The Golden Rule & The Transformation of Being
by Stephen Aronson

The most ancient of principles that binds all religious and philosophical traditions together is what we have come to call “The Golden Rule.” Simple in its statement, its actual practice seems at best fitful and, for many, difficult to impossible, from the level of our ordinary consciousness. To be able to practice the principle even with those we already love is not always easy. To practice it with others with whom such affection is absent is something else.

The communal benefits of consistent, fair, and kind behavior with one’s neighbors is an obvious foundational skill for building any sustainable, creative community. But this ancient urging is not only about my relationship with others. It is also about my relationship with myself. If we are honest, we must admit that the interference patterns reside within ourselves.

There are levels of practice. Being, at minimum, polite to others outwardly is only half the equation. Often my inner attitude is far less generous. If I am only practicing outside, what is happening in my interior?

Two personal examples come to mind. A few years ago, I was walking through a local park. Off to the far right, my peripheral vision picked up a figure moving in my direction. I saw, arising spontaneously in my mind, judgmental assessments about this figure even before I realized what was being reacted to. On watching this inner reaction, I realized that assumptions were automatically being made about this person based on their physical appearance and clothing. Although in actual interaction with such people, I am always courteous, and if needed, helpful, there was, to my surprise, a disconnect with inner attitudes. And I had to admit that these attitudes were expressions I would disapprove of when manifested by others.

Recently I was listening to a research author read from his book about exploring drug-induced mystical experiences. I noticed my feeling of impatience and astonishment at the disconnect between the personal dramatic experiences he was describing and his intellectual incapacity to recognize their significance in terms of a deeper reality. He spoke the words, but his tone suggested a continuing intellectual distancing from his feelings. I became interested in the emotional strength of my annoyance until I recognized that I was reacting to a very similar part of myself.

How would I want others to think and feel about me in their interior psychological world? I would not want them making private judgments about me even while applying the Golden Rule towards me outwardly. If this is so, then I have to learn to practice treating others as I would wish them to treat me in the privacy of their hearts and minds.

The Golden Rule encourages an experience of the blending of I and Thou. What type of
“I,” what aspect or level of myself can I bring to this sharing of goodwill? To love you as I love myself would first require that I do love myself and with the appropriate quality of what we call “love.” If I don’t love myself, what love do I have to give to you? If my self-love is narcissistic, I am blind to you. If the self I love is my self-image, constructed out of personality, then my understanding of you will be distorted by my need to protect and enhance my image of myself in your eyes. In that case, I will do unto you what I believe will cause you to feel good about me. To be objective about what you need, I would have to be objective about myself.

To be objective about myself I would have to know both my subjectivity and what can objectively observe it. To know myself at this level would require that I recognize that I am made of levels, some capable of striving for a state worthy of the Golden Rule and many others disinterested, or oblivious or hostile to it. If I recognize these levels in me, I can recognize them in others.

The intimacy of experiencing a state, a level of consciousness that can hold the taste of I-Thou, can also bring sufficient objectivity such that I can sense my level and the level in that moment of the Other. At times, a true application of the Golden Rule may necessitate direct honesty, not polite pieties or avoidance, but also a sensitivity to timing and location so as to, per a venerable Sufi saying, “neither humble nor distress.”

The universal key to this mystery has come down to us from antiquity:

“Know Thyself.”

“Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.”

“On the way to enlightenment, one must swallow everything said about another.”

Days of fasting and self-reflection, confession to oneself or another, are included in all traditions to open the door to this process. These practices are clearly suggestions for preparation to achieve a state of inner understanding which would allow for the consistent application of the Golden Rule. Such consistent application, when manifested by others, catches our attention, and we look towards such individuals as models and verification that the practice is possible.

I believe the practice of this principle is difficult because the understanding of its purpose is often too shallow. Its potential is far deeper than the practical challenge of living in communities with minimum interpersonal conflict, and it is too easily confused with being “nice,” a “good” person, which belong to a level of reason that dances with the danger of inflated self-image and the insufficiency of role-playing rather than an actual transformation in Being.

The Golden Rule can be understood as a practice designed to transform one into a person who is capable of consistently manifesting its principles because of a change in understanding of oneself. How can I put myself into the shoes of another if I am unaware of standing in similar shoes within myself? To do this requires that I am aware of my own suffering, my own errors of judgment, my own hypocrisies, my own weaknesses, and failings—all the manifestations I use to justify my lack of acceptance of those who display these qualities I would not want to attribute to myself. How can I understand and have compassion for the weaknesses, unpleasant manifestations, and suffering of others if I do not understand and have compassion for my own weaknesses, unpleasant manifestations, and sufferings?
It is my refusal to acknowledge traits unbecoming to the image I want to have of myself, that blinks me to the parts of me that I judge in others. Judging these unattractive qualities in others helps me to distance from them in myself. This creates blockages in my psychological world that dull my sensitivity, my compassion, my willingness, or my actual capacity to try to understand the position of another, particularly when it clashes with my own values and beliefs about myself.

G.I. Gurdjieff presented versions of the Golden Rule in his teachings, culminating in a responsibility for universal relationship, with “Love everything that breathes” as the culmination of such a practice. But wishing does not make it so. The price to be paid for the development of this capacity is a prolonged period in the purgatorial state of staying present to the discontinuity between my wish to be able to fulfill this commandment and my personal incapacity to do so, due to the many attitudes and prejudices conditioned into my psychology by my surrounding social structure. Gurdjieff calls this state of active remorse, Divine. The fire of its experience is necessary to develop the quality of objective, self-reflective responsibility that can lead to an honest and forgiving relationship with myself. From that foundation, the differences between myself and others disappear. Just like me, they hope and wish and suffer. And just like me, everyone I lay eyes upon will die.

If I allow myself to feel this truth, my heart will break with tenderness for all.