

TUNE INTO FEELINGS

We went to see the Denzel Washington movie “Fences” yesterday, the Pulitzer Prize classic work by August Wilson. I couldn’t help noticing the two different parenting styles used by the mother and father. Stereotypically, the mother was nurturing and the father was authoritarian. The ideal is for each parent to be both nurturing and limit-setting.

To be nurturing equates to tuning into the other person’s feelings and caring about those feelings. We do that with our babies but many of us fail to use that skill with spouses, friends, grown children, etc. When we are stressed, it’s very difficult to tune into and care about the other person’s feelings. When we take the time to stay in our “Comfort Zone” we are much more likely to be caring and responsive to the other person’s feelings.

Historically

If you stop and think about it, in our Western Philosophical Tradition, feelings are second-class citizens. We have been saturated with those rationalistic paragons, the ancient Greeks. They invented the supremacy of reason and science. This has been perpetuated by Christian theologians who extol the virtuousness of reason while denigrating emotions.

Contemporary psychology emphasizes the wisdom and healthiness of equal valuing of our thoughts and feelings. The challenge is being equally aware of both our thoughts and feelings and communicating them in a balanced manner. For example, “I think we need to leave by 4:00 pm. I’m worried about being late.” Some people do this naturally because they grew up in healthy families, while other people need lots of coaching or learning about feelings.

Levels of Feelings

Stop and listen to how people talk. Most of us routinely confuse thoughts and feelings. We use the phrases “I feel like, I feel that, or I feel you/I/we”, and in each instance we can substitute “I think” and the sentence still makes sense. We use the word “feel” but we don’t connect with how we feel. For example, “I feel like this chair is too hard” instead of saying “I think this chair is too hard. I feel very uncomfortable in it”.

I think we do this because we’re probably moving too fast to connect with how we feel; and perhaps we’ve learned to hide our feelings because so many people haven’t cared about our feelings.

The core or central reality is that how we feel at any given point in time is who we are. If people don’t tune into our feelings they don’t tune into us. If they don’t tune into us we probably don’t want to have anything to do with them. The formula for understanding this principle is “I feel (followed by a one word label) equals I am (followed by one word). For example, “I feel frightened or lonely or

excited equals I am frightened, lonely or excited". We call this listening with "the third ear". Each communication we receive from another will have both a cognitive and an affective component. Our third ear tunes into the affect.

Of course, few of us have been educated about feelings. We are taught to be rational, cognitive and evaluating.

Changing Feelings

We may believe that we can't really change how we feel. Yet psychology research informs us that we are able to change how we feel by changing our thinking or what we do with our body. If we go for a walk or do push-ups we'll probably feel different. If we change our thinking from "I can't do anything right" to "I do some things well and other things not so well" our feelings will change.

Deeper Feelings

So, the three words, "I feel" or "I am" followed by a one word label of the feeling constitute the essence of two huge human challenges. They are being assertive and being intimate. Many if not most of us occasionally struggle with speaking up for ourselves and revealing who we really are (how we really feel) to another.

The pivotal skill is learning to connect with our deeper feelings, i.e. the feelings beneath the feelings. Visualize layers of an onion or a bull's eye target. At the outermost layer we place anger. We call it the most superficial feeling. It never really gets us anywhere. If someone treats us in a disrespectful manner, we most likely feel angry but underneath the anger we may feel hurt, disrespected, ignored, unimportant, discarded, invisible, etc.

Getting in touch with our deeper feelings takes time and practice. Men tend to be more strongly defended against feeling their deeper feelings. It's okay for little girls to cry but little boys must hold in their feelings.

Owning Our Feelings

Commonly we say, "You make me so mad/frustrated/crazy, etc." The difficult to understand truth is that the other person will do and say things that spark or ignite feelings in us but the specific feelings that arise come from our history/uniqueness. The informed or healthy or self responsible phrasing is "I feel ___?___ when you do or say ___?___."

Two or more people may experience the same stimulus event but have very different response feelings due to their uniqueness. One may feel curious, another perturbed, another combative. Owning our feelings is self-responsible. Blaming the other for how we feel in response to what they have said or done is irresponsible. This is probably hard to accept or grasp.

Roots of Feelings

This last point about feelings is even more difficult. When we arrive at our bull's eye feeling, i.e. the deepest feeling we are able to discover, it will originate in our childhood. Feeling that deepest feeling fully will construct an emotional bridge in our brains that will connect us to the roots or the origins of our feeling.

If we chronically felt abandoned, unloved, invisible, unheard, etc. in our childhood, the other's behavior will activate that core feeling but we may only be able to connect with our anger. This is why so many marriages end in divorce. The spouses feel the anger but fail to connect with the real issue, the core hurt feeling from their childhood.

So we can see how important empathy is. If the other person lacks the ability or is unmotivated to care about how we feel, we have a most distressing dilemma.

Final Thoughts

Learning and practicing the language of feelings is akin to learning a foreign language. It takes a lot of dedication and practice. The results are worth the effort because we will have increased self-awareness and self-valuing as well as deeper emotional intimacy with others. Initially, we will probably "think" our feelings but eventually we will thaw out and feel our feelings. Healthiness entails feeling all our feelings fully but not getting stuck or fixated in them. Be passionate! Enjoy!

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