

## Practicing the Principles

. . . . Rick Jackson, Dip.C., MTC

I recently had an encounter with someone who was hoping for a breakthrough in his life. He hoped that by learning about my experiences in seemingly re-inventing myself, he could figure out how to change his own circumstances, which he described as stale and unsatisfying. He seemed to be saying that the only missing ingredient was knowledge.

While there is no doubt that others can often provide inspiration for change, (this is the capital of countless gurus and self-help manuals), it is not my experience that one transforms through knowledge. Knowledge is always "about" something and not the thing itself. In the same way religion may be "about" spirituality but not actually spiritual.

Certainly there is a place for reading and knowledge. It is not uncommon for me to have 3 or 4 books on the go at one time. But as a friend once said, you can require a drunk to read the big book of AA cover to cover but if he doesn't stop abusing alcohol, all you'll have is a knowledgeable drunk!

The tools we gain through personal growth seminars, particularly the communication skills, need to be *practiced* for change to occur. The last day of a Come Alive or other Haven program isn't the finish line — it is the starting line.

Everyone I know who credits The Haven Institute courses as being instrumental in the process of transforming their lives has tried to practice the principles they have become aware of through these programs. Not perfectly of course (luckily there is no requirement to be "perfect" until we are already "perfect"). However, unless the learning is integrated into our daily lives, the course experience ends up being just that — an experience.

A good example of this in my life can be found in my history of relationships. When I first arrived at The Haven's door my history at relating was pretty dismal. My main "skill" was in avoidance of any kind of interaction with another where I might need to make myself vulnerable. Elusiveness was my trademark and for many years it seemed to work for me, particularly in the business world.

When I witnessed others connecting and experienced myself connecting with them in the session room, I was jolted into the realization that my "normal" experience was one of disconnection. This was an astounding insight for me on many levels.

I might have gone on for some time basking in this newly found knowledge, but not changing my elusive ways. However, Ben and Jock helped me to take things to the next level by encouraging (actually challenging) me to get into "dialogue" (using the communication model) with another person for 20 minutes per day during the period of the course. While I am sure we didn't practice the communication model to perfection, I learned a lot about myself (and how incredibly clever I can be at avoiding something if I'm scared enough) and I found the confidence to take this practice into other relationships outside The Haven.

Looking back, it is the practicing of the principles of honesty, openness, and self-responsibility, however haltingly and imperfectly, that has allowed me to change my way of being in relationships at home, at work, and in the world. I make no claim to complete transformation. I imagine my default to "avoid" testy situations runs deep and will likely always be a part of me. But my circumstances have changed. I look forward to the meaning derived from direct and honest dialogue with my life partner, adult children, co-workers, and close friends. And recently the CEO of my organization telephoned from Ottawa to say he thought my "directness" at executive meetings had generated a major shift in how the whole organization operates.

It turns out my avoidance tactics have been both external and internal. Connecting with others at a more honest and intimate level allows me to connect with myself in the same way. Telling others my truth and trusting that others are doing the same increases my overall trust levels. And this trust in myself and in the universe is the essential ingredient I needed to undertake what my friend thinks are "reinventions" of myself.

I have come to realize that there are countless opportunities for me to practice these principles if I choose. Every day I am presented with opportunities to break through barriers with others; to learn more about myself in the process and, to actually increase the level of meaning in my life. This can be done without defensiveness or hostility of any kind and it can transform critical discussions into encounters that are dynamic and meaningful rather than terrifying or threatening contests.