

The Not So Big Life

Chapter Seven: Improving the Quality of What You Have

Your Turn: Planned Pauses

If you slow down your body but find that your mind is still racing, you may want to implement the following practice. It is a way to perforate your day with mini-pauses that remind you of what's going on beneath the storyline or your waking dream. It works the same way as when you take a fifteen-minute break at work, but these breaks are shorter and more frequent. Here's the practice: Every fifteen minutes, take ten seconds to pause and simply notice what is happening in your body and in your mind.

You'll need a timer with a repeat function to alert you to the fifteen minute intervals. There are all sorts of watches and vibrating clocks available in the marketplace these days, and a number of them are listed on the website's Product Recommendations page. You can even use an egg timer in a pinch, though if you are around others much of the day, this will drive them crazy in short order, so the silent variety of reminder may be preferable.

Although this exercise sounds deceptively simple, its effects can be profound because it will bring you into the moment over and over again.

Exercise: Experiencing Presence

Being present is often shrouded in misunderstanding. It doesn't require that you retreat to a cave on a mountaintop to contemplate the meaning of life. Presence can be combined with your normal daily routine, because it's not about the content of your life, but about the attention with which you engage it; you can practice being present in your life, just as it is. What most of us crave is a feeling of calm and of delight in what we are doing. Being present is the access door to that vitality we're longing for.

Let's try an experiment in stepping outside of all your frenetic activities for a bit so you can recognize what presence is firsthand. Allow at least 20 minutes for this, and make sure you are in a place where you won't be distracted. You can do the exercise alone, or with friends or family members. But while you are doing it, don't engage one another.

Here's the exercise:

Take one of your favorite foods. It could be a piece of fruit, like a strawberry or a peach, or it could be a particular type of chocolate or a brownie. Put the food on a plate in front of you. For the next 20 minutes, you are going to become completely involved with this

piece of food. The only things in the world right now are you and this favorite delicacy. You are to look at it, touch it, smell it, taste it, and then consume it—very, very slowly. When you taste and then slowly eat, close your eyes so that your surroundings don't distract you.

An alternative first step for the extremely over-committed and over-taxed:

If in reading this exercise, you think to yourself, "There's just no way; where am I ever going to find the time?" then start with something simpler. Simply eat dinner like a normal, civilized human being. Turn off the TV. Don't answer the phone. Tell your kids that you want to find out who amongst them can be quietest for the longest, and just eat—slowly, quietly, and without thinking. Look at the colors, taste the flavors, and just enjoy the process of feeding your body. You can work up to the engagement with the favorite food over the next few weeks, but for right now, this is a good beginning.

After you've completed the exercise, write down your experiences on a piece of paper so you won't forget them. What you just experienced is presence—at least partially. You probably found yourself experiencing some intrusive thoughts, such as, "I bet I look really stupid right now," or "I wish I'd picked a riper strawberry." In these moments, you are NOT present. When your mind is commenting on what's going on inside your head or around you, that's a clear indicator that you aren't fully engaged in the Now.

But when you really tasted that first piece of food, when the flavors exploded, and the texture was experienced—perhaps with some surprise or delight—then you were totally present. You were so completely engaged in the experience that there was no boundary between you and the food. You and it were one, and the feelings it evoked were in all likelihood revitalizing and deeply fulfilling.

I conducted the tasting experiment once with a group of friends and a plate of brownies. Although each homemade brownie was only about 2 inches square, by the time the exercise was done, I could have sworn it was three or four times that size. It was, without a doubt, the most delectable brownie I've ever eaten.

But what struck me most is that all these friends, who never before had a gauge for presence, immediately understood. They had been present for a significant portion of the exercise, and they could also recognize other times in their lives when they'd been fully present, because they could use the exercise for comparison.

The point, of course, is not to eat brownies and drink tea all day, but to engage everything you do with this same kind of total-ness. Although it won't happen

overnight, with practice you can live more and more of your life this way. The results will astound you.

The exercise described above suggests that you set aside twenty minutes. If you put the exercise off because you don't have twenty minutes to spare, even though something inside you knows it might be valuable, you are most likely putting off a lot of other things that would be valuable to your development.

If you decide to put the exercise off, and to come back to it when you have more time, keep in mind that in most cases later never comes. Here's a question for you: Who or what is it that is deciding there isn't time? What would happen if you overrode that decision and simply did the exercise anyway? Sure, someone who is expecting you to behave in the same old ways might be put out by your break in pattern, but it's actually quite amazing to discover that everyone manages just fine without you for a little while, and things shift to accommodate change without your having to orchestrate them.