

The Power of Awareness

by Thom Rutledge, LCSW

What are you doing right now?
What are you feeling right now?
What is happening in your body and in
your mind right now?

Answer these questions and then . . .
answer them again . . . and again.
These simple questions (and others like
them) can take us into territory most of
us have long avoided. These
offensively simple questions challenge
us to make use of an innate ability that
we have been taught to ignore,
discount, or to at least minimize: Our
ability to experience simple awareness.

Avoiding Awareness

Awareness is underrated, and often
misused. It is underrated not just within
our dysfunctional family systems, but
throughout our entire western culture.
We are programmed to take any piece
of new awareness and move instantly to
take some action. This kind of impulsive
movement frequently removes us from
any awareness we are beginning to
experience, and results in more of a
medicating or distracting behavior. We
actually move into this action to avoid
the awareness, rather than moving to
action as a natural outgrowth of our
expanding awareness.

More times than not in our culture these
two words are good advice: SLOW
DOWN.

Mis-using Awareness

SLOW DOWN. Be aware of the world
around you and the world within you.
Be aware of your own tendency to
interpret your environment in self-critical
ways. Be aware of your tendency to
convert what is happening within and
around you into self-indictment, into

implicit and explicit messages about
how you should do, feel and be
different.

Many of us expertly accomplish this
even with self-help material, ie. "I should
be kinder to myself. What a total jerk I
am to criticize myself all the time."

This excessive and/or consistent self-
criticism is a mis-use of awareness.
Awareness misused in this way is highly
biased (against us), and results in an
inwardly focused aggression that has
nothing to do with healthy self-
confrontation or mature accountability.

We must face the possibility that
awareness alone is sometimes the most
powerful healing agent. When we can
let go of the compulsion to "do
something . . . do anything!" and instead
use this compulsion as a signal to slow
down and take stock of what is going on
within and around us, and when we can
accomplish this without buying into
blaming and shaming thoughts, we take
a giant step toward becoming the self-
responsible, self-compassionate adults
that we want to be.

Through the Fear, into the Action

The medicating and distracting
behaviors (and this includes obsessive
thinking) that remove us from necessary
awareness are fueled by fear. And the
fear behind much of our resistance to
remaining with our awareness is that
awareness will lead us to hopelessness,
to giving up, staying stuck, even
agreeing that nothing can change.
Awareness is not a way of agreeing to
remain stuck. It is an essential step
toward quality change and growth.

If I want to get to New York City from where I sit right now -- which is Nashville, Tennessee -- I not only need to know where New York is on the map, I had better know where Nashville is. Knowing exactly where I am right now will make all the difference in my travels. Criticizing myself for being in Nashville when I want to be in New York will be of no use. Avoiding the knowledge of where I am certainly won't help.

Please do not misunderstand me to say that taking action does not have its place in our lives, because it certainly does. Taking action is an essential tool for any of us learning to move out of our victim ways. My point here is simply that our abilities to use awareness are atrophied, and need exercise -- rehabilitation. Action naturally growing

out of sharp, accurate awareness is more powerful than any impulsive, compulsive or desperate action can ever be. And the secret, of course, is to SLOW DOWN.

Commitment

Make a commitment to expand your awareness, to use your awareness . . . of where you are, and what you think, and what you feel, and how you are responding to what you think and feel right now. This kind of non-judgmental self-awareness will automatically mobilize you toward a healthier and happier -- and even more action-packed -- relationship with yourself. And that is where it all begins.

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