January 16, 2020 – Self-Observation  
Lauri Raymond

**A close up of a sign

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As I said last week, the foundational, transformational practice that we learn in the work is the three-in-one process of **self-observation**, **non-identification** and **Self-Remembering**. Tonight we'll focus on an overview of self-observation. We'll be returning to it a couple of times this year, because it's a very big topic. (There are almost eight pages of references in the index of the *Commentaries.)*

One of my high school English teachers, Miss Eyrich, informed us that in order to be good writers we had to write about what we know. She told us about the ancient inscription on the Temple of Delphi that read, "Know Thyself." At the time I had no idea what this meant, because it seemed to me that I knew everything about myself. I knew what I liked and what I disliked. I knew I was good at English and bad at math. I knew what I was afraid of. I had opinions … I knew everything!

Fast-forward through all the vicissitudes of life – I came to a turning point. I had been a long-time on-and-off attendee of CCH, but beyond feeling inspired by Tim's talks, I had never really engaged the two primary practices taught here. But one day, after two failed marriages, a lot of relationship difficulties and having the man I loved decide to leave, there was a moment of utter surrender. I began to suspect that I didn't know myself at all. I began to suspect that maybe *I* had something to do with all this. The surrender led to a wish. I returned to CCH and haven't left since. I put on the practices of Centering Prayer and the Work. Through self-observation, I started seeing parts of myself that I'd never known and that had been controlling my life. I was drawn to and God was drawing me into the light.

Until we know what we are really like – what runs us – we cannot hope to change, to break free. Through non-critically bringing it to the light, we become more and more what we truly are.

"The first demand, the first condition, the first test for he who wants to work on himself is to change his appreciation of himself. He cannot just imagine, or simply believe or think, but actually \*see\* things in himself that he did not see before, really see them. Never will his opinion about himself change as long as he will not see inside himself. And in order to see, he has \_to learn\_ to see: it is the first initiation of man into self-knowledge. … Today we have only the illusion of what we are. We overestimate ourselves. We do not respect ourselves. To respect myself, I have to have recognized in me a part which is higher than the other parts, and to which I show respect by the attitude I have towards it. In this way I will respect myself. And my relationships with others will be ruled by the same respect. … You have to stop inside and observe. Observe without prejudice. While accepting for a time this idea of lies. And if you observe in this manner, paying of yourself, without self-pity, by giving all your false riches for one moment of reality, maybe someday you'll see all of a sudden something you have never saw in you before. You will see are someone else from what you thought you are."

- G. I. Gurdjieff, September 1941, from *Question de Gurdjieff,* by Albin Michel

**What do we observe?**

In the Work we learn that, rather than going through life as awake, conscious beings, responding to the events and people in life in new, fresh ways in each moment. In a sense, we are hypnotized. We don’t have agency; we react mechanically, habitually, like machines. We are asleep.

We are run by energetic programs that were developed a long time ago out of self-protection, to avoid further trauma or loss, to compensate for perceived separation from Source, out of the perception that we're alone and have to go it alone.

Nicoll called these stuck, repeating patterns recordings on wax phonograph rolls or phonograph records. Today we might call them computer programs. Thomas Keating calls them "programs for happiness." Brain scientists might say, "deeply-grooved neural pathways." Dr. Joe Dispenza calls them "memorized emotions."

Whatever we call them, *that's* what we want to observe.

"To begin to objectify the subjective mind, to begin to observe the program, means you are no longer the program. Awareness is your goal."

- Dr. Joe Dispenza, *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself*

Beryl Pogson and Bob Hunter wrote a book called *The Very Next Thing.* I really like that title because it says exactly what to observe – the very next thing. For example, the very next time we notice we're **identified. (**"Identified" is a way of saying tweaked.)

Our aims, our wishes, our intention will draw our Work to us. Or we could say that the Divine Therapist is drawing *us* to the very next thing. (Remember Fr. Thomas' teaching on the *archeological dig*. In service to our healing and transformation, God is skillfully drawing us deeper and deeper through the long-buried wounds of a lifetime.) Each day will bring its own opportunities. The Work aphorism, **"My being draws my life,"** is another way of saying that we can trust the Work to show us our next opportunities to self-observe.

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

- Matthew 6:11

**Key points in self-observation.**

**We learn divided attention.**

In the Work, we learn **divided attention**; we learn to divide ourselves into two – an observer and the observed. The observer side of us, which in the Work is called **Observing I**, is curious, has no theories and is absolutely neutral. One way to describe Observing I is, it's like Sherlock Holmes solving a mystery: absolutely objective, without opinions, judgments or theories, holding a magnifying glass. If personification doesn't work for you, you can just understand Observing I as a neutral faculty or an internal sense organ that can be developed. What it observes is our reactions to people and events outside of us.

"Self-observation is an act of attention directed inwards – to what is going on in you. The attention must be active – that is, directed. … The attention comes from the observing side [of oneself], whereas the thoughts and emotions belong to the observed side in yourself. This is dividing yourself into two. There is a saying: 'A man is first one, then two, and then one.' The observing side, or *Observing I*, stands interior to, or above, the observed side …"

- Maurice Nicoll, *Commentaries*, "Self-Observation," January 9, 1943, Vol. 1, pp. 213-214

**We practice non-critical self-observation**

In my experience, one of the reasons it has taken us so long to get serious about this Work is that we are afraid of what we'll see and that we'll find out we're horrible. So the emphasis in the Work on **non-critical self-observation** is critical. We learn that what we're observing *is not* I! It's a non-entity; it's just a fragment. We learn to **non-identify**.

Often when we're self-observing, **the critic** shows up. It is likely to be saying things like, "I can't believe you said that. Now you've done it! Why are you so stupid? You never learn." The critic is just another 'I,' and should not be confused with Observing 'I.' Beginning Work students will certainly want to take some time observing the critic. What does it say? What is the emotional tone animating it? What does it feel like in the body? After you've gotten a good picture of what the critic is like, how it operates, it's best to simply non-identify with it when it shows up. It can take your attention away from self-observation. We're able to take an attitude toward it like: "Thank you for sharing, but you're standing in the way of my investigation."

**We self-observe in all three centers.**

To gain a full understanding of the program, we self-observe in all three centers: intellectual center, emotional center and moving center. So a complete observation means observing our thoughts, our emotions and our bodies.

For example: I am sitting at my computer and I read some words in an email from someone I know offering constructive, valid feedback about something that I've done. I realize that I am identified. I might observe:

*The Critic*

Thoughts – self-criticism, controlling (*You screwed up again. You're not good enough for this job.)*

Emotions – scorn, disgust, pride

Bodily Sensations – tension in the arms, clenched fists

Or we might know the critic is present if we see the other side of the coin. For example:

*The Downcast One* or *The Criticized One* \*

Thoughts – unworthiness, self-blame (*I screwed up again. I'm not good enough for this job.)*

Emotions – embarrassment, shame, vanity

Bodily Sensations – nausea, cheeks flushed, feel like crying in throat and eyes

\*Naming the 'I' helps us to recognize it when it recurs. Some also visualize it as a cartoon character.

Only when we see the pattern through the lens of each of the three centers, have we made a complete observation. Think of the identity or 'I' as being a triangular link in a chain.

With continued self-observation, we come to realize that groups of these three-sided 'I's tend to hang out together – link together – and they pop up in certain similar situations. So while observing *The Critic* and *The Downcast One*, I might also observe:

*The Righteous One*

Thoughts – blaming, self-justification (*Nobody told me! I worked so hard and it's never good enough!)*

Emotions – anger, self-righteousness, defensiveness

Bodily Sensations – burning in gut, tight jaw and lips, shortness of breath

And:

*Fly Away*

Thoughts – giving up, running away (*This is too hard. I think it's time to quit.)*

Emotions – fear, anxiety, flight/escapism

Bodily Sensations – fluttering in stomach, jittery legs

The name of this whole gang or linked-together chain (chain-gang!) of identities or 'I's could be, *Feeling Criticized*. The chains link together with other chains, until we come to realize that our being is armored with a suit of medieval chain-mail – and we have outgrown it.

*Of course this is just one way of seeing it and these examples are just that.* Each of us will have our own, unique pictures, when we make the effort to self-observe. While we be informed by another's experience and sharing – and we are! – nothing will be gained for us if we don't apply the Work to ourselves – do our own self-observation.

Let's take a moment for observing in all three centers. (Guided real-time self-observation.)

**We develop a light – even accepting – attitude toward what is observed.**

These patterns, habitual ways of reacting are not our enemies. They were primitive tools that were useful up to a point. It's just that now our hand has become stuck to the club and we go around pounding everything. We intuit that there is something more, but we realize that, as we are, we are powerlessness to change. What is the remedy? The light.

In time, with practice, we develop a non-adversarial, softer, more compassionate attitude toward these 'I's, these recordings. We come to *understand* the memorized emotion, without *believing* that the present-time situation warrants acting or speaking out of it. In truth, these 'I's are both young and old. Formed in early life, they are long-standing young selves that figured out how to navigate life and got frozen or stuck there – concretized. With time, we even come to appreciate and be grateful for them. They helped to get us here.

"If you truly understood, you would not disagree."

- Work Aphorism

The more they are fully brought to the light – enlightened – the more we are able to recognize their motivations and why they came about. We develop compassion for ourselves, which leads to more compassion for others. With the light, the solid, concretized chain mail is raised in vibrational level, becomes more transparent. We start to be able to "see through" these old patterns, until the very chains themselves become the Light.

*The night is almost over, and day will soon appear. Let us stop behaving as people do in the dark and put on the armor of light.*

- Romans 13:12

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

- Matthew 11:28-30

**Homework**

Our homework is: Drawing upon the definitions and *Commentaries* cited of what is and what is not self-observation, practice definite, concrete, topical self-observation.

It comes from the following quotation from the *Commentaries*. (You'll find a longer version of the quotation in the email that you got today.)

"What I am speaking of here is *definite, topical and concrete self-observation*. It consists in observing in yourself what definitely irritates you in another person. It is definite, because it is about what you definitely notice in another. It is topical because it has to do with what is going on more or less at the time and it is concrete because it demands that you get down to the concrete job of finding in yourself what you find so irritating in the other person. ..."

- Maurice Nicoll, *Commentaries*, "Definite, Topical and Concrete Self-Observation," July 12, 1952, Vol. 5, p. 1598

This is related to the Work idea of **externally considering**, that is to see oneself in others and others in oneself. The idea is that often we are invisible to ourselves, but others are mirrors for us. By observing what irritates us in others, we are given a clue to something waiting to be seen in ourselves.

So to restate: *Definite*: we are to observe in ourselves what is definitely irritating us in another. *Topical*: Observe something current, the very next thing, not long in the past. *Concrete*: Don't just think about what it might be; go within in order to do a complete 3-centered observation of what has been buried in concrete.

Questions or comments about self-observation or the homework?

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"All this Work is about making what lies in your Being more and more conscious – that is, bringing out into the light of consciousness what has always acted mechanically in you so far and perhaps spoiled your life…. Do you fear not to be properly treated, for instance? (I am not speaking of instinctive fear). If you begin to see the connection between some forms of violence and some not hitherto realized or acknowledged fear, then you will find that this connection exposed more and more to the light of consciousness (by means of self-observation) will operate less and less powerfully. In other words, whereas you reacted mechanically, now you see and begin to act consciously. This is a change of being."

- Maurice Nicoll, *Commentaries*, "Further Note on Violence and Understanding," June 14, 1947, Vol. 3, p. 1047