

Do the Inner Work

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In the course of our lives, we are all enamored by the illusion that our 'real work' exists outside of ourselves. It exists in the company, the role, the initiative that we have given ourselves to. We get lulled into the belief that our growth is primarily about better execution of our tasks. With this external emphasis, we go hunting for better strategies, systems, and task management solutions. And for many of us, the demands of our work challenge us so immensely that we come to the end of these systems. We realize that the best tactical system in the world can't help us engage our most significant work- work on our self. This realization places us onto the threshold of a rich and demanding process. A process that will make one thing abundantly clear- the real work for our growth is inside. If we want to grow as leaders, as people- we need to do the inner work.

What is Inner Work?

A profound paradox exists around the human capacity for self-awareness. In general, people default to thinking that we know ourselves well. But, consider this- we have spent every waking moment of our lives with ourselves. And yet, we still regularly and consistently encounter things about ourselves that we were unaware of. We find blind spots about how we interact with and impact others. We find emotions that have evaded us. We encounter desires that we didn't know we had and we didn't know were driving us. And this paradox persists throughout our lifetime.

Inner work is the process of embracing this paradox and engaging with it in a manner that allows us to see ourselves more completely and hear ourselves more clearly. This process identifies patterns and traces them back to their origins and forward to where they exist on the surface of our lives. This process ends up looking a lot like an ongoing conversation with our inner world. During this conversation, we spend time with our thoughts, feelings, and desires in order to deepen our awareness of who we are and how we show up in the world.



Why is it Necessary?

Life pursues us and invites us to more presence. The invitation to step into deeper awareness of who we are and what our life is made of comes in a myriad of ways. These invitations often appear laced with pain. A failure at work. The loss of a loved one. An unexplained panic attack on our car ride home. The persistent feedback of people in our lives telling us that we have hurt them or failed to be present with them. A question that suddenly grips our heart like, “are you happy?” Or, “what do you most desire in life?” In order to respond to these invitations, we must do the inner work.

At some point we realize that our lives are what we make of them and how present we are for the process. As James Hollis puts it, “each of us has an appointment with ourselves, with our own soul. Whether we keep that appointment and step into the largeness of the summons is another matter.”

The Characteristics of Inner Work

Learning to do the inner work is a discipline in and of itself. It's a discipline that requires time and focus. And, there are a lot of things about this work that can seem counterintuitive when we first begin.

Slow, not fast. Inner work takes time. Our inner world does not respond well to being rushed and pressured. It responds well to slow, steady attentiveness. As the poet Mary Oliver put it, “This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.”

Circuitous, not linear. The process of good inner work is not as linear as we might like it to be. Realizations and changes come in a circular, repetitive manner rather than a linear progression.

Questions, not answers. While much of our work life is about finding the right answers, our inner work is more about finding and holding the right questions. These questions take time to find and even more time to unpack. Applying a quick answer will eject us from the process and keep us from a

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

- Rilke



richer, more meaningful understanding of ourselves.

Complexity, not simplicity. Once we have taken the time to apprehend deep questions, we then realize that the answers are complex, not simple. Rather than binary answers, our inner work invites us to paradox. Good inner work is about holding things in tension rather than reducing answers to a simple yes or no.

The Demands of Inner Work

Our career can prompt us to focus on outcomes, action, and tasks. While posture benefits many of us in the fast paced environment of our jobs, it does not suit us well when it comes to doing our inner work. Because of the nature of inner work, the process demands a different posture in order to be done well.

Reflection. Our inner work requires us to reflect well on the patterns of our internal world. These patterns include our thoughts, emotions, desires, and the dynamic interplay between these aspects of our experience. Learning to be comfortable with the process of reflecting comes with time.

Patience. The slow, circuitous nature of our inner work demands patience. Our reflections will lead us back down the same paths time and again until eventually something new breaks through.

Vulnerability. Our inner work requires us to leave old defenses behind and to embrace who we are. The process of inner work is inherently uncertain and at times, confounding. This defenselessness in the midst of an uncertain system requires us to be vulnerable. In the end, our vulnerability opens up layers of our self and our life that were not previously accessible from inside our defenses.

“Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling the who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live-but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.”

- Parker Palmer

“It starts to make sense that we dismiss vulnerability as weakness only when we realize that we've confused feeling with failing and emotions with liabilities. If we want to reclaim the essential emotional part of our lives and reignite our passion and purpose, we have to learn how to own and engage with our vulnerability and how to feel the emotions that come with it.”

- Brown, Brené.



Courage. Our inner work requires us to sit in the unknown, embrace aspects of ourselves that are scary or leave us feeling powerless, and to trust a process that involves extended periods without clarity. All of these things can prompt us to eject and seek certainty. Remaining committed to doing our inner work in the face of these uncertainties requires courage. And, eventually yields the results of our work. As Joseph Campbell put it, “The cave you fear entering holds the treasure you seek.”

The Practices of Inner Work

In order to do our inner work well, there are people and practices that are conducive to the process. Most people find a combination of these items are helpful to facilitate their growth.

Develop Your Inner Observer. Developing the capacity to non-judgmentally observe the activity of our inner world is a necessary habit for good inner work.

Reading. Finding good books that invite reflection, bring clarity to our inner experience, and help us to hold our important questions is a valuable resource.

Journaling. Journaling is another tool that enables us to focus our reflective process. Journaling is cathartic, it brings clarity, and it helps to identify threads running through the repetitive patterns of our life.

Silence. In a world filled with noise, silence is one of our best companions for good inner work. This silence helps to quiet our life so that we can hear what is important to us.

Meditation/Mindfulness. As we engage with our inner work, many people find that a practice of mindfulness or meditation becomes helpful to their process. These practices have many benefits including the development of our inner observer as well as increasing our awareness of internal patterns.

I want my own will, and I want simply to be with my will,
as it goes toward action;
and in those quiet, sometimes hardly moving times,
when something is coming near,
I want to be with those who know secret things
or else alone.

- Rilke



Trusted Friends. Our inner work brings about awareness of who we are and what we value. Trusted friends who can hold our questions with us are invaluable companions in the process.

Trusted Colleagues. Finding other colleagues who can empathize with the demands of our inner work as it interacts with our outer work can go a long way toward facilitating our process and helping us to remember that we are not alone.

A Therapist or Coach. A trusted therapist or coach is an invaluable companion who will co-labor with us as we do the inner work. There are many talented coaches and guides who practice a variety of disciplines. But for our inner work, we are looking for someone who can venture with us into our inner world. Someone familiar with the terrain of inner work and all of its demands.

The Outcome of the Work

As with all work, inner work leads to an outcome. Much like the slow, nonlinear process of inner work, the outcome takes time to gradually take shape. The patient attention we give to our inner work leads to a growing body of knowledge about our self, the life we are building, and how we show up in it.

Increased Self-Knowledge. Doing our inner work involves listening to ourselves and paying attention to who we are and how we show up in the world. Over time, our self-knowledge increases. We recognize internal and external patterns, we know our own stories intimately enough to trace themes through various circumstances, and we are familiar enough with the edges of our own blindspots to know when they are impacting us.

Presence to our Role, Relationships, and Responsibilities. “Our presence” is an abstract term that is difficult to accurately describe. And yet, people engaged in doing their inner work regularly find that this language describes a key outcome of their labor. This should not be too surprising when we consider that human beings have a profound capacity to be physically present to a task while being

If we are serious about our work we tend to find ourselves apprenticed to something much larger than we expected, something that calls on more of our essence than we previously imagined, something seemingly raw and overpowering.

- David Whyte



mentally or emotionally elsewhere. Human beings also seem to be the only creatures who have the capacity to attempt to be something other than ourselves.

Locating New Paths Through Old Problems. Finally, our inner work leads to identifying ways to engage with old problems that previously eluded us. In the midst of a lack of awareness, automatic responses, or blindspots obstructing our view- we are unable to find alternative ways to approach our most repetitive patterns.

Conclusion

The roles we find ourselves in- founder, manager, CEO, leader- end up demanding more of us than we imagined. We start our careers thinking that we need to grow as a “professional.” With better ideas and execution. And as we live this reality, we eventually find another truth. Our roles require more than execution. It turns out that the personal is professional and our growth in both requires the presence of the same thing- us.

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