



Welcome to the HealthyMind Blog!

Edited November, 2021 to improve format and remove out-of-date material.

It's my pleasure to offer you this collection of ideas about how to live well. I discovered these insights during 30 years of work as a clinical psychologist in Washington, DC. where it's been my privilege to help individuals and groups enrich their relationships and improve their lives.

My hope is that these pages will also help *you* to change how you view yourself and your world...perhaps even profoundly. "You're kidding!" you say. I understand...it's a big goal. But read on and see. (Note that posts are listed in reverse chronological order, most **recent** first.)

David Bissette, Psy.D.

=====

There's a baby in that bath water

Posted on April 8, 2016

Back in medieval days bath water was shared by several people. The last to get use of the water was the baby in the family, after which the water was discarded. By that time the water wasn't very clear...and the saying "Don't throw out the baby with the bath water." resulted. In a way, the same is true in our own lives. When we feel particularly strong about a situation there is probably something important in those feelings even when they do not seem constructive. In fact, one reason that we find such difficulty changing old feelings at times is that part of us knows that we will be hurt by doing so.

So, some "sifting" is necessary. What aspect of those feelings needs to be affirmed, rather than abandoned? Both Gestalt Therapy and Internal Family Systems address this significantly. Perhaps the issue is that what you want most, underneath the obvious trappings of a wish, is being expressed in an unhelpful way. We are many ages on the inside, and some ages aren't sophisticated at problem solving. Part of us may feel that the way to halt ongoing pain in an arm is to cut the arm off. Not helpful!

So, take a look at your strong wishes, even when they seem destructive, and see if there are important "furnishings" in your emotional house before bringing in the wrecking ball. And then, don't bring in the wrecking ball, but be gentle with wisdom, kindness, and firmness, as needed. You will probably need to work with a young, lonely, or scared part of yourself that is holding an extreme view or is panicked. Rage may need to be replaced with assertiveness, and hopeless with a more measured letting go of something...or a different way of feeling hopeful. You may need to offer compassion and love may to the parts of yourself that you have not understood. Look for the adaptive expressed poorly.

So, do not be quick with the internal machete knife. Work with your inner parts as with children whose wants are important, but need to be directed and helped. Have those conversations between your wise self and your younger parts. And don't throw out that baby with the bath water!

David

=====

Make a list of those who have loved you

Posted on April 7, 2016

Who has loved you?

Many people who come to see me have had lives that were deficient in wholesome love, especially during their early childhood years. This has cast a pall over their emotional lives as adults. They are plagued by many questions, including: "Why did I not receive more love in my past. What is wrong with me that I am so unlovable?"

Whether parents were emotionally unavailable because of some problem in their own lives, or whether some set of circumstances prevented us from being parented much at all (an unfortunate institutional living situation), or for a host of other circumstances, when we do not have those all-important feelings of being loved and special to others, there is unhappiness and often a sense of hopelessness about being loved as an adult.

However, God and the universe were often reaching out to us through others around us in ways that we were not able to take in at the time...and in ways that we need to pay more attention to now.

In recent weeks I have been asking some of my clients to think back in their lives and make a list of people who reached out to them in love when they were younger. Often an aunt, uncle, or grandparent, a teacher, or the mother or father of a friend saw a need in our life and attempted to offer what love and interest and care they could offer to us. Sometimes they secretly guessed what it was like to live in our homes, and attempted to make our lives better.

It can be helpful to think back on these people and meditate on what their thoughts and feelings about us might have been. We were loved...by those around us who could do so. This simple act can bring great hope to our lives. Make yourself a list and reflect on those important people...and their interest in you! Don't underestimate the value of this exercise.

You are indeed lovable. You *always* have been.

You may notice that the date of this post is a long time since my last post. I took some time off from this blog to simplify my life for a while. It's nice to be back!

David

=====

A short summary of what you probably already know about developing good self esteem

Posted on June 19, 2014

Throughout this blog it is my passion that my readers feel better about themselves after spending time here. It's what I care about most, and my best gift to offer you. So, at the risk of seeming simplistic to some I'm going to summarize much of what I have said in this blog in just a few lines.

1) Our self esteem is largely experientially based. If we were treated as valuable by others in our past, and if we have been successful in our social interactions with others along the way, our self esteem will typically be good.

2) Several things can interfere with this. Bad experiences with others are like looking in a mirror and not liking what we see. We assume that the negative responses of others are a reflection of who we are. More often though, a negative response is a reflection of who the other person is, not us. It takes time for us to learn this, especially when we are children without much emotional resilience or expertise in handling social situations.

3) Another thing that can interfere is the complicated fact that we are all made up of “more helpful” and “less helpful” traits. I recently had a client say that he has confidence in his appearance but not in his intelligence. That’s the way it is in life...we all have strengths and weaknesses. Learning to accept and be grateful for both is important. The first informs us that we have something to offer others and gives us confidence. The second reminds us that we need others and provides us with humility. It’s crucial for a good self esteem to work well with both sides of this equation.

4) We can also have physical limitations that are severe, like a congenital illness or bodily difference from our peers. A solid sense of spirituality makes a difference when we might be inclined to slip into hopelessness. Hopelessness is a very dangerous place to be emotionally. It must be addressed actively for life to progress.

5) Other extreme experiences can include childhood traumas such as bullying and sexual abuse, or other more adult traumas such as war and rape, that make us wonder if life itself (or God) thinks we are not valuable enough to be treated well.

6) Whether the challenges happen at birth or at any point in our lives, two things must happen to overcome such experiences. First, we must become clear that suffering is often randomly experienced by people in the world, and the question to ask, if you are going ask one, is not “Why me?”, but “Why anyone?”

Second, we MUST make something out of the experience we have had, or the experience will make something out of us. In fact, every difficult situation in life must be worked with...with the potential benefit that these experiences will take you places and give you gifts that you would not have otherwise. Be aware though, that destructive pride or bitterness will sabotage your progress.

Making something out of an experience often starts by telling your story to others who can understand, and by gaining the love, friendship, and comfort that results. Involvement in workshops or groups designed to deal with these types of issues are a great gift, and should be a part of life for all of us. Who do you know that never goes to a doctor, or a gym, or a health workshop to take care of their body? And when you go to the gym you wear all sorts of clothes that you wouldn’t wear to work or a social event at someones house. Our souls need attention also, and when we go to workshops or therapy we wear (or divulge) all sorts of aspects of ourselves that we would not share at a social occasion. That’s normal! It’s also true that just as many hurts come through unhealthy others, our healing will also come in part through interactions with healthy people at places where talking intimately about oneself is the norm. You must risk being known by others!

7) We must also directly cultivate our own positive opinion of ourselves. It can be helpful to stand in front of a mirror and list the things that you are grateful for about yourself. A friend of mine, during his younger life, was told by a psychiatrist to write down three things each day that he liked about how he acted that day. It changed his life.

8) There are skills to be learned in making these healing experiences happen. There are also technical ways of working with traumatic memories to help make them a thing of the past. A good therapist can help you be effective in your healing and relationships. Find a therapist who

is good at helping others. Many in the helping professions will go out of their way to help those who are sincere and passionate about their growth.
It's not easy

I understand that the ingredients necessary to heal a poor self esteem and develop a good relationship with yourself and others are not always easy to find. I know, because I have spent my fair share of time in life healing the wounds that I have picked up along the way. We are all on a treasure hunt in life, if not simply trying to survive. Work hard and results are likely to follow.

If you haven't already started, start here as you read these words. I may not know you personally, but I do know that you are gifted, beautiful in a variety of ways, and important to both me and all of us. As people in the world we are a system...the well-being of any of us ultimately relies on the well-being of ALL of us.

If this speaks to you in some way, say something below. Tell a story of success in this journey, or something you are learning. Don't keep your insights to yourself.

Grateful for you,

David

=====

How to share yourself with others and keep your dignity

Posted on June 9, 2014



I guess I'm stuck on the topic of personal sharing at the moment. This and the two previous posts concern this topic. But, I think each post hits the topic a bit differently, so here goes!

The topic for this post can sound a bit odd, but one of the problems we face when wanting to be open with others is the feeling that we are presenting ourselves as pitiful. It's an understandable concern.

After all, you are successful in some things, and not others. That's the way it is for all of us. Things are going well with your

son, and your daughter won't speak to you. You're doing great things at work and have a medical condition that you are afraid to have diagnosed. You got an "A" in chemistry and flunked history.

So say it that way. People will appreciate the honesty...on both sides of the "success" coin. It's much easier to share with others if we aim for balance. It's like being on a seesaw as a child. You have to find the right place to be so that things are balanced with your partner.

“I’ve doing really well with my eating and exercise for a while now, but my spending is out of control. I can’t seem to get a handle on it.” Acknowledge your success to others, and show your under-belly at the same time. You’ll find that you do more sharing and won’t feel so over-exposed.

It’s about balance.

David

=====

Where to find friends? Try personal growth groups.

Posted on June 4, 2014



Friends are more important than vitamins. In fact, good ones are like emotional vitamins. They make our lives go better. I’ve talked a lot about this in this blog. However, the question arises... Where do I find them?

I live in the Washington, DC area. To plan lunch with a friend may require making plans three weeks out. How out of control is that? It’s a problem in this city. People are so busy they almost have to “carve out” (a phrase I hate) time to breathe.

It an atmosphere like this how does one get below the surface with others? When our business suits and our busy schedules hide both our joys and pain, where do we find a place to let down our hair and “be real”?

I have an answer to this...and I understand that it is an answer that will not interest everyone. But the answer is to get involved with anything involving healthy personal growth. Those who are willing to change and grow are often interested in sharing themselves honestly, and time over coffee or a walk through a park is valued by them.

I have made many of my most lasting friends in life at workshops and other small groups. I have mentioned before that some people avoid personal growth like the plague, and it puzzles

me that they do. That is not my path. Whether it is a small group in a healthy church, a 12-step meeting, or a workshop at a retreat center, small groups provide a chance to share with others. Don't get me wrong...it's not all about being intense with others. But that rock solid foundation of honesty and openness makes hikes, movies, and cooking out in the back yard more fun.

I'll keep this simple. Life is, at all times, about personal growth. From before the moment of birth until our death we are designed to grow and change. And take heart, it can be fun. It's easier to make friends in a personal growth context because personal growth is such a basic activity of living. And constructive, alive people are easier to befriend!

Got an experience of finding friendship in a personal growth context that you want to share with other readers? Leave a comment below. I will typically remove your email address before posting your comment. (Let me know if you want me to leave it.)

David

The human requirement for shared experience

Posted on June 1, 2014



Watching a movie trailer recently I had a renewed glimpse of the importance of having shared experiences with others. It is a critical part of living a full, meaningful life.

To be honest I can't remember much about the movie at the moment, but a socially isolated teenage character entered her home with an air of excitement that was evident. I knew immediately she had made a connection with a friend.

Whether it's winning a race, graduating from school, or more unfortunately, having a serious illness, there is comfort and often joy in being in the company of

others who understand what we are going through because they have gone through it too.

This is especially true in more extreme situations. If you have lost a child, watched your business fail, or seen your behavior become more and more upsetting as you fall into the clutches of an addiction, you will need to gather your courage and find others who are taking a constructive approach to their similar problem. It's a critical thing to do. You won't regret it.

It amazes me to meet as many people as I do who are categorically opposed to sharing their joys as well as difficulties with others. Sometimes I am stunned. Many people also avoid any event associated with personal growth because of the sharing with others or the looks inward that are typically part of such an event. The shame they imagine from others or the fear of what lurks within themselves cripples them.

The old saying, “Shared joy is doubled, and shared sorrow is halved,” is true. And, the better the match the more results we get.

Of course, this comradeship needs to include sharing our emotions...or ”being ourselves out loud,” as I call it. Otherwise our sharing can be dry and unsatisfying.

I once had a client with severe chronic pain. I felt sad as I worked to help her cope when her local pain clinic closed, and she had to scramble for a new doctor. Unfortunately, pain medications are typically addictive and have to be prescribed sparingly. It’s easy to want more than it’s safe to have, and addictions can result.

This particular client told me about her “pain pal.” This person was someone who suffered from pain like herself, and when the pain was difficult and the medications did not help enough, they would talk on the phone to provide a distraction from the pain until the worst had passed. Sometimes it took hours. It was a mutual arrangement. The mutuality was important.

In summary, life has its difficulties and its joys...and both are truly better if we share them with constructive others. It may make the difference between an isolated depression and friendship and a sense of purpose and growth.

David

=====

The Four Questions

Posted on December 16, 2013



Things go wrong in our lives all the time. And when they do, some of us respond in ways that address the problem and typically bring us a measure of emotional comfort. However, others of us either pretend that nothing has happened or fall into a place of hopelessness and defeat.

You can guess which response I hope you have. When things go wrong, and I mean even when they go BADLY wrong, there are four questions to ask yourself. They are important questions and they can make a huge difference in your life. Here they are:

1. Who should I talk to about this problem?
2. How to I need to adjust my plans and expectations because of this problem?
3. What lessons and gifts does this problem have to offer me?
4. What is the next right step for me to take?

The next four blog posts will deal with these questions one at a time.

=====

Question 1: Who should I talk to about this problem?

Posted on December 16, 2013



Who should I talk to about this problem?

This is one of the first questions I encourage people to ask of themselves when things go seriously wrong.

Why is this such a big deal? When facing a significant problem one of the worst mistakes you can make is to try to handle it alone. You will need support from others to tether you safely to the ground, as well as to find perspective and understanding about how to approach the problem.

Who should you look for? There is more than one category of person, and talking to several different people may be important.

Look for someone who will offer comfort. When we're in pain (and we are when things go wrong) we need comfort and reassurance. Comfort is important. In fact, it's interesting to see how much of our lives are devoted to seeking comfort. We eat comfort food, stay in Comfort Inn's, wear comfortable clothes, and use thermostats to keep our houses comfortable. When things go wrong we need the presence and support of others to feel reassured that our life still has a future that is good and hopeful. We also need to be calm enough to be able to think. Emotional comfort helps us to do that.

Look for someone who is skilled in handling your specific type of problem, or at least problems in general. This is critical! Even Googling your problem on the internet can bring up a surprising amount of information about most problems. Of course, talking face to face with someone is still important. It can take some time to locate a good "advisor" or guide, but do so.

Alcoholics Anonymous is great at helping members find their way out of unmanageability, fear, and confusion. Members often serve as a sounding board for one another and offer feedback from their own experience. I had a client several years ago who, when he would have a problem, would talk to three other members of AA who had faced a similar problem before deciding what to do. He listened for what worked for them, for lessons learned, and for suggestions for perspective and action. The combination of their care and their wisdom often worked for him.

Also, don't be afraid of getting professional help when it is needed, whether it is for mental health or for the plumbing in your home. And speak up honestly to the professional. I tell clients who have illnesses that frighten them to tell their doctor that they are scared. They report that a simple, honest statement about fear often brings our a humanity in their doctor that they have not seen...both by way of offering more information and listening well to their questions.

In cases where the results of a particular problem are far-reaching over time, look for others who at some level share the same problem. You will take great comfort in their fellowship and find that the social aspects of sharing can enrich your life greatly. You will also get concrete help in dealing with your challenge by their experiences and learning, and at times enjoy a shared sense of humor that makes difficult things more palatable.

In addition to the above there are other character traits that you will want to look for in others. Here are a few suggestions:

Look for someone who can keep confidences. This is one of the most important positive qualities to look for when feeling vulnerable. You can assume that someone who gossips about others may well gossip about you. You might not want to seek out a person like this when a matter is sensitive to you. Be plain-spoken about your desire to retain control over who knows about about the matter at hand. Your information is yours...it is not others to give away. And in problematic times you will want to have control over who knows about your difficulties to preserve your sense of safety.

Avoid people who tend to panic. I've made the mistake of talking to people who actually increased my anxiety about a problem rather than reduce it. Ouch. This may keep some of those who care a lot about you from being very helpful. You do not want to have to calm down your listener! Rather, look for a listener/advisor who will stay calm and let you tell your story.

Avoid people who are judgmental or try to "fix" you. People who judge quickly tend not to be good at listening; rather, they move quickly to solutions that you could come up with yourself, or they criticize you for being upset. I won't go into this more at the present time, but by and large judgmental people can be hard to deal with in times of distress. All of the positive traits listed above won't necessarily be found in one person, and some of the negative traits may be found in those who are helpful to you. There may be no "perfect" person to talk to. However, it is important to start somewhere. You can also ask others about whom to seek out for a conversation. There's always a place to start.

Thanks for reading! The rest of the questions will follow soon.

David

=====

Question 2: How do I need to adjust my plans and expectations because of this problem?

Posted on December 15, 2013



When obstacles happen the question arises: Should I alter my plans or keep things the same? Or, as they say in poker, "Do I hold 'em, or fold 'em?" This is an important question, and attitude has a lot to do with getting the right answer. Let's take a quick look.

When do I hold 'em—stay true to my course and maintain my directions and plans?

Here's a good time to do that: when it looks like perseverance is the best strategy; i.e., when not being swayed from my original objectives or strategies by the difficulties I am encountering seems like the smart thing to do. "Sticking to one's guns" can be

an important quality in accomplishing any important goal. Without "stick-to-it-ness" we may end up being a quitter when we shouldn't quit.

It's been said that it took Thomas Edison over 1,000 trials to find out the proper combination of materials to make a successful light bulb. When questioned by a reporter about the high number of "failures" in the development of the light bulb, Edison is said to have commented that there were no failures at all, it was just a 1,000 step process. Elbow grease...it can take a lot of it to get the job done.

Here's a bad time to hold onto your plans: when you do so because you want to pretend that nothing is going wrong and that there really is no problem, or when you are afraid of addressing the possibility of change.

It's been said that the company that develops the next "big idea" won't be the company to develop the next one after that. Why? Because when a company has a big success it tends to cling to that success and lose their edge. One only needs to remember how popular Blackberry phones were for several years, and then observe their rapid fall from popularity as other phones came along and took away their market.

When to fold 'em—making changes in my plans because of an obstacle.

Here's a good time: When it looks like my original goals may no longer be obtainable and that alternate goals or strategies need to be adopted.

Alcoholics Anonymous has a famous prayer that offers wisdom here. You've probably already heard it. It's called the Serenity Prayer and goes like this:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference. (Reinhold Niebuhr, 1892-1971)

Changes made with purpose, courage, and wisdom often save the day. Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke was a German Field Marshal and is regarded as one of the great strategists of the latter 19th century. He is famous for the saying, "No plan of operations extends with certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main strength" (or "no plan survives contact with the enemy.") To survive one must change.

In another military example, Norman Dixon in his book *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* writes of how many disastrous military decisions in the past have been made because of an unwillingness to change plans when intelligence reports suggested the need to do so. Change is inevitable, and though some situations do require perseverance, others require change.

Here are two bad times to change your plans: When you're simply afraid of the obstacle and give up out of fear, or when you're overwhelmed with exhaustion and have lost your vision. All of us quit sometimes when we should keep going. We abandon perfectly good plans after become overwhelmed with fear. When this happens it's time to go back to question one: *Who should I talk to about this problem?* The same thing is true when the problem is exhaustion or a loss of vision for the task. Take a break, pace yourself, talk things over with a friend, and get a renewed perspective.

I don't doubt for one moment the sincerity of Academy Awards recipients when they thank those who supported them in their careers. None of us are our best without the support of others. We all need cheerleaders and wise counselors in our lives. Don't let discouragement be the reason you give up on a goal. Talk over the situation with wise, experienced others and then make a decision about whether to continue your plans or change them.

But, in any case don't fail to recognize that obstacles can sometimes result in a greater good than otherwise would have been the case—which brings us to our third question.

David

Question 3: What lessons and gifts does this problem have to offer me?

Posted on December 14, 2013



Of the four questions to ask yourself when things go wrong, this question is the happiest one. It bends our mind to the fact that all is not lost when things don't go the way we want.

Years ago as a new therapist I was talking about a personal problem with a friend of mine. He gave me advice I have never forgotten: "If you work with this, it will give you gifts before it is all over." He was right. I don't even remember the problem, but I remember the lesson. If I work with my problems they will teach me lessons and give me gifts.

As I write this post many sayings come to mind that we all commonly hear. In fact, most of them are so common that they sound a bit trite, such as, "Every cloud has a silver lining" or "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade."

At least two things are true about this type of saying. First, they usually resulted from circumstances in someone's life that were profound. For example, if you look up the saying about lemons and lemonade in Wikipedia you will learn it was originally penned by Elbert Hubbard in 1915 while writing the obituary of a man named Marshall Wilder. Wilder was a dwarf who, despite his limitations, became a well-known actor in the latter part of the 19th century. He refused P.T. Barnum's offer to join his circus in order to do "legitimate" acting and counted King Edward VII as one of his fans. The King eventually attended some twenty of Wilder's performances. Hubbard wrote about Wilder that, "He picked up the lemons that Fate had sent him and started a lemonade-stand." (Wikipedia)

Second, if you are in the middle of a difficult situation and are able to have a positive focus, these sayings won't seem trite. For those able to see their truth, they offer hope and energy to continue when life is difficult.

This is a great lesson to teach our kids. When visiting San Francisco recently I went with a friend and his young son to visit the Exploratorium, a science museum especially designed to interest children. My friend's son and I both like science, and he had particularly wanted to go to the museum with me on my free day—my last day in San Francisco. I had promised him this trip for months. Unfortunately, when we arrived to the museum it was a Monday, and it was closed. One look at my young friend's face convinced me that I wanted to do something to improve the situation right away. The museum store was open for business (of course!) so I told him, "Since we have to postpone our visit, I think you should have something fun to do until we come back when the museum is open. It will be something that you would not have gotten if the museum was open. How cool is that?" His eyes brightened, and he went home with a new erector set which we used to build a space ship. He also experienced for himself that unhappy events can lead to happy ones.

Of course, many of life's circumstances are more severe than a closed museum. In their wonderful and wise book The Spirituality of Imperfection, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham propose that we obtain our spiritual growth more from our imperfections in life than our natural strengths. It's true. I've had more than one alcoholic sit in my office and tell me in all seriousness that the work of recovery from alcoholism resulted in a life much deeper and richer than would have otherwise been the case.

So, when things get dismal, work with your problems. Don't hunker down and pretend that they don't exist. Instead, develop an expectation of good to come out of bad. You will be richer for it.

David

Question 4: What is the next right step for me to take?

Posted on December 13, 2013



There's a time to think, a time to talk, and a time to act. And after doing what is described in the posts above, it's time to act. But, how does one get started?

Lest the size of a problem you are facing overwhelm you into paralysis, zero in on the next right step you need to take and start there. You may have a long list of objectives, but it can be too much to look at all of them at once. So, pick an important one and take a real step in the right direction. After accomplishing that step things may look different from your new vantage point. In any case, you will probably be able to focus on the next right step after that one!

I'm not much of a hiker, but I once took a week-long hiking trip in Switzerland. It was a series of day hikes in the Alps around beautiful Zermatt, home of the Matterhorn. Even though I had trained to be in shape for the hikes, I was one of the slower hikers in our group. While on a steep portion of a trail one of our guides noticed my huffing and puffing and gave me some kindly advice. He said, "When the trail is steep take shorter steps and don't look up the trail." He was right—things were easier when I did that.



The Brooklyn Bridge (shown to the left) was initially designed by German immigrant John Augustus Roebling with construction beginning in 1870. After an accident during the initial surveys for the bridge (which later led to his death), he placed his 32-year-old son Washington Roebling in charge of the project. After the son was also injured in an accident related to the bridge and could not leave his home, prospects for the project looked dim.

However, he managed to supervise the ongoing design and construction from

his apartment. His wife studied higher math and engineering to assist him in the last 11 years of the project, performing many of the duties of chief engineer. The bridge opened in 1883 with his wife leading the way for those first to cross it, including President Chester Arthur. The history is thrilling to read. (Check it out in Wikipedia—and also read the article on Washington Roebling.)

How was this feat accomplished? One step at a time. Many of the challenges were not discovered until the building of the bridge was underway. It was the first bridge of its type in the United States, and at that time was 50% longer than any other bridge in the world.

When challenges come your way, do the leg work...get support, wise counsel, and be open minded about possible changes to your plans...then act. You'll be on your way to something good!

David

=====

Happy people and unhappy people

Posted on January 15, 2013



My work often involves working with the internal “younger” parts of an individual that have been hurt by past events. As a result, I have to make sure that I put my thoughts in the simplest way possible so they can be understood by the part of the person I am dealing with. (No, this is not crazy...if you're done any inner child work you will understand!)

In explaining why a parent or peer would do or say mean things to another person, I recently found myself saying to the young part of a person, “Happy people say happy things to other people, and unhappy people say unhappy things to them.” As I attempted to explain why they were unfairly criticized or bullied, this explanation jumped out at me as very, very true.

It's true of bullies...they are unhappy people who feel powerless, so they want to show their power to others by being superior to them in some way. In recent times that can even mean taking away their lives as they shoot up their classmates at school. Often mental illness contributes to an extreme situation such as killings in schools, but mental illness is part of what makes a person unhappy enough and distorted enough in thought and emotion to do such a thing.

In fact, I believe unhappiness is present in people who abuse in any way. Why were bad things said and done to you as a child? The people who did them were unhappy, and they spread unhappiness to you.

It was never about you. Never.

Knock over a glass of milk, and milk comes out. Knock over a glass of anger, and anger comes out. Knock over a glass of love and understanding, and love and understanding comes out.

Of course, we can be difficult to love because of our own attitudes and actions, and we have to acknowledge our contributions to the way that other people treat us. But if the behavior is chronic, or without provocation, it is primarily because the other person is unhappy. We may not need, or get, a more complete explanation than that in our lifetime. That truth is the most fundamental dynamic, and more detailed explanations can only expound on it.

Finding our happiness is one of our basic tasks in life. It may require professional help if trauma or disability is present, but we must do it nevertheless.
Good luck on your journey!

David

=====

Blaming your spouse for your self esteem

Posted on January 10, 2013



You are responsible for your self esteem. It's true. Ultimately, we are all responsible to take the actions necessary to help us feel good about ourselves. As children our parents were supposed to give us the feedback that helps us appreciate our strengths and have a healthy, realistic humility about our weaknesses. When that happens we feel that we belong, have important things to offer others, and need others also.

When that goes awry, as it easily does, then we have to take up the task of building self esteem later and work on it for ourselves.

However, it is easy to blame others when we don't feel good about ourselves—and especially our spouses.

Who we spend time with certainly does affect our self esteem, so it's inevitable that our spouses have a big effect on our self esteem. They can make it easier or more difficult to have a good self esteem. However, the ultimate responsibility to develop and maintain a healthy self esteem is our own.

I deal with this a lot when I treat husbands who have sex addiction, which is understandably destructive to the self esteem of their spouse. However, five years later after the husband has put much effort into recovery and become much more effective in demonstrating love, honesty, and commitment some spouses will essentially hide behind their husband's past behavior instead of addressing feelings about themselves they often had before they ever married. There are too many aspects to building a good self esteem to cover here, but I do want to put forth the basic idea that we can and must take responsibility to develop a loving and healthy relationship with ourselves. Trauma in childhood—and later in life—intrinsically hurts self esteem, as do the events that affect our physical appearance or ability to perform physically or

mentally. To combat this, having a rich circle of colleagues and friends is important, as is getting professional help when needed.

There are genuine obstacles to overcome in our work of feeling good about ourselves, but they must be addressed actively. Your self esteem is a treasure that you possess. Build it firmly and guard it carefully.

David

=====

Big feelings and little feelings—know which one your partner is having

Posted on December 30, 2012



Recently in a therapy session I hit on an idea that seemed really helpful. It is simple, as most helpful ideas are. Here it is: When your partner is upset, ask yourself, “Is this a big feeling or a little feeling that my partner is having?”

People are typically together because they love each other. However, irritations and fears arise, and comments can be made that are real, but not central to the core of the relationship.

Example: You walk in the door late from running errands and your spouse or partner yells at you: “You are always late. You are so thoughtless!” At this point, ask yourself, “Is this a big feeling or a little one?” It may be big in the sense that your partner really means it in that moment. But it

does NOT mean that the bigger feeling—“I love you”—has gone away.

We have lots of feelings at once. We love someone. We are irritated at them. We are worried about being late to an event, or that our efforts at making a good dinner will be thwarted by it getting cold.

Remembering that your partner loves you, and ultimately thinks you are a good person, is important when they are thoroughly irritated at you. It will help you to be calm and respond in a way that improves your situation rather than hurts it.

Remembering your partner’s “big” feelings is a skill that can help you a lot.

David

P.S. Of course, the opposite can be true...it is possible to underestimate the importance of a feeling when you shouldn't. Underneath, “You’re always late!” can be the feeling, “I want you to respect my efforts here at the house more.” All feelings are important and should be attended to. It’s just that when attending to the negative ones, remembering the bigger, more positive ones can help.

=====

Teddy Bears and Recovery

Posted on December 30, 2012



I received an email today which makes a claim that I have believed for a while. This email said that hugging a teddy bear can be a really comforting thing. Specifically, this email said that hugging a teddy can release the same amount of endorphins as sexual intercourse. Wow! Talk about safe sex!

I actually heard in a professional workshop that hugging anything comforting releases endorphins, and that not only does hugging help, but laughing does also. We are made to need humor and comforting touch. When life has you stressed out consider snuggling up to a teddy bear, and I bet you'll find out that it helps. Also, consider checking out a humor site on the web and get a few laughs when you are down. Look for humor in your problems and you may

just release some of those helpful endorphins.

Of course, none of this is meant to take the place of more substantial action needed to improve your situation, but every little bit does help! And by the way, hugging people is known to be a good thing also—especially a “knees to nose” hug rather than a “teepee” (touching shoulders only) hug.

Here's hoping that your life contains plenty of hugs and humor, despite the difficult things you may be facing!

David

=====

Experiential therapy and the healing of trauma, Part 1

Posted on October 14, 2012

I just returned from the annual conference for Internal Family Systems in Providence, Rhode Island. While there Bessel van der Kolk, one of the most well-known authorities in the field of neuroscience and trauma, spoke on the healing of trauma. I found one point he made to be very instructive. He commented that there is no direct connection between the logical, reasoning faculties in the front of the head and the area in the back of the head that stores trauma.

This means that talking about trauma, which significantly uses the frontal lobes, does little to heal it. I have already known this to some degree, but this time it really sank in.

The experiential therapies often have good success with trauma. In some of these therapies much of the work is internal rather than interpersonal, but it is still experiential rather than merely talking about a problem.

Given this awareness, it makes sense that anxiety and depression, which are frequently associated with frontal lobe brain functions, are often helped with cognitive-behavioral techniques that also strongly utilize the front of the brain.

However, trauma is stored more in the back of the brain, and the more experiential techniques reach “back there” more effectively. I’m no expert in neuroscience, and I’m not wanting to overstate things, but even based on physical location of brain involvement it makes sense that experiential work would be more effective because more areas of the brain are intensely involved.

Of course, therapeutic work is only of value when it is done skillfully. Badly performed experiential work can be traumatic itself. If you are recovering from trauma and want to engage in experiential therapy you will want to have a credible and skilled therapist. More to follow.

David

=====

Experiential therapy and the healing of trauma, Part 2

Posted on October 14, 2012

In the previous post I say that well-done experiential therapies are good at healing trauma. But what kind of therapies does this include?

Several types of experiential therapy come to mind. Many of these therapies include a focus on paying attention to what is going on in your body—where you actually feel your feelings. That alone tends to move you toward the experiential side of things. Gestalt therapy is good at this, for example.

Paying attention to different emotional “parts” of us is also helpful, and Internal Family Systems focuses on just this. It is experiential (and extraordinarily effective), even though most of the work is “internal” and individual, rather than directly involving others.

Other types of work can be more interpersonal in context, and this can be very important in healing from trauma. As the field of human growth has learned in recent years, much learning is interpersonally mediated. We often learn, grow, and develop best in the context of a relationship that matters to us. Attachment theory is clear about this.

When trauma occurs in the context of an interpersonal setting (such as sexual or physical abuse), some healing may also happen best in an interpersonal setting. That’s why people get so much help from 12-step meetings, psychodrama, role-play gestalt therapy, and various forms of group work. Of course, just being in the room with a therapist can also be interpersonal if the therapist isn’t being so *impersonal* that the atmosphere is sterile. It should be noted that when the effects of the trauma are intense, initial work may need to be done individually with a therapist until the individual is ready to include a more interpersonal experience as part of their growth.

Much of my own personal growth has involved a variety of formats, some that have been primarily talking and others more experiential. The experiential has always paid the best dividends.

Bottom line: if you want to recover from trauma don’t try to do it just by talking about the trauma. You may end up stuck in a cycle of insight without change. The more experiential

realm helps to heal trauma, and eventually including some work that is interpersonal in nature will get you even better results.

Good luck!

David

=====

Don't wound your family and friends with judgment

Posted on October 7, 2012

That's what it will feel like to them—a wound. Over and over again in my therapy room people tell stories of being judged by others. Often the judgement is not obvious. It can easily be a tone of voice or a rolling of the eyes, as well as the more obvious impatient criticism that ignores our efforts to do something well.

I should add that you can wound yourself with judgment also and greatly limit and harm yourself.

I once hosted a personal growth group in my home as a way to enrich my own life. I advertised the group on my condo listserv, on Craigslist, and by sending emails to my friends. It was an informal group—I facilitated it but did not act in the role of a professional since I was going to be a member. Twelve people met for the first session, and I posed two introductory questions to the group. I asked each person to tell something they looked forward to in the group, and something they definitely did NOT want to happen in the group. The first person to go was a tall, handsome, friendly fellow who said what he did NOT want to happen in the group was to be judged for the things he shared. The group nodded, and EACH PERSON in the group agreed in turn that being judged would be their greatest fear also. The group was a rich experience that lasted for over a year, and the lack of judgmental attitude in the group contributed to that success.

We all have to identify the difference between actions that are constructive and destructive, but this does not involve blanket judgments about the worth, intelligence, or morality of another person.

Also, you can be sure that if you have a problem judging others you probably judge yourself also. Give both yourself and others a break...lighten up. It will feel good for both you and them.

David

=====

The Perils of Overprotection

Posted on August 11, 2012

When life looks dangerous we protect ourselves. When it looks really dangerous we protect ourselves a lot. That's a good thing. However, most of us don't stop protecting ourselves when the danger is over. That's not a good thing.

Have you been dumped by a lover and been afraid to try again? Have you been misunderstood and refused ever to trust someone with your inner thoughts again? The solution

to sadness and loss involves four things: 1) grieving your loss and receiving comfort, 2) finding hope, 3) finding safe people, and 4) taking baby steps.

1. Grieve your loss and receive comfort: It can be easy to isolate when we are hurt rather than acknowledge our sadness to ourselves and others. When losses occur (and even being turned down for a date can feel like a small loss) it is important to both comfort ourselves and receive the comfort of others. Self-soothing is an important skill and should be actively learned. Take the time to Google it and get help with this if you need it. Also critical is receiving comfort from others. If that doesn't happen we sometimes carry sadness in our bodies for years, and we are made a bit more frozen by each accumulated loss. I have spoken about this elsewhere in this blog, but receiving is an active process that must be learned.

2. Find hope: Spirituality in life is critical. Whether it is through a story of hope repeated by a friend, reading books such as the Chicken Soup for the Soul series, or going to a healthy church service or 12-step meeting, we must find hope. Being in touch with what is good in life keeps us going when we want to quit.

3. Find safe people: As much as we need others in our lives, not every person out there is safe. More than one person has reached out for help only to be wounded by the person they trusted. Here's where we overprotect. Though it's important to know who NOT to trust, it's equally important to know how to identify trustworthy people. There are lots of rules to learn—here are a few: Reveal yourself to those who will reciprocate. Watch how someone treats the server in a restaurant...they will treat you like that sooner or later. Look for kindness. Listen for honesty and patience. And above all, avoid those who are quick to judge.

4) Take baby steps: Though I had a roommate once who learned to ski by taking one lesson and heading straight for the expert slope, that is not a good idea for most of us. Take manageable risks with others. Scatter your friendship seeds widely. If you want one new friend, try to make five and see if one sticks.

Be skillful in your self-protection, but don't overdo it. And if you need to, go to workshops in self-expression to learn to take enough risks to have a rich and satisfying life.

You deserve the best!

David

=====

Vulnerability and Addiction

Posted on August 11, 2012

When someone comes to me for help with an addiction one of the first things we do is to identify events that trigger their addictive behaviors. We then identify activities and thoughts that are nurturing to them, as well as the signs within them that they are in a dangerous place emotionally with their addiction. These things dance around a central concept that is not directly talked about very often in addiction circles. That concept is vulnerability. We may speak of being "in a bad place", but we often speak of a temporary state of being when we say that. Vulnerabilities can be more complicated and often last a long time. Triggers tend to be events, while vulnerabilities have more to do with our ongoing state of being.

In recovery it's always important to know the nature and extent of your vulnerabilities and how vulnerable you are to acting out at any point in time. *This is important because it can be very*



easy to misjudge your vulnerability. Also, ones acceptance of being vulnerable can trigger shame, and we are inclined to underestimate it. However, we need to be honest with ourselves about this because when we are very vulnerable a small trigger can be enough to send us over the edge. At other times, when we are at a good place, we may be able to withstand a rather large difficult emotional or physical event without failure.

I often have clients come in who have had a slip and are surprised by it even as it happens. They describe “watching themselves” act destructively as if they were someone else watching the event. When I do a post mortem with them to determine what contributed to a slip or relapse, it often becomes clear that the main trigger that created the vulnerable state happened days or weeks before the actual slip or relapse occurred. In my own life, when I get too angry in traffic I sit down with myself and ask what else I am upset about. Something else has been going on, and my reactions show it. Often the event or events that have concerned me actually happened days or

even weeks previously, and things have been simmering on the back burner of my mind.

Essentially we all carry inside us the sum of the vulnerabilities we have accumulated over time that have not worn off. A nap may take care of temporary weariness, but the effects of sexual abuse may last a lifetime.

The concept of vulnerability also helps one to understand how an addiction develops to begin with. In some addictions, and perhaps all of them, there is a genetic component from birth that creates vulnerability to addiction in both the body and brain. It is also clear that traumatic experiences create emotional, and possibly chemical, vulnerabilities to addiction. And at any point in life events can happen—the death of a family member, economic difficulties, job frustrations, or relational problems—that can increase our vulnerability to acting destructively for long periods of time after they happen.

In summary, it can be difficult in recovery to stay aware of your level of vulnerability for acting out, but it is important to do so. This is especially true in early recovery. Knowing your level of long term vulnerabilities and working on reducing them, while not ignoring the shorter term triggers, is critical. Even short term attitudes are important. AA has long identified resentment as creating vulnerability to acting out. Self pity does the same. Going to a 12-step meeting, working the steps, talking to a friend or sponsor, or even taking a nap can reduce ones vulnerability. Getting some therapy can help with the more enduring vulnerabilities. All of these affect ones state of being. It’s a simple concept, but it can help to keep you sober.

David

=====

Have you walked away from yourself? There is good news.

Posted on July 15, 2012

When we are small children we don't know any better than to be who we are. We laugh when something is funny, cry immediately when we are upset, and try to do things we are not good at without too much concern. However, over time we learn what gets us the attention we want as well as what doesn't. We gradually do more and more of what gets us love, or at least some sort of recognition.

A healthy family welcomes our expressions of who we are and helps us to develop and express our own unique personality successfully. We are encouraged in those tasks for which we show aptitude, and are dealt with patiently when we attempt things we don't do well. Our expressions of affection are welcomed and returned, and our ideas and feelings are considered important.

However, when that doesn't happen we typically walk away from who we really are and adopt behaviors that are "not us" to get the best results we can from others, even when those results are minimal. As a result we don't show affection if it is not welcomed, we don't speak about our own true thoughts and feelings, and we do try out for football or to be a cheerleader when we don't want to. We contort, restrain, and hurt ourselves to please others. We do so in order to survive socially and emotionally, if not physically as in the case of physical abuse.

As a result our self esteem-suffers. We're not sure who we are or how we want to behave, and we're not sure that those who profess to love us know us well enough to actually have that love.

What have we done?

As we have walked away from ourselves in childhood in order to survive we have lost ourselves and our way. Like Hansel and Gretel we are lost in the forest.

I have two suggested thoughts that may help you:

- 1) There is not now, nor has there ever been, anything wrong with who you are. Of course, we all fail at times—including plenty of moral failures—but who you really are as a personality and being is, and always has been, lovable.
- 2) Don't assume that you know who you are. Be willing to explore a little. Consider whether you may actually have the traits you envy in others, and that you have interests and abilities that you have never developed.

During your lifetime you will never discover all the facets of your personality. There is always more about you to unwrap. Yes, there is plenty of you to go around. In terms of your personality and your gifts you are all you need to be. It is true.

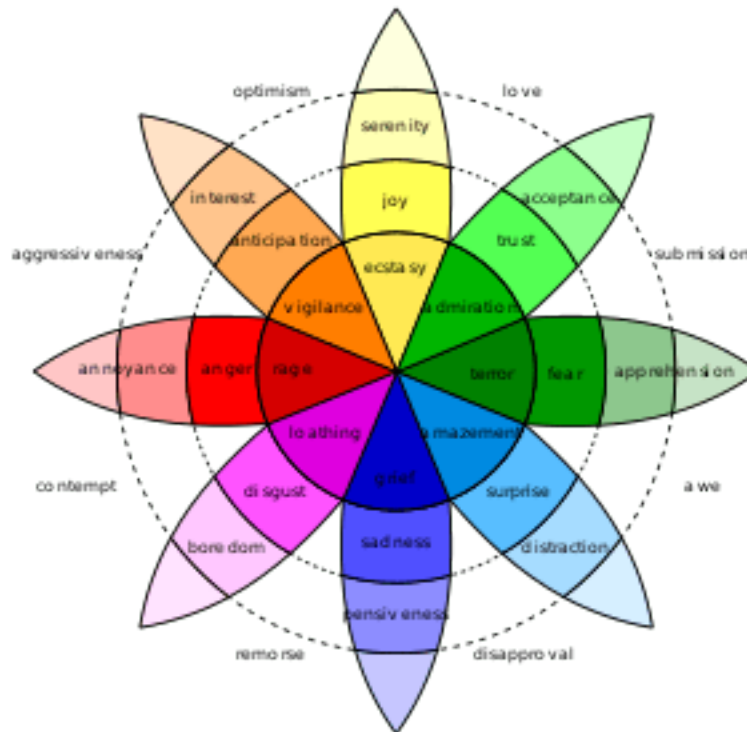
David

=====

You are an organism!

Posted on July 15, 2012

According to gestalt therapy you are an “organism”.



English: Robert Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Over the years as I have learned gestalt therapy I've not been fond of this use of an otherwise perfectly fine word. To begin with, it doesn't seem like a very flattering term—it's a rather sterile and impersonal way to describe living human beings. It seems to leave to out a lot, partly because there aren't many words that are broad enough to include all that makes up our complicated natures.

However, as time has gone by I have grown to accept the use of this word in this way. As people we are physical, spiritual, electrical, chemical, emotional and even somewhat “animal”.

We have personalities, biological drives, and spiritual intuition and dreams. We also seem to have a wisdom that comes from our whole being...bigger than just a thought or a feeling. In gestalt we talk about our organism having a wisdom of its own. “Your organism knows what you need,” is a phrase often heard. Our body, our muscles, our brain, our spirit all act in unison, if we allow them to do so, to tell us what we need.

It's easy to attempt to reduce ourselves down to one of our parts and consider that the most important part, whether it's our physical, emotional, or spiritual self. We are both creaturely and spiritual. In gestalt thinking, in our current existence, we don't just have bodies, we are our bodies.

In many ways this can be humbling. However, the result is that our organism can often tell us what we need if we learn to listen—especially to what our bodies have to say. I often tell my

clients (and have said earlier in this blog) that we have our thoughts in our heads, but our feelings in our bodies. When we go to the theater we don't look at the projector, we look at the screen. The image may originate in the projector, but it is played out on the screen. Our body is like that. Our feelings may start in our brain, but we experience them in our bodies. If we start with our bodies to see what we feel at a physical level, we can then look for an emotion word that seems to match that physical sensation and get an idea about what it is we're actual feeling.

It's true that we are organisms—amazing, miraculous organisms. And if you learn to pay attention to your whole self, including your body, you will find that you have more wisdom than you know.

David

=====

Laughing your way to happiness? I'm serious.

Posted on April 17, 2012



Alcoholics Anonymous has a saying that sometimes you can “act your way into feeling.” It's true—we've all experienced it. Feelings do follow behavior at times. (You may remember going to a party that you didn't feel like attending only to find that once you were there you had a good time.)

I once had a client who said he couldn't cry about the loss of his dad, though he felt very sad. I asked him to show me what it would look like physically if he cried...to put his hands, face, and body in the position he would assume if he cried. He

put his head in his hands and his elbows on his knees—and began to sob over his loss. His actions released the flow of his emotions.

Thoughts, feelings, and behavior...whenever we change one of these the other two are affected.

I was contacted by a reader of this blog about groups being held around the world for the purpose of laughing...just to laugh. The effects are very beneficial they say, and I believe them. The Wikipedia article on Norman Cousins contains the following quote: **“I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep,”** he reported. “When the pain-killing effect of the laughter wore off, we would switch on the motion picture projector again and not infrequently, it would lead to another pain-free interval.”

He went on to write **Anatomy of an Illness** describing his discoveries about humor and healing.

Much more recently I attended a workshop of the treatment of trauma only to discover that the speaker recommends her clients go to humor sites on the internet to sooth themselves when distress becomes unmanageable. It's not a matter of denying the difficulties in life, but in shifting our obsessive attention away from them to give us a break. (Laughter also releases endorphins, our natural internal pain reliever.) Of course, this was but one of several strategies she offered to help temporarily relieve significant emotional pain.

The reader who wrote to me about the topic was promoting the website for **Laughing Yoga**, which is informative and motivating. Give it a look and take a second look at the role of laughter in your life. Perhaps you, too, can act your way into feeling on a tough day. As Norman Cousins would probably say, I bet it won't hurt!

David

Note: The concept I am talking about here is not meant to be used as a substitute for facing the difficulties in your life, of course. However, it *can* help you face them with greater ease.

=====

Ten tips for recovery from sex addiction

Posted on March 6, 2012



Here are a few ideas to help you recover from sex addiction...

1) Acknowledge that your sex life is truly out of control and that you can't stop the problem by yourself. (12-steps)

2) Get help—typically two types:

Professional—a professional can help to deal with the trauma that often underlies sex addiction as well as the underlying medical problems that may need attention

Peer support—finding a support group of peers who understand can make a lot of

difference; the 12-step groups for sex addiction are like this

3) Make your recovery the first priority in your life. It will not happen as a mid-level priority!

4) Do more than you think you are going to need to do. This will help prevent relapses as you discover the power of your sex addiction.

- 5) Develop your spiritual side. If you have a history of spiritual disappointment in what you have been taught, look for what is true for you. Do not allow yourself to remain in bitterness. Develop some form of spiritual practice.
- 6) Be honest with others about your true feelings and behaviors. If they are recovering and honest themselves, they will understand. Do not be afraid to admit your own problems and shortcomings.
- 7) Learn the things that trigger you, nurture you, and indicate that you are at a dangerous place emotionally. Take them into account as you live your life.
- 8) Encourage family involvement when helpful, and ask your family members to be involved in their own recovery as needed, whether from alcohol, drugs, or codependency. Typically spouses WILL need their own recovery, at least from the trauma of discovery of sex addiction in their relationship.
- 9) Get involved as a couple in couple's recovery/therapy. Sex addiction is an intimacy disorder, and there are often problems with intimacy on both sides of the relationship.
- 10) Exercise and eat well to aid your emotional and physical well-being.

Good luck!

David

=====

The Law of Parsimony? Occam's razor???

Posted on March 6, 2012



I majored in chemistry and psychology in college, and I have lots of fond memories about those days, as well as some really tough ones. Like most of us at UNC-CH during the late 60's and early 70's I actually did learn a lot...and some of it was even in the classroom!

But whether in the classroom or outside it, a few ideas have particularly stood out to me through the years, and one was from the field of science. Roughly stated it says: "A simple explanation of a phenomenon is preferred over a more complex one." It's known as the Law of Parsimony, or strangely enough, Occam's razor.

Sounds like a bunch of gobbledygook, doesn't it? My chemistry professor explained it by saying that if a law of science is very complex, then it's probably not in its final form yet. In other words, the important things in life are actually profound and can be broken down into relatively uncomplicated pieces.

That helps most of us regular people, and also explains why someone who understands something REALLY well can often explain it to others. They really "get" it.

Why am I saying all this? Good question!

I don't know about your life, but "uncomplicated" doesn't always describe mine. However, I do look for ways to make it less complicated and more profound. I seem to be driven to find simple, important ways of being that are joyful and durable in the face of life's problems. In fact, I'd love to learn from you. Do you have an idea or experience to share? If you're up for it, leave a comment here with a discovery or two of your own. I'd love to read what you have to say, and I'm sure others would as well.

David

P.S. One quick comment that's actually rather obvious...simple/profound does not equal simplistic. The first takes some thought and wisdom, the second only superficial thinking. Too bad.

=====

“There was a big fight at my house last night. Unfortunately, it was inside me.” (Internal Family Systems)

Posted on February 21, 2012

We can all say that we have fights inside ourselves. It's true...one part of me takes a position on something, and another part of me disagrees.

Polarities. They happen all the time.

Often we try to get rid of one side of a polarity. That's not a good idea! Typically each side has something important to offer, and the two sides need to be reconciled. Hating part of ourselves is similar...not a good idea. If we look closely, each part of us typically means well, though we may be acting or thinking in an unsophisticated or childlike manner.

When something traumatic happens to us as children, or later in life, the part of us that remembers the event tries to figure out what to do to make us feel better. If it can't get closure on the event, it becomes "unfinished business". Whenever we think about the trauma we become upset, and we typically try to push the part of us that remembers it aside so that we can function as well as possible. Another term used to describe this is "compartmentalization."

Interestingly enough, when we do this we isolate the part of us that has the feelings and memories. And I mean, we *really* isolate it. It does not particularly grow or change as time goes on. It retains the level of thinking that it had when the event happened. As a result, it thinks in unsophisticated terms and has poor problem solving abilities. In other words, many of the parts of us that are so destructive are that way because they are essentially "young", not evil.

It turns out that we don't just have an "inner child", but we have inner *children*, or various parts of us that need compassion and healing.

This is not to say that we don't have a core, mature self. We do. But we have dissociated parts of us that are frozen in time, and who get excited and inundate us with discomfort and anxiety and a thousand other feelings when they are upset.

Don't let them fight. And don't try to get rid of them. Become your own therapist or find one to help you...and help them to find healing.

Here's hoping for a happier inner house for all of us.

David

=====

Asking an emotional part of you to “stand down” (Internal Family Systems)

Posted on February 21, 2012

As I continue to explore Internal Family Systems, much to the benefit of myself and my clients, occasionally an aspect of managing ones emotional life comes into sharp focus. One thing that I have particularly liked recently has been the awareness that at times we need to ask an emotional part of us to “stand down.”

What do I mean by that? One of the tenets of IFS (internal family systems) is that we have parts of ourselves that act like they have a life of their own. We also have a “core” self, who is more stable than our reactive emotional parts and who needs to guide us as a person. Hopefully, our more core self is in the “driver seat” of our life at any moment, but typically our emotional parts crowd their way in and influence us when they become concerned or agitated. This can upset the apple cart.

When that happens we can “ask” the part of us who is being reactive to stand down so that we can “hear” its concerns. It's like asking a very upset friend to calm down *so that they can tell us what is wrong*. It's not to deny our feelings or disrespect them, but to get some space from them so that we can respond to them from our more calm self. Of course, then we do need to respond to them, and there can be some complications to that, but it's definitely a skill one can learn over time.

I find this to be a very helpful concept. There's a difference between “having” our feelings and “being” them...i.e., lost in them. The overall IFS way of working with oneself is by far the best I have ever found. If you're looking for a therapist, look for one that utilizes IFS in their practice. If you find someone who is a good therapist in general, then the IFS emphasis will make them even better.

One note: IFS gets its name from the discovery that techniques often used in family therapy work in individuals. It is a way of working that is typically done in individual therapy. Don't be put off by its name.

David

=====

Ideals versus behavior

Posted on January 31, 2012

None of us live up to our beliefs about what our behavior should be. Otherwise we'd all fit into slim clothes, exercise just the right amount, always be honest on our taxes, be patient with others and ourselves, and have an impeccable spiritual life. And that's just for starters.

There exists a gap between our ideals and our behavior, and how we handle that gap matters a great deal in terms of how we feel about ourselves.

What are the possibilities? Let's see...most of use one of three strategies.

Strategy 1: Telling ourselves that the gap doesn't exist...maintaining our ideals and saying that we meet them. In this strategy we tell ourselves that we are a "much better than average" person who realistically has very few flaws. Of course, we don't fool those close to us, as well as most other people. Turning a blind eye towards ones own faults is a practice that we all participate in. In some circles, particularly fanatical ones, this strategy can be a favorite.

Strategy 2: Ignoring your ideals and saying such a state of living doesn't exist. Lowering our ideals isn't such a good idea either. We can tell ourselves that what we intuitively know to be true isn't, but deep down we don't believe ourselves and are left to live with our own internal condemnation.

Strategy 3: Acknowledging our ideals, and being honest about our lackings. This is a tricky thing to do without becoming overwhelmed by our failures. However, we can live with ourselves honestly--when our efforts are spent in growing toward our ideals.

People will like us more when we are honest about ourselves, and we will like ourselves more also. **This key to this strategy is to accept where we are in the present without being content to stay there.** Spirituality is important, and we have to learn to live gracefully *with the tension* of our incompleteness.

Patience with self and others, and a good dash of humility, will work wonders. Gratitude for being loved in our flawed state will replace defensiveness, and life becomes more peaceful. Not all-peaceful (that is another ideal), but more peaceful than it would be otherwise.

Good luck,

David

=====

The breadth of sex

Posted on January 24, 2012

When I think of sex, I think of three different categories: gender sexuality, romantic sex, and genital sex. What's the difference?

To me "gender sexuality" is that aspect of our nature that is most broad. It has to do with the expression of our gender in social relationships and daily tasks...our manliness and femininity as we individually express it. It's fun to experience and express to others our sense of gender, and to compliment others on theirs. It's a basic part of our self esteem and our lives.

Romantic sexuality is a more intimate level of sexual feeling and expression. It has to do with fondness, attraction, flirting, and other expressions of romantic interest, including touching, kissing, etc. More vulnerable feelings become evident, and our self esteem is engaged at yet another level.

Genital sex is the third level...I think of it as even more powerful and intensely engaging level of self expression—when one is emotionally present to themselves, the experience, and their sexual partner.

Each level of sexual expression involves its own set of factors and emotional accomplishments to be experienced well. I've already written on the **importance of engaging your heart** as you engage your body with someone else's, so I won't say much about that here. But do allow yourself to think of sexuality in broad terms relative to your personality, with an awareness that it's a part of your nature that needs nurture and maturity to be enjoyed fully. Sexual maturity, and overall maturity, go together.

Of course, I'd be fooling myself if I thought this is easy. The post above has to do with living with our failures...a very relevant concern to this topic!

David

=====

Recovery and the ability to receive

Posted on December 21, 2011

In this post I'd like to highlight one aspect of behavior that perpetuates the addictive cycle—the inability to “receive” what is needed from others.

It is a fundamental tenet of Gestalt therapy that the ability to receive is important. When a person has a yearning, but lacks the ability to take in what is desired, the yearning is guaranteed to persist. This is the case for most people I see who come in with sex addiction—as well as for most of the rest of us.

Receiving is a very active process. It requires noticing the responses of others, giving credence to their intention and good will, and acknowledging their efforts and delight in wanting to see us happy. All this and more is needed in order to “receive well”.

Of course, *becoming* a “good receiver” is not necessarily an easy task for some of us. We will have to address the feelings of shame that make us feel unlovable. That means healing destructive trauma from our past and engaging effectively with healthy people in the present. It's a process with many facets...which is one reason why recovery takes time.

By the way, please note that I'm not meaning to suggest that life is all about receiving. Giving love to others is important in life also, but it is hard to give what we have never let ourselves receive.

David

=====

An idea rather than a product

Posted on November 21, 2011

Steve Jobs died recently...

...and when I heard about it I was profoundly sad. I do love my iPhone and all the amazing things it can do. And, I'm typing this blog post on my MacBook with pleasure. But beyond

these things, Steve Jobs was a man passionate about an idea—using electronics to improve our lives. I remember hearing that he said a good test to see if the iPad was successful was if you could sit in a coffee shop and use it to get a date with someone a few tables away. That's a humorous statement, but he was probably serious. You see, he was committed to an idea, not just a product.

Walt Disney was also like that. The Disney empire grew up as an expression of an idea he embraced...that *human imagination* is powerful in its ability to improve our lives and create joy. I don't actually know a lot about either Steve Jobs or Walt Disney, but it seems to me that they were who they were because they embraced an idea, which is much more than a product.

Sometimes it seems like Disney has already lost some of its imaginative edge, and I hope the same won't happen to Apple. Imagination happens in individuals...individuals like you and me. And we all have more of it than we will ever have time to express.

My big idea in life is about personal growth in things that are important...being who we are, having spiritual health, enjoying creativity and personal relationships, healing from trauma.

What idea does your life express? I bet it's good.

David

=====

An idea is like a ghost

Posted on November 14, 2011



The image to the right showed up on my iPhone screen recently as the result of solving a simple puzzle in a game called PathPix (which is a lot of fun).

It mentions something that I have never thought of, but like a lot. The idea is this: some thoughts have to be massaged a bit before their truth can be clearly seen.

This has certainly been my experience. Some helpful thoughts seem to hang out in the fringes of my mind just out of reach. I know they are there, but it may be a few days before I can find the right words to express them. Hopefully you're reading the fruit of those discoveries in these blog posts.

The same is true of *your* thoughts. Give them a chance to develop and they will reward you.

I'll offer you a different analogy, but since I'm not as familiar with ghosts as Charles Dickens (he included three in *A Christmas Carol*) it won't be about the supernatural. Here goes: **Like a good stew, some thoughts need to simmer before they are ready for consumption!**

Okay, it doesn't have that Dickens touch, but you get the idea.

David

The mountain you climb is within you.

Posted on November 7, 2011



A friend of mine who loves to hike traveled to Peru last year to hike to the famous lost city of Machu Picchu. While there she bought a card in a gift shop that had the title of this post on the front: "The mountain you climb is within you." She said that she was struck by the profundity of the card and found the saying to be true. In life the greatest challenges are not external, they are internal.

I agree with her. To conquer the mountain we have to conquer ourselves.

David

Worshiping security

Posted on October 31, 2011

I have a quote for which I have lost the source, but I resonate with it so much that I'm going to include it here anyway, asking your help to identify the author. It's about love, risk and spirituality...three things that inevitably go together. It's from a Christian perspective, but the truth is universal.

Here it goes...

"Martin Luther once wrote that security is the ultimate idol. We so long for security that we will bow before it, offer up to it our firstborn, and freeze our future into an ever-present now for it's sake. In worshiping this golden calf we squander our energy by frantically throwing up security barriers when what we ought to be doing is venturing out into the open, just as God did when God risked dwelling among us. We are not made for safety spiritualities, for hunkering down or dodging risk. We are lovingly made for love, and to love is to accept insecurity and risk and vulnerability for the sake of Love. There is no painlessness in a love-ruled world, and that's necessarily frightening. But it is also a reasonable price to pay. Even God has to ante up for the sake of love."

Helen Keller seems to agree about the impossibility of security when she said: "Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is a daring adventure or nothing at all."

There's a balance to be maintained between risk and safety. Most of us, however, lean strongly towards the safety end of that spectrum. As a result, we experience less adventure, happiness, and yes, less love in our lives.

What kind of risks can we take that will make a difference? There are many. One risk is to reach out and get help with emotional problems that have caused you to shrink back in the face of life's difficulties. We all carry emotional wounds in our bodies and there is healing available for most of them. However, it takes courage to begin that journey.

Another risk is the risk of being ourselves rather than trying to copy someone or imitate a popular idea of who we should be. We are at our best when we are *our best self*. In conversation and relationships, it does pay to be our best thoughtful selves, listening to ourselves from within and responding honestly to life with a measure of openness and vulnerability.

I won't go on at the moment, lest this become too long...but the point is this: too much security = too little life and love. Live a little!

David

=====

Discerning who to trust

Posted on October 24, 2011

When we take risks interpersonally it is important to do so with our eyes open. There's an old saying about how to open up to others. It goes *Share – Check – Share*.

This describes the process of “putting a bit of yourself out there” to others (taking a manageable risk), and then checking to see what you get back before sharing more. If they don't really share back with you at a similar level, and you want something a little deeper, then accept the response for what it is and try again with another person.

After all, we connect with others through our vulnerabilities. I have a friend who often jokes and is playful with servers in restaurants. I asked him about this once, and he indicated that he has been teased in a friendly manner by servers since he was a child. He's an outgoing fellow, and apparently the servers recognized this and engaged him. Eventually, he learned to initiate in return. These days he is inconsistent. Sometimes he will engage with others, and sometimes he will not. He explained to me that he can sense when another person will welcome the interaction before he attempts to engage them, and if they do not seem open he keeps to himself. In others words, he is discerning about his interactions.

Many people in the world are not actually ready for intimate relationships. They may welcome a kind word, a brief hello, or a discussion about something newsworthy, but when it comes to discussing the more personal side of their lives they may not be willing to do so (or even know how to do so). If this is the case, it is much easier to move along rather than try to change them.

A hint: when it comes to discerning who is going to be both fun and meaningful to be with, watch to see if the person tends to be judgmental. Judgmental folks are not a lot of fun to be with. Underneath it all they do not approve of themselves, and they are not going to approve of you either. You can offer them kindness and a friendly gesture, but they can be like trying to hug a porcupine. It's dangerous to your underbelly.

In summary, since we connect with others through our vulnerabilities we must do so with care to avoid new wounds. However, to fail to try is to fail. You owe it to yourself to sharpen up your conversational skills and give folks an honest try. Some people are slow to warm up, but are

worth the wait. Others are simply locked into their isolation. You'll find enough of what you are looking for out there if you give vulnerability a chance and receive well when healthy friendship or love is offered.

Happy hunting!

David

=====

The gestalt concept of maturity

Posted on October 17, 2011

A main focus of gestalt therapy is helping individuals take responsibility for their lives and be proactive in getting their needs met. This relates to the gestalt concept of maturity.

When we are young children, and we are lucky enough for things to go well, our needs are basically provided for us. Food is prepared and provided, we are clothed and bathed by others, and our interactions with others occur then they pick us up and play with us. However, as adults we are expected to take much of that initiative for ourselves.

Being mature does NOT mean that we don't need food, safety, and comfort by others when we're upset. In the case of comfort, for example, it means that we let others know about our situation so they can offer comfort if they are willing. We are open and honest instead of resorting to isolation, self-pity, and other destructive behaviors.

I was in a gestalt workshop once when an individual asked for help in having more joy in his life. The leader agreed to help and gave him these instructions: Stand up, go to the middle of the room, and create some joy for yourself. He looked at her confused. Create joy, here, now? She nodded yes.

He stood up uncertainly, walked to the center of the room, and looked at the other 25 workshop participants. He asked someone for a hug, which they gave willingly. He gave another person a compliment, which apparently gave him pleasure to give. He went from person to person interacting, and the feeling in the room became buoyant. When asked how he would like to end his "creation" of joy, he indicated he would like to dance with as many of the group were willing to do so. He had a favorite song on his iPod, and he played it and the room broke out in some very exuberant dancing.

The point: if we want joy in our lives it is up to us to take action and create it. He learned by doing that day, and I learned along with him.

David

=====

“If you don’t have a dream, how are you going to have a dream come true?” Walt Disney

Posted on October 10, 2011

What a simple and wonderful saying! The ability to use healthy imagination and fantasy is a great gift, and we need the inspiration and hope they provide. Dreaming **dreams** is important for all of us, and most of us need to spend more time dreaming about what is important to us. But dreaming is just a start...we also need to follow those dreams. When you do that you will be in for a wonderful adventure. Placing a vision of something you care about in your mind can motivate you and keep you going when things are difficult, and perseverance in following your dreams can help make them a reality.

Recently I was at Disneyland in California and saw the actual bench that Walt Disney was sitting on when he had the idea for Disneyland. The bench is now located in the lobby of the “**Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln**” attraction, and here’s a picture of it and a sign commemorating the event. Walt dreamed and then acted.





Here's a personal example of what I'm talking about. I wanted to be a psychologist for a long time before I became one. After graduating from UNC-Chapel Hill with a degree in chemistry and psychology in 1972 I worked in another field for 10 years before deciding to take the plunge. Five years of graduate school was a bit daunting, but at the age of 32 I applied to three schools, got accepted in all three, picked one, and enrolled.

Graduate school in psychology wasn't easy, and there were times when I thought the process of learning how to help others grow (and grow myself!) was too confusing to complete well. But my dream was to be a psychologist, and numbers of family, friends, professors, and supervisors along the way imparted wisdom and assistance that made my dream possible. I followed my dream...with lots of help. And I have not regretted the decision.

So...

What dreams lurk inside you?

What dream do you need to start to follow?

It's said that Walt Disney once failed to succeed in a job application because he was considered not to have enough imagination. Imagine that!

But he followed his dream. Shall we do the same?

David

=====

Gentleness

Posted on October 3, 2011

As I write this I'm on a plane on my way from DC to a wedding in Los Angeles. It's October and plans for the weekend include an outing Mickey's Halloween Party at Disneyland. I plan on riding Space Mountain and Thunder Mountain (roller coasters), listening to Tiki birds sing, eating a corn dog and Dole Whip, enjoying the special fireworks, and taking a picture with Goofy or Donald.

As I anticipate such whimsical and wholesome activities I look up and see a vivid and violent war movie playing on the TV monitors over the aisles of the plane. The contrast is shocking—harshness, bullets flying, people falling and dying. It's no wonder that we struggle to adjust to the wide variety of experiences that exists in life.

We have to be gentle with ourselves when we can. Life hands out enough harshness to all of us so that it's not a good idea to add to it voluntarily by treating ourselves and others badly. Life has buoyancy, bounce, whimsy, and surprise, and when we add understanding, patience, and compassion towards ourselves and others into the mix, it's a good recipe.

David

=====

The bully on the playground (and other places) – Part 1

Posted on September 19, 2011

I'll never forget the first time in group therapy when I asked the men in the group if they had ever been bullied. The group got strangely quiet, and yet seemed emotionally charged. I quickly realized the power of bullying in these men's lives.

Since that time I have been quick to notice when a client describes bullying behavior. In truth, most of us have been bullied, and we all will bully from time to time to get our way—pushing for what we want and shoving others a bit, either physically or emotionally. It happens at the airport, the grocery store, and especially on the freeway. It also happens a lot in families, and not only between children, but between children and parents—in both directions.

I think there are two different goals behind bullying. The first is the least damaging emotionally...and that is when someone simply wants their way and pushes past someone else to get it. The second, more damaging type, is when someone deliberately wants to make another person feel humiliated and "less than."

Today I am writing about the second type—the bully on the playground, as I think of him. He (or she) is likely to be an individual who does not feel good about themselves—in fact, he typically feels rather badly. Whether he is being mistreated at home or is suffering from some social or other failure, he feels shame about himself, and he is angry about it. His goal? To pass his shame to someone else, whether in public or private, and experience feelings of superiority for a change.

As Nathaniel Branden wrote in his famous book, The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem, "It would be hard to name a more certain sign of poor self-esteem than the need to perceive some other group as inferior."

To reach this goal of being “better than”, the bully must select someone they feel they can overpower. After all, they might lose if they picked a fair fight with someone. Instead, they choose someone they perceive as weak in some way. Thus, they can demonstrate their strength by calling attention to the other’s weaknesses. Ridicule, fights, confrontations...these are the meat and potatoes of the playground bully.

So Rule #1: When confronted by a bully it helps to understand that he hates himself.

More to follow...

David

=====

The bully on the playground (and other places) – Part 2

Posted on September 12, 2011

When I started my professional life as a psychologist I went to a major bookstore and pulled several children’s books off the shelves about bullying. I needed some strategies to offer kids that I met in my office. As I thought through the bullying phenomena, I decided that there are three types of bullies and that that they require different responses from us.

Type 1: The powder puff bully

This type of bully is mostly show. They don’t mind pushing others around, but are not seriously looking for any type of conflict. They will back down quickly if they perceive that you have enough confidence to stand up to them at all. An example of this type of bullying may be seen in an older person who has become used to having their own way, but who realizes that they are unable to actually push very hard for their wishes to be met. This bully is not a problem. If you decide you wish to resist them, then simply do so and they will deflate, possibly even becoming obsequious.

Type 2: The average bully

The average bully is a little harder to deal with. They have some confidence that they can push others around or make them feel bad about themselves. However, when they run into someone who will resist them effectively they will back down in self preservation. They will not escalate a bullying episode until the stakes become dangerous for themselves. It’s not worth it to them. They would rather find an easier target.

These bullies can be resisted if you need to and want to. (I’ll suggest some strategies in the next post.)

Type 3: The professional bully

This type of bully is a big problem. He feels so bad about himself and so angry that he is out of control. He is a very self-destructive individual who would get into a knife fight about a parking space. With this type of bully the thing to do is to cut your losses and leave, no matter what type of shame he throws your way. Give him the parking space or the apology he wants and get away from him. He is willing to go way further than you will want to go. Do not go down with him as he continues to destroy his life.

Bully Rule #2 is: Identify the type of bully you are dealing with and gauge your response accordingly.

One last post on this topic follows...

David

=====

The bully on the playground (and other places) – Part 3

Posted on September 5, 2011

How does one resist a bully? Assuming that the bully is not a “professional bully” as described in the previous post, there are several things you can do.

First, develop a thick skin and don’t be too quick to take up an offense. Often the bully is not worth your time, and if you can simply ignore them then this may be the thing to do. Of course, you are entitled to stand up for yourself if you wish, and at times it may be the appropriate thing to do.

Don’t show weakness. That will encourage the bully. If you’re confident in yourself show it. You may want to act naive and show surprise that the bully would say or do such a thing. Sometimes it works to say the bully that what they’re saying or doing is “weird.” No one likes their behavior to be described that way. However, don’t be overly aggressive in return. Your goal is not to escalate things, but to diffuse them.

Gather allies if you need to. Don’t let a bully isolate you. Pull someone over to join you or get your friends to speak up if they are present. Prep them in advance if an encounter is predictable at a business meeting or family event. In the children’s books about bullying that I read this was a favorite strategy. A child being bullied would get friends to plot together to embarrass the bully, and the bully would retreat rapidly. After all, the goal for the bully is to get rid of shame, not increase it.

A very different tact can be to be nice to a bully at a later time, but not in a way that suggests that you are covering. If a bully is in a vulnerable position at some point, show him you’re not in a power struggle with him by giving him a compliment. If you’re good at math and he isn’t, and he gets a hard problem right, give him a compliment with confidence. He’s hungry for a friend actually, and if you’re “big” enough to not get defensive you may actually win a friend, or at least quiet him. He won’t expect such paradoxical behavior from you. Again, this isn’t likely to work with a bully that is hardened and unreachable, but you never know, it can be worth a try in some situations.

Remember, whatever the bully does is about them, not you. We all have weaknesses that others try to exploit from time to time. Know your strengths as a person and use them in life both to stand up for yourself and make friends with others.

One last repeat reminder...if confronted by a “professional bully” do not engage. Leave. It could turn into a costly situation that you will regret. When unsure the best behavior is to be safe rather than sorry.

Bully Rule #3: Be smart in your response to bullies. Know and use your strengths and your allies as needed, and avoid escalation of an unpleasant (or potentially dangerous) situation. Consider a paradoxical response...surprise the bully with something he does not expect. It

could be a bold move to call some friends over to join you or simply acting as if their move is rather odd and puzzling and moving on, not giving them much time or attention.

This is a big topic and I would encourage you to read elsewhere about addressing bullies. Consider these ideas just a start in what you might need to know to be effective—they are not meant to be exhaustive.

Good luck!

David

=====

How to slow downnnnnnnn...

Posted on August 29, 2011

Do you feel like you're in a rush as you read this? It wouldn't be a surprise. Most of us often feel that way.

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that it would probably be helpful to slow your life down a little. Most of us know that it would be good for our hearts and bodies. Taking things a little slower reduces the stress we generate when we get into "rush mode." However, it's easy to talk about slowing down to "smell the roses"—or genuinely taste our food, for that matter—but it's hard to do.

Here's a simple suggestion about how to enjoy life more: ***Listen to your body.***

Does that sound like a weird thing to say? I'm not talking about listening to the sounds your stomach makes when it's hungry—at least not primarily that. I do mean paying attention to the sensations in your body as you go through your day. Does your chest feel tight? Is your gut in a knot? Are you numbed out and not feeling much of anything? These sensations are important information for you.

It's also helpful to notice when you feel "light" in a good way, or energized, and something you're doing is working well for you. Then you can know to do it again later!

If you're in a rush too much of the time paying attention to your body will automatically slow you down. It's not so much "*slow down...slow down...slow down*", like giving yourself marching orders. It's more like..."*this doesn't feel good to my tummy. I need to slow down and feel better. There! That's better.*"

I won't keep writing, because you probably don't have much time. But I do want to put this idea out to you: monitor your body and be friendly to it, and you'll find yourself slowing down to a healthier pace of life...and enjoying things more!

David

=====

Motivation lagging? Self-esteem beaten up?

Posted on August 22, 2011

I spoke to a friend a few minutes ago who is doing his best to date. He spoke of the difficulties he is running into, and I expressed my belief that it takes nerves of steel to date these days and requires a good self esteem not to feel too badly beaten up.

Many of the practices that are common in dating at this time are hard to live with. The worst, and most frequent frustration, is having a date say that you are interesting, attractive, and sexually appealing, followed by no communication afterwards that you exist. No response to a text, email, or phone call, depending on your style of communicating. I hear this all the time. Ouch!

I feel for him, and since motivation to keep trying anything in life is a precious commodity I thought of the video shown below.

Occasionally there comes along a rare person who, by their actions, has essentially written the book about making lemonade out of lemons. Nick Vujicic is just such a person. Born without arms or legs he came to terms with his experience and has made quite a life for himself. You can [read about him on Wikipedia](#).

Below is a video you won't forget. It's about finishing strong in times of difficulty. It's funny, meaningful, and moving. Enjoy!

[Nick Vujicic : Are You Going to Finish Strong](#)

Good luck to all of you out there who are looking for a partner or who need motivation for some other task. Keep looking, and be healthy in your communications!

David

=====

Safety in numbers

Posted on August 15, 2011

Truths, like coins, often have two sides. Just as birds of a feather flock together, so also do opposites attract. Of course, when we speak of one side of the coin we often act and think as if the other side temporarily doesn't exist.

However, balance between the two sides of a truth is often the key. That's the case with today's topic...safety in numbers. When we are bothered by a difficulty it's easy to withdraw and attempt to figure things out all by ourselves. Doing our own thinking—being alone with ourselves, reading, journaling, or doing a spiritual practice such as praying or meditating—these are all important. However, being alone with our thoughts only—to the exclusion of others—rarely provides us with the diversity of thought and experience we need to find genuine wisdom about a problem.

My point? There's safety in numbers when it comes to personal growth. Don't try to do it alone—only. Time spent with others alternating with time alone, like night and day, need to cycle through our lives. Trusted and wise friends are a treasure, and they important for our well-being. I have a simple test I apply to my friendships. I try to surround myself with those who

shine brightest when things are most difficult. That means they'll be there for me when I need them.

We all tend to become like our friends. We don't really have any choice about that. It's just the way we are. The choice we do have is who our friends are. And once you have trustworthy friends, make use of them! As the old saying goes, "Without consultation plans are frustrated, but with many counselors there is success." There's safety in numbers, when those numbers include the right people.

David

=====

Harmony between heart and genitals

Posted on August 8, 2011

What a strange title to this blog post!

There has been much talk in recent years about the mind-body connection, as well as other types of harmony within us. "Splits" between feelings and intellect or between mind and body are frequent topics at psychotherapy conventions, and the whole topic of mindfulness is about healing this split. One important split that also often exists is a split between heart and genital sexual expression.

Anne Stirling Hastings, in her book **Finding sexuality that will satisfy you both** (out of print), states her belief that sex is more about feelings than about sex. I agree with her. It's easy for impersonal sexual arousal to become a pursuit to heal our wounds or provide excitement for a lagging emotional life. In fact, sex addiction itself is typically about impersonal sex, not relational sex.

Dr. Hastings also describes two different kinds of sex...what she calls "sex from the inside-out" and "sex from the outside-in". Sex from the inside-out happens when you know someone, have feelings about them, and your body tells you what it wants to do to their body. This is the "good stuff." Sex from the outside-in is about using objectified others, images, or objects to create sexual arousal because one "gets off" on the high of the experience. It tends to be impersonal in nature, and one's heart, or emotional self, is relatively shut down during the experience.

Sex without relationship can be very arousing, but it typically isn't all that satisfying. It can feel empty to have one's heart disengaged during what is a really intimate physical body experience. Gestalt therapy, which I enjoy, emphasizes the importance of healthy contact with self and others. Many people in the gestalt world define healthy contact differently, of course, but to me having one's heart engaged simultaneously with one's sexual body is a good way to avoid pseudo-emotional contact that happens during impersonal sex.

In fact, in some ways we learn about intimacy and sex at different points in our lives. Much of our learning about intimacy happens during the attachments of early life within our families. When that doesn't happen in a healthy way there are often negative effects in our ability to engage intimately later. Genital sexuality tends to be learned when the hormones start to flow in adolescence. The goal for most of us is to blend the two types of intimacy together into a loving relationship.

We don't tend to see articles about nutrition recommending "junk food" as staple ingredients for a good diet. In the same way "junk sex" leading to pseudo-emotional momentary intimacy

isn't a staple ingredient for a satisfying inner life. Learning to express ourselves emotionally as well as physically is a mark of maturity.

Heart and genitals function well together...they are a great gift when used in harmony.

David

=====

Being open-hearted

Posted on August 1, 2011

It's a temptation to hope that by working on ourselves and growing beyond old hurts we can avoid future sorrow and suffering. And, to some degree, this is true. Personal growth has its benefits...and lots of them.

However, it's also true that as we go through life some degree of sorrow and suffering are important to keep us open-hearted. What do I mean? It's often pain that causes us to grow to begin with, and pain that causes us to learn new lessons and have compassion on others. In some ways pain grounds us and keeps us "alive" in our spirits.

This is a tricky statement to make, of course. Too much sadness or pain can be paralyzing and is not to be sought after. In fact, pain is not to be sought after at all. It will happen by itself. And when it happens, it makes good sense to try to relieve it and feel better. But, nevertheless some degree of ongoing pain is important in our emotional diet.

The result is that we must learn how to live with the presence of sadness and difficulty in our lives, and not wait to "live" until after we get rid of them. Getting rid of sadness and sorrow won't happen in this life without numbing ourselves, which carries its own constellation of problems.

May your pain in life be little, but enough.

David

=====

Confidence and humility...a great pairing

Posted on July 18, 2011

Much of life is about balance, and one of the great balances in life is between the traits of confidence and humility. These two traits are meant to be in a simple, straightforward relationship.

It is critically important that we know our strengths as individuals. This results in confidence and a good self-esteem. After all, every person has a lot to offer both themselves and others. We all have reason for a *healthy* sense of pride and accomplishment.

However, at the same time it is equally important to have an awareness of our weaknesses and limitations. This is the source of our humility and is what keeps us balanced and reasonable in our self-perspective. To be aware of only ones strengths and ignorant of ones weaknesses puts one in danger of arrogance. And of course, to fail to know what one is truly good at can lead to discouragement and misery.

It's simple...make a list of what you are really good at in life and enjoy those gifts well. Develop them and be generous in helping others when you can. And make another list also...a list of your weaknesses and limitations. While some weaknesses can be strengthened, others are simply going to remain. *Work with* your weaknesses and improve the ones that can be changed. And for the ones that won't change, acknowledge your need for others who are strong at your weak points and ask them for their help. It will give them a chance to feel important and needed by you.

In summary, do not be ashamed of your weaknesses. They are important. And be grateful for your strengths, too. It's all good.

David

=====

Motivation and chocolate cake

Posted on July 11, 2011

The more we anticipate public humiliation and guilt, the worse we're likely to do when it comes to self-control. If we focus on the pride that comes from good behavior, we make better choices. By far. Deborah MacInnis, LA Times

This week I read an online article in the LA Times that was wonderful. It was about research indicating that personal self esteem and healthy pride are much stronger motivators for self-control than being shamed into doing the "right thing."

Three groups of people were put alone into a room with a large piece of chocolate cake. One group received no instructions, another group was told to think how *badly* they would feel about themselves if they *ate* the cake, and the third group was instructed to think about how *good* they would feel about themselves if they *refrained* from eating the cake. The instructions about feeling good about oneself was the clear winner. Positive motivation works better than shame.

In other words, think about how good you'll feel about eating well, about getting healthy exercise, and about saving some of your income in the bank. Wow! It can make a difference. Get out there and enjoy feeling good. You'll love the results.

David

=====

Accepting parental limitations...especially when adopted

Posted on June 27, 2011

One of the more difficult tasks in life can be to accept the limitations of our parents or caretakers during childhood *without* making it to be all about ourselves.

It's hard when life provides us with parents or caretakers who are significantly limited... something that's actually not unusual. Whether one's caretaker suffers from medical, psychological, economic, or behavioral problems—or all of these—it's hard to grow up being

ignored, cursed at, hit, or molested. These experiences communicate a powerful “in your face” message that we are not lovable, and that life or God does not consider us valuable. This is hard to overcome, and thus my field of work.

Of course, you are valuable and lovable, and these behaviors never were about you. They were about the person from whom they came and their limitations, whatever they were. There are huge spiritual implications in all of this, of course, and the issue of innocent suffering immediately arises. I’m not going to deal with that here, however—that is for another time.

What I am going to do though is at least put before you the idea that our parents limitations say nothing about us. They are not personal, even though we experience them in the most personal way. And we did not cause them, even if we were difficult children to parent for some reason.

This is especially true for someone who is adopted. Parents who offer up their children for adoption typically do so for good reasons. It is often more about their lack of capacity to be a parent rather than their lack of love for their child. Simply speaking, they feel unable to offer a healthy, loving home to their child. The sense of failure for the parent can be profound, even if they try to deny it to themselves.

I have seen many situations in which I wish more parents had offered their children up for adoption to healthy parents who are unable to have their own children or who simply wanted to adopt. There are many children who would have fared better in healthy adoptive homes than in the homes that hurt them so badly.

In summary, if you were physically, verbally or sexually abused it was not about you...it never was, including if you were adopted and it happened in your adoptive home also. The task for all of us is to acknowledge our parents’ limitations, including morally, without making it to be about any lack of lovability on our part.

In therapy it’s always good news that the negative things that our parents did to us were not about us. We didn’t cause them. It wasn’t our fault. Whew...that’s good to accept!

Of course, the bad news is the same thing, that life was not all about us—not like we would like it to be. In some ways the question is not, “How could this happen to *me*?” The question is rather, “How could this happen to *anyone*?” The inequalities of life are hard at times...and that’s where spirituality comes in. A healthy spiritual life makes a huge difference in ones ability to face an uncertain and erratic future, especially when you’ve had a difficult past. In fact, you may want to do some reading and talk with others to explore the characteristics of a healthy spiritual life, since so many people have spiritual lives that are at times harmful to themselves and others.

Accepting parental or caretaker limitations is difficult, but possible. It can set you free to explore the person that you are—that is, the person your parents were supposed to reflect back to you and help you find.

Do that exploration, though, and you will be surprised by all you find yourself to be. I promise. You *are* more than you know.

David

=====

A good relationship with yourself

Posted on June 20, 2011



One of the defining tenets of gestalt therapy is an emphasis on contact...with yourself, others, your environment, and for many, a Higher Power. The ability to have healthy contact is a prime mark of psychological well-being.

What surprises some people is that one of the most important relationships we have is with ourselves. We have thoughts about ourselves, we have feelings about ourselves, and we talk to ourselves—thus we have a relationship with ourselves. And this relationship is fundamental to all other relationships.

Cheri Huber writes (as I quoted in another post):

*Here is the secret to the whole thing, I think. If I see myself as worthy and lovable, and if I act in the world from that place, people will see and respond accordingly.**

Our relationship with ourselves is also a favorite topic of **Mariah Fenton Gladis** of the Pennsylvania Gestalt Center. She coined the term: **“Arrive already loved”** to describe how we should begin a new relationship—already having a loving relationship with ourselves.

What kind of relationship do you have with yourself? Do you treat yourself in a kind and understanding manner, showing compassion and patience toward yourself? Or do you say harsh things to yourself and call yourself names? How you view yourself and behave toward yourself will make all the difference in your happiness and your relationships with others.

David

*There Is Nothing Wrong with You: Going Beyond Self-Hate, Cheri Huber, Keep It Simple Books, 2001

=====

It's not where you start in life...

Posted on June 13, 2011

...it's where you end up.



These wise words were spoken last night in a workshop I attended. And as soon as I heard them I realized they are true. We have no control about how our lives begin...some people are born into very beneficial circumstances while others are born into difficulties right from the start.

However, life is a journey that can go in all sorts of directions. To make it through life well we all need hope, and a good bit of encouragement to actually take the actions that improve our lives. But if we take those actions we will get results, and our ending can be much better than our beginning might have predicted.

According to the wonderful [Chicken Soup for the Soul](#) series of books, Lucille Ball was advised against going into acting after an audition, Walt Disney was turned down for a job for lack of imagination, and Abraham Lincoln was defeated repeatedly for public office prior to running for President.

When I hear a helpful thought I file it away in my mind to pull out and review as needed. This one is a keeper.

David

=====

A Conversation with One of my “Parts” (Internal Family Systems)

Posted on June 6, 2011

Note: You may want to read the post on [“We all have parts”](#) before reading this one to understand what’s going on here.

I continue to find the Internal Family Systems, or “parts”, way of working to be amazing. Recently I decided to try it out on myself regarding my eating habits. I’m always wanting to lose a few pounds, but find it very hard to do. So, I went “inside” myself and asked, “Is there anyone here who wants me to eat a lot?” Much to my surprise I immediately “heard” a response, “Yes, me, right here!” It came with promptness and clarity.

I waited a few minutes, then asked that part of me, “What is your concern about my eating?” Again, much to my surprise, I got a response that said, “I want you fat and safe.”

Well, I’m not what I would consider “fat”, but I got the message. After a couple of minutes I asked another question: “And what is your concern about me being fat and safe?” The response also came clearly, “Do you remember those pictures your dad had?” I said, “Yes.” Since this part was inside me, I knew he was referring to pictures my dad had in an album from World War II. He had been sent into a concentration camp when the war ended to document what was there.

The album contained picture after picture of piles of dead, emaciated bodies. As I remembered those pictures, my “part” said to me, “See, if you’re fat you’ll never end up in one of those piles.” I was stunned. I would have never connected those pictures with any motivation to eat in my present life. But clearly it was there.

I found those pictures when I was a child, and they obviously scared me and had a lasting impact on me—a kind of small trauma. My thinking and logic about the pictures was childlike also—another sign of trauma. And the most surprising part was that the information had been there all along just for the asking.

I went on to reassure that part of me that we would talk about the people in the pictures in the upcoming weeks, and he would learn that “we” were safe from that happening to “us.” That part of me seemed to calm down some at that point.

Of course, there’s lots more to my eating habits than this, but this did come up first. And there’s more to this story about what helped calm down my “inner kid” and what I learned from this incident. But, this is at least a start in understanding how this type of work occurs. “Parts work” in therapy is not always this simple (or this calm), but it does work.

However, please remember that you don't want to do trauma work on your own. See the post below.

David

=====

The process of healing

Posted on May 30, 2011

Please note: This post contains suggestions for healing from traumatic events. When undertaking work of this sort, there is always the possibility for destabilization of one's emotional state. Trauma work should be done under the supervision of a psychotherapist. Though I have tried to speak about the following healing elements in general terms, indicating that aspects of them can happen in casual relationships and support groups, for any specific individual it can be unsafe to try to deliberately do what I describe here without professional help. Do grow...but do it safely!

For many, the process of healing is confusing, scary, and seemingly out of reach. After watching the healing process in hundreds of lives, I've drawn some conclusions.

Part of what has to happen in recovery from trauma has to happen within the person. Trauma treatment for the past 20 years has included such wonderful contributions as **EMDR**, and more recently, an emphasis on mindfulness, **Internal Family Systems Therapy**, and neuroscience. All of these can help.

However, part of what needs to happen in trauma recovery is often interpersonal, particularly when the trauma happens in childhood. After all, many of the traumas themselves are interpersonal, such as sexual abuse. As a result, the healing will have significantly interpersonal elements also.

Here is a rough outline of the interpersonal side of the healing process as I have observed it. The format in which this happens can vary widely, but these elements seem to be included in some way.

1. The person is able to identify and acknowledge in some way that a trauma actually happened.
 - Ideally it is safe enough to remember the trauma without excessively destabilizing the person. Developing an understanding of emotion management skills and some perspective on how the nervous system responds to trauma can help. Timing is also important, and the process shouldn't be rushed.
 - Also, having a healthy spiritual connection to a higher power can help, along with an understanding about the nature of suffering in humankind. This can take some time to develop also, but need not take "forever".
2. The person is able to feel their feelings in their body (enough) to express them to others in a context where that is expected. A workshop about healing is a perfect place, or a group therapy. It can also happen in individual therapy, in a variety of support groups, and within friendships.
 - An important aspect of this is the sense that those who hear are not overwhelmed by what they hear—that the person's experience does not drive others away. This

is one reason why this often happens better in a group with a well-trained leader. In a group there will always be those who understand.

- A visceral expression of emotion is also important...whether is is crying or anger. Art can be useful, or role plays that express the emotions in safe ways.
3. Support is expressed by the group. Acknowledgement that they, too, have experienced something similar, or understand the person's pain and fear, is important. Expressions of sadness and compassion about what happened to the person help. Hugs, eye contact as feelings are expressed, and a sense of not being alone in the experience are all important.
 4. Part of the message a trauma survivor needs to hear is that they were not responsible for the trauma happening. This is especially true in cases of neglect and abuse, where the victim is so prone to blame themselves. In other cases where they somehow participated in bringing about the trauma (i.e., an adult driving unsafely) it is acknowledged that it is a common thing that happens, and that they are not especially "bad" because they had a traumatic outcome from their error that others have not experienced.
 5. In any case the compassion and support of the group must be received by the person in order to be effective. A deliberate awareness of the sincerity of the group and direct eye contact is important. The love and support must be "let in" by the person. Again, hugs and safe touch can be important, if the person is comfortable receiving them.

Several "applications" of this can make a huge difference in life-altering traumatic experiences. I have occasionally had clients who have simply been unable to feel the old feelings of shame and depression after just one experience of this type of work—particularly when done in a workshop. One experience of healing will not "fix" a childhood, of course, but the elements included here can offer real progress.

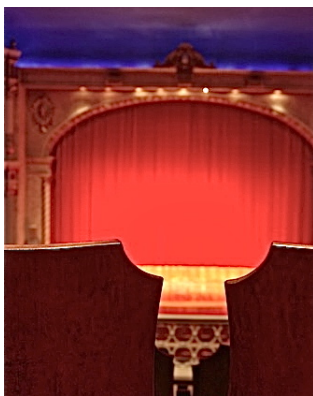
Whether you experience the elements listed above in a workshop or some other setting, you'll find help in addressing traumatic experiences. Remember, what is described above does not replace individual work with a therapist, and must be done in a safe manner to prevent yourself from becoming overwhelmed and potentially harmful to yourself. Healing is not out of reach, but it takes courage, perseverance, and a reasonable approach.

David

=====

Having a life

Posted on May 23, 2011



This past weekend I attended a reception for potential volunteers at a local community theater in my town. I was warmly welcomed and enjoyed the evening immensely. Much to my surprise I came away considering taking a beginners class in acting. It was clearly something I had not expected.

My plan for attending the reception had been to learn how I might occasionally volunteer to build sets after work. Some simple "hammer and paint" activity would add a welcome contrast to my days at the office. Actually, I still plan on doing that, but I may do the acting class also.

When it comes to “having a life”, contrast and variety are keys to enjoyment. They are also important for our mental health. Years ago I had a friend who called her weekends her “days of contrast activity.” If she had been outside most of the week, she was less active on the weekend. If she had been alone a lot, she was particularly social.

And speaking of being social, having an active and varied life will certainly make you more socially attractive to others. I often tell my clients that if you want to share your life with someone else, it presumes that you *have* one. Otherwise, you’re not bringing much to the table for the other person.

We all have more personality traits than will ever make it to the surface of our daily lives. It’s fun to explore...ourselves. Try out some new activities and interests just like you’d try on clothes in a store. See if they fit.

After all, opening windows occasionally to allow fresh air in your home is a great way to keep it healthy and pleasant inside. Try it with your schedule—and leave a public comment (or a private message to me [here](#)) if you have success. I’d love to know.

David

=====

Better the therapist than the lawyer...

Posted on May 18, 2011

Stories swept media around the world this week reporting the arrest of International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn on charges of sexually assaulting a hotel housekeeper. These reports were followed in short order by acknowledgments by Arnold Schwarzenegger that he fathered a child with a domestic servant 10 years ago while married to Maria Shriver.

This type of story has become familiar to the American public in recent years. Whether it’s Bill Clinton, Tiger Woods, John Edwards, or Silvio Berlusconi (the embattled Prime Minister of Italy who is currently accused of hiring an underage prostitute), our leaders have been the subject of accusations regarding their sexual behavior that have been very costly to them. Not all accusations will be true, of course, but many are.

Whether some of these individuals highlighted by the media suffer from sexual addiction is not really our business. What is our business, though, is looking after our own lives.

Help is available for all sorts of human problems, including sexual addiction. My own practice as a psychologist focuses on treating this damaging addiction. Addicts are not responsible for developing an addiction...that is the result of years of anxiety, trauma, and loneliness, as well as a myriad of other causes. What addicts are responsible for is to get help.

Just this morning I was in a meeting with other therapists when one of them commented how much better it would have been for the men we read about to have spent their money on therapists to reduce their distress rather than on lawyers to manage the chaos caused by their behaviors.

It’s an old saying that, “A stitch in time saves nine.” If you are suffering from out of control sexual behavior...make the call. Get a qualified therapist. The Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health, the professional organization for the treatment of sex addiction, has a member

directory of providers as does IITAP.com, another organization of therapists who treat sex addiction. Check them out.

Now.

David

=====

Are you quirky?

Posted on April 30, 2011

The short answer is “yes.” *All* of us are quirky. And that doesn’t mean weird—just a little unique. Kim John Payne, in his delightful book [Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids](#), addresses this issue as he attempts to calm worried parents. He claims that all children are quirky, and that parents shouldn’t be in a rush to get concerned when their children display unexplainable, odd, yet harmless preferences.

That’s good news for all of us, because if all children are quirky, then we adults—who grow out of the same genetic stock—are bound to be quirky also. You see, not every eccentricity matters. In fact, it can be helpful to be eccentric. Let me explain.

I once heard a pastor talk about a business executive who came to him shortly before retiring. The executive asked for help in becoming eccentric. Bemused, the pastor asked him about the source of his concern. The businessman explained that it was his observation that others seemed to be remembered for their eccentricities when they died—that people often spoke fondly of their uniquenesses and oddities. He went on to say that he feared he was such a conventional person that when he died his grandchildren would have nothing to remember about him.

We all want to be remembered...and we don’t want to wait until we die for that to happen. Do you have quirks? It’s okay. Enjoy them unless they do damage to you or someone else. Be yourself out loud in your own quirky, lovable way. Clones are for the biology research labs...not real life.

David

Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids, Kim John Payne and Lisa M. Ross, Ballantine Books, 2010

=====

When I feel the wind blowing on my face...

Posted on April 26, 2011



When I feel the wind blowing on my face, I experience not only the wind, I experience my face.

As I have said elsewhere, genuinely knowing ourselves includes experiencing ourselves at a visceral, feeling level in our bodies. This is how much of the first part of the gestalt **Cycle of Awareness and Contact** happens. The question arises, of course, about how to experience ourselves in this way.

Actually, the answer is rather simple. Pay attention to your body as it comes in contact with your world—both inner and outer—and you will learn a lot about yourself.

We live in constant contact with both the world around us and our internal world. As a result, the interface between us and the world has two sides: us (in all our many parts) and the world.

When we feel the wind blowing on our face we

experience not only the wind, but the sensations on our face caused by the wind. There is a “face” side of things. So when you are with a friend, pay attention not only to your friend, but what you feel in your body when you are with your friend.

Paying attention to yourself in this way is part of a practice called mindfulness. It has to do with being observant about yourself in various situations. For example, what do you feel in your body when you sit down at your desk, say hello to a new neighbor, or go running? How does your body respond when you eat certain foods or buy new shoes? You can learn a lot about what “works” for you when you’re mindful regarding your body throughout your day.

Feeling in your body involves actual physical sensations...tightness, warmth, or quivering, for example. After you identify the physical part of things, find a feeling word that seems to go with the sensation, such as happy, sad, upset, or tired. If you do this you will get a better sense of what you feel. If you always feel tired and listless around a particular friend, that could lead to a significant insight about how you experience your friend. Or if your body becomes energized when talking about gardening, you may have across some helpful information about what you like.

Whole books have been written about this topic. Author Babette Rothschild, in her book about safe trauma recovery, has an excellent chapter about the surprising and useful things you can learn about yourself in this way. It’s well worth reading.

Of course, don’t be surprised if awareness leads to change. When done in this way, it just might!

David

=====

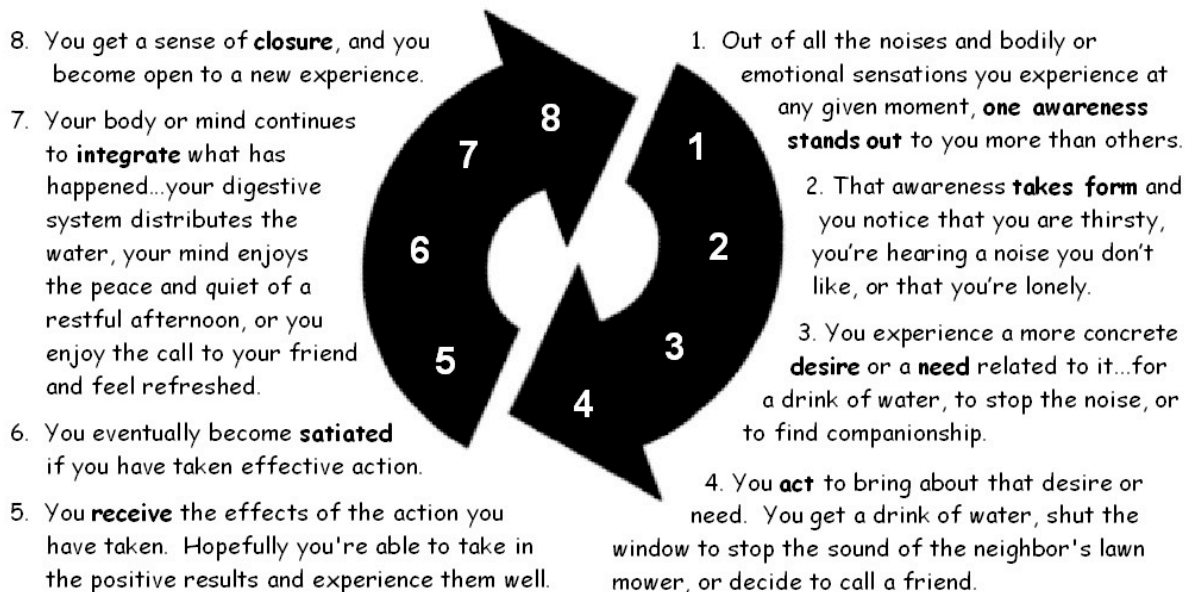
Cycle of Awareness and Contact

Posted on April 24, 2011

In Gestalt therapy the *Cycle of Awareness and Contact* is concerned with our ability to meet our needs. *Awareness* has to do with knowing what our desires and needs are, and *contact* has to do with taking actions to meet those desires and needs. This cycle is made up of several different steps, and they are explained below in a simplified, non-technical manner. It is important to understand this cycle to skillfully find satisfaction and happiness.

This cycle goes by a variety of names in different books. It is also known as the Hunger/Satiation cycle or the Contact/Withdrawal cycle. For our purposes here we describe what happens when it works well. We'll talk about problems that can arise in other posts.

The first three steps below have to do with awareness: out of all the noises, sights, emotions and bodily feelings of a given moment something forces its way to our attention. The sensations gradually get clearer and we notice that we are hungry or are hearing a noise we do (or don't) like, etc. This in turn evolves into an awareness of some concrete desire or need. (See examples in the diagram below—note that the text goes clockwise around the arrows.)



Awareness is an active process that requires practice and skill, and performing this part of the cycle successfully is very important to our happiness. After all, how often do we labor for that which doesn't satisfy? Fortunately, a big part of therapy is the gradual learning of what we require for our happiness.

If the process of awareness is followed by action, we at least have a shot at getting what we need. Circumstances can get in the way of course. However, even superficially "getting" is not enough—we must actively *receive* and *integrate* the results *into* our lives to get the actual benefits.

When we finally receive enough of what we really need we feel satisfied. Eventually the original desire will fade from your awareness, only to be followed by some other awareness related to something else.

These cycles can be short or long in duration. One can feel thirsty and be satisfied very quickly, or be aware of a desire for further education, which may involve quite a long cycle of awareness and contact.

Developing our *awareness skills* and our *contact skills* will improve our lives. Therapy, personal growth books, and workshops can all help, as well as lots of other activities. So dive in and enjoy—it's worth it.

We'll also discuss some of those skills here.

David

=====

The need to be understood

Posted on April 20, 2011

"I just don't understand why I do that!" is a common thought we have after we eat that extra doughnut, have a silly fight with our spouse, or yet again drink too much at a party.

The need to be understood stands right next to our need to belong. They go together. We want to understand ourselves and we want to know that others "get" us and are not put off by who they see. We all need compassion about our faults and a sense that others understand and experience us as like themselves—in an okay way.

However, this requires that we hang out around others who tend to be understanding about human nature and who are relatively nonjudgmental in their approach to life. Friends who are quick to judge others usually don't help us feel good about ourselves. Less judgmental friends, however, can be quite comforting.

Of course, it also helps if we aren't judgmental toward ourselves, though we do need to be honest about our behaviors when they are destructive. It's hard when you judge yourself to open yourself up to others.

Choose your friends wisely. We have no choice but to be influenced by those we spend time with. The choice we have is who we spend time with. Friends who understand much about human nature can be rare to find, but they are worth the hunt, and they will be healing in our lives.

David

=====

Being enough

Posted on April 19, 2011

You are now, and always have been, enough.

I almost always say certain things to my clients during their time with me. One of them is the statement above. When people come to see me they usually want to change. However, change can be tricky, because some folks believe that changing means repudiating the person they have been.

That's not the way it is. Therapy is not about becoming a new person, it is about learning to be *successfully* the person you have always been. Many behaviors may need to be altered, as well as thoughts and emotions. But change who you really are? *No*. You're already a worthwhile person. Sure, you have your flaws, but your basic make-up is a wonder to behold, right now.

In *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, a delightful book about spiritual growth, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham quote a wise Jewish teacher in one of their very human illustrations: Rabbi Zuysa said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zuysa?'"

The rabbi had it right. Our responsibility is to be ourselves. Or, as Cheri Huber, a teacher from a very different tradition, says:

Here is the secret to the whole thing, I think. If I see myself as worthy and lovable, and if I act in the world from that place, people will see and respond accordingly.

Becoming a new person is not our goal. Our purpose is to learn who it is we've actually been all these years and do a good job at being that person.

David

The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, Bantam, 1993.

There Is Nothing Wrong with You: Going Beyond Self-Hate, Cheri Huber, Keep It Simple Books, 2001.

=====

We all have "parts" (Internal Family Systems)

Posted on April 19, 2011



One of the most useful and true-to-life theories I have found in psychotherapy is something called *Internal Family Systems* developed by Richard Schwartz, Ph.D.. Simply put, it is this:

1. We all have characteristic feelings and thoughts within us that act in an enduring manner. "Part of me wants to go out tonight, but part of me hates going to parties." These aspects of our personalities act as "sub-personalities" of a sort.
2. We can't help but have relationships with these parts. "I hate the part of me that binges on food. I just can't stop eating."

3. Three kinds of parts come into play during therapy:
 - Some parts carry memories of hurts, and they suffer great pain. We try to keep a distance from these part so we don't feel the pain they carry. They are called *Exiles* because we attempt to send them away.
 - Other parts try to keep the Exiles from disrupting our lives by preventing us from having feelings or by being our task masters and organizers. "You've got to lose weight!" "Don't let anyone get angry at you." "Don't think about what happened with that person." They are called *Protectors* or *Managers*.
 - A third type of part is a specialized kind of Protector that has the role of trying to calm down Exiles when they are triggered and the Protectors can't keep things under control. They are called *Firefighters*. They often use compulsive/addictive behaviors as their "water" to put out emotional fires.
4. The parts always mean well. In fact, each of them is doing the best they can to keep you happy...it's just that they see things from a very limited perspective, much like a child who offers a simplistic solution to a problem.
5. You also have a *Self*, a different level of entity than the parts. Your self is a spiritual being who is more mature than any of the parts and calmer. It is your Self that needs to calm and help the parts be more adaptive in their responses.
6. Therapy involves working with these parts, essentially building a coalition among them. It is similar to the work done in Family Systems therapy, thus the name Internal Family Systems.
7. This work does not pathologize people...it is kind, effective, and creative.

I won't go into this any more at the present time, but from time to time I will write other entries related to it. For the time being I suggest you read an article or two if you are interested. Click on either of them below or go to the website of Internal Family Systems at ifs-institute.com have a look around.

Wikipedia also has a good article at: https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Internal_Family_Systems_Model

David

=====

Attending workshops

Posted on April 18, 2011

I've attended numerous personal growth workshops in my life and have typically enjoyed them. In fact, some of them have changed my life. This has been especially true if they were interactive or "experiential" workshops rather than primarily lecture-style.

As an effective workshop comes to an end, however, I've often noticed that a common topic of conversation centers around the difficulty of re-entering "the real world." Some people also actually seem to feel ashamed for having needed the workshop, as if it is a second class place compared to the healthier "real world."

I take exception to this. People gather for all sorts of reasons, whether it is to play sports or learn about gardening. When people join together to improve their lives it's an interesting and legitimate activity. One's experience at a workshop is as much a part of the real world as playing football...just a very *good* part of it.

We all want to be known and understood. Unfortunately, it's difficult to make connections with others and share about the deeper aspects of our lives in the course of daily life. An interactive personal growth workshop—if it is skillfully designed and carried out—is a great place for that to happen. It can help us satisfy our yearning to be fully enjoyed for who we are. Also, people we meet in those situations are often like-minded people who make good friends. We may get lucky and come home with a new friend.

I encourage my clients to take part in a variety of growth producing experiences whenever they find them. I encourage them to choose carefully, because poorly run workshops can be hurtful, but I do encourage them to choose. We all need effective doses of healthy interpersonal interaction. And since many of our wounds in life are social in origin, it makes sense that part of the healing is going to be social also. That has become clear in recent years as we have grown to understand more about brain science.

One last point: experiential workshops help us to develop contact skills that make us more effective with opportunities we run into “back home.” Being *skillful* in cultivating relationships is important to our overall well-being and happiness. We all have to create a little bit of “workshop” in our daily lives to get along.

David

=====

Suffocating yourself with safety

Posted on April 17, 2011

Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is a daring adventure or nothing at all. Helen Keller

One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time. Andre Gide

The beginning of the adventure of finding yourself is to lose your way. Joseph Campbell

There's almost no comment needed after these remarkable quotes. Most of us already know it's impossible to live without some risk, since it's also risky to do “nothing” in life. We must be at least a little bit active or die—even eating runs the risk of food poisoning. However, that doesn't mean that taking *meaningful* risks is easy.

Risk requires courage, especially in the emotional realm. And while it's true that our past experiences ARE in the past, our feelings about them are often in the present and can pose quite a problem. Feelings about past unhappy experiences can haunt us and prevent us from both adventure and reward. It takes some courage to face the past and overcome.

Ask yourself this question: Am I suffocating myself with safety, or am I keeping my “risk muscles” in good shape?

David

=====

Find your missing parts

Posted on April 17, 2011



We often form relationships with others who seem to contain our “missing parts.” By that I mean our sense of humor if we’re not funny or our outspokenness if we’re shy. This is a basic principle of Imago Therapy, as popularized by marriage therapy guru Harville Hendrix.

However, as the theory goes, we become unhappy because being with someone who has our missing pieces doesn’t do for us what we hoped. We don’t seem to be able to take that missing piece and incorporate it into our own lives, or what seemed to be a “match” ended up being a “mismatch.” The introvert marries an extrovert and feels left behind as

she walks off at a party to meet new people and leaves him behind.

The truth of the matter is that typically our parts *aren’t* missing. We’re just not in touch with them. Don’t try to substitute someone else’s humor for yours. You have your own brand of humor—look inside and let it shine. Often your gut will tell you what you want to say while your head is awash with “socially correct” but boring possibilities.

You are more than you think in any way that really matters. Give yourself a try!

David

=====

Give as an adult, receive as a child

Posted on April 12, 2011



This principle may be one of the most useful insights I know. In his wonderful book Tuesdays with Morrie, Mitch Albom describes how Morrie Schwartz, a past college professor becoming incapacitated from Lou Gehrig's Disease (ALS), taught him this valuable lesson.

One day this well-loved professor asked Mitch to adjust his glasses because he could no longer do so. Mitch did, then asked his friend how he dealt with having to receive so much help from others, since Morrie was a person who so characteristically gave to his students.

Morrie answered that when he finally recognized that his helpers understood his condition and really didn't mind helping, he was able to enjoy the attention. He went on to say that none of us gets all our needs met when we are children, and part of us still longs for nurture and attention in a very childlike way. Mitch wrote that "Morrie had found the secret of giving as an adult and receiving as a child."

As mentioned elsewhere in this blog, "receiving well" is important. And being able to receive directly to the childlike part of all of us is even more important. It will enable us to experience a deep level of satisfaction and a growing sense of maturity as individuals. Morrie, the ever-giving professor who gave as a mature adult to so many people—even when increasingly disabled—was able to turn on a dime and receive like a child when the opportunity arose.

Each of us needs to make friends with the young-feeling parts of us and actively allow them to enjoy gifts in word or deed—whether from a friend or simply the opportunity to enjoy a ice cream cone on a hot day.

Tuesdays with Morrie, by Mitch Albom, Random House, 1997.

David

=====

The importance of receiving well

Posted on April 7, 2011



Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it. Rumi

One of the basic life skills that we often need to improve is the *active* process of “receiving well.”

At first it can seem a bit silly to be concerned about receiving. Aren’t we all eager to have gifts provided to us, whether love, compliments, or a new sweater? Actually, not.

In my therapy office *receiving* is an important emphasis. How often do we tell someone who compliments us that they are wrong...that we don’t actually deserve the compliment? In many cases we discard their gift right in front of them. When we are fortunate enough to identify what we need in life and do the work to obtain it, we still have one more active step to take. And that is to actively receive what we have worked so hard to obtain. Why the word active? Because receiving well involves opening ourselves up to another person or group, and acknowledging to ourselves their good will, intent, and efforts in giving us some gift, whether it is a birthday present, a pat on the back, or a compliment on our choice of wardrobe.

In fact, when someone gives me a gift I want to make them feel like a hero. I want to encourage that behavior! I thank them and tell them, if it is true, that they made my whole day. That is my gift back to them.

So, when someone lets you into traffic or tells you they think you are smart, receive their gift well. Take in the good will. And when you open a present, think of the effort it took for the giver to decide what you might like, find the gift, and wrap it. Watch them as they look at you intently, hoping to see a smile on your face as you unwrap the present. Your life will be enriched and your mood lifted.

One last word, make it a point to receive from nature also...the goodness in the beauty of a flower or sunset. And when you eat a delicious meal, receive the food well...take it in and taste it and enjoy it. You won’t be sorry.

David

=====

The well that poisoned you...

Posted on April 7, 2011

One of my favorite, simple sayings is this: Do not go back to the well that poisoned you to look for healing waters.

By this I refer to how many times we go back to the families who hurt us, or people who are like them, to try to find healing for the hurts they inflicted. Of course, people change and reconciliations occur, which is a wonderful thing. But when this does not happen, and wounds continue to be inflicted, it is important to look to healthy people to have healthy experiences. To do this we will have to accept that we have a tendency to feel most comfortable around people whose interpersonal style is familiar. However, it is healthier people who are more likely to offer love, appreciation, and a positive response.

Encourage yourself to explore relationships with healthy people. It may take a while to learn to recognize actual health, but when we are successful in doing so we will enjoy the results.

David

=====

Thoughts in our minds, feelings in our bodies

Posted on April 5, 2011

Many of us do not realize that while we have our thoughts in our minds, we experience our feelings in our bodies. What do I mean by that? Simply that our experience of our feelings is typically felt viscerally in our bodies...in the knot in our stomach, or the tightness in our chest, or in the relaxed happiness of our smile.

When we go to a movie theater we don't look at the projector to see what is going on in the movie. We look at the screen. Even though the movie originates in the projector, it is played out on the screen. In some ways our bodies are the screen for our feelings. It is by paying attention there that we will understand what we are feeling.

Being clear about *what* you feel may help you to know *why* you are feeling it.

David