



Sibella Circle Member & Visionary Leader

THE POWER OF AWARENESS

Witnessing Without Judging

By Catherine Dowling

Recently a friend of mine decided to document the commentary on life that goes on inside her head every day. She took a writing pad and pen and beginning at breakfast, wrote down all the judgements she made throughout the day, however benign.

Breakfast didn't fare too well. Her cornflakes were too soggy, her coffee just a bit too sweet. But as she went through her day, judgements about herself and others popped up with disturbing regularity. By lunchtime she had filled one and a half pages with self-criticism.

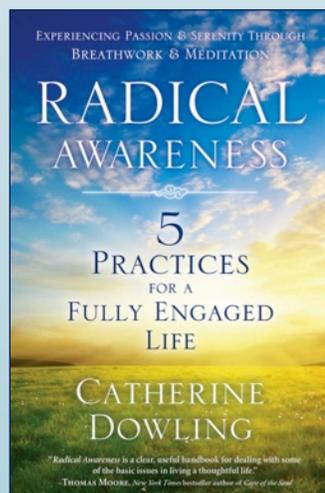
Her judgements were often so subtle that until they appeared on the page in front of her, she didn't realize they existed. The way she criticized her weight was not a surprise. But she also criticized aspects of herself that, in someone else, she would have responded to with compassion. Early on-set arthritis in her knees generated an inner scolding about not being able to hop up onto a chair to change a light bulb quite as freely as she used to.

My friend may be more self-critical than most. Even she found some of what she wrote about herself over the top. But it led to a discussion about judgement. We live in a world where we need to make judgements every day in order to survive. We decide when to cross a street and when not to, when to speak to a stranger and when to pass by, when to get a taxi home late at night rather than walk. This good/bad judgement can keep us safe. But what would it be like if, outside of these essential discernments, we were able to accept what is as it is?

My friend and I embarked on a one-hour project. We set ourselves the task of witnessing life for just one hour without making any kind of value judgement on anything or anyone. It wasn't easy. We're programmed into dualistic thinking - most things, including ourselves, are positioned somewhere on the scale between good and bad, right and wrong, pretty and ugly and so forth. What we found surprised us.

When looking at something as inconsequential as a curtain, we judged its color, pattern, shape and drape. When we suspended judgement we found the curtain's pattern appeared more vivid, we could appreciate the sensuousness of the drape, and noticed for the first time the texture of the fabric. When she suspended judgement about her knees, she found compassion and gentleness that compelled her to put less pressure on her aching joints. When we looked at the people in our lives without judgement we found appreciation of all the good they bring to our lives and barely noticed their limitations. It's difficult, we found, to go against our natural tendencies towards judgement, but our little venture into non-judgmental witnessing of life was both enlightening and energizing.

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