

Good & Beautiful & Kind

Chapter 6 ~ Resisting Reactivity

Over the past two chapters we've discussed becoming securely attached to God through contemplative prayer, and becoming more trusting and humble by letting go of our false self so our true self can emerge. This chapter now focuses on becoming a calm (self-differentiated) presence, which flows from what was established in the past two chapters.

"Becoming someone who can remain present to oneself and to another, especially in times of disagreement or distress, is one of the most important things we can do to become whole."
(page 115)

- *Who is someone you would describe as a calm presence? Would others describe you as a calm presence?*

"The cultivation of calm presence is the conscious and courageous decision to remain close and curious to ourselves and others in times of high anxiety." (page 116)

One of the things I'm struck by in this chapter is how as much as we may want to be healthy and whole—individually and in relationships—it doesn't come easy. It's a lot of hard work. At the same time, it's what we were created for, which is what makes the effort worthwhile. I hope none of us want to settle for being unhealthy and having fragmented lives. But we can't wish our way into health and wholeness. We have to learn a new way of being. Through this book Rich is helping us do that, and providing some initial steps in that direction.

Being aware of, paying attention to, and knowing what to do with our feelings, dreams/aspirations, preferences, and values is how we "*remain close to ourselves*" (page 117 ff) I have a practice of getting together with trusted friends on a regular basis and we each share such things with one another. This involves paying attention to what's going on inside of ourselves, and then being willing to share that with one another. This requires trust and vulnerability. It also requires listening as we pay attention to what others share with us. (Remember, listening is an act of love.) Personally, this has been one of the most transformative practices I've experienced. (FYI, it's also one of the chief practices we do in Soul School.)

- *With whom do you share your feelings, dreams/aspirations, preferences, and values? If you don't have such a person/people, would you be interested in cultivating such relationships? (Within your Table Group might be a good place to start looking for someone with whom you can go deeper with.)*
- *If you're willing to share, what was your family of origin like? Was your family of origin a place where you felt you had a voice, where your feelings, dreams/aspirations, preferences, and values were heard and considered?*

The opposite of a calm presence, or self differentiation, is “*reactivity, emotionality, and automatic functioning.*” (page 119) As Rich points out, referencing Peter Steinke, three signs of staying connected are...

- *Maintaining a nonreactive presence with people who are reacting to you.*
- *Resisting the impulse to attack or cut off from those reacting to you, or to appease them to dispel their anger or frustration.*
- *Manage your own anxiety, not others’ anxiety*

(see page 120)

A calm, self-differentiated, presence is one that is curious, courageous, and compassionate...which we can understand as expressions/elements of love. (see page 120)

- *When you think of calm, curious, courageous, compassionate...who comes to mind? Who is a non-reactive presence in your life? Or, to ask in another way, who do you know that is emotionally healthy/mature? What are you doing in order to become such a person? (Remember, it’s not going to just happen.)*

Rich makes the point that anxiety is less about fear or timidity and more about an automatic way of functioning (see page 123). As we would expect, when anxiety is low, people generally get along better...it’s easier to remain close. “*The true test comes when anxiety is high.*” (page 123) When we’re dealing with a highly anxious person it’s easy to “*disappear into*” that person...i.e. essentially hand all control over to that person, or to “*disappear from*” that person...i.e. to disengage and create distance (physically or emotionally) from that person.

- *Think back to your family of origin. Who was the most anxious person in your household? How did people generally respond/react to this person?*

One thing we all desire, I suspect, is favorable outcomes. Being a calm, self-differentiated, presence is not a way of securing the results we’re wanting, rather it’s about becoming the type of person that’s needed in any circumstance we find ourselves in...and a way of bearing witness to the Presence of God from whom we draw our confidence and security. In other words, we can add anxiety to an already highly anxious world, or we can offer an alternative. Or to say it yet another way, the “outcome” or “result” we’re looking for is to become a particular type of person...regardless of the situation/circumstances.

- *Let’s get real and timely for a moment. As a church family we’re undergoing some changes. Change has a way of producing anxiety. As we embark on these changes, are you bringing an anxious presence or a calm presence to the table? If anxious...why? If calm...how? What is at stake for you with these changes?*

Rich offers 3 practices that help cultivate a calm presence...

Emotional Self-Regulation

“Emotional self-regulation is the ability to collect ourselves in times of distress.” (page 132). This is easier said than done. We have to be able to notice early that stress, anxiety, anger/frustration is building. This is why Rich emphasizes paying attention to our bodies. Our bodies pick up on things and give off cues often before our minds are consciously aware.

“Self-regulation is not suppression. It’s not ignoring the very real emotional sensations coursing through our minds and bodies. It’s not spiritualizing. It’s the training of our minds and souls to resist the force of our impulses...self-regulation is about adjusting ourselves in such a way that keeps us present to ourselves, for the sake of presence with others.” (page 132) Once we are aware that we’re becoming heightened, then whatever sort of practice, exercise or activity that allows us to stay centered is what we should do. Such things can include breathing, walking, praying, meditating, etc. Whatever works for you.

- *What cues does your body tend to offer you to alert you that you may be getting provoked?*
- *Care to share a recent time when you noticed yourself becoming dysregulated?*
- *What sort of self-regulatory practices/exercises do you use? Or, if this is new to you, what sort of practice/exercise do you think would help you?*

Rich offers this important reminder, *“Self-differentiation is the commitment to paying attention to our actions, our reactions, our anxiety, our responsibility. Through self-regulation practices, we give our bodies and souls the care they need in order for us to relate to others from an unanxious place.”* (page 133) We cannot (and should not try to) control others. But we are called to control ourselves. I would add that self-regulation is an “add on” practice to the more foundational practice discussed earlier of contemplative prayer. Self-regulation is much harder if not coming from a place of secure attachment to God. Conversely, a regular practice of contemplative prayer helps us notice more quickly when we’re beginning to get dysregulated.

Naming the Messages

You and I believe all sorts of things about ourselves, others, life, not all of which are true. (We’ve discussed false narratives vs. true narratives at length in the past.) Rich states, *“We all carry deeply rooted messages in our souls, and unless we can excavate, behold, and then reject them, we will live controlled by lies...our ability to name messages that heap shame on us is what positions us to remain close to others.”* (page 133). As the saying goes, *“Name it to tame it.”*

It can be hard to identify false messages. It can be helpful to have a close trusted friend who might be able and willing to offer feedback on what they observe in us. And, again, contemplative prayer can be a helpful practice that allows God to bring false messages to our attention.

- *What’s a false message you’ve realized you carry, and have let go of (or are in process of letting go of)? How did you come to recognize it as a false message?*

Speaking Clearly

Since Rich references Emotionally Healthy Discipleship (FYI...that's the book the CUMC Governance Board went through together last year)...allow me to share from it regarding how healthy speaking is respectful, honest, clear, timely...

Respectful. Give thought to your words and don't simply blurt them out. Take the other person's feelings into consideration.

Honest. Say what you truly think and feel rather than softpedaling or distorting the truth.

Clear. Communicate directly. Rather than being vague or dropping hints, be clear.

Timely. Consider the moment. Understand that some moments are better than others for certain conversations. Notice when the other person is tired, irritated, or short on time, and choose to wait until they are more relaxed before talking about your concerns.

(Incidentally, this comes out of a chapter in that book entitled, "*Make Love the Measure of Maturity*". Appropriate, I think.)

Rich is good to remind us that the goal isn't agreement but connectedness, unity, and love. "*To be rooted in love is not to believe a fantasy that we will agree on every matter, big or small. But it is to believe in the possibility that we can remain close to ourselves and each other in the most challenging of moments. The truth is, we will disagree; we will bump against each other; we will have conflicts. But our conflicts need not uproot our love. In fact, those very conflicts can embody love.*" (page 134)

- *How do you handle conflict? (Avoid it? Minimize/deny it? Stir it up?) Consider the relational conflicts you've experienced: which have hurt the relationship, and which have made the relationship stronger? How do you account for the difference in outcomes?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Self-Regulation & Naming the Messages

We're going to practice two of the three practices Rich describes in this chapter. This week, notice every time you feel yourself getting heightened, provoked, or dysregulated. (Perhaps traffic; an unpleasant exchange at work or at home; maybe the news; etc.) Take note of what's causing it. As you sense it in the moment, try to do something to help regulate yourself. (The situation might dictate what your options are.)

Then, spend some time in reflection of those moments. Try to identify and name the false messages you were tempted to believe are true about you. Prayerfully share this with God and allow God to offer you true messages. (see pages 130-131 in the book)