

Lessons from the Peanut Man

Many years ago I was watching Johnny Carson one night, which was pretty unusual. One of his guests was a peanut vendor from Shea Stadium in New York. This man (I've forgotten his name so I just call him The Peanut Man) had an uncanny ability to throw peanuts a very long distance with great accuracy to his customer. He could also catch the money returned by the customer even though thrown badly. The fans loved The Peanut Man so much that when vendor-throwing in the stadium was banned because a lady was hit in the face with an ice cream sandwich, the fans boycotted the games until it was reinstated and The Peanut Man could perform his feats again. He was also asked to throw out the first ball of the season one year, an honor that is usually reserved for dignitaries and very famous people. And now he was on national TV on the Tonight Show.

While I watched the show, I understood why he had earned these honors. He was an exemplar of loving presence. Johnny Carson had a habit of subtly and not-so-subtly demeaning his less-than-famous guests to get a laugh. It was one of the reasons I didn't normally watch his show. As The Peanut Man went out into the audience and exhibited his remarkable skills and then taught Johnny how to do it, I watched with great interest how he responded to Johnny's unflattering cracks, or I should say how he didn't respond. It was like water off a ducks back. He was just so present and welcoming of each moment, there was nothing to resist. Just watching the man opened my heart.

Many would say that his job wasn't important and would find it difficult to find any meaning in it. Some would even feel ashamed by it. This man made it an art form that changed lives and earned him national recognition. He changed my life. I've thought of him often in the ensuing years, especially when I created stress for myself by resisting what I was doing.

There have been periods of my life when I was doing jobs that paid the rent but weren't something I loved. Slowly I learned that when I was resisting what I was doing and being uncomfortable doing it, I was usually doing it badly, which of course just made it all feel worse. I eventually self-corrected, found my presence, and was able to be more comfortable with my tasks.

I remember, I forget, I remember... (see the poem in the poetry section of this website)

Making Our Contributions

A reinforcing story came from Stewart Emory, who used to have a personal growth company called Actualizations in the 70's. A woman wanted to join the Actualizations staff. Stewart asked her what she was presently doing for work. She said she was a waitress and she hated it. He asked her what her nightly take was in tips. At that time I think she said she got about \$35. He told her that when she took home a minimum of \$100 per night in tips that she would be ready to join his staff. His reasoning was that if she was present with her job and truly making a contribution, her tips would increase. He said as long as she had not mastered being present and making a contribution in her waitress job, she wasn't ready to make a contribution on his staff.

It's been my observation that we humans have a deep-seated need to make a contribution to life. Studies have supported this observation. The key appears to be in how present we are to this moment. Like The Peanut Man, no matter what we are doing, if we can be present, comfortable, and accepting of what we are doing, we make a contribution. And if our situation isn't enabling us to make our best contribution, by being present and thereby removing all the added stuff, the way seems to open more easily to what is our best contribution.



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To be clear, I'm not saying to not take action to change our circumstances. If appropriate, do take action AND stay in the moment with what you are doing. In my case, hating my job didn't make the road easier to get to where I wanted to be. It just made my stomach hurt while I did my job badly. Accepting what I was doing, being present with it, doing it with mindful awareness AND taking action to change my circumstances alleviated my stress and made me more effective.

It's all about awareness. The more aware we are, the better we are able to respond in the moment (response-ability), the less energy is required, the less extra stuff we have to do, the more effective we are at making our contribution, and the more pleasure we experience. Bottom line is it's just more fun!

And yea, it's easy to say and doing it is often quite another thing! So we use baby steps and little experiments...

Experiment:

Here's an interesting experiment that has worked incredibly well in my busy life and with many clients and students. It's especially useful for those who don't have time to meditate or engage in one more activity.

Take any activity that you do on a daily basis. It's best if it's not something that requires a lot of mental focus, such as bookkeeping. Ideal activities are housework, cooking, personal hygiene, or exercise. This experiment is even better if you choose an activity that you have to do, but don't necessarily enjoy. Commit to do it mindfully, with singular focus, for one week.

As an example, if the task you want to focus on is sweeping the floor, notice the sensation of the broom in your hands, notice your breath as you perform the motions, notice the feel of your feet on the floor, notice the intricate movements in your body that are required to manipulate the broom to catch the dirt under it's bristles. Notice how you manage the dirt, animal hair, etc. as you sweep it into a pile. Notice the thoughts that arise and fall away as you continue to return your focus to your breathing body sweeping. Ask yourself the question, "What can I notice that I haven't noticed before?" as you sweep. See if you can refine your awareness and actions so there is nothing added – no extra energy required – just the pure and simple action of sweeping.

Notice what happens to your experience of your task after just one week. If you choose to do this experiment, I'd love to hear the results.

Enjoy!

