Practice 1: Radical Self-Awareness

We are beginning a journey today through 5 different spiritual practices outlined in Robert Brumet’s book on transformation, “Living Originally”. Last week we just dipped our toe into the water with ideas of transformation and spiritual practice. This week we jump into Radical Self-Awareness.

If you grew up in the 60’s, fancied yourself a hippie bent on changing the world for the better, you might like the label, Radical. Otherwise, that title might make you a bit uncomfortable; it may seem a bit too extreme. I love the irony that researching my talks sometimes reveals. Let me give you the first two definitions of ‘radical’: 1) of or going to the root or origin; fundamental. 2) extreme, especially as regards change from accepted or traditional forms.

Let me propose that the practice of self-awareness we are discussing is both fundamental to building transformational spiritual practices and that the form of practice we desire to engage in is extreme compared to what others practice or what may feel more familiar to you. With courage and the process of transformation in our hearts, let us begin radical self-awareness.

The most basic level of self-awareness is one we have watched get established in infants: this is me and everything else is not me. Babies discover toes and fingers, and we teach them eyes and ears and noses. Mostly at that point they put everything they discover in their mouth. So we begin with a basic understanding of this is me and that is not me. Then we discover feelings and thoughts. Angry, happy, that is pretty, want a cookie. As I reflected on the levels of self-awareness, it occurred to me that some people may not ever move beyond this level or at least may not spend much time beyond this level. Perhaps a refinement of this level is to own the thought or feeling: I am angry, I think that flower is pretty, I think I want a cookie. So first we identify what is me and what is not me, then we identify thoughts and feelings within me. Next we identify a reaction or a meaning associated with the thought or feeling; This is me, this is me experiencing my anger, and I am uncomfortable being angry with my face red and my body tense. The final level of self awareness is all of what I just said AND I am aware that I notice I am uncomfortable being angry.

I propose that with each degree of self-awareness comes an opportunity for freedom. At first we may not really be able to identify our feelings; we are
reluctant to own our thoughts. Anyone who has taken the NonViolent Communication course knows that clearly identifying our feelings and needs can be difficult. There are more complex feelings than pain or pleasure; this is beneficial, this connects me or disconnects me with others, this is a sense of pride or a sense of shame. True freedom comes when we are aware that we are aware. This is the level of freedom of choice! Choice exists at all levels but without the awareness of the choices, we are caught in the cycles of stimulus-response established out of our most basic brain functional level. Sometimes we call this our ‘reptilian brain’ and it is the power of the survival instinct. It reacts in a way programmed to protect us. It withdraws from painful stimuli, seeks pleasurable stimuli and defends itself when threatened.

So here we are, at this highest level of self-awareness, in which we can identify thoughts and feelings, notice sensations in our body and secondary thoughts as reactions to our thoughts and emotions and we have an awareness that all those things are happening IN US and THROUGH US. Just because we CAN identify all those nuances, DO WE? The easy and obvious answer is NO, not always. Well, why not? Hmm...There are times it takes a higher level of mastery to over-ride the reptilian brain and we may not be there yet. Some situations take us by surprise and if we had time to prepare, maybe we could have over-ridden that forceful and inarticulate wave of anger, panic or shame. But in that moment, we didn’t. There are also times we simply go unconscious. With the holidays coming, has anyone ever noticed that sometimes when we are with our family of origin we just go unconscious and return to all the roles we had when we were 10? Every self-awareness and spiritual practice we routinely use, every day, just goes right out the window and we interact like we did when we were 10. Now is a great time to take our spiritual practices into the fiery furnace of holiday interactions! Or to notice where we are when we go unconscious.

I want to explore a concept from Unity co-founder Charles Fillmore that Brumet includes in this chapter: the flow between conscious, subconscious and super conscious mind. Conscious mind is that part which is at various levels of alertness and sends out directions, takes in information from the outer world through our senses and makes records, which it stores in the subconscious. In quoting Fillmore from Dynamics for Living, I want to paraphrase, “The subconscious is the vast, silent realm that lies back of the
consciousness mind and between conscious mind and the superconscious. The true purpose of subconscious is to receive impressions from the superconsciousness and to reproduce them upon the canvas of the conscious mind. Humans, however, having lost the consciousness of the indwelling Divine as an ever-present reality, has reversed the process and impresses the subconscious from the conscious mind. In this way the subconscious is made to register impressions according to the thought held in conscious mind at the time the impression is made.” Our subconscious is a file cabinet of impressions made based on the thoughts we held at the moment we experienced something in the outer. So what is this superconsciousness? Fillmore says it is “A state of consciousness based on true ideas, on an understanding and realization of spiritual Truth. The connection between the superconscious mind and the conscious mind is established within--by meditation, by going into the silence, and by speaking the word.” Fillmore also has this to say about super mind, “The Christ consciousness; the mind that knows all and is able to accomplish all things because it is one with the Mind of God.”

So let’s play with this a moment. WHAT IF, your subconscious mind, your back-up files let’s call them, were filled with ideas that say, “You are enough” “you are beautiful” “you are loved and you are loving” “you have the power to do whatever you desire” “you are connected to infinite good”. These are the files you might have if subconscious mind were storing impressions fed to it by superconscious mind. So now imagine conscious mind encounters a situation. Input is registered that a person, not me, says that I have done something wrong. Consciously, I draw upon my files and find, “I am enough”, so without being threatened or angry, I curiously say, “What is it you feel I have done wrong?” Wouldn’t that be a wonderful experience! Open to the conversation, I am living from my divinity.

Now, lets look at what happens more often. Our subconscious mind, our back-up files, are filled with ideas fed to us from moments in our outer world that we recorded. We take in exactly what others say or opinions we form based on our earliest experiences.

Most of the files say, “This is what you lack” “This is how you screw up” “This is what is wrong with you” “This is why you are not loved”. So encountering the same situation, someone not me says I have done something wrong,
I draw upon my files and find, “This is what is wrong with you”. My conscious mind now responds with shame because once again there is evidence of my flaws. Or I draw upon the file that says, “This is how you screw up” and my conscious mind engages in a battle to prove I did not screw up this time. Although I am threatened with more evidence I am wrong, I defend.

In the first situation, my need to be myself, whole and complete, is met by turning my conscious mind to files originating in superconscious, affirming my divinity and I stay open to interactions in the here and now that involve my humanity. In the second situation, the flow is a short circuit that projects my wholeness out into the outer world where I receive both all the feedback about my flaws and the ever changing image of what wholeness looks like. Can the short circuit ever create wholeness? Or Love? Or Peace? No, because the feedback is constantly changing, the image of my need changes and the feedback and image are filtered through judgment—everyone’s judgment.

When I first came to Unity in the 80’s, I heard a lot about “erasing old tapes” or “breaking up crystallized thoughts”. These are the files in subconscious that tend to continue to feed into our present moment conscious choices. The practice of self-awareness in which we are aware of our awareness, gives us access to consciously choose superconscious mind as a source of input for our conscious mind. I record the pure data, “a person who is not me is saying I did something wrong”. I notice I feel threatened. My body tenses and my breathing sort of stops. I have a thought, “Oh no, something is wrong with me!” (Notice how I internalize the feedback from outside me) Then I have another thought, “Wait, the judgment I did something wrong is not my judgment.” I own the thoughts and feelings I have and taking just a tiny step back, I begin to distinguish what is mine and what is not mine. I do not go on autopilot and make everything my own. Some back-up files begin to present themselves as subconscious feeds conscious mind: “Oh, remember when you were bad and got punished?” Self-awareness steps up, “OK, that was the past.” Consciously I connect with files from superconscious, “In this moment, you are all you need to be. You are whole.” Consciously I think, “Let’s see what this other person is talking about.” All of this occurs in a split second.

Self-awareness opens up a world of choices which come from living from our original divinity rather than from the files stored in sub-consciousness or the unconscious direction of our reptilian brain. It begins with awareness.
The simple, everyday practice is to notice your body sensations, your emotions or feelings and your thoughts. You may want to find a trigger to help you notice you are noticing. You might focus at a specific time, 11 minutes after each hour. Or wear a string or a bracelet that reminds you to notice each time you notice the string. Or each time you answer the phone, or change computer screens, or take a step; you will become aware. As you are aware of your body sensations, your emotions or feelings and your thoughts, own all of it. Recognize that you are creating your thoughts and feelings. You are creating the story you hear in your head. Where is that coming from?

The formal practice is to set aside time to meditate and journal. I recommend at least 15 minutes to begin with. Whatever longer time works is fine. The practice of radical self-awareness may become uncomfortable as you notice thoughts or feelings that keep repeating. As we begin to notice the subconscious files presented, we may become aware of deep, early wounds that created those files. And, as we notice that many of the thoughts and feelings have arisen from past subconscious ideas, we may also begin to clear and thin the clutter in the subconscious to allow a deeper connection with superconscious mind. The light that we are begins to shine brighter and brighter in us and through us out into the world. We begin to see the world more clearly as it is. Healing and health may appear in body and mind.

Notice your intention in your practice: Are you trying to be a better person? Are you trying to reduce your anxiety? Is there an ideal image you are striving for? This is a translational practice. Practice for the sake of practice is more likely to produce transformation. Transformation might reveal possibilities you had not considered, new insight you didn’t know you didn’t know. However transformation is not a goal you can set or an endpoint you can reach.

Is your rationalizing mind already making excuses for not practicing? “I can’t spend all my time in the present moment! I have to make plans.” OK, just notice your thoughts are about the future, not now. Or notice when you are reflecting on the past. “I don’t have time for all this mumbo jumbo.” Hmmmm...we are going to have all the thoughts and feelings, whether we notice them or not. Self-awareness is simply a direction to turn our mind. Would you be interested in living from your divinity rather than how you are currently living?