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What Keeps Us In Good Shape?

MARINAABRAMOVIC, Inner sky for departure, 1992 Stand under the Inner sky Eyes closed. Motioniess. Depart Time; Limitless Material: Amethyst geode



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when to be optimistic would seem an escape.

What Keeps Us in Good Shape?

BRIAN STANFIELD

nybody in "the caring vocations" finds that caring for themselves—body, mind, and spirit—is critical if they are not to be overwhelmed by the day-to-day crises of their work. In fact, anyone alive knows that the tasks and the wear and tear of living take their toll. Like a vehicle on the road, a human needs regular maintenance—and comprehensive maintenance at that. So what does it take to maintain the whole person? The body-mind-spirit is a whole system, and each part in the system depends on every other part.

Let's start with body and mind. The body is always asking to be exercised and cared for. It is true that some of the saints of history went out of their way to neglect care for their bodies, but they did it in protest at the sybaritic lifestyle of their times. Care for the body does not demand investing in every single product of the Body Shop. Reasonable care of the

diet and daily exercise, in whatever form, tone up the body and enable it to be an effective instrument of mind and spirit. Some people spend much time working out, but a good long walk every day may do just as well. You can go overboard and exercise for two hours a day. You probably won't suffer a heart attack, but you might be too tired to do anything worthwhile for society. Doing some kind of exercise every day is the important thing.

Reading, discussion and involvement with the news keeps us on top of what is happening in the world. It keeps our minds alert. People these days are realizing the need for exercising the mind. Seniors are going back to school, to university, even to completing new degrees. Book Clubs abound, and other kinds of discussion groups. Graduating from novels to serious non-fiction can be a step up in exercising the mind. And some people wouldn't let a day pass

without teasing their brains over the crossword in the newspaper.

Without this basic care for body and mind, the body is likely to turn into suet; the mind into fog. But care for the spirit part of the body-mind-spirit is perhaps a larger task. I want to focus here on caring for our spirits through relationships and reflection.

Taking the positive relationship

I have to have my blood checked regularly. I try to get to the medical lab first in the morning. One lab I go to resembles Monday morning after the local football team lost. The receptionist virtually snarls at you: "Sit there!" When my turn comes, she manages to grunt, "Go to No. 2." In the other lab the mood is the opposite—sunny, welcoming: "Hello there! Good morning! Please take a number and have a seat." You start wondering, "Why the difference?"

Taking a positive, cheerful relation to whatever is going on is key to more than doing good business. It is key to living life itself. Most people experience days that put them in the dumps. And when that happens, the mood may spread to those around them. A corrective is needed. My wife Jeanette has a remedy for cheering me up when I'm going through a crisis. She gets me to sing that old Depression-era song of Jimmy McHugh. She will launch into:

Grab your coat and get your hat
Leave your worries on the doorstep
Life can be so sweet
On the other side of the street.
At her signal I join in:
If I never had a cent,
I'd be rich as Rockefeller,
Gold dust at my feet

On the sunny side of the street...

This may seem really schmaltzy, but, for me, it does the trick every time. I do indeed "cross over."

Auschwitz may seem an extreme example to start with, but if our theory works there, it can work anywhere. Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp opened in 1942, became the site of the greatest mass murder in history, committed against the European Jews as part of Hitler's plan for complete destruction of that people. The majority of the Jewish men, women and children sent to Auschwitz went to their deaths in the gas chambers immediately after arrival.

"We always have the freedom to take a stand towards the restrictive conditions and transcend our fate." That was the central learning of Viktor Frankl after his time in Auschwitz, where he saw people walking to the gas chambers, chanting the "Shema Yisrael (The Lord our God is one Lord)." Frankl made it out of Auschwitz alive and lived to found the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy, which he called Logotherapy. (The First Viennese School was founded by Sigmund Freud, and the Second by Alfred Adler.)

It is always possible to choose a relationship to whatever situation we are in. Some take a despairing response, others a cynical response. Those stances will never help us. In fact, they are what needs to be healed. If you want to find something wrong with every situation, you will never run short—the world has imperfection built into it. It takes a big breath to come out with "Nevertheless, life is good."

Cheerfulness may be an always-welcome psychological state, but it can be more. In the face of life's trials, big and small, it can be a decisional relationship you are taking to the trials. And, as everyone knows. it catches.

This relationship to life is better known as affirmation—the habit of saying yes to every situation. To better clarify, it is worth saying what this is not:

- Affirmation is not a romantic vision of life. It is not seeing the grass as greener on the other side of the mountain. It is not viewing life through rose-coloured glasses. It is daring to affirm life just as it is, without any attempt to pump up the volume or get some good vibes.
- Affirmation is not an escape from life's problems. It is the acceptance of pain, struggle, and joy as valid parts of life.
- Affirmation is not optimism: "the good times are just around the corner." Affirmation does not say that every cloud has a silver lining. Affirmation says that the cloud is the silver lining.
- Affirmation is not the forced visualization of a better life. Emile Coué, a French psychologist popular earlier in the 20th century, used optimistic autosuggestion and got people chanting, "Every day, in every way, life is getting better and better." This is not to discount the value of what Louise Hay and others call "affirmations." But, as a standing point, the stance of affirmation says that life is good right now. It may or may not get better in the future, but whatever happens, it's still good just as it is.

Although we welcome cheerfulness when we encounter it, affirmation is more than cheerfulness. It is more than an emotion. It's a decision, a deliberate choice we make in life, when to be optimistic would seem an escape.

Feeling sorry for ourselves gets us nowhere. DH Lawrence seems to say that it's not even natural:

I never saw a wild thing sorry for itself.

A small bird will drop dead from a bough without ever having felt sorry for itself.

An Australian doctor and colleague of mine, Liz Banks, once flew to India for a meeting. As her plane approached Bombay (now Mumbai), the captain's voice came over the intercom: "Ladies and gentleman, something is seriously wrong with the nose wheel of the plane. It won't lock into landing position. We

may have trouble landing. So please take off your glasses, and take up the position for a crash landing. We have to land in fifteen minutes." Bent over, their knees knocking together loud enough for everyone to hear, the passengers wondered what on earth was going to happen. Well, the plane crash-landed. The front of the aircraft caught fire. It took twenty minutes for the rescuers to get everyone out. After Dr. Liz shot down the rescue chute to the tarmac, she reflected, "Life is nothing but sheer gift. I could have skipped through the streets of Bombay, taking every beggar by the hand and declaring, 'Whether you like your life or not, it doesn't matter. Life is a sheer gift." Later, she added, "Ever since that crash landing, I have been driven to declare that we have just one life to live, and it can be lived every day with gratitude. Every day, this memory keeps me affirming life."

As if to test me, and see what my relationship would be to a crisis in my life, the Mystery intervened in the writing of this article. When I had completed the article, got rid of all the double spaces and typos, something happened. The entire script disappeared in front of my eyes. There was no article, and the only back-up was two month's old. How did I respond to such a disaster? I reported it to my wife who immediately used computer magic, attempting to recover the lost article. In the meantime I went to the movies, had a good night's sleep, and, since Jeanette's recovery had failed, began working on the essay again the next morning. My cheerfulness, however, was lacking, and my Halleleluia slow in coming. I completed the article, worked on the double spaces and the typos, and, as I watched, the second half of the article disappearedzap! The gremlins were working overtime. Responding to life's problems positively sometimes taxes us beyond all reason.

Reflection

Reflecting on our lives is life and death. Essentially, our lives are a series of events, some major, some minor. Saint Paul had one major event in his life on the road to Damascus. One wonders what would have happened if Paul, after being hit by lightning, had just brushed it off, machostyle, and continued on his way. One

wonders how the histories of India and South Africa might have gone if the young lawyer, Mohandas Gandhi, after being thrown off the train at Pietermaritzburg for being "coloured", had just said, "Oh well, I guess that's what happens when I stick my neck out."

Unless we process the events in our lives, we miss great opportunities for learning, and change just doesn't happen. Gandhi spent the night in a South African railway station, shivering away the hours in a corner, pondering that incident of being kicked off the train. In later years he would say his political mission in life began that night in the waiting room at Pietermaritzburg.

When we don't stop to reflect, we are all our own biggest enemies. Only too willingly we get caught up in the daily rush-the rush through breakfast, the rush to work, the rush to catch up on yesterday's work, the rapid-fire communication at work, the overtime, the rush home. It is easy to get hooked on adrenaline. When we rush, somehow our life seems more significant. When we stop, we may feel too aware of our emptiness. We flop into bed at night without reflection, without processing the day. And tomorrow we do it all again. Sometimes we descend into numb stupefaction through endless hours in front of the TV set, the video game, or whatever we use as an escape from the burdens of consciousness.

How do we reflect? First, by paying attention to what is going on. This is simply staying aware of life as it unfolds moment by moment. In the civilization depicted in Aldous Huxley's *Island*, mynah birds continually evoke the attention of the inhabitants:

Attention! Attention! Here and now, boys! Here and now!

Mindfulness is a function of wakefulness. The TV series *Columbo* portrayed a rumpled, weary detective with an old, beaten-up car, who looked like he wouldn't solve a crime in a thousand years. But he had the extraordinary capacity to notice everything going on without seeming to—the carnation being surreptitiously picked up by a suspect, an anomaly with the clock on the wall, a hand beginning to tremble, a cigarette ash in an odd place.

When I was a little boy, my father often got me working alongside him. He trained me to look ahead and anticipate the next tool he would need: a hammer, a pair of pliers, a screwdriver, a saw. After a while the fun wore off that, and my mind would wander. All of a sudden I would hear this sharp voice, "Stick a pin in yourself, Brian!" That meant, "Wake up, pay attention to what's going on. Stop daydreaming and pass me the next tool."

Paying attention is also a matter of listening to what the other is saying, and listening with what someone called "the third ear"—that depth listening for what lies below the surface. Paying attention involves noticing one's own bodily reactions to what is going on. Sometimes you may find your hands starting to tremble or getting clammy in response to emotional words, or a story on TV. It is important to note that. Sometimes when I am typing away and staring at the computer screen, my head starts to nod into a slight doze. Afterwards, if I look at what I have just written, there may be a message there. If what I wrote addressed my own life, then a little snooze may indicate that I don't want to deal with that part of my life, and so my awareness wants a little holiday. When that happens, I simply note it. After noting it a number of times I may see a pattern. And that pattern may be quite revelatory as to how I am relating to life. This kind of paying attention is called "noting".

To be mindful, to be able to reflect self-consciously, we must slow ourselves down in order to re-centre ourselves. There is a story about André Gide, who was accustomed to traveling very fast through the jungles of Africa. One morning the native guides sat in a circle and refused to leave the camp. When Gide urged them to get moving, they looked at him and said with firmness, "Don't hurry-we are waiting for our souls to catch up with us." Many of us are far ahead of our souls. We keep going and going, like the Energizer Bunny. But reflection requires a distancing-a standing back from what we have been doing. It means consciously deciding to re-run the movie of our lives so we can see what is happening, how we have been responding to life, and how we might need to change. In other words, we have to stop to answer TS Eliot's question: "Where is the life we

have lost in living?" Without reflection, it is possible to go through life making the same basic mistakes over and over again. Without reflection there is no real learning.

In an article in The Toronto Star. Elaine Carey tells of an interview with a successful businessman who had bought his BMW and racing motorbike, traveled round the world, taken up hang-gliding, but found that nothing was ever enough. He said, "By now, I thought I would have felt that I'd made it. Instead, I just keep saying, 'That's not it.'" The article goes on to tell how the man signed up for a five-day retreat in the Thousand Islands, to help him put his house in order. Another article in Time, "Get Thee to a Monastery", tells how Catholic monasteries and convents are now besieged with would-be retreatants booked months in advance. Some of these visitors wake at 2:25 in the morning to follow the canonical hours throughout the day. Others simply enjoy the silence of the monastery as an opportunity to pray, reflect, write in their journals, and deal with their inner problems.

Reflecting on experience is like interacting with a radar screen. When we view the screen at first it might be blank. But then suddenly there is a blip. and in another part of the screen another blip, and another. When we look back over our experience, we look for those blips on our radar screen—events, happenings, interactions that have a particular awareness attached to them. In a standard day at the office, Mildred has just interacted with a customer. Suddenly a co-worker says, "Mildred, you gave that customer the brush-off. I don't think that kind of interaction with people is going to get us into the future." That's a blip on our radar screen, demanding reflection.

Reflection is how we care for our consciousness. At times, we find ourselves acting more like robots than human beings. Reflection enables us to interact with the reality of our lives, rather than with wish-dreams or illusions. It enables the healing of our wounds, the affirmation of our actual lives, and our constant movement into the future.

So, how do we experience our experience? It happens like this: One day I am sitting in my office, tapping away in fine style at the keyboard. Suddenly, a col-

league walks in and says without preamble, "I just want you to know that what you said about staff relations at the meeting yesterday irritated the hell out of me," and walks out of the room. My first response is "Wow! What was that?" My second, "What did he say?" My third, "What did I say?" My next response is to say, "Well, people get irritated all the time." And I go back to the computer as if nothing much has happened. At night, I wake up thinking about his words and can't get back to sleep. I realize I have not really allowed those words to get to me. I have not processed what happened. So I decide to get up and write in my journal what did happen, including yesterday's meeting. I think I know what it was that offended my colleague so much, and I decide to chat with him about it next day. After the chat, I reflect some more in my journal. I decide that what I said in the meeting was ill advised and not thought through. I decide to tell my colleague the next day that I went off half-cocked.

By such means, we dialogue with the stuff of life so it yields its meaning. It is too easy to react to life's events or go through life as if we were in a trance. Every second of this life is ours to live. Reflection helps us stand present to every bit of it. We were not given emotions because they tingle us or give us a charge. We were given emotions so that we could experience our experience. If I feel terrible, if I feel like a failure, it is really important for me to find out why I feel this way, and then do something about it.

Intentionality in Reflection

Many of the events in our lives are like oysters. If we dig deep enough, we find the pearl concealed there. Reflection is the constant effort to push through ordinary experience to reveal the pearl of insight, the "aha", the depth implication. In this way we keep on turning the water of mundanity into the rich wine of meaning, so that we make new meaning over and over every day. This requires some intentionality. It assumes that we regard such reflection as important enough to allot some time to practice it. There are many ways to do this.

For example, as I think back over my day I come across an event that really collided with the routine of my life. To re-

flect on this I have to acknowledge that this was a real interruption in my life. So I ask myself what happened and start taking notes. Four simple questions can help me here. These questions follow the pattern of ICA's focused conversation—objective, reflective, interpretive, decisional:

Objective: What happened?

I was at our family doctor's clinic, because I was coughing so much and feeling generally run down. The doctor had already determined that my systolic blood pressure was at 220—almost a world record. She was going through a standard list of questions. The next question hit me right in the solar plexus: "Do you smoke?" I answered "Yes." "Good lord," she said, "You've come to me to find out why you're coughing and don't feel well. You've got to quit smoking!"

Reflective: How did it make me feel?

I felt mortified, shocked, embarrassed and angry that someone was telling me how to live my life. How I loved that pipe! I couldn't believe that someone was telling me I had to stop. I remembered how for many a long year a "smoke" had served as welcome pause and punctuation to my life. Now it was being ripped away.

Interpretive: What's the meaning of this event in my life?

It seems that if I want to maintain my mission in life, I've got to maintain my-self in good health. Stopping smoking is a keystone in that program.

Decisional: What is an appropriate response? What do I need to do?

- 1. I am going to quit, right now, cold turkey.
- 2. I'm going to talk to my wife, and to some friends who have quit.
- 3. I'm going to tell all my acquaintances that I have quit, so they can hold me accountable to my decision.

This reflection is only five to ten minutes' work, if that. Many find writing down reflections to be more helpful than an endless loop of brooding. Writing yourself through the four stages of the process helps concentration. It enables closure through making a decision about the event. It lets life flow on, without being locked into what happened the day before.

Maintaining a positive relation to what is going on in your life, reflecting on what has been, and taking good care of mind and body are key ways to keep your spirit bright.

ICA Bangladesh

In 1971, East Pakistan broke away from West Pakistan to become the independent nation of Bangladesh, a nation of 141 million people. Most of the country is situated on deltas of large rivers flowing from the Himalayas.

Suppose people in a country like Bangladesh have heard about the work of ICA in neighbouring countries like India and Nepal, and would like to begin an ICA themselves in Bangladesh. How would they go about it? Something like this:

In October 2002, Tatwa Timsina from Nepal conducted Facilitation Skills Training for twenty NGO executives in Bangladesh. From that course the ICA Bangladesh team was formed, and set up an office in Chandpur. 2003 was a year of developing a mission and constitution for the emerging ICA. In 2004, ICA Bangladesh was awarded provisional statutory membership of ICA International. It published its first brochure and made contact with NGOs, corporations and individuals for ToP training.

The next steps towards becoming a recognized ICA office is to get ICA Bangladesh introduced to the ICA world and its partners. The team needs to establish a fully equipped office, and to get thorough training in ICA methods and community development. Learning how to do fundraising and funding proposals is a prime necessity. Colleagues from India and Nepal have done Facilitation Training for 25 people, and the trainees have started communitybased projects in environment and health. They want to undertake a joint project with ICA India and ICA Nepal on AIDS. The establishment of a training centre in Chandpur will greatly facilitate their work.

In the coming months, the Bangladesh team needs to arrange exchange visits and effective networking with other ICAs. It requires effective fundraising locally and internationally with the help of ICAI and national ICAs. Good luck to colleagues in ICA Bangladesh.

Volunteers Needed

BADLY NEEDED - AN ANGEL

ICA Canada is a non-profit that relies on donations, memberships, subscriptions and royalties for its funding. We badly need a funding angel who can and will provide funding for projects as well as inspiration to other donors. For more information, please contact Barbara Miles at bmiles@icacan.ca

Edges Newsletter Coordinator

ICA Canada's primary method of communication with its members is through Edges, a quarterly newsletter. The coordinator's role is simply to ensure that all of the elements of the newsletter are put together in the most expedient fashion and on time. Most of this work is done by e-mail. An ability to write some copy is desirable. You need to be the kind of person who can set and maintain deadlines without getting frustrated when those deadlines are not met. All graphics and editing are done professionally. Please contact Barbara Miles at bmiles@icacan.ca if you are interested.

Web site manager

ICA Canada is in need of a web site manager. Our web site is up and running but it needs someone to maintain the content and improve its overall looks. The foundation of the site and its data-base are professionally maintained and will continue to be. Experience in web site management is an asset. If you are interested please contact Barbara Miles at bmiles@icagan.ca.

Volunteer Coordinator

ICA Canada is beginning to expand its use of volunteers to enhance its ongoing work. We are looking for a volunteer who can establish and coordinate an active volunteer program. Our intent is to involve members in contributing to the organization both within the Greater Toronto Area and throughout the rest of Canada. Experience with volunteer programs is helpful. Please contact Barbara Miles at bmiles@icacan.ca if you are interested.

Facilitation empowers youth leaders

"Facilitation" has a new meaning for ICA Canada's 2004 summer research assistant Leah

Taylor. Here she shares her experiences working on the Youth as Facilitative Leaders

(YFL) program, observing how tools such as the Focused Conversation Method can open

up a broad spectrum of new possibilities for young people.

Before coming to ICA, the word "facilitation" had meaning to me only in the broadest sense. I understood that to facilitate was to help someone by easing their passage or journey. Facilitation as a viable skill or career option was a completely foreign concept. This led to my initial uncertainty about exactly what ICA was offering to these youth organizations in the Youth as Facilitative Leaders (YFL) program. Though the idea of teaching young leaders in a collaborative fashion appeared excellent, it was difficult for me to describe the YFL's real benefits to organizations. But after attending the Group Facilitation Methods workshop with ICA Associates, the word "facilitation" now holds a very personal and powerful meaning. "Facilitation" has become a word to describe the building of consensus and common visions through clear-cut, accessible tools. I now understand facilitation as a synonym for leadership through participation, rather than the dominant top-down model, where leadership means holding unequal power over subordinates.

The main focus of my job was to research and contact over 100 non-profit, youth-oriented organizations. The purpose of this was to isolate five or six organizations for ICA to partner with in delivering the pilot-stage of the program. I was amazed at the overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic response from groups I spoke with. A number of them not only had an interest in YFL, but had already identified (previous to our conversation) a need for their youth to have facilitation skills. It was astonishing to discover so many fantastic youth organizations centered on creating positive social change, where facilitation skills could have a real impact. For Cara Naiman (our Research Coordinator) and me, it was immediately apparent that choosing the five initial pilot groups would be difficult where so many organizations had the interest and resources to partner with us.

Attending the GROUP FACILITATION workshop deepened my understanding of how youth can benefit from gaining these skills. Participating in the workshop altered my perceptions of leadership and facilitation. It empowered me to create positive outcomes in circumstances of indecision or lack of accord. I immediately recognized how valuable these tools could be in anyone's personal or professional life. Already I have begun using the Focused Conversation Method in my daily life – at home and in classes – whenever conversation is stagnant and needs revitalization. I also apply the methods while volunteering with the Curriculum Task Force for YFL. It's great that ICA has developed facilitation tools that help people promote active participation – rather than blind obedience.

After experiencing the philosophy of ICA Canada in my daily work and through taking the Group Facilitation workshop, I begin to see clearly how ICA's leadership and facilitation tools have the power to fundamentally alter the way we participate in society. Having had the double vision of being both a research assistant and a student of basic facilitation skills, I'm excited at the myriad possibilities of applying these skills to my life. I'm excited that I now have the tools to accomplish my goals, rather than just dream. Most of all I'm excited that many other young people will have the opportunity to attain the skills I find so valuable. §

Leah Taylor is currently a second year university student majoring in International Development at York University.

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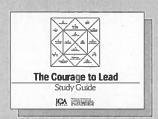


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Statement of Purpose for Edges

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