture and language. That context defines how we ask questions and therefore the kinds of answers we can receive. It is both defining and limiting. If, for example, your paradigm is that people either make bad or good choices, then everything seen within that paradigm gets labeled with either “good choice” or “bad choice.” It is a paradigm utilized frequently by parents (and sometimes it is useful when helping children to understand the reaction society has to their behavior). But an alternate paradigm might involve, as we have been speaking about, how to turn everything you must do (all the grunt work and clearing up of glitches to your cable bill or broken hammer you bought) into something useful for yourself and/or for others. Have you *opportunized* anything and everything you *have* to do that initially you wouldn’t choose to do if it were up to just you?

I have a clear personal example of how to do things badly, of how to make long work days an “opportunity” (I saw this cynically) to sit on my butt and NOT exercise enough and feel too tired to eat as healthfully as I would like (to grab and go, as it were). Why not, instead, use the long work day as an opportunity to do lots of little bits of strength training in between appointments? To grab and go with Clementines and nuts and snap peas in yogurt dip and a couple of squares of 62% dark chocolate during the afternoon energy slump?

The question is not: “Am I too tired to do anything healthy or do I have the energy for it?” but rather, “What can I do that is healthy given my level of energy right now? What options are open to me?”

The questions we ask, of ourselves, of others, of life, mobilize us physically, emotionally and cognitively. These questions or paradigms actually organize who we are in the moment as we move down the highway of our lives. At every minute of every hour of every day, we can make our journeys opportunities for enrichment, love, abundance, development, or appreciation.

Ponder on what you can turn into an opportunity? Perhaps something that has been a negative challenge for you.

Week of December 8, 2014

The “careful watchful core”

From [Journal Meditations: October 1-31, 2011:](#)

It would be a supreme accomplishment to live in close communion with my careful watchful core. To do what it says. To be careful when it says be careful. To nourish it with words and silence when it asks to be nourished. To nurture those friendships, relationships it guides me to; to avoid

those it asks me to avoid. To tune into guidance what comes to me in senses and colors, guidance that I can't put into words, but that I can feel.

– Roderick Maclver

Thinking about the “careful watchful core” as one part of Self, and that other part--the ornery or unaware part that Rod is encouraging to live in close communion with the core-- makes me reflect on integration and parts: What can happen when parts of the self, those differing voices, operate in opposition to each other; when one part of the person goes rogue and destroys the whole person's life.

Last week I thought about parallel universes, and how the relationship between our inner parts can often create a parallel universe in the external world. Here we represent one part of ourselves while we project the conflicting part onto someone else.

So, for example, a man who hates himself because he feels like a failure because his business is tanking ends up acting this out in unusual behavior--embezzlement or cheating on his wife, or some other manifestation of self-hatred. By behaving this way, acting out his self-hatred, he creates the circumstances under which, say, his wife now hates him, and his colleagues now hate him. It is as if some part of him said, “I hate myself so much that I ought to be punished. I will make my wife hate me and she will punish me with her outrage and her rejection. I reject myself so I will make her and all of my friends and colleagues reject me also. At the end of this I will have paid my penance and perhaps come out of it with a moment's peace. Punishments may be hellish, but unresolved inner and outer conflict create a high level of ongoing stress. What a mess!

The “careful watchful core,” as Maclver describes it, is what Marsha Linehan (Dialectical Behavior Therapy) would call “Wise Mind.” Or what others would call “intuition” or “inner wisdom.” This aspect of self can serve as the point of integration, the hub for the other parts that circulate around with their multiple agendas. When an urgency, an impulse, a compulsion, an amplified emotion like anger drives a body to do or say, or not do or not say something of impact, then the result might prove highly consequential in a negative way. It is incredibly difficult to learn to calm down these propelling emotions (the word ‘emotion’ means movement outward) but it is the hallmark of maturity and integration to do so. Monitoring and choosing—experiencing the freedom to choose one's actions and words—based on a confluence of thoughts, feelings and values represents maturity and integration. And I differentiate that from avoidance or paralysis.

Related to the notion of listening to the core is the notion of *slowing down* one's processing of experiences. When we have repeat stressors in life—a narcissistic mother, a critical boss, a demanding job, etc.—we tend to operate on automatic pilot and, almost without thinking, respond to these stressors in defensive ways unconsciously designed to adapt to an

onerous or burdensome situation. When things do not improve, we can only say “ouch,” again and again unless. . .we start to make real decisions, decisions whose repercussions are as yet unknown but which represent the best of our thinking and evaluating abilities. We want to be able to do the counterintuitive, the less easy; the more-confrontational-but-better-thought-out set of actions. But this requires slowing down, taking a real pause and thinking and feeling our way through the issues until we, having considered the options, make a real choice and exercise our freedom of movement and speech because we believe it to be the best course, the most right action and the thing that issues from our core wisdom and highest self.

Week of December 1, 2014

Parallel Universes: selfish to selfish, void to void

Like warp and weft in fabric, two people begin to weave their lives together in both conscious and unconscious ways. The pulls and tugs from multiple sources—jobs, other people, responsibilities, long held habits, financial stresses, preferences, and so on—make their mark on the strengths and weaknesses in this fabric. If there is a fairly high level of compatibility, the areas of weakness or stress in the fabric may not show themselves very often, but add either a single major stressor or a massing up of small stressful interactions over time, and eventually the fabric’s seams may bulge or even rip open because, finally, there is not enough to hold it together.

What is fascinating, is that while we tend to aim for sameness and homogeneity in our relationships in many ways—perhaps because it feels familiar and relaxing and because we can identify or understand that kind of rootedness in the world—we are also drawn to people who might have complementary characteristics rather than similar ones. So there are couples in which one person is fairly needy, for example, and the other person is a giver. Or couples where one person is an ambitious leader and the other person is a great helper and likes to be the right-hand partner. Or couples where one is an extrovert and good at making social events happen while the other is more introverted and happy to go along with either the event or staying at home. Homogeneous relationships work until too much head-butting goes on. Sameness tends to work well when not a lot at stake, but if one person likes to choose (what to do, what to eat, how to set up the house) and so does the other person, then the challenge involves finding fairness, reciprocity and mutuality within that context.

With complementary couples, things tend to break down when roles become too calcified and flexibility gets lost. If one person likes to do everything, and the other is happy to have things done for him/her, then eventually the doer gets tired, angry and resentful while the other person feels picked upon or does not understand why their partner is suddenly so upset.

Since we co-create our relationships, we also co-create our happiness together and we co-create our pain. We see what we create. We all see through the filters of our own beings, as through a camera lens. Our lenses get clouded by who we are and how we behave toward our partner. I can create a parallel universe fairly easily: As a selfish person or, as common parlance would have it, if I am all-about-me, then when you try to do something for yourself or stake a claim on something we have going on, I see you as all-about-you because you are taking away from me what has typically been mine (a choice, a priority, a convenience, my time, and so forth). My selfishness makes you look selfish to me. I am convinced of it. You won't do what I want so I see you as selfish, when, in fact it is me who is typically selfish, or as I like to say, self-minded.

It is healthy to include self-mindedness and other-mindedness in thinking about how to do life with another or multiple other humans. When things get too skewed, and if I am too self-minded, the relationship will suffer and so will my view of the other party. They will become, in my eyes, a mirror of my own selfishness.

As another example, for persons who sadly move about the world with a large emotional void, and are constantly seeking to have it filled with lots of attention and validation, the partners of those needy persons become suppliers. Like a celebrity and his/her fan, the complementarity in such a relationship can work until it becomes too calcified. Eventually the supplier (imagine him or her as a tank of emotional gasoline) finds the other party's demands draining. Draining to the point of a feeling empty him or herself, feeling the very void that the needy partner feels. There is some inner balance point of mutuality that cannot be exceeded without risking the end of the relationship. We humans want to give and to receive, to love and feel loved back. Otherwise the work of relationship on a day to day basis would exceed the worthiness and joy it can bring.

Week of November 24 2014

Excellence

What makes some human beings strive for it?

I don't usually watch TV but with family visiting for Thanksgiving at my house I was introduced to Master Chef Junior with Gordon Ramsey, and to some mixed martial arts fights featuring Ronda Rousey, born February 1, 1987.

Ronda is fast, determined, a grappler. She trains with lots of fighters-turned-coaches from around the world. It is amazing to watch her, her incredible focus, the speed and grace with which she most efficiently launches her victims to the ground until they submit or have their arm in an "armbar" position where, if they don't submit, it would easily be broken.

And turning to the children in the Master Chef Junior TV show with Gordon Ramsey, it is amazing to see their passion and creativity at work. They cry, they hope, they are ambitious and awe struck as well as polite but competitive. These children, and Ronda and her competitors, want to be the best at something. They train, they practice, they envision new outcomes to their craft.

What is most notable about excellence is that this is not, per se, a heritable quality. We humans may be born with gifts—our possibilities like a clear voice or long, strong muscles. But excellence is built, honed, honored for its inherent virtue. Excellence means brinksmanship, it means inching closer to the limit of human capability and to the great abyss of the impossible lying just beyond. We must harness passion as well as talent, determination and discipline to move toward excellence. And we must also apply another ingredient—valuing excellence, understanding its worthiness.

I believe everyone has the capability of moving toward their own excellence. And when we move toward that excellence with passion, vision and discipline, then we experience, if not euphoria, then living in “the flow experience,” as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi would call it. In the flow experience we become completely absorbed in what we are doing as if time and space have no hold on our consciousness; nor do we experience a strong sense of ego. As quoted from “About Education” on the internet, there are ten aspects to the flow experience:

1. Clear goals that, while challenging, are still attainable.
2. Strong concentration and focused attention.
3. The activity is intrinsically rewarding.
4. Feelings of serenity; a loss of feelings of self-consciousness.
5. Timelessness; a distorted sense of time; feeling so focused on the present that you lose track of time passing.
6. Immediate feedback.
7. Knowing that the task is doable; a balance between skill level and the challenge presented.
8. Feelings of personal control over the situation and the outcome.
9. Lack of awareness of physical needs.
10. Complete focus on the activity itself

In an informal questionnaire I have given clients on ‘happiness,’ many have felt their happy place, so to speak, lay just beyond arm’s reach. And interestingly, in number “7,” knowing that a task is doable allows us to feel engaged. If our visions of excellence were merely pie-in-the-sky, then we would not feel motivated because of the disconnect between our present capabilities and future options.

Connection to the self, and connection to others and our world, are crucial to developing our excellence. One can find creative ways to make any task incline toward excellence. For example, in speaking with a woman who sells office equipment and wants to generate more meaning within the sales environment, we brainstormed about ways to make the actual experience of a copier, for example, so different for an employee, that it would sell itself. Technology can be simple, like a hammer, or complex, like a copier or a robot. But it is an extension of the human hand or an extension of human imagination or action. If a 58 year old woman can be trained, like a surgeon, to operate a copier with the same kind of intimacy with which a surgeon enters a body with her scalpel, and once inside can trouble shoot with savvy, then the entire experience of using that machine would alter. The training on the machine offered the 58 year old woman the opportunity to experience herself as “smart,” and capable, if she understood the copier’s innards and its functioning the same way a doctor does the anatomy and physiology of the digestive tract, then the thing would sell itself.

With a spa owner we talked about the deeper meaning of, say, a facial. If one helps a person feel like their best self from the outside in, then the meaning of the facial as well as performing the facial turn transcendent. The customer’s connection between her own layers of being, as well as with the aesthetician transform and become transformative as well.

Excellence, striving for it with heart and muscle, build both connection and happiness.
Find what excellence you express and make it more so!

Weeks of November 10 and 17 2014

Influencing and Being Influenced on Identity Development

In a fundamental way, we are who we think we are. When we judge ourselves negatively—I am worthless or unlovable or stupid or a loser, or bad, etc.—we become that negativity. It would be like sitting at a table and serving ourselves trash for dinner. Eventually we become that trash because it ultimately gets digested and insinuates itself into every cell of our being. The food we eat as well as the food-for-thought that we take in, eventually toxifies or helps us.

Adolescence is one of the times in life during which the questions of identity get heightened: What do I believe in? What kinds of other people draw me to them? Who will accept me? With whom do I belong? What do I like to do? How do I appreciate the way my body and mind look when mirrored back to me? What do others expect of me and what do I expect of myself? Who am I as a sexual person? As a political person? As a family member? As a friend? And so on.

During this time of questioning, we often “try on” different identities. We experiment with altered consciousness (drugs, alcohol, staying up all night), with pitting ourselves against daredevil feats—climbing a mountain, going alone to NYC, or even engaging in running away from the police after bashing mailboxes or spraying graffiti on a bridge. This is the equivalent of killing one’s first buffalo, the pitting of the self against a huge adult challenge (positive or negative) in order to test the power of one’s being and reassure oneself about the ability to face the adult world and stand on one’s own two feet.

Midlife crises occur during another time of reflection and reevaluation. Is the person we’ve become to our liking? Have we reached our potential? Are we pursuing something, any more that really matters to us? Do our relationships bring deep satisfaction? Have we acted according to our most deeply held values and beliefs? Are we persons of integrity?

But identity is largely formed at the locations where our most permeable human edges meet the influential edges of others. We may think that we are uniquely formed, somehow impervious to the influence of others, when in fact most of our thoughts and even the feelings attached to those, have formed in our relationships with important others. We are inextricably interwoven into a human fabric, and those closest to us have threads that run through us. When we are woven too tightly to others we may fail to identify anything we might name as an “I.” Sometimes when children grow up in a family that is highly judgmental, critical or controlling, they learn to do what others want of them and inadvertently give up on identifying what speaks to them, for example.

And when we are too disconnected, or too loosely woven into a human fabric we may feel isolated, lonely, and our successes seem less lustrous because we cannot experience the impact on others who might benefit. Or it may make no sense for us to try to achieve anything because what it seems pointless?

Here is a quote from Carl Jung: “The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.”

In those beautiful and rare moments where, viewing a sunset over the ocean, we feel transformed and one with our experience, we *are* the experience. The sense of time recedes. We sit wordless and awe-inspired. And so, too, in a moment of gracious love of your baby, the love suffuses the entirety of being. Afterwards we might think, “There are no words.” Because the experience of oneness with another, with the world, with the universe, has no narrative. Our stories recount how we read the world. Our stories project our identities upon the world in which we live. We come to know ourselves as people with an “I” by what we think of the world. Our projections form our worlds and our worlds mirror back to us our projections. But “I” am an “us.” And there has to be some balance between how much room a sense of “I” takes up relative to my sense of “us.” I am you, with a unique set of fingertip whorls. Your eyes are like no others, each Maple leaf drops to the ground this Fall in its own expression of the design.

Think about those who influence you most. Do they help you to feel loved? To experience yourself as your best self? Do you encourage and inspire those around you? How do you want your “I” to be part of an “Us?”

Week of November 3, 2014

Power, Influence and Making a Difference: You Matter, Even in the Darkness of a Moment

When someone experiences a sense of being overwhelmed—the heavy lifting of their life not making enough of an impact to fix a big problem—this can lead to depression. Depression’s hallmark sensations are heaviness, lack of motivation and joy, sadness or blueness, a lack of energy and various “vegetative symptoms” like loss or increase in appetite, over-sleeping or under sleeping, and sometimes these sensations are accompanied by anxiety. It makes sense: the things that depress people are typically worries, and, when worrying, we feel anxious. The cognitive aspects of depression involve thoughts of being hopeless and helpless to change a negative situation and those thoughts are often inflated and globalized. The feelings of depression can become so dark as to create the illusion of entrapment in inescapable torture. In a context of despair, a person might think that nothing they do can make a difference to their own happiness or to anyone else’s. “Why bother? What does it matter? What do I matter?”

This is a quote from the American writer Henry Miller, a literary tour de force in his time:

“Trust everything that happens in life, even those experiences that cause pain, will serve to better you in the end. It’s easy to lose the inner vision, the greater truths, in the face of tragedy. There really is no such thing as suffering simply for the sake of suffering. Along with developing a basic trust in the rhyme and reason of life itself, I advise you to trust your intuition. It is a far better guide in the long run than your intellect.”

- from [Reflections](#), edited by Twinka Thiebaud (in Rod MacIver’s own journal quotes from December of 2011)

Although Nipun Mehta’s “moment of suffering” was less immediate than poverty, hunger, or sickness, he nonetheless had a period of existential reckoning, wondering if his soul, or other human beings were benefiting by his successes. Hewas a computer programming prodigy, living in the Silicon valley area of California during the dot.com boom. Like many of his

friends he got rich fast. After living this life for a while, Mehta began to worry that as his bank account went up his humanity was declining into bankruptcy.

In her chapter, 'Pay It Forward,' (The Bond) Lynne Mctaggart writes about one of Mehta's significant experiences as the recipient of someone else's generosity: "He'd taken a ride with his friend on his motorized bike, and as they belted along over the uneven pavement and potholes of Mumbai's back streets (in India), Mehta was overcome by such uncontrollable nausea that he asked his friend to stop so he could vomit on the edge of the crowded street. Suddenly, a dirty, emaciated old street vendor appeared, riding past on his bicycle. When he saw Mehta, he stopped, slowly reached into a sack, produced a lemon, cut it in half, and handed half to Mehta, gesturing for him to suck on it in order to stop the nausea. From the look of him, it might have been his last lemon, yet he was happy to share it. Without speaking another word, the old man got back on his bicycle and rode off. He had showed up out of nowhere in time of need, carried out an act of kindness and then just disappeared, without requiring any credit." (p. 203)

Mehta recruited his friends to begin development of multiple fountains of generosity, utilizing their skills on a volunteer basis for the benefit of non-profit organizations as well as other individuals directly. Mehta expressed to Mctaggart, "When generosity is the basic social capital, you see things from a broader perspective. You come from a different place of openness. You're more likely to see multiple views. It deepens trust. The cup of gratitude overflows, and turns into action in so many ways." (p. 205)

What is the work of your heart? Or head and heart? Always, in my mind, there is an audience or a recipient who will somehow benefit. All of us stand in relation to one another. Invisible strands connect us all. The impact of one good human being counts, whether or not the behavior of that good human gets expressed in a book, a scientific or medical discovery, fighting for freedom in the trenches, providing direct or indirect services to others, or as nurturing love to fellow humans. Everyone has a contribution to make.

An elderly woman who lives on my road stopped by the side of it and got out of her car to retrieve a littered paper cup. Walking nearby I smiled at her and said, "You're a good Samaritan." She said that her husband, who had had Alzheimer's for some years before he died, had needed something to do and the two of them got some exercise by walking along Sheep road and picking up litter. This provided him with a worthy occupation as well. We talked about the culvert in front of my house, now a small pond after some rain. It sometimes attracted ducks as well as beer cans. She said she and her husband had bought a grabber to get the crumpled debris afloat there.

"A grabber is such a great idea," I acknowledged. She got into her car and drove to the dump with the extra garbage bag she used to collect what more thoughtless folks left behind. On the upward climb to my house there was a large empty beer can. I retrieved it to put into my recycle bin. She gifted me by her influence—I saw more, I cared more, and I did more.

Influence has suppleness to it, a watery flow. To influence someone else or a group of people or an outcome means flowing powerful energy into that situation. The qualities of influence get experienced differently than what happens when two people or two opposing groups lock horns in a power struggle.

Power struggles occur between warring factions over differences in many aspects of life, like religious beliefs, ethnic or cultural traditions, claims to historical ownership of turf—land or other resources like oil. And power struggles occur on a day-to-day level between neighbors, marital partners, parents and children, and friends.

In conversation with one parent, we were brainstorming about ways to turn power struggles with children into powerful but benign parental influence instead. Like an energy or electrical surge, parent might need to establish such a surge so that it would be able to enter the child's experience and initiate a confluence or mutual direction to what follows. As an example, this parent patiently allowed her two and a half year old child to climb all over the car, like a jungle gym, before the child got into the car seat for travel. Eventually, the child began climbing around and resisting any attempt on the parent's part, to get buckled in safely, even when the parent mentioned that their destination was highly prized by the child.

For children, as well as for adults, gear-shifting can be difficult. When one is engaged with one kind of energy, it often takes some time to downshift. People who work late at night at a restaurant, for example, might come home with that "wired tired" feeling and need to eat something, watch a little television or listen to some music before finding it possible to fall asleep. Children who get overly stimulated often find it hard to downshift into a lower gear and go to sleep as well, even when they are tired. Parents often refer to their children as "overtired" when in that state.

So, if we modify the question of "How do I get my child to do what I want her/him to do?" to "How do I get my child's energy to synchronize with mine?" then we might open up some fruitful possibilities. Let's consider the problem of the car seat. According to the child it seems like a fun challenge to climb over and around the car seats, physically exploring the possibilities. One option entails joining the child in play in order to get on board in a combined stream of energy, to suggest for example, a game of getting over the front seat and back seat and into the car seat by the count of ten. Or, to compete for getting into the car seat, parent racing against child. Or to tickle the child or make them laugh, joggling them into a different but related fun energy. These games put parent and child into the same energy zone and their activities are connected. When two people get connected in their activity and rhythm, like singers and rowers, their brains actually "entrain."

When any two people are working at cross purposes, so to speak, it is like having a tug of war. In order to get on the same side, some theorists suggest creating a "superordinate goal." This superordinate goal is a shared goal, over and above the opposing goals of each individual. Mother wants child in seat. Child wants to play. They act at cross purposes until the

mother can create a superordinate goal to which the child will subscribe. The child is already having fun but maybe having shared fun is even better!

If that strategy does not work, then sometimes a really powerful way to join energy with someone involves closing the space between you. When your face is close to someone's and your eyes are looking deeply into their eyes, the press of your energy is great. Often parents yell that it's time to clean up from the kitchen to a child in a playroom two or three rooms away. The power of the yelling parent gets diluted across the expanse between the parent and the child. Not only does the wide space weaken the parental power, but so does the divided attention of the parent. The direct beam of a parent's attention is very appealing to most children.

If a parent wants a child to shift gears, it can often work to validate what the child is currently doing while heavily influencing the child's energy to move in the necessary (worthy) direction. As an example, a parent might say, "Johnny, you are having such a great time climbing around in the car. You make it so much fun that at the moment you would rather do that than go to visit Grandma but we can't drive safely unless we both get buckled into our car seats." Those are some words, but they need to be buttressed by hugs and close eye contact and breathing into the child's face. Put the full weight of your personhood close to his and like a heater, heat him up, super-charge him with your energy in order to get his energy moving in sync with yours.

In school, teachers are working with multiple children and perhaps it works to say, simply, "This is what we have to do, line up to go out to the playground." But there is a lot of energy to utilize. Only several of the children have to pay attention right away and jump into line in order for all of the children to have that grid of energy light up around them. Not only the teacher, but the cooperating children have an impact on the rest. Of course the reverse can come true—an acting out child might have such infectious energy as to get others to act out as well.

We can also influence people by speaking to what some refer to as their "higher self." This may be pertinent to children, adolescents, and adults. But this is a topic for another musing moment.

Week of October 27, 2014

Un-rushing, connection, and sacred geometry:

Early, light under Gabriel's door means the artist is at work making more Halloween witches from Model Magic clay. I tiptoe into the tiny cottage kitchen to make coffee and watch mist and chevron shaped clouds rise from the lake like phantom birds. After breakfast we go for a walk. She wheedles her ten year old feet into unenthusiastic boots and delays at the door,

but ultimately follows. The gravel lane wends around to a country road, paved some time ago so that divots and concavities have formed, filled this October with rainwater, leaves and pine needles. I keep peeking behind me, watching Gab's face furrow and crumple like a paper bag. She empties her breaths in increasingly dramatic expulsions.

Several times I ask her what the matter is, why she feels so unhappy. She only cramps her lips together more as the tears roll out of her eyes. A couple of times I put my arm around her and ask again. Finally it is that she is tired, she didn't sleep well, she has a headache and her back is hunchy. So I offer Tylenol when we return home *after our walk*. I tell her the bank, where we will make a quick stop, has baskets of treats and perhaps she can pick one. I ask what she likes to do to remedy a headache and she says an ice pack helps.

But as we continue on our way a full meltdown develops. Tears amplify into wracking sobs and her legs turn to noodles. Her pace slows to nothing. This time I grab her face to my light down coat and put my arms around her, stroking her hair, rubbing her back and swaying gently side to side. I breathe slowly myself, prepared to stand there forever if we must. We rock and rock. It is a Saturday morning and the day, like the green fields to our side, stretch broadly and without expectation. I do not offer to return home before the loop of our walk is complete. I do not rush her out of her mood. I simply stand there, holding her to me, and she calms down eventually eventually, pushing out a few last sobs with an operatic voice. We stand there longer as the breeze blows by.

When I move to her side we see a squirrel dart across the road, its tail movement a flourish. To our left a sparrow rustles in the birch tree and Gabriel points it out with excitement as the sun emerges from cloud cover. We talk about the importance of the sun to all living things. How solar flares in space make for more wars on earth. She asks the brilliant question, "How?" And half-lying, half in ignorance I tell her something about how that involves electricity and we are electric—our heartbeats, our brains. How we have ions and ions have charges both positive and negative and all of us and everything are made up of energy, and energies affect other energies.

At the bank she picks a purple lollipop and when we are lollipop-licking on the homeward half of the loop Gabs says we are playing a walking game. First, we must step only on shadows. At level two on wet shadows. Level three means no touching leaves. Level four, only walk on leaves.

At home she never mentions the ice pack or Tylenol. Or her mother lost in California, or the blindness in her left eye. The shadows of power lines are tightropes so we place one foot in front of the other at level five, extending our arms so we don't fall off.

I wonder about all of the parents I see in my office, guilty about their impatience and angry at the lack of cooperation of their children in rushing life forward: dancing in and out of the car, to school, to soccer, to ballet, to CCD, to homework and dinner and bathing and

brushing and reading and not knocking your sister, and saying “hi” to Grammy and not talking and going to sleep and going back to bed with the bad dream tucked away and the backpack ready for the morning, and the next morning struggling from the warmth of the bed into the cold speeding day. . .We live in a world of epidemic busyness. We rush by in a daze, every day a marathon of endurance, our mental GPS’s finding shortcuts so we can do more, be more and ultimately end up with far less.

I find it fascinating to recall how Gabriel’s headache and heartache were healed in our hug, standing there among the wet leaves as if we had all the time in the world. I felt no impatience. And instead of feeling drained by her, I too felt energized and reinvigorated. This is what can happen between any two people and a squirrel and a sparrow and the sunny end to a rainy spell on a country road. We are not only connected to each other, each and every one of us, both near and distant, but we are also connected to everything in nature, and even beyond that to the universe. Within our bodies and minds, at a cellular level, we are connected in such a way that healing can take place. If we can move the energy around where it needs to go, we can power ourselves to higher levels of ability to heal ourselves and our relationships.

The thought of Sacred Geometry came to mind: the isomorphic architecture of the micro and macro universes in which we move. At home there was an old book from 1994 by Nigel Pennick. He says, “Geometry is an image of the structure of the cosmos,” and “can be readily used as a symbolic system for understanding various features of the universe. This symbolic function is exemplified by a little-known scientific instrument which was used in pre-colonial times to teach Polynesian boys the fundamentals of navigation. Although the Polynesians did not have any of the instruments now considered necessary for navigation, the sextant, compass and chronometer, they were able to travel regularly across great expanses of ocean and reach their objectives. Using the stars and other physical features like the presence of cloud banks over land, Polynesian navigators could detect the presence of islands, but the most useful method was by reading the waves. Just as any object in the sea, like a rock, will have an effect on the pattern of the ripples, so on a much larger scale will the presence of an island cause diffraction patterns in the waves many miles away. . .The science of wave recognition was taught to the boys by means of a mnemonic system, the mattang. In its form, this instrument, composed of sticks arranged in a precise geometrical pattern, was uncannily like European sacred geometry. This geometrical devise demonstrated to the pupils all of the basic patterns which waves form when deflected by land.” (p. 9, [Sacred Geometry](#)). Interestingly, a similar example is given by Lynne McTaggart in [The Bond](#): “We can change our perception of things by learning to see the holistic connection between things. The indigenous populations of Micronesia have learned to navigate the open seas for several hundred miles. . .Subtle signs in the sea and the sky enable them to make accurate predictions about the

weather. . . The shapes of clouds, the color of the sky at sunrise and sunset, the ocean swells and their directions against the stars, even the shape of the waves guide a seasoned navigator along the direction of the current.” (p 150-151, The Bond)

The geometry of life, the shapes of things, have intimately to do with how living and non-living things function, but non-living things are moved by living things. Rocks are created from heat and pressure and the wash of seas. Seas are influenced by planets and objects, as above. The cells in our bodies are influenced by weather patterns. The spiral of shells is formed by how a shell grows, so form and function/execution-of-function are inextricably and dynamically linked. Liliana Usvat, author of an article in ‘Mathematics Magazine,’ writes, “. . .the chambered nautilus grows at a constant rate and so its shell forms a logarithmic spiral to accommodate that growth without changing shape.”

Usvat’s general description of Sacred Geometry is beautiful: “The strands of our DNA, the cornea of our eye, snowflakes, pine cones, flower petals, diamond crystals, the branching of trees, a nautilus shell, the star we spin around, the galaxy we spiral within, the air we breathe, and all life forms as we know them emerge out of timeless geometric codes.”

(<http://www.mathematicsmagazine.com/Articles/SacredGeometry.php#.VFZ6mmd0zcs>)

Week of October 20, 2014

On pressure: Usually pressure is not isomorphic, the forces on each side so equal as to keep something in its place. Generally pressure is exerted against a somewhat movable object, or person or situation, to get it to move. The resulting movement of the passive object/person might be a complete yielding or surrender. It might be simply an adaptive movement or the kind of receptive movement that allows the force exerted on it to enter the passive object/other and influence feelings and actions.

A therapist exerts pressure on a client at times, not so much against a client as in alignment with the client’s internal pressures. For example, a woman wants to apply for a higher level position in the company in which she works. She thinks she is qualified except for in one aspect. She believes she could learn that aspect, but is hesitant to be rejected or to appear arrogant, etc. She is also tired--taking care of her elderly father and her two teenaged children. She is somewhat bored with her current job, but a large inner voice is telling her to side with complacency, to stay the course and not ruffle the waters. Because I hear the small but distinguished voice she shares with me, and that small voice wants advocacy, wants support and needs more wind in its vocal cords. So that is where I exert my own pressure, in tandem with her internal pressure, and I echo the small voice until it has become a duet and perhaps later it will summon a whole chorus.

Dictionary definitions of PRESSURE:

the continuous physical force exerted on or against an object by something in contact with it.

the use of persuasion, influence, or intimidation to make someone do something.
coerce, pressurize, put pressure on, press, push, persuade, force, bulldoze, hound, harass, nag, harry, badger, goad, pester, browbeat, bully, bludgeon, intimidate, dragoon, twist someone's arm, strong-arm

pressure (ˈprɛʃə)

n

1. the state of pressing or being pressed
2. the exertion of force by one body on the surface of another
3. a moral force that compels: *to bring pressure to bear*.
4. an urgent claim or demand or series of urgent claims or demands: *to work under pressure*.
5. a burdensome condition that is hard to bear: *the pressure of grief*.
6. (General Physics) the normal force applied to a unit area of a surface, usually measured in pascals (newtons per square metre), millibars, torr, or atmospheres. Symbol: *p* or *P*
7. (General Physics) short for atmospheric pressure, blood pressure

vb

8. (*tr*) to constrain or compel, as by the application of moral force
9. another word for pressurize

[C14: from Late Latin *pressūra* a pressing, from Latin *premere* to press]

Words can constitute an important kind of pressure. They are just puffs of air, in one sense, and powerful influences in another: A woman who has suffered victimization in the past gets triggered by another's actions and feels herself being consumed, suffocated, dominated. As a child she had to "submit," and no longer does she want to submit to someone else's unscrupulous authority, even when the other person is neither unscrupulous or concerned about authority. The word "submission" circulates in her mind like a caged tiger. I offer the pressure of another phrase, "surrender with delight, or joy." Can she find a distinction in her experience between diving into the cold deep pool of water below the waterfalls of life and being forced underwater in the bathtub? Can she surrender to the tickle of laughter and let her voice free like the flapping of a hundred birds' wings? Can she throw herself into someone's loving arms and trust that she won't be crushed? 'Submission' and 'surrender,' now distinguished in her mind as two separate kinds of experience, gave her back opportunities that had been triggered into the same sleeve before.

Week of October 13, 2014

The errant gardener: An embarrassment, my plot in the community garden: neglect yielding an abundance of unpicked corn and sodden tomatoes, a dense and redolent spread of weeds with

thick stalks and determined roots that barely yield to pulling. It is the kind of garden that unfulfilled dreams yield—over-ripe and molding fancies that have passed their season. It is the garden of ‘too little too late.’

This happens to me, even as decades burn by: creative projects call to me and I answer ‘yes,’ because at the beginning the project is full of ideas and promise. But it has no feet. The project has not entered the days and times that calendars provide, nor has it entered my spine for the bending and digging and weeding and planting and pruning and watering and harvesting that all good gardens require if they are to yield the fruits of labor. This garden, my un-garden, is a brain-child, a delight of the imagination, but such a failure on the ground. And not unlike other projects that suffered from a misalignment of WISH and WORK. And so the Charlton soil I tilled without enough diligence or devotion went the way of winds and eloping seeds and grew itself green and happy without me. And I cannot go back and gaze on it in shame. My unkempt child, the one I forgot about, who is ragged and barefoot between the well-dressed and harvested neighbors who did what they should have done and made their work count.

If I cannot prune my gardens, then I must prune my dreams.

I know what it is to do too much. I know what it means to want to do more than is mine to do.

Out along the sunny road the oaks, maples, and other deciduous trees full of color lose their leaves, sometimes in drifts and sometimes one by one. Leaves glide over the grasses and roadway touching down, begin to cover the grass. My spirit lifts, my mood shifts, my limbs loosen.

Startled, an acorn falls from its tree and hits the topside of my thumb. It stings. The sensation lasts for the next few minutes on the surface and underneath my skin. As the sensation fades it occurs to me, once again among the many times this thought arrives, that **small events—a random intersection of two people or a confluence of events or a negative barb or a friendly gesture—can have a spreading impact**, can have an incompletely anticipated expression beyond the initial “hit.” Small changes in behavior, in the quality of listening, in the willingness to be a bit uncomfortable for the sake of someone else’s happiness or to have the courage to face one’s fear for a higher purpose, all these can result in sweeping alterations in the trajectory of a life or lives. The acorn that hit me with such force is the seed of a powerful oak, after all. That notion is the central metaphor of James Hillman’s book, *The Soul’s Code*.

A couple with their granddaughter, smile at me, walk toward the road eager to meet. Jeff shakes my hand, and the baby in his arms, Annabelle smiles, the acorn of that smile lighting me up. Her soft halo of hair, sticking straight up from her head in soft determination, seems gloriously funny. What is there to do but laugh at the open smile of a baby who looks at you with eyes open as the world, so curious, so eager. And it happens this way, that refreshment

after refreshment gifts me, even without my asking, all because I opened the door and let my sneakers guide me.

What/who is your acorn? How well is it expressed in your oak?

Sunday October 12, 2014

It is a radiant morning, the dew on the grass on the lawn between the deck and the lake sparkling in the sun. I turn up the heat enough for the flames to leap up in the hearth. The mist rises from the lake into the sunshine and, momentarily, I wish I could stay for a month, get acclimated and energized and begin a process of uninterrupted working out, eating well and writing. But it is a beautiful and no less radiant Sunday for being the last day of the weekend before going to the goodness of my work tomorrow and seeing the faces of the people with whom I am blessed to have so many intimate conversations. And if I can lift someone's spirits, even a bit, then that is good. When people say they feel better it is good. When I was a younger therapist I used to think, and had heard, that bringing up difficult stuff might create more sadness, or other emotional hardship, and I subscribed to the notion that a client might feel worse leaving my office. Now, I do not, not so much. Now I know, have lived, that hopefulness and encouragement to face feared aspects of life will typically bring a sense of greater empowerment and also the experience that most obstacles can be, if not overcome, than negotiated with greater skill and ability, whether those abilities include acceptance, or honestly facing something head on, or doing what has to be done because it is the rightest thing to do. When we encounter hardship WITH someone else at our side, we are strengthened more than twofold. It is as if we are buoyed and aided by life itself. This is **the power of relationship**: We can change each other, catalyze each other's strengths on an emotional, intellectual and even atomic level.

I have worked with mechanics and contractors and always want to work again with those who seem to me honest, caring, and skillful. If I do not trust someone to be as good as their word I would not utilize their services again. It is much easier to tolerate a delay in construction, the need for patience in order to acquire a car part, when that is negotiated with kindness and even humor, than it is to tolerate belligerence or belittling or betrayal.

My mantra is always: *Let me be of good service.*

Week of October 6, 2014

Twelfth Fairy-ism: In the story of sleeping beauty, twelve of the thirteen fairies in the land have been invited for Princess Aurora's christening. The shunned old crone interrupts the blessings and curses Aurora. She will prick her finger on a spindle at the age of 16 and die. The 12th and youngest fairy, upon hearing this, comes from the shadows to amend the curse.

Aurora will indeed prick her finger, but will not die. Instead she will sleep for one hundred years or until a prince comes to awaken her. A thick tangle of thorns grows up around the castle and the whole castle falls asleep when curious Aurora's finger meets the one hidden spindle in the attic of the castle.

Therapists too, attend, listen, witness, amend. Are small in a client's life, like the littlest fairy. Important but not important at all. I imagined myself like an ear drum while early this morning in the dark I headed for the local 24 hour corner store that sells fresh brewed coffee. Ear drums resonate, vibrate, bounce back the energy of air waves stirred by the voice of another. To hear is to vibrate in attunement with what has been spoken, shared, whispered, cried to me.

We all have chatter in our heads. The interior voices—those naysayers and boosters, the voices that remind, compel, cajole, soothe, or that create language for poems, songs, conversations with others, presentations and jokes. When a client speaks to me, that mental chatter has a reflective target that bounces back to her--perhaps enhanced or amplified, or with harmony or a question mark--what she is thinking or feeling or wondering or hoping. Those of us who sit in the chair across the room, on the other side of a breath or a tear drop, resonate back with our humanity added in, something important to the person on the couch. There is something powerful that happens when a person viscerally registers the experience of being heard. This is a full-bodied experience, not merely a documentation in the eye-blink of eternity. And at a cellular level things change, dance a bit more freely, catapult into space a liveliness that had not manifested itself a moment before.

Words are just puffs of air, in one sense, and powerful influences in another: A woman who has suffered victimization in the past gets triggered by another's actions and feels herself being consumed, suffocated, dominated. As a child she had to "submit," and no longer does she want to submit to someone else's unscrupulous authority, even when the other person is neither unscrupulous or concerned about authority. The word "submission" circulates in her mind like a caged tiger. I offer the pressure of another phrase, "surrender with delight, or joy." Can she find a distinction in her experience between diving into the cold deep pool of water below the waterfalls of life and being forced underwater in the bathtub? Can she surrender to the tickle of laughter and let her voice free like the flapping of a hundred birds' wings? Can she throw herself into someone's loving arms and trust that she won't be crushed? 'Submission' and 'surrender,' now distinguished in her mind as two separate kinds of experience, gave her back opportunities that had been triggered into the same sleeve before.