

OCD – THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RAINBOW

By Christian R. Komor, Psy.D.

*You do not need to leave your room.
Remain sitting at your table and listen.
Do not even listen, simply wait.
Do not even wait, be quite still and solitary.
The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked.
It has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.*
- Franz Kafka

Perhaps this article would be more appropriately titled “The Other Side of The Storm” since for many of us with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and other OC-Spectrum disorders our life can feel like a storm. Pelted by random and useless messages from our brains, we struggle to keep our heads above the waterline of our rituals and compulsions. Anyone who has struggled with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder or other compulsive dysfunctions knows how compulsions can come to replace natural spontaneity, aliveness and the ability to approach life from a centered sense of self. They become, in a sense, “other gods” that we worship through our rituals.

As part of our recovery from OCD many of us challenge ourselves to set exposure and response prevention G.O.A.L.S., confronting our “other gods” through proactive behavior change. As difficult as these behavior change goals can be to achieve, we should not mistake them for more than intermediate steps between the agony of obsessions and compulsions and the life that we are seeking. Beyond the pain of OCD, and the hard work of behavior therapy, there must lie some reward – something we can look forward to. A pot of gold, as it were, at the end of the rainbow. Why is it that those of us with OC-Spectrum disorders so seldom talk about what life can be like without obsessions and compulsions?

We are living at this very moment in the Garden of Eden. Surrounding us is a world of unbelievable beauty, peace, and utter fulfillment created, many of us believe, by a loving God. We can see and experience the hand of grace in the sunlight glistening off the water, the wind drifting through the trees, the rains nurturing the earth. Even better, we have an amazing variety of fellow creatures with whom to share this with. Truly our world is a garden of delights waiting to be experienced. Each moment we are alive on this earth holds the potential for joy, fulfillment and serenity. Life is inherently designed to be a wonderful experience. Just the basics of being alive (eating, breathing, working, sleeping) can be incredible *experiences*. The pot of gold at the end of our recovery rainbow, it turns out, has been right here under our noses all the time. The problem is, wrapped up in our obsessions and compulsions, we have been unable to open it. Our compulsions block us from entering into a spontaneous, alive and rewarding experience of living. Cognitive and behavior therapies are simply the tools we use to achieve our ultimate goal of aliveness and healthy being!

It is important to understand that the power of spontaneous being is within us from birth and does not disappear. Rather it is covered over by compulsive behavior generated by misfiring neurons from our brains. Healthy being is the polar opposite of obsessive-compulsive behavior. Paradoxically, those of us with OCD are in an excellent position to experience and appreciate healthy being. Without the struggle of obsessive-compulsive behavior we are less likely to appreciate the sweetness and joy of healthy being. A Zen poem captures this idea well...

“My barn having burned to the ground, I can now see the moon”

We have all had times when we connected with this state of healthy being - On a vacation when we let our guard down and truly relaxed or after challenging ourselves successfully with a piece of exposure and

response prevention work. When approaching life from the perspective of healthy being, the inherent perfection and spiritual harmony in the natural world can be experienced. In the state of *being* a powerful feeling of aliveness and connection to our bodies is experienced. The environment seems to come alive and we may be thrilled with the wonderful elements of the natural world. A sense of release and letting go in our relationships is developed so that others are accepted rather than controlled, or treated as objects of dependency. A sense of destiny and an acceptance of the flow of life is also likely to be present along with a deep awareness of one's Higher Power.

Healthy being leads us to:

- Make decisions and choices out of self-ownership rather than an externalized ideal of how things "should" look.
- Accept all experiences in life as holding potential for personal growth and enhancement.
- Carry with us an inner resolve to relax fully in all situations – even when it seems we should be tense and upset.
- Focus our attention on the present moment rather than on our fears and projections regarding the past or future.
- Listen to our spontaneous inner voice as opposed to the voice of our obsessions.
- Be committed to transparency and congruency in relationships so that we interact with others as our true self rather than a façade.
- Enjoy the process as much or more than attaining goals.
- Balance our time between self-care and self-wear.
- Be patient and persevering in our approach to life and our own growth process.

Words and ideas cannot really capture the *feeling* of being. There is no way to *know* what it is really like to be in touch with your spontaneous self except by *direct experience*. You will know what it is like to *be* when you have been there and not a minute before that! Most people recognize the spontaneous sense of aliveness that is characteristic of being and slowly begin to learn the individual psychological path they must follow to return to it again and again. Just as we develop the ability to walk, not from being told how or "figuring it out," but by actual trial and error, so do we gradually develop an inner *experience* of what it is like to *be*. Gradually the awareness of the being side of living grows stronger and life without beingness begins to look flat and unfulfilling.

The increased ability to "just be" also means that the healing compulsive person is less likely to be acting out through rituals and fear-driven behaviors to avoid feelings and especially anxiety. When healing from obsessive-compulsive behavior, we begin to pay increasing amounts of attention to what we feel inside. Instead of compulsive rituals or accomplishing things, we spend more time feeling feelings and sharing them. At first these feelings may seem like weird aliens within, but gradually we learn to listen to them even when we don't know for sure where they will lead. We develop a sense of trust in our destiny and an ability to take up the thread of our feelings knowing that the total fabric will show itself eventually.

What can help provide the courage to make the journey from doing to being is the awareness that even a lifetime of material success and good work *pales when compared to even a few hours of true beingness*. When we are brave enough to face down shoulds, we make a contribution to the world that is as real as it is difficult to measure. When you think of the people who have most influenced your life or those you have felt most loved by, it is likely you will find that they had a strong quality of being about them. When we are into beingness, wonderful things begin to happen to us and around us and other people benefit either directly or indirectly.

As part of an ability to live in the moment, we learn the importance of the five senses. In healing we discover that it is those experiences that involve the *senses* that are most enjoyable and that are most real. We become able to be still long enough to appreciate the smell of a spring afternoon, to feel the warm sun in the morning on the way to work, to enjoy the cool water we drink, to make love and take pleasure in the sensuality of the experience, to feel our bodies and sense the messages they have. We begin to see the intrinsic God-given value in what we sense. Our experience becomes a teacher as well as a guide.

Coming home to our self is a wonderful feeling. In the midst of obsessive-compulsive behavior we may even have stopped believing that *we* still exist. It sounds funny, but many recovering obsessive-compulsives will say that they had even forgotten what it *felt* like to be their true self! Recovering from obsessive-compulsive behavior means finding our identity as people again. We recover the person we were meant to be.

As someone who has been traveling this road I can assure you that you *are* still the wonderful human being that you started out to be. When you begin to recover your sense of really *being*, you will know this is true. In those moments, hours, or days in your life when you have been able to move beyond obsessive-compulsive behavior and feel really at peace you may have experienced a sense of serenity and wholeness, a sense of somehow being different. Instead of feeling separate from the world and other people through attempts to control, such moments bring a sense of flowing — of being part of life in a deeply spiritual and fulfilling way. When we are deep into obsessive-compulsive behavior, it helps to remember that sense of serenity is always there *inside* waiting for us to shift perspectives and behaviors enough so that it can *come out*. The end of the recovery rainbow is right here, right now. It's time we talk about it.

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