

Mother Nurture

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Being Skillful with Your Inner World, Too

I used to run a sizeable department in a Fortune 500 corporation before taking a few years off to be at home with our toddler and his baby sister. Back on my job, I felt like I could make things happen through analyzing problems, writing reports, calling meetings, prodding people, etc. I felt effective. And now, I still feel effective in terms of running a home and being a good mom. But where I don't feel at all as effective is with my own thoughts and feelings. They run all over the place and I can't control them. It's weird: you'd think the place we'd have the most control would be inside our own head!

That is SO true. We've written at length about the five essential inner skills and how you can get better at them, and you can get those articles on our website, www.NurtureMom.com. By the way, those essential skills are awareness, letting go, insight, taking in the good, and using the will – and they encompass just about every psychological ability or competence there is.

Having written already about the HOW of inner skills, in this column we'll address the WHY.

Two Kinds of Skills

There are two major ways to make things better in your life, and actually, in the whole world altogether. First, you can improve the outer world, your circumstances, your environment. Very important.

The second is to improve your inner world.

The Limitations of Outer Skills

Now, both are important. But it's an observable fact that trying to change the outer world has certain problems:

- Your power is limited. For example, those darn other people often just don't seem to want to go along (as only a French existentialist like Sartre could put it, "hell is other people"). Similarly, those square pegs just don't seem to want to slide into those round holes

- It's often *hard* to change things out there. It's tough to get a boss to be nicer – or your teenager! – or to wring more gas mileage out of your car or more profit out of your business, or to keep the weeds out of your back yard.
- Most of what you *can* change or fix is just a small part of your life: whether it's the drip of a faucet or the landscaping or even your job or partner
- And usually whatever you improve changes over time: kids move away, gorgeous remodels get dings and scratches, new blouses fray. Rust never sleeps.
- And even if whatever you improve does not change, *you* change in reference to it in the sense that we typically get used to things, even great ones, and they don't move our needle much any more. We habituate or satiate to them.

The Power of Inner Skills

On the other hand, improving your inner world does not have these disadvantages. In contrast:

- You have tremendous influence over your thoughts, feelings, desires, reactions your whole interior landscape
- It's often strikingly easy to shift your inner state. For example, attention is very much under volitional control: you can put it where you want, and bring it back if it trots away. With just a little will, you can let go of painful experiences, soak in positive ones, challenge thoughts that make you suffer, and open your mind to new ideas. None of that is actually very hard to do. The key is given in the dumb/profound joke about therapists:
 - How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb?
 - Only one. But the light bulb has to want to change.
- You take yourself with you all the time – “wherever I go, there I am” – so shifts in your interior experience are with you all the time. And they tinge and shape how you experience all of your various circumstances.
- Inner learning is pretty stable. Yes people can backslide. But just like we don't forget how to ride a bike or read, we usually don't forget how to be aware of our feelings, or how to see the ways our childhood reactions are getting transferred into the present.
- And, interestingly, we never satiate on ourselves! Actually, the problem is that we're *too* caught up in ourselves. But we find ourselves endlessly fascinating and worthy objects of attention. Useful tools and perspectives in our mind keep moving the needle.

It Takes Two Wings to Fly

But even though improving one's life (and the lives of others) through improving external conditions is much less effective than improving internal conditions, it's obvious that most of the focus in the world is on the former rather than the latter. Think of all the emphasis in schools or in job trainings or in society altogether on outer competence – and how little on inner competence.

Even without making inner skills more important than outer ones, at a minimum they are equally important. Like a bird needs two wings to fly, we think a balanced and truly effective person, one able to help him/herself as well as many others, is strong in both the inner and outer skills.

We have found this framework of growing skillfulness to be extremely useful for both psychological well-being and spiritual realization. It's hopeful in its focus on what you can do for yourself. It's positive in its focus on health and high levels of happiness and functionality, rather than on pathology or dysfunction. It's respectful in the way that it recognizes a diversity in individual patterns of strengths and weaknesses. And it's powerful for all the reasons that improving your inner landscape is so effective, compared to improving the outer one.

(Rick Hanson is a clinical psychologist, Jan Hanson is an acupuncturist/nutritionist, and they are raising a daughter and son, ages 16 and 19. With Ricki Pollycove, M.D., they are the principal authors of Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships, published by Penguin. You can see their website at www.nurturemom.com or email them with questions or comments at info@nurturemom.com; unfortunately, a personal reply may not always be possible.)