

Thrive – 3rd Edition

Creating a Thriving Life Week One – April 26, 2021 Sense of Self, Support, and Community

Who Are We?

I once asked a group of people to come up with 30 responses to the unfinished sentence, “I am...” The first responses were an assortment of vocations, roles, and relationships. I am an architect, a teacher, an elder at church, a care-taker of dogs, a husband, a single mother with three children. Then the responses moved to emotions and adjectives, lonely, lost, confused, grateful, creative, intuitive, simple, of two minds, unhappy, apathetic, grounded, wondering what I’m doing with my life, a shadow of myself. Then the answers turned toward the ineffable, grasping for their deepest sense of self. A child of God; an old soul; more than I know, more than I’m experiencing right now, more than all the things I’ve just described myself as; I am created in the image of God; Ubuntu - I am because you are; I am.

Mark Nepo says, “Our quest for purpose begins with knowing our natural gifts. Then our life’s work becomes the inevitable journey of becoming what we already are.” What we already are! In the broadest and deepest sense, we are created in the image of God. And in almost every religious tradition, God is described as a creator. Thus each one of us are creative souls, in our own unique way.

Shadow Creatives

*Disguised since childhood,
haphazardly assembled from voices and fears and little pleasures,
We come of age as masks.
Our true face never speaks.
Somewhere there must be storehouses where all these lives are laid away,
Like suits of armour or old carriages, or cloths hanging limply on walls.
Maybe all paths lead here, to the repository of un-lived things.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

It was rare if we were nurtured and encouraged as children in our creativity. We were probably criticized more than encouraged. We heard “That’s not a good idea”, instead of “Try it and see what happens!” We were told to “Be sensible”, instead of “Explore your dreams.” I am not into blaming parents or teachers. But it is important to acknowledge that our efforts, achievements, and triumphs, towards creativity, towards our true self, was often lacking. It *disconnected* us from our creative soul. Einstein said, “If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it’s stupid.” We were often judged by other standards than who we were. *We became what our family and culture wanted us to be, from the outside-in, rather than discovering who we are, from the inside-out.* We became what Julia Cameron calls *Shadow Creatives*.

Many of us are *Shadow Creatives*. We're too intimidated to become creative ourselves. Our self-esteem is so low we don't recognize *we have a creative dream*, a sense of purpose and meaning. Unable to recognize and acknowledge the creativity in us we admire in others, we are drawn to those actively pursuing their creative dreams. We date them, marry them, hang out with them. We choose careers that get close, but do not allow us to live out of, the creative gifts of our souls.

Julia Cameron's words hit me with the force of a shock wave. "Very often audacity, not talent, makes one person an artist and another a shadow artist." (p. 27) When I began to paint, I'd see art hanging in a café, a gallery, and I'd think, "That's not good". But I was envious of them for putting their creativity out there! What would it mean for me to be "audacious"? To believe in my own creativity? I approached a local café owner. I showed her some of my work. "Yes! You can hang in my café!" I hung my paintings with fear and trepidation. *But I hung them*. A week later a friend said, "Tim, one of your paintings is gone!" I said, "What? They stole it??" "No," he laughed. "They bought it!!" My first sale! *Something shifted*.

A year later, the café doubled in size. I hung another show. I was working larger now, and I had several 3x4 paintings to hang. The word "audacious" came back to me. I had been reading about the relationship between an artist's value of their own work and the pricing of the work. So I took a huge chance. I did something *audacious*! The most I'd charged up to that point was \$1,000. I pushed the price of the larger pieces to \$2,000 each. I sold three of them.

Audacity, courage, valuing our creativity, gives us a sense of self. Trying something outside our comfort zone strengthens our creative soul. Mark Nepo says that a bird doesn't sing to be heard, it sings because that's what a bird does. *To find what our creative souls long to do, and do it, is to be a bird singing. It's natural, because we are creative!*

We *Shadow Creatives* can judge ourselves harshly. We beat ourselves up for not *acting on our dreams*. Just ask me - SIB, Trust Me, The Labyrinth! This cruelty only reinforces us as Shadow Creatives. Remember, it takes nurturing to free our soul's creativity, but still we blame ourselves for not acting fearlessly. The Censor knows where our jugular is! We want to organize a non-profit, teach children, write a novel, paint, become an activist for universal health care, create music, become a yoga instructor, fight for racial justice - whatever - but we are afraid to take ourselves seriously. This is what *Thrive* is about: listen deeply to our creative soul, take that soul - and its particular creativity - seriously. For many, taking our soul seriously means we must *learn to play!*

Protecting the Creative Child Within

Our creative soul is like a child. We need to find and protect that child. Learning to let ourselves be creative in our unique ways, is like learning to walk. We begin by crawling, then baby steps, and - of course - major fall-down-and-go-boom-booms! Horrible first paintings, a chaotic non-profit, poems that would shame a Hallmark greeting card. The Censor uses these as evidence that we're a fraud. We measure first paintings against a Van Gogh, a reorganization of the company against a Big Eight accounting firm, a new transformational course against an established and well-loved curriculum! We want to be great, right out of the gate!

But judging ourselves for early, and often ugly, creative efforts is a form of emotional abuse. As recovering creatives, it is necessary to go gently, kindly, and slow. We are healing old wounds, not adding new ones. Mistakes are necessary! Stumbles are normal! These are baby steps! Progress, not perfection, is what we are after. It is a tentative, embarrassing process. But take this to heart: *it is impossible to get better, and look good, at the same time*. To recover our creative soul,

we must be willing to be a not-very-creative soul. Give yourself permission to be a beginner. Go through the bad creativity, to truly be creative, very creative and alive. One of my mantras when I first started painting was, "I am willing to make bad art, in order to make good art!"

The Enemy Within: Core Negative Beliefs

When we feel blocked in life, it is often because we feel safer being blocked. Let that sink in. We may not be thriving, but it's familiar. We feel safer with the familiar. We fear the unknown. "If I fully recover my creative soul, what will it mean? What will happen to me, my relationships, my career, my family?" We have some awful ideas about what *could* happen. So, we stay blocked, rather than find out. This is seldom done consciously. *It is more often an unconscious response to internalized negative beliefs.* This week, we will work at *uncovering* our negative beliefs, and learn to not believe them anymore.

Here is a list of commonly held negative beliefs: "I can't live into my creative soul because..."

1. People will think I'm selfish.
2. I will hurt, upset, or abandon my friends and my family.
3. I don't have the training, the experience, or good enough ideas.
4. I will do bad work and not know it and look like a fool.
5. I will feel too angry.
6. I will never make any real money.
7. I will get self-destructive and drink, drug, or sex myself to death, or get cancer, auto-immune disease, or the plague.
8. I will feel bad because I don't deserve to be successful and happy.
9. I will have only one good idea or piece of work in me, and the rest will be junk.
10. It's too late. If I haven't become a fully-functioning creative soul yet, I never will.

None of these core negatives need be true. They come from our parents, religion, culture, fearful friends, and our own experiences. Negative beliefs are just that: beliefs not facts. *What we are is scared.* John Common, a singer/songwriter, sings, "You're not broken, you're not broken, you're not broken, you're just scared." How true that is. Core negatives keep us scared. Bottom line? Core negatives – personal and cultural – always go for your jugular. They attack any vulnerability, self-doubt, weak spot.

Mark Nepo writes, "You do not have to do anything to be loved. You do not have to perform, or achieve, or earn a merit badge, or be witnessed doing good...the only thing that matters is how deeply you try. For out of this trying comes sincerity and love. This has led to another realization of heart: Being who we are does not let others down. For much of my adult life, I've heard the message, 'You must consider others,' offered as a caution against following your heart because it might upset others. Certainly, true compassion begins with the consideration of others, but the displeasure of others is not reason to muffle your love. You do not have to do anything to be loved, and being who you are does not let others down. This needs to be repeated, and often. Simply be who you are, and love what is before you." (*The Book of Awakenings*, p. 279)

Underneath our negative beliefs, is a *core* negative belief. "I can be romantically happy, financially successful *or* live into my creative soul." Either/or thinking makes the price too high, and we feel it's too expensive to pay. So, we remain blocked. But it is possible to have both, to be both. Internalized negativity is the enemy within. Here's some effective weaponry.

Affirmative Beliefs and Emotions

Enough about the *enemy* within, the Censor, the Accuser, and all those negative beliefs. We have an *ally* within: God's life in us, as us, the Spirit, created in the image of God. As blocked creative souls, we will sit on the sidelines judging and critiquing those who are living into their creativity. We might feel animosity, jealousy, envy, and our resentment can run high. But this is another stalling technique that reinforces staying stuck. We tell ourselves, "I could do that better, if only..." but we never get to the "if only." We could do better if we would let ourselves do it, if we *believe* we can do it! And believing is something we *think* and something we *feel*.

An affirmative belief, an *affirmation*, is a positive statement, or more precisely, a *positive disposition*. Some of you are already rolling your eyes at the idea of "affirmations". We remember, with great belly laughs, the Saturday Night Live skit titled "Daily Affirmations With Stuart Smalley" by actor Al Franken. "*I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!*"

But let's do a little math. Yes, math. The percentage of *negative beliefs* in our minds, compared to the percentage of *affirmative beliefs* is so obvious! Earlier I talked about finishing the sentence, "I am..." We could fill pages of what we're not – "I am not good enough, smart enough, handsome, beautiful, kind," or we say, "I am... a failure, a selfish person, untalented, lacking in depth." But we struggle to fill in one page of "I am..." in a positive way. "I am kind, thoughtful, generous, creative, playful." If we can become one-tenth as good at affirmations, as we are at negative self-talk and belief, we will notice an enormous change – for the good! But it's not enough.

When we *believe* those negative things about ourselves, we also *feel* the accompanying emotions: sad, down, lousy, guilt, shame, mad, depressed, anxious, confused, apathetic, numb. We need to not only *believe* differently about ourselves, we need to *feel* differently about ourselves.

In his book "Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself," Joe Dispenza explains the importance of both *thought* and *emotion* for bringing the power of the *quantum field* into play. Experiments have shown that when we both think and feel differently about a situation, we begin to experience those things in the present moment, and it begins to break the old patterns of negative beliefs and negative emotions that run automatically. We are laying down new neural pathways, releasing new chemical markers, and altering the expressions of our genes, that lead to change in our lives.

Dispenza writes, "By repeatedly thinking and feeling the same way you did the day before, and the day before that, you will continue to create the same circumstances in your life, which will cause you to experience the same emotions, which will influence you to think 'equal to' those emotions...If you insist on thinking and feeling equal to the circumstances in your life, you will reaffirm that particular reality." If we keep believing and feeling the same way, we continue to manifest those thoughts and feelings. To change, we need to go beyond our environment (the circumstances of our lives), our body (the feelings and thoughts we have memorized), and time (letting go of the past and future to be in the present moment). Our thoughts, attitudes and emotions, and actions, are so repetitive they form who we are. Thus we are creating a mind that only reaffirms our current reality. We are stuck.

We are asked to think, feel, and act greater than the memorized circumstances of our lives. We are asked to do so in the present moment so that we think, feel, and behave as if that new reality has already happened. Here's a simple example to demonstrate the concept. Says Dispenza: "In *Evolve Your Brain*, I discussed how research subjects who mentally rehearse one-handed piano exercises for two hours a day for five days (never actually touching any piano keys) demonstrated almost the same brain changes as people who *physically* performed the identical finger movements

on a piano keyboard for the same length of time. Functional brain scans showed that all the participants activated and expanded clusters of neurons in the same specific area of the brain. In essence, the group who mentally rehearsed practicing scales and chords grew nearly the same number of brain circuits as the group who physically engaged in the activity...The brain does not know the difference between the internal world of the mind and what we experience in the external environment. Our thoughts become our experience.”

I’m asking us to believe in a future sense of ourselves we cannot yet see, but have thought about, and felt as if it were real, enough times, that our brains change to look like the experience has happened. I’m suggesting we create new thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors to see, think, feel, and act as if our dreams are real. This is affirmations on steroids! Yes, we will run into setbacks, because we have become habituated, even addicted to, our old thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. We’ll be working on that.

“When you have thoughtfully rehearsed a future reality until your brain has physically changed to look like it has had the experience, and you have emotionally embraced a new intention so many times that your body is altered to reflect that *it has had the experience*, hang on...because this is the moment the event finds you! And it will arrive in a way that you least expect, which leaves no doubt that it came from *your relationship to a greater consciousness* – so that it inspires you to do it again and again.”

The picture we hold of ourselves, the feelings and attitudes we have, the thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and judgments we hold in our minds about our lives, the actions we take toward ourselves, manifest in our life. What kind of world *have* we created? What kind of world *are* we creating? This is what we get to do! Thrive!

I want to give this bigger idea of affirmations a new name: *Manifesting Motion Picture*. *Manifesting* points to the changes coming into being for us through this process; it speaks to our longings for a more thriving life! *Motion* indicates this is ongoing, shifting, changing, and reminds us to bring our emotions and attitudes in alignment with our thoughts and beliefs. And *Picture* indicates the visual aspect. We see it played out in our imagination, not just a photograph, but a movie of this new sense of self coming into being in the present moment. And just like a movie we feel it, we are engrossed in it, as if we were right there. We are right there!

Our *Manifesting Motion Pictures* help us create a sense of self, security, community, and hope as we recover our creative soul, and recognize the creative soul in others. When we first start working with MMPs, they will feel dumb, hokey, embarrassing. That’s interesting to notice, because we so *easily, without embarrassment*, and – more importantly – *without consciousness*, bludgeon ourselves with the old film reels of our lives we keep repeating: “I’m not gifted enough/not clever enough/not original enough/not young enough...” Ad infinitum!

In response to our MMP’s, our Censor, who loathes anything that has real life to it, will go into attack mode. It’s our body’s addiction to those old chemical patterns of sadness, guilt, shame, apathy, and negativity. “Who do you think you are? You are not those things and you know it!” Julia Cameron calls these Censor outbursts, *blurts*. You will be amazed at the rotten things your subconscious will *blurt* out. Write them down in your Morning Pages. These blurts flag your old negative film reels, and by investigating them, seeing them, you begin to become free of them.

Where did your blurts come from? Mom, Dad, siblings, teachers, your youth pastor? Early in this work, several blurts immediately came to my consciousness, and I realized how long they had operated below the surface of my consciousness. I can hear my Dad say, "You're a disappointment; I thought you knew better." "You never finish anything!" "Don't get your hopes up, so you don't get disappointed." Investigating the source of our negative blurts can unearth long forgotten experiences, sometimes as serious as emotional abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse.

Pay attention to your own list of blurts. They are very important to your creative soul recovery. Each one of them has held you in some form of bondage. Each of them needs to be dissolved. For example, a blurt that runs, "I, Mona, am untalented and a phony" might be converted into a new Manifesting Motion Picture - "Mona, the Maven of Marvelous Momentum!"

Weekly Tasks:

1. Morning Pages every day.
2. Take yourself on a creative soul date.
3. Come up with 30 responses to "I am..." Out of those responses, which seem to comprise the deepest sense of your own identity? What do you make of this? Where does it point you?
4. Come up with your own Manifesting Motion Picture. Let your imagination, your beliefs, your emotions, really come to life in your mind. What kind of life do your gifts, longings, and dreams point to? Imagine it in great detail, and play it out in your mind and emotions daily. What do you discover?