

The Not So Big Life

Chapter Four: Removing the Clutter

Your Turn: Hidden Beliefs

In reading through this last section on hidden beliefs and the habitual patterns they've helped generate, what has come to mind about your own relationship to time? Are your patterns similar to the ones described above, or are they entirely different? Can you identify the underlying beliefs related to the way you engage time? And can you identify some countermeasures that could help you to do things differently? Take a few minutes to write down in your notebook any thoughts and ideas about your relationship to time. There may be more habitual patterns that come to mind over the next few pages as well, so keep the notebook handy.

Exercise: Revealing the Underpinnings of Your Personality

Collectively all our conditionings define the thing we call our personality or self-image. Although in colloquial language, we tend to think of personality as a "good" thing, as can be seen with such statements as "He's got a great personality," and "She's bubbling with personality," the reality is that it's not really our friend. The personality is separating us from our true Self. It is simply a collection of conditioned patterns, most of them founded on inadequacies and insecurities from early childhood, and all of them filtering the full experience of what's really here, true Reality.

So in order to uncover more of our true potential, it's necessary to become familiar with the primary conditionings that shaped your personality, and who you've come to believe you are. In order to do this exercise, you need to be very honest with yourself. Some of what you are about to look at may seem insignificant, or embarrassing. You'll tell yourself some things are common to everyone, and therefore aren't worth writing down, while others you may feel deeply ashamed of and that you simply CAN'T acknowledge them. But if you are to come to know and understand your personality structure, it's important to look at all of your conditionings, and most especially those that make you the most uncomfortable.

As you go through this exercise, it's critical that you remember throughout that these ways of behaving aren't "YOU." Conditioned patterns are simply recordings on a tape, and listening to those recordings over and over again has shaped your experience of who you are. In fact, we've gone so far as to believe those recordings are who we really are. But it just isn't so. The recordings are what get in the way of your experiencing

your full potential. You are the tape upon which the recordings have been made, but you are not the recordings themselves.

Essentially, when practiced over time, this exercise will allow you to find the off-buttons for each of your conditioned patterns. It will take years to see all of them, so be gentle with yourself. This process isn't helped by pushing and forcing, or by self-judgment. It requires an attitude of allowing for the unfolding to take place. If you develop your inner ear—if you listen for the inner wisdom that's inherent in all of us—the patterns will gradually present themselves, and you'll learn more and more about how you came to experience things in the way that you do.

Here's what you need to do:

1. Take your notebook and begin a new section, "Chapter 4 Exercise: Revealing the underpinnings of my personality." Now write down all the things you can think of that make you really frustrated, unhappy or discontent. Use a new line for each item. You can use the following questions to get you started, but there's no need to restrict yourself to these.

Are there particular words that cause a reaction inside you? Are there particular people that drive you crazy? Are there places that you dislike intensely? Are there objects, animate or inanimate, that always irritate you? Are there particular events or circumstances that cause you discomfort? Is there anything else along these lines that come to mind? Write them all down.

2. Now on the next page, following the same procedure, make a list of all the things that make you really happy, joyful, or delighted. Some questions, just the reverse of the ones above, to help you get started are as follows:

Are there particular words that evoke these feelings? Are there particular people that you are always happy to see? Are there places where you feel particularly comfortable and contented? Are there objects, animate or inanimate, that always delight you? Are there particular events or circumstances in which you always feel particularly joyful?

3. This next step is the key. Adjacent to each item on both lists, or on a separate page if you like, see if you can remember the event or situation that first catalyzed your response. Don't restrict the flow of what comes to mind. Use as many pages as you need in order to elaborate fully. Sometimes an exercise like this will bring to mind situations that you'd entirely forgotten until right now,

and writing them down allows you to look at the dynamic underlying the situation more carefully than if you keep it in your head.

For example, if you always have a negative response to the smell of roses, can you recall why? Was there perhaps a mean old man in your neighborhood when you were a child, who shouted at you once when you'd stepped into his garden to smell the roses. This in turn had made you think, "Well, I hate roses anyway! I hate that smell. I hate gardens too. I hate everything having to do with this nasty, mean old man". If you can recall it, that's the root of a conditioned pattern that may have been affecting how you experience flowers, scents, and growing things all your life. But if you never identify the conditioning for what it is, it will continue to filter your perceptions, and continue to deprive you of the experiencing of growing things.

If this example were indeed your pattern, chances are that you'll think to yourself, "No loss there. I don't want to experience growing things anyway. I hate them." Recognize that this is the personality speaking. It's the tape playing back what it learned the day that old man shouted at you. But make no mistake, that recording is depriving you of something wonderful, and the only person it's hurting is YOU.

4. If you can't remember the first time a conditioning was set in motion, which will likely be the case for most of the items on your list, then you can use the following associations process to access at least some of the original stimuli that created the pattern. Write the word, phrase, or issue in the center of a piece of paper. Now, in a flower of associations surrounding that center, write down all the words that come to mind. Don't edit. It's best if you can write down your thoughts as quickly as possible so you don't have time to analyze what's coming up. Even if the associations seem way off base, or completely unassociated, let them come. Evaluation can come later. Here's an example of what an associations flower might look like.

No knowledge of anything
 No hope Desperate lonely So alone Don't know who I am
 Miserable Frightened Powerless Shallow
 Suffocated Challenged Small Helpless Wisdom
 Lost Loss (When someone gets angry) Lost Missing
 Worried Hurt Fear Wanting Fear Horror
 Shattered Painful Love Loss
 No center Where am I? Who am I?

Every iteration of the exercise will bring forward different fruit, but in the example shown here, I am able to see that whatever the source of the conditioning, it almost certainly happened when I was very small, when I was still obtaining at least some of my sense of who I was from my caregiver. It's not important who that was. It could have been a babysitter, a parent, or a sibling. That's just the story line of the conditioning event—its surface clothing, and not the dynamic beneath. What matters here is to see that I have a hidden fear that when someone gets angry, I may disappear, or lose the sense of who I am. Checking this out with my experiences as an adult, I can recognize that this correlates well with what I feel. Before unearthing the roots of this pattern, I would often feel that I turned into a balloon of sorts with no identity and no center, and with only one wish-- for the angry other to return to normal so I could find myself again.

Having lived for a couple of years now with some understanding of the pattern's roots, when I encounter this kind of situation, though I still feel the fright, I no longer lose the sense of myself, or my centeredness. This has dramatically changed my experience of every day life, as I now understand that confrontation and anger are not life threatening. Though I knew this intellectually, my conditioned patterning told me otherwise, and my personality attempted to arrange my life so as never to come into contact with irritation. I was in effect tuning out a large segment of reality because of my fear.

You can continue to play with this exercise your whole life. Once you get the hang of it, you'll find that you can easily invent your own questions to elicit insights into patterns that you know must be there but can't see right away. Understanding how each

conditioned pattern came into being will allow you to recognize when they arise, and when they are “running the show” — that is, when they are replaying without awareness. Simply bringing awareness to them, and being able to say, “Aha, this is a replay of such and such conditioned pattern,” gradually drains them of energy; once you really see your conditionings for what they are, it’s hard to buy into them anymore. Over time your personality will relinquish the reins, and there will be less and less filtering of the world you experience, which allows you to experience ever more of what’s really here.