

The Tao of Melalvai

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INTRODUCTION

This is your new thing now
And it makes the whole world spin
It's as least as old as sin
But not quite
--"New Thing Now" by Shawn Colvin

I always have a new thing, something I'm excited about and I'll tell you all about it. The latest book I've read. A new idea I discovered. When I find a blog I love, I spend every waking moment reading the archives for a few days.

This is a collection of "new things" I've dabbled in, waded in, or drowned in over the years that relate to my happiness. It is a living document, in that I keep adding to it as I think of things that belong in it and as I discover new truths to my happiness.

MAY SPILLING SOUP ON YOUR SHIRT BE THE WORST THING TO BEFALL YOU TODAY

I was hanging out on a MUCK one morning.

Oh, you don't know what a MUCK is? It's like a MUD, only social.

Oh, you don't know what a MUD is, either. Forget about MUDs. I'll explain MUCKs. Back in the day, before Final Fantasy and massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), we had MUDs and MUCKs. We didn't have graphics. It was all text. You moved around by typing 'n' for 'north'. Then you hit 'enter'. Then you read a description of what you were seeing.

You see a grassy plain.

You can go: north

<n>

You see a grassy plain.

You can go: north or south

<n>

You see a brick building.

You can go: into the building or south

<i>

The day of MUCKs was over, but a few lingered, and some friends from way back when would hang out on the MUCK and chat now and then. By 'hang out', I mean that we'd have the MUCK running in a window and every now and then we'd check to see if anyone had said anything.

Yeah, MUCKs didn't chime or blink to notify you that there was activity. You just had to look.

We all had different names on the MUCK. We didn't call them names. We called them 'handles'. My handle was Melalvai.

On my screen one day appeared the words:

Paxa says, "I spilled soup on my shirt."

I thought, "What a dumb thing to complain about." But I didn't want to be mean. I typed:

Melalvai says, "May spilling soup on your shirt be the worst thing to befall you today."

Pangie laughs.

Wixenstyx laughs.

Paxa laughs.

"May ___ be the worst thing to befall you today" became a favorite phrase when anyone complained about anything.

The Tao of Melalvai is not a radical concept. It's just perspective. Whatever awful thing I am complaining about, I remind myself, "May this be the worst thing to befall me today." I went to the grocery store and forgot my wallet? Ok, that's annoying, I have to go all the way home and get it and

come back. It's not a big deal and there's nothing I can do other than go get it, so enjoy the journey and contemplate telekinesis as a superpower.

One day, one of the muckers experienced a broken arm. She told us this in one-handed typing.

Melalvai says, "I sincerely do hope that is the worst thing to befall you today!"

DISRESPECTFUL JUDGMENTS

The first time I read the phrase, "Disrespectful Judgments", coined by Marriage Builders, the concept resonated. "I think I do that sometimes," I thought.

A Disrespectful Judgment is made when I try to impose my values or beliefs on someone, when I try to fix someone. I'm claiming that my opinion is better than theirs.

The next line instructed me to ask my spouse if I think I might be guilty of Disrespectful Judgments. So I did.

"Would you say I'm guilty of Disrespectful Judgments?" I asked.

"Oh yes," Iain assured me.

"I thought I might be sometimes."

"Often," he corrected me. "Frequently."

I was floored.

"I don't want to make Disrespectful Judgments," I said contritely. "Please tell me if I do, so that I can become aware."

I asked my daughter to help as well, to alert me to my Disrespectful Judgments.

But they rarely had to. I knew right away if I was thinking a Disrespectful Judgment and I corrected it before I said or did anything to express it.

Before that day, I made Disrespectful Judgments about Iain and his housekeeping, his leisure time pursuits, and his energy levels. I made a Disrespectful Judgment when he stayed up all night playing a computer game. I made a Disrespectful Judgment when he didn't help with supper.

After that, he didn't have to alert me to any Disrespectful Judgments about himself. He did alert me to Disrespectful Judgments about other people. A co-worker who had an annoying habit. Supervisors who supervised too little or too much. People who made, in my opinion, poor life choices.

Words like 'jerk', 'stupid', or 'dumb' are red flags for Disrespectful Judgments.

A friend's husband travels a lot, and she resents being left to manage the house, kids, and dogs alone. Imagining that he was a secret agent saving the world in tights and a cape, her resentment about picking up the dog poop seemed ridiculous.

The next time a driver cut me off, I imagined he was a secret agent in tights and a cape. The nanosecond that he gained in his rudeness to me literally saved the day.

A related term in social psychology is Fundamental Attribution Error. When we judge our own actions, we are keenly aware of our circumstances. Our behavior, even our mistakes, seems perfectly reasonable and logical in light of the external factors. But when we judge someone else's actions, we do not make allowances for their circumstances. We ascribe their behavior entirely to their internal characteristics, and we judge them harshly.

THE SPIRIT OF CURIOSITY

I use my Spirit of Curiosity to slay the Disrespectful Judgments. The "Spirit of Curiosity" is not my original idea, but unfortunately its origins to me are lost in the mists of time.

My favorite example to illustrate the Spirit of Curiosity is the laundry. I had years of resentment built up about the laundry.

Iain doesn't do laundry because he is lazy. Because he thinks I should do it. Because he is selfish.

As soon as I say any of those explanations out loud, I know they are ridiculous. He isn't lazy. He doesn't think I should do all the laundry. He isn't selfish.

He is forgetful. He forgets to do the laundry.

He forgets because he doesn't care.

Because he doesn't care about me? Again, ridiculous! Because he doesn't care about the laundry? That is true. He doesn't care much about clean clothes or about looking nice. But so what? I don't care about that either.

We do run out of clean towels if I don't do the laundry. He doesn't hang his towel up after a shower so that it doesn't have to be washed right away.

He doesn't hang up the towel because he's stupid.

Whoops, we're back into ridiculous territory. He's not stupid. And suppose he did have a relatively low IQ, what is he supposed to do about it?

He doesn't have the habit of hanging up the towel. He doesn't have the habit of doing laundry. In fact, he's tried to do laundry. He is terrible at it!

- He doesn't notice when laundry needs done until he's run out of underwear or towels.
- After he puts the laundry in the washer, he doesn't remember to put it in the dryer.
- If it makes it into the dryer, he doesn't remember to put it away.

He's tried putting it on his calendar to remember to do laundry and other chores. He forgets to look at his calendar.

He's tried making a schedule. He makes very nice schedules. They are ambitious and beautifully formatted. But making a schedule doesn't get the laundry done.

He's tried setting alarms when he starts the washer or dryer. That actually helps, except when:

- he forgets to set the alarm, or
- the alarm goes off and he tries to finish what he's in the middle of first, but forgets about the laundry before he finishes.

I, on the other hand, am very good at this sort of thing. It comes so naturally to me that I don't understand how it can be so difficult for him.

I must use my Spirit of Curiosity to understand.

ALTERNATE HYPOTHESES

I've ruled out the hypotheses that Iain is lazy, selfish, or stupid, or that he doesn't care.

I'm starting to see an alternate hypothesis.

He has many fine qualities, and laundry isn't one of them.

Laundry is one of my qualities. I have a good memory for that sort of thing. I have a good memory for all the wrongs done to me, too! My good memory for that sort of thing is not an unqualified blessing, and sadly is not complemented by a good memory for happy times.

With the Spirit of Curiosity and a healthy dose of creativity, I can come up with many alternate hypotheses that allow Iain to be a good, kind, caring person yet unable to remember to do the laundry.

Here is another example. Someone cut me off on the highway. What a jerk! Or maybe my Spirit of Curiosity can devise an Alternate Hypothesis. What a driver, who made a mistake! I've made mistakes on the road, too. My mistakes have inconvenienced others and even posed a danger to others. The driver made a mistake. The driver may be under the misconception that driving in a certain way will get him there faster. The driver doesn't understand, like I do, that traveling slowly is not only safer but immensely enjoyable, and I don't understand the thrill and excitement of driving fast.

CREATIVITY

Creativity is essential to developing Alternate Hypotheses. With the Spirit of Curiosity, Creativity is another weapon against Disrespectful Judgments. A driver cut me off and I am angry with my assumption that the driver is intentionally rude to me. I use my Creativity to develop Alternate Hypotheses. The hypothesis "The driver is a jerk" is replaced with:

- The driver doesn't know how to drive around bicycles and was confused.
- The driver has had a bad day.
- The driver wasn't paying attention and didn't see me.
- The driver hasn't had the same life experiences that I have and doesn't realize what a dangerous activity driving actually is.
- The driver was terrorized by clowns on bicycles as a child and now has a thing against both clowns and bicycles.

I could go on.

Creativity helps generate ideas of other ways to accomplish something that don't involve a Disrespectful Judgment.

Back to my laundry example, my list of solutions to the laundry problem looked like this:

- Ask Iain to help with the laundry
- Tell Iain I need help with the laundry
- Remind Iain to do the laundry
- Yell at Iain about not doing the laundry

I removed from my list of solutions anything that involved Iain doing the laundry. Now my list looks like this:

- Do the laundry
- Don't do the laundry

That's not much of a list. If I do the laundry, won't I feel resentful about it? If I don't do the laundry, who will? No one? But if no one does the laundry, what will we wear? What will I dry off with after my shower?

Oh! So the real problem is not that Iain doesn't do laundry. The real problem is that I need clothes and towels. There are lots more solutions to *that* problem.

- Do the laundry
- Buy more clothes
- Wear dirty clothes
- Dry off with something other than a bath towel (hand towel, wash cloth, t shirt, dishrag)
- Ask someone else (not Iain) to do the laundry
- Pay someone else (not Iain) to do the laundry

Those ideas aren't as ridiculous as they sound. Are my clothes really dirty? Do they look dirty? Do they smell dirty? Do they feel dirty? If the answer to all 3 of those questions is "No", then *my clothes*

aren't dirty. There is no secret invisible dirt germ skulking in my clothes. If I can't see, smell, or feel the dirt, then there is no dirt. (Raw meat is an exception to this. I wash any fabric that comes into contact with raw meat.)

The towel thing kind of bugs me still. Towels are energetically expensive to dry. It is so much more efficient to hang up the towel to dry and use it the next day, and the next, for several days. But "saving energy" is a different problem than "drying off after my shower", and requires another creative list of options.

ANGER AND RESENTMENT

When I rid myself of Disrespectful Judgments toward other people, I eliminated anger and resentment from my life.

At least, I almost entirely eliminated anger and resentment from my life. I'm not like some Zen master who lovingly smiles as the police beat him with billy clubs.

I do feel anger and resentment from time to time. When that happens, I think, "Ah ha! This is an opportunity for the Spirit of Curiosity!" I am glad to experience anger and resentment because it is a chance for personal growth and learning about another human.

Well, maybe I'm not so glad when I'm feeling it. When it is over, I am glad to have had the experience.

ANGER

I parked my bicycle in front of the drug store. The bike rack was crowded and a badly parked minivan didn't help. I was in a hurry and I ran in, got what I needed, and came out. The minivan driver was putting her purchases in the minivan.

"I hope you didn't scratch my car," she said. My bike was leaning ever so slightly against her badly parked minivan. I pointedly looked at her wheels, well over the line marking her parking spot and encroaching on the bicycle space.

I may have argued with her briefly. But I hadn't rushed through the drug store to dally in an argument with a stranger.

I left, angry. Furious. Steaming.

I breathed, the 3-part breath. I breathed, the 4-count breath.

I had been reading about a WWII POW who was haunted by dreams of the man who tortured him. Then, one day, he got religion and got over it. He didn't forgive the man. He didn't forget him. He just didn't allow the anger to control his life.

The minivan driver wasn't torturing POWs. She didn't hurt me, and she certainly didn't hurt me intentionally. My anger was ridiculous. I can save my anger for something important, like people who torture POWs. No one has ever done that to me, and I trust no one ever will.

The minivan driver was just a sad woman who doesn't know the joys of bicycling.

My life is free of anger and resentment. That doesn't mean I don't ever feel those emotions. It means that those emotions don't control me.

GUILT AND SHAME

When I turned the Spirit of Curiosity on myself and slew the Disrespectful Judgments of myself, I became free of guilt and shame.

Just like anger and resentment, that does not mean I don't ever feel guilt and shame. It means these emotions don't control me. When I feel guilt and shame, I think, "Oh, boy, another opportunity to trot out the Spirit of Curiosity." (It is possible that I do not say this gleefully.)

FRIENDS

I went to a friend's birthday dinner and did not enjoy myself. I didn't like some of the people who had been invited, so it was no great surprise that I didn't have a good time. I wondered why I had gone to the dinner, and I realized it was because I felt guilty for neglecting the friend.

I questioned that guilt. Why should I feel guilty for neglecting him? Have I been neglecting him? Have I been neglecting him more than I have been neglecting other friends?

In truth, I had been neglecting him. I had not been neglecting him more than other friends, so my next question was, did I want to be friends with him? Do I get something out of that relationship?

I decided that I do value that relationship, and that there was one other I'd been neglecting that I valued. I decided that I wanted to take steps to nurture those relationships. Attending the birthday dinner had not helped the relationship. There were too many people present. The relationship would thrive with fewer people present, and particularly with the absence of people I dislike.

I invited both of my neglected friends for dinner and cards. My guilty feelings evaporated and we enjoyed the evening enough that we decided to make it a regular thing.

GIFTS

Many people struggle with feelings of guilt surrounding gifts. I did, too, until I turned the Spirit of Curiosity on gifts.

When I give gifts, I hope the recipient will feel happy about the gift. If the gift itself was not wanted, at least she will appreciate that I thought of her. Even if I give the gift during the holidays or for a birthday present, I don't expect her to feel guilty or stressed about not having a gift for me.

Because I want recipients to feel happy and loved when I give gifts, I believe that is how people want me to feel when they give me gifts. They do not give me gifts in order to make me feel guilty and stressed out.

A friend received a Christmas gift from his daughter. The gift did not fill him with warm feelings of love and delight. He did not consider how thoughtful and kind his daughter is. Instead, he reacted with stress and guilt. He panicked about all the Christmas gifts he ought to buy but hadn't bought yet. Other friends who are trying to be fiscally responsible expressed great guilt and discomfort with their frugal gifts during the holiday season, as if their family and friends would want them to incur debt and financial liability on their behalf.

When I receive a gift, whether it is at Christmas time, on my birthday, or any other day, and whether or not I reciprocated or intend to reciprocate, I respond with delight and happiness. Because I do not feel any obligation to reciprocate, I can enjoy the gift without worrying about what I should give in return or how I will pay for it.

I give the gifts that delight me to give. I give the gifts that I can afford. And I receive gifts the way I hope my gifts will be received, with grace and happiness.

My approach works well for me but it would not work in some cultures where gift giving is an intricate and complex dance that sends messages about social status and respect.

My life, already free of anger and resentment, is also free of guilt and shame.

MANIPULATION

It takes two to tango. Manipulation involves a manipulator and a manipulated. A friend, we'll call him Jamar, told me a long, complex story involving several people and many details. I quickly got lost and never did understand why this story mattered. It was a soap opera, and not even a particularly interesting one. The result for Jamar was that he might or might not attend a supper that he didn't really want to attend. He was angry at another person, let's call her Frieda, for putting him in this situation.

I was confused. I didn't understand what the situation was. He might or might not attend a supper that he didn't want to go to? That was the situation? What I saw is that Jamar was obsessing about this situation and about Frieda. He felt manipulated.

I wondered why he was wasting his time being unhappy. He could decide to go to the supper, he could decide not to go, he could wait until the last minute to decide. Any of those options could be done in a second and then he could move on to enjoying life and love and being happy.

Manipulation that is done through lying or presenting misleading information is an opportunity to learn that one person or another can't be trusted. She fooled him once, and he knows to be skeptical of her information in the future. Manipulation that is done through guilt or shame is something he allowed to happen. If he questions his feelings of guilt and shame, he cannot be manipulated.

There is not enough time for all the happiness that I can experience. I won't waste it being unhappy. Manipulation is a trick of my own mind and I can change the story in an instant.

THE FALLACY OF SUPPOSED TO

How many times I have felt overwhelmed by all the stuff that needed done. But does it really need done? Who says?

"I have a reading assignment and a writing assignment. I said I'd prepare the letter for that meeting. I have to get this stuff done for work. I was supposed to work out today, I put it on my calendar. I have to make dinner. The house is a mess. I have to get the kid to her swim lesson."

I'm supposed to pick up my laundry and keep the house tidy. If someone drops by, they will see a pile of dirty dishes in the sink. I'm supposed to wash the dishes and wipe down the counters. I'm

supposed to sweat a lot more often than I do. I'm supposed to exercise, to read books and broaden my horizons, to listen to erudite podcats, to improve myself by playing the piano. I'm supposed to cook from scratch and eat healthy, nutritious food.

The list goes on and on, making me crazy!

Who is it that is doing the supposing? Who burdens me with these expectations?

The truth is, no one does.

I learned this when I started bicycling.

Drivers of automobiles yelled, "Get off the road!"

So I biked on the sidewalk.

A pedestrian yelled, "Get off the sidewalk!"

I was confused!

I researched it, and learned that the safest place for me to bicycle was on the road, even though neither the road nor the sidewalk was designed for bicycling. In fact, no one had thought about bicycles when the road was built.

No one had ever thought, much less said, "People should bicycle here". They simply hadn't thought of bicycles at all. Ever.

There is no "supposed to" for bicycles. I learned what the safest, best practices were for bicycles in an automobile's world. I do that, ignoring the honks and yells of "Get off the road!" Those drivers of automobiles didn't design the road. They don't know what is best or safest for me. Only I know that.

I have decreed that I am supposed to do what is best and safest for me. I am the one who is doing the supposing.

I took this lesson to the rest of my life. I feel ashamed that a visitor is about to drop by and the floor needs swept. When I remember that I decreed that I am supposed to live with peace and harmony, prioritizing schoolwork, sleep, and nutrition, I take a deep breath and let go of "supposed to" with regards to sweeping the floor. My friend won't care. He probably won't even notice the floor. If he does, he won't remember it tomorrow. He's far too kind to say anything. And if he should say something, my response is, "I had better things to do with my time." Not, "I was too busy," but "I had better things to do." Like go for a bike ride on a sunny day. Cuddle with the cats on a cold day. There are many better things to do than sweep the floor!

Long ago, between my junior and senior years of college, I had a summer with not much to do. Well, that isn't quite true. What I did that summer was have a baby. In one of the few rare moments of wisdom of that time of my life, I wisely forbore from scheduling or signing up for anything that summer, because I was going to spend the summer having the baby. Baby arrived without incident, Grandma spent a couple weeks helping out, then she left. I still had 5 weeks before classes started, and a newborn baby doesn't take all that much time. (They need attention frequently, but it is later that they need lots of constant attention. During the first few weeks they just sleep and eat, and if they aren't colicky, there's times of boredom.) A friend visited me and said, "This is terrible for me to say, but I have never seen your apartment this clean."

"I know, it's awful, isn't it?" I replied.

Since then, I've known that a clean house is either someone racing in exhaustion trying to get

everything done, someone is a little bored, or maybe someone just likes to clean. I don't much like to clean, and I'm not ashamed that I spend my time doing things I enjoy.

Displaying my messy house makes other people feel better about their own housekeeping. It helps them adjust the "supposed-tos" in their head.

The Fallacy of Supposed To is related to a psychological term, the Just World Fallacy. If the world is just, our hard work will pay off. People who work hard won't suffer poverty. People who do what they are supposed to will be taken care of. But the world is NOT just. People do work hard and still fall on hard times. People do what they are supposed to and they fall through the cracks.

Get control of your "supposed to". Figure out who is doing your supposing for you, get them out of your head, and do your own supposing.

SELFISHNESS

Fighting Disrespectful Judgments and using my Spirit of Curiosity and Creativity to form Alternate Hypotheses and new solutions is not something I do so that other people will have more comfortable lives, free from my criticism and anger and resentment.

I do this for myself.

The minivan driver didn't suffer because of my anger. Neither did she profit when my Spirit of Curiosity diffused that anger. She has never seen me again.

I suffered when I felt anger. I profited when my Spirit of Curiosity diffused my anger. My happiness increased.

Iain does suffer from my criticisms and my Disrespectful Judgments of him. But I do not use my Spirit of Curiosity to understand him for his sake. I use it to ease the suffering I endure from my resentful feelings. He doesn't want to be resented, but more importantly, I don't want to resent him. Resentment reduces my happiness.

SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND DISRESPECTFUL JUDGMENTS

You probably think I'm going to rant now about how our society promotes and rewards disrespectful judgments, and wistfully describe utopian cultures of the past or the future that incorporate a Spirit of Curiosity. But I am neither going to rant nor wax nostalgic.

I am happier when I refrain from judging "society" or "culture", whether it is my own or anyone else's. There are a lot of people in my life who rant about our society or the dominant religion of our society. There are also a lot of people, people who get labeled as prejudiced, who rant about the evils of another society and its dominant culture. Both sets are extremely judge-y.

I'm not judging those people. I am, however, choosing to refrain from joining them. Judging my society or another society is perhaps the most unhappy-making type of judging I can do, because I have absolutely zero chance of changing an entire society by myself. It makes me despair and lose hope.

It is more fun and more interesting to seek to understand my culture and other cultures, rather than to make a judgment and dismiss the culture as not worthy of further consideration. I'm fascinated by the power that needing to belong has on shaping the behavior of a population.

Sometimes it seems impossible to look at certain aspects of our culture without judgment. Some of my atheist and scientist friends rant about Christianity, but find literally every other religion that ever was interesting and acceptable, if deluded. My intellectual and sci-fi-fan friends can't stand anything about the sports culture and football fans, but enjoy role-playing ancient gladiator games.

I once shared some of these biases, but I learned a trick that enriched my life: I pretend I'm an anthropologist learning about another culture. Just as anthropologists learn about domestic abuse, sacrifice, genocide, and slavery of ancient peoples with interest and without judgment, I can learn and participate in rituals of my friends, whether it is a football game or a Bible verse quoted at me, with interest and without judgment. I can apply this even to those aspects of my culture or other cultures that are deplorable and depressing, like police-sanctioned racial profiling. That doesn't mean I approve of it! It just means that I accept that this is the way our culture currently is, and I look forward to the day when we look back on these times in wonder, just as today we look back on Aztec sacrifices in wonder.

THE OLD MAN AND THE HORSE

In addition to observing ourselves, others, and society without judgment, we can view events unfolding around us without judgment. *The Taoist Farmer*¹ is a favorite story of mine that illustrates this. It is supposedly an ancient Chinese parable, but the earliest reference I've found is from 1991. Wherever it came from, it's a story that I love, and here is my retelling of it.

An old man had a horse that escaped. His neighbors came to commiserate.
 "We're so sorry your horse is lost," they said.
 "Why are you sorry?" he wondered.
 Puzzled by his attitude, the neighbors left.

The horse returned, and with it, 3 mares. His neighbors came to rejoice with him. Now they understood why he hadn't worried when his horse ran away.
 "How did you know your horse would bring you 3 mares?" they asked.
 "I did not know," he answered.
 "Congratulations on your new horses," they said.
 "Why do you congratulate me?" he wondered.
 Puzzled by his attitude, the neighbors left.

His son rode one of the new horses, which threw him and broke his arm. His neighbors came to commiserate. Now they knew why he hadn't rejoiced about the new mares.
 "How did you know your son would break his arm?" they asked.
 "I did not know," he answered.
 "We're so sorry," they said. "How awful."
 But they were not astonished when he said, "Why are you sorry?"
 Puzzled by his attitude, the neighbors left.

The emperor sent recruiters through the kingdom and all able bodied young men were conscripted. The old man's son was exempt because of his injury.
 His neighbors came to... well, surely this was something to rejoice about it.
 "How did you know?" they asked.
 Then they all joined in chorus with the old man as he said, "I did not know."
 "Congratulations," they said uncertainly.
 The old man merely replied, "Why do you congratulate me?"

The old man was an obnoxious git, but the point is that we judge an event as good or bad but it leads to other events which we then judge as good or bad and really, none of these events are good or bad. They just are.

We are foolish to be upset by something someone does that changes something about our lives, because we don't know if the supposedly negative consequence might lead to something supposedly positive.

¹ Chin-Ning Chu, in "The Asian Mind Game: unlocking the hidden agenda of the Asian business culture -- a westerner's survival manual," New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, page 182. (1991)

We didn't have enough money to replace our 2nd car. Sad!

Without a car, I rode my bike. I discovered that I love bicycling. I love not having a car payment. I got healthy and fit. Happy!

My daughter rode her bike with me, and got hit by a truck. Sad!

As a result of 3 serious bicycle wrecks in the area (including my daughter), the local hospital contacted me with interest in teaching drivers how to drive safely around bicycles. Happy!

Back and forth it goes.

Even as I advocate for change, like better sidewalks and more bike lanes, bicycles for disadvantaged people, equitable laws for bicyclists, I recognize that I might not know all the consequences. Some of the changes we pursue fail at the ballot box or at city council-- but perhaps this failure opens another opportunity that will be even better at getting more people biking.

I ascribe a value judgment to certain outcomes, such as "more people walking and biking", and recognize that the outcome may have consequences I didn't predict, and that the strategies we use to achieve that goal may not be the best.

THE PERFECT MOMENT

Once we can see events without judgment, we are open to the perfection in every moment.

A friend once said to me that we are blind and deaf. Every moment is precious. "A 10 minute wait in line can be a transcendental experience."

I think of that every time I'm in a line. I look around me and wonder. I breathe the 3-part breath. I look at the people. I take it all in. I'm not impatient. I'm not thinking ahead to the next thing I have to do (put away the groceries, start supper).

I think of it when I'm feeling discomfort. I went on a 6-week bicycle trip with my dad. We camped in state parks for 41 nights. There was a lot of discomfort! I was hungry. I was tired. I was thirsty. I was emotional. I was unhappy. I was drained. For three days, I promised myself I would quit tomorrow.

My friend visited us at a campsite. I told her about my discomfort, and that I had dreamed and planned this trip for so long that I hated to back out now, but that I would if I didn't feel better soon.

"You are living the dream," she sighed wistfully.

When I next felt the uncomfortable feelings, I breathed the 3-part breath. I observed the discomfort. I observed the sensation.

It was a Perfect Moment.

She was right. Even in misery, I was living the dream.

After a couple weeks, I had my "sea legs" or something. Not only was the discomfort gone, but I felt euphoric. Flying. On top of the world. I pedaled up steep hills, strong and smooth and sure. I was having the time of my life.

It was a Perfect Moment. It was 6 weeks of Perfect Moments.

I still got hungry, and tired, and lost, and upset, and frustrated. Each time it was a Perfect Moment.

Because what would life be like if I never felt those things? What if I suddenly lost my ability to feel frustrated? What if I couldn't remember what it felt like to be tired? I would lose an important connection with everyone I know and love.

The Perfect Moments are all around us. Every moment of every day. They are just waiting to be noticed.

BREATHE

In moments of discomfort, I breathe. I use the 3-part breath and sometimes the 4-count breath.

For the 3-part breath, I breathe in and expand my tummy, pushing it out as far as it will go (that's 1), I fill my chest with air (that's 2), and I breathe all the way out, all the way to the bottom (that's 3).

For the 4-count breath I inhale a quarter-breath, up to half, up to three quarters, finally the last quarter of breath, and I then exhale in 4 parts.

I don't think it matters what breathing pattern you use. The important thing is that it focuses your thoughts on your breath.

I started doing this on my bike trip. By the end of my trip it was habit. When I'm waiting in line at the grocery store or driving a car, I find myself automatically pushing my tummy out, filling my chest, blowing out every last bit of air in the 3-part breath.

Moments of discomfort, the Perfect Moments, come from:

- boredom,
- loneliness,
- sadness,
- anger,
- fear,
- hunger,
- fatigue,
- and more.

Some uncomfortable moments are mildly uncomfortable, like being bored or hungry.

Some uncomfortable moments are very uncomfortable, like grief or fear.

The 3-part breath and the 4-count breath allow me to experience uncomfortable moments with curiosity and as Perfect Moments.

FEELINGS CONTROL ME

Emotions are powerful. They are supposed to be. Emotions evolved as a way to make an animal do what was best for the animal.

That's not quite true. Emotions make an animal do what is best for future animals. For humans, that generally means doing what is best for the tribe. Not what is best for the individual's happiness, but what is best for the tribe's survival.

Evolution didn't maximize individual happiness. Evolution maximized reproductive success. The human animal achieved that by becoming a social animal that depends on its tribe. A human cut off from her tribe is a human who has almost no chance of survival, and her babies have even less of a chance. Evolution resulted in emotional programming that maximized the survival of the tribe and the reproductive success of the individual. Tribes survive when all humans work together as a cohesive unit. In many species, individuals compete with each other. There is no working together. In some species, working together gives closely related individuals an advantage. Nowhere is that more pronounced than among humans, where even unrelated individuals work together for the good of the tribe.

Some emotions are easy to understand, Fear is an emotion that propels you to run away from the tiger. Sexual feelings get you to make babies. Love gets you to take care of babies.

Other emotions are trickier. How did embarrassment help a caveman? Or righteous indignation?

Most of our emotions developed to preserve the tribal unity at all costs. A tribe that functions as a smooth, well-oiled machine has an enormous advantage, even if the cogs are subjugated and unhappy. We complain that it's not right to manipulate people. Manipulation is half of a tool that maintains the tribal integrity. Our responsiveness to manipulation is the other half of the manipulation tool.

Our emotions evolved to control us.

Emotions are incredibly powerful.

The most powerful emotion is falling in love. Falling in love happens in the same parts of the brain that cocaine triggers. Falling in love is so powerful that a senator risks his career and his family to be with his Argentina girlfriend. Falling in love is so powerful that a woman neglects her child to bicycle with her crush. People who succumb to love aren't bad people or weak people. Falling in love is so powerful as to overwhelm all other considerations because there was some evolutionary advantage in making it so.

Emotions control us without our being aware of it. So often I think I am acting rationally and only much later realize that my actions didn't make a lot of sense unless I allow for the possibility that my actions were driven by emotion.

I have slowly acquired a helpful habit of recognizing the physiological nature of my emotions. When I feel a negative emotion, I do not act on it right away. I ask myself several questions.

- Am I hungry?
- Am I tired?

- What time of month² is it?

An emotion might have a "real" cause, or an external cause. If I feel angry, it might be because someone said something mean. But even emotions that have an external cause have an internal component. Many times my emotions are entirely internal. I feel depressed and after I've eaten healthy food, I feel better. After I've slept, I feel better. In a couple days after my hormone cycle moves on, I feel better. The same is true of anger, fear, shame, loneliness, and many negative emotions. Even if someone did hurt my feelings, my physiology influences the resulting anger. It is never a bad idea to leave the emotion alone, feeling it but not acting on it, until I have eaten, slept, and looked at a calendar.

Sometimes I think an emotion has an external cause, but actually the emotion was entirely internal, and, not knowing this, I looked around for the external cause until I found something plausible. "I feel angry," I reason, "therefore something must have made me angry. What could it be? Ah ha! The laundry isn't done!" I don't do that consciously, of course, so I have to make a conscious effort to guard against it.

² If you don't have ovaries, time of month might not be relevant for you. With or without ovaries, time of day or time of year might be relevant. My brain does Not Work Properly at 3 am. Iain gets unhappy every day around 4 pm. Some people experience Seasonal Distress Syndrome. Time of day, time of month, time of year--there are lots of physiological influences on our moods.

FEELINGS DON'T CONTROL ME

Recognizing that my feelings control me gives me the power to free myself from that control.

The sequence used to go like this:

I feel angry.

I seek the cause.

I lash out.

More unhappiness ensues.

Now that I know my feelings control me, the sequence is like this:

I feel angry.

I breathe a 3-part breath.

I eat, sleep, and look at a calendar.

I am curious and creative. I develop Alternate Hypotheses about my anger and about what I think has caused my anger.

I develop Alternate Hypotheses about the external vs. internal cause of my anger.

I wait out the internal, physiological sources or contributions.

I use creativity to come up with real solutions to the external triggers.

I am calm and happy. I am not angry.

Acting on an emotion exacerbates the emotion. I learned this when bicycling. If someone honks or yells at me, and I completely and 100% ignore the person, not responding *in any way*, I will forget the incident entirely by the end of the bike ride. If I respond *in any way*, such as yelling back, or flipping the person off, my righteous anger will burn long and terrible.

Some people think I should punish the person who harassed me. "You can't let him get away with it," they say. But how does yelling or flipping them off punish them? It only punishes me. I might make a note of the license plate number and report them to the police because it is illegal to harass bicyclists. But I won't engage the person. It accomplished nothing but fueling my own anger.

I don't want to feel anger. Even if it is justified. Anger is not a happy fun feeling.

Not acting on my anger is different than not feeling my anger. I'm not stuffing or bottling my feelings. The best thing I can do in that brief moment of anger is a 3-part breath. And another 3-part breath.

Am I still angry? If I am, I take another 3-part breath.

I don't ignore the anger during the 3-part breath. I allow myself to feel the anger. I observe the feeling. I am curious about the feeling. I am curious about the thoughts and motivations of the person who (apparently) invoked the feeling.

After I have eaten and slept and looked at the calendar, then I might act on the feeling of anger. Then I might flip off the driver or yell back-- only she is long gone, of course! If the situation hasn't driven away, then it is only after I have eaten and slept and looked at the calendar that I might think about how to resolve my anger. More likely, that is when I will invoke the Spirit of Curiosity and my Creativity to gain a deeper understanding.

On my bicycle, my anger doesn't control me and raise my hand in a one-fingered, rude salute that at best gets my own blood boiling and at worst escalates the situation.

In my home, my resentment doesn't control me and set me brooding and fuming while I do the laundry.

On the internet, my loneliness doesn't control me and have me post angst-riddled messages that embarrass me later.

My later embarrassment doesn't control me and have me sign off the internet forever in shame.

And if I do those things anyway, it is because emotions are powerful!

Employing these strategies when I feel an uncomfortable feelings does four things for me.

- 1) I endure the feeling with equanimity until it passes.
- 2) I don't act on the feeling.
- 3) I minimize the amount of time spent feeling the uncomfortable feeling.
- 4) I minimize the magnitude of the uncomfortable feeling.

Before I developed these strategies:

- 1) As far as I knew, the uncomfortable feeling was permanent and I would never be happy again.
- 2) I acted on the feeling because to ignore it would mean I would never be happy again.
- 3) I nurtured my uncomfortable feeling to great lengths.
- 4) I fueled my uncomfortable feeling to great heights.

THREE CATEGORIES

In trying to explain my ideas about feelings to other people, I've found it helpful to categorize my feelings by their underlying influences: physiological, story, or real.

PHYSIOLOGICAL FEELINGS

When I have an uncomfortable feeling and ask "Hungry? Tired? Time of month?", and the answer to one of those is "Yes", that is a physiological feeling. My physiological feelings are most often fear (a keen and terrifying nameless fear), loneliness, or worry. It's become easier to recognize a physiological feeling right away, before I even ask myself the three questions.

Those three questions most often reveal my physiological feelings, but each person has her own flavor. For some people, it might be food or sleep. For some, it might be time of day, time of month, or time of year. The timing contributions to feelings involve hormones: circadian, seasonal, menstrual. Sexual release (or the lack thereof) drives physiological feelings in some people.

Boredom is perhaps my arch nemesis, but it is often really just fatigue.

STORY FEELINGS

Some feelings are the result of stories I tell myself. I can tell a different story and feel completely differently about the same events or person. These, then, are feelings I choose to have, and I can choose to not have them by reframing the narrative. Anger, resentment, guilt, and shame are examples of story feelings. Overwhelmed is another story feeling, the result of a story that someone else might be judging what I am doing with my time. Despair is a story feeling, the result of two stories: that something would be better if it were different, and that there is no hope of changing it.

By changing the story, I can feel compassion, empathy, and love instead of anger and resentment. I can feel hope, excitement, and generosity instead of guilt and shame. I can feel interest instead of despair.

REAL FEELINGS

Physiological and story feelings are real feelings, in that they are feelings that I feel. I take them seriously and I don't try to minimize or deny those feelings. But I don't take them seriously, in that I don't let the feeling dictate my behavior. If I feel fearful, and I know that I'm tired, I don't hide or get a gun to protect myself. I sleep, change my physiology, and the fear goes away. If I am angry, I don't yell at the person making me angry. I employ my Spirit of Curiosity, change the story, and the anger goes away.

Real feelings don't go away with a square meal and a good night's sleep. I can't talk myself out of real feelings. Examples of real feelings are grief, happiness, and love.

Maybe I come home feeling anxious about my job, embarrassed about a misunderstanding, and convinced that the job and I are a poor fit. Anyone would advise me to sleep on it and get a good

meal before tendering my resignation! Maybe my job *is* a poor fit for me and I decide to resign, but before I make such a momentous decision I want to be sure of myself.

That's an extreme example to illustrate why I want to identify and rely on my real feelings, not the physiological feelings and the story feelings. But the little decisions, the ones with seemingly no consequence, are none the worse for a little delay and some story revisions. The little decisions *do* have consequences that impact me far more than may be obvious. Expressing my anger, such as by yelling or flipping off a driver, exacerbates my anger. Holding off on the decision to respond to a driver until I can think about the decision with a clear head benefits me. Though I miss the moment to respond to that particular driver, I realize that a response would not do any good and that there are other actions I can in response that will do some good, such as joining and supporting my local bike/ped advocacy organization. Identifying my real feelings and making sure I'm not responding based on my physiological feelings and story feelings is as important for the little decisions as it is for the big ones.

Someone asked me, "What do you do when an immediate response is required? Angry people, bosses, or students? They won't wait for you to go home and sleep."

The only response that ever really has to be immediate probably involves calling 911.

Her use of the passive voice, "is required", was a red flag for me. Who is requiring an immediate response? Who has the right to require an immediate response of you? These people-- angry people, bosses, students-- can demand an immediate response. You have the choice to comply or not. Getting away from people who are demanding an immediate response can be tricky. The popular blogger Captain Awkward recommends rehearsing scripts to use in uncomfortable situations. She might recommend using a script like, "That's a good point. I need to think about that. I'll get back to you tomorrow morning." As some people can be very persistent, be prepared to repeat this verbatim, or use variations such as, "Thank you for bringing this up. I'll think about it and get back to you tomorrow morning."

HABITS

If there is any secret to happiness, it is in our habits, a point made by philosopher Gretchen Rubin³. Philosophers through the ages recognized the importance of habits to happiness. I learned a lot about habits reading "The Power of Habit" by Charles Duhigg and I recommend this book for learning how to get a handle on your habits. Briefly, there are two important concepts I learned from that book. One is that a habit cannot be erased, only overwritten. To break a bad habit, you have to replace it with a neutral habit. This is why smokers chew gum or suck lollipops. The addiction is partly about the nicotine but also about the physical sensation in the mouth.

The second important concept is the anatomy of a habit. A habit has a cue, a routine, and a reward. The reward is not always obvious. Nail biters have a "reward" of a physical sensation. One woman broke her nail biting habit by stroking her arm when she felt the urge to bite her nails. This created a physical sensation.

I've mentioned the effect of fatigue, hunger, and hormones (circadian, monthly, seasonal) on mood. Getting a handle on sleep, food, and exercise has a huge impact on these. I'm not a nutrition expert, but I have read enough about it that I am confident recommending experimenting with eliminating the following foods from your diet:

- Drugs: legal or otherwise, and including alcohol and nicotine
- Refined sugar, including corn syrup
- Caffeine
- Wheat, red meat, and/or dairy

Some people find it easier to eliminate a food entirely, while others do better with the occasional treat. I eliminated caffeine and sugar and had great results from that. I've never used drugs of any stripe, so that wasn't something I could try. Some prescription drugs are essential, but some can be reduced or eliminated as you develop other good habits, especially exercise.

I view wheat, red meat, and dairy as "last resort" things for me to try. Some people have had dramatic positive effects through eliminating one or more of these from their diet.

I struggle a lot with sugar, particularly my coke habit. (That's coke as in the soft drink, not the fossil fuel or the illegal drug.) I discovered that having a big breakfast of 3 eggs killed my morning sugar cravings. But when I added a piece of toast for breakfast, I get sugar cravings. Even when my toast is homemade with 1/3 whole wheat flour.

I'm a big fan of experimenting with aspects of my life to maximize my happiness. I don't have to be convinced that cutting red meat out of my diet will make me happy to experiment with cutting red meat out of my diet, for example. I am willing to try most things, like meditation or yoga or stretching, and while I give each thing a good try, I easily let go of things that don't make much difference.

Food and exercise are easy to experiment with, but good sleep habits probably have the most pronounced effect on mood. However, it's all intermixed. Good diet and exercise give you better sleep, good sleep makes it easier to exercise and stick to a healthy diet. Trying to get a handle on all

³ Gretchen Rubin, "Better Than Before", Crown Publishers, 2015

three at once is overwhelming, but so is reinventing your diet without the benefits of good sleep and a solid exercise regimen. Exercise and diet have concrete, obvious steps (sort of) but sleep is contrary and hard to control. It becomes a catch-22 quickly.

Once bad habits that diminish your happiness are overwritten, adding in good habits that maximize your happiness probably starts with sleep, food, and exercise for most people. Just as important to look at, perhaps, are habits regarding social interactions and sex.

The Quantified Self website is useful for getting a handle on metrics to change your habits. There are tools to measure just about anything you want, and what is measured is managed! That is something that hasn't worked out for me-- I find the act of measuring to be tedious in the extreme-- but this is a strategy that works really well for some people.

CONCLUSION

My insights are not original. They are largely a synthesis of things I've read, like Marriage Builders, The Happiness Project, and The Power of Habit. They derive from other old and ancient sources, such as Benjamin Franklin, Plato, and the Tao.

The simplest summary of my strategies to maximize my own happiness is: wait out the unhappiness. Generally, anything I do while I'm unhappy increases my unhappiness. It increases the depth of my unhappiness and it increases the amount of time I'm unhappy. If I'm angry and I act out my anger, I get angrier and I stay angry longer. If I'm sad and I indulge in fretfulness and worry, I get sadder and I stay sad longer. That's not to say I should bottle up my feelings, and sometimes a little venting does help get it out of my head. But the quickest way to get back to my happy place is to allow the unhappiness in myself. Angry actions or fretful worries are attempts to remove the unhappiness. Not only do they fail to remove it, they make it worse. Allowing myself to feel unhappy, observing the unhappiness without judging, gives the unhappy feeling the attention it seems to need and before I know it, it's gone.

I don't pretend that my strategies will work for anyone else, particularly people who are part of abusive relationships or have mental illness. There's a strong biochemical component to feelings--sometimes I suspect far more than anyone realizes or is willing to believe. The physiological contribution to feelings is perhaps responsible for the majority of feelings, with the stories we tell ourselves contributing to many more, and the "real feelings" making up a small fraction. The physiological component may be beyond the simple fixes I identified (hunger, fatigue, hormones) and reflect chemical imbalances that defy all attempts to restore happiness.

My insights resonate with some people, and I hope many people may derive some comfort from them.