

Pathways

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When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness.

Joseph Campbell

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Comparisons

I suppose that over the last few months, I have done a lot of comparison-making. Retiring from a career is no small event in life. I have compared the outcome of my career with others I have known. I have compared my abilities as a father, a son, a scholar, a teacher, a martial artist and a poet. So why bother? Why would I do all of that at this particular threshold in life?

I suspect that one of the reasons we look at ourselves is because that inner critic of ours can always find ways of telling us we're not good enough.

So who is your inner critic? Who is **YOUR** Gremlin? From whence does he or she draw power?

By way of introduction, our Gremlins are old, they have been with us since childhood. We build a Gremlin character to keep us safe and secure, and also by default...small.

As children we learn that the world does not always place nicely, and we learn fear. We learn that we do not control all the outcomes in our world. We learn that we don't always get what we think we want and that in some ways we are seemingly powerless to change the outcome. We learn these lessons in so many different ways and places, but it doesn't really matter how we get there, the Gremlin knows. The Gremlin knows every weakness, every fear, every doubt and can act in incredibly subtle ways to protect us from pain and keep us safe and small.

The tricky part is that our Gremlins know how to play chess better than we do, because they always know the next move we are going to make.

So what to do?

If we take a lesson from last month's article about gratitude, I can be grateful for my Gremlin. After all, my Gremlin acts only to protect me from the perceived threat of harm.

The problem is that my Gremlin has the eyes of a child, not the eyes of a man who has lived a life. Sometimes my Gremlin simply gets in the way, even in very subtle ways.

Comparison is one of those ways in which my Gremlin can reinforce the message that I am not good enough. After all, my Gremlin knows every perceived failure I ever made, every supposed weakness or mistake. So we compare ourselves to others and the Gremlin makes sure that someone comes up short. Curiously, even now, I hear the voice in the background and can laugh at it...“After all Chris, you are short”.

Implication? I am not tall enough. For what? It's a very old Gremlin message that lost its power years ago. So I laugh...the message no longer holds meaning.

So what is all this comparison stuff anyway? What is the real hidden message? No matter how good I get at something, my Gremlin will find a way of telling me it's not good enough. For who? For what? When did I learn that?

The real message is clear enough: We are not perfect.

Of course we are not. So what?

Oh that's sneaky....what if we were perfect exactly as we are? What does that do to the message?

What is the benefit that I draw from clinging to my perceptions of not be-

More comparisons

ing good enough? Or perfect?

Suppose I quit making comparisons with what isn't me, and just live full out, living in this moment just because it is? What then?

The difficult part of all of this is that by making a comparison at all, I am making the unfounded assumption that I am all-seeing. What hubris!

When I compare myself to someone who is seemingly better (or worse) at something than me, what am I really saying? The not-so-obvious assumption is that I think that I know everything that there is to know about the point of comparison.

Really?

Well, actually, yes. Look at it for a moment though. What do I really know? Let's say I know it takes me effort to learn something. For someone else it seemingly comes easily. But does it really? I can only see my perception of a surface phenomenon. I know nothing of the inner workings that lead to the result that I observe in someone else. I am reminded of the story of the two martial artists.

One of two friends, who trained together since they were children, seemingly struggled with every move. He always felt clumsy, awkward and untalented. Sometimes his classmates even made fun of him. His friend seemed always graceful, intuitive even, and was unbeatable in competition. They trained together for years. As the years passed, they grew in skill, but at different rates.

Eventually, the champion retired from competition with a wall full of medals and trophies, while his friend

had nothing similar to show for all the years. He still felt that he was not as good as his friend who had all the accolades of tournament.

An interesting thing then came to pass. When they both had sons of their own, it was the champion who realized that he did not know how to teach, and that *in his eyes*, it was his seemingly clumsy friend who was the master of the art, because he knew what he was doing.

From the perspective of the champion, although he intuitively knew how and when to move, his friend knew not only how, what and when to move, he also knew why to move. From the perspective of the champion, his friend had learned by making every mistake in the book, so he truly understood what each move meant.

The friends realized that the comparisons that they had made to each other for years were fruitless.

Their gifts were not the same, neither were their experiences of life. Each had a wonderful gift to offer.

There is another part to all of this.

I have spent three decades teaching and learning. I can compare myself to my mentors and say that I am not as good as a teacher. But what do I know?

How many thousands of students have past through my classrooms over the years? What effect did I have in their lives? I have not the slightest clue. For sure, some of my students will tell me of the effect that I have had, but beyond that? Where does the ripple end? How can I possi-

bly know the full outcome of my teaching through the years?

Being a teacher was the greatest gift that the universe gave to me. All I ever wanted was to see my students succeed; to be a force for positive change in their lives. Where then, is the value of comparison with other lives? Why not simply be grateful that I was given an opportunity?

Comparison-making is an invitation to see yourself as lacking, and to examine your supposed inabilities.

Cut yourself some slack!

Each of us is doing the very best we can with what we have. If we could do better, we would, and as we learn, we will.

Each of us is on a path of learning. Each of us walks a truly unique path that no-one else can ever live in the way we live it.

So what's the value in making comparisons? The Gremlin message will always act to prevent me from seeing that I am greater and wiser than I think I am...and that by extension...so are you!

So what does my Gremlin message do to others around me? If I am not good enough, who else ever could be? The inner critic becomes the outer critic.

The Gremlin message prevents me not only from seeing my own potential, but that of those wonderful people around me.

If there is one thing my Gremlin has taught me, it is that everyone I meet has a Gremlin quietly talking to them too. How's the conversation going?

☺

When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everything, that's love.

Sri Nisargadatta

Finding Value

Here's something to consider: What are your life values? I have spent a fair amount of time this past month talking with my clients and friends about what constitutes a Life Value.

In some ways, our life values define the ways in which we play the economics of life. Put another way, it seems to come down to the energetics of cost.

Every choice exacts an energetic cost. That cost is either anabolic and builds you up, or is catabolic and sucks the life right out of you.

To explore what I mean a little more, let me give you an example out of my martial arts coaching world: Let's say I have an athlete who states that his top three values are Judo, Education and Family, in that order (ascending). That means he will compromise Judo for education and education for the needs of his family, *regardless of cost*. Now put them in the other order...that is the value set of an elite athlete. In the second scenario, our athlete will put Judo training above everything else in his life, *regardless of cost*. It is important to recognize that there is no judgment here, no sense of one being right or wrong, simply that these are the values and this is how they play out.

In my Judo example the values were demonstrably objective. Conversely, for another person the values could be things like Faith, Freedom and Love, all of which are more nebulous and more personally subjective. Values are simply that, values; they can be objective or subjective, it matters not in the slightest.

So apply the idea to your own life... when you meditate, or contemplate life, or just sit quietly, you might want to consider what underlies everything you do in life. When you dig down to the core of what motivates you to behave in particular way, in a particular setting...those are

your values. What are your top three values? How do they stack?

So what of it? In what way could this have any importance?

Firstly, our values tend to be an unseen rudder, steering our ship through life. Our values will often underlie the patterns we play out in our lives. Interestingly, our values tell us a lot about how we are doing in life.

Normally in life, when we feel stressed, stuck, challenged or frustrated and when these things begin to manifest physically, it may be because we are compromising a Life Value. The higher the value, the more chronic the symptomatic expression, and sometimes the deeper the root.

So let's take an example...you knew I'd do that, right?

Let's say I have a job, but I keep feeling restless on the job, or I keep feeling unchallenged, or frustrated, or maybe I take longer-than-necessary lunch breaks, or I get headaches, or I am drained and irritable when I get home, or I feel unfulfilled, or demotivated...you get the picture.

They are all symptoms that something is out of place.

What could it be?

For the sake of argument, let's say that my top three values are Creativity, Family and Accomplishment (not necessarily in that order).

Now let's say that I am working at least 60+ hours a week on a project that requires me to work on a lot of weekends in addition to my weekdays, and follow an established set of rigid guidelines, to reach an inflexible deadline and that once this project is done, there is likely to be another one just like it. Let's also say that there are limited prospects for advancement in this position

What is your diagnosis of values being compromised?

Family? Check.

I'm working more than 60+ hours per week and I want more time at home with my loved ones.

Creativity? Maybe. I'm stuck to a rigid set of guidelines, with more of the same on the horizon.

Accomplishment? Maybe. I see similar projects out there, and no hint of them getting me further along in my career.

The degree to which this job challenges your value set is, in part, a function of how you order the values, and how you interpret your job and its prospects.

If at this stage of your life you place your career ahead of your family, you may think that the long-term pay-off is worth the sacrifice now. If you see things the other way around, time with family now is not worth sacrificing for your career, no matter how much money you make. Again, don't read any judgments here, it's not about right or wrong, good or bad, it's about how you choose to play the game, and how your value set will tell you how much you are on track.

So let's now say that all three values in my example are being compromised. My guess is that you and the job will part company pretty soon, depending upon how far down the list security sits for you. If you find that no matter how uncomfortable you feel in your job, you are unwilling to leave it for your family, for the opportunity of advancement, or the chance of using your creative talents, then that tells you that you will want to move security higher in your ranking, because you are unwilling to compromise your perceived security in your current position for any of the other stated values.

Do you begin to see how it works? What you have here then, an incredibly powerful tool for self-discovery.

So what value does this have for you?

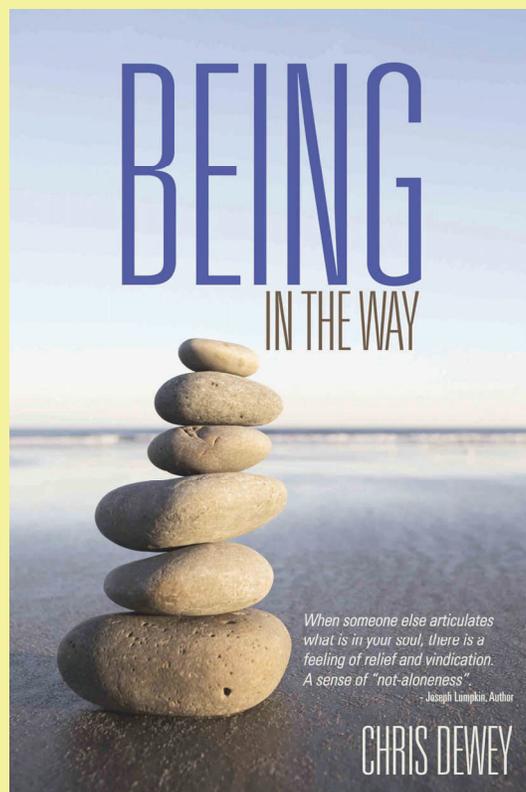
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