

## TAKING RISKS: PARADOX AND PROVOCATION

*Provoke. Perturb. Disturb. Challenge. Push back. Take risks in the service of life.*

No one would deny that our individual and collective lives become stagnant. All too often we find ourselves digging deeper and deeper ruts or spinning in endless circles. At times like these, it helps to disturb the personal and collective paradigms that are in place. At times like these, we need to vigorously stir the pot!

I am not urging you to create movement just for movement's sake and hope for the best. More often than not, these erratic actions only cause more suffering. I am speaking about the challenge of creating healthy movement that calls us to wholeness.

Think of some modern historical figures that profoundly disturbed life—Gandhi who would not eat, Martin Luther King who marched, Rosa Parks who simply said no. Their actions were direct, purposeful, and disturbing.

Two effective ways to stir the pot are paradox and provocation.

### Paradox

Many times over the years I have found myself in the treatment room with patients who, for whatever reasons, did not talk much. At first, in an effort to engage them, I would speed up my conversation and ask even more questions. Over time, however, I learned that these methods seldom work. Now I greet silence by sitting still, speaking slowly and less often. As a result, patients frequently begin to speak more freely about themselves.

The story exemplifies how paradox can be used to stir up the pot. In many situations, *stillness creates movement* and *silence provokes speaking*.

On occasion, going against your habits and intuitions will stir the pot. If nothing else, you will get a fresh look at what is happening. The phrase counter-intuitive may be the modern synonym for a paradoxical response.

Thirty years ago while doing programs with the Arica Institute, I adopted the idea of creating a morning routine. To this day, I devote the first 45-60 minutes of the day to self-care. The routine may included anything from meditation, chanting, a round of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, or even a short jog. I inevitably leave home feeling awake, alert, and ready for the day. This structured time frees me up to fully tend others. Incorporating this routine is an example of *structure creating freedom*.

Can you think of other examples? A time when you found light in the darkness? Or discovered courage and strength in the midst of illness? Had moments of joy while suffering?

### Provocation

Thirty years ago I took a college course in twentieth-century American literature from a professor named Arthur Gitlen. My fellow students and I were predominantly

from small towns in upstate New York. That is, we were young **and** naive. On the reading list was Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, a searing portrayal of disintegrating human lives.

I will never forget how Professor Gitlen began his discussion of the book.

"You students make me laugh. You think you go out to the bars on the weekends looking for *love*, looking for *the one*.... I'll tell you why you really go to the bars. It's real simple. YOU'VE GOT AN ITCH AND YOU WANT SOMEONE TO SCRATCH IT."

Thirty jaws dropped to the floor and the room exploded in response, "What are you talking about?" "No way." "That's not true." "We're not like those people in the book." For the next two hours we sat on the edge of our seats in a heated conversation about love, sexuality, aggression, and violence in the early 70's.

Gitlen was provocative. He took a risk in order to serve our learning. He perturbed the cherished images we had of ourselves and challenged us to take a closer look at our lives. On that morning, he was a powerful healing presence.

Is it risky to go against your own habitual ways, to purposely rock the boat? You bet. Might these methods also create more suffering? At times they do. And, we need to ask, what is the cost of *not* disturbing life in this manner?

I learned in the treatment room over the years that we are not as fragile as we might think. People invariably grow and change in response to adversity and challenge. Go ahead. Push back. Hard truths save lives.

## ***Reflections***

In recalling the people who have had a profound influence on your life, did some provoke and disturb you?

Did they take a risk? Challenge you? Push back against you?

What aspects of your personal life would benefit from being perturbed right now?

## ***Practices***

Create a dinner for your partner, spouse or family. Speak little while serving the food. Continue to eat in friendly silence. Observe how others respond.

Write an entry in your practice log about a "predicament" in which you currently find yourself. Exaggerate all the morbid details until your story gets ridiculous. Blow up the problem until it becomes so huge—even Superman couldn't solve it! What, of substance, now reveals itself?

Practice taking an aspect of your life with others that has become stagnant or predictable and consciously disturb it. Do something different. If you always get together with a friend for lunch, go for a walk instead. Go to a play or a movie. Bring along a third party. Stir the pot!

Take a plan you have for the future (i.e. meeting with your boss, taking a trip with a friend) and take a risk. Purposefully insert an unknown into the event. How did making this change affect how the event unfolded?