

Practice, Practice, Practice...

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if you want to get to Carnegie Hall that is! AND if you want to shift your life into a higher gear! Life-Shifting is all about practice and, perhaps more importantly, *practices*.

On the way back from Florida I started thinking about the next crucial step in the process of Life-Shifting. After the identity crisis, the resistance, the surrender, the grieving and hopefully the laughter of release, what comes next? Well, you've got to pick yourself up and start "re-tooling", re-constructing the new, bigger and better "self". And, this step always begins with practices: new ways of being and doing in the world that serve to break up old patterns and reinforce new ones.

I have already spoken here about practices such as meditation and yoga, both of which are powerful disciplines that bring together mind, body and spirit to access greater and greater levels of self-awareness. These practices serve to awaken our powers of observation, so we can become witness to our ingrained habits of thinking, doing, and feeling. Without moving in our bodies, watching our minds in action, and learning to FEEL OUR FEELINGS, we will always be dominated by whatever grooves have been etched in our psyche from childhood conditioning.

BUT these are not the only practices that support the process of renewal. What is key in choosing a new practice is *to move out from your comfort zone*, to dive into a physical, emotional, mental or spiritual domain in which you are a true beginner.

In this context, I want to share a story of one of my clients, whose dive into a new practice served to restore him to wholeness, ultimately shifting him to an entirely new level of being in the world.

One day, a truly lost soul showed up at my door (referred, incidentally by another therapist who had thrown up her arms in frustration) who proceeded to announce, within a few minutes, "I have no self. I am nobody." Whew. He really knew how to jump right to the core. I was impressed, if a bit non-plussed. This guy was extremely bright, a true intellect of the highest order. He was a philosophy professor and a scholar of ancient Chinese, Greek, and Hindu culture and history. He was erudite to the extreme, and spoke in esoteric, metaphysical jargon that snowed me with acute regularity (and I was a philosophy major!). This guy was the quintessential talking head.

As it turned out, his engorged intellect may have been the only thing that saved his life. As a child, he was the victim of parental neglect, vicious sibling rivalry, and a psychotic mother who committed suicide, right in front of him, by immolating herself. Truly, a nightmarish loss from which he had never recovered. Many years, many time zones, and many defensive postures later, this guy had wrapped himself in books and theories, epistemologies and cosmologies of an ancient world...all in hopes of avoiding the buried pain that had been thrust upon him in the present one.

He did great therapeutic work with me. Slowly, over a period of many months we applied the wisdom of the ancients to the wound of the present. He began to see that his flight to philosophy was a flight away from his pain, and he slowly connected the dots from a child in survival mode to an adult whose hold on reality was tenuously tied to a bunch of archaic, if brilliant, dudes who lived thousands of years ago. At a certain point, however, in the wake of a great outflow of grief and release of repressed pain, it was clear to me that although we had reconnected his head to his heart, we were still missing his body. He had taken off the intellectual suit of armor, but not yet replaced it with a more contemporary outfit. He was in limbo, naked, raw.

One day I asked a simple question: have you considered doing something physical, trying a new exercise practice or joining a ball team? I thought he needed to start to “get in shape” for the new identity that was clearly at a formative stage. Not one for following typical routes to anywhere, he came back to me a few weeks later and said that he had taken up pottery.

He loved working with his hands, spinning the wheel and manipulating the clay. Weeks went by, and unbeknownst to him, a discipline, a practice, took hold in him. He became fastidious in his daily attempt to craft ever more sophisticated pottery, and to his own great amazement, he was very talented at it. He crafted beautiful vases, swirling unorthodox bowls, undulating cups and saucers, eerily “philosophical” jars that, to my mind, seemed to synthesize ancient Greek classicism with Salvadore Dali-like abstractions.

The more he took to the practice the faster our work together progressed. Within a very short span of months, not years, he began to proclaim a new sense of self, as a teacher, lover, writer, thinker, spirit...and of course, potter. He was a revelation. Was this success a tribute to therapy? Perhaps, but I’m more convinced that his real healing and transformation, the process of true self-renewal, only became manifest when he took up the PRACTICE of making pots. Pottery became the keyboard on which he could practice, practice, practice, and if there were a Carnegie Hall for pottery, today he’d be a star performer.

Practice is a key element in any major Life-Shift, there is no doubt about it. And finding the *RIGHT practices* for you is a crucial step along the way. Once you’ve stepped off the well worn road of habituated patterns, shed the tarnished clothes of the past, and stand stark naked at a fork in the road, ask yourself: what would I *never* do...that I might like to do? What practice would be TOTALLY new?

What activity would require you to wear a new uniform, a new attitude, a new frame of reference? What would force you to see with a beginner’s eye? Start small perhaps, but get your hands dirty. Dig in with discipline, diligence and commitment—and lo and behold, soon a new you will emerge, not only in the art, the craft, the performance, but in the body, the spirit, the soul.

I leave you today with a wonderful quote from a famous “practitioner” of life, the amazing dancer and choreographer/inventor of modern dance, [Martha Graham](#):

“I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each, it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes the shape of achievement, a sense of one’s being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes, in some area, an athlete of God. Practice means to perform, over and over again in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired.”

Martha Graham

So, strap on those training wheels and get out on that practice track!

Peace,

Dr J