

A Raisin in the Sun

March 11, 2007 by [lifeshifting](#)

“What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?” From “Harlem”, a poem by Langston Hughes (1902-1967)...

Recently, I discovered a wonderful new book called [“Mindfulness and Psychotherapy”](#), edited by Christopher K. Germer, Ronald D. Siegel, and Paul R. Fulton. In this book, perhaps for the first time, fully credentialed clinical psychologists explore the applicability of mindfulness practices derived from Eastern contemplative traditions for the treatment of depression, anxiety, and other serious psychological disorders. Basically, this book tells therapists how, when, and why to use meditation techniques as an adjunct to psychotherapy, something that I’ve been doing for years. As a therapist who has respectfully practiced and studied the healing ways of Eastern, Native American and indigenous cultures for a number of years, it is a revelation to finally see these disparate worlds colliding in a positive, and affirmative manner. I highly recommend this book to anyone whose interests span the chasm between Eastern spirituality and Western psychology.

In the chapter on treating depression, there is a wonderful anecdote about how one therapist used the power of *one single raisin* to break through the diagnostic barrier we so matter-of-factly call “depression”. I loved this story because it perfectly illustrates one of the foundational principles of my “Life-shifting” approach to transformation and self-renewal: *we are not our LABELS*. So much of our self-worth and self-esteem is wrapped up in how we identify ourselves—our titles, our addresses, our resumes, our family ties, even in some cases, our diagnoses! Yet, it is only when we wake up and realize that we are much more than our surface identifications that we become open to possibility and free to choose other options for our lives. The label “depression,” it seems to me, is rapidly becoming one of the most egregious examples of this process of over-identification. In this case, following a tactic openly propagated by pharmaceutical companies, more and more of us are self-identifying as “depressed” and reaching for the pills! Eventually, if big Pharma has its way, we will ALL be diagnosed as depressed and the market for anti-depressants will cover the entire population. Now that is a marketing coup!

But I do digress. Ok, I’ll get off my soapbox now and share the raisin story: a patient comes to a therapist with a rather severe case of depression, that he states has drained him of vitality, happiness, and joy. He says that he has been depressed for years, and knows no other state of being. After a few sessions in which they work to create a sense of relationship and safety, the therapist asks him if he is willing to do an experiment with mindfulness. The patient rather reluctantly agrees, willing to try anything to “get off those drugs”. In the experiment, the therapist has the patient practice ten minutes of silent sitting, focusing on his breath, guiding him into a state of deep relaxation and calm, becoming aware of himself, his surroundings, and especially, the sensations of his physical body. The therapist then takes a single raisin, and asks the patient to put it in his

mouth, to slowly roll the raisin around in his mouth, to feel the sensations in his mouth, and to focus all his attention on the experience of flavor, texture, and movement as he savors the raisin.

After swallowing the raisin (we are assuming here that the patient LIKED raisins!) and bringing the patient back slowly into the room, breathing lightly, and staying relaxed, the therapist asks the patient to describe what happened with the raisin. In recounting the experience, the patient uses words like pleasurable, sensuous, tasty, and delicious. The therapist asks the patient if while he was tasting the raisin he felt depressed. The patient sat back and reflected for a moment and said, of course, he was ALWAYS depressed. Yet, when asked again to truly reflect on those ecstatic moments of raisin heaven, the patient had to admit that the experience of tasting the raisin was one of pleasure, not depression.

This experiment between raisin, therapist and patient probably lasted ten minutes. Fifteen tops. Yet, it changed everything. The patient literally woke up to a new reality: *he was not always depressed*. Depression may have been a good part of his experience, but it was not his whole reality. It was as if the raisin brought in the sun and shined a light on this over-identification with the label, “depressed”. Think about it. We are all unhappy at times, sometimes longer than others. Sometimes we find ourselves in pain and the need for help is real. BUT, the window of possibility, the opening to something else, also ALWAYS exists. We sometimes just need a tiny, wrinkled nugget of golden sunshine to remind us of *who we really are*.

One of the foundational premises of “Mindfulness and Psychotherapy” is that the practice of meditation is designed to bring our experience of ourselves out of our swirling thoughts about the past and the future, and, at least momentarily (and for longer and longer periods as we practice) into the present moment. By sitting quietly, focusing our attention on our breath and the sensations in our body, we become more awake to our *present state of awareness*. In time, we become aware of the transient and chaotic state of our thinking mind, learning to simply observe our thoughts, feelings and sensations as they shift constantly. In this manner, it becomes possible to begin to *detach* from our thoughts and connect to our vital and vibrant core—to momentarily glance through the fogged window of judging and labeling out onto that pristine landscape of joy and self-acceptance. Ultimately, the goal of mindfulness practice is freedom; freedom from our attachments to our thoughts about who and what we think we are...even including, possibly, depression.

So what, who and where are the raisins in your life? Are they golden nuggets of sunlight that serve to remind you of your beautiful, vibrant, life-force? OR are they just dried up grapes—symbols for lost dreams like in the Langston Hughes poem—withering and hardening under the glare of loathsome labels like “depression”. Either way, the “life-shift”, the shift of perspective away from the darkness and out into the light of possibility, is always only a moment away.

You only need to sit still, relax, grab a box of raisins, and breathe...

Happy Munching!!!