

Always...Never...

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New York is truly a magical place. I find it to be like living in a ready-made “Life-Shifting” laboratory, where every idea or theory that I ever come up with seems to get played out on the streets, on a daily basis. Take yesterday, for example. Just coming up from the 49th street N/R subway, emerging in the glare and electric hum of Times Square, I witnessed one of the core themes of “Life-Shifting” played out right in front of me. As I exited the subway, I heard the deafening roar of jack-hammering only a few feet away. Right at the entrance to the subway, it seems, there was drilling for oil underway (probably nothing that exciting, actually...). Anyway, as I slowly made my way through the din, wincing in pain at the screech of the jack-hammer, I glanced at the construction worker who was wielding the hammer, and lo and behold, he was not even wearing ear plugs! I couldn’t believe my ears...or should I say HIS ears. How could he stand it? I thought Jack-hammerers ALWAYS wore earplugs or hardhats or sound proof helmets or SOMETHING. But no, this guy was happily hammering away, sans any protection whatsoever. Well, if that wasn’t enough of a shock, I turned in the other direction, and lo and behold again, there was a homeless man, a street bum, as we might unfortunately deem him, sitting on the curb looking very dirty and unkempt, except for one thing: he was wearing a very expensive pair of sound-reducing headphones, the kind that cost upwards of 300 hundred bucks in an electronics store. Top-drawer. Needless to say, I was dumbfounded at the juxtaposition of these two unlikely crashers of the sound-barrier. Of course, I thought, one NEVER sees a street bum wearing expensive head phones, whereas, jack-hammerers ALWAYS wear ear protection! Until yesterday. Ah, New York. Another street-level lesson in Life-Shifting!

You see, one of the key principles of “Life-Shifting” that my writing partner, Judy and I are currently working on for my book, **“Shift it! Let Go of Fear and Get your Life in Gear”** has to do with the formation and re-formation of personal identities. As we see it, if there is no true “Self” to rely upon, then we are constantly creating and crafting our “personal identity” and, like a set of clothes (or ear phones), we take on labels: doctor, lawyer, construction worker, husband, boyfriend, son, daughter, wife, old guy, bum, etc. Now do these labels actually identify who we REALLY are? Of course not. Are these identities static or constantly changing and shifting? Shifting, of course. So how do we come to recognize and KNOW each other, our loved ones, ourselves? Well, the obvious answer is that we get very attached to our labels...we BECOME our identities. We may know deep down that the self is always in flux and constantly shifting, but living with that awareness tends to make us uncomfortable. So, we generally ignore this truth and rely on the labels. We relax into knowing that construction workers act a certain way...and likewise, street bums act a certain way...until they don’t!!! That is the wake-up call.

But why is this idea of labels and attachments to identities so important? Well, just think of how often you say the following words to your significant others: *Always. Never.* Do they ALWAYS forget to wash the dishes? Do they NEVER tell you that you are pretty?

Do they ALWAYS arrive late to meet you? DO they NEVER fail to disappoint? We all do this, instinctively. We get used to certain behaviors and attitudes and ways that our loved ones ARE, in relationship with us...and that's it. They BECOME their identity. They take on the outfit—the label—that we dress them in, permanently. Of course, then when they leave us, or rebel, or get angry at being reduced to a label, or worse, a stereotype, we are shocked. What it comes down to is this: how can we give our loved ones the space to CHANGE and BECOME and GROW if we are not willing to see that they are not ALWAYS/NEVER anything?

But even this tragedy of de-limiting our loved ones is not the real crime: we do this to ourselves as well. We take on identities, we label ourselves with endless ALWAYS's and NEVER's, crafting neat identity prisons from which we can seemingly NEVER escape. How many times have you said to yourself: "I am ALWAYS falling into XX"(XX = debt? trouble? fights? depression?) or "I NEVER have any XX" (XX= success? luck? happiness?). Are these statements really true? I doubt it. Sure, we may not have had much success or joy or whatever recently, or perhaps we have had conflicts with our partner or taken on some debt...but ALWAYS? NEVER? NOT.

Here is the principle to think about: to shift your life, **you must drop your attachments to who you think you are and who you think others are.** These are labels. Not truths. The deeper truth is that we are always changing, always becoming, always flowing in an endless cycle of birth and death and re-birth. Today we are a construction worker with bad hearing, tomorrow we are a street bum with good ears! Life, like the streets of New York, is filled with surprises!

So, just for today, try this exercise: watch how often you use the words ALWAYS and NEVER in association with others and most importantly, with yourself. Count'em. Banish'em. Open up to the possibility that you are more than your personal set of labels: make the shift and open up the space.

Have an adventure in Life-Shifting!

Peace,