

Coming Into Balance

I recently broke my foot, a fracture that occurred as I missed a step on my front porch. The break occurred on the outside part of my foot- the fifth metatarsal. My doctor provided some good news in that I wouldn't need a cast and I proceeded to adjust to my broken foot. Or so I thought. In deference to the pain on the outer perimeter of my foot I shifted my weight toward my other side, compensating for the damage.

By the following week later I had developed a new and more painful problem. I had stressed the unbroken part of my foot by placing an inordinate amount of pressure on it. I actually experienced more acute pain in that area than in the break itself. A month later the broken bone had essentially healed--but the damage I caused to the inner part of my foot still lingers. This is an issue of compensation. And nowhere does this tendency provoke more havoc than in our emotional and psychological lives.

At different times in life—and most particularly in childhood—we develop coping mechanisms to adjust to the challenges and travails that we encounter. Coping mechanisms are the adjustments that we make to our personalities, typically in our childhood. We're not usually aware that we're developing them as they assimilate into our being in very subtle ways. We craft them so that we might deal with the challenges, wounds, rejections or other stressors that life brings us. Coping mechanisms are our way of defending against stressors.

An abusive or unloving parent may cause us to act indifferent to the hurt so that we can survive the pain. So we fashion a personality to protect us from being vulnerable. And in so doing we preclude having more open and intimate relationships.

A chaotic or turbulent home environment may induce us to fashion the mask of being a people pleaser, as we try to placate everyone so that peace may reign. We might also seek the security of predictability to compensate for the uncertainty of childhood. Over time, becoming rooted to the need for that predictability, we dull the growth and creativity that only comes from embracing uncertainty.

We might be simply compensating for not feeling good enough, popular enough or loved enough. In most cases the temporary defensive formation can be a helpful mechanism. It assists us in getting through a difficult transition. Over time, however, the coping mechanism becomes a fixed and habitual feature of our persona, which limits our growth.

These adaptive techniques are reasonably purposeful when we first adorn them. The problem is that most of us struggle to shed these previously adaptive parts of our personality and over time they become hardened. In other words, they burden us and they block our greater emergence. What was once a coping mechanism becomes a suit of armor—and we clank through life wearing it.

Due to the subtle nature of these coping mechanisms, we lose sight of the fact that we constructed them in the first place. Eventually, they tend to become masks, blocking us from our higher, more authentic self. The coping mechanism becomes habituated and inveterate over time. What was at first compensation cements into a rigid restriction. When this occurs, as it often does, it blocks the developmental progress that people require in their personal evolution.

These coping mechanisms are no different than my compensating for my broken foot—causing stress to another part of the foot. When we compensate, physically or emotionally, we

become imbalanced. If you check the air pressure in your tires and it's too low, it would be nonsensical to over inflate the tires and go to the other extreme. Yet, that is precisely what we tend to do in our lives.

Coming into balance—the ultimate goal in achieving a well-lived life—requires noting where we are compensating. What part of you are you defending? What makes you feel vulnerable? What aspect of your personality are you overly identified with? The answers to these questions will illuminate the compensatory imbalance. The next question is how to proceed with the coming into balance.

The coping mechanism, so valuable to us at the time of its origination, eventually becomes a prominent roadblock to our growth. Once we've identified these blocks, loosing their grip can be quite challenging. One of the primary difficulties in achieving this unfettering revolves around our attachment to our identity. Although we clearly see the obstacle to our growth, the loss of this part of our identity is daunting. As counterintuitive as it may sound, the loss of an old and tired feature of our identity may provoke anxiety.

Positive Disintegration

The term, positive disintegration refers to the shedding of the old part of the personality that has outlived its function and no longer serves us. This flaying off of old coping mechanisms, which are no longer required is indeed, positive. Yet, the uncertainty of the new terrain often invokes discomfort. Learning to embrace that disquiet is essential in the process of positive disintegration. The unfolding of our self-actualizing requires the death knell of some of the primary coping mechanisms as they give way to higher forms of our self.

Shifting our identity—breaking free of old, worn out encumbrances—often induces anxiety if not fear. Permitting the disquiet that arises from shifting into the middle is essential into coming into balance in our lives. The pathway toward achieving this integration opens by not only tolerating, but by actually welcoming the discomfort. In other words, we need to change our relationship with anxiety, and literally welcome it into our lives, to fully integrate and come into balance. When we do so we shift from a fixed state of being into the unfolding process of becoming.