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The First Two Steps in Inner Work

Developing the Inner Witness

When someone starts doing therapy or any sort of self-reflective inner work, their first task is to develop the Inner Witness, the one who reflects your experience back to you. This has also been called the Observing Self, and its job is simply to record what you think, feel, say and do, moment to moment. The Inner Witness is only a witness. It does not judge; it does not comment; it does not correct. Those things are done by the Inner Critic, which we'll get to in a moment. The Inner Witness just makes a recording, sort of like a video recorder, so that you can go back and walk through the experience again to see how you got from point A to point B.

For instance, suppose that you are remarried after a bitter divorce and you are going out for the evening with your new husband, but you're not quite ready yet. Your husband says, "Come on; we'll be late" and suddenly you find yourself enraged and screaming at him. What happened? How did you get from 'not ready yet' to 'enraged and screaming'? You can ask your Inner Witness to play back for you, very slowly, all the steps in between.

As you review the steps, you begin to see the connections. Maybe it went something like this:

- Uh-oh, it's getting late. But I still have this one more thing to do to get ready. If I don't do it, I won't feel fully dressed for this party.
- But if I take time to do it, I'll be late again. I hate that.
- What's wrong with me, that I can't be on time? (self attack)
- He'll probably complain about it again. I really hate that. He's got no right! (attacking other)
- My first husband used to complain about it, and then, when he left me for his stupid secretary, he pretended that it was because I was late so often. (now furious and lost in the past) Damn him! It wasn't my fault!

At this point the hapless second husband says, "Come on; we'll be late" and you bite his head off, not distinguishing between him and your first husband.

If you have not developed the Inner Witness, you may think that your anger was caused by something your new husband just did, and your mind will get busy looking for the evidence to justify that idea. On the other hand, if you have the ability to go back through your own experience second by second, you will realize that what angered you was a hurt from the past, and that the present situation only reminded you of it. Now you know two important things: 1) you are still hurt and angry about the past situation, and 2) it is not happening right now. Your Inner Witness has helped you come back to the present moment and learn something about yourself in the process.

The Inner Witness is the first step required for all inner work. It is the mirror you look into to see yourself more clearly. Its job is simply to show you a clear reflection of yourself. It does not judge or comment in any way. It just shows you the movie again of everything that was going on inside you and outside you so that you can understand what happened to you. It provides the clear, accurate view of yourself that is essential to all inner work.

Changing Your Relationship with your Inner Critic

The second step required for inner work is a change in your relationship with your Inner Critic. This is the voice in your head that constantly judges and corrects you. It develops in early childhood, roughly between 2 and 5 years of age, and its job is to stop you from doing things that your parents won't like.

You create it by remembering all the times they told you to 'do this' or 'stop that' and blending them all into one voice inside your head that encourages and admonishes you. It stops you before you do the bad thing, so you don't get punished for it again. It guides you in what to do to win their praise. It tries to turn you into a little performer, into whoever they want you to be.

To do this, of course, it has to beat down many of your instincts and desires. After all, you want that cookie, dinner time or not. To make you comply, it yells at you and shames you and calls you names. Any tactic you've seen your own parents use, either on you or on someone else, it copies and uses against you. Its tone can range from merely admonishing to vicious and hateful.

I want to distinguish here between the Inner Critic and your conscience. Your conscience also offers you advice about what to do, but it matures along with you and eventually develops empathy and compassion. The Inner Critic doesn't mature much after it is formed, so for the rest of your life, it is operating on the understandings of a 5 year old. New situations are measured only against "Will Mom like this? Will I get in trouble for this?" And the Inner Critic doesn't just guide you, it attacks you in its efforts to control your behavior. A critic attack always devalues you in some way. It always makes you feel small or stupid or bad in some way. That devaluing is the hallmark of the Inner Critic and the way you can recognize it every time.

Now the hardest part about all this is that at first the voice of the Inner Critic seems to be your own voice telling you these things, calling you these names. The last major event in the formation of ego structure is the separation of the central ego from the super ego, that is, the separation of your own authentic inner voice from the voice of the Inner Critic. For many people, this step was never completed and, even as adults, they consider this inner critical voice to be their own voice. Some even believe it is the voice of truth, telling them how bad they really are.

But it is not the voice of truth. It is not even your own voice. It is the voices of other people telling you who they want you to be and how they want you to behave. Its job is to keep you inside the box they have assigned you to. This means that every time you want to grow and expand, to explore some new part of yourself, your Inner Critic will be there at the door telling you not to do it. Its job is to maintain homeostasis in the psyche, which means to keep you within the known territory and not let anything new happen.

Obviously, the Inner Critic is not a fan of inner work, or of anything that involves growing, changing, or exploring new parts of yourself. That is why the second task of inner work is to change your relationship with the Inner Critic. Instead of thinking it is your own voice and believing what it says, you need to realize that it is only a young part of you, trying to protect you in its 5-year-old way. You need to recognize when it is attacking you and learn how to defend yourself from the attack. You don't need to fight with it or try to reason with it any more than you would with a real 5 year old. Mostly you just reassure it that things will be okay and it can relax.

Once you have dis-identified from the Inner Critic and learned how to recognize and defend against its attacks, your inner exploration can proceed much more easily. You have cleared out a space in your psyche within which you can relax and explore your experience. And you have the Inner Witness to actually show you your experience. There is still a lot of work to do, but you now have a solid foundation for your inner work.