DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

Being and Doing
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September 14, 2017

Sometimes life seems a bit like a never-ending battle between doing and being. if I wish to be present, I need to turn my attention toward myself, noticing my thoughts, reactions, sensations, as I try to answer with my whole self the question: Who am I?

But who has time for that? I've got all these obligations. All of us have work that must be done, much of it with deadlines. Plus there are those things we want to do that give life its juices, like write the Great American Novel, convince a prospective client ours is the best product, or simply get those to-do items checked off the list. So we have to tear ourselves away from larger questions and focus our energy on daily living — to express, convince, and accomplish.

When I sit quietly in the late afternoon, enjoying the silence or listening to music, my world stands still. But as soon as I stand up and go inside to prepare dinner, the calm and clarity vanish. So I'm wondering, "Is that loss inevitable?" While these two opposite modes of being and doing never seem to co-exist, is there any hope that someday I might do and be at the same time?

While most of us lose our connection with ourselves as soon as we go into movement, great dancers, great athletes and great actors are visibly centered. As we watch them move, we can't help but see how deeply connected they are with themselves, seemingly listening to themselves while giving a superlative performance. What's their secret?

It clearly has to do with attention, with focus. When my attention pours out into my life, into the things and people around me, I'm pretty much lost. How to return to home base? How, quite simply, to be where I am, in touch with who I am? I've read about the effortless effort of the blindfolded Zen archer who unleashes the un-aimed arrow from his bow in a centered and relaxed state. Zing! It cleaves the bulls-eye. Could that apply to me? Or is the image telling me that I'm bow, arrow and target all at once?

Whoops! There's the doorbell with my next client. We all have a million things to do: meals to cook; money to make; people to be cared for. Even a Zen monk needs a roof over his head, clothes on his body, and food in his bowl. How does that happen if I'm not up and doing? So here I am, either running on a treadmill, adrift on the sea of life, or sinking deep into metaphysics. Nevertheless, I want to understand how two seeming opposites can come together, so here's an attempt to ask useful questions and undertake experiments in Being. And since the wise folk say today is the only day we have, I propose a series of experiments called Being Here Now that we could undertake together.

For starters, let’s notice how these two modes, Being and Doing, play through us during the day today. When do you live in one mode and when in the other? It helps to name them—“Ah, this is me, Doing.” Or to realize when you sit down for a moment with a cup of coffee that it’s an opportunity for Being with your Self. Which seems more nurturing? Which makes you feel better? Since it often it feels so good to move or to get things done—let’s have no judgments, just observations.

Then, after a day of naming, we could make the experiment of giving a little more time to Being. What does that mean? How to try? Meditation is an obvious choice, but walking in the park is another. And if you are stuck on the job, you can listen to the sounds of the world from deeper inside. Try tuning in to the vibrations of the voices in a crowded room. Or speak your heart with a true friend. Or give someone at the office the gift of your presence by attentively listening to what they have to say. Right at your desk you can call a friend on the phone or pay a visit in your mind to someone you love.

We can find many other ways to experiment with Being in Action once we get started. Think of it like this: if 90% of our waking hours are spent in the doing mode—putting out energy on the job, the laundry or the internet—when will there be time for rest and restorative reflection? We might schedule a few times we’d like to stop for a moment of reflection. A ten-minute pause that refreshes the spirit would probably help us perform better at whatever we have to do today. Then we can make a list of what works best.

Another day we might take a moment to think about some of our family members, living or dead, call up memories of someone’s way of being or invite an image of their face to enter our inner space. Then we could stay and sit with them for a few minutes. What feelings do they awaken? What memories return that we’d almost forgotten? Begin to notice that whenever we give space for a moment of Being, we become more aware of our feelings.

If all this seems too much to ask yourself, why not choose something nourishing or thought-provoking to read every day this week for 15 minutes. Or listen to music as if it were playing deep inside you. And next time you sit down for a coffee break, listen to what’s going on inside you—whether symphony or cacophony. There are many things happening all the time deep within us that we are almost never aware of. What’s more, we’re all members of a species called human beings, not human “doings.”