

Fear Not Part 2: Mind the Gap

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Well, I guess I'm about twenty years too late to join the hip-hop generation, which is too bad because I really like their attitude. Or should I say 'tude. Wassup? Not much, they might say, we're just chillin.

Chillin. Relaxing. Taking it easy. Taking a breather. They're on to something here.

Yesterday, I left off with a long Sunday morning exhale, trying not to leave you feeling too anxious or worried or stressed out to learn that FEAR is a perfectly normal reaction to the way the world is behaving these days. My key point was this: it is not usually the fear itself that causes us to get all tied up in emotional knots, rather it is our denial of it, and our resistance to it, that brings on strife.

The minute we shift our focus from pushing our fears away towards recognition and acceptance of their absolute normalcy, things start to change. We may find ourselves with a little bit more room to breathe, a little more space for creativity and possibility to emerge. AND THEN IT IS TIME TO CHILL!

I have written here before about the difference between *reacting* and *responding* to life. In a very practical sense the only difference between the two is space, that brief moment of silence, recognition, awareness that occurs when we respond as opposed to that instantaneous, painful—and sometimes hurtful—lurch of reactivity.

Those vibrant young hipsters who would admonish us to “chill” are pointing the way: the key to releasing our fears once we've recognized and accepted their presence is found in that blessed space between awareness and response, what I'll call the gap. And we find our way into this space by “chillin”—stopping to breathe, to get grounded, to relax a bit, to WAIT before acting until we feel centered again.

Reacting to our stressors—be they the purveyors of bad news on CNN, irritating spouses, demanding bosses—with immediate fight/flight agency (remember the last time you flipped the bird to the driver that cut you off!) just reinforces our fearful state. In our reactive mode, we feel the tightness in our chests, the brow furling, the breath becomes short and halting. We may call it an “attack” of anxiety but in truth the attacker is ourselves: we react to our fearful state by reinforcing it.

Of course, all this talk of chillin is easier said than done. Most of us are habituated to react...and react we do. In our rather out-of-whack society in which action is revered and contemplation is considered a waste of time by many, “minding the gap” is an unusual practice. Meditation helps, but for many, meditation is very difficult, if not impossible. I personally prefer yoga.

The gift of yoga is that while it is a meditative practice, with a focus on centering, breathing, and being present, the whole body is engaged. Yoga offers us the opportunity to experience the spaciousness of presence, not just in the mind, but in the muscles, lungs, fingers and toes—where the energy of fear often lingers, coiled, tight and ready to spring. Whether yoga, meditation, or some other practice—playing music, writing poetry, prayer, etc—we all need to find our way to “mind the gap” — to find some space between the notes.

Here’s my summary thought for yesterday and today’s posts. Let’s call it the two-step dance for releasing fear: 1. *recognize and accept*: when your anxiety, stress, worry, and irritation is FEAR in disguise. 2. *Mind the gap*: create space for the feeling, allow it some breathing room. Take that very crucial moment—and **respond** rather than **react**.

So...how you be chillin'?

Dr. J