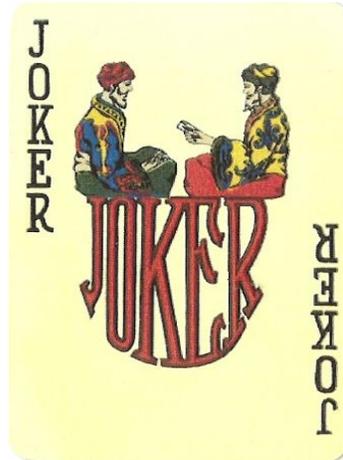


A QUEST TO FIND MYSELF



1. The Mission Begins

As an adolescent and in my early twenties, I was unhappy, without direction, and lacking in self-esteem. Compared to the evident purposefulness, sense of achievement, and contentment of my friends, and most of the other people I knew, my own existence wasn't so hot.

Perhaps I wasn't playing with a full deck, or so it seemed to me at the time.

I simply did not understand the ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that most folks seemed to regard as normal and healthy daily requisites for being a participating and productive member of society. I had been raised with clear expectations that I would grow up to experience timely achievements like college graduation followed by a profitable career and predictable events like romance with a best friend and soul mate, a happy marriage with enthusiastic, loving children; and ever-increasing financial security as I aged. Maybe I'd accrue a bit of respect, positive notoriety, or even fame? This positive progression of achievement and smug satisfaction would define the ultimate meaning of my life.

As a child, I wondered: "Who am I?" "What am I doing here?" "How am I going to make sense of 'my life,' whatever *that* is?" "Am I the only person with these questions, and a curious and steady sense that there is something profoundly important that I must learn?" "What is it about 'the game of life' I am not getting?" "How can I become articulately independent and celebrate my original freedom on my own terms?"

Having no one with whom to discuss my questions and wanting to discover other ways of perception, I fed my ever-expanding curiosity by reading futuristic fantasy and science fiction, then existentialism, and later ancient mythology and world religions. Eventually, I discovered Eastern philosophies and spiritual disciplines, and then some Western perspectives on the Eastern Stuff by Alan Watts and Baba Ram Dass.

'*Playing With A Full Deck*' began as a collection of my journal entries, written during my last several years of college and continuing through my thirties. At first, in a very rough form, it was a nightly diary and also a private reference log for my recording and figuring out what I then called my Automatic Program, or A.P. Later, I came to regard this phenomenon as the Negative Automatic Program, or NAP. I had realized that my mind was operating with negative emotional patterns that led to behaviors that caused me sadness, stress, and suffering. There had to be a better way of being! So, I became eager to define and create my own 'better way'.

Please accept *Playing With A Full Deck* as my offering to you of what I have found to be practical awarenesses, reliable skills, and durable truths for living more consciously, purposefully, accountably, intimately, and peacefully. Consider this little book as the enlightened self leadership primer that I wish I could send back in time to a younger me, when I began the long, meandering journey of "finding myself."

This book will provide you with insights and perspectives for empowering yourself. It is written with the intention that you discover ways of liberating yourself from Spiritual Amnesia and the Negative Automatic Program, or NAP. Then, you can be challenged, nourished, stretched, and strengthened by the wonderful smorgasbord of books, seminars, mentors, new friends, teachers, therapists, and learning experiences that are available to you!

2. Not Playing with a Full Deck

We're all doing the best we can, and the best that we know how to do with our lives. We strive to make the maximum of our personal gifts, the optimum of our potentials, and the best of our circumstances. Even so, sometimes we feel that our efforts are not enough; and that the growth, satisfaction, prosperity, intimacy, and fulfillment to which we aspire are somehow elusively unobtainable.

Many of us have not been aware of two essential components of human consciousness, the Negative Automatic Program, or "NAP," and Spiritual Amnesia. This doubly unfortunate lack of awareness severely limits our experiences of awakening our personal potentials. Consequently, we "NAP" in forgetfulness of our Divine Origin, Natural Powers, and Oneness with Each Other, with the Earth, and with the Creator. While "NAPping," we are unable to make the most of our Unique Spiritual Blessings.

I call this way of being "Not Playing with a Full Deck."

The truth is we were all dealt a full deck of cards for playing the game of life. However, none of us were made aware of the Two Jokers, the NAP and Spiritual Amnesia. When we feel confused, frustrated, and unfulfilled; and conclude that we have not been "Playing With A Full Deck;" the problem has not been too few cards, but two too many.

So, unknowingly, we often deal ourselves "bad hands." Eventually, as we transcend the NAP and recover from Spiritual Amnesia, we can learn to play with a basic full deck, using only the standard 52 cards, and perhaps some new wildcards of our own design! As children about to play our games of "Go Fish," "Crazy Eights," and "Old Maid," we would sometimes forget to remove the two jokers from the deck. Not doing so would make it impossible to play our childhood games properly and in ways that may improve our chances of winning.

This is also true in playing the game of life. We must each first remove two jokers from our personal decks - the NAP and Spiritual Amnesia. Only then can we play the game to create effective, rewarding, and satisfying results.

3. My First NAPping Experience

I first learned to react and behave automatically at home, without knowing any better or imagining that there might be other more effective and satisfying options. This bright innocent child would eagerly do whatever appeared to be expected of him in order to "be good," please, appease, obtain approval, and become what was presented to me as "normal" and "appropriate." I would "behave." I would do anything for love, or what appeared to little me to be love.

When I was twelve years old, my parents announced they were getting a divorce. None of my friends' parents had divorced and I had no one with whom to discuss this surprising, scary, and confusing event. Furthermore, I had no idea WHY they were parting, especially since they told my sister and me they still loved each other. I was mentally befuddled, emotionally overwhelmed, and spiritually bereft!

At the time, I didn't realize that meaning well; they had lied and withheld some of the truth that would have made things clearer for me. I was quite shaken up inside and the question of, "Why is my family breaking up?" was driving me bonkers. I was desperate to understand "why," to feel that I could once again have a life that would make sense, and to feel secure and confident in my imaginary and self-delusional abilities to predict and control my future.

I read the Bible and prayed every night, hoping for insight, understanding, inspiration, and comfort. I would have been happy with any one of those experiences; but unfortunately knew none of them. Eventually I would turn out the light, still dismayed and distraught, wondering why my fervent efforts and sincere prayers went unanswered. I wanted so desperately to reach some level of understanding that would allow me to transcend the sorry state of being in which I dwelt.

Since no one, not even God, seemed willing to give me any answers, I came up with my own. I decided that my family must be breaking up because I, the oldest child, was simply not good enough or sufficiently lovable to keep the family together. I naively concluded that I must somehow become a better kid; yet I was at a loss as to how to accomplish this.

My motivations were selfish and simple: I just wanted to feel secure that I was lovable, wanted, and loved. I trained myself to function in a dysfunctional and broken family, and in an impossible to understand world. My personal "normalcy" was subject to the conflicting determinations that I simultaneously be a kind and loving person and yet never be vulnerable to being hurt or abandoned again.

I figured I could still be a loving person even if I was basically not all that lovable myself. So, imperfect and not so desirable as my heart seemed to be, I would close it off; imagining that others probably would not deem it worthy of much respect or kind treatment. I later realized that I had created a self-fulfilling prophecy.

At the time, I believed I was one of the saddest and most screwed-up individuals in the world; and that most people were loved, supported, and happy as a general fact of life. As years passed, and I worked my way out of my clueless agony, I realized I was not the only one suffering. Lots of people would have taken even one of my bad days as a vacation from their own private hells.

As I grew up, I struggled to make sense out of nonsense. What I accomplished was to make even more nonsense out of the previous nonsense. Not knowing any better, I regarded the ways of being modeled by my family of origin as appropriate, correct, and 'normal' defined my initial understanding of "love." So, I created my personal frame of reference to "life" and "reality" as a direct reaction to their distorted emotional monkey business. Unknowingly, I had created my own alternative reality, one that, I eventually realized, also did not work.

Eventually, I realized that my life was being run by something out of my control and about which I had no knowledge. And I endured years of confusion, frustration, and suffering before I began to recognize that I was painfully muddling through repeating patterns of dysfunctional behaviors and unfulfilling emotional states. My NAP, or Negative Automatic Program, was running and ruining my life.

4. Giving Myself a Cold

Between my junior and senior years at the University of Massachusetts, I co-taught a weeklong summer course at Trenton State Teachers College. It was a challenging, growthful, and exhausting five days with morning, afternoon, and evening classes as well as additional meetings with my colleagues for review and planning. Additionally, we spent many late evening hours talking with students, as it was a residential program.

On Saturday morning, I began driving back to Amherst, a six-hour journey, with my friend and co-trainer, Bob Hawley. After an hour on the road, I began feeling some chills and started sneezing.

"I see you've given yourself a cold," observed Bob.

"Given myself a cold? I replied. "You'd have to be an idiot to GIVE yourself a cold!"

Bob just smiled at me and nodded yes. It wasn't a put-down.

"Okay, make your point," I offered. "As far as I know, colds just happen. Bad luck."

"Did you have a busy week?" inquired Bob.

"Absolutely! We were lucky to get five or six hours of sleep a night!"

"And how did you like the food?" asked Bob, knowing that I had spent the week eating fruit and yogurt in order to avoid the heavy and unappetizing institutional fare.

"Not at all, Bob. I can't wait to get home and cook some real food!"

Bob again. "Hey, how about playing frisbee yesterday during the afternoon break? What did you do immediately afterwards, just before we resumed class?"

"I was hot and sweaty, so I grabbed a cold glass of lemonade and sat down to cool off in front of that industrial-size air conditioner in the gymnasium."

And then that little light went on in my awareness. I had not been paying attention to what I had been doing. I'd been away from home for a week, worked many hours, slept too little, and neglected to eat a balanced diet with sufficient calories. Finally, I had compounded all of these deleterious effects by overheating my body and then rapidly cooling it. OF COURSE I had given myself a cold! Duh. Only an idiot ...

I was unaware of what I had been doing to myself for five full days, and then I thoughtlessly denied my accountability for having done so. I had automatically and unknowingly deluded myself into believing that my cold had "just happened," as had so many other events in my life. That lesson was one of the greatest awakenings in my life!

5. Understanding Life

We have each found our own ways of understanding life. We have done so in spite of our common experience and agreement that life does not often seem to make much sense. We also like to believe that we understand ourselves and each other, again in spite of the evidence.

It seems to me that our sharing the common delusion of believing we understand so much about life, each other, and ourselves must be an automatic reaction to all of the nonsense, chaos, and confusion we encounter. We somehow manage to convince ourselves and then fervently pretend to others that we "understand."

To do so must be normal, as most of us do it with great regularity. Let's face it; no self-aware person would deliberately choose to feel, think, and behave in some of the ways we humans often do. If we truly did understand ourselves and each other, wouldn't life be less frustrating, easier to self direct, and more fulfilling?

This "believing that we understand" may simply be a denial of the confusion we experience about essential life questions, like:

Who am I?
What am I doing here?
What is the meaning of life?
Why do I suffer?
What is love?
How can I create intimate and nourishing relationships?
How can I make a positive difference in the world?

More recent and less eloquent questions include:

You don't see me? Hey, I'm walking here!
What, me worry?
So, what are you looking at?
Why ask why?
Why me?

Finally, the most articulate and commonly asked question in the universe: Huh?

Is it any surprise that we have a misplaced faith in our abilities to understand each other and ourselves? We HAVE to! This "understanding" is built into each of us, as is automatically feeling, thinking, and behaving in so many ways that inhibit and limit our capacities for realizing our potential for growth, satisfaction, intimacy, and prosperity.

Furthermore, it begins to explain why we stay stuck in certain unpleasant modes of consciousness and self-limiting behaviors even when we are aware that we are suffering and wish to stop doing so.

If we had mastered the understanding of life, we would also know how to do away with confusion, frustration, fear, guilt, shame, and all kinds of suffering.

One could then imagine that satisfaction, intimacy, and fulfillment would be abundant and commonplace. Yet when I look around, they appear to be in short supply, certainly not due to a lack of demand.

Rather, what we find is pandemic tragedy: unhappy families, broken homes, mental illnesses, drug abuse, runaway children, uncared-for elderly people, alienation, sexually transmitted diseases, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, ineffectual government, bankrupt financial institutions, and corrupt political and religious leadership. There are chasms between our espoused personal and national values, and those to which we actually commit our passion, time, money, and energy.

It's as if there is a hidden, negative automatic pilot, programmed to secretly lead us astray.

Picture a 747 flying from New York to Los Angeles. Somewhere over the Midwest the navigator is surprised to see a radar image of a mountain several miles ahead when he thought they were flying over the Great Plains. He immediately realizes they are drastically off course.

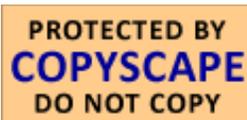
Naturally, he informs the captain, advising her to turn off the automatic pilot and to make a manual course correction to avoid colliding with the mountain. Imagine his surprise and fear if the captain were to respond, "No! The automatic pilot can't be wrong! We'll just stay on course."

Crazy sounding, is it not? Yet that is exactly what we often do with our personal lives. Even with lots of indicators that we are way off course, or even lost, we continue to buzz along as if on automatic pilot.

Playing the game of life With A Full Deck
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