

Deep Change Through Long Term Focusing Projects: GUARD DOGS

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"Guard dogs" is my name of a phenomenon that sometimes arises when a person is trying to change at a deep level, and she/he is getting somewhere and there is a sudden backlash or setback. The guard dog is protecting the status quo; it is protecting the structure bound process from opening to life. Also implicit is the notion that the guard dog may be protecting you from a premature change in a deep structure, the new supports may not yet be in place so that the "bearing wall" (another key piece of my approach) can be dismantled.

An Example: a woman has studied voice for decades, she has long felt that she was ready for and would be furthered by a formal recital, but she has been blocked in manifesting that. Her attempts to overcome the block have failed even though it seems like it shouldn't be so formidable given the other things she has been able to accomplish in her life. Finally she decides to do a long term focusing project on changing this seemingly unchangeable block.

Through the power of focusing and her persistence she overcomes her block to the point that she has a recital scheduled, prepared, guests invited, a spiffed up performance place, the whole works. The night before the recital she gets a long distance call saying her father has had a heart attack and may die in the next 24 hours. She cancels the recital and goes to be with her father.

This event of the untimely heart attack of her father coincidentally occurring at the only time to guarantee cancellation of her concert is a Guard Dog for her.

Often guard dogs manifest as completely outside of one's control or anyone's control. (I am not in any way implying that either the daughter or the father had control of the timing of his heart attack.)

Guard Dogs is a component of a theory/approach I have developed and am developing about Deep Change through Long Term Focusing Projects also known as **Changing the Unchangeable**. Before going further into guard dogs I want to lay out the other major components of this approach.

A. Problems resistant to focusing. Sometimes a person using regular focusing and focusing partnerships is unable to change stubborn problems/situations. This is not through some insufficiency of focusing. It is simply a special situation which requires a special application of focusing. Deep Change through Long term Focusing Projects is that special application.

B. Changing the Changer. Things that don't change despite many legitimate efforts and despite it being legitimate to expect success given one's other accomplishments, are a double-edged sword. They bring tremendous

frustration, disappointment, and shame; however, by definition they point to a linkage to some frozen deeper structure, a structure bound process. In this positive side they are the clues to a journey into deep change. This change is comparable to or the same as character change-- changing structures that are hard-wired, hardware and moving them into software where they can be modified, to use the computer metaphor. The deeper change goes in terms of who we are the more complicated it becomes.

C. Ropes. The difficult to change issue is connected in a deep place to one's personality and structure. The flaw, the problem is held in place in many ways. Focusing can find the sequence forward for dismantling and changing even extremely complex matrices. However, a person needs to be prepared for the complexity and extensity of the work or they can easily become discouraged. I use the image of a gong hanging by many ropes or a trampoline held in place by many ropes to suggest the many aspects of a stubborn problem that need to loosen before the problem is visibly affected. In a single focusing turn or turns we may simply be loosening 1 rope with no visible affect on the gong or trampoline. This image suggests finding the many aspects and connection of a problem **and** getting somewhere with each of these before getting discouraged or quitting. It guides a person in where to work (**Not:** "I'm working on quitting smoking, focusing session #231) but rather "what aspect of quitting smoking (which rope) shall I work on today"? Answer: I'll work on how 'cool' it makes me feel to smoke. It prepares the person for the complexity and perseverance required.

D. Bearing Walls. Deep Change is often forced to go a round-about or indirect route. In addition to the many connections holding it in place it may be a supportive structure in the whole self construction. Thus indirect and preparatory strategies may be required for the change. Focusing can imply these changes and their order but it helps to know that the changes may be indirect and preparatory and requiring a transitional structure. In taking down a "bearing wall" of a house we cannot just go in and take it down with a sledge hammer without risking major collapse and significant damage. We have to plan for a transitional structure and a sequencing of preparation that can be elaborate. Sometimes we do not know if a wall is a bearing wall or not so we are forced to take precautionary measures.

E. Guard Dogs. When many ropes are loosened and the gong or trampoline begins to wobble there may be a protective backlash as the system senses the impending implicit changes. This backlash may or may not be a signal that the transitional structure is insufficiently prepared. It may simply be a natural inclination of systems to resist change. Focusing can elegantly lead us through the hazard of the guard dog. It helps to prepare us for this backlash and not be devastated and quit. It helps prepare us for the seeming "entirely out of our control" nature of the guard dog's initial appearance. It helps us forge ahead and start making friends with the guard dog.

F. Bias Control. Because a seemingly unchangeable process implies linkage to a structure bound more deeply imbedded process, we should be aware of the problem of bias (see Gendlin: Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams). A workaholic has a tendency to interpret a dream as suggesting he needs to work more. Because the structure bound place is imbedded in who we are, our person, our meanings, our insights, and our realizations could be skewed by this situation and biased toward it. Deep Change can then require efforts to control bias.

G. Focusing Style. Not only is focusing a key to change and personal growth through the unfolding of the implicit organic process of life but also the style of its use reflects aspects of one's psyche and personality. Deep change will imply a deepening in one's way of focusing and vice-versa--deepening one's way of focusing can help change structure bound processes which are implied with these seemingly unchangeable problems. Knowing this can help prepare you for the disorientation that comes in your focusing style changing and open you to the value of deepening your way of focusing.

H. Egalitarian Focusing as Primary Generator. Deep Change is occasionally achieved via psychotherapy and psychoanalysis or through religious and esoteric transformation. In this work I am suggesting that egalitarian focusing exchange can be the primary generator and mover of the project. Therapy or spiritual approaches can supplement. Body work, dance, moving to a new location or not, a deepening or change in relationship status, a new career, an expressive avenue, can all support the project. In particular, Periodic "Changing the Unchangeable" retreats, and focusing partnerships devoted exclusively to a long term project in addition to one's regular focusing partnerships are helpful. We now have one focusing "long term projects" Changes group aiding this journey into the unknown.

I. JOURNALING. Keeping a felt sense and issue trail allows retracing. Keeping a journal allows a synthesizing process for each turn and then a pulling together of the turns to build momentum and to find the carrying forward of the carrying forwards.

Back to Guard Dogs and our story. Lets say that this woman has had the good fortune to know about guard dogs or is just determined beyond belief. Thus after the cancellation of the recital, she congratulates herself on getting close enough to "change", to elicit a guard dog and to realize the "guard dog" may indicate a need for more preparatory change before the big change is safe. This will not eliminate her disappointment and devastation, and the disorientation of the crossing with the father's heart attack, but it may buffer or modify the devastation. That buffer can support her in reengaging with the struggle.

So after the devastation subsides this woman restarts her move toward a recital. She restarts her project to change the unchangeable through focusing. She may have to go through some of the same obstacles she overcame before and this may again be a difficult and time consuming struggle but it should be easier because the route to the night before the concert is now known and plowed. If she kept a journal of her focusing turns as I recommend, the focusing work can be retraced by following the felt sense--issue trail.

So now she arrives to the night before the recital, again. She breathes deep--all signals are go. The next morning out of the blue, and uncharacteristically for her, she wakes up with a horrible case of strep throat which she hasn't had in 10 years. She again cancels the concert and is devastated. A few days later she realizes this could have been another guard dog. She is reluctantly encouraged to realize she had managed to again get close enough to success to elicit the guard dog and there may still be further change before it is safe to change this "unchangeable" phenomenon. Moreover, after a week or two she is forced to admit that the guard dog is moving in a forward direction. It is now closer to her locus of control. Though she doesn't blame herself for causing the strep throat (thank goodness!) there are things she can do to lessen the likelihood of it happening next time (unlike her father's heart attack). Moreover, the coincidence of this strep throat being the first in 10 years at the worst time does imply the possibility of unconscious forces involved in a way that is conceivable while the father's heart attack is more in the realm of the extra-rational when it comes to explanation.

Now she becomes **curious** about these "just before" setbacks that are "out of her control" but connected to her. She begins to explore other situations in her history that these setbacks now remind her of--situations beyond the recital project and beyond the previous scope of her project's ropes.

In my work with long term projects I have run several retreats for people who want to begin long term projects. I introduce the concept of Guard Dogs even though they are not going to have encountered such in those first few days. I stress that "guard dogs" are not always encountered, I do not wish them on anyone--they don't have to have one to change the unchangeable. But they do need to be a bit prepared. I marvel at the interest in guard dogs even though they may not have encountered one specifically in relation to their project or they may not have recognized it. I suppose there is something in our human spirit that recognizes the tendency to self-sabotage and undermine even if we fervently believe in the power of the self-actualizing life forward tendency, as I do.

The staff of my retreats meets periodically to work on our own long term projects and we discover the guard dog tendency in small and big ways on many occasions; the buffering aspect of this discovery is remarkably helpful in its own small way.

From participants we have seen an unexpected bout with intense depression, a discovery of childhood trauma followed by a vanishing of the focusing urge after years of practice, that in their timing and fuller context seem like guard dogs. The intense depression led the person to some psychotherapy which was essential. Never should "Changing the Unchangeable" be construed as anti-therapy.

When guard dogs hit I ask the question: Could this be a guard dog? and I check to see if that question brings a forward feeling, or a relieving feeling. Perhaps this is only a heuristic device to buffer me from the slings and arrows of discouragement in life or maybe there really are guard dogs. At this point in the project, I don't care, I'm just glad for the forward feeling.

At some point recognition of guard dog helps the person restart the project though perhaps revising its definition or name. I'm not seeking for rigid projects imposed on lives rigidly. Our projects need to be changing as we do and open to subtle and dramatic redefinition.

When projects restart I encourage curiosity about the guard dog and, if it is chronic, ongoing, or recurring, getting to know it and making friends with it.

Another Example. A man is working on taking his career to the next level and he is making progress, he is on a bit of a roll. The day before a critical presentation he is suddenly hit with total insomnia, not a common phenomenon for him before big events. The presentation goes poorly. His momentum is halted in its tracks. He is furious, disoriented, helpless at his organism's betrayal. This pattern recurs. He begins anticipating the problem causing further complications.

The problem is a bit unpredictable. It does not always occur before big presentations. It doesn't always affect his presentations so negatively. He gains weight as he adjusts his schedule to compensate for the insomnia and it interrupts his health regime.

At some point he becomes curious about the unpredictability. He is amazed that occasionally he performs better after little or no sleep. He tries various remedies and is thrilled when they work, discouraged when they don't and eventually comes to begrudgingly admire his organism's ability to override these remedies. He begins to see over time this problem as a worthy adversary.

The guard dog then becomes less destructive. Rather than ruining presentations it now tends to occur the night before open days,--days where he planned to use his creative talents to go forward. He is making friends with the guard dog.

One more example comes from one of my own long term focusing projects. The context is that I had been divorced for several years. I loved the single lifestyle except the regular periods of no intimate relationship. I had found that brief

encounters contrary to popular belief were sometimes wonderful and sometimes not hurtful to either party. They became a nice respite to handle the long times without an ongoing intimate relationship. Eventually I began to notice that these encounters could work against me. I began to be more careful. I would ask myself, "Is this an event like the woman in black in the movie "The Natural" where Robert Redford is a young promising professional pitcher whose career is almost ruined after an indulgence with the woman in black?"

Consequently on a journey to Cost Rica I was making a hit in a special small community. My singing skills brought me my own concert. My psychological skills brought me a chance to demonstrate one of Virginia Satir's magical processes--a Parts Party. I was on a roll in my project to find success and recognition in a community. When a delightful seemingly non-hurtful encounter presented itself, I went to the water but didn't drink. I flirted with the relationship but refrained from sexual involvement. The flirtation was enough to destroy one of my key contacts in the community. However, I ended up befriending this woman and being a helpful force in her life. It was a bit of a draw.

Four years later and after significant focusing work related to the issue I discovered ways that brief romantic encounters "disprepared" me for the mythic soulmate, lifelong partner search. Mythic though it may be I wanted to be prepared at every point. When I met the woman who became that mythic lifelong partner (or so I plan) we had a classic misperception. I thought she was married (a ring on the wedding finger). She thought I was involved with a woman I was visiting (in fact I was staying at the house of this woman (a long time friend) **and her husband**. A potential brief encounter with another woman at the same workshop where I met my unbeknownst to me wife to be, presented itself. Without thought of my wife to be as available at all, but strictly from my inner work I navigated through this opportunity without any indiscretion, not even a flirtatious pseudo-involvement. 6 months later I returned to Costa Rica, I discovered the misperception about mythic partner to be--she had not been married, she discovered I had not been involved and we began our myth-making. Along the way I discovered that the other woman had been a business colleague of my wife. Knowing my wife now I realize our fragile beginning would have been significantly compromised or even preempted if I had indulged in the seemingly harmless intimate encounter which had presented itself.

I had mastered my guard dog and the prize was mine.

In this example the guard dog was not nearly as obvious. Some might even argue my puritan influence was causing me to project this idea. To me it didn't matter whether the guard dog was a heuristic device, helping me to reach my goal but not describing reality or a real force in the world or not. I could care less-- I had found my lifelong partner.