So here’s an interesting one. I was involved in a texting exchange the other day and made the comment that awareness precedes understanding, which precedes change. Before we can do anything about anything in life we have to have some experience of it...that is to say we have to sense it in some way or another. For a moment, let us assume that I am not talking about intuitive awareness, I am merely discussing practical everyday awareness. Unless I am aware of the things that impact my existence, there’s not a whole heckuva lot I can do about any of them. For instance, I could be driving down the road paying attention and driving well, but blissfully unaware of the accident that is about to happen. It is only when the events begin to unfold that I begin to react to them. Equally, I might be asymptomatic yet deeply diseased and completely unaware of my medical condition. The point is that in both scenarios I am unlikely to change any of my actions or behaviors until some event causes me to re-evaluate my perceptions of reality.

The intermediate step, that of understanding, can be stunningly quick or protractedly slow. In the scenario involving the driving incident, my understanding of events will trigger rapid reflex actions and change my immediate driving behaviors. In the second scenario, once my condition becomes known to me, understanding may be present, but I might engage in some disbelief, before I begin to take any action. Equally, I might begin to take action right away. Which brings us to...Change.

Here’s the place where the depth of awareness and understanding are revealed. Now here’s the thing. The changes we make in our actions, choices and behaviors, are entirely dependent upon the depth to which we are aware of the implications of our current situation and our understanding of what it means in the moment and in the greater scheme of things. We might be aware that things are not going as swimmingly as we might like and we might also understand that a change in course is desirable. If, however, we are not sufficiently aware or understand enough of the implications we might not make the most desirable changes soon enough.

Curiously, those around us might be more aware, or have a deeper understanding of a given situation, but that will not benefit us one iota, until we can see the thing and understand it at a personal level. All of which brings me to one of my coaching mantras: Each of us is doing the best we can with what we’ve got, all the time. In truth, if any of us could make a better decision, we would, regardless of what anyone around us might see or think.

The thing is our behavioural options will always be governed by our own internal awareness and its accompanying understanding. Put another way...our perceptions of reality govern what we think we know and therefore how we act.

If you want to get philosophical about it we are talking here about the intersections between i) epistemology...what we believe to be true, ii) axiology...what we value, and iii) ontology...how we make connections in life.

Bottom line? We will only engage in change when we see benefit from doing so! The good news is that as awareness and understanding deepen, options emerge that would otherwise not have been possible. ☺
In the last few years I have ample opportunity to examine and face my fears in life. In some ways, I think that fear gets a bad rap. Fear is an unrelenting teacher, if we allow it to be so.

Frank Herbert in the Dune cycle refers to the litany against fear, calling fear ‘the mind killer’. I think that fear also stultifies the heart and can numb us into inaction.

It is a curious observation to me, but I have often been trapped between a pair of opposing fears: Failure and Success. I’ll let you imagine what those two fears can do if given the freedom to run amok. I am telling you this because I believe that every last one of us knows fears of an irrational nature. I’m not talking about the fear of truly impending disaster, like the moments before a seemingly unavoidable accident (now there’s a conundrum for you...unavoidable accident??!).

The point to this is that our fears restrict our perceived options and therefore our ability to engage in the possibilities of Freedom.

I talked about this in the last article a bit, but the choices that we make are based upon what we can see in any moment. If all I can see is the fear that consumes my mind and paralyzes my heart, my choices will be severely limited.

Let’s take a really simple example. I have had test anxiety for as long as I can remember. No matter how much I study, or learn, there is an undercurrent in my mind that tells me that I know nothing and will fail the upcoming test. To look at my GPA over the last four years of school, you might not credit it, but it is true. Now, here’s the thing. That fear can totally paralyze me if I allow it. When I face the fear and do it anyway, I am invariably successful. When I was a young Judo coach, just beginning to travel for the USJA and teach as a clinician at their summer camps, I traveled with Phil Porter’s (the then president of the organization and during those years, one of the nation’s most accomplished coaches and visionaries). I recall the immortal line that he quoted at almost every session: “We are afraid - of everything, all the time. Face the fear and do it anyway.” He was so right.

As a geologist I have known moments of life fear. Often as a geologist I have been out in the field on my own, with no-one to know my exact whereabouts. During those years, I have known moments when I have stared death squarely in the face. Moments when, climbing and working, I have placed myself in extreme jeopardy. In those moments I have know the fear of survival. I remember one event so clearly. I was much younger back then and free-climbing a sheer white rock wall towards the end of a cold day, when the weather turned nasty and clouds descended to envelop me in fog. I was climbing a few hundred feet up a vertical white wall, surrounded by white clouds that made everything wet. Yes, I was scared. Truly, deeply, gut wrenchingly scared. I was miles from the road or my campsite and this was in the time before cell phones...not that it would have helped. No-one would come looking for me, because I had no field assistant, and no-one was expecting me to return to university any time soon.

That fear was real. One false move, one misstep and I would die. Fear of taking exams is something else entirely. Test anxiety is without any true basis in reality. It is, in fact, an outgrowth of internalized messages and errant belief structures. Seeing the fear for what it is, allows me to go forward...to face the fear and do it anyway.

It is all about courage needed to face the next moment... and the next. To face the fear, the pain, the potential loss, the potential rejection...fill in your own fear... and do it anyway. That is, after all, the ONLY path. Do it anyway.

When I was a young man leaving England for the first time to embark upon a new life, I had no idea what lay ahead, but I was not afraid so much as excited at the prospects. At this end of life, starting out anew in a new place, with no contacts is a tad bit scary...the sands of time are seemingly not as replete in the hour glass, and that brings with it a new set of fears. So you see, no matter where we go, or what we do, there will always be fears. Many of them are imagined, not real. Fears of being alone, fears of rejection, fears of success, failure; we all know them. There are, I suspect, few of us who have not known at least one of these fears.

So those same fears can restrict our freedom, narrow our vision, limit our choices. Or, those very same fears can be used to fuel the courage it takes to carpe diem. It seems to me, based upon my own experiences of life, that fear exists to allow us insight into courage.

Courage cannot exist without a pre-existing fear.

“I have fallen and I can’t get up.” We can say that about so many events in life whether it be a physical truth, a career loss, a relationship loss...it really doesn’t matter. What matters is whether you buy into the statement. If you buy into it, you are giving your fears full access to outcomes. If you reject the second clause and replace it with “and I’m looking for a way to get up”, then courage begins to take a hand in the choice of potential outcomes.

Again, I’m not saying it is easy. Facing some of my own demons and fears has taken incredible effort at times, but that’s the overriding point here...Action overcomes fear.

Action is simply the decision to get out of bed and face the day. Action is to recognize that all outcomes are not readily observable from your current perspective. Action is about trusting that “there is more in heaven and earth.”

After all isn’t that what carpe diem means? Another day, another fish? 😊

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“We are afraid - of everything, all the time. Face the fear and do it anyway.”

Frank Herbert

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“Be kind; every [person] you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

Ian Maclaren
Internal voices...what the Buddhists call “the Monkey Mind.” It’s on all the time...right? There is a constant dialog going on in the mind that judges, analyzes, interprets, values, criticizes, evaluates and examines every thought, word and deed all the time. Seemingly, the mind never gets quiet, never still, silent. Even when we sleep the mind sifts and sorts and presents dreams for us to interpret, evaluate and from which we might learn.

So here’s a challenge for you

Like really good music is created by the space between the notes, look for the space between your thoughts.

Initially, the instant you sense a space in your thoughts you will fill it, because it is only too natural to examine, analyze, interpret...you know the drill. It is almost impossible to simply observe, to watch the silence without internal comment.

The moment that you do, however, simply watch the space between your thoughts without rushing in to fill it or make some sort of internal commentary, you have hit gold dust. Even if, for a fleeting moment, you can watch yourself not thinking, you have introduced into your world a whole new aspect of being.

I know it sounds both paradoxical and antithetical...how can I simply observe the space between two thoughts, acknowledging the fact that I am not thinking, without...well, thinking about it?

All I can tell you is that the moment you have done it, you’ll get it. There are, in fact times in my life when words simply do not work...sorry, but there you go, such is life.

From a very yin-yang sort of perspective, observing the space between your thoughts takes a good deal of practice and, at the same time, takes no effort at all. For me, it is as easy as being in nature, waiting for a photograph...just watching nature, not judging or analyzing or interpreting or evaluating, just watching. Another place it happens for me is at a symphony concert when I simply disappear into the music and my mind gives way to my heart...just like it does in nature.

I think that a good deal of it relates to how we are enculturated in the West...we are trained to think, analyze, interpret, judge, and strive almost from day one. Rarely, do we allow ourselves the option (read: freedom) of simply feeling or sensing without judging in some way. In short, from infancy most of us are trained to live in our minds rather than in our guts or hearts. Think about it for a moment...(yeah, I know what I just said)...what resonates more strongly in your experience of being a child: Choice A: “Careful, you’ll hurt yourself.” Choice B: “Look at that flower, how does it make you feel?” Seriously though, how many times are we invited in a direct and overt way during our childhood to feel rather than think? I could be wrong, but my sense of it is that for most of us the journey to emotional awareness and understanding is a solitary path of self-learning. I’m not being critical here, please understand that. I am merely addressing the root so that we can understand the branches.

Our minds are full of thought branches...a tangle within which we can easily become ensnared. Negotiating a path through the mind in like walking through a minefield...or perhaps a ‘mindfield’. Success is guaranteed by stepping between the mines. Calming the monkey mind is ensured by settling between the thoughts.

When I am at my most stressed, my mind takes full rein over my being and diminishes my heart to nothing. I feel lost and my mind reinforces that position by parading before me all my perceived failures and supposed mistakes. As if my mind could tell.

My mind only knows what it thinks it sees, it knows nothing of the events that have occurred outside of my experience, or what potential pathways of choice exist within the current trajectory of my life.

It is precisely in those times, when my mind is raging full tilt into some imagined fear or disaster, that I have learned to step outside of those thoughts and recognize them for the imposters that they are. I’m not saying it is easy, far from it, what I am saying is that it takes a deliberate focus to turn away from my mind and listen to my heart. It may be only a fleeting moment of silence in the mind, but it is the key to facing self and all its attendant delusions and placing the next foot forward in the journey of life.

In summary, observing the space between the thoughts allows the heart and gut to emerge as equal partners with the mind, rather than living entirely in the mind. Possibly, a more unified existence?

Just a thought. ☺

“I neither complain of the past, nor do I fear the future.”

Michel De Montagne
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