

You Are Not Participating!

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In the mid 1980's, during my forty-second year, I reluctantly register for a personal growth seminar. My closest friends and female companion have all completed the work. I am getting very uncomfortable with my transparent resistance. A small internal voice wants to do it. But my fear of unleashing an uncontrolled self suppresses any initiative without the push from others.

It is a six-day training. For four days I do my usual number. I stay in my head and in control. My neck, shoulders and back are hurting and at times I check out. From childhood abuse I know how to split. I have my rehearsed responses and protective barriers to prevent any real public vulnerability.

If I really “let go” what will happen? Perhaps I will not come back. Maybe I'll go crazy. Maybe I'll be locked up. Maybe I'll hurt someone.

Maybe someone will hurt me. What will happen if I cannot take care of myself? Many of you who are reading this article recognize these thoughts and fears.

On the fourth night, before the 55-mile drive home, I buy some cassette tapes. My selection is unconscious and uninformed. The titles sound good. Adult children know what I mean as they roam bookstores in search of titles that promise a reasoned answer to internal longings.

It's late. I'm very tired, confused, not sure of what to think. It's a rainy, dark night. My body is aching. My mind has slowed to near stop. I reach to the seat beside me and without looking at the title, open a tape and shove it into the player. Little do I know what is about to happen.

The speaker announces: “Guess what I'm hearing about you? You are not participating.” I begin to cry, flooding would be more accurate, without sound. Then I begin deep sobs. I can barely see to drive. More than once, I pull to the side of the road. Part of me drives onward while another part remains in a deeply altered state.

Arriving home, I make my way directly to my bed and collapse. Upon awakening, the bed looks like no one has slept in it. I have just enough time to get ready and make it to the training on schedule. Yet, as I walk from bed to shower, the tears begin again, uncontrolled, uncensored,



automatic. The crying continues as I shower. My conscious mind is beginning to tell me to stop and get myself together. I do not.

I stand in front of the bathroom sink looking in the mirror at eyes that reflect the consequences of prolonged crying. I pick up my Old Spice stick deodorant and remove the lid. I raise one arm to receive the deodorant and one to apply it. I am shaking and vibrating from all the upset. I apply the deodorant.

Then, as I reach for the lid to close the container, my arms freeze in position. I cannot move. My mind is alert. My body is rigid. My mind tells my arms to let go. They do not move. Before fear can spiral, insight flashes: "Thomas, your lid is off and you're about to put it back on. Don't do it! Leave it off! Let go!"

A lid on a stick deodorant is becoming a metaphor for my life. Intellect is being totally bypassed. Feelings arise, so powerful that they will use anything to get my attention and prevent my closing. As this awareness flashes, my arms fall limp and I just stand there watching an absolutely vulnerable, naked human being.

A little boy who feels so deeply and needs so much. One who surrounds himself with defiance and intellect to stop the pain that is trapped inside from a childhood he doesn't understand and cannot escape. Ignored by authority figures who can say or do something, but who do not. Abandoned by parents trapped in their own denial. Used by those who trade on vulnerability. Left to survive as best he can. Bright and productive to the outside world, desperate in his inside world. The splits of childhood barely patched together in a façade of control and perfection.

The insight is so freeing that as my arms release, I sit the two parts of the plastic deodorant case on the sink and just stare at them saying: "I'm not going to put the lid back on. I'm not going to do it. I'm not." Then I put the lid at one end of the bathroom and the bottom at the other. This is not enough. A voice says: "Maybe someone else will put the lid back on when I'm not here." So off to my toolbox and with hammer and screwdriver, I chip the top out of the lid. Now it has an opening if someone (even me) attempts to put the lid back on.

I make it to the seminar on time. I stand up in front of 110 people and "let go." Part of me fears that I will die if I do. Another part of me knows that I'll die if I don't. Crying, trembling, voice cracking, legs shaking, head swimming, I open myself to whatever will be. I am too tired to control any longer. Too tired to struggle with myself, anyone or anything else.

I begin truly caring for myself. I let go of concern for the judgments of others. I let go of having to be good and to look good. I let go of having to be right. I let go of being perfect. I receive self compassion.

I don't die. I'm not attacked, abused, ostracized or criticized. I do not disappear, go crazy, get locked up, hurt myself or anyone else. People reach out with sensitivity not silence, with assurance not abuse, with understanding not judgment, with attention not abandonment.

I begin the training by submitting to pressure from others. I end the training in surrender to myself. Life continues to present opportunities for me to learn the difference between surrender and submission.