

## CAUGHT IN MY OWN TRAP!

Did you ever ...

- Spend weeks anticipating a special event, imagining to the nth degree every little wonderful detail that would occur, only to feel deflated and disappointed on the actual day of the event? Even though other people seemed to enjoy it?
- Prepare your role in something meticulously, scripting yourself and spending hours going over and over your plan until you were sure you would be perfect, only to be blindsided by an unexpected change and find yourself floundering because it demanded a departure from your carefully rehearsed scenario? Even though you know what to do?
- Promise yourself you'd lose a certain amount of weight, or improve your muscle tone, or change a bad habit, for sure, by a certain time, only to let yourself down and feel like a failure? Even though you've made some progress?
- Go all out to achieve a certain goal in a certain way, only to accomplish something entirely different and notice that you are feeling ambivalent about what you actually did achieve? Even though others around you think it's great?
- Expect certain behaviors or certain grades or certain standards of dress and demeanor from your children, and then question yourself as a parent or lose faith in your children when they express themselves differently? Even though they're happy and feel good about themselves?

Most of us have done some, if not all, of those things. And, when we have, the trap of our expectations snaps down on our enjoyment of life and leaves us wriggling helplessly in that mental snare.

Expectations, thoughts we take seriously about what we should do or what we should be, are deceptive. It seems responsible to have them. They look like an intelligent strategy for progress in life. If we didn't have expectations to measure against, how would we know how we're doing or whether things are working out?

Yet experience consistently proves expectations to be a form of personal arrogance, a know-it-all stance towards our life that leaves no room for the unexpected, for sudden opportunity, for our own insights and creativity, for changes in course, for occurrences in the future we are incapable of imagining in the present. Unmet expectations are fertile ground for the weeds of disappointment and self-doubt. The feelings that grow from unmet expectations crowd out surprise and appreciation.

Taking expectations to heart and living in constant judgment of ourselves and life events is a way of punishing ourselves without realizing what we're doing. We're sailing against the tide of life and running aground. We are using our personal thoughts against

ourselves, instead of using the navigational wisdom that takes us in the direction we want to go, without plotting a specific course beyond the moment. This is not to suggest that we should drift aimlessly, however. The gap between just drifting and meeting expectations is filled with fearless faith in a strong intention. It's the sense of knowing that it will unfold, without knowing exactly how it will unfold. Such faith is pure commitment to a vision, which gives us the eyes for every positive step along the path. Whether our intent is as significant as finding the cure for a disease or as hum-drum as eating healthier food, it works the same way. It will lead to unanticipated discovery in the one case, and to the willingness to sample new things in the other. Progress is measured by gratitude for results we can see, not by ticking off marks on a pre-set checklist.

One time, while I was conducting a seminar in Colorado, I noticed a young woman in the audience crying. At the first break, I went to talk with her, concerned that I might have inadvertently offended her.

“Oh, no!” she sobbed. “It’s just that I’m so relieved that I may not be a failure, after all.”

I asked her why she thought she was a failure, and why she now felt differently. Her story was a perfect illustration of the trap of expectations.

On her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, she had proudly mapped out a 10-year plan and shared it with friends and family. In that plan, she would finish college, and then graduate from nursing school with an advanced degree by the time she was 24. By the time she was 26, she expected she would have attained a responsible position, with opportunities for advancement, in a hospital. She planned to become a nursing supervisor by the time she turned 30.

Now she was 26, and had just started nursing school after more than three years of taking care of her mother through a terminal illness. Her mother had been diagnosed a few weeks before she graduated from college. Because she was living at home and because she was both interested in and unafraid of offering care to the seriously ill, she made the obvious decision to become her mother’s caregiver and companion until her death. After her mother died, she had returned to school, but she was “off her plan” and felt a total failure. She did not regret the time with her mother, but she feared she would never “catch up” with her plan for herself.

She told me, “This morning you said, ‘We have to remember who made up the rules we have for ourselves, and who can change them.’ I felt relieved when I heard that. I made something up when I was 20, based on my world the way it was then. I couldn’t have known my mother would get sick and I would want to take care of her. As I was thinking about it, I realized that I had learned much more about nursing as a profession from those years tending to my mother than I ever could have learned in school. I was actually getting closer to my goal of being a really good nurse, just not the way I expected I

would. I can't believe I've made myself so miserable over my stupid plan not working out exactly right!"

Her intention to pursue nursing and her vision for herself as an excellent nurse made her decision to care for her ailing mother an obvious next step along the path of her life. If she had stumbled across such an opportunity with someone less dear to her than her own mother, though, her expectations of "staying on schedule" might have deterred her from a decision to become involved in such care. Yet, as we talked further that day and she went into depth about how much she had gained personally, how differently she had come to see life and death, how touching the final months had been and how she had come to recognize the dignified compassion required of nurses through her experience, there was no doubt in her mind that the three years she "lost" were actually a tremendous gain.

I have come to see expectations as creatures of insecurity. When I start doubting the future or failing to trust my own wisdom and vision for life, I start making increasingly detailed plans or dreaming up ever more elaborate processes. Forming expectations generates increasing insecurity because I start thinking of worst-case scenarios as soon as I lay out my first plan. Then I have to make alternate plans to cover those contingencies. While I am consumed with all of this brain activity, life continues to serve up new choices, new opportunities, moments filled with promise. But I'm too busy with my agendas to notice. As the cliché we've all heard so many times goes, "Life is what's happening while we're making other plans."

The trick is to notice the difference between expectation and intention. Expectation feels urgent, important, complicated, burdened with the potential for stress. Intention feels purposeful, meaningful, simple, heady with the promise of the not-yet-known. In the state of mind created by expectations, people feel like they've got a strenuous job to do to prepare to climb the mountains life puts before them. In the state of mind created by intention, people feel inspired by the freedom to climb.

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