There are moments in life when we realize that we are not who we think we are or pretend that we are...even to ourselves. Who are you when you think? Who are you who feels? Who is it that lives in the body? I might suggest to you that you are not your thoughts, nor are you your feelings, nor your body either. Huh?

Have you ever had one of those moments when you witnessed yourself do something?

When I was an emerging martial arts competitor decades ago in Canada, I had the good fortune to have a coach who truly warped my mental construct. He asked me once during a lunchtime class practice if I actually thought it was me who was doing the throw in Judo.

In my naivété, but thinking that I had a true grasp on the matter, I replied that, no, it was a collaboration of effort between my partner and I, a physical alignment of forces. I remember that my instructor sort of smirked at me from the corner, didn’t really offer any sort of agreement and then invited me to consider what it would be like if I could stand at the side of the mat while I was working with my partner and watch myself doing Judo.

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I recall very clearly the Saskatchewan State Championship, when what he described actually happened to me. I was fighting another brown belt (it was after all, the early 1980’s), and I was losing the match. In a moment, during which time seemed to expand to ridiculous lengths, I was watching from the side of the mat, seeing myself fight in slow motion, as a big throw appeared...for my partner...but as my opponent set in for his throw I laid in a choke and when the referee called the half-point score for the throw, I released my grip, stood up and my partner lay unconscious for a few seconds. I won the match, and I watched it all happen as though I was an observer to the process.

It was a rare and pivotal moment in my evolution as a martial artist. Equally, over the years there have been moments as a teacher in the classroom that I have been an observer to myself teaching. Ditto that for being a field geologist, nature photographer, and writer...almost all areas of my life.

In every one of these moments, I have been intimately aware that I was not my actions, my thoughts or my feelings; I was in fact, a witness observing, and at the same time living and experiencing the events. Sometimes then, in sublime moments of assurance and awareness, I am the witness. Most of the time, I am simply the guy who bumbles around in life getting hijacked by my thoughts, worries, fears, feelings, and all their attendant baggage.

I offer not much in the way of explanation to you. I do suggest this though: When we move without judging (or perhaps expecting), we can become the witness.

If being a father, a geologist, martial artist, teacher or coach has taught me anything, it is that when I get out of my own way, amazing things can happen, because I am not judging everything I am doing, I am merely being and witnessing.

We are told by the wise, that any event when performed with purity, can be a meditation, regardless of whether it is an act of prayer or the act of sweeping a floor. Perhaps this is the heart of being...Just something to consider. ☺
Since I am writing for people who live mostly in the Northern Hemisphere, and more particularly in N. America and Europe, the Summer Solstice, which marks the midsummer’s day is about June 21st, this year. For me, in the Rocky Mountains, it is the 20th. For those of you in Europe it will be later.

The Summer Solstice is the day when (from our specific planetary perspective) the sun is overhead at the Tropic of Cancer and we experience the longest day of the year, and by extension, the shortest night. Even at it maximum, however, given our point of observation, the sun’s path in our sky will move back towards an equatorial position and then towards Summer Solstice in the Southern Hemisphere. Only to repeat the cycle next year.

In the Chinese calendar the summer solstice is called Xiazi. Using Yin/Yang theory from China then, the Summer Solstice marks the day of maximum Yang in the Northern Hemisphere. Concurrently, in the Southern Hemisphere it is the Winter Solstice, or day of maximum Yin.

Yin/Yang theory is intimately tied to the progression of day and night, light and dark, solstice and equinox. One always give way to the other, and one cannot exist without the other. From a purely experiential level, there is no light without dark and vice versa.

To every culmination, there is a descent, to every collapse, a rise. To every mountain, a valley. Such is the landscape of life.

The Summer Solstice reminds us that at our height, we will be at the zenith, moving towards decline. Equally, at our lowest of lows we are at the nadir, poised to rise again.

If life shows us anything, it is that we do not remain in one position for long...our fortunes rise and fall. It is a mark of wisdom not to let these cycles affect us too much. No matter how high the high, nor how low the low, neither of them are permanent. I think that this is what Kipling was getting at in his poem “If”.

So there are lessons here if we wish to be open too them. Perhaps the more cycles we have experienced, the more readily we can accept that nothing in our lives is permanent and that most things fall within the realm of Yin and Yang at some level of investigation.

It’s all a matter of scale. By way of example, new cells are being born and are old cells are dying every moment of every day in our bodies and yet at another level of investigation, the moment after we enter the world as a newborn, we are on a cycle of decline towards death. Somewhere along that path we will reach a point of maximum physical development, maximum mental prowess, and so on.

Like I said, it is all a matter of perspective and scale. So where am I going with this? Something we all know: In the center of every perceived failure in life are the seeds of our next perceived success and vice versa. When we get wrapped up in the appearance of perceived failure we might, however, lengthen the ‘dark night of the soul’ because we lack the insight to allow the seeds of our next success to germinate in the soil of our perceived failure.

In like fashion, when we attempt to cling to our successes, glories, triumphs and achievements, we hasten their decline because we are apt to push too hard or cling too tight. It takes wisdom to act, it takes wisdom to rest. It take wisdom to allow things to both grow and in their appointed time, to decline, decay and die.

All of it; the rising, the falling, the cycles of birth and decay follow the principles of Yin and Yang. When we allow it to happen though, we can step aside from the mutual opposition of Yin and Yang, to see the underlying unity, rather than the dualism. On the surface there is not one thing without its opposite. At a deeper level, there is only the unity from which both emerge.

So how does this help me to live my life?

At the most basic level, it invites us to see that “this too shall pass.” At a deeper level it allows us to let go of many of our fears and worries, because no matter how hard we strive, no matter how hard we work or how lazy we get...not one of us is in control of much of anything.

To quote from the Desiderata: “...and whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.” A truly comforting perspective, as we make yet another celestial trip round the sun, as it, together with the rest of our solar system, makes its own trip through space as the galaxy rotates...

“Courage doesn’t always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, ‘I will try again tomorrow.’”

Mary Anne Radmacher
Three words:
- Desire
- Risk
- Trust

Three questions:
- How much do you really want what you say you want in life?
- How much are you willing to risk to get it?
- How much do you trust yourself to accept the outcome? (Including the potential loss of what you say you want).

How we negotiate the territory that defines the Triangle of Opportunity has a lot to do with what we achieve in life and what we face (and what we never choose to face). In short: How we answer these questions says much about how we realize the potential that lies within and the promptings of our hearts that no-one else might ever know.

In the last few years I have seen great loss and great success. I have examined my life, its trajectory and the things that truly define who and what I am.

A casual observer of my life (or perhaps even someone who knows me well) might be critical of some of my choices, such is their freedom, but they are not on the inside looking out.

I have known times of self-doubt and despair in ways that I never imagined possible...and yet at another level I have done all of it with deliberate intent.

When I was twelve I knew I wanted to be a geologist and set my heart upon that course. When I was eighteen I knew I wanted to be a university professor and was ultimately willing to do anything to achieve that goal, including leaving my home, family and friends to begin a new life in a new-found-land, ultimately to end up with a wonderful career in Mississippi.

In my mid-fourties, something else started to exert a force in my being. I had been a marital artist for long enough by that point, to realize something really, really important was missing in my training. I had reached another threshold in my life and I knew that I wanted to learn Oriental Medicine. It took me almost ten years to get to a point where circumstances made it possible to embark on that particular part of the journey.

At every stage in this process, I knew one thing of importance, was willing to follow its promptings and face the consequences. I’m not saying I was wise enough to understand, or even presentient enough to see the potential challenges and losses I might face along the way. I just knew enough at the beginning of each step that the journey was important.

Out of it all I have discovered something that perhaps many of you already know: Any thing you want to achieve is born in the cauldron of self-trust.

Goethe tells us that once we make a deliberate intent that the universe shifts to help us achieve it. Maybe so.

We often put a spin on Goethe and talk about trusting ‘fate’ or the ‘universe’...or whatever, but I don’t think that this is the essential message. I think that the essential message is that we trust ourselves.

There were times during school that I faced moments of self-doubt that were greater than anything I had ever known, I had put everything on the line for the degree...there was no net, if I fell.

Funny thing is that when we believe in ourselves and our own hidden potential (there is more in heaven and earth, Horatio...), opportunities DO emerge, lessons are learned and we emerge from our trials stronger, wiser and perhaps not a little bit more compassionate for the struggles of others.

Ultimately, Plato (quoting Socrates at his trial) is right...an unexamined life is not worth living. Words that sting perhaps.

When you truly know what you want in life and are willing to risk everything you have and are, to get it, and to trust that you can survive (face) the outcome of taking the risk to reach your desires, then you have learned a great lesson about yourself and about life...you have begun to examine your life.

Perhaps, Kipling was right too...if we can face both triumph and tragedy and see them both for the imposters that they are, we have learned something important.

You see, from where I stand right now, it seems to me that it is not about the desires, or even the achievement of the desires. It is the journey to awareness that is important.

My suspicion is that if we have the courage and passion to embrace the Triangle of Opportunity for all it is worth, we may well find the turbo-booster of learning what it is to live an examined life. ☺

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"Undertake something difficult; it will do you good. Unless you try to do something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never grow."

_Ronald Osborne_
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