

Taking Better Care of YOU Part I –The Secret Doors

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This article is dedicated to Stu who asked how far I was willing to go to take better care of me? Through his gentle guidance and support I am going all the way!



I want to tell you a story about my search for ways of taking better care of me. I am hopeful that it will help you evaluate if you would like to take better care of you as well. In the past six months I have attended a workshop about inner tranquility, begun training in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) and participated in a week-long program of mind, body and spirit integration sponsored by the National Institute for The Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine (NICABM). All of these and more influenced what follows.

NO RIGHT WAY

One of the most refreshing aspects of the workshops I attended was the repeated statement by presenters that there was no one right way to implement or practice these activities. We were encouraged over and over to just do it any way that felt comfortable to us. That was a very, very helpful instruction. It allowed for wide latitude, no mistakes and freedom to just be. To take better care of us we need to disconnect from perfectionist expectations and more comfortably embrace the idea of “good enough.”

It made me realize that we tend to live life as if there is one right way to do the things we do. In so doing, we restrict ourselves and add needlessly to our self-consciousness and the pressure we put on ourselves. In many instances, we give up our own choices and personal power to live up to unreasonable or inaccurate expectations that we believe exist. Truth be known, there are different ways to live our lives and different consequences as a result. There are a few guiding principles that can make a significant difference in terms of the quality and substance of our lives, but many, many different ways to apply those fundamental principles.

My hope is that, as you continue to read this article, you will begin to see many more ways to take better care of you and be able to personalize it to your specific situation. More importantly is that you will be able to embrace a “no right way” philosophy that will free you to be more creative in your pursuit of personal satisfaction, balance and inner peace.

A GIVING HEART

The majority of people who come to visit my office have what I would call a giving heart. They are kind and caring people -- generous to a fault. They give of themselves, their time, energy, emotion and money. They are supportive of their loved ones and friends and are typically available to be of assistance. That they are visiting me means that they are not as happy in their lives as they might be, but still willing to give to those around them in caring ways. There is only one exception to this rule. They are not as generous or as giving to themselves.

It is as if they put themselves last, allowing, if not encouraging, everyone else to go ahead. While that is noble, it is not necessarily fair, healthy or appropriate. I encourage time-sharing of caring so that at least some is self-directed.

There are many ways we could be more giving to ourselves. I do not mean materially for the most part, but in all other areas of life. A new shirt, dress, car or whatever doesn't quite do it. Here is a partial list of ways that we could be kinder and more caring of ourselves:

- Being more affirming of our positive qualities and less focused on our not so positive ones except to try to modify them.
- Giving ourselves time to enjoy life more than being hyper-focused and obsessed with work, achievement, being there for others and doing rather than being .
- Accepting ourselves as we are rather than constantly tormenting ourselves with our need to be thinner, more social, more accepted by others, etc.
- Giving ourselves the freedom of mobility to walk about the cabin of our lives with less worry, self-consciousness or self-doubt.
- Allowing ourselves time to relax and enjoy the little things in life which actually tend to be the really big things in life.
- Having the patience to know that personal growth and healing are slow and that becoming a whole person is not an easy or effortless process.

WE CAN CHANGE

Whoever said, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” was wrong. They were either totally misguided in their thinking or focusing on dogs instead of people. In the past six months I have learned a variety of things that have allowed me to make modifications in the way I feel and function. I am different. A transformation has shifted my view of myself and my world. Though seemingly small, these changes are actually huge and expanding like a sponge under water. One shift builds upon the other in a synergy of modifications. I have always said that the opposite of a vicious cycle is a positive one. It feels as if the chains that have bound me up for years and years are slowly breaking, freeing me from my well -practiced drills of overly productive engagement.

To encourage these changes, I practiced the very steps I will be outlining in this article. The doors have worked well for me because I have worked hard on me. When embarking on personal growth, modification and transformation, nothing is more powerful than the commitment to achieve that. Changes of this type require much more than proceeding rotely through a series of steps. They involve opening one’s mind, embracing one’s heart and being willing to learn to walk all over again. When we were children we would take a step or two or three, fall down, pick ourselves up and go forward again until we mastered that skill. The same is true now. We need to be willing to stumble and even fall, never losing sight of our goals or the belief that we can achieve them.

As you will come to learn, the doors are easier to identify than they are to open. Timing and luck have their roles in any transformative effort. As we shall also see, part of being different is being a little indifferent to that which has always

been very important and of the highest priority. We need to challenge our assumptions about life and ourselves and what I have come to call the “drills” that have become habituated. I strongly believe you can be different, too. Whatever your emotional issues might be, significant alterations are obtainable. No one needs to be stuck and remain rooted in the ruts of their own making unless they so choose. Hopefully, what follows will be a stimulant to encourage you to assess your present state and make changes to take better care of you.

MY JOURNEY

I recently attended a workshop in Norwalk, Connecticut sponsored by Miriam’s Well about finding one’s inner tranquility. Believe me when I say that if I knew my inner tranquility was waiting for me in Connecticut I would have gone there to get it thirty-five years ago. The workshop was conducted by a brilliant philosopher, poet and former priest, John O’Donohue. His lilting Irish brogue, from which pearls of wisdom flowed like spring water, illuminated dark spaces with the candle power of a floodlight and the harmony of a verbal symphony. The workshop was called “The Elegance of Spirit”. It was presented in a truly elegant way which added to my inner tranquility.

This trip was part of a journey I have begun to learn how to take better care of me and to help others do the same for themselves. This article is a first step in that direction. My search is for philosophies, strategies and tools of healing, health and peace of mind. These are so critical to our sanity and survival -- yet, seemingly scarce in today’s stress-laced world. We seem to be suffocated by stuff that interferes with anything even remotely close to feeling comfortable, content and balanced in our day-to-day lives.

As I have previously written, (see www.williampenzerphd.com, “A Hole In Your Self: Parts I,II, III”) we all seem to struggle with deep holes in our self that stretch across our lives. Old wounds join with new ones in a never-ending, self-defeating and self-deflating way. I search to accelerate the healing process to decelerate our tendencies toward self-destruction. I believe I have found some helpful sutures to facilitate stitching up our holes.

WHY DON’T WE TAKE BETTER CARE OF US?

The following lists the most frequently cited reasons that are given to explain tendencies toward self-deprivation and less than equitable self-care taking behaviors:

- time
- money
- demands of life
- self-sabotage
- not feeling deserving
- a distorted philosophy that we learned early on

The list divides in two – the first three are excuses, not reasons. As we shall see, taking better care of your SELF requires little time, virtually no money and won't interfere with your life responsibilities. Small modifications can yield big dividends in this area.

The second three items are really at the core of our not taking better care of ourselves and they work together. A self-denying philosophy marries with a less than deserving sense of self which produce as their offspring a full house of self-sabotage. Divorcing from this unholy and unhealthy alliance becomes your goal and challenge.

SIMPLE WAYS OF SELF-CARE

I want to stress that taking better care of your SELF involves allowing time and focus onto simple, easily available and relatively inexpensive opportunities. These include anything from just taking a few minutes to sit quietly, get in touch with the present and trying not to focus on anything in particular all the way to taking a class in yoga, doing mindful meditation, listening to relaxing music, a guided imagery CD or just taking a walk for 10 minutes or more in your neighborhood, at the park or the beach. Sitting on a bench at the beach would qualify as would a bubble bath or enjoying a nap.

Basically, there are three components. One is a mindset that encourages taking better care of you on a regular basis. The second is surrounding yourself with tools that support a more peaceful and tranquil experience. In this regard people enjoy having a fountain, listening to relaxing music, lighting a candle, keeping live flowers or plants around, fish tanks or bowls filled with pretty rocks, etc. These help to facilitate and encourage a more relaxing ambiance. The third involves a wide range of activities that people do on a regular basis that encourage relaxed states of mind and body. These include relaxation exercises, physical exercise, meditation, self-hypnosis, yoga, etc. Taken together these three components can make a significant difference in your mental and physical health.

THREE SECRET DOORS OR MORE

John O'Donohue asked as homework to discover three secret doors through which we can get out of our own way. What was at first an intriguing and mysterious question became for me an exercise into looking more closely at the process of personal change and growth. Truth be known, there may be more than three doors and each of us have unique ones that relate to our particular situation. To get out of our own way I believe we need a strategy – perhaps a series of steps that slowly, but surely, move us from point A to some other point down the alphabet. It may only be from A to B or A to D or so on, but it is clear that getting out of our way requires some degree of modification. My three doors – I discovered five actually – stand on The Bridge I Call Transition. This critically important bridge is one we walk each time, either by choice or circumstances, we

set out to make changes in our life and our self. It is the bridge upon which people visiting my office or those of my colleagues walk. It is a bridge I have tried to cross many times in my life – sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

THE WATERS BELOW

Below The Bridge I Call Transition lie troubled waters. This makes the Bridge I Call Transition the Bridge Over Troubled Waters. Hopefully, Simon and Garfunkel will not sue me! In these choppy, dark and polluted waters lie a lifetime of our mental muck and misery. Included are times we were hurt, insulted, abused, taken advantage of, put down, called names, made to feel inadequate and inferior or came to feel that on our own. These and more are all floating along like flotsam in a dirty canal. This cess makes a mess and blocks our way to healthier habits and taking better care of ourselves. This is what makes our walk over The Bridge I Call Transition such an important one to get to healthier places and more self-caretaking ways.

MY FIVE SECRET DOORS

In my exploration to find these doors, I have uncovered five that make sense to me. I do not mean to imply that they will make sense to you, but encourage you to consider mine and then consider what might work for you. Feel free to borrow from these if they work or find different ones if those make better sense to you. Important is the essence of John's question. Namely, that we find some ways to get out of our own way, stop tripping ourselves up and begin taking better care of us.

The five doors I have identified are:

Door Number One, **Participant Observation** -- We need to look more closely at ourselves to see how we get in our own way so we can get out of our own way.

Door Number Two, **The Transformational Hypothesis** -- At the heart of all change lies the belief and hypothesis that we can. We don't know for sure, but we hypothesize that we may be able to.

Door Number Three, **Redefinition** -- This involves breaking long standing habits of mind and body (i.e., thoughts, feelings and behaviors) to create alternatives that move us in the direction of better self-care.

Door Number Four, **Continuity** -- This is the hardest part of the change and modification process which involves sustaining those changes and not "relapsing" back into past unhealthy habits.

Door Number Five, **Meant to Be** -- This door is the more spiritual one. It basically asserts that, "timing is everything."

This is a very brief summary of the five doors I have discovered for myself which might have some relevance to you as well. What follows is a discussion of these doors and the hinges upon which they swing.

DOOR NUMBER ONE



Behind Door Number 1 (I suddenly feel like Bob Barker on The Price Is Right) is **Participant Observation**. The path to all personal change, I believe, is taking stock and a closer look at ourselves. We need to know how and when we get in our way, in order to begin to identify ways to avoid doing that.

Intriguingly, though we are all self-conscious to varying extents, that and participant-observation are not the same. Self-consciousness tends to be about how we look or how we measure up on some internal competitive scale that we have distortedly created. Our self-consciousness reeks with judgmental stuff that is highly critical, typically unfair, exaggerated and intrusive. It is filled with “not good enough” self-statements. In fact, self-consciousness is one of the many ways that we get in our own way.

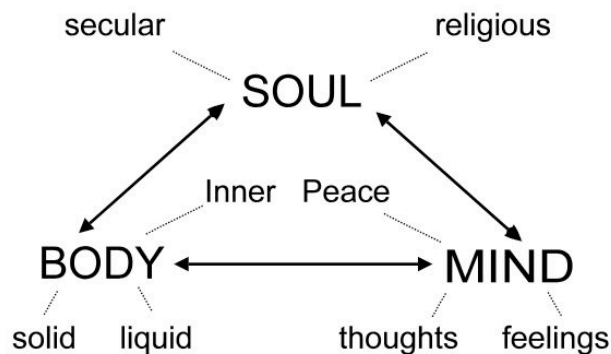
Participant observation or heightened self-awareness helps because it is a non-judgmental, unobtrusive and quiet process. We gather data about our self like a researcher testing scientific hypotheses by observing what happens. In this sense the laboratory is us. It is looking sideways at the subtle parts of ourselves as we go about our life. It is reminiscent of that great scene in the movie, “Dead Poet’s Society,” when Robin Williams, playing a teacher in a boys’ private school, suddenly jumps up on his desk and encourages his students to look from different angles and perspectives to better understand the subtleties of life and themselves. In that brief, but powerful, soliloquy he spoke to all kindred students of life and self.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Although you may be intrigued by the notion of looking a little more closely at yourself, you may wonder what you are supposed to be looking at. Remember, there is no “right way.” No clear formula exists to guide you in this participant observation process, but there is a formulation that may be of help. The following diagram illustrates a model of a person composed of a body, a mind and a soul. Though by no means original, it is a simple, graphic summary of the components of our SELF.

I believe if we can keep these three critical pathways of our self in reasonable balance, we can experience inner peace, tranquility and a spiritual glow. It follows that if any of these zones are out of balance in some significant way the likelihood of experiencing inner peace is not high.

Figure 1. Our goal is to try to fill our self with healthy substances in all areas. Inner peace is our reward if we can find a healthy balance upon which to manage our life. This is a very interactive model with each area influencing all others.



It seems clear that our goal is to put pure things into our body and mind which will, in turn, nourish those areas as well as our soul. The healthier the input, the healthier is your self. Your task is to look more closely to see what you are putting into your body, your mind and your soul. Assess your present circumstance and evaluate if you are comfortable with that or would like to make any changes or modifications. Decide what percent of what you do now is in the direction of putting healthy substances into your mind, body and soul and then decide whether you are comfortable with that or whether you would like to raise that percentage to a higher level. The nice part is that you get to decide just how healthful and balanced you want to be.

This simple-minded model is but a suggestion as to how you might approach your self-observations. Any other framework or perspective from which you would like to view yourself is fine. The beauty of self-care is in that there are no rules except that you take a closer look and see what you might do on your own behalf. There truly is no right way.

KNOW THYSELF A LITTLE BETTER

Though we may think we know ourselves well, there is always more we can learn. Be particularly alert to what I call your personal “drills.” I believe that, over time, people slip into programmed behavior patterns that are analogous to the plays of a football team or the steps of a dance or drill team. These become so well practiced, ingrained and habituated that they occur automatically – no thought or conscious focus required.

There is pay dirt buried in identifying and challenging these drills from a self-care taking point of view. In so many small but significant ways, you may be robbing yourself of opportunities as you rush through your life. Forget about smelling the flowers – so many can’t even see them. Rather than tiptoeing through the tulips, you may be trampling on them without missing a step.

Here is a personal example. In practicing Door # 1, I noticed that when a person visiting me cancels last minute or doesn’t show up I have a “free hour” drill. I immediately go to my phone list and start making calls. Then, if time allows, I file papers and files. Then I go to my bag of paperwork stuff and get busy with forms, bills, etc. The guiding, underlying, unverbilized philosophy seems to be “BE PRODUCTIVE !!” don’t waste a moment of time, achieve !!! That same credo seems to guide many other drills of mine as well. In fact, it may have ruled my life for almost 50 years.

Another example of a drill that I have observed is the way people shop at the supermarket. We buy mostly the same items and we have a route that we follow to get them in the most efficient fashion. While that makes eminently good sense in our hustle- bustle world, having noticed that in myself, I decided to take some extra time and wander some aisles I rarely, if ever, go to for any reason. I was rather amazed to notice products that I never knew existed. Some were interesting and tempting, while others were not to my taste, but the experience was an eye opener in terms of not always being bound by my “drill.” Opening your eyes a little wider to the world around you can be a very interesting experience that expands your horizons and adds to your knowledge base.

Intriguingly, when I have traveled to foreign countries I have paid much more attention to the products in their supermarkets and the associated prices than I would at our home base. This is similar to people who live in New York City, but have never been to the top of the Empire State Building, though are quick to do the sights when they travel. The goal of breaking up our home-grown drills takes us directly to Door Number Two.

DOOR NUMBER TWO



Behind Door # 2 lies an important issue which I call the **Transformational Hypothesis**. It states that you can change some of your drill behavior into taking better care of your SELF. It is a hypothesis about transformational potentials which may hopefully prove true. An example is when we say we are going to diet, exercise and lose weight. We don't know it will happen, but we hypothesize that it will and then test that by trying to do that. In a sense, to get out of your own way you need to hypothesize that you can and then test that hypothesis by combining your personal efforts with tools and resources.

Once you walk through Door Number 2 there are many smaller doors that sit like a labyrinth within. Each door has a name on it that is a tool through which transformation can be accomplished. These include: Yoga, Relaxation Training, Meditation, Hypnosis, Therapy, EMDR, Religious Participation, Support Groups, QiGong, Taking a Class, Reading a Book, etc. All of these and more exist through Door Number 2 as very helpful resources to assist you in your journey across The Bridge I Call Transition.

As it relates to my "free hour" drill (which is not very free at all), I hypothesized that I could do it differently. I looked at other alternatives. I gave myself permission to explore other ways I could use that time. I introduced choice as opposed to what has become a rigid repetitive routine. With that mind set I was able to take it a step closer to Door Number Three.

IT'S NOT AS IMPORTANT AS WE THINK

Part of the reason we develop our life drills is that we are comforted by predictability. The more lives are structured around these routines, the more we feel we know what's coming at us. Though this is mostly illusory, we face each day with many such false, but reassuring beliefs. This is why even people who are not as compelled to achieve and be productive also have their "drills." Friday is neighborhood pub night, Saturday is date night, Sunday is football, Tuesday night is poker, mahjonn, or bingo, etc. These types of drills, while

certainly more playful, are not necessarily in the direction of inner peace and tranquility either. Each person needs to define his/her own personalized rebalancing. The really lovely part of taking better care of you is that you decide the way to do that.

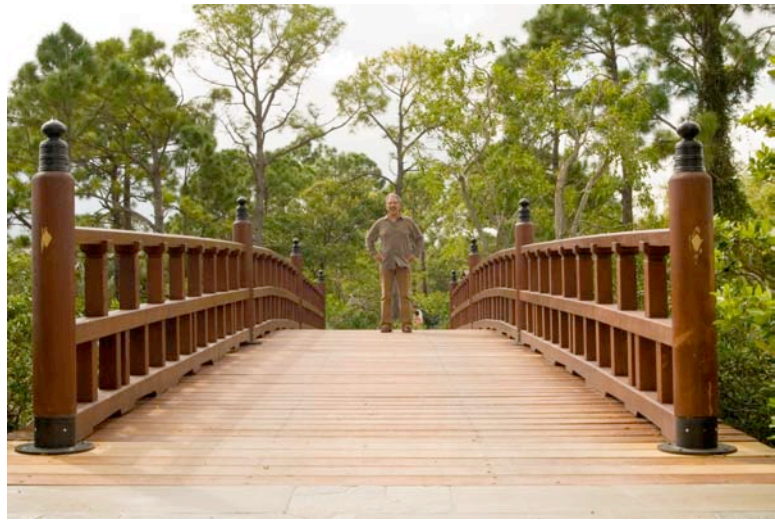
It is important to realize that much of what people view as important isn't really all that important. We create the value of our self-created drills. As we move from Door #2 to Door# 3, we need to reevaluate our actions relative to their actual importance. Obviously, I have a responsibility to return phone calls, do paperwork, etc., but I can modify my drill to include fresh air, reading, writing or goofing off. Oh my goodness, not goofing off! Well maybe? I can take care of my responsibilities later or even tomorrow. Those task (assuming no emergency calls) are not that important and, frankly, I'm not that important except to a few. The likelihood is that some of your drills are similarly unimportant, while you and I are eminently important in terms of taking better care of ourselves.

Recently, I posed this hypothetical question to a group to whom I was giving a talk about taking better care of themselves. You can hear that talk on www.williampenzerphd.com if you are patient enough to allow 4+ minutes to download. In my highly biased opinion it is worth it. I asked them to imagine a horrible thought just for self-exploratory purposes. Make believe one of our fearless leaders comes on the TV one night and says:

Ladies & gentleman and all good citizens of the world. I am sorry to report that due to a technical glitch that we will not be able to fix, the world -- the entire planet earth -- will be destroyed 90 days from today. I am sorry to be the bearer of such news. G-d bless and G-d speed.

This somewhat morbid and macabre scene can be a catalyst to taking a closer look at how you spend your time and how you might in this end of the world scenario. What would you stop doing and what would you do more? How would you spend the last ninety days of your life? Certainly, I am not encouraging you to abandon your responsibilities, but am encouraging you not to abandon your SELF while carrying out your responsibilities. You need to become more aware, rather than remain oblivious, to the times you short-change your SELF and slowly, but surely redefine yourself in a more balanced way. This brings us to and hopefully through Door # 3.

DOOR NUMBER THREE



It is relatively simple to get to Door # 3, which I call **Redefinition**, but very difficult to get through it. You may stand before it on The Bridge I Call Transition for quite a while before you figure out how to open this particular door. It is one thing to hypothesize transformation and quite another to achieve it.

Two ideas hopefully prevail:

- Patience is a virtue worth courting!
- Never, never, never give up!

The drills in which you engage can, at times, feel like they are cemented in with crazy glue. In fact, they are. All of our behaviors – eating, sleeping, working, playing, etc. -- are very consistent day-to-day, week-to-week. Even minor modifications can be easily resisted by those parts of you that need them to remain in place. Thoughts and feelings can be as scripted repetitively as your behaviors. You can become as addicted to your habits of thought, feelings and behavior as people become to drugs. You can be jonesing for your fix of whatever, like the person on the corner waiting for his/her “candy man.” Your troubled waters cement your habits and defenses into place.

Two quick personal examples will illustrate the point. A few years ago, I was writing a book about losing weight, (“YoYo No More: My Skinny on Being Fat”), and pondered the general issue of changing behavior. In the context of learning to modify behavior I tried to change the direction in which I walk in the park near my home. It is a winding oval path, a little less than a mile long, which I like to do for two to three laps. I have always walked starting in the northerly direction and decided to reverse course and go the other way. Obviously, it doesn’t matter which way you go and people walk and bike in both directions.

Truth be known, I couldn’t comfortably do it. I tried several times, but it felt strange and my typical view of the landscape was reversed and altered in a meaningless, but agitating way. Since this was a change for change sake situation and since I walked for health and relaxation, I abandoned my effort.

Yet, just as it is for a dieter that starts and stops within days, Door # 3 can be a bear!

Example two is a current effort to force my way through Door # 3. For more than twenty years I have enjoyed taking a steam bath four or more times a week. It provides a relaxing experience with a nice release of toxins, while offering the illusion of losing a couple of pounds, at least until I drink a glass of water. While almost all people in the co-ed steam room at the gym just stare into space or close their eyes, for as long as I have been going I sit and read the newspaper. Yet another “be productive” drill in which I have unwittingly engaged.

Invariably someone in the room will say, “How can you read in here?” to which I reply, “ My paper is waterproof,” with enough of a glare that they chuckle and leave me alone. Upon returning from Connecticut and John’s deliciously alpha inducing meditations, I decided to meditate in the steam room. They seemed to complement each other in a synergy of tranquility.

I chuckled to myself as I carried the paper with me to the steam room despite my meditational intentions. I swear it would have been easier to leave my swimsuit in the locker than my paper! That said, I am not a news lover, feel most of it is negative and not the brightest, literally and figuratively, way to start or end one’s day. I brought it with me none-the-less as some form of security blanket and laid it aside as I concentrated on breathing deeply from my belly. Within a minute, two at the most, a voice inside my head was shouting, “You should be reading the paper.” Within a minute thereafter I was. A minute after that another voice was shouting, “Meditate, reading this junk is not tranquil.” It is quite amazing I am sane, given the discordant chorus that lives inside my head. Lest you think I am some kind of obsessive nut with compulsive features, rest assured that many of you experience similar challenges, albeit in different areas of your life. I’m not the only one that hears a conflicting chorus inside my head.

So far this dueling chorus continues, but I am committed next time I go not to bring a newspaper and see what happens. I’ll keep you posted as I struggle to crawl my way through Door # 3. When the serenity prayer says, “Strength to change what I can,” it ain’t kidding around. Yet, in other areas such as my free time drill, I have sailed right through Door #3. Now, when this occurs, I go out of my office and enjoy the fresh air, sun and sights around me. I call this being mindless which I would like to do more in the future. Then I decide how I want to spend the rest of the time. Sometimes I read, sometimes I make my calls and do my paperwork and actually started writing this article during one such break.

By challenging my drill, giving myself choices and focusing on what works best for me in the spontaneous moment, I am supporting the transformational hypothesis and succeeding in taking better care of me. While this may be a joke to any card carrying narcissist, for me it is a giant step forward in getting a step closer to Door # 4.

Eventually, with patience, persistence and perseverance we can get through. Sometimes it is a waiting game till the moon, sun and stars are in the right position or your head is on straight, or you are so desperate you just do it. I write the latter prescription a lot in my office and Nike and Company would be proud of its effectiveness.

DOOR NUMBER FOUR



Hard as Door # 3 is to get through, Door # 4 is even more difficult. I call it **Continuity**. The easiest way to define it is that it is the opposite of yo-yoing. It is the maintenance part of a diet at which just about everyone, except my mother, fails. She's maintained her weight for 47 years and still hits the gym twice a week at age 97. She and I would like to write an article soon to help you know her philosophy of life. Continuity, hers and yours is sustaining the redefinitions you fought so hard to achieve. It is not relapsing back to previous drills, but continuing to mix it up in self-enhancing ways.

Clearly, given how hard it is to avoid the yoyo despite all the benefits and prideful feelings redefinitions offer, we are taking on powerful forces from within ourselves. It is as if tidal waves from our troubled waters can knock us right off The Bridge I Call Transition. I believe scientists will someday discover that our "drills" and habituated ways over years and years have a neurological, as well as psychological, basis just as substance addictions do. This tug-a-war in which we all participate may be so difficult because we are fighting both emotional forces and neuropsychological pathways that do not yield easily.

The good news is that they do yield. As any recovering addict, no longer smoking, resolved panic and anxiety or eating disordered person can attest, we can walk through Doors 1 through 3 and sustain it for a lifetime by staying snug and secure behind Door # 4, once and for all and forever. Despite my compulsive nature and my consummate inhaling of cigarettes and pipes for almost thirty years, I haven't puffed in over twenty. As Pete Seeger taught us years ago, "We shall overcome someday."

A TALE OF IMPROBABLE, BUT PONDERABLE EVENTS –

DOOR NUMBER FIVE



I was momentarily dumbfounded when at Saturday’s outdoor lunch in Connecticut, among an umbrella of leaves slowly turning into an artist’s palette, Richard, co-founder of Miriam’s Well, sat down with us. It was as strange as the warm greeting he gave us upon our arrival Friday evening as he shouted to his wife, Susan, the other co-founder, “The Penzers are here. “ Though they are warm and welcoming people by nature, to be greeted as special friends, given we’d never met, seemed puzzling, but wonderfully appreciated.

After some small talk, Richard looked at me and said, “You know it is because of you that we are all here.” I hadn’t a clue what he was talking about and, in my stereotypical, clinical tone, I replied, “How so?” He said, “Remember when you called, you asked if we were sure we were going to have this program because you didn’t want to get stuck with plane tickets.” I hadn’t remembered, but his prompt quickly reminded me that my wife encouraged me to ask the question. He went on to say there were many logistical obstacles and an initially low number of signups and they considered canceling the workshop. Then they remembered their promise to me, went forward based on that commitment (which reflects the elegance of their character) and ended up with sixty plus attendees and this most transformative experience.

As I pondered this improbable set of events, I remembered something John had said at the workshop that morning. “Ask the right question at the right time to the right person and wondrous things can happen.” We did and it did! This all brings to mind that delightfully textured Yiddish word-- Bashert -- which translates into “meant to be.” Both good and not so good things are “bashert” according to this practical wisdom. In this context the most important door on The Bridge I Call Transition is labeled **Meant To Be**.

The point of Door # 5 is that we can lay out a set of steps to achieve transformation like pavers on a slippery slope, but unless, it is meant to be it is not likely to happen. This is why timing is so important and persistence such a

necessary part of the transformative process. We never know when meant to be is right now.

A MAGICAL CAPE

In the spirit of Harry Potter, what would five secret doors be without a magical cape that will help you pass through each one along The Bridge I Call Transition. The front of this beautiful cape is made of the finest silk fabric in a lovely print of your own design. This front piece I call Gratitude. It is the fundamental acknowledgement of all the good that we enjoy no matter how bad the bad. Life, as we know, is not easy but surely we have some positive things within our self and with others whom we love and cherish. Gratitude affirms and acknowledges these in a powerful and positive way. It is something we don't do enough of in the course of our everyday lives. For reasons that are not so easy to understand, people tend to be more attached to the negatives than to the positives. Gratitude helps us to detach from that and finally count it all!

The back panel of our cape is equally beautiful and designed to your own taste. I call this piece of cloth Acceptance. This includes acceptance of yourself and those you love and care about despite all of the faults and blemishes that we as people carry with us. It also includes acceptance of life as it is for better or for worse in all of its complexities. The more we accept, the more comfortable energy we create; the more we resist the more negative energy persists. Acceptance of our self, as we are, paves the way for affirming ourselves and taking better care of us.

This beautiful silken cape is sewn together with golden threads I call Compassion. This is a very important element given our tendency to be judgmental and see ourselves and others in negative terms. Compassion allows us a perspective that is more tolerant, kind, caring and understanding. It allows us to be more aware of our vulnerabilities and the limitations that all of us carry with us as a result of our programming by the negative experiences stored in the troubled waters below The Bridge I Call Transition.

With these three elements framing our perceptions we are better equipped to traverse the bridge, move through its doors and unlock the blocks to taking better care of ourselves. These also provide a framework within which to appreciate the magnitude of the project and its feasibility. In this cape we are finally able to see ourselves bathed in a shimmering light that glows with our fundamental dignity and elegance.

THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE PSYCHOLOGIST

Door # 5 may be the only door to which John O'Donohue would give his blessings. Believe me when I say he gives many, many beautiful ones. He is a strong believer in the idea that, "the implicit structure will unfold on its own." He

feels we should not mess it up by being too eager. He goes on to say that," If you search for yourself you will never find yourself. Furthermore, that it is undignified to be so taken with a personal project of self-improvement." Perhaps that is where a philosopher and a psychologist choose different paths. The philosopher is ready to, just as the Beatles suggested, "Let it be." The psychologist is ever positioning to facilitate change and encourage proactivity. My hope is that in this article the philosopher and the psychologist can walk together arm in arm.

In "Anam Cara, A Book of Celtic Wisdom," John O'Donohue says,

Spirituality is the art of transfiguration. We should not force ourselves to change by hammering our lives into any pre-determined shape...It is far more creative to work with the idea of mindfulness rather than with the idea of will. Too often people try to change their lives by using the will as a kind of hammer to beat their lives into proper shape...

Clearly, I don't completely agree. I believe we can try to shape and sculpt our own destiny with tools that are softer than hammers, but more forceful than mindfulness alone. We can take a more purposeful position with regard to reformulating our views and transforming into someone far more self-caretaking. We can begin to walk The Bridge I Call Transition to move from and over our troubled waters. This needn't be obsessive, but can be directive and intentional. I say this with much respect for John's vision into our soul, but giving equal significance to my vision into our SELF.

As previously said, my doors make sense to me. Any door or ways you use to take better care of you that work are fine. It is the desire to take better care of you, rather than the path you take, that is important.

STEAM ROOM SERENDIPITY

Despite giving it a really good shot, I must confess that I failed meditation in the steam room 101 big time. Despite a number of attempts, I just couldn't get into it. I finally concluded, as I did with regard to walking in the opposite direction, that some changes are not that important and some habits so engrained as to not be worth the effort. I accepted that without criticism or any sense of failure.

Intriguingly, at the NICABM conference, I took a 3 day class on mindfulness meditation. On the first day I was able to meditate to a reasonable extent although I have an active mind that tends to go all over the place. Thank goodness the teacher gave us wide range and permission to do it any way we could. On the second day, however, the room in which we were meeting was extremely cold. I found that I was not able to get very much into the meditations

all that day. I have come to conclude that the extremes of temperature and my meditative potentials do not work well together. When it is too hot or too cold my mind has trouble going ohmm! I will continue to try to include meditation in my everyday diet when the temperature is right. This is much more positive than being concerned when certain conditions do not work well for me. I encourage you to take that same position with any self-caretaking efforts in which you might engage. When it works - great. When it doesn't that is OK. That you tried is positive. It is time to try another self-caretaking strategy!

WALKING THE WALK

In that same regard, at the NICABM meeting, the thought occurred about what I would do if I showed up at the park upon my return to find that the north pathway had been closed until further notice. In that scenario, my only choice would be to start my walk in a southerly direction or go home. I know for sure I would not choose the latter as I really enjoy walking in this park. I love the greenery, squirrels, ducks, turtles, parrots and other birds and all of the other beautiful sights and sounds. Thus, I have decided that the north passage is closed. This is not really the case but I am making it up for purposes of changing. I believe with that mindset I will be able to shift and go in the other direction. This is no different than my being told that the office in which I rent space one time a week in Boca is closing at the end of the year. I went right about the business of finding an alternative location. Had it not closed, it is likely I would have stayed there for life, even though the conditions were not ideal for me.

What this brings up is the issue of an internal versus external basis of control. We tend to be more adaptive to external forces than we might be to internal ones. Most people will adapt to changes brought about by outside influences. Therefore, there may be times where we want to play around with the notion that we can't continue doing whatever it is we are doing that is not particularly helpful or caretaking because of some outside force, even if that is not truly the case. It might just help us to continue our passage across The Bridge I Call Transition just because, we have to!

INFINITE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITLESS OPPORTUNITIES

These words, often spoken, are undeniably true. We who are horrified at the thought of having to go to prison can so easily create one of our own and become our own jailor and warden. We limit ourselves! The reality is we can do most anything we want, anytime we want, if we want. Despite a variety of barriers and restrictions, roadblocks, detours and dead ends, we have seen that people can do amazing things. The truth is your mind is a power tool and you can plug it in any time you want to take advantage of its healthy energy. In that context we can all do a little better job taking better care of ourselves.

IN CONCLUSION

To sum up, I am encouraging a way to get out of your way by prioritizing taking better care of yourself. To achieve this goal you need to observe yourself, hypothesize change, work toward redefining and then sustaining those changes and time it all properly. Changing some of your ways becomes a process of modifying long established habits of thought, feelings and behaviors. This, in turn, may require understanding the underpinnings of your drills and regimens to facilitate modifying them.

I wish I had discovered these doors and their accompanying philosophy many years ago. In that sense my tranquility was waiting for me in Connecticut. I just didn't know about it. Living with a transformative perspective is exciting and energizing. In the ideal it is a philosophy upon which to launch one's life from eighteen on. No matter your age, it is never too late!

Beyond the few examples I have shared there are many more of my self-caretaking in the past few months. I am much less focused on doing and much more motivated to just be in tranquil space. Though I want to continue being helpful to people as long as I am alive and able, I will learn to do it differently. I am planning to integrate my psychotherapy work with teaching relaxing tools and techniques. I am not working as many hours as I used to. I now do more and more phone visits which will eventually allow me more choices as to where I live and how often I visit my office.

There has also been growth in other areas. I am more able to confront people and situations that upset me and find paths to more inner peace. I am more comfortable being me and accepting my strengths and limitations. I wear my magic cape every day. You may not see it, but I know it is there. In addition, I have taken many trips in the last six months for educational, experiential and enjoyable reasons and will continue to do that in '08 and beyond. What's more, goofing off is starting to feel like fun and mindlessness can be as elegant as mindfulness!

Going one step further, I realized from the forms that follow that shooting hoops in the schoolyard in the Bronx, N.Y. as a kid was a real peaceful high for me. I recently bought a basketball and shoot a few at the end of my walk, now taking place in the southerly direction. I'm confident the Miami Heat scouts will be calling soon. What is a bit ironic is that while shooting baskets I came up with a great idea for a novel. I guess, for this "old dog" new tricks blend with old drills. For me, that is what I call transformation. The point is that we seek a better and more complete integration of our responsibilities and the "drills" that we have created with better self-caretaking. Try not to settle for tokenism, but rather a fully integrated bus on which to ride the rest of your journey. That is my goal for me and my hope for you.

In this regard I wish you fortitude and good fortune if you choose to begin to cross over The Bridge I Call Transition. I wish you the wisdom to know which doors work best for you, and which are uniquely yours. I sincerely hope that getting out of your own way is meant to be at this time in your life, just as this wonderful John O'Donohue workshop was for all who attended, as was this very writing which grew out of it. Chaim Potok taught us that, "All beginnings are difficult." He was undeniably correct, but not trying to discourage our efforts. He was merely alerting us to be prepared for a challenge as we begin all journeys – especially the one of trying to get out of our way from that which blocks our taking better care of ourselves. In the final analysis Stu's question is relevant. How far are YOU willing to go to take better care of yourself? Only you can answer that. I sincerely hope that sharing my tales and my experiences will help you to figure it out for yourself.

SELF LOVE IS NOT SO VILE A SIN AS
SELF NEGLECTING
William Shakespeare

