

Roads to Reconnection

The E-Journal for Bonnie Miller's Inter-Action Consulting
Writing about the ideas, tools and practices of reconnecting life to living.

In this issue: How a Grammar Lesson Can Stop you
Eating too much Chocolate

In the last issue, I wrote about the influence of problems, and how they reinforce negative story-lines, making change difficult by focusing on labels as if they are something that is inside a person, part of their character. And I suggested that you try four steps as a way to change negative story-lines, and deal with problems differently. I said that you should:

1. Name the problem and set it at a distance from yourself so you can see it.
2. Study the habits, timing, behaviour and results of the problem.
3. Look for times when the problem does not get its way with you.
4. Share the story of those times with yourself and others.

In this issue, I'd like to look into number 1, with a little more detail, and to explain how this approach is helpful. It starts with the difference between nouns and adjectives.

A noun, as we all know, is a person, place or thing- also an idea or concept. An adjective is a word that describes a person, place or thing.

Why is this relevant?

It is relevant because when we use an adjective to describe ourselves, it has a tendency to become part of our identity. So if we describe ourselves as shy, or

An Invitation to Practice-

Sometimes when I suggest to people that they make a THING of their problem, and have a conversation with it, they look at me like I am

a little weird. One older woman I was working with told me that in her country, you get called crazy for talking to what isn't there.

Am I the only one who talks to other drivers on the road, as if they can hear me?

And I KNOW that there are folks who talk back to the radio!

In any case, let me invite you to try this-

The next time you feel the influence of a mood that you normally dislike- depression, or crankiness, or resentment, or worry- try

speaking to it, literally as if it were another person in the room.

Get a little bit curious about what it is doing there with you, and ask it if it would like you to know anything particular.

Investigate its agenda- what would it like you to do next? And why?

If you get this information, then try to take a moment to check in with yourself and see how you feel about this idea. Do you agree?

Why, or why not? And then what will you do?

If you have questions, or something you'd like to share, please

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anxious, or irritable, then these words become qualities of what we think of as our self. And when we become troubled by these qualities, we have a difficult task- we have to change ourselves. To do this, we set out on a program of reform- trying new habits, new ways of thinking, new routines, new diets, maybe even new company- in an effort to alter our personal qualities through applied effort. And it might work, for a while... but often what happens is that we slip up in our program of reform, and then we take this as evidence that this troublesome quality is "Just How We Are", and there is no hope of change.

That is what happens with an adjective.

But what happens if we use a noun, instead?

What difference does it make if we talk about Anxiety, instead of saying we are an anxious person? What does it matter if we say that we are bothered by Irritability, rather than stating that we are irritable by nature?

Something very interesting can happen with this shift- a little space is created between ourselves and this problem, this quality that we have now made into a thing. This noun, this Thing- now exists outside of us, and we can begin to get a bit of Objectivity. When we look at that word, we see that it is related to this idea of making something into an Object- and an object is something we can observe, study, and get to know with a view to understanding it better. This is very different from an adjective, or description, which tends to be a label that describes a state of being.

When we make the problem into a thing, we can also see that we are in relationship with this thing. And then we can see that relationships are altered much more easily than states of being.

Should we debate that last point a little bit?

Relationships can be altered much more easily than states of being.

Here's an example. Let's say that I have a relationship with chocolate. I imagine that chocolate will help me to feel happy, satisfied and taken care of, that chocolate will give me energy and help me accomplish tasks. Let's say that because of this loving relationship with chocolate, I overindulge, and eat a family sized Fruit and Nut bar. Now I have a state of being- I feel full and slightly sick, and I have a sugar induced headache, and in half an hour, my head is on the desk. At which point is it easier to

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intervene: when I am in relationship with chocolate, or when I am in a state of being, with the chocolate inside me?

Problems are very similar- once we have taken them inside us, internalized them, they are much more difficult to interact with- it is like trying to interact with your chocolate bar, after you have eaten it and buried the wrapper at the bottom of the trashcan. It is true that you do continue to interact with that chocolate bar, but the processes are automatic, and much, much more difficult to influence.

Relationships are something outside of us that can be influenced by setting, by a different viewpoint, a different action or a different attitude. If I am in relationship with a problem, then I can still exert my values, my intentions, my vision for myself in the next three hours- and choose whether or not this includes a sugar headache and a queasy stomach.

But maybe Chocolate is not the Problem.

It is important to get a good feel for what to name as the Problem. Chocolate could be quite innocent, and wrongly accused. And if that is the case, then all my arguments and bargains with Chocolate will be futile, because the more influential problem is still pursuing its agenda.

Maybe the more influential problem is Stress, or Insecurity, or Resentment. When I do a bit of detective work, and name the biggest culprit- then I can have a useful conversation.

Let's say that Insecurity feels like strongest influence at the moment. I might ask myself how Insecurity got invited into my day. I might discover that it stepped up because I have a task and today is the deadline. And now, here is Insecurity with negative messages and attacks on my character- calling me hopeless, a poor planner, pronouncing me ill -suited for my job.

If Insecurity is *inside* me then I might hear these messages as if they were truths, facts, descriptions about my identity. In response, I might tense up, feel defeated and tired. And Insecurity might include other people in its critique-my partner who kept me up all night with the TV on, (how inconsiderate)-or my kids who demanded my help with their homework, when I should have been working at my computer. Not only that, but according to Insecurity if I had been a better parent, my kids would be able to do their homework on their own.

Family-sized chocolate bar, here I come.

But if I am able to think of Insecurity as an influence that is outside of me, I can begin to evaluate these messages differently. With some space between me and this problem, I can put up a counter argument. I can present evidence that refutes the

accusations of poor planning. I can assert my values as a parent, and the importance of my relationship with my kids. I can feel sympathy for a partner plagued with insomnia. I can tell Insecurity that it is exaggerating, and wasting my time, when I could be getting on with things.

And when Insecurity suggests that I eat that king-sized fruit and nut bar, as an antidote to the tiredness that Insecurity has itself created... well, I can be aware of choices. Is that what I want? Or is that what Insecurity wants? And if I give in to these suggestions, does Insecurity get more or less powerful?

Creating choice

This idea of creating choice is probably the greatest benefit of putting space between ourselves and the problems that influence us. When we are in relationships, we discuss and make decisions in some kind of cooperation.

It can be the same with problems.

If we conceive of problems as something outside of ourselves, as an influence or habit that we are in relationship with, then we create an opportunity for choices all along the way.

If we wake up, and Depression is sitting at the end of the bed, holding up our shoes, we have a choice. We can acknowledge its presence, and decide whether we would like its company for the day. If we decide that we cannot leave Depression at home, we can still decide if we are going to let it encourage us to drive, or if we will choose to walk instead. We can choose to follow its suggestion not to say hello to co-workers, or we might prefer to extend ourselves, and offer a smile and a greeting.

And if we do decide to go along with Depression's suggestions, we can consider why we are making that choice. Perhaps Depression is right, and we have been working too hard. Perhaps Depression's idea that we should just call in sick and stay home is an idea that has some merit- and we can decide how to spend that day. We might decide to spend it in conversation with Depression, finding out why it has shown up on this day, and what it would like us to notice about our lives at this moment. We might decide that its presence in our lives is a signal to make some changes, and get some help doing just that.

Deciding on the nature of the Relationship

What it comes down to is this: when we are in relationship with an influence, like Insecurity, Depression or Anger, we can decide where we stand. Instead of Insecurity pushing us to neglect family and health because of fears of incompetence, we can offer reassurance, demonstrate our successes, reassert our values and preferences. We can consider its demands for us to pay attention to time and details- but on our

terms.

We can acknowledge Depression's concerns and Anger's sense of injustice, without being driven to rash or ill-considered actions that poison the opinion of those we care most deeply about. We can take care of our problems, in a nurturing sense- making sure that the problems' concerns and warnings are not neglected, but setting boundaries and guidelines to help the problem behave itself.

That sounds like a healthier relationship, doesn't it?

Therapy Speak

Last issue, I wrote about the concept of *Internalizing*- which is what therapists and social workers call it when people accept a negative label as part of their personal make-up or character.

This issue's article explores the concept of *Externalizing conversations*. This idea was developed and promoted primarily by Micheal White, a therapist and writer from Australia, who died very suddenly in April, 2008.

Micheal White was one of the primary thinkers, writers and practitioners of Narrative therapy- a therapeutic approach that uses the metaphor of story-lines to help people undo problematic dynamics in their lives. He developed the approach of Externalizing problems in an effort to help families and children get out from under the influence of problems like soiling, anorexia, depression and family violence.

If you are interested in Micheal and his work, you might start here with this Winkpedia link: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_White_\(psychotherapist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_White_(psychotherapist))

Or Google "Micheal White narrative therapy".