Allowing Helpful Change: Adventures with My Neuroplasticity

Richard Holdsworth

plus

Ali Peterson, Hannah Holdsworth, and

Free Thinkers Tús Nua

For Roberta, who makes all the difference.

I am happy to give a grateful shout-out to all who have crossed my path. In adversity for what you taught me and in amity for how you encouraged me. Thankfully, Roberta (robertatuccistudio.com), Hannah and Max travel with and support me on this evolving adventure. And I am very grateful to Ali for her fantastic editing, and Hannah for superbly turning my written bits and pieces into this book. Of course, without Free Thinkers Tús Nua (túsnua.org), none of this would have happened. I especially appreciate Tús Nua participants who kindly read the manuscript or gave helpful feedback. I would also like to thank Oya Alatur (serenemindsllc.com) for her many years of therapeutic guidance and Ramona Robinson (rorahypnosis.com) for introducing me to hypnosis and then helping me deepen my awareness.

"There is only one journey. Going inside yourself."

Rainer Maria Rilke

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

These short commentaries originated as introductions to a daily international online support group I host each Tuesday. Participants in FreeThinkers Tús Nua (túsnua.org) join after their lives have become unmanageable, but by being open to allowing helpful change, it need not stay that way. The meeting emerged during COVID-19 from the agnostic branch of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program. However, it is not affiliated with AA, does not advocate for any particular wellbeing program, and welcomes everyone with any or no beliefs. It attracts a motley crew with varied self-identities, diverse challenges and unique personalities. In a safe, controlled online environment, we simply, and lovingly share our experiences. We also freely offer hope and lavishly spread encouragement.

Long before I joined this meeting, I started in AA because my life had become unmanageable from the effects of alcohol. But before that, since the 1980s, I had been engaged in numerous self-help programs, therapies and belief systems because my life was also unmanageable for reasons other than alcohol addiction. These included post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), panic attacks, depression and unmanaged manifestations of my neurodiversity. But these were not mutually exclusive traits or diagnoses. My PTSD affected my drinking and substance abuse. My neurodivergent perspectives increased anxiety. My addictions produced psychotic episodes. My diagnoses and dysfunctions overlapped to create a multi-challenged hot mess!

When I joined AA in 2014, I was familiar with the Twelve Steps. I knew they worked for many people, and I had dipped into several variations for different addictions. There are over thirty Twelve Step programs for various addictions, such as alcohol, narcotics, food, gambling, nicotine, or other habits, people, places and things that dysregulate life. Then ten years ago, it finally worked for me because I acted with the AA maxim, “Fake it till you make it.” And I have remained clean and sober ever since.

The Twelve Steps tackle addictions, one by one. However, they do not provide holistic therapy for underlying causes of addiction. They were written in 1939, before ADHD was well understood (1968); before the identification of PTSD (1980), and before the term neurodiversity was recognized (1990s). The founders of AA were progressive in their day. And they promoted the use of every means available for alcoholics to meet

all their treatment needs. They suggested the Twelve Steps as guidance. But, although the world of healing and addiction recovery has come a long way since 1953, the Twelve Steps remain the same. And for many members, they work with their original intention. Make no bones about it, if you need to recover from an addiction, try the Twelve Steps. However, many of us also have additional widespread needs to address for improved mind management and emotional regulation.

I began my healing journey in the 1980s when the self-help movement got underway, and I became willing to change. Since then, I have diligently explored many self-help programs, taken part in several therapies and delved into a variety of belief systems. Of them all, I found the concept of neuroplasticity most reassuring and effective. This concept refers to the brain's ability to adapt, change and heal. I use the benefits of neuroplasticity to manage my mind and regulate my feelings more effectively—to heal. By healing, I simply mean that I cope better. I enjoy more stability and greater equanimity. To do so I tap my inherent wellness that waits to be let out.

"In the midst of hate, I found there was, within me, an invincible love.
In the midst of tears, I found there was, within me, an invincible smile.
In the midst of chaos, I found there was, within me, an invincible calm.
I realized, through it all, that...
In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.
And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger – something better, pushing right back."

Albert Camus

ADVENTURES WITH MY NEUROPLASTICITY

I thought I would always be the way I was, but neuroplasticity altered that assumption. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change, develop and adapt to life experiences by forging fresh neural tracks and building new networks. It brings healing properties that transform my perspectives to heal my psyche.

At one level, the brain changes all the time. If I hear a sudden noise, for example, I become alarmed. If I hold a baby, I feel warm fuzzies. Each new experience activates neural circuits to perceive my version of what is going on. When the same change happens repeatedly, my neurons hardwire new neural circuits and my mindset shifts. There is a popular neuroscientific adage about neuron circuits; "What fires together, wires together." What fires together can be stressful for, say vengeance, or healing, for kindness. When given the opportunity, neural circuits fire together to create greater wellbeing. They fire together like this when I open my mind to allow them to. Their healing circuits help me see myself better and treat others healthier.

It takes persistence to allow new circuits to override old neural barriers obstructing my inherent wellness. And with about one hundred billion busy neurons active all the time, my neural healing also requires calm and rest. Without rest, my conscious thinking becomes ungrounded, distorted; I catastrophize, with brittle, stressed feelings. In calmness, however, conscious thoughts lose their grip, and without their entangling spell, my mind can forge new ways of perceiving and become more manageable. My latent calmness functions in the brain's home base: the default mode.

Because of its profound benefits, I deliberately root myself in the default mode by taking deep belly breaths, for example. We all become based in the default mode as we slowly awaken from or drift into sleep. The state of flow that occurs when I enjoy something I love, such as a breeze on my face, is in the default mode. I am in the default mode if something absorbs me, such as writing or dancing. Whenever I simply zone out, I enjoy the default mode. Glimmers can trigger it. Glimmers are cues that create feelings of calm and wellbeing. The default mode removes self-consciousness from the picture. In the default mode, nothing else matters, all struggle ceases. Yet I used to neglect this latent and essential core of my inherent wellness.

The wellness of the default mode is not just a mental function. The vast majority of what goes on in my mind is triggered by physical senses—such as when I see with my eyes and my brain makes something of it. If I see a dog that looks unfriendly, I react differently than when I see an adorable wagging pooch. My mind interprets what my nervous system perceives. Bodies and minds are in sync. A calm body brings a calm mind. My unmanaged mind causes unregulated feelings. My managed mind regulates feelings. To manage my mind, I deliberately calm it or become absorbed in an interest or activity. In the calm default mode, my mind and body perfectly blend. Then conscious thinking ceases. Rooted in stillness, burdens disappear, and I feel calm: sometimes even blissful. The conscious brain is like the surface of an ocean: sometimes placid, sometimes tumultuous, from smooth to frothy. But the default mode resembles the deep ocean bed—untroubled by surface events and basically calm. There I am whole and well.

> One of the reasons neuroplasticity makes sense to me is that it reiterates and repeats the oldest wisdom lessons. For thousands of years, the beneficial default mode has been described in various terms. The focused peace of the default mode is at the heart of ancient Vedic wisdom and is the Buddha nature. Its calm is the Christian state of grace; its serenity is an aim of Twelve Steppers. For some it is a spiritual, sacred realm. Every transformative belief system I have studied or practiced uses a term to characterize inner stillness—what recent science taps as the default mode: I claim it as my inherent wellbeing. By being inherent, it is encouraged and allowed rather than discovered as a new entity.

Like every other organ and limb, my brain is programmed to heal. It wants to heal. It heals when I allow it to, by letting it rest with reliable healing practices. So, I relax my mind with belly breathing, listening to music, doing something that absorbs me, or I might think of what makes me smile, or hum. I develop anything that deflects the shadow of a negative state to release my latent default home wellness. It matters less how long I stay there than that I accept its healing power. As I become increasingly aware of my latent mind, I have learned to focus more deliberately and nurture it more frequently. As I allow my healing to flourish, I become more grounded and feel safe.

I rest my mind to allow healing because I have realized that no matter how distressed I am, it doesn't have to be that way. Despite setbacks and failures, I can learn to use tools and refine techniques that help me manage my mind. One tool is to feed my mind with positive attitudes, such as gratitude, optimism and kindness. I try to see the future as a welcome challenge rather than a daunting threat. Accumulating skills and tools takes work—it works if I work it. But the healing takes care of itself—it works if I allow it. To enable it, I am open to helpful change.

Helpful change heals me. I am becoming more stable with a calmer nervous system. Recently I heard a loud bang but didn't flinch and freeze. For a PTSD survivor, this is a miracle of healing. I still minimize driving on highways, but I no longer have panic attacks about it: another miracle. If I feel a compulsive urge, I can foresee its negative consequences and do not give in to it.

Thanks to my healing transformations, I simply cope better. As I heal, I increasingly manage my mind and regulate my feelings. Unlike in initial recovery, however, I am no longer primarily healing from something, such as PTSD or alcoholism. As I increasingly sustain stillness, I heal toward something. I heal toward, and am transformed by, my mind's healthy home base: a natural, strong confident state so often mentioned in traditional Twelve Step meetings—serenity.

FROM CHILDHOOD

TRUST AND COOPERATION

From an early age, I have had recurring nightmares. In one of them, I was a child alone in the gloom of a moonless Yorkshire wood where I felt safe until I realized that a murderous presence was stalking me. The presence took on vague human forms, but I did not know who they were. Nor did I question their right to destroy me. In order to escape, and knowing the woods with boy scout acumen, I scurried to the side rather than ahead of their encroaching nearness and snuck into a moorland field through a familiar sheep gate in a stone wall. There, craftily rather than fearfully, I scampered behind walls to zigzag around pastures toward a known safe hiding place. Along the way, much to my surprise, I saw a light at the top of a hill. And in the light was the silhouette of a house that I realized was my home. But to get there I had to cross an open field. Risking exposure, I ran to the door and banged on it. As my father opened the door, my family gathered around him, and I awoke just as I realized that they were in league with my murderous stalkers. That memorable nightmare continued well into my healing journey. No wonder I had trust issues.

An important aspect of trust that resonates with me is that it affects my levels of cooperation. If I do not trust a person, organization, situation, or healing program, I do not feel safe. Consequently, I become uneasy, reluctant, or downright oppositional to it. Even when I was somewhat trusting I used to be a quarrelsome contrarian, over-enthusiastic about sharing my opinions and thought I had correct views on everything. My contrariness got me into a lot of trouble and created ribald escapades, but it also brought entertaining mischief.

In 1970, I attended the London School of Economics and Political Science as a mature student. One of my tutors, (who was also a psychoanalyst) advised me not to go into academia because I am an original thinker, rather than an analytical developer. Nowadays, someone with her qualifications would also recognize characteristics of my inventive thoughts as part of my neurodivergence.

Although I can't change my inherent neural design, I can adapt my behavior. I have worked on improving how I react, respond to, and express my lack of trust, or reluctance and opposition to what is going on. I can, for example, be assertive without being aggressive. And because I have been open to helpful change for many years, the all-pervasive trauma of my scary nightmare has faded, and once in a while I even wake up peacefully from a pleasant dream.

WATCH OUT WORLD, HERE I COME!

During the 1950s, one of my rural English childhood addresses was East Lodge, Maplewell Hall, and the name of a quaint village. There, tucked amongst ancient trees, I was awakened before sunrise by a lively dawn chorus of birds. On non-school days, by 4:30 a.m., I had eagerly leaped out of bed and rushed to help the farmer bring his dairy cows in for milking. But at sixteen I left the farmlands and dashed off to sea. I had a "Watch out world, here I come!" attitude. I tackled everything with willingness and indiscriminate gusto. However, my childhood was far from idyllic. With my hyperactivity and a surfeit of mischief, I was defined as different and difficult. Strict efforts to make me conform brought harsh treatment with traumatic abuses that became normal for me.

Eventually, during my child protective investigator training in the 1980s, I realized my behavior displayed all the indicators of a severely abused child. So, I began my self-help explorations. Since then, I have had professional counseling, including hypnosis, and periods on medication. I have explored many programs that claim to help. And it has all been worth the challenge and pain of realizing what happened and how it affected me.

But early in recovery, without my dysfunctional defense mechanisms of bravado and manic hype, I became anxious, depressed and suffered from panic attacks. In therapy, I explored why I always dreaded leaving the house and driving a car. I used to enjoy fast driving, especially when I worked in law enforcement (I even loved my patrol car's name, Juliet One). But years later, despite my diligent therapeutic efforts, I could never understand how I lost my enthusiasm to relish whatever came next.

Perhaps it is part of the aging process, but now I realize that my dread did not lie in specific events or situations. They were part of my overall foreboding about the future. But I have started to change this. To challenge foreboding, I have begun to use handy tools that I found in an article entitled, "Fear the Future? Three simple steps to manage that sense of foreboding." (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-neurochemical-self/201912/fear-the-future), by Dr. Loretta Breuning. The steps are:

1. Manage what I let influence my mind (e.g., I watch less news)
2. Become more positive about what goes on in my thoughts (e.g. I exercise gratitude and kindness)
3. Trust that I am designed both to survive and to thrive.

And to thrive I need more than "Watch out world!" To increasingly thrive I am learning to welcome my world.

STOP BEING SO SILLY

In the early 1950s, I asked my mother, "Why do dogs have two tails?" She clipped my ear and sent me upstairs for being "rude and too nosy. "You don't deserve even one tail," she shouted after me. I ignored her until she carelessly uttered a toxic comment that terrified me. At the top of the stairs, I stood on the landing, numb, rigid in fear with warm pee trickling down one leg. My mind was frozen. After a while, my sister came upstairs and asked, "What's wrong with you? You're as white as a sheet."

"She told me to wait while she sharpens the kitchen knife." I hoarsely answered.
"What for?"
"To cut my willy off.'
"MUM!" she shouted. "He says you are going to cut his willy off."

My mother replied, "I would never do a thing like that… tell him I was only joking. Tell him to come downstairs and stop being so silly."

My so-called silliness was actually a trauma—an event that overwhelmed my mind's ability to handle it. Until the mind can make sense of it, trauma remains trapped with basic survival responses of fight, flight, freeze, or appease. This incident, along with other ongoing traumas, destroyed my clear thinking and all sense of safety. It activated instincts of hyper-vigilant post-traumatic stress that wired me to be always on high alert for constantly anticipated catastrophes. Reminders of what happened triggered horrendous flashbacks. Overwhelmed, I self-medicated on excesses of alcohol, sex, drugs and rock 'n roll to become oblivious to my nightmare feelings. Then, often in a demonic rage, I sometimes exhibited psychotic episodes. Even when I was otherwise lucid, a Crazy Richard lurked inside me, ready to spring out like a jack-in-the-box.

In 1980, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first recognized as a mental health disorder. I started therapy when it was still relatively new, so despite displaying PTSD symptoms, I was initially diagnosed with separation anxiety and continued to live life as Crazy Richard. But later, while in couples' counseling, my therapist commented to my partner, "Have you noticed that when you criticize Richard, he puts his hands over his privates?" And then she asked me, "Can you tell us why that is?" At the time, I didn't know. I subsequently found out, and now I am not so crazy.

IT WORKS IF I ALLOW IT

On that mind-changing day, I was a skinny boy soprano cautiously singing in the school choir. We were practicing the Alleluia Chorus until our music teacher and conductor unexpectedly rapped his baton on the podium. As we came to a ragged halt, he pointed his baton at diminutive me and bellowed, "You lad! Yes, you! Holdsworth! You are supposed to be praising the Lord God Almighty, boy! Shut up until you can do so as if your life depends on it!" The choir resumed singing, while I stood silently as Alleluias resounded in, around and through me. Then, unable to restrain myself, I let rip with gusto. And I have since sung in several choirs with much gusto though little skill. I can't read music, but I have good pitch and like many things in my life, I wing it.

Much later, my life depended on joining AA or I would have ended up in a hospital, prison, or morgue. But even at my first AA meeting, I thought I would be able to wing it as I had done while singing. Much to my surprise, I recognized a clergy member from the church where I sang in the choir. Although not close friends, we sometimes socialized, so I thought, "I've got it made. He'll be my sponsor and teach me all the tricks." During the meeting, I shared heartfully and acknowledged that alcohol made my life unmanageable. Afterward, several people spoke to me, and my friend shook my hand. Expecting an invitation of support, I was surprised when all he said was, "It works if you work it," and walked off. I thought, "Cheers mate, is that all you got for me?" But he was right, I had to work it.

I started AA with gusto. I attended the recommended ninety meetings in ninety days. I went to weekend retreats and conferences and overall became a model participant. Even though I was perplexed by the theme of the Third Step about a "God of my understanding," I could adapt my versions of what that meant to stay sober. But coming from a social work background with many years of self-help and therapeutic experience, I became wary of some Twelve Step practices, especially the sometimes psychologically unsound advice that well-meaning, but unaware sponsors can give with importunity. I also found unacceptable the over-use of the "blame game" that dismissed legitimate reasons for dysfunctional behavior, known as "character defects."

While acknowledging that "It works if you work it," helps many people, I find, "It works if I let it," a preferable guide. If I do not resist healing, it happens. Using useful techniques, I calm down and remain open to helpful change. Then thanks to neuroplasticity, my brain reprograms for greater equanimity. Thus, my mind not only recovers from addictive cravings; it also heals why I have them, and I sing with even greater gusto!

TICKET TO RIDE

Because we had no car, I grew up riding on buses, which I enjoyed, even though we always had to walk at least a mile to the nearest bus stop. We would set off in good time in case it was early. And when it was late we waited with as much patience as we could muster because we valued punctuality.

I loved riding on the top deck, where my favorite seat was at the front with a panoramic view, but that was seldom available. In my teens, from my crowded school day bus, I saw on my left side the familiar steep, craggy Otley Chevin moor, and to the right stretched our wide-open Wharfedale valley, with the silver river winding along. At the end of the bus ride lay another mile's walk to school. Rattling, cigarette smoke-filled, lumbering buses carried me through my childhood world, and I loved it!

Over sixty years later, I resumed bus rides from a stop that is a two-minute walk away. To ride modern buses, I have downloaded three apps on my phone to keep updated, buy my tickets, and track the bus as it gets closer. My senior citizen ticket is only eighty cents a ride and I use an e-ticket, waving my phone around under a flickering red light until it sounds its ping and demands a photo ID. "It's ok, you look over twenty-one," the driver jokes. And far from rumbling along miles of bumpy moorland, my smooth electronic urban ride takes just ten smoke-free minutes. I ride the bus to get to the gym and back.

My new bus experience to the gym has not just demanded that I learn new skills; I am functioning in a different dimension. I no longer make physical bus-riding arrangements but utilize digital bus-riding management. I have gone from what I thought would never change to continually anticipating updates, revisions and improvements.

I have had a similar experience in my recovery and healing. I used to assume I could not change and denied my need for change. In my mind, I would be riding the same old behavioral bus forever. But I have changed my attitude from "This is how I am" to "I can work on that." By becoming open to allowing change and learning how to help change happen, I enjoy a challenging healing adventure. Staying fit is a crucial part of my ongoing wellbeing progress. Even so, I don't look forward to the gym, but I enjoy the ride there and back.

KISS: KEEP IT SIMPLE, SURRENDER: AN AA ADAGE

When I was a lad in Yorkshire, with my father's enthusiastic encouragement, I eagerly read The Story of Jack Cornwell and Jack became my ultimate role model. Jack was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously during WWI for his stance at Jutland in May 1916 on board H.M.S. Chester. The official report stated, "The instance of devotion to duty by boy (1st Class) John Travers Cornwell who was mortally wounded early in the action, but nevertheless remained standing alone at a most exposed post, quietly awaiting orders till the end of the action, with the gun's crew dead and wounded around him. He was under 16½ years old. I regret that he has since died…." Although Jack was probably frozen in trauma, for significant propaganda purposes he received the highest heroic medal, a Victoria Cross, and was given a spectacular military funeral. Thanks to Jack and his ilk, the idea of always doing my duty and never surrendering was firmly embedded in every fiber of my being.

> But in South Florida in the 1980s, my life had surrendered to a tropical mess of sex, drugs and rock-till-I-dropped. Eventually, I started therapy and read widely. When I came across an ancient Buddhist text that began, "There is nothing difficult about the great way, but avoid preferences." I was stunned, appalled. My whole life depended on clear and uninhibited hard-wired preferences. Although I didn't trust any of that seemingly absurd Zen approach, I no longer trusted my preferences either. Reducing preferences was an option I felt I should try. So, I acted as if the quote were true.

The theme of accepting the reality of what is, rather than resisting it to prefer something else, recurs through all my exploration of recovery and wellbeing programs. For example, surrendering personal preferences in meditation and/or prayer; turning them over, letting go and cultivating self-acceptance, all describe ways to diminish the power of preferences and remove my resistance to change. It does not lead me to ignore social injustice or put up with other people's crap: but I do so with greater assertion and less anger. For me, surrender means to stop being as rigid, picky and judgmental—relinquish my stubbornness.

AT SEA

CHEERS!

I joined my first ship, M.V. New Zealand Star, in 1962 at King George V docks in grimy Plaistow, London. On my first night ashore, I stepped alone along the dingy, deserted East End dockside street and heard cheerful piano-playing drifting outside a pub. Although underage, I opened the pub door, and a welcoming mayhem greeted me. I had never known anything like it before; I felt a switch inside me flip from off to on. I weaved lithely through the loud, loopy throng to the bar and ordered a pint of beer, then edged into a standing space by a table, where I recognized some crew, but they didn't acknowledge me. The tabletop was covered with pints of beer that sat in a pool of spills. Someone stood up and pushed his chair to me and I sat down, expecting a greeting, but none came. I enjoyed the jolly piano playing in the affirming, inebriated noisiness, with odors of smoke, sweaty bodies, and beer. Feeling giddy, I cautioned myself to sip slowly.

My pint sat two-thirds full on the table when the sailor who had given me his chair stumbled by. As he did so, he dropped a shot-glass of whisky into my beer. I sipped my first boilermaker and entered bliss. Everything changed with the taste of heaven. I would never be the same again. I had never felt like I was anyone before. Suddenly I was not a strange, gawky lad from Yorkshire; I was ME! "Cheers!" I shouted to the throng, waving my glass, and was hardly noticed.

Thus began my active, destructive alcoholism. By the time I had completed my first trip, I was repeating "Cheers" in multiple sozzled bouts of extreme boozing. And shortly after, in Auckland, New Zealand, I realized that my alcoholism was unmanageable. A young evangelical preacher visited the ship and talked to me about salvation. In a moment of transcendent ecstasy, I threw myself to my knees and begged forgiveness. Thus began my first recovery effort.

Since then, drunk and sober, I have studied and worshipped with various sects, denominations and religions. Whether using drugs or not, I have explored many spiritual and secular belief systems and healing programs. Throughout it all, at some level, in some way, with meditating, turning it over, letting it go, self-acceptance, or other means, they all accentuate the theme of openness to allow change. And it works! Cheers to that, mate!

HAPPY, JOYOUS, AND FREE (AN AA MANTRA)

On my first sea trip, after we had cast off from a chilly autumnal London dock, I helped the deck crew prepare for our deep sea voyage. I could hardly focus on the manually demanding tasks because I was enthralled as we coasted down the choppy Thames estuary. Exhausted, I was asleep in my bunk as we swayed in a storm along the nighttime rolling English Channel (La Manche). When I was awakened for my first midnight sea watch, I excitedly donned my uniform and scurried into the bracing night air. In the darkness, I made my way to the companionway steps to reach the bridge, and there I paused.

Through the magnificent howling night wind that whistled magically through lofty rigging, I heard the pilot's barked navigation commands sharply repeated by the helmsman. The compelling clicking gyroscope compass mesmerized me. I wanted that moment to last forever but was too excited to stand still. "I'll remember this for the rest of my life," I proclaimed to the vast oceans of my future, before rushing up to the bridge. I had been fleetingly happy, joyous, and free.

And now I know more about why. Eminent marketing professor Raj Raghunathan recommends that for greater fulfillment and happiness, we should prioritize goals rather than pursue them. He demonstrates what this means by using sleep as an example. To prioritize sleep we should do what brings a restful night—exercise, a good diet, and no arguing before bedtime! We cannot find good sleep by simply going to bed and willfully pursuing it; that will likely keep us awake. This principle can be applied to many issues as well as happiness.

But one size of happiness does not fit all, and it comes in different brands. One brand is from external factors—people, places, activities, and things. Money, for example, might not buy happiness, but it can help. Britt Ekland once quipped that crying in her Mercedes-Benz was preferable to crying in a clunker. Another brand of happiness is when we achieve a deep sense of fulfillment from a job well done, problem solved, or goal achieved. And in flashes of euphoria, we can upgrade to be joyous and free. But sustained joy and freedom are in a deeper dimension.

To find them, I must prioritize what creates them. This includes being more at peace with myself—and greater self-acceptance. And I hinder joy when I compare myself with others or I am too picky. To prioritize my joy, I quiet my mind with belly breaths or other flow experiences where I am at one with myself, free of all burdens as if it lasts forever.

FULL AHEAD!

My first trip was full of adventures. The New Zealand Star had been built in 1935, had survived WWII, and was one of the last to remain without a radar. We also had no AC in the cabins, and we broke down in the Indian Ocean because an engine casing had simply worn through. After we voyaged to Australia, we returned in time to for me get my accumulated earnings in cash a week before Christmas. It was the first time I had money to spare. When I phoned home to tell my parents, my mother told me not to disclose the amount in case someone was listening. But I said it was one hundred pounds, and she said, "Be careful, put some in your sock!"

On the New Zealand Star, our journey back to Christmas in the UK had gone well until we reached the English Channel (La Manche), and a dense fog set in. We crept along slowly, sounding out and listening for fog signals: our ears were our only eyes. Off Dover we hove-to and with radio contact, the Chanel pilot's launch appeared out of the vapor. The pilot climbed aboard, and then on the bridge, stunned everyone when he announced, "Full ahead, Captain." After a pause, the captain replied, "We have no radar." The pilot simply said, "I know. But everyone else does." As the engine telegraph clanged "Full ahead," radar technology scattered thousands of years of cautionary maritime sea lore.

Although the captain of a ship is always in command, he needs a pilot for dangerous or congested waterways. And I think that the captain/pilot relationship provides an apt metaphor for my dysfunctions and my healing program. When my dysfunctional needs take command, like a lone captain, they can sail me to disaster. So, to avoid perilous stretches, I need a pilot—a program of recovery, healing and transition.

Over the years I have customized my program within a broad, sound framework. My dysfunctional urges might question or resist its wisdom, but my program increases my stability and helps me cope: it works for me, if I let it; "Full Ahead, Richard!"

EASY DOES IT: AN AA ADAGE

"But what really annoyed me was that you didn't even hurry up the gangway," remonstrated the captain of the English Star, on which I was a juvenile cadet under his command and care. What had initially annoyed him had been my drunken arrest in a Rio Grande de Sul brothel. Getting the ship's Brazilian agent to engineer my release the next morning also rather annoyed him. What annoyed him more was that he couldn't record my behavior or punish me officially because he would be in trouble for letting it happen. But what really annoyed him was that I hadn't followed typical protocols and hurried up the gangway eager to repent. And that wasn't the first time my over-easy attitude had been noted. In Auckland, New Zealand, already guzzling brewskies before breakfast, I had been blamed for the third mate's sickly hangover, and I indifferently claimed that he had led me astray.

Then I was converted to Christianity and tasted my first bout of repentance and sobriety. It lasted a few years. Later, at other significant points in my life, I again tried sobriety, but it didn't work. Recently I attempted to count how many times I had relapsed, but I couldn't remember them all. I recalled bottoming out three times. The last time was about ten years ago when I woke up in a police cell at age 70, about 50 years after my first arrest.

Typically, I was complacent about my relapses and was intrigued rather than alarmed by the effects of hard drinking. I would joke about being a functional alcoholic and add that it was OK for my life to be partially unmanageable because to qualify for AA it had to be totally unmanageable.

After my last arrest, I impressed the judge with my English accent and appropriate court demeanor. I truthfully assured him that I had become sober and joined AA. I got only a small fine and learned he was a Downton Abbey fan. After paying the fine, I wrote a letter of apology to the cops and my neighbors. I also showed genuine contrition to my family and made amends to those I had hurt. Over time, I climbed a healing gangway, but I couldn't hurry: easy does it!

ONE WORD AT A TIME

I was a teenage cadet on the Empire Star when during an epic sea storm, we were hove-to for three days. At the height of the storm, the mate (Chief Officer) died of a heart attack. Across heaving decks, I helped carry his bulky body to an empty cabin. There I was to assist the bosun in sewing a canvas body bag (with the mate inside it) for his burial at sea. The canvas came with three heavy shackles to ensure it would sink. "Fuck that! Two's enough," the bosun said, and we hid one to sell. The last stitch went through the corpse's nose. Out on the deck, a section of the ship's railing was removed to make space for a greased door taken off its hinges. There, we lay the body, covered by a Red Ensign flag. The crew gathered; tearful gay stewards, who had designed pretty wreaths from the chilled Christmas flowers, began loudly sobbing.

The ship's engines stopped, and on the placid Tasman Sea, we glided soundlessly save for a few flamboyant sobs. The captain (a.k.a the Old Man) arrived and removed his battered hat to quickly read the Lord's Prayer, followed by a cursory nod. As the stewards' sobbing escalated into wails, the mate's corpse was tipped into the sea, along with a little cascade of colorful wreaths. The body bag hit the swell, dipped under for a moment, then bobbed back up as the Old Man shouted, "Full Ahead!" The wails turned to horrified gasps because, under a pure, cloudless sky, the body bag drifted toward the massive, fast-churning propeller blades. "Fuck!" exclaimed the captain and as if on cue, the body bag slowly sank.

> I appreciated the captain's and other seafarers' f-bomb skills and had nimbly developed fluency in this new language of one word with a million meanings.
>
> Back on the bridge, the Old Man asked, "How long were we stopped?"
>
> "Four minutes, captain," said the second mate.
>
> "Fuck! Better make that ten," he ordered. "Show his widow some fucking respect."

No one questioned his command. Back ashore, he would visit the grieving widow. By referring to the logbook entry, he'd give her a load of old blarney and avoid the f-bomb. To do so, he had to adapt his behavior.

Princeton scholar Robert Wright helped me understand how we adapt behavior. He describes how, in social situations, subconscious neural energies compete for dominance to determine public behavior. Subconsciously, neurons act somewhat like reporters urgently demanding the attention of a celebrity. Our self-centered conscious minds respond like celebrities—with good PR to present a credible impression of a whole self. This is how the crusty captain would charm the trusting widow.

Wright also explains how putting on a good show is often stress-filled and can become unhealthy. He advocates for us to develop greater wellbeing with a quieter mind for more authenticity. As I develop tools to manage and still my mind, I cope better, but I can't resist a well-placed f-bomb!

BULLSHIT BAFFLES BRAINS: AN OLD ADAGE

I was a bawdy, young smartass seafarer who often tricked his way out of trouble, charmed someone to deflect disapproval, or otherwise blagged about whatever situation I had caused. To boast of my exaggerated expertise, I would quip, "Bullshit baffles brains." And one of the first things I learned in recovery was that I could "Fake it till I make it," which appealed to me because I have wangled stuff all my life.

I kind of fake it to diminish the power of persistent uncomfortable thoughts and replace them with pleasant experiences. To do so, I can summon up a reason for gratitude, for example by thinking of something that makes me smile. To get a warm fuzzy oxytocin fix, I just think of holding a baby, or I can pet an animal. And I become a lot cheerier while I am a little kinder. When I become nervous, instead of giving in to "What if?" I can consider, "Even if..." I dissipate my anxiety by repeating, "I am excited," because physiologically they are congruent.

I can trick my mind because it does not know the difference between now and then, real and imagined. My memory, anticipation or thoughts are as neurologically binding as an actual person, situation, or event. Believing in the best scenario, for example, is not more fallacious than believing in the worst-case scenario. Neither will probably happen as I imagine, but best best-case scenario feels better! Unfortunately, sometimes even with my greatest efforts, I'm overwhelmed: my mind goes haywire and becomes unmanageable. But even in such extreme moments, I increasingly remain open to allowing change, which challenges the monopoly of my concerns.

As I began to learn about mind management, in the depths of despair, for example, I would still become debilitated. I would lie in bed paralyzed with depression and tell myself that at 3 p.m. I would go to the fridge and get an apple to eat with a piece of bread. But at the fridge, I became immobile—powerless to open the door without summoning an enormous, painful effort. Unable to get my apple, all I knew was that moods did not last, and in three days or so I would not feel this way. That was my lesson. Later I learned to beware because good moods also pass! For my depression, I eventually went on meds for several years. Recently, thanks to my healing techniques, I can mostly recognize and address warning signs of depression and other potentially harmful problems, such as cravings. I do this partly by tricking my mind into producing a beneficial mix of chemicals.

Tricking the mind is possible thanks to my brain's ability to change. "You don't have to believe this, you just have to be willing to do it," says Norman Doidge, a leading neuroscientist talking about how to let my brain heal itself if I am calm, self-aware, and willing to change—with a dash of brain B.S.

ON LAND

IF ONLY….

"Parade! You're on parade!" yelled the training- center drill sergeant. Immediately our motley, young crew of 120 potential British Bobbies snapped to attention. Meanwhile, the paper-delivery boy rode his clanking bike up the steep driveway. Soon after, as the boy freewheeled back down, the drill sergeant called him over. In a commanding voice, he loudly explained that the neighborhood lad was saving his paper round money to pay for a school trip, and it was his birthday. Then he emptied the paper-round bag and told us to "Stand easy" so we could dip into our pockets for loose change to put in the bag. After we cheery fledgling coppers had done our bit, the sergeant hollered, "Attention!" and had us sing Happy Birthday. It was fun, but mostly while on parade were seriously purposeful.

I've done my fair bit of purposeful marching. "Chests out, bellies in, lads! Look lively! Bags of swank!" one drill sergeant would holla. And I loved it. I had marched proudly as a dutiful boy scout, keen cadet officer, and then as Police Constable 1007, Surrey Constabulary. I also loved marching bands that kept us in step. Military parades warmed the cockles of my innocent young heart. Now, I shake my head and think, "If only it were true—that they march to epic glory and not into devastating gore."

And I have other "if only" concerns. If only I believed in medieval theology, I could have been a darn fine clergyman. If only I hadn't been abused as a child, I would not have been so messed up. If only my brain had been wired more typically, I would have more friends. If only I hadn't dropped out of three graduate programs….

But I don't let "if onlys" be just regrets. They have also been life-long motivations. In the 1960s, for example, I became politicized in South Africa with "If only apartheid could end." In the American South during segregation, I thought, "If only there were equal voting rights." I remember 1970s bra-burning and thought, "If only women had equal rights." The historic list goes on. If only homosexuality were legal; if only bullying prevention programs could be mandated in schools. I worked on issues related to these "if onlys" and have enjoyed some progress. My current "if only" list includes the upcoming US election, what is happening in overseas wars, global starvation, exploitive child labor, and dehumanized sexual trafficking.

Personal “if onlys” have included: If only I would stop drinking, expressing rage, experiencing flashbacks, being depressed, putting people down, etc. I had a friend who would quip, “Leave me alone, I don’t want to be happy.” And I need to leave some “if onlys” alone if I want to be happy. Some are too distressing for me to handle.

STAYIN’ ALIVE

“You are alive; you made all the right decisions,” the rape counselor told her traumatized victim. When I heard that, I was a young policeman, with no realization that victims sometimes beat up on themselves for their perceived failure to deal with a traumatic event or blame themselves for what happened. As a hot-headed young fella, I wondered why a rape victim didn’t just kick or grab the perpetrator’s testicles to stop him. But now I understand that one life-preserving reaction is to freeze: to freeze in terror. It wasn’t until well into recovery that I realized that despite my bravado, I too sometimes froze in traumatized terror. Afterward, I would do or take anything to numb its devastating effects; I called my alcohol-assisted crash into numbed oblivion “The Thud.”

After years of healing, my system sends fewer alarming messages; it has become reprogrammed. I can more readily recognize and accept situations for what they are.

My refined instinctual alerts have become less instantly reactive and more thoughtfully responsive. But it is thanks to my unrefined survival instincts that I am alive to tell the tale.

MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THIS

In 1979 for a creative writing MA thesis, I started twelve short stories about growing up in post-WW2 Yorkshire. They were pleasant enough pieces, written before I had any conscious notion about my childhood abuse, and I received encouraging feedback to continue. But I didn't complete them and left my program to research and write for museums. Over the years I have dipped back into my early creative writing efforts to edit and refine them. Recently I had a couple published, and when my sister read them, she disputed my memory. My story was in the wrong place at the wrong time with dubious details. I didn't argue with her, because memory is not for recalling actuality but for creating partial and imperfect narratives.

To recall an event, we latch onto a few salient points, and then peripheral factors link them. My mental standpoint, for example, influences how I reveal a situation with, say, cynicism or optimism. Or if I forget a detail I might fill in the blank inaccurately. After repeated telling, events become rounded out and embellished; others might add details that become included. Our self-reporting is biased by how we see ourselves, perhaps as heroes, victims, or simply doing our best. No matter how sincere I am, or convinced that I am right, my memory is not designed for accuracy as much as for persuasive credibility. In memories, distortions are normal.

> And some memories are too extreme to be stored in the mind. When an overwhelmed mind becomes too bombarded to accept and process what goes on, the trauma is trapped inside the body. In a PTSD flashback, for example, the nervous system, not just the mind, reacts—with physicality, such as fight, flight, or yelling in hyper-tense survival mode.

Until I was able to process my trauma into my unique narrative, it manifested itself in typical dysfunctional conduct. My behavior demonstrated the usual physical and emotional evidence of my suffering until my brain could consciously recall, process, and articulate my individualized story. As with editing the early creative writing, I have pegged away at awareness about my behavioral dysfunctions and refined how to deal with them. Unlike cleaning up my creative stories, however, clarifying what happened and how it affected me does not produce a clean ending. But my ongoing inner narratives make enough sense to help me cope better.

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

At 4.30 a.m. one torrid Florida August night, in the rowdy parking lot of the Lizard Lounge, my mind snapped. I had started losing it at the bar as I argued with my latest dysfunctional crush, Jenny after she became tired of my obsessive attentions that I was convinced she had provocatively encouraged. We left the lounge drunk and high, yelling at each other. Our aggressive behavior was hardly noticeable in the drunken, druggy mayhem of turning-out-time turmoil. We stumbled our rage through the feisty throng toward the beat-up Dart Slant Six that Jenny had bought without a title. I stomped off to recover my nearby bicycle, while her revving engine revved my brain. As I regained my bike, I saw her car move toward me. Suddenly, she sped up and drove straight at me. I froze. Then, in an adrenaline rush, everything slowed to become a leisurely dream. The lumbering car sluggishly rolled toward me, and I could see her shaping slow-mouthed curses. Suddenly something snapped in my head. I picked up my bicycle and hurled it at her windshield. The car swerved along the sidewalk, spilling drunkards left and right before bouncing back onto the road.

My brain did snap! I can almost feel it now. Amid the pain and confusion, I thought very clearly, “So that’s what people mean when they snap,” and I realized that I should stop using crack and get help. It wasn’t only crack that I needed to stop using, but that is what sprang to mind.

My therapist identified early on how Jenny and all my other relationships had brought me pain that resulted in misery and rage. She asked, “What do you call someone who seeks relationships that bring them pain?” I paused for quite a while before I could say, “A masochist,” and did not add that I also liked causing pain. But whatever I felt, I eventually came to own it. I gradually stopped blaming others for my feelings and acknowledged that my decisions permitted my partners to hurt me. Eventually, my pain became a guru for kindness. With the demands of patience and challenges of persistence, I no longer allow people to hurt me, and I am done with addictions and obsessions, except for a little fan crush on Lady Gaga.

PANIC! ATTACK!

I had to get up early for my 6:00 a.m. routine blood work appointment about five miles away. I dreaded leaving the house and driving there. However, I stopped myself from lamenting that I never had trouble sleeping when I had boozed. And before I had settled down in life, my incorrigible bravado had allowed me no anxiety.

"It's only my amygdala," I desperately told myself at 3:12 a.m. when I again checked the clock as my panic attack kicked in. My whole being trembled; I sweated profusely, anxiously panting, straining to oxygenate my sprinting heartbeat—terror! Combat mode! I told myself to breathe deliberately and calmly, relax, and do the 4-4-4 deep breathing exercises I practiced in therapy. But instead, I shouted, "Fucking amygdala. Fuck you, Gypto!"

I had named my amygdala Gypto. The amygdala is part of the limbic system. It fires electrons on hard-wired circuitry—perpetually alert for specific emergency reactions. Gypto was always ready to flip the switch that activated a fight reaction, for example; less frequently, Gypto pulled the flight lever and sometimes pressed the freeze button. There was also an appease tripwire that had fallen into disuse since early childhood when I realized that begging for mercy would not save me. I had come to know Gypto's fight, flight, freeze, or appease modes from anger-management classes.

The classes also taught me that my amygdala functions this way to keep me safe. The amygdala was formed in pre-mammalian epochs to warn of life-threatening danger. It is part of what is called our "lizard brain." The early human amygdala (Greek for almond because of its shape) warned of dangers, like tigers and snakes, in untamed areas when life was, as Hobbes so aptly claimed, "nasty, brutish and short." Although these historically life-threatening dangers are uncommon for many of us much of the time today, the amygdala still activates the same way, toward, say, an email from the boss.

But it need not be that way. By facing, accepting and learning from what goes on in my brain and how it affects me, I have developed techniques to manage my mind better and regulate emotions.

With practice, I have learned to discern early warning signs of dysfunction in my life and diminish the power of what could make life unmanageable. Ironically, it is perhaps thanks to resolving unmanageable dysfunctions that my wellbeing has become greater than I could have anticipated. I have almost gone from "Fuck you Gypto!" to "Thank you Gypto."

IN THE ZONE

In the 1980s, during a period of relative stability and partial sobriety, I became a part-time director of religious education at a Unitarian fellowship. A Buddhist group also met there, so I introduced myself to them and was invited to stay for meditation, which I did. They tolerated my fidgeting with encouraging smiles, but I didn't go back. However, I was fascinated by the notion that, if willing, I could empty my mind to change my thinking. Until then, I had assumed my mind was unchangeable and should be busy. And this was very stressful. So, to alleviate stress, I tried meditating on my own.

The first time, my goal was to take ten breaths without letting thoughts intrude. No way! My short attention span made it impossible to stop my mind from leaping around and bombarding me with tangled thoughts, fantasies, and to-do lists. And as for sitting upright cross-legged and relaxing—impossible. After some practice, while lying down, three thought-free breaths could make me happy, but that had more to do with willpower than meditation! I tried several ways to learn how to meditate properly, but it was futile.

Meditation utilizes the brain's default mode: a calm, home base of stillness. But cascading neurons with tumultuous agendas can override it with selfish needs, fears, negative bias, vehement feelings, or old ways of habitual thinking. Against these odds, my meditative techniques didn't stand a chance. Even with guided relaxation that conjured up soft breezes on sunny beaches, my mind wouldn't let up. But meditation isn't the only doorway to the default mode. I experience the default mode whenever I zone out.

We all need a break from thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, so we naturally zone out. There, with our minds on autopilot, we are at one with ourselves, here and now, in a pleasant internal mindscape, disengaged from concerns. This is exactly what I was trying to do in meditation. So, I began nurturing the zone-out. I first identified it; I call it my sweet spot. And I noted when I zoned out—walking, lying down, listening to music, for example. I sometimes zoned out while I was active and conscious of the surrounding world, but it was like drifting through it. By remembering the zone-out feeling, and being open to ushering it in, I experienced what I sought from meditation: less stress. I became calmer, more open to change, and willing to learn. As my default mode became more accessible, my resistance to healing eroded. My favorite prompt to clear resistance from my mind to allow helpful change is “know nothing.”

While zoning out, I increase my awareness of how I feel. As awareness grows, stillness expands, peace deepens, and my mind wanders less. I become aware of what my conscious mind cannot fathom. With practice, I learn to manage my mind and regulate my feelings more effectively. But I still take deep breaths—up to five, sometimes….

TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE: AN AA MAXIM

In the early 1990s, on Thursday nights a local backwater tavern, Up the Creek, used to host a free crab fest. Long before diversity became mainstreamed, the bar attracted a motley crew of gender identities, ethnic variations and mixed abilities. I would dance with a woman in a wheelchair. The only time I experienced any disharmony was during a murmuring lull of munching crab eaters, when a man said to a guy in our group, “You have your legs crossed like a queer.” I crossed my legs and said, “So do I. Does that make me queer?” He replied, “Well, are you queer?” In the stunned silence that followed I quipped, “Give me a kiss and I’ll tell you.” Amid the ensuing laughter, he made a hurried exit. Once again, true to myself, I had jested compulsively with no idea of what I would say.

In that setting, it worked. My intuitions caught the mood, had a desired response and used humor to diffuse what could have been a negative situation. Some people bemoan that it is only after an event that they can think of a suitable retort. On the other hand, I tend to blurt out a rapid comment and subsequently wish I hadn’t. Like when a juvenile offender’s public defender claimed that the boy had a job with a lawn service and I, his probation officer, joked, “Well, that depends on what he means by cutting grass.” Yoiks! To thine own self be true, but not like that!

In the latter case, I had been authentic but inappropriate. There are several indicators for authenticity. Authentic folk are really themselves and do not just play a role. Other people do not over-influence us and we stand up for whatever we believe in. However being true to ourselves can also cause us to ignore social cues, fail to empathize, and become over-opinionated because we think we have correct views on everything. And we can be painstakingly honest, not realizing that even the most authentic honesty without kindness is cruel.

> I learned this after I, and my authenticity, joined AA, where I had signed on not only for sobriety but also for honesty. To be true to myself, I became more honest with myself and others. But honesty without kindness can be brutal. The hardline honesty of some authentic AA "Old Timers" was a "strict parent/naughty child," approach. It succeeded with many but did not suit me at all. Becoming honest and authentic is not enough for me: I must work on expressing it kindly. To thy best self be true is my maxim now.

TO MY OWN SELF BEING TRUE

At a recent party, while an avid beekeeper described collecting a new swarm, his face lit up to recall joy at discovering the queen bee. He demonstrated how cautiously he hand-foraged amongst the bees for her. As he enacted his movements, his eyes replicated how all the bees keenly watched him in case he made a sudden movement, when they would attack him as a predator. Someone else enthused about how, on extensive travels, he always brought home some local honey. My wife, Roberta, explained that she always returned with local salt. Not to be outdone, the traveler boasted he even had honey from Easter Island—a remote Pacific Island. I chimed in to recommend a biography of Captain Cook's last voyage there. The traveler detailed his love of history, so I banged on about the economic history of codfish and my current fascination with the global impact of jute from the Bengal Delta. The fun just got better and better. On the way home I was surprised to hear myself say, "I enjoyed that," because being neurodivergent, social events can freak me out. I seldom feel safe in a group.

When I started in AA groups I learned about the "we" aspect that describes how alcoholics display similar traits. I was told of the value of fellowship. But I was as neurodivergent in AA as I was anywhere else. I did not share the typical traits, I was not invited to informal coffee meetings, and no one replied more than once to my phone calls. My experience with a sponsor was unfulfilling. This is not to slam AA, which displays many exceptional attributes. It is a perfect fit for many, and some meetings I attended were accepting and sociable. But it is not superhuman—one size does not fit all. Like almost all social gatherings, it has hard-wired customs and revered liturgies. It insists on perpetuating well-defined comfort zones with a "don't rock the boat," culture.

Because I am neurodivergent, I often rock the boat. Neurodivergent people can take the adage "To thine own self be true" to the pinnacle of vivid individual doggedness. We can miss or ignore social protocols, for example, or talk obsessively about esoteric topics and compulsively delve into obscure interests. Neurodivergence is a recent term for about 20% of people whose brains are not wired typically. Without trying, we see and express things differently. Neurodivergence describes people with autism and/or ADHD, but it also includes those, like me, with undiagnosed, but prevalent symptoms.

I enjoyed the party. I felt safe being me because I didn't have to watch what I said. The people were mostly creative folk, innovative, somewhat obsessive and very accepting; I felt I could be appropriately true to myself. Even so, I was very relieved to get home and glad to retreat into my stillness. But first I compulsively needed to look up the history of apiculture (beekeeping).

AUTHORITY, HOPE, AFFILIATION, ILLUMINATION

We were mediocre Methodists for family occasions, but for national events, everyone stiffened into proper English Episcopalians. So I had no frame of reference for my sudden, dramatic conversion to becoming an evangelical Baptist. All I knew was that, alone in my cabin, I felt an inner force that threw me to my knees in repentance. And although I was only nineteen, I had plenty about which to repent; I had taken to being a drunken sailor like a duck to water. Ashore in port, I didn't get past the first bar, and on board, I never went for breakfast before downing a swift brewski. But all that changed after I joined the Merchant Navy Christian Fellowship (MNCF). In every port, I was greeted by a host family and got my feet under a table laden with love and home

cooking. For example, one night at 2 a.m., after weathering a brutal gale, we docked in Dunedin, New Zealand, and I heard the announcement, “Cadet Holdsworth. Visitor at the gangway.” My local MNCF host could not sleep because I was in the storm and had come to ensure I was OK.

The hosting was wonderful. However, the narrow theology of many MNCF members could not accommodate my relentless neurodiverse delving and obdurate contrarian questions. Nonetheless, I was sober, and even after becoming agnostic and drinking again, I remained intrigued. I was fascinated, not by the differences among the many religious and secular cults, sects, denominations and religions that I explored, but by their similarities. They all provided four identical attributes: authority, hope, affiliation and illumination. And the shared groupthink of members reveals how a belief preserves unity. Groupthink is when a group thinks alike in harmony.

I have noticed that when doctrines, texts and creeds are pre-eminently authoritative, it leads to fundamentalism. Just as babies are dependent on parents, fundamentalists accept the undisputed authority of set principles. As I progressed from infancy to childhood, I believed in stories with happy-ever-after endings. In groupthink, this idyllic hope can lead to expectations of utopia in a perfect society or eternal bliss. During typical adolescence, we become more sociable as we seek peer approval in a group culture. A pronounced urge for social accord can translate into a dominance of organizational management. Additionally, organizations accentuate a shared vision. They offer illumination from the revelations of their perceived truths. Followers keep their eyes on the inspirational organizational vision. In my experience, members of organizations cluster their group thinking around and within these primary attributes. We all function at differing and varying levels of maturation all the time, which is reflected in how we express what we believe.

However, I did not ultimately receive my source of authority, hope, affiliation and illumination from groupthink awareness. I found it in self-awareness and from increasing acceptance of each childhood stage.

WELLBEING WAS ALWAYS IN ME

For over forty years, I have worked on unraveling the struggles between my ears. But I recently realized that despite all that dysfunctional chaos, I had never lost my wellbeing. I didn't healthily activate it, but it was in me all that time. Now, thanks to self-help, therapy, recovery and neuroplasticity, I experience my wellbeing more often, I cope better and am calmer.

Even while experiencing my past distress, dysfunction and diagnoses I still enjoyed wellbeing through four immersive experiences: euphoria, thauma, flow and serenity. These are not mutually exclusive, nor are they clearly defined. They all, however, occur in a state of mind in which qualms, divisions and the sense of time are notably absent: I am "in the moment." At their core, I am safe and whole while at one with myself and the universe. Nothing is wrong. This "don't worry, be happy" part of the mind is the default mode. The default mode is like the undisturbed ocean bed in a surface storm. Unlike the conscious mind that continually defines, creates and solves problems with preferences and comparisons, the default mode is trouble-free. It is where I am complete and whole. Before I sought it healthily, I used shortcuts to it with adrenaline highs, alcohol and drugs. The default mode underlies the following sensations:

> **Euphoria**: intense happiness, confidence and wellbeing, e.g., laughter and dancing. Intensified, it became my mania.
>
> **Thauma**: wonder and amazement, e.g., being intrigued by a puzzle. When exaggerated, it was my obsessiveness.
>
> **Flow**: full engagement in a pursuit, e.g., when mesmerized by an activity. Unfettered, it encouraged addiction.
>
> **Serenity**: love, confidence and joy in a deep sense of peace. My dysfunctional version found oblivion.

Some activities, such as sex, can combine all or several attributes. But however manifest, each of these experiences miraculously transports the mind from fragmented conscious thinking to cohesive wellbeing. Once I realized this, I could learn techniques to delve into it, develop its latent potential and depend more upon it. Default-mode wellbeing now forms the inspiration for my recovery and healing. I am shifting emphasis from consciously solving problems to enhancing my inherent wellness.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

by Rainer Maria Rilke

Why do you want to shut out of your life any uneasiness, any misery, any depression, since after all you don't know what work these conditions are doing inside you? Why do you want to persecute yourself with the question of where all this is coming from and where it is going? Since you know, after all, that you are in the midst of transitions and you wished for nothing so much as to change. If there is anything unhealthy in your reactions, just bear in mind that sickness is the means by which an organism frees itself from what is alien; so one must simply help it to be sick, to have its whole sickness and to break out with it, since that is the way it gets better.