

Thursday, January 31, 2008

Short Article

Befriend the Difficult Other: Feel Better about Yourself

"Difficult Others" are often our most effective teachers. Why? "Difficult Others" are like rubbing the hair on a monkey's back. If we stroke in the smooth direction, we don't find the fleas that we uncover by stroking the hair in "rubbing-in-the-wrong-way" direction.

Don't get this wrong. Those difficult others may have "fleas and blood-sucking pests" hidden underneath their facade, but the irritants that are most useful for us to discover are our own. Another analogy that describes our relationship with the "Difficult Other" is that of the "splinter." When we ram a splinter under our skin, we receive constant "signals" often escalating signals, to take action and rid ourselves of the irritation. Here again, it's easy to assume that the irritant that needs to be removed is the "Difficult Other." However, honest (often painfully honest) self-examination reveals that the splinter, irritant, foreign object that needs to be plucked out, lanced, excised … is in ourselves.

It would be a mistake to apply the analogy of a grain of sand in an oyster as evidence that just coating the irritant with something slippery and smoothing over the irritant in passive coexistence is a manageable strategy.

By coating sand with a smooth substance, the oyster enters into a powerless accommodation with the irritant. And, the accommodation provides nothing of value to the oyster. The pearl only gives the grain of sand a comfy, secure new coat, and enhances its appearance. The oyster gets little positive, only some negative reinforcement (i.e., removal of aversive stimuli or punishment) and doesn't really resolve the problem until it finds itself in a stew.

Instead, we benefit when the "Difficult Other" prompts us to examine the faults and flaws that are in ourselves. These flaws and faults are the ones that the "Difficult Other" launches, sets off, detonates. Our honest, truthful insightful examination of the situation and the relationship exposes: Inaccurate self-talk that incorrectly labels the meaning of the relationship, and incorrectly labels the meaning of the impact upon our lives

The fact that our self-limiting beliefs cause us to label the impact of the "Difficult Other" as a danger of threat to us and our lives

An "Outside of Conscious Awareness" mental picture (images, feelings, sensations, memories) that are "pushed-to-the-background" … painful avoidance responses to real-life experiences that we need to integrate into our psyche so that we can mature and act responsibly

Unfinished "Growing Up" and stunted wisdom that we fail to notice because we are so focused outward on the slights, scratches and bruises that we receive from the "Difficult Other"

So, use the unavoidable encounters with "Difficult Others" to further your own maturity and professionalism.

You can't avoid these encounters since "Difficult Others" are as ubiquitous as politicians at a lobbyists' free escort service.

So, if encountering "Difficult Others" is a natural occurrence, like sunburn, we might just as well take steps to protect ourselves.

And, most of those steps involve personal changes to a more rational belief system, and changes in the content of our self-talk. That means that the changes that matter most are changes that are within our control and within our sphere of influence (not dependent on others).

This is a difficult lesson, more difficult than blaming our stress, misery and frustration on our antagonist-enemy-superior-teacher, our "Difficult Special Other."

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 09:00