

Living in the gutter – why change is so challenging

"You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment." - Henry David Thoreau

Daily we're bombarded with new books, news, and research about why folks behave irrationally - even when they "know" their behavior is not rational, why affirmations don't lead to change, why change is so difficult when the brain is supposed to be so "plastic," etc. Why is true and lasting change and transformation so challenging? Here's one perspective. See how it works for you.

Visualize the "gutter", the ball return "groove," next to a bowling alley. Assume at one time it was completely flat. Visualize that, with guide barriers on either side to keep it in a straight line on the flat surface, the ball moves from the far end of the alley to the near end where it returns to a ball-holding area. Over minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years, depending on the frequency and intensity of each individual ball return action, see the ball begin to carve out its own pathway, no longer needing any guide barriers to control it. The ball now follows its own self-created pathway – day in and day out, night in and night out, over and over, with never a change in direction. The ball seemingly has a mind of its own.

Think of the initial guide barriers on either side of the "groove" as your parents or primary caregivers, your siblings, relatives, playmates, teachers, clergy, etc. - those who "guided" you from infancy to about the age of seven.

And think of that "groove" as the neurological pathways, neurons, and synapses in your "mind" and your brain – each representing an "habitual ways" of doing, be-ing, and thinking (i.e., self-image, self-concept, and other personal and world related assumptions, premises, expectations, worldviews, beliefs, etc.).

So, now, even with all the neuroscience research touting "brain plasticity," and popular books annotating how irrational we are in spite of our protestations to the contrary, etc. we have a glimpse of why many folks cannot or will not change.

"All appears to change when we change." - Henri-Frédéric Amiel

In order for true, real and lasting change to occur, one of two things has to happen: (1) we have to "sand-paper" down the original grooves and/or (2) create new grooves representing new ways of do-ing, be-ing, thinking. Either way, both of these tasks require concerted time and effort. And here is why "recidivism" of a sort haunts most folks who want change.

What prevents most folks from carving out new grooves is that they're wired to hang on to their original grooves. They are "clinging."

Most folks live in a "closed system" – a loyalty to our own internal reality - resistant to change. We become in the present what we became in the past. In Buddhist terms, we are attached to this inner reality, constantly reconditioning to itself. The brain also continually generates this closed internal representation of our outer world, seeing and relating to it the same way, over and over again, even if, IN REALITY, the outer world is changing. We are stuck in our "grooves." It's an emotional and psychological necessity, survival, for us to keep it the same. "I am this" and "my world is such-and-such."

This orientation to our world is how we were as infants, then children, then as adolescents and now as adults. We are our earliest "grooves" even as adults.

The good news is that this "stability" helped us survive and make sense of our world as infants and children. The bad news is that it locks us into seeing and reacting to our world and experiences in similar

ways over time, i.e., we are hardwired to be resistant to change.

The key to true and lasting change, from the perspective of some psychotherapists, and from a Buddhist perspective, for example, is to open the closed system in such a way that we do not view our self as a calcified, reified structure but rather as a "process" - often why many folks who do deep personal work say they are "works in progress," not as an "entity" or "thing." They no longer need to say "I am this" or "I am that" but see themselves simply as "being" (in the process of sandpapering down the old grooves, and loosening the hard, rigid identification with one's self, i.e., "who I think I am" or "who I take myself to be.") and creating new grooves.

An important point here is that such change most often cannot be done through the mind, i.e., "cognitive" efforts, alone. True change needs to be processed through a conscious mind-body-spirit process - one reason why "positive thinking"-type efforts seldom produce true, lasting change and transformation. The mind alone cannot "open" its own closed system.

Think of the moment you wake up. That split moment. When perhaps you hear the birds communing, or notice the sky, or hear the rain, or really smell the coffee - that split moment before "thinking" kicks in. That's the place where true change and transformation takes place. That's the place where we are an "open system." Here we are not conditioned by past experiences. We are completely present to our experience, right here and right now. No brain to interrupt, to interpret, to link our present moment to past experience. Once "thinking" begins, almost all (change) bets are off.

As soon as we allow this moment to become influenced by memory, conditioning, and past experience we slide right into the old "grooves" and are taken over by past perceptions, judgments, thoughts, beliefs, etc. - back to the old ways of "I am this" and "I am that." We futurize our past. Our history take over. Our present is experienced through our past. We are clinging.

As soon as we begin "thinking," then all the old feeling and emotional patterns related to our thoughts also arise. The clinging process is mental, cellular, neuronal, emotional, psychological and physiological as all our old patterns, urges, needs and desires arise, often unconsciously - just as the ball habitually returns to its starting place. Clinging that reinforces our closed-system inner reality, our old, habitual self.

"They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself." - Andy Warhol

Clinging is the basis of resistance to change. Clinging is a survival strategy that emanates from deep, deep down in our core. In every "new" situation, we keep "re-birthing" our old, fixed self and in the process our familiar, protective ways of defending our old, familiar, resistant self also arise. This process is our "way of life."

A process that leads one to a conscious, deeper awareness of these dynamics, a process that supports one to move into presence (where identity with "grooves" is non-existent), where there is no need to defend, where there is no attachment to "I am this" or "I am that" is one possible way to experience true and real shift and change. The "mind" alone cannot foster such change and that's one reason we read so many examples of "irrationality."

The challenge is to choose to move away from "things mental and rational" into "things spiritual" (not religious or theological, but spiritual) where we shift from identification and the need to proliferate our conditioned self, but towards an attunement to our self as we are in that moment when we wake up, in that present-time experience, before "I"/"me" kicks in.

True and lasting change is an eminent possibility. But it takes time, consciousness, striving, honesty, steadfastness, courage, strength, will and lots of love and compassion for one's self - qualities that for many in our culture seem to be in short supply.

We can smooth out our old grooves, the "gutter" of our past, the "irrationality," and create new grooves – but just not by 9:00 tomorrow morning - a sad realization for many enmeshed in our microwave-oriented, Twitter-connected, 15-second sound-bite, seeking-immediate-gratification culture.

"It's not that some people have willpower and some don't. It's that some people are ready to change and others are not." - James Gordon, M.D.

So, our \$10 food for thought questions are:

- On a scale of 1-10, what number describes your general feeling of impatience?
- Do you ever reflect on how you came to be who you are, what you think or why you act the way you do? If so, what do you see about yourself? If not, are you curious as to why not?
- Do you feel enslaved by your electronic life? Is this by choice?
- What "old grooves" would you like to sand down and eliminate? What new groove would you like to create? Are there obstacles that prevent you from doing either, or both? How so?
- Do you ever behave "irrationally" – do-ing or be-ing in ways you know you shouldn't? If so, why?
- What of your past do you cling on to? Why?
- Can you envision a world where you feel free in most every moment, where you can let go of notions of how you "should" be and dis-identify with "I am this" or "I am that?," where you're not a fixed entity but a process?

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