

RESPONSE-ABILITY



24. Crossing a Stream

Two college students, Ron and Peter, were about to go on a weeklong hike through the forests and mountains of Yosemite Park. Before departing, the guys were sternly admonished by their fiancées to "behave themselves" and to not get involved with any young women they might meet during their trip. Naturally, Ron and Peter fervently assured their future brides of the purity of their intentions, and their ultimate devotion and loyalty.

During the first three days of the journey, the friends hiked in shared solitude, meeting no one. On the fourth day, they encountered two young women at the side of a rushing stream. The current was swift and turbulent, with waist high water. "Could you guys help us cross the stream?"

Ron looked at them for a moment, shook his head, and without a word began crossing. Using his hiking staff, he carefully worked his way through the swirling torrent. Once on the other side, he did not look back, and began walking away on the upstream trail.

Peter responded, "Glad to help you! One at a time, step up on that rock and climb onto my shoulders, and I'll carry you across the stream. No reason for us all to get wet, and your added weight will make it easier for me to get solid footing on the stream bed." Ten minutes and three trips later, all were across. The two women thanked Peter, waved in parting, and began hiking along the downstream trail.

Peter then hurried along the path to catch up with his buddy, and was surprised to find that Ron had not waited and was now far ahead. Finally reaching him, Peter asked why he hadn't helped or waited for him.

"I don't want to talk about it!" snapped Ron.

During a pause for lunch, Ron turned away and kept to himself. Throughout the afternoon he took the lead on the trail, never acknowledging Peter's efforts at conversation.

After making camp for the night and starting a fire, Peter asked Ron, "What's troubling you, man? You've been aloof and quiet since we crossed that stream this morning!"

Ron blew up, "We promised our fiancées that we wouldn't get involved with anyone, and you carried those two women across the stream!"

"That's true. I carried them across, and then I put them down. It's clear to me that you have been carrying them both, and me, all day! You must be exhausted, man!"

Without realizing it, Ron had been taken over by his own NAP. It had kept him in a state of indignant righteousness all day. He got stuck on an idea, a movie in his head of what was "right", and how his buddy, Peter was "wrong." Ron forgot to be wary (as in "beware") of his NAP, and so was not response-able (able to respond) in the present moment. Still, he was accountable for his own bad mood, and for his poor manners with the two young women and with Peter.

One can be "had" by one's NAP, or simply be the "haver" of it. On this occasion, Ron had been "had" by his Negative Automatic Program.

25. Lynn's NAP, Igora

My friend, Lynn, called me late one evening to lament about how her boyfriend wasn't demonstrating consistent sensitivity to her needs and wouldn't even have a conversation with her about her need to discuss her needs! I let her vent, complain, and cry for almost ten minutes; and then interrupted her.

"Lynn," I said, "I'm clear you are angry, frustrated, and upset about your involvement with John. Are you ready to shift to a discussion of how you might best address this difficult situation?"

"Oh, yes! I've just been so stressed out and in my NAP."

She paused for a long moment and then asked, "Tom, in the future, please don't let me carry on with my NAP for more than five minutes, okay? I mean a little griping and complaining is fine, but that's not why I call you."

"Deal," I replied. "How do you picture your NAP in your mind?"

"Well, it's this little creepy monastery guy, like in an old horror movie and he catches flies and eats them as snacks."

"Does he have a name?" I asked.

Another pause. "How about Igor? Or better, how about I make it a feminine name. Igora!"

"Okay, then." I agreed. "I'll address you by that name as a reminder when you are in your NAP."

Several weeks passed before Lynn called me again about her most recent soap opera. Immediately, she began rambling and crying about her frustration with John. I listened attentively for five minutes and when she paused to catch a breath, I simply said, "Really, Igora?"

Lynn laughed and said, "Whoa! I'm back. Thanks, Tommy! How are you?"

She had brought her Self back into the present moment.

Then we had a very constructive discussion about how she can more quickly recover from what she called *Big NAP Attacks*, and get into the present more consciously and quickly.

26. A Boot Print on the Beam

During the tenth meeting of a Full Deck seminar series, we were talking about "What bugs you the most?" Danielle jumped up and yelled, "The marred beam just inside the foyer of my home."

"My husband and I saved for years until we had our dream home built. It was finished six months ago. Inside the front door, over the wide arched opening to the living room, is a blond pine beam. I didn't notice until a few weeks after we'd moved in there was a big-cleated boot print on that beam. I bet it's a size fourteen! Well, I got out the ladder and went to wipe it off, but they had brushed the varnish right over the top of that boot print, and I can't get it off. Every time I walk into

my house and see it, I just get so mad that I now enter and leave through the garage and the laundry room so I won't have to see that ugly boot print on that beam. Now I get angry because I can't even enjoy my own foyer. I am just so tired of that ugly boot print bothering me!"

Someone asked her, "Have you considered calling your builder and having him take care of the problem?"

"Right away; but he told me he wasn't responsible for any clean-up after we signed the final inspection and moved in."

"Have you considered getting some varnish remover, cleaning off the beam, and refinishing it?" asked another student.

"Of course, not! Having to do all that would bug me even more. Besides, it's not my job to clean up someone else's mess."

"What's really bugging you?" I asked. "What makes this such a big deal?"

"Well, the boot print on the beam, my being embarrassed about people walking in my front door, my not wanting to see it and having to come and go through the garage, the builder screwing up by putting varnish on top, then not taking care of it like he should. And it's certainly not MY responsibility to go to all the trouble to scrape down that beam, clean it, and refinish it! The whole situation makes me feel frustrated and angry. It really bugs me because IT'S NOT MY FAULT!"

"Okay. What is there about this boot print soap opera that is REALLY bugging you?"

Danielle looked at me quizzically, as if I hadn't heard a word she'd said. I waited and looked at her encouragingly.

For a moment she glared at me in exasperation. Then the light bulb went on over her head. "Oh! My NAP has been bugging me."

"What are you going to do about the boot print?"

She paused, and smiled. "I don't know yet. I may refinish the beam, or I may just leave that boot print up there for awhile as a friendly reminder to myself not to get caught NAPping again."

27. Conan the Barbarian Bully

I recall an evening with friends in a busy San Francisco night club. A buddy and I were standing in a crowded hall, talking, and people watching, when a tall, smiling woman in a low-cut blue gown passed directly in front of us. There was a brief lull in our conversation as we quietly appreciated her passage. After four or five seconds of reverie and mild conjecture, we turned to resume our conversation.

Just then I was hit on my right shoulder. Not bumped accidentally by someone in the crowd, but slammed hard with an elbow! I turned to see a huge dude about six foot six and weighing 250, a Conan-sized guy who's IQ had evidently been diminished by too many beers.

Had I reacted automatically with a "Watch it, pal!" or a shove, as might be expected from many men in this situation, there could have been a brief fight. He might have been bruised; and my evening, or month, would have ended in a hospital.

I was calm though, and simply responded, "Yes?"

"What are you doin' lookin' at ma girlfren'?" he slurred loudly.

Again, I might have replied, "Excuse me, but with all due respect, I can LOOK at any woman I choose to." But that would have resulted in him saying something insightful like, "Oh, yeah?" or simply punching me in the nose.

I chose to go around his NAP, a short detour.

"Your girlfriend," I repeated. "Do you mean that attractive woman in the blue dress that just walked by?"

"You better know it!" he declared proudly.

"Would you agree with me she is certainly one of the most beautiful women here tonight?" I inquired. "I mean, aren't you a lucky guy?"

"You're darn straight!" and he grinned.

"Could you expect a woman that attractive to walk right in front of me, and for me not to look and admire her for a moment?"

"No way, man!" he agreed, now smiling.

"Then tell me, please. *Was* there something troubling you?"

Conan paused. His eyes glazed over a bit, and then he just turned and ambled away. No dominoes.

On that occasion an aware Self responded to a NAP. I was fully present, no Spiritual Amnesia and no NAP. I responded in a way that worked for both of us. No conflict and no drama.

Instead of my saying something bully-ish to "take the wind out of his sails," I simply dropped my own sail . . . and he stopped blowing.

28. Vicki's Olympics

Years ago, I was involved in an exciting and very satisfying romance with a bright and vivacious woman named Vicki. We talked openly about almost everything and agreed that a healthy and balanced relationship required equality.

Eventually I noticed that although we had agreed to be equals in making plans for how we would spend our time together, I was expected to take the lead; although only after picking up on her hints. As you may know, the WAYITSUPOZTOBE in true love is that one may be expected to be psychic, and immediately willing and able to satisfy every unstated whim of your sweetie.

On those occasions when I was a bit slow in getting hints after already having shown myself to be an insensitive buffoon by not JUST KNOWING, Vicki would employ great flair and subtlety in pretending not to manipulate my free will. After a while, when I realized I was being "played," I would grab any handy piece of paper and write a number on it, generally anything from a five to a nine. Then I would hand the paper to her and smile.

Knowing I have a playful sense of humor, and also not having a clue as to what I was doing, she made no remark until a week had passed. By then I'd given her at least a dozen slips of paper with numbers on them.

"All right!" she asserted. "What's the deal with the numbers?"

"Every time you try to maneuver me into thinking I am making a decision on my own, I've been rating you. It's the Vicki Olympics, and the event is Manipulating Tom."

"I recall receiving some sevens, eights, and nines; but no tens. Why not?"

"Well, Babe, I'm sure there were a bunch of perfect tens. Those times you were so smooth I didn't even realize what was going on. Most likely, you played me so well that I didn't even think about rating your manipulation with a number!"

We then had a discussion about openly asking for what one desires, needs, whims, and wants.

I realized there are ways to confront someone without my being offensive and without the other person feeling defensive. No NAPs and no dominoes!

When NAPs duel for supremacy the conflict can quickly escalate to an awkward entanglement, or even a dramatic soap opera. Being "right" and "the winner" may unfortunately take precedence over cooperating and collaborating for a win-win situation.

Resisting another person's NAP creates conflict. Accepting someone else's NAP while simultaneously responding to that person's authentic Self might be described as emotional aikido. No one gets hurt, and ultimately, each person, and the relationship, wins. Conflict can be avoided. Harmony can be ours.

29. Baloney

Several years ago, my beautiful Dodge Dart was broadsided by a much bigger car driven by a speeder running a red light. A few days afterward; I talked about the accident with some of my colleagues at the counseling center.

Lois, a graduate of too-many self-improvement seminars, inquired, "Tom, why did you create that experience for yourself?"

I leaned over the table toward Lois and beckoned her closer, as if to tell her a secret. Then, I intentionally surprised her by slamming my fist down on the table and yelling, "BALONEY, LOIS!" Startled, she jumped back, eyes wide with shock.

"Lois," I asked softly and not in any mean-spirited way, "Why did you create that experience for yourself?"

In playing her game of More-Enlightened-Than-Thou, Lois had confused the actual event of the collision with my experience of that event and my subsequent response. By slamming the tabletop with my fist, I surprised *her* with a small event.

"Lois," I said, "The event is not the same as the experience of the event. Neither one of us had any choice about an unexpected event. Whether we react automatically or respond proactively following the unexpected event is largely a personal choice.

"My first response following the collision was to make sure everyone in my car and then in the other driver's car was alive, uninjured, and safe. Then I felt thankful. After that, I went through the whole license, registration, and insurance discussion with the other driver."

I am not accountable for the *creation* of all of the events in my life, although I AM accountable for being aware of my NAP, staying light, and deliberately *responding* to each of those events.

When a crisis shows up, the initial stress creates an invitation to amnesia and my NAP.

Therefore, when the going gets tough, the tough are wise to stay out of their NAPs. They remember they have the option of being responsive, proactive, and accountable in their responses to the surprising people and unexpected situations they encounter. When the going gets tough, it is a grand idea to pause and avoid the NAP.

Finally, I asked Lois how she felt about this unasked-for lesson. She shook her fist in my face, then smiled, and we talked for a while.

30. Will You Be My Mentor?

After participating in several of my courses in self leadership at a local college, Donna approached me after a class and asked, "Will you be my mentor?" She explained to me she wanted for us to

meet at least once a week for a few hours of counseling and coaching, have me give her assignments for reading and journaling, be available just about any time for a phone call, and "be there" for her, to challenge, encourage, and support her.

She was clear about what she wanted, and I knew she was sincere and committed. I had been blessed with a few mentors when I most needed them, and I had served as a mentor several times. I was happy to accept her invitation.

"What will it cost?" she asked.

"Oh, it will be far more expensive than most therapists!" I stated, to her sudden chagrin. "Not in money. You will have to show up on time and follow instructions. As long as you invest in your Self, I will invest in you. Throw in a pizza, your treat, once in a while and we've got a deal."

Donna was going through a very stressful time. After 17 years of what she described as a happy marriage with three children, her husband had suddenly left her and the kids and moved out of state with his very young secretary. As you might expect, Donna's NAP was having a field day!

During this time of sudden change, increased responsibility, financial challenges, and the need to do "double-parenting," she was suffering from grief, fear, confusion, and feelings of worthlessness. All of this was quite normal and predictable.

As she was under the influence of her NAP, up popped an automatic "coping mechanism" for temporary distraction and gratification. She would go out with some of her single girlfriends once a week to drink, dance, and unwind. At times, this would lead to inebriation followed by a brief horizontal interlude with a new male acquaintance. Afterward, Donna would feel terribly guilty and vow to never repeat the experience.

Unfortunately, she was trapped in a very ordinary and insidious NAP cycle:

1. Overwhelming stress . . . that led to
2. NAP "coping behaviors" . . . that led to
3. Temporary distraction through drinking, dancing, and dubious gratification through meaningless sex with a stranger, which led to
4. Terrible guilt and feelings of worthlessness . . . that, in turn, led to - 1, 2, 3, 4, then 1, 2, 3, 4 . . . and so on.

I have found that coaching and counseling is especially effective in a peaceful and therapeutic natural environment conducive to sharing and self-revelation. So, Donna and I often went for long walks on the running trails and meadow paths that surrounded campus. Usually, we would bring along some sandwiches and a thermos of lemonade or tea. We would often walk along quietly for half an hour or more before resuming our most recent discussion.

We had walked several miles through the country when she told me about her "terrible promiscuity." I asked her about how many men she had been with since her husband had abandoned her and their children several months ago.

"Seven," she whispered.

"SEVEN!" I yelled loudly, and with no intonation of judgment.

At that, Donna fell to the ground sobbing. She bawled herself hoarse for the next twenty minutes.

I gave her my sweatshirt to use as a crying towel. She soaked it!

Finally done, she said, "That's the first time I've cried since the day that jerk left!"

Eventually, we walked on, and after a bit I asked, "Seven guys in how long?"

"None, at first. But it's been seven guys in the last six weeks."

I talked with her about how to beat the NAP.

“Without training from a guide or teacher, the mutual support of growthful friends, and one’s own diligent personal attention, none of us has a chance of transcending the NAP. With practice, honesty, and accepting support, we can become aware of the NAP more quickly.

“Let’s imagine that I realize I was stuck in my NAP yesterday during a disagreement. So, I call and apologize, and clean up the communication. As I accept I have a NAP and keep making corrective actions, I notice my response times are becoming shorter.

“Eventually, I may realize I was NAPping two hours ago, then an hour, fifteen minutes, and eventually . . . just a moment ago. Finally, I begin to realize the skill to intercept my NAP before it gets in my way.

“Then NAP interference drops down to a simple tendency toward having an automatic reaction, much weaker than the former locked-in and certain negative reaction.”

Donna and I continued to meet regularly, and talked on the telephone four or five times a week. She learned how the NAP operates and how the Prime Directive functions.

Donna "got" the sequence of stress, to NAP, to self-limiting coping, guilt, the Prime Directive, and how the cycle repeats.

A month or so after her Big Cry, as she later called it, she told me that she'd only been with one guy since then. "Progress!" she said. She wasn't proud of that one night, but she didn't feel guilty either. Donna made it clear she was not about to have her NAP run her life; especially over her "NAP-omaniac former husband that broke her heart and abandoned the family for that conniving chippy slut!"

On another walk, she put her hand on my arm and stopped, turning me to face her.

"Tom," she said, "I've grown so much in the last three months, I think I'm falling in love with you."

"Nah," I responded, "You're growing to know and love your newly discovered and empowered Self. I'm just the first person with whom the 'new you' has felt free to be open and intimate!"

Then I walked on.

Donna caught up with me about five minutes later. "You bastard! You're right, you know. I see. Boy oh boy, that was the shortest romance of my whole life!"

And we both fell apart laughing.

Playing the game of life With A Full Deck
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L113 - 150418 / ISBN#

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