

Provocative story that breaks thinking patterns to empower life-changing decisions.

A Left-Brain Thinker On a Right-Brain Journey

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Chapter 3

A True Story: Identifying Root Cause for Change

November 1998 was when it all began to unravel for me. I was travelling frequently to meet clients. My young consulting practice was four years old and I was already booked solid with engagements, which prevented me from taking on any new business strategy clients for at least the next six months. It appeared as if everything was going great. I loved the work I was doing professionally. The engagements were intellectually stimulating and challenging. My clients flew me to first class resorts and exciting cities to work with their Boards of Directors. My relationships with my husband and six-year old son were good. Finances were not a concern.

We had recently moved from the Washington D.C. area to Florida and lived in a beautiful new home near my husband's large family. I enjoyed the warmth of the Florida sunshine and the casual lifestyle. But I felt completely stressed out, frazzled and unhappy. How could that be when I had everything going for me? I had the flexibility and control that an independent consulting firm provides, yet a feeling of constraint and constriction was deeply bothering me. My ability to understand my feelings was hampered because of the busyness of my lifestyle, along with the illogical paradox of thinking that I had everything I wanted, yet feeling unsatisfied.

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There is a wonderful quote written by Caroline Myss, author of *Sacred Contracts* and *Anatomy of the Spirit*, which fit my situation perfectly: “Chaos is the precursor to transformation.” What the author meant was that you have to get to a point of so much chaos and pain that you demand change in your life. I was approaching that level of chaos and pain, although I did not know it. I was getting ready to embark on a transformation, but did not even know the word existed for me or what it meant in a personal context. Here is what happened.

My friend and business colleague, JR, casually suggested a book she had enjoyed, *The Path*, by Laurie Beth Jones. The book is about identifying or clarifying your personal mission, with a process offered as assistance. I laughed at the idea of reading this book. I thought, “The contents of this book are what I do for clients every single day – work on mission and vision.” After further thought, however, I realized even though I had completed a strategic plan five years earlier when I started my consulting business, I had never focused on the personal use of a mission or vision. It had always been in the context of professional self and goals. I contemplated the idea of devoting time to this process and decided it would be an interesting experiment.

I began to dig into the book, but could not stop my brain from thinking about the varied business processes that I used with clients to uncover mission and vision, and ultimately, implementation of goals. What would happen, if anything, if I applied those business processes to myself? Would it make a difference? Would I have greater clarity or insight? Would I feel uplifted with a plan just like my clients tell me

they feel after we finish a strategic planning process? Well, why not try it?

A month later, in December 1998, I was still exploring these questions while traveling at top speed in the air and on the ground, mentally and physically. One of the questions I needed to take a hard look at was, “what feels wrong in my life right now?” I know this question sounds negative and simplistic, especially when there is so much to be thankful and appreciative for. But I did need to confront what was bothering me in order to grow beyond it. In a business, this question might be presented as “what are the critical issues preventing us from moving forward?” For both humans and businesses, what is itching below or on the surface, wanting or demanding our attention?

Before I continue, I want you to think about this question from the book *The Path* for a moment. Dig deep into your heart, and then respond.

Think, Feel, Respond:

What feels wrong in my life right now?

Read your response and pause to reflect on it. You might even want to take a break now.

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Let's continue. We will come back to your response in just a moment. I want to illustrate "discovery" through the example below.

After I answered that question, I realized I had written a whole paragraph with amazing speed and flow. My feelings and thoughts poured out. My response included things such as, "I'm not doing any of the hobbies I enjoy. I don't feel like I'm giving back to the community. Everything is about my work, and secondly my responsibilities to my family. Where am 'I' in my day to day life? Where is fun?" A whole paragraph was blurted out with ease, and some anguish.

I went back to read what I had written. My curious nature begged the question, what was the cause for all those things written down? Was there a pattern producing all of my various responses? Was there a "root cause" to all of these troubled feelings? (I created the phrase "root cause" to help me visualize all of my symptoms as connected below the surface at the roots.)

Yes! Everything that I had written down was produced from the same source. While it may be obvious to you what my "root cause" was, it was not obvious to me until that moment. The root cause to everything that I had written was related to **my choices** for how I was using my time. It's so simple to see now; my root cause was my **choices** for how I was using my time. (I had unknowingly taken responsibility for the problem by defining it in terms of my choices. If I had made the choices that created the problem, maybe I could make choices to alleviate the problem?) While this root cause appears simplistic, it was no small feat to implement change that would right what felt wrong.

Now remember the purpose for sharing this story is to illustrate how a person is illuminated when he or she is able to uncover the root cause of discomfort. That first step must happen if you are truly going to bring significant change into your life. Your root cause may be entirely different from mine, and we'll begin exploring that in a moment. The process of thinking objectively about yourself is what's important here. To look at your situation as objectively as possible. Let's continue.

When I identified my root cause as “my choices for how I was using my time”, I was not talking about time management. I was compulsive with time management and organization (which I later uncovered as part of my problem, thinking too much and not “feeling” about what I was doing). My problem pointed to the choices I was making for myself related to time allocations. My choices for how I was devoting my time were intellectual, practical choices and not passion-oriented, intuitive choices. Therefore, I frequently felt resentful or unhappy even when I was doing what I had chosen to do, and even when I was successful at the task at hand. Something felt wrong because I was not listening to my intuition or gut about what I really wanted to be doing at that moment! I was not aware of what was happening between my practical head and my energy-filled heart.

I had absolutely no idea what “living in the moment” meant, or how to do it. My dominant left-brain had pre-scheduled my time down to the minute, and placed me on autopilot with multi-tasking, thus disregarding what my feelings or passions were telling me in that moment. I later found out that my performance and efficiency soared

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when I completed tasks that were in alignment with my feelings, rather than abiding by an artificial schedule planned days earlier. I also examined the pros and cons of multi-tasking (and later read research that claimed the damaging errors and stress resulting from multi-tasking actually cause the “recuperation” period from multi-tasking to take longer than if I would have focused on only one activity at a time in the first place.)

The responses that I had written for what felt wrong in my life were symptoms of a bigger challenge. They were symptoms of my choices, not the root cause of my feeling unhappy or stressed. For example, “I’m not doing any of the hobbies that I enjoy.” This is a symptom contributing to my feeling unhappy. If I would have tried to squeeze in time to enjoy a hobby under my current state of priorities, I would have most likely felt even more stressed thinking about the work and other chosen priorities awaiting me. The cause for my unsatisfied feelings was that I had chosen to keep working until very late at night, or to take on commitments that used my time, leaving none for fulfilling hobbies. I couldn’t just squeeze in time for hobbies and also leave everything else the same. There were only 24 hours in the day. I needed a new framework for how I made choices and for what was motivating these choices.

Until I addressed the root cause for how and why I was making these choices, and what I was labeling as important priorities, the symptoms causing me frustration would never go away. They would continue to reappear and frustrate me. I would continue looking for

myself and for that which brought me fulfillment and even fun in my life.

Therefore, I had to address the root cause. I had to. I did not want to continue feeling stressed and constrained. But how the heck do you delve into understanding “root cause”? How do you change the way you make choices without first reexamining what is motivating those choices? Did I need to examine my whole philosophy on life’s purpose and what is meaningful? Would I really change my view of priorities? How do you know you can change how you think or what your choices are? How do I even begin to address this newly identified problem?

I wanted to reexamine my whole basis for making decisions in order to understand if my choices were bringing me in alignment with my true passions or taking me away from them. This was too big of an issue to tackle on a piece of paper during an airplane ride. First, I had to get in touch with my true passions and desires. What were they? I was going to have to think about this and study it, because at this point, that was the only way I knew how to make decisions – to analyze and think them through. But, I needed time to think. Yes, if I really wanted to tackle this problem, if I really felt the pain and discomfort of how I was living was bad enough, then I would have to do what I did best: schedule time to think about it. A long period of time. And that’s what I did.

Let’s pause in the story and go back to what you wrote in response to “what feels wrong in my life right now?”

Read your response again. Expand or make any changes you wish. Is there a pattern to what you wrote? Is there any similarity to what is

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causing all of your different responses? The pattern could be related to the type of work you are doing, to the company or organization you are working for, to relationships, to financial issues, to where you live, to the lack of using your talents in more giving or generous ways, or to choices you are making on how you are using your time. There are just as many root causes as there are people. Try to dig deep to unveil the cause for all those responses that you wrote.

Sometimes it is difficult to objectively view your life or to objectively view what might be causing good or not-so-good feelings to occur. In other words, identifying your root cause may not be obvious. You may not see a pattern causing what you wrote down. If this is the case, you may want to share your written response with a trusted friend. Have them ask you “why” four or five times after each statement you wrote in an effort to dig deeper to the root cause or pattern for what is causing the symptom.

For example: If I wrote “I don’t feel as connected to friends as I desire, enjoying friendships and having fun with them.” Why? “Because I don’t take the time to share with them or make too many plans.” Why? “Because I don’t necessarily want to hear all of their problems or disrupt my priorities.” Why? “Because I am very busy with my own schedule and priorities.” Why? “Because that is what I have chosen to do - spend my time with work priorities instead of friends.” Ding, ding, ding goes the bell! If I want to feel more connected to friends then I have to BE a friend. I have to be more accessible. I have to provide for a two-way street of sharing so that I feel the joy and comfort of friendship. But it took asking “why” four times before I

really started to think about the root cause for that symptom. And when I asked “why” about my other responses, the pattern began to be revealed.

Think, Feel, Respond:

Write your responses to these questions.

- ***What is causing each of your symptoms to occur? (Ask “why” four or five times to dig deeper towards the root cause.)***
- ***Is there a pattern surfacing?***
- ***Are you beginning to discover your “root cause” that must be addressed before the symptoms will go away or be greatly reduced?***

If you feel you are getting close to identifying your root cause, or have actually identified it, congratulations! That is a huge first step in transformational change. Awareness of what is causing you pain or discomfort is critical to succeeding in making positive steps towards greater fulfillment. If you have not exactly pinpointed what you feel is the root cause, don’t despair. This is one of the most difficult tasks. As you explore questions in chapters ahead, your clarity will improve and

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the root cause will become more obvious to you. After you read a few more chapters, revisit this section if you feel you want to think more about your root cause.

It is time to move on. For significant change or fulfillment to occur, you need to want change so badly that there is no other choice. Let's see how that can be accelerated.

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