

Changing the Things You Can

by Thom Rutledge

an excerpt from *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook*

Applying self-help material to our day to day lives can be a little like learning to ride a bicycle in interstate traffic. What we have mastered in theory, or even in practice among a safe group of supportive people, becomes a much more complex matter when we take it to the streets, so to speak. The key to riding safely in traffic is remaining focused on what we are doing, keeping a vigilant eye on our own responsibilities.

It's no big surprise that accepting responsibility for ourselves is an essential ingredient in bringing about the changes that we want in our lives. It would be difficult to find someone to argue the point. There is a simple guideline, in the form of The Serenity Prayer, that can be a trusted ally in evaluating self-responsibility in our daily lives. Accept the things I cannot change, change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. But how do we tell the difference between the things that we can and cannot change? Considering a far-less-than-perfect track record in applying this simple principle, we understandably may ask, "Can I really trust my own judgment in this important matter?" A better, more productive question to ask is, "How can I develop good judgment in distinguishing the difference between the things that I can and cannot change?"

I have a friend who says that we are actually very good at telling the difference between the things that we can and cannot change. According to my friend, the problem is that we apply the serenity prayer backwards: pouring loads of energy into efforts to change the things we have no chance of changing, and little or no effort into the things we could change. When I first heard this, I laughed at the humor intended, but as I thought about it, the backwards application of The Serenity Prayer seemed more accurate than I wanted it to be.

TOWARDS CHANGE

What follows are seven checkpoints that I have used in my life, and in working with others, to help determine how well we are doing in the realm of self-responsibility. To the degree that we are effectively accepting and acting from, a position of genuine responsibility for ourselves, we will be in motion towards the change that we desire. These checkpoints are not intended as a way of "grading" yourself, but as a way of pinpointing problem areas, a way of locating your stuck places along the path of self-forgiveness. Post these checkpoints where you will most need to see them (above your desk, on your refrigerator, at your bedside, on your bathroom mirror), and use them to improve your level of self-responsibility. Beware of the inner-critic, your Should Monster, who will attempt to use this information against you, diverting valuable energy into ineffective self-criticism.

HOW TO USE THE CHECKPOINTS

The next time you are experiencing some pain or discomfort in your life (most of us don't have to wait long for the opportunity to present itself), identify your problem as specifically as you can, and then "try on" the seven statements that follow. As you focus on your problem (aka: stuck place), repeat each statement to yourself (preferably aloud), and pay close attention to the responses that you experience. Notice how your body responds: can you relax around the statement? Do you feel powerful? Or do you feel

increased tension, tightness, or other sensations in particular areas of your body? How does your stomach feel? Your chest? Your throat? The back of your neck? Your hands? Just be aware.

And notice your emotional responses: do you feel angry or frustrated? Hurt? Powerless? Helpless? Sad? Or do you feel empowered and self-confident? Again, allow the awareness of your responses to be your goal. Awareness without immediate evaluation will provide considerably more information than the old “let’s categorize everything right away” thinking that we are used to. Good problem solvers know that gathering information without jumping to conclusions is pivotal to arriving at successful solutions.

Listen also to your mind’s responses to each of the seven statements. What do the individual members of your “committee-within” have to say? Sit quietly and listen; you will not need to go looking for these responses. And remember: it is all just a gathering of information. Valuable information.

The better you get at this kind of nonjudgmental information gathering, the more self-responsible you will become, and the more you will find yourself stumbling into productive real-world solutions to your problems. Sometimes when we turn all the puzzle pieces up and step back to look, the solutions become obvious.

THE SEVEN CHECKPOINTS

Now here are the seven checkpoints:

- 1.) I know that the resolution of my problem lies within my reach.
- 2.) The motivation for solving my problem is solely my responsibility.
- 3.) I can only change myself, and I will take action to do so.
- 4.) I will seek and accept support from others.
- 5.) I will recognize and acknowledge improvement when it occurs. (give myself credit.)
- 6.) I will use new behavior where familiar behavior has been ineffective.
- 7.) I will do whatever it takes to remain self-compassionate and self-forgiving along the way.

A POCKET MANUAL

If this article has been helpful, copy the seven checkpoints on a piece of paper, put them in your pocket, purse, or briefcase. Keep the checkpoints handy. For the next week or so, refer to them often. Train yourself to think in terms of the seven checkpoints. Think of it as defensive bicycle-riding lessons. And I will see you on the interstate. By the way, nice bike.