



#87 The Psychology of Self-Transformation

“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” (Henry David Thoreau, Walden)

Henry David Thoreau made this remark over 150 years ago, however, it is an observation that still rings true today. Often this desperation is the product of nagging feelings that we are wasting our life, accompanied by the frustration that despite our desire to make something of ourselves, the years pass by, and nothing seems to change. Phillips Brooks commented that those in this predicament “feel the thing [they] ought to be beating beneath the thing [they] are” (Phillips Brooks). If we ignore these feelings for too long then we will remain forever haunted by what might have been. In this video, we will explore how we can escape from a life of quiet desperation and transform ourselves in a manner more conducive to a fulfilling existence.

“We cannot change anything unless we accept it,” wrote Carl Jung. The first step, therefore, is to acknowledge that a change in our way of life is needed. An easy way to determine how necessary it is for us to change, is to take note of how often we are afflicted by feelings of regret, guilt, anxiety or depression. Jung believed that in the overwhelming majority of cases, neurotic symptoms such as these are a direct result of an inadequate approach to life and act as signals communicating the necessity of change.

“It seemed to [Jung] that the meaning of [neurotic] sufferings might consist in their compelling a man to come to terms with the foundations of his being and with the world, and thereby to gain a better knowledge of his limits and possibilities. . .Jung thus puts the emphasis on the prospective aspect, giving neurosis a positive meaning and not regarding it only as a burdensome illness. According to him, it can even act as a stimulus in the struggle for the development of the personality and be, paradoxically, a curative factor.” (Jolande Jacobi, *The Way of Individuation*)

When troubled by these negative emotional states, however, most people choose to take the easy road. Instead of changing their behaviours they try to dull their feelings or flee from them if possible. They take drugs, drink, or distract



themselves by pursuing mindless pleasures. In the long run, this only exacerbates the problem and Jung offered a warning to those who choose this path:

“We may think there is a safe road. But that would be the road of death. Then nothing happens any longer – at any rate, not the right things. Anyone who takes the safe road is as good as dead.” (Carl Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections)
After accepting that change is needed, the question becomes what type of change is most conducive to a fulfilling life? In the mid-20th century, the psychologist Abraham Maslow set out to answer this question. Unlike many of his colleagues who devoted most of their time to studying the mentally ill, Maslow decided to do the opposite. He chose to study those who excelled in life and this led him to an important discovery. The healthiest and most flourishing among us are those who are “motivated by trends to self-actualization”, which Maslow defined as “an ongoing actualization of potentials, capacities and talents, as fulfillment of [a] mission, as a fuller knowledge of, and acceptance of, the person’s own intrinsic nature, [and] as an unceasing trend toward unity.” (Abraham Maslow, Toward a Psychology of Being)

Maslow was so convinced of the importance of self-actualization, that he made the following bold pronouncement:

“If you plan on being anything less than you are capable of being, you will probably be unhappy all the days of your life.” (Abraham Maslow, Toward a Psychology of Being)

But after years of stagnating, years in which our bad habits and destructive behavioral patterns have solidified, how can we become self-actualizers? A quote, of uncertain origins, but often attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, provides some direction:

“Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

The first step is the ‘thought’, and for those of us striving to live more fulfilling lives, this entails the selection of an aim or purpose to our existence – for as



Maslow pointed out self-actualizers are very much defined by a life mission. In making this selection people sometimes get tripped up into believing that this requires the determination of their true passion. The problem with this approach is that it overlooks the fact that very often our passions follow the development of our skills. Therefore, if you are uncertain of where your passions lie, it is unlikely you will discover them through thought alone. Rather than delaying for too long it is far better to pick something challenging, which sparks your curiosity, and not to worry about whether it is the perfect choice.

With that said, the sowing of the thought, or the selection of a goal, will only be of positive consequence, if we ‘reap the actions’ and build the better habits which ultimately move us forward in the pursuit of our aims. Having something to aim at is important not so much because of the external rewards achievement of the goal will bring, but rather because of the transformation it forces us to undergo. Pursuing a challenging goal requires us to leave our comfort zone as we develop new skills, cultivate self-discipline, and in the process, discover that we are not as helpless as we once thought.

The problem for many of us, however, is that we struggle in moving from the sowing of the thought, to the reaping of the actions. Often people blame their inability to take productive action on their anxiety, depression, fear, or a lack of confidence in their abilities. Before taking the actions necessary to pursue their aims, such people reason, perhaps they must first rid themselves of their negative emotions. This, however, is an approach often doomed to fail.

These negative emotional states are by-and-large the result of faulty behavioural patterns and the avoidance of facing up to our fears and courageously taking on the challenges in our lives that would lead to personal growth. Meditation and introspection alone will never cure us of these feelings, rather we must learn that we can take purposeful action even when we are feeling anxious, depressed, or fearful. The importance of purposeful action as a cure for our troubled emotions is foundational to Morita therapy, a Japanese school of psychotherapeutic thought. As David Reynolds, a practitioner of this school explains:

“...realign your life toward getting done what reality sends that needs doing. In other words we advise you to focus more on purposeful behavior. Let the feelings



take care of themselves. What I think you will find is that when you get good at doing what needs doing in your life, the feelings stop giving you such trouble. And even if your feelings become troublesome, when you are involved in constructive activity, they remain in perspective. Feelings cease to be the whole show.” (David Reynolds, *A Handbook for Constructive Living*)

The ability to act even when we are not feeling up to it is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of self-actualizers. For as Thomas Huxley wrote:

“Perhaps the most valuable result of all education is the ability to make yourself do the thing you have to do when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not.” (Thomas Huxley)

Furthermore, as Maslow wrote in *Toward a Psychology of Being*:

“Self-actualizing does not mean a transcendence of all human problems. Conflict, anxiety, frustration, sadness, hurt, and guilt can all be found in healthy human beings.” (Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*)

Therefore, it doesn’t matter who you are, or what stage of life you are at, negative emotions will always present themselves – the question is do you have the courage to act in the face of these feelings or not? Those who find such courage will live far better lives than those who cower in the face of their fears, for as Emerson wrote:

“Do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

An effective way to gain the necessary courage to act in the face of your fears is to reflect on the imminence of death. The Stoic philosophers suggested that those who become more aware of just how brief life is will be far more likely to live in the most intense and courageous manner possible, striving to take advantage of each moment. Steve Jobs, who was clearly a man of action, recognized the power of this method:

“Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything— all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.



Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.” (Steve Jobs)

But awareness of our approaching death is a double-edged sword. If we delay too long in instituting the changes required to live a more fulfilling life and instead of striving to actualize our potential we fritter away our time, then awareness of our mortality will give rise to nagging, and increasingly intense feelings of guilt and regret. We will have chosen the safe road, which Jung called the road of death, and we will spend our remaining days fleeing from the fact that we are wasting our life. In her book *The Way of Individuation*, Jolande Jacobi provides a warning of what can be expected for those who choose this path:

“Any obstruction of the natural processes of development. . .or getting stuck on a level unsuited to one’s age, takes its revenge, if not immediately, then later at the onset of the second half of life, in the form of serious crises, nervous breakdowns, and all manner of physical and psychic sufferings. Mostly they are accompanied by vague feelings of guilt, by tormenting pangs of conscience, often not understood, in face of which the individual is helpless. He knows he is not guilty of any bad deed, he has not given way to an illicit impulse, and yet he is plagued by uncertainty, discontent, despair, and above all by anxiety – a constant, indefinable anxiety. And in truth he must usually be pronounced “guilty”. His guilt does not lie in the fact that he has a neurosis, but in the fact that, knowing he has one, he does nothing to set about curing it.”(Jolande Jacobi, *The Way of Individuation*)