

Thanks to Buddha, et. al.

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Well, it is another glorious sunny warm morning in New York City and there is plenty of jack-hammering and horn-honking going on outside my window...so I feel quite at home and at peace! Amidst the paradoxes of New York—sunshine, noise pollution, blue skies and trash collectors—it feels fitting to take a first stab at explaining a bit what the idea of “Life-Shifting” is all about.

Many people have said to me, “well, my life is certainly ALWAYS shifting...but what are you trying to get at with the phrase?” My first response is to say, “you’ve got it!” That’s basically the core principle of “Life-Shifting”, that life itself is constantly shifting. Everything is in a state of flux and nowhere is that more noticeable than in our own lives. So how do we manage it? What do we hold on to? How do we find peace and happiness in the midst of the raging river called life? How do we “go with the flow”, as the sages would have us do? Of course, we know intuitively that there are no easy answers to these kinds of questions. And the principles and practices of “Life-Shifting” don’t provide any. However, what we *can* do...and what the approach to personal and spiritual growth that I call “Life-Shifting” can do to support us...is to help us live more deeply, richly, and fully, letting go of easy answers and instead—embracing the questions.

But before we head off on further adventures in the land of “Life-Shifting”, I want to stop and express some gratitude for a few of the many teachers that have tilled the soil before me. Although there have been many, and continue to be many teachers that cross my path and enrich my perspectives (in fact, that pretty much would include EVERYONE that I meet!), there are three main characters that are probably most responsible for the birth of “Life-Shifting”: James Hillman, the Buddha, and Dr. Phil (a great trio, no?). So before I get any further into explanations about the principles of “Life-Shifting”, I need to give these guys there due.

First, let me thank the Buddha. Just about exactly (how’s that for equivocating!)10 years ago this fall, I went to my first Buddhist Vipassana meditation retreat. For ten days I sat in silence, eyes closed, trying desperately not to move, to follow my breath, and to banish the endless swirl of thoughts that raced through my mind like the Daytona 500. I learned many things on that first foray into Buddhist practice: that pain and pleasure are very similar emotions and always in motion, never static; that my mind constantly regurgitates an endless litany of complaints about everyone and everything; that the small details of life’s wonders—a blade of grass, a passing cloud, the taste of a raisin—can bring tears of ecstasy. But most importantly, I learned that there is no such thing as a “self”.

Just as the Buddha had pointed out thousands of years ago, I finally got to “discover” this truth on my own: where ever I looked for “myself” during those ten days in silence, I never found much there. I never heard the “real” voice called “mine”; I never got to the root of my essential being; I never figured out ANYTHING about who I am or where I am going. Nothing. Nada. Yikes. AND..Whew! Wow! What a relief. Thanks to the

Buddha I learned the key principle that forms the foundation of “Life-Shifting”: Relax. There’s no there there. Everything, including me, is always changing, always shifting, never complete, never finished, never arriving. So, thanks to the Buddha for bringing me to a whole new state of awareness about what/who I am...and am not.

And so... the Buddha brought me to Dr. Phil.

I sometimes call myself the “anti-Dr. Phil”. I have read his books and I actually have been touched deeply by the wisdom and heart in his approaches to healing. But, and it is a big but, I think his core premise is all wrong. Sorry, Doc, but thanks for waking me up to what REALLY matters. You see, his book called “Self Matters”, which is the one that got him started on the road to Oprah and to national fame, starts with a devilishly false premise: that there is a Self..and that it MATTERS.

Of course, I certainly respect his endeavor to support those who have never gained (due to childhood trauma and hurt) a sense of what he calls the “authentic” self; I engage in this healing work myself with clients. It is important stuff. But at the end of the day, we have to remember that the “self” is something rather elusive, something that is never finished getting constructed...and it never will be finished. The work of re-mem-bering your authentic self (or what I would call re-building your ego) may be an important step in personal growth and healing, but it is really just a beginning. Just a starting point. Life is never that simple.

What do we do with people who have achieved a so-called successful life—money, achievement, career, family—when they appear in my office saying: “Everything I’ve built is falling apart...my family, my career, my sense of self!”? Or even more commonly, “Is this all there is to life?” After hearing these words hundreds of times from many people over the years, I can’t help but surmise that Dr. Phil’s simplistic path to the “authentic self” just doesn’t cut the mustard. It seems that as soon as most people have a modest sense of “self” cobbled together, something or someone manages to come along and tear it apart. So where does that leave us? Well, on the heels of Dr. Phil’s valuable contribution, we embark on the good ship “Life-Shifting”.

And that brings me to James Hillman.

Dr. Hillman is famous for being the ultimate contrarian, the psychologist who is most committed to de-bunking the mythic “truths” constructed by just about ANY psychological frame of reference. Hillman’s approach to knowledge, which he outlines beautifully in his book, “We’ve had 100 Years of Psychotherapy and the World’s Getting Worse,” is what he calls “seeing through”. He loves being the ant in the ointment that refuses to let us get too attached to “knowing” anything. Everything, and he means everything, can and should be “seen through” as a construction of the mind—a mythological interpretation of an unknowable reality—and our job is to constantly be on the look-out for the fundamentalism in our thinking. Well, with Hillman’s powerful lens of deconstruction pointed squarely at the work of Dr. Phil and other big “self” promoters, we find ourselves grappling with a whole host of questions that perhaps really do

matter...the ones that many of my clients are facing...the ones that form the permeable and flexible (always shifting never static) foundation “stones” of “Life-Shifting”:

- >How do we hold “it” together when everything is constantly coming part?
- >If there is no “Self” to hide behind or cling to, then how do we live?
- >If change really is the only “constant”, how do we make life work?
- >Is there any meeting point between my thoughts, my emotions and my physical body?
- >Whew! Can I relax and just not know?
- >What DOES really matter?

(As an aside...if you’re getting my drift that we’ll be living in the unknown from now on...welcome on board! If you would like a bit of an anchor for the voyage, I suggest you see the movie: [“What the Bleep?”](#), which came out about a year ago. It is a uniquely creative film that gets at the core principles of what I am calling “Life-Shifting” as seen through the lens of quantum physics!)

So there you have it! These are the starting points for the Life-Shifting approach to healing and personal growth. With Life-Shifting, rather than seeking buttoned-up answers...we choose to step off the hard ground of black/white, right/wrong, normal/abnormal etc. and step gingerly into a different kind of space...a space of inquiry...a space of opening...a space of possibility. And so, thanks to Dr. Hillman, Dr. Buddha, and Dr. Phil, we are compelled to “jump off” the construction ladder called “building up the self”...and begin the journey down a path less linear and concrete and breakable...a path more flowing, fluid, and graceful; more like a spiral of possibility.

Life-Shifting, as we will discover together, is all about endless change, endless contraction and expansion, endless identity formation and re-formation, endless creativity and renewal. Re-invention. Rejuvenation. Renovation. **Self-renewal**. This is the key.

Have a great day and stay tuned!!

Peace, Dr J