

Bob Gunn, Editor

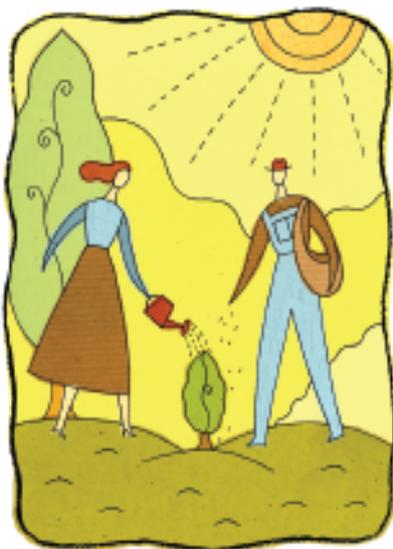
One Hundred

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

It's hard to believe that this is our 100th column. This monthly ritual began with an impulse to pass on hard-won lessons, but it has turned out to be more an opportunity to learn—an invaluable catalyst on our journey of becoming more open and aware. What has changed for us in the past eight years?

Bob: Three areas of my life are profoundly different. First, being awake, mindful, and conscious in order to focus on alleviating distress has become my central purpose. Second, to stay present and in the moment, it is essential that I am vigilant and alert to being triggered by my habitual thoughts. Finally, being committed to daily meditation is renewing my spirit as a source of friendliness and kindness—no matter how difficult the day.

It wasn't always this clear. I first woke up to the nature of reality about 15 years ago when I glimpsed



the notion that life is created from our thinking process; that is, our experience of reality is shaped by our moment-to-moment flow of thoughts. Previously, I had no clue just how powerful and relentless the thinking process

is. We never stop thinking—a simple truth that's so easy to lose sight of! Meditation has shown me that this flow can't be controlled, but it can be tamed by remembering to focus our attention, quiet our mental activity, and then release any particular thought that

comes to mind. It's simple, really—though some days certainly are easier than others.

As my mind cleared, it became obvious that repetitive patterns kept surfacing. The first of these was worry, which seemed to occupy my every waking moment. It produced tightness in my jaw muscles and persisted at night in the form of teeth grinding. As I learned to “catch” the worried thought in the moment and “let it go,” my feeling of walking through mud or drowning in quicksand vanished. I began to notice life around me: the wonderful diversity of people, the beauty of the evening sky...simple observations that had been buried by worry.

Other repetitive habits have surfaced. “Being right”—having the best answer—was accompanied by the feeling of someone poking me in my left bicep. And the habit of needing to be in control was experienced as a big hand propelling me hard in the middle of my back. This year I've noticed a habit of irritation and frustration—a flash of anger when someone isn't acting according to *my* story line or preconceived reality.

These mental afflictions are humbling, but so human.

I've come to prize the art of getting back to neutral, of releasing attachment to any particular train of thinking and dropping negativity. I'm always striving to be in the place of clear seeing, looking into the depths of a limpid pool.

As I've gained more confidence in mastering my thinking process and recognizing that I have a choice whether to pour gasoline on some random thought or let it go, I've relaxed into life. I admit imperfections, ask for feedback about how I am coming across, and, more often than not, recognize when my emotions are triggered rather than "waking up" in the midst of full-blown righteous indignation.

More and more often, I find myself pointing to this path with clients—talking about presence, pointing toward confidence simply to be in the unknown, and to work and lead moment to moment.

Betsy: On September 12, 2001, as the immensity of our national loss turned personal, I said to my husband, "I won't have a job anymore." During 16 years at a top 10 public relations firm, I had built a group with special expertise, ran a business unit, and launched a global practice. The agency had created a special title for me: Senior Counselor. But the Internet boom had led to staff bloat in the late 1990s, and the firm struggled to cope with retrenchment through the winter and summer of 2001. I knew the agency would have to hunker down and eke out greater productivity and that there would be no room for special positions like mine.

But it wasn't until I was actually out the door two months later that I realized what price I'd been paying. Work had consumed me. I had no hobbies, no clubs, just one Board

membership, and a couple of close friends. My professional network was concentrated in my old firm. I was 54 years old. Who would want me? And what would I do?

But that wasn't even the worst of it. One of the horde of women who had entered the workforce in the 1970s, I'd always felt like an outsider, struggling to understand a sort of code as self-assured men talked over my 5-foot-1-inch head. It wasn't that I said one thing and did another. But step by unconscious step, I stuffed down feelings that were out of synch, refused to entertain thoughts that contradicted the corporate line. I hadn't even noticed when my internal voice had gone mum.

When I joined with Bob in the summer of 2002 in trying to shed light on the human side of business, I was engaged in my own journey of recovery: recovering the parts of myself that I had shut out and shut down in order to succeed in the corporate world. At the same time, over the next four years, I was called on to participate in another kind of journey: walking my mother, as a hospice chaplain calls it, "part-way home."

In other words, when Bob started this dialogue, I was greatly defined by two identities that no longer apply. I am no longer a firm's Executive Vice President, and I am nobody's daughter. And if I am neither of those identities, then who am I?

Gratefully, I can introduce myself with different labels now. I'm a grandmother, an executive coach, an author, a volunteer, a yogini—and still a wife, stepmother, mother-in-law, sister, aunt, niece, and friend. But I'm no longer worried about an "identity"—a definition of myself by which the world can categorize me.

By stepping into the universal-yet-personal experiences of loss and grief, I have been touched and deepened. Above all, I value less what I *do* and more how I *am*.

And I hold out the hope that you who are still in the corporate trenches will do it better than I did, that you will find the way to *do* what needs to be done while *being* true to your own voice.

Both of us: More generosity and compassion suffuse our lives. There's no question that the path to liberation is very hard work. More often than not, it seems as if for every two steps forward, we take one step back. Consequently, this path demands from us equal parts discipline and patience, rigorous practice tempered with self-forgiveness and self-kindness.

One hundred columns ago we all had yet to experience the bursting of the dot-com bubble, the flagrant frauds of Enron and its ilk, and the rise and implosion of subprime mortgages. That's not to mention new eruptions of conflict fueled by intractable thoughts about right vs. wrong, holy vs. damned, and pure vs. impure.

So much change seems beyond our influence. But with faith in constancy, we are dedicated to chipping away, day after day, at the afflictions that separate us from our authentic being. ■

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