Chapter 4 ~ Empowering Your Self

The meaning of empowerment

The term ‘empowerment’ has been hyped-up and de-valued with jargon over recent years, which is a great shame because the original meaning of the word is practical and … well, empowering!

The two main meanings of ‘empowerment’ are ‘to authorize or enable’. So empowering yourself involves making yourself the authority on what holds true for you, what you want to do and how you will do it. And it includes giving yourself the support and the means to make it possible.

Claiming your authority

Often our ideas of empowerment are stereotyped, grandiose and infer being like somebody else. If you’re a man, you may do the emotional equivalent of pulling your stomach in, looking slightly mean and preparing to do battle. If you’re a woman, you may think of donning a power suit and reaching the top.

However, a truly empowered you may choose to have a paunch without apology or to downsize without shame, no matter what other people think. You may want to set and achieve huge goals that bring you acknowledgment and financial success. You may want to make a significant difference to your community. You may want to simplify your life and live quietly without pressure. And you may want to do something else completely different.

As they become more empowered, my clients choose to do less in some areas and to say ‘no’ to certain people and pressures. They also stretch themselves considerably in other areas that matter to them – not because they ought to but because they want to and it fulfils them; they value themselves enough to go for it.

So let’s distinguish between being empowered and what you choose to do with it, which may, or may not, look like what I or somebody else chooses to do. In other words, we are talking about your being empowered to be and to express you.

All too often, we give away our authority and allow others to be the ‘author’ of our life-script. We restrict ourselves and our choices out of fear of what others will think and how they will judge us.
Reflection point – letting go of the ‘shoulds’

What would you want to do (or not) if you let go of all ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’?

What would a ‘less correct’ but ‘more real’ you choose?

Failure as feedback to success

We also let fear of failure prevent us from reaching for the things we want. Many times we don’t admit to ourselves, let alone to others, what we do really want. We think that if we did that then we would have to do something about it and we might fail. So it is safer not even to know what we want in the first place. If we had acted this way as babies, we would still be crawling and would never have uttered our first word in case it was wrong!

Failure is not inherently painful or negative. Seen in another light, failure is simply a process of feedback that leads to success. The majority of people who have accomplished a project that matters to them have gone through many setbacks and kept on trying new approaches. They use ‘failure’ as feedback that a change is needed and not as a sign that they are not okay as a person. Look around and, in general, ‘successful’ people have experienced far more failures than people we call ‘failures’.

When you drop the ball

I used to give classes in the Alexander Technique, for posture and movement, to students on a performance arts course. There is a lot of pressure and competition in the performance world and even though they realized that being relaxed allowed them to perform better it could still be quite a challenge.

To get them used to maintaining a relaxed body awareness, I would teach them some simple three-ball juggling. Initially, they would tense up because their biggest concern was not to drop the ball – to fail, as they saw it. So the first step was to make this not such a big deal. Whenever a student dropped a ball, I got them to turn to the class, relax and say as cheerfully as possible, ‘I dropped one!’ Of course, being a bunch of performers they played this up beautifully. Then they would casually take their time to pick the ball up and start again. It was a delight to watch uptightness turn to grins as they got used to this perspective. Also to hear how they took this outside the class to auditions and other situations. And, by the way, most of them learned to juggle and to enjoy it.

Next time you find yourself getting uptight or giving yourself a hard time because you got something wrong, try saying with a smile, ‘I dropped one!’ Then pick yourself up and start again.

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Reflection point – fear of failure

If you had no fear of failure, what would you attempt that you have been holding back from?

One of the most empowering things is to have a vision or goal that really connects with you and which pulls you forward and motivates you. We'll talk more about that in chapter seven. Here we'll look at what empowers you generally in being and expressing yourself, as you move towards your visions and goals, whatever they may be.

Organizations, families, teams and relationships vary enormously in the extent to which they empower or disempower you in doing your best and enjoying yourself. It makes sense, wherever possible, to choose environments that are empowering. It makes even more sense to take care of your inner environment and to aim to give yourself what you would ideally want to receive from others.

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, the root meanings of empowerment are firstly to take full authority for your life and secondly to enable yourself to achieve the results that matter to you. In looking at what supports you in this, the following model has been invaluable to me and to many of the people with whom I have worked.

The 3 Rs Model of Empowerment

- Responsibility – Ownership and Accountability
- Respect – Attitude and Language
- Resources – Time, Things, Skills and People