

Minding My Real Self

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The dense traffic was inching along the highway and once again I was resigned to being late home that night. In the rear view mirror I caught a glimpse of a vehicle, about six cars back, sneak out onto the shoulder and accelerate past the slowly moving convoy. As the SUV passed by I felt a wave of anger and resentment towards that inconsiderate driver. This was followed almost immediately by a twinge of guilt for having such intense negative feelings - you see I consider myself a nice guy, laidback, and tolerant. Anyway, the guilt must have done the trick, for within a couple of minutes the feelings dissipated and I was back to my normal self.

Maintaining my positive self-image is important to me; to not harbour negative thoughts. By trading the 'punishment of guilt' to assuage the 'pain of anger' I seem to have created a balance of sorts and avoided the anti-social act of expressing anger. But have I really let go? Or have I just suppressed the resentment and actually reinforced my belief that deep down, I am an angry person and need to control my negative self? If this is the case, my so-called positive image is a sham and a lie. This notion is underscored in *A Course in Miracles*, (lesson 21) which suggests:

"You will become increasingly aware that a slight twinge of annoyance is nothing but a veil drawn over intense fury."

I realize that my self-image is totally made up; an artificial creation of my mind. It is made up of a number of adopted attributes to which I have become rather attached and forms my identity. I certainly am proud when any of my achievements are publicly recognized. However when things don't go the way I planned, or reality doesn't follow my rules, it seems to be a threat to this identity for I find myself getting anxious, upset, and sometimes angry, as I try to get back in control.

It is interesting to notice how defense routines kick into place immediately when our identity is threatened, either by blaming circumstances or the person causing the upset. The neat thing about this strategy is that any counter attack would of course then be justified and it would be unfair to label it as vengeance. If external blame doesn't work, and since the idea of blaming myself would be an even bigger threat to my identity, the fallback position is to deny the problem exists, cover up the denial, and forget that I did. Perhaps Eckhart Tolle, the author of *The Power of Now*, is right when he said in a 2001 interview:

"All ancient teachings agree that the normal human state of consciousness is ...a state of insanity."

While this false way of being is not exactly a recipe for a life of peace and happiness, it has its compensations. When I am in a negative state of being annoyed at something; when the adrenalin is rushing through me, at least I feel very much alive. Vernon Howard counters in his book *The Power of Your Supermind*:

“A person refuses to give up his painful moods because he fears he would be empty without them. Notice how painful feelings, like sense of loss or indignation, provide a peculiar exhilaration. They induce a false sense of aliveness.”

Some people reinforce this view in defining their anger as a strength, innocently hidden by describing themselves as just outspoken; folks who call a spade a spade. Teacher and author Guy Finley adds:

“Negative emotions cannot exist without having something to blame for their punishing presence.”

If I am in the thrall of a pseudo self, a false identity, what am I supposed to do about it? I turn again to Howard’s solution:

“You can give up your pretentious picture of the anger without identifying with it; we must not call it our own. Simply watch it come and go, without shame or comment...”

This sounds like being a split-personality, but that is just the point. Rather than a futile fight to control this fearful part of ourselves – which is artificial anyway – we can stand aside and dispassionately observe. Count Leo Tolstoy echoes this thought with:

“But if men ... would only approach nearer to the phantoms which alarmed them, and would examine them, they would perceive that for them also they are only phantoms, and not realities.”

Experimenting with this new approach, at first I was disturbed to find out just how frequently I got irritated with little things, and how intense were those feelings that I had previously hidden. On the other hand, it was amazing how disowning these same feelings calmed me. Often I find myself inwardly chuckling at some of the foolish triggers to my rants. On realizing that I was no longer a victim of my own anger, then its handmaiden, guilt, disappeared. In addition, I am far less likely to be drawn in by other people’s anger. Now, I may be tolerant and nice guy, but does it really matter?

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