

What Feelings Need to Bubble Up? The Value of Self-Reflection

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“Dig within. Within is the wellspring of good; and it is always ready to bubble up, if you just dig.” – Marcus Aurelius

Self-reflection and emotional honesty can ultimately be very liberating and exhilarating, but the prospect of digging deeply within ourselves can be frightening. What will we find? What will we unleash? Should we play it safe and just let sleeping dogs lie in the realm of emotions?

Most of us turn away from feelings we are uncomfortable with, such as sorrow, shame, fear, anger or vulnerability. We keep them buried and don't acknowledge them. Or we allow one “bad” feeling to take center stage and shun the rest, such as an outwardly angry woman who is masking feelings of loneliness or a jealous man who harbors shame inside.

Where did we learn to live like this, with such large parts of ourselves hiding in the shadows? Generally, in our childhood homes. For instance, if you grew up in a family where everyone was expected to put on a happy face whatever the circumstances, you might still stuff down a lot of difficult feelings. If your family was tuned to one emotional channel, such as anxiety or resentment, you might not have learned to welcome the entire spectrum of feelings into your awareness.

Regardless of your personal history or your current emotional landscape, digging down can clear away psychological debris and release a wellspring of emotions that allow you to live the full, authentic life you deserve.

Growing and evolving as a human being also requires that you allow yourself to spread your roots and branches. I have two ficus trees that are exactly the same age but vastly different sizes. I think about how they are a metaphor for people. One ficus lives in a pot on a shady porch. Above the root line, it's four feet tall and three feet wide. The other ficus grows in the

ground and receives full sunshine. It's 16 feet wide and as tall as a two-story building. The plant that flourishes has the ability to fully spread its roots and live in the light. The other is certainly alive, but it's not reaching its full potential.

The large ficus tree benefits from an extensive root system and the warmth of the sun. Not bound by the constraints of a pot, it freely spreads its roots. The light and nutrients it receives from the earth allow it to grow robust branches full of leaves. When the wild winds blow, the tree's strong root system prevents it from toppling over, unlike a potted plant.

How does this translate to human beings? Many of us live like the small ficus, bound by a pot we've created that only allows us to reach so far. Our walls might spring from a sense of constriction: "This is as far as I can go. I'm not allowed past here." They might be defined by fear: "I'm safe inside my little container. The world outside is too scary." Whatever defines the boundaries, they can stunt our growth in all directions.

We can also keep ourselves hidden in the shade, like the little ficus on the porch. What would happen if we as individuals stood openly in the light of day, fully visible to ourselves and others? Would we flourish in the warmth? Would we burn? How deep and wide could we grow if we broke out of our restrictive boxes? There's only one way to find out...