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Thoughtful Life Blog

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Linking to The Wisdom Page & The Center for Future Consciousness

A few weeks ago I contacted Tom Lombardo, Director of The Wisdom Page & The Center for Future Consciousness about becoming a contributor to their Wisdom Page newsletter. Tom reviewed my blog, Living a Joyful Life, and graciously accepted my request even though he stated in his email back to me that: “As you might expect, I don’t agree with a number of points you make in your blog, but The Wisdom Page is a relatively open forum for different ideas and views on wisdom — of which there are many.” To me, this speaks volumes about the intellectual integrity and authenticity of Tom, his Board of Directors and the entire organization. We do agree that disagreement, when expressed with care and an open mind, is a process where insight and deeper understanding can happen.

I have spent 45 years stumbling along the path of seeking “enlightenment”. I have studied and, in many cases, immersed myself in all kinds of enlightenment methodologies, teachings and training. Sufism, Kabbalah, Zen Buddhism, Taoism, mystic Christianity and many more. Then I realized the finding is more rewarding than seeking (although seeking is lots of fun). It’s no mystery at all, rather humanity’s greatest gift. We are aware that we are aware if we choose to be. Every living thing is aware (on some level, maybe everything), but only humans are conscious; able to remember, reflect, learn and self-evolve. If we choose to. We can wake up and open the “third eye” (self awareness) any time we choose and thereby become truly human.

My writing is informed to a large degree by the ageless discourses on awakening, particularly from the eastern Taoist and Zen points of view. My teachers are many; Alan Watts, George Gurdjieff, Lao Tzu and Carl Jung to name just a few. My writing style is conversational – my intention is to restate and re-frame classic and timeless ideas in today’s idiom, carrying on a tradition that has been done by many others in their own time. I use

my life's experiences (some real doozys there!) to illustrate and press a bit of my own patina on the art of awakening.

As a quick example, I am quite convinced that information only becomes knowledge after we reflect on it, compare it to our experiences and values and understand it as part of a larger whole. Knowledge only becomes wisdom after it changes how we decide and act. Wisdom is often mischaracterized and valued as knowledge because we like to think that we're wise; just a fairly easy matter of acquiring more and more knowledge. Uh, no. True wisdom is reflected in behavior and, as such, is unmistakable. A truly wise person doesn't need to tell us a thing, we recognize their wisdom immediately. It informs every thing they do.

Future consciousness for me is completely dependent on how we use present consciousness. I mean right this very now. Self-evolution is not a future event, it requires continuous effort (at time, great effort) every now moment. I'm in my sailboat of consciousness, my past is the wake and my future is the 360 degree horizon. I can change my past any time by changing the direction of the boat. Same for my future. It all depends on whose guiding the boat; the currents and the wind in conjunction with my preset autopilot or me. And, if I choose to take the helm, the better I know my boat in specific and sailing in general, the more likely I'll travel the course I choose. Even more important, I must learn how to watch the journey as I use all of the tools at my disposal (rudder, sails, compass, sextant) properly and at the right time.

Just a bit more about the autopilot. Our consciousness has been, and continues to be, programmed while we sleep from birth to the present moment. Not by us but by the universe. I know that sounds creepy and a little over-the-top mystical, but if you give it just a little thought, it makes perfect sense. The universe wants us to behave as societies, communities and individuals in very particular ways. It wants us to live by habits acquired through the programming done by other sleeping humans. Autopilot. Some think that, in our sleeping state, we are like transformers converting all of the incoming energy (senses, thoughts, emotions) into output that the universe requires. Even though it sounds weird at first, something like this has to be the case. If the universe needed us to be awake, then all of the conditions of our lives would reinforce continuous self-awareness. Instead,

just the opposite is true and, in fact, awakening requires using every resource we have – effort, persistence, extreme subtly (once the universe sees you trying to wake up, it is very creative in putting you back to sleep), total trust in the unknown so that we can completely let go and all the help we can get.

But here's the rub; the universe is evolving. And, we can choose to do what we must to awaken in every now moment – self evolve. Self evolution by even one of us changes the universe's evolutionary trajectory forever. As we become self aware, so does the universe. We become the eyes of the universe, allowing it to see itself. As we become aware of the immense importance of considering consequences before choosing, so does the universe. As we become able to live in this way, so does the universe. As we see and experience the much richer and joyful life that comes from reducing suffering instead of creating more, so does the universe. Is there a tipping point where enough conscious beings awaken that the universe fundamentally changes, moving away from the "fuel" of suffering and toward the nourishment of love? I don't know. It sounds like a wonderful outcome. But, in a way, it doesn't matter; the rewards of turning off the autopilot and living a truly conscious life are more than enough. So very much more.

For those of you lucky enough to have the itch, I welcome you to my blog. And once again, I am very grateful to Tom and his staff for allowing my voice to be part of the discussion.

Getting Started and a Few Definitions.

Why I'm writing this blog.

Remember Aesop's fable about B'r'er Fox's Laughing Place? Very briefly: B'r'er Bear came upon B'r'er Fox hooting in laughter. When B'r'er Bear asked B'r'er Fox what was so funny, B'r'er Fox said he had just been to his "Laughing Place". B'r'er Bear exclaimed that he liked to laugh too – and could he visit B'r'er Fox's Laughing Place? "Of course" giggled B'r'er Fox and took him to a small hill overlooking a very large thicket patch. "Jump right in" said the sly B'r'er Fox and B'r'er Bear did. Whereupon poor B'r'er

Bear started howling in pain from all of those nasty thorns, saying “This ain’t no fun and I ain’t laughing!” B’rer Fox, rolling on the ground with laughter, shouted, “I said this was MY Laughing Place, not YOUR Laughing Place”.

This blog is MY Laughing Place where I will be both the bear and the fox. I intend to post my reflections on life, the human condition, religion, physics, and whatever else seems right based on my own experiences (yeah, I know, they’re the only ones I have). I’m going to say “In my opinion” and “I think” just this once. Clearly everything in this blog is. I’m writing this because “I” want to. In fact, I very much feel compelled to.

Since most of my wounds have been completely self-inflicted and the rest at least partially, I know about needless suffering in a fairly deep way. The notion that “It’s not what life does to you, but how you respond.” is only part of the truth. You can, if you try, really screw up first – before life has a chance to hand you anything. And you can cause a little, some or a ton of needless suffering for others and yourself.

One of the biggest blessings/curses of being human is our ability to communicate and learn from each other. Everything from not touching red-hot fires to how to reduce stress can and is being communicated from humans to humans. In this way, we can avoid a good deal of pain and suffering if we take the teaching to heart and make it part of our lives. I’ll discuss the other upsides as well as downsides of communication later, but for now my hope is that some of you will get something from my writing that reduces the suffering in your life. Like the wood from a tree that warms you twice (preparing the logs and burning them), if you have a listening for some of what I’m saying and it helps then we will be twice blessed.

One big warning: I have read hundreds of self-help, wisdom, theological and philosophical books. The Taoists say that your never more asleep than when you’re dreaming that your awake. Many of those books were inspiring, uplifting and full of wonderful knowledge and, inevitably, when I read them I was totally asleep, dreaming of being awake. You will be too. I welcome dialogue with one really big caveat; please be respectful and kind. I’m not worried about spelling, syntax or grammar – mine or yours – or healthy, vibrant discussions from different points of view. As long as

you've learned that anything in this world can be done with kindness, that negativity is the hallmark of a frustrated soul and that there is no wisdom greater than kindness, we'll get along just fine.

On the transformation of information to wisdom.

INFORMATION: Data, facts, opinions, impressions, individual thoughts (yours and others), anything that enters your consciousness whether sought or incidental, noticed or not.

KNOWLEDGE: Information that has been reflected upon, thought about, processed, linked with other pieces of relevant information, and about which you have formed your own opinion. Typically, you can speak and write your knowledge. Rarely is your knowledge original; most often it's like a book about books written by others whose books are based on others; ad infinitum, and usually ad nauseam.

WISDOM: Knowledge (rarely information) that is integrated into your behavior, then exhibited in your actions in a way that is experienced by others and (in part) defines who you are .

So, here's the rub; confusing any and all of these distinctly different elements of understanding with one another is epidemic in virtually every person in every society everywhere. And, the curses and blessings of the digital age make the situation way more murky and dangerous while bringing the potential of wisdom to more of us than ever before.

Back in the day, when information wasn't as ubiquitous, the confusion of knowledge for wisdom was more the order of the day. Now, spouting information in any form can be considered "wise". Whoa. Information isn't even knowledge until you actually "know" it; that is, thinking and reflecting on information thereby coming to an understanding of the relationships and connections to other pieces of information. Getting your own handle on related threads. Making your own story. Letting your own values and opinions on the fabric of woven information form, and change, and reform until you truly understand – in your own way.

All the knowledge in the world doesn't make anyone wise. Erudite, clever, cunning, articulate, interesting (maybe), productive (maybe), self-deluded and inflated (maybe), but not wise. Not until you live what you know. You can know " Do unto others as you would have them do unto

you”. You can preach it, write about it, talk about it, promote it, argue it, isolate yourself with it, on and on and on. You are not wise until you live it, best you can. Not just intend to live it, live it. Not just believe in it, live it. Without knowledge, you can’t be wise – knowledge alone that does not change your behavior is pretty useless, kind of a mental bling. Actions don’t just speak louder than words, they are the only true measure of your wisdom.

In my life, I’ve been chocked full of information and knowledge. Man, could I sound smart and wise and deep and blah, blah, blah. In reality, my ego was horribly over-inflated and weak to compensate for a tremendous core insecurity and an almost total self-isolation. I was as disconnected from others as a man can be. In short, I could talk a good game but I had woefully little real wisdom. None, actually. It’s only been very recently that I sobered up (meaning a whole lot more than quitting drinking) and started to wake up. I pray that this blog will serve as a chronicle of my continued waking up and, if it rings a bell for someone else, even way better. More later.

Be kind.

On Becoming Self-Aware

WARNING! If you haven’t honestly and completely reviewed your life and come to the conclusion that you **MUST** become self-aware to end the needless suffering you’re causing. If you haven’t considered changing the context surrounding your life because who you really are is just fine but in the wrong context. If you haven’t struggled like crazy trying several methods to achieve higher consciousness (whatever that is). If you haven’t tried to overcome addictions that are causing significant pain and suffering with AA or any one of a zillion support groups. If you are not **ABSOLUTELY CONVINCED** that considering the consequences of your actions **BEFORE** you act isn’t really important (kind of weak there – how about the only way to stop your train wreck). In other words, if you’re not ready, then reading the rest of this probably won’t hurt you; it will just put you further asleep. For most of you – sweet dreams.

As I've mentioned before, I had made a fair country effort at attaining self-awareness on and off for 46 years. The "secret" is that, just like becoming physically fit, there is no secret. Just work that you do – first because you absolutely have to and then later because you want to and then later because you love the experience of conscious awareness of self and other a whole bunch. There is no "high" that even comes close to enhancing the ongoing experience of life than seeing it consciously. I call the whole process becoming sober.

Let's start with the work. Any and all of those selfish urges become the triggers for awakening, but you have to be very clever with how you handle them. For instance, I get an urge to drink, or fantasize about inappropriate (to my current context) intimacy, or lie, or inflate myself (yeah boy, you are one smart guy), or any of those urges/thoughts/fantasies/whatever in my head/heart/gut that I know are wrong. And, let's not kid ourselves here, the issue is never knowing what's wrong (or right) – it's choosing. I see it. I know it's there. Now, and I mean right now, I have a second or two to awaken and handle it.

This is where you need to be careful. If you try to block it, it's going to gain energy from your denial and come back again and again – changing it's presentation and finally biting you in the ass (and, unfortunately, others as well). If you attach to it, you're dead. Literally. It lives, you die. The trick is so easy, it seems hard – you just let it pass through your mind. If you don't block it or attach to it, it just drifts on through and is replaced with the next thought. Done. You've gained two really good results; you thought consequentially (think Gomer Pyle's voice – "Surprise, Surprise") and you've had a moment of self-awareness. Is this cool, or what? The "crazier" you are (God knows, I was bat-dung crazy), the worse the train wreck, the more you hurt, the more you have to work with. And I mean work. No exceptions, no time off, no excuses. Each demon gets seen and allowed to pass right on through.

This never gets easier, so don't expect that. Daily meditation for even a minute or two helps a lot. For me, asking God for help also helps a lot (don't get all squirrely on me – I don't give a rat's ass whether you believe in God or not). It does, however, become less frequent in time. And, just like a little miracle, you like this awareness stuff. Sometimes you're 1% self-

aware and 99% other, sometimes it's 50/50 and sometimes (for me, during meditation) it's mostly self-awareness. But, dang, I'm aware that I'm aware all of the time.

Do you have any idea how good ice cream is when you're aware that your tasting it? Do you know what it's like to give and receive a genuine smile when your aware of that delightful process? Do you have any sense of how incredibly rewarding reducing suffering can be? Of how much love you have to give if you're aware of you giving it and their needing it? Hot damn, your addictions, your selfishness, your isolation, your suffering, your sins have led you straight to what so many have tried so hard to attain. You are aware. And aware that you are aware.

Sobriety is a whole lot more than not drinking, doing drugs, whatever. Just like in poker, it's table stakes to get in the game and, if you know how to play, it leads to winning. Doesn't get any better than that.

Be kind.

Chasing the Habit Rabbit Down the Hole.

As I've mentioned elsewhere, we are (and continue to be) programmed to stay sound asleep and fulfill trans-formative functions needed by the universe. This programming is primarily done by other sleeping humans who are simply passing along their "code" and starts at our conception. It's undoubtedly in our genetic coding as well. The universe almost desperately wants us asleep on the programmed autopilot and doing it's bidding. Why else does it require everything we have, from obstinate persistence to sneaky subtlety to awaken? The universe is not the enemy, it's just as asleep as we are. Part of the universe's evolution can involve awakening if those of us who can choose to take on the task get it done. Awakening changes everything; causing and avoiding suffering are no longer the prime motivators. Reducing suffering and causing joy happen with awakening.

Habituation is one of the most fundamental and widespread strategies involved in keeping us asleep. So much of what we think, feel, choose and do are habits. Actually, almost everything. Let that sink in for a minute. We are almost completely driven by habits, and even scarier – they're not of our own choosing. Programmed habits. When we say we know someone, what we really know is how they habitually react; when they say they know us – get the point? We are perfectly predictable. Oh, we have different personalities, but take an honest look at yours. Uh huh, just a bundle of habits. Whether programmed from nature or nurture makes no difference. Every choice we make while asleep totally depends on our habit set. I mean to belabor the point; what and how you think and feel, how you present yourself by clothes, talk (accents, anyone?), beliefs, values, and choices are all habitual. Habits appear to be the easy way, forming more is the objective of virtually every form of education and training. Why then are novels of pod people or other forms of “alien” possession so scary? Because we recognize the absolute truth in these stories. We are the pod people. We are completely possessed, asleep and too lazy to care. We have absolutely no free will.

One of the more effective, formidable, common and widespread habits I know of is rushing, so let me use it as an example of the power of all habits. I can absolutely guarantee you that rushing, hurrying, forcing, making it happen ASAP, multitasking as fast and hard as possible will keep you sound asleep. I have a lot of experience at useless rushing, at times it's the bane of my work to wake up. Rushing is generally not only approved but encouraged by every sector of society. How many times have you driven your car faster than you needed to go just because you're conditioned to rush? Uh huh. More is better and more requires going as fast as you can. All day. Every day.

Think you're relaxed on the sofa watching TV or reading or listening to music. Maybe sitting at the beach on vacation? Not a chance; look at your adroit, non-stop mind. You're thinking a mile a minute all the time. Habit thinking about a misremembered past, mulling over all of the slights and victories and wasting tons of emotional energy on your

fantasy of the past. Habit thinking about the future, speculating about what will be (mostly scary and bad) and feverishly inventing strategies to cope with all kinds of impending dooms that almost never happen – again wasting tons of emotional energy on literally nothing. The irony is that none of the rushing is useful or necessary, actually quite the opposite.

Being awake takes time. Time to see from the perspective of self awareness. Time to real-ize where we are both in the outer world and our inner condition. Time to attend to the moment just as it is. Time to consider the consequences of our choices. In my life, when I realize that I'm asleep, one of the first things I do is consciously slow down. I mean really sssslllllllloooooooowwwwwwwww ddddddooooooowwwwwnnnnn. It feels great and immediately invokes the proper conditions for waking up. Try it. Isn't it very much like coming to? Waking up? Now start watching you interacting with the world. My, look at all of those habits just waiting to pop out of you or pop inside you. Ignore them, it's very clear that they're not you. Want to change and start making your own choices? Let go and there you go. Easy when you take the time, impossible if you don't.

As with every aspect of becoming self aware as part of becoming real, you must trust what you've never experienced the first time. In this case, the first time you stop rushing. You need to summon the courage to trust long enough to experience the consequences. You'll see that everything is just fine, in fact better. All that you really need to participate in doing gets done at little if any stress cost to you. You make choices that don't create stress and other forms of suffering for you or others. Now, just stay there. And, when you get carried away again and again, stop rushing. Come back as soon as you can and stay as long as you can. I'm there. Right now. Are you? Peace.

Be Kind