

MY SECRET LIFE: Ten Tools for Transformation

Chapter Twelve

BODY II: Taking Charge of Addictions

Smoking

I wanted to interact with the world with my whole being. Wanted to breathe in and out so fully and completely that every breath would unite me wholeheartedly with the natural world. Laughing, chagrined, I called my smoking “a fucked-up pranayama.” Smoking was a “pranayama,” since, like yogic breathing exercises, I was practicing full intake with each breath, yet “fucked up,” since with each breath I inhaled poison.

My smoking habit had been triggered by my doctor father’s admonition, all through high school, “Don’t you ever start smoking!” Naturally, as soon as I got away from him, as a college freshman, I picked up my first cigarette. This was my first act of rebellion against that tyrannical figure, and though rebellion was important, my way of doing it trapped me as much as his strict rules ever had.

Over the years, many times I had “tried to stop” smoking. Each time, after a few days, or a few weeks, or a few months, the anxiety would become overwhelming. I would beg a puff on someone else’s cigarette, or accept the one which was offered, or furtively paw through wastebaskets for someone’s long dead butt . . . One puff and that was it, I was hooked again. And of course, each time I tried to stop and failed, I felt even more ashamed.

Letting Go, Letting God

One day when I was 40 years old, something suddenly shifted within me. Whereas before I had been under the dominion of Saturn, trying my damndest to control my body, to deny its insatiable craving, now, during the year when Uranus opposed itself (the year astrologers define as the beginning of the protracted “midlife crisis”) something deep within me changed. Something unexpected and sudden — Uranian!

On that day I woke up and decided to forget about trying to stop smoking. It wasn’t working. I couldn’t make myself stop. My ego was enslaved to this bodily habit. My body was bigger, stronger, more

powerful than my ego. This was a fact, and this fact was humiliating.

The energy of Saturn was still working within me, but now in a more evolved manner. Rather than attempting to control, I was acknowledging reality: this habit was out of my control.

In my birthchart, the energy of Saturn is “conjunct” (within five degrees) to that of another planet, Uranus, one of the magical, mysterious, miraculous “outer planets.” In the same moment that I shifted my way of working with Saturn, Uranus took over: I handed my longing to stop smoking to my “higher self.” I let this higher self be responsible for when I stopped — if ever. (A few months later, I discovered this decision was identical to the first two steps in the “ten steps” of AA.)

Meanwhile, in order to prepare myself for eventually stopping, I decided to imagine myself as a snake, shedding its skin. That I would envision this regularly, as a daily meditation. That when the time was ripe, I would slough off the smoking habit, like a snake its old skin.

Meanwhile, I gave myself permission to smoke as much as I wanted, guilt-free.

Much to my surprise, within three months the situation ripened. I was at my parents' home for Christmas, and my father, with a manner very unlike his usual righteous dogmatism, showed me an article in a medical journal. "Look at this," he said, in a concerned tone, as if he were talking with a colleague.

The article described how the production of cigarettes involved a radioactive process! This discovery shocked me, because at the time I was a peace activist, working to educate people about the 50,000 nuclear weapons aimed down everybody's throats. Now that I knew how cigarettes were manufactured, I could not continue to smoke and be a peace activist.

Reading that article, and having it come from my father in that mild, nonjudgmental manner, felt like a sign. It was time to stop. I had started smoking to thumb my nose at his attempt to control me; now the respectful way in which he showed me the article cancelled the original motivation to smoke.

Within 24 hours, friends called, asking me to house sit their beautiful home on a canyon rim in the country with a hot tub and huge stereo and eagles flying overhead. For five days, exactly the time I would

need to detox with water and fruit juice — and music and journaling and yoga and long walks in the wild canyon.

Every time I stopped smoking, I had manifested the perfect retreat for detoxing. But this time was different. Rather than feel determined, I felt humble, accepting. For the first time, it wasn't hard. It was easy, simple, natural. I was amazed. What I had envisioned only three months earlier had already come true.

After the five days were over, I drove to spend the weekend with a lover who, ever the gentleman, offered me a cigarette at dinner the first night. The moment was important: I paused, noticed the temptation, took a deep breath and let it pass through me. Then, looking up at him, I smiled and said, “No thanks.”

As a result of that single incident, of being offered, and gently turning down, a cigarette, I knew what the real test was to be. In order for me to stay off cigarettes, I would have to live with those who smoked without judging them. I would have to remain, with full acceptance, in the presence of second-hand smoke until my karma with cigarettes entirely dissolved.

One year later, the air was clear. Those who had not chosen to stop smoking had drifted out of my life, and I was meeting others, non-smokers.

There was one other aspect to this process of letting go of cigarettes which was crucial: I knew that the part of me that was addicted was the hidden, subconscious, instinctive, bodily self; that to rob it of cigarettes, and not give it anything in return, would be foolish. That I had to give it something else as a substitute, or it would feel deprived — and ultimately rebel. I decided that for one year I would allow myself another addiction. I picked sugar. Once each week, I spent the same money I had spent for cigarettes on treating myself to a sweet roll at a nearby restaurant. When that year was over, I let sugar go, too.

Even now, when I think about how I stopped smoking, I feel proud. Proud of myself for following through with my intention. Proud of myself for working with temptation, with my own judgments — without denial. And I am proud of the millions of my fellow U.S. citizens who have also managed to “kick” this — reportedly most difficult — addiction. I am astonished by our courage, our victory, our orientation towards health. I challenge my readers to

view this process of letting go of cigarettes as a template for transformation. If we can transform *this* unhealthy aspect of our lives, what can we not do? If this is possible, then no task, no matter how difficult it may appear, is impossible.

Taking Charge of Health

For me, letting go of cigarettes was the foundation. Until I succeeded there, I could do nothing else. To stop smoking was to initiate myself into the journey of consciously taking charge of physical and emotional health. Ten years earlier the old woman healer had taught me that my dis-ease had to do with what I feared and what I hated and what I felt guilty for. Since that time I had made only sporadic attempts at doing the inner work to dissolve those fears and hatreds and guilts.

That third bout with peritonitis, when I learned that physical and emotional health are linked, had occurred when I was 31, at the time of my discovery of astrology. I find this conjunction of events interesting. Though we might tend to think of our small personal bodies and the infinite cosmos as opposites, I view these two as another example of the Hermetic maxim: As Above, So Below; As Within, So Without.

During my 40s, my capacity for both working with my body and working with astrology deepened. Success in letting go of smoking was the first step in facing, embracing, and gradually erasing the terror that had been locked inside my body.

From the time I was 26, when I “woke up” in the hospital, I had been driven to understand my inner life. A few years later, I discovered astrology and began to couch my questions and answers in that ancient language. By the time I entered my 40s, I had both transformed my most pernicious addiction and had incorporated the language of astrology so thoroughly that I saw the whole world through this technical/mystical lens.

Self-knowledge, up until this time a mostly unconscious goal, now became a conscious priority. Working as a consulting astrologer for others by day, by night I would descend into my inner world, using astrology as a research tool.

Linking Mind to Body

Sitting on my couch, surrounded by notes, I would look up important dates from the past in my well-thumbed astrological “ephemeris,” to track daily

positions and motions of the planets. I was attracted to dates when I had been in crisis of some kind, or when some important event had taken place, or decision made. The ephemeris would tell me which planets had been “active” on that date, i.e., crossing over or geometrically aspecting the positions of planets in my original birth chart.

Each time I looked up a date, I felt the thrill of discovery, anticipation, longing. What would the planets tell me now? What kinds of new lights would be thrown on old memories?

Looking at the structure of any cycle as four-fold (the “cross” inside the circle) and utilizing the exact length of each planet’s cycle, I could also look up other dates that were relevant to the ones I could remember. For example, if I was investigating how the Saturn cycle had operated in my life, I would divide that 29.5 year cycle into four parts, each of them slightly over seven years, and then look up what events had occurred during those “seven year itch” periods. Probing memory further, events that had occurred on those dates could be lured out of hiding. Inevitably, there would be some kind of eureka experience. “Aha!” So that’s why that happened that way.” “So that’s why that meant so much!” “Oh, so that’s where that came from!” I wrote the

autobiography of my first 30 years (first Saturn cycle) as the finale of this period of concentrated inner work.

In linking events to one another, it was as if I was connecting the dots to create a figure upon a ground, a gestalt — only most of the dots were missing, and I had to find them first. Each dot/event would become an object of contemplation. Deliberately, I would open, descend into memory, relieve how that situation from long ago actually felt at the time it occurred. I knew that what I was remembering was important. I was *re-membering*, putting myself back together again, this time with a fuller understanding and appreciation of what had formed me. In this manner, little by little, I freed up the frozen detritus of guilt, blame and fear that had been stuck inside. I was liberating memories by allowing them to tell their stories; I was fully feeling them, so that once honored as *real*, the frozen feelings could melt and transform.

So, though the structure and the language of the work was mental and astrological, each time what my research pointed to was a memory, lodged in my body, in which feeling was stored. I was using ideas to get at feelings, using the mind to link up with body. Using logic to be instructed by instinct. Joining

the split between mind and body. Healing the separation between self and the world.

Reparenting Orphan Annie

The addicted part of me was the child part, who demanded attention because her mother did not pay her enough attention. This child had been frozen in time, only identified through her emissaries, addictions. I even gave that child a name, “Orphan Annie,” which seemed appropriate, since so many memories had to do with being emotionally or even physically abandoned (See chapters ____ and ____, Journal, and Dreams).

I was uncovering the raw feelings of that child self, and I was reparenting her, with my adult self as mother. What I was not able to do in my 20s for my own children, as a repeat of my own lack of adequate mothering, I could now begin to do in my 40s, for the long-neglected child self within me. As my empathy and compassion for this inner child increased, I began to understand and forgive myself for my incapacity to mother my own children.

Of course inner healing affected the outer; within a few years I was also healing the long-term estrangement with my adult sons.

As the dialogue with emotional memories took hold, I began to be able to stay inside my body, to remain there, rather than cathecting out, into my mind. No longer did my body feel like a foreign object in the room. Rather, my body became the locus of personal presence, my medium for an increasingly powerful, differentiated, and subtle expression of energy. As I allowed and encouraged myself to actually feel into the pain that I had been carrying all my life, I began to be capable of staying present, first with the pain, and eventually, as the pain dissipated, with the capacity for pleasure that lay — what a gift! — just underneath. The cement wall did thin, over time, to a membrane. Another dream came true. My body began to resonate — with a bird's call, with my own soul's call.

Body as Teacher

Now I look back on my addictions with compassion for my younger self. I had been genetically gifted with an enormous amount of fiery energy. That energy had been repressed by my equally repressed stern German father until I was 26, when dervish dancing aroused it so suddenly and overwhelmingly that I ended up with peritonitis and almost died. From that time on, my energy, released, began to rage. As a

young person, I wasn't focused enough to utilize all of this energy; I had to siphon some of it off just to function in this repressive culture, and I did that, through addiction.

Once my dissipation started to catch up with my physically, and I began to recognize my own exhaustion, the jig was up. Addictions were using up all my available energy. To continue with those small repeating patterns would be to enter the ranks of the living dead.

Most people focus on nutrition when they talk about healing their bodies naturally. In my own case, interest in nutritious food developed as a consequence of my desire to heal my emotional body. As I grew in capacity to remain present, to actually feel what was going on within my body, I would notice, for example, that red meat made me feel heavy and sluggish, unlike vegetables, which seemed to harmonize and energize. Rather than grabbing something, anything, just to fill the void so that I could forget about my growling stomach, I learned to pause, and create a ritual out of both food preparation and meal times. As I learned to love my inner child, so did I learn to love my body. She is my foundation, I care for her as my own.

While it may look like I knew what I was doing, and my healing was fast and thorough, that is just because I don't want to bore you with all the stops and starts, all the tiny little steps forwards and backwards, all the stuck places. When I began this process of personal healing, I did make it a conscious priority, but, fool that I was then (and am), I thought it would take at most a year or two. Now, 15 years later, I view my healing process as continuous with my life. I will always be healing, as I will always, given the nature of our toxic industrialized society, be living within a relatively unhealthy environment. Even if we actually do manage, as a society, to wholeheartedly commit to cleaning up our Earth nest, this commitment will have to be one that holds through seven generations.

Throughout my healing process, it has been my body that has dictated what had to come next. I would not have let go of cigarettes, despite my hatred for being enslaved to them, except that after so many years my respiratory system was beginning to be impaired. Also, as a smoker, I knew that my senses of smell and taste had been blunted, and that I was missing out on pleasures which, at a certain point, began to seem even more valuable than taking that first pull of a cigarette. And of course, I just didn't feel good anymore.

I'll never forget the day when I noticed that I no longer sprang out of bed immediately upon waking; that instead I lay there for ten minutes or so, slowly gathering steam. That was one of those many and always unexpected shocks that the aging process gives us; I was forced to notice that my actual physical energy was wearing down.

When I was young I had so much energy that I could throw a lot of it away without noticing. The range of choices that I could act upon without obvious consequence was enormous. I could get drunk one night, and wake up the next day refreshed. I could go without sleep for a night or two and still function. I could drink ten cups of coffee and not shake, and not have my stomach burn, not have shooting pains in my wrists.

As time went on, the same behaviors that I once could perform with impunity began to take their toll. The range of choices began to narrow. All along, my body has been gradually and subtly directing me to refine and narrow my focus. My body prompts me to notice what behavior feels good and what doesn't. By the time I hit my 40s, I wasn't even tempted by the wild parties of my 30s, instead seeking more subtle kinds of pleasure.

Now, rather than thoughtlessly opening the freezer and eating a bowl of ice cream every day, I might have one cone each summer, and totally delight in the experience, treat it as ritual.

Instead of eating a huge piece of fried meat, I stirfry tofu with olive oil and soy sauce and garlic and onions, adding it to lots of different vegetarian and grain-based dishes.

Instead of hiking 15 miles with a heavy pack on my back, I do yoga daily, and swim a mile three times a week. I do day-hikes with small packs, and I drive through wilderness, stopping to sit by a lake, to watch the subtle colorations the wind makes as it moves along the water.

All along, my body has been my teacher. The older I grow, the more profound, the more refined will this teaching become. The most direct route to my evolving spiritual life is, has always been, the increasingly subtle and insistent demands of my own body.