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Why You Don't Change (1 of 2)

If your mind is full, you can't learn anything.

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“Only dead fish go with the flow.”

— **Viking Proverb**

Fundamentals of Change

The first determinant of change is whether you want to, and most people don't. But then, most people would not agree on what change is if they thought about it, and most don't think about it.

Two types of change are a change in your environment and a change in yourself. A change in your environment is basically a change in what you perceive. A change in yourself is a change in how you

perceive. With almost no exception, the change people want is a change outside themselves. They want a change in what they perceive, a change of things in their environment.

The most common things we want to change—as should be obvious—are security, affection, and value. Security is often defined in material terms. Affection is what we project as our self-image. And value is the degree to which we appreciate our life. These are things we feel in ourselves and, naturally, we are not willing to change these, instead we want more of them.

It's often said that the only person you can change is yourself. That's rather trite. What does it mean to change yourself? Does it mean creating a change that other people do not participate in? Or is it changing your behavior, how you think, or how you feel?

You're an Onion

Think of yourself as an onion; you have many layers of perception. The outermost layer is what you perceive to exist outside yourself. This is not as clear a boundary as you might believe because you have internalized your environment. You have internalized the value of money as well as standards of social behavior. For the purpose of simplifying, just consider what's outside yourself to be what you can change by emotionless actions: simple acts of will.

What's inside yourself is most easily defined—though not most easily understood—as the part of your experience that you're not aware of or not in control of. Consider these as two aspects of the same thing. It's clear that you can't control what you're unaware of. It's less clear that you're unaware of what you can't control. Perhaps it could be better stated that you're unaware of how to control what you can't control.

There are external events you cannot control that you are aware of. You can't control the weather yet you are aware of the weather. There are many other events going on around us—most in fact—that we're aware of but cannot control. We can only control how they affect us.

Ignore those things over which we have no control and cannot have control. I'm not concerned with material things. Focus on the things we're unaware of that we can't control, like our feelings. Things over which we lack control but might learn how to control. This lack of awareness is in our minds of which we're unaware.

You have many unconscious thoughts and associations of which you're not particularly aware. For example, how you see or feel things is largely unconscious. You see and hear things, certainly, but you rarely exert control over how you see and hear them.

By expanding your awareness you can learn how to gain control over these and other autonomous functions. With practice and effort you gain aptitude, sensitivity, and perception. By stopping your normal modes of thinking you can expand your awareness.

Until you have a feeling, you cannot control how you feel. Feelings “well up” in us, coming into consciousness along the habitual trails of thought which we clear and groom. Greater awareness can

create greater control both because you're more sensitive and because you've decided how to react. You have unconscious and semi-conscious habits. The unconscious habits are things you do automatically. Your semi-conscious habits are things you're inclined to do, but you do with some amount of conscious intent.

Control is Good

There are all kinds of control, some good and some bad. Control can be institutional, paternalistic, environmental, mind control, and self-control. There is stability, balance, evolution, and disaster. In each case achieving a positive result requires control.

Being controlling has a negative connotation because it's often done badly, but making bad decisions and having the ability to make decisions are different. Bad decisions are not made better by abdicating control. Our bodies are precisely controlled. You need precise control just to stay alive. Controlling yourself is necessary, and it's especially important if you're going to change.

Once you get past politics and innuendo, control is the opposite of chaos. Everything in our environment, society, and lives requires balance, and balance requires some kind of control. Chaos is more of a danger than being over-controlling because chaos applied to structure is destructive.

Destruction has its place, such as in recycling, but growth and awareness require organization, and organization requires control. Even letting nature take a constructive course requires control. Change requires a combination of chaos and control.

What You Want

To change yourself is to change what you're aware of and how you control yourself. Those who want change recognize that they'll need to give up existing patterns of control. Giving up control in order to change seems counter-productive, yet it's necessary. Change requires losing some degree of control in order to see things in ways that you don't understand; letting go in order to get a better grip. When it comes to change, most people are tense to the point of rigidity.

We let go of things all the time, but we don't let things get out of control. We stop some aspect of our world and reposition ourselves. We'll put down our pen in order to pick up something else, but we are not relinquishing the authority to write our story. Most of this kind of "letting go" involves taking a small risk for a large gain.

Consider steering your car. You take your hands off the wheel as you turn it, and then you replace them at different points. By using two hands—and only releasing one hand at a time—you retain control. You do lose some control, but the risk is small.

You're supposed to know what to do when novelty appears, and you presume you will. But when change is imminent and we don't know what to do, our tendency is to keep doing what we did before.

I drove to California with a scientist who had just gotten his drivers license. When we got there the road ended at a stop sign and a “T” intersection. Driving now involved something more than the gas pedal and the steering wheel. Something had to change. A new kind of control was needed, but none was forthcoming. The driver simply cranked the wheels without slowing down. We could have flipped over but, luckily, we just flattened a road sign and rolled to a stop on the grass.

Give Over, Not Up

When you reconsider a situation, you give up some of the control that came with your previously held beliefs. You do this because you have the feeling that a better idea is available. There are those funny cases where you let go of one thought and then don’t remember what you were going to think next. Nothing comes to mind. There is simply nothing there.

Then there is the problem of being out of control, losing control of your steering or your life. When you start to skid, you’ve lost the control you thought you had. It’s important to recognize that something new is needed. Unlike steering, there are some things you cannot reach from your old position or through the use of your previous approach.

We sometimes lose our temper or are overwhelmed with emotion, but no one wants to act hysterically. Almost by definition, the results of irrational actions are unpredictable. If it’s necessary to let go, then we’d like to do it without capsizing the boat. And this is the problem: how much letting go is enough?

You’ll engage in all manner of desperate gyrations to regain control. You might be impulsive or violent, or you might be careful and forward thinking. Most of what are considered irrational actions are not irrational, they’re just based on mistaken assumptions. In these cases, real change is imminent and you’re trying to mitigate the risk.

So, if you’re making external changes when you’re in control, and you’re reaching for external control when you’re out of control, when are you open to internal changes? Short of succumbing to bribery, when are you open to changing how you think or feel about some internal matter?

For most people, most of the time, there is little openness to internal change. If I can get a client to accept one new idea, I consider it a major victory. How much of your own basic thinking patterns are open to change?

(to be continued in Part 2)

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