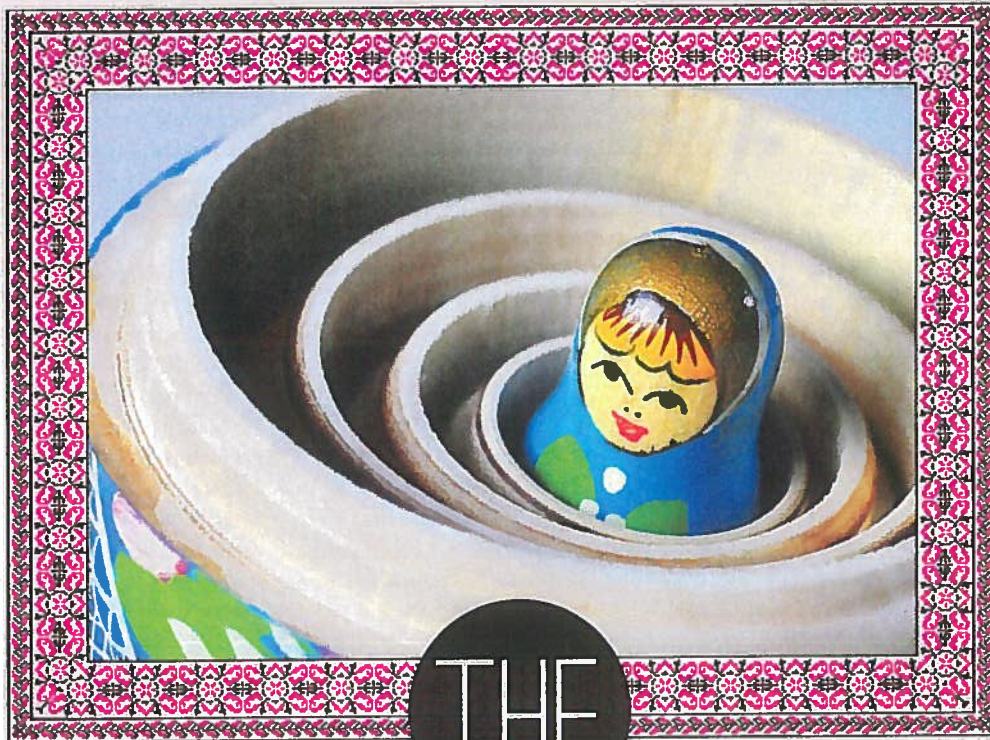




THE Matryoshka METHOD

Therapist supervisor, Cedric Speyer explains the benefits of discovering your inner Russian doll

It's the most natural thing in the world. When people are hurting, they want to find out what's really gone wrong and make it right. Even when it comes to emotional wounds, we're used to the medical model. Find the open wound, clean it out, and sew it up. But what if we started with what's right and whole and good about a person and build them up from there?

Introducing... The Matryoshka Method, a joyful way of re-envisioning yourself, with or without the help of a professional healer.

As a supervisor of therapists and counselors, I've seen what happens when 'working through' issues means peeling back layers of psychological pain, like onion skins, in the name of getting to the deeper pain or 'core issue'.

Like onion peeling itself, the gift of tears

can be involved. But when we reach the bottom of the tissue box, what then?

Then you still have to realize you're not defined by what happened in the past or how you're treated now. If previous abuse left you feeling something is fundamentally wrong with you, you can still embrace the strengths allowing you to move forward, in other words, what's right with you.

Instead of peeling back the onion layers, consider another image – the colourful wooden Russian Matryoshka dolls that fit one inside another. Imagine the smallest, innermost doll as the essential core of goodness inside each of us. When you start from there, you can build up your Russian doll layer by layer, realigning the outer personas with the essential needs, values, and intentions of your innermost Russian doll.

The Matryoshka Method doesn't just lead to insight. It seeks with the soul and sees with the heart. This simple concept is a dramatic paradigm shift, like realizing the earth revolves around the sun rather than vice versa.

This shift in perspective is not about treating psychological conditions. We still have psychiatrists and psychotherapists for that. The Matryoshka Method is a creative way to practice attunement, realignment, and ongoing calibration, based on what the soul wants, and the shape your innermost Russian doll already takes.

So much of traditional psychotherapy has become 'woundology', a method mired in finding out what's wrong, peeling back layer after layer, searching for the real problem. That is one way to go. Yet it's a long-term proposition and you can still be



left talking about 'my depression' and 'my anxiety', endlessly pursuing how to not let those nasty gremlins rule your life.

You see, the trouble is, there will always be more and more layers. Human pain unfortunately goes on indefinitely, especially if we keep making it the main focus of attention. And uncovering repressed sources of psychological pain is the way most traditional therapies have been conducted. Yet the down side of treating underlying 'conditions' is that we can end up perpetuating victim stories in which we identify too strongly with the problem.

Sometimes too, so much pain gets tapped that we bandage the wound too soon. Then it festers and leaks into our lives in unexpected and unpleasant ways. We all know people who cannot stop talking about their abusive or vindictive ex, who can't quite seem to rise above the challenges life has presented them. The emotional wound becomes their identity. 'I'm a recovering... (fill in the blank),' someone says, when it sounds more like a therapeutic badge of honour than a new lease on life. Or, 'I shut down when intimacy increases, because my mother was a narcissist who I couldn't trust to sustain connection.' This kind of therapy-speak is all too familiar between wound-mates who would be soul mates. The pain is real. We must 'hold the space' for it compassionately. However all too often 'insight' is where the process stops or circles back on itself.

What the soul wants

All the hard work of cleaning out the wound can serve emotional healing, for sure. Sometimes it works. But we live in a time when very few of us have the resources for the long-term effort that process takes. More importantly, we have the capacity to overcome problems that appear insurmountable if we call upon qualities from the treasury within: courage, solidarity, forgiveness, perseverance, loving patience.

Here's a radical thought: what if we approached the need to feel at peace, fulfilled, and joyful in life from the source of those feelings rather than removing obstacles in their way? What if we dwelled instead on the essence of ourselves? What if we went there first, focusing on the redemptive aspect of our better natures or imagination of that, drawing it out, growing and expanding it, and then realigning our life priorities accordingly?



When you do things from
your soul, you feel a river
moving in you, a joy.

RUMI

What would that look like? It would start to look like an opportunity to enter the places of pain that can be healed and reframed; sometimes all it takes is the affirming gaze of unconditional acceptance or a soul friend's vote of confidence. Seen as distortions of our deepest truth, old patterns lose their grip. Problems look like opportunities and catalysts for growth. Our focus shifts from what we don't want to what we do want. We aren't aiming for perfection. Yet life predicaments, misfortunes, and disappointments might look different enough.

You come to understand that what's happening to you can be equally viewed as happening for you. Your process is now about what you discover and know about yourself when facing what cannot be easily fixed in life. Your indomitable innermost doll sees everything from the flip side of the problem.

This may sound like a bypass of people's pain. The past facts of our lives cannot be changed, and they play a role in who we've become. How could they not? Every life has set-backs and sadness. Emotional scars, trauma, family dysfunction, confusion and chaos, they're real too. As Rumi says, 'Half of any person is wrong and weak and off the path. Half! The other half is dancing and swimming and flying in the Invisible Joy.'

Which half would you like to focus on? The constantly beleaguered ego, or the soul with a vision of its destiny, who can risk some misadventure along the way? What do you choose to foster and nurture within yourself on a daily basis? It's a choice to take any experience, no matter how challenging or crazy-making, and turn it into a soul-making opportunity.

The soul never defines itself as wrong, wounded, or weak. It doesn't organize itself around the bad things that happened to us, and it doesn't deny the dark side. There's incredible power in this point of view, because the soul is stronger than the ego. It's more qualified to drive the bus. You will only really know that when the ego and its

grievances are in the back seat. When we are more interested in what the soul wants, then we can begin to expand our identity into the fullness of our life, be rooted in our truth, live in a bigger story, and reinhabit the world in a way that's more aligned and congruent with what matters most to us.

A man who was physically abused as a child can move beyond thinking that all his problems – his marriage riddled with resentment, the distant relationship with his adult daughter, the flare-ups of work rage – are caused by that punishment he received which has since become internalized and downloaded on loved ones. Using The Matryoshka Method, he can focus instead on what that punishment couldn't touch. He can recall the people, present and past, who've shown him love and respect. He can think about how he's been purposeful and effective. He can further assess his skills, successes and competences. He can explore his positive needs, even the unmet ones, feel into them, own and celebrate them. He can understand the larger context of his life, and draw lessons and strengths from it. He can move beyond feeling like damaged goods. He can find out what's right with him not what's wrong, and move towards what he finds life-giving.

Again, it's not about denying the reality of your story. It's about becoming aware that whatever level of reality you pay the most attention to will continue to prevail.

Attention is the engine of transformation. You do have the ability to redirect your attention. When the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail, observed Abraham Maslow. Pain overly probed does the same – it draws attention away from other things that are actually more important, but just aren't hammering away for your attention.

Creating the Shift

Let's return to the Russian nesting dolls as a metaphor for all this. For instance, the outermost or biggest doll (let's call her Beatrice) is living contentedly with a self-concept that says, 'Look, I'm cool, an artist, very trendy. Everyone likes me.' Then there's a crisis. She learns that her best friend lied to her about the reason she wasn't invited to the vernissage. Beatrice's ex is going to be there, making it awkward, and he's more popular with the art crowd. There's a crack in the surface persona. It no longer works. Now Beatrice is thinking, 'I don't have what it takes. And the groupies there just want to

have a shot at him. Those pretentious artsies think nothing of throwing me under the bus. I bet they're glad to have me out of the way.'

If we stay with this investigation, the next doll down in the set might say, 'I'm fine on my own. I don't need anybody. Screw them. I'm tough. I don't care.' That defensiveness, if we attend to it carefully, reveals a part of Beatrice she's disowned – the void she feels in her life. So let's send her to see a counsellor who has an empathic presence and practices active listening. Beatrice is invited to get in touch with this emptiness and not judge it. She then confesses, 'I'm scared, I'm lonely. I don't know if I can make it on my own, without my boyfriend and our mutual friends. I don't know if my paintings are any good. Maybe I should give it up.'

Beatrice has an even deeper doll that she's been hiding. 'I'm fine for awhile, but then I go on these eating binges that make me feel disgusted with myself.'

If the bingeing is interpreted as trying to fill the lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem in Beatrice, she then hits bottom of the negative core issue: 'I'm totally screwed up. I never worked through the impact of my father's alcoholism. I think I need to go into long-term therapy.'

Now let's see the difference if we practice The Matryoshka Method with Beatrice. Instead of trying to delve deeper into the roots of her discouragement, let's go straight to the core of what's right with her. Let's look at the person behind the problem, to encourage and re-motivate her (without glossing over or process-skipping). There are values held by the innermost Russian doll, who is intact, not hollow. We ask Beatrice about someone in her life who believed in her. 'I was a very shy child who kept to myself. But my grandmother always said about me that 'still waters run deep' and 'we need more people like Beatrice, who aren't just making noise'. Then we ask Beatrice what has been life-giving for her. 'I used to draw nature scenes based on my walks through the countryside where I grew up. Whenever I go outdoors to sketch, it brings me such peace.'

Aha! When Beatrice is painting, it puts her in a mindful state. In further conversations, we can

explore the outgrowth of that, the people and experiences connecting Beatrice with herself. We continue to assess what is of deepest value to her, what her hopes are based upon, and where and when her attention naturally tends towards outflow. We keep attuning, realigning and calibrating Beatrice to the beauty and truth of her inner Russian doll. She learns that whenever she has a problem, the problem doesn't necessarily have her. It can serve personal evolution.

Using The Matryoshka Method, we are free to experiment with, explore, and express all the layers of who we are. We trace back the radiance of momentary experiences of peace and well-being and attune ourselves to the nucleus of joy in our life. We remember how the last big hug felt. We greet our dear friend with Alzheimer's who doesn't fully recognize us, and understand simple presence is what it's all about. We recall how much we love our soul friends and conscious companions, our place in nature, our competence in an emergency. We give ourselves credit for what we get right each day. We acknowledge our courage for how far we've come in life, given very human limitations. We are actively engaged in day-to-day attunement with our innermost self, doing things from our soul, the source of restorative fullness which fosters ongoing growth. We know spiritual solace. We are at home within ourselves. 



Find out more

- Cedric Speyer is a Benedictine Oblate as well as Clinical Supervisor of E-Counselling for a major Employee & Family Assistance Program, and Creative Director, InnerView Guidance International (IGI). As a pioneer of E-counselling in Canada, he developed and implemented a short-term counselling model for online practitioners, edited a textbook on the subject, and does related freelance writing. Cedric also directs a documentary series entitled, *GuideLives for the Journey: Ordinary Persons, Extraordinary Pathfinders*.
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