



# BEING RELATIONAL

**The Seven Ways  
to Quality Interaction  
& Lasting Change**

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## Chapter 5

# Being Grounded

**W**hile being engaged and being centered largely have to do with how you act, how you present yourself to others, and how you respond to them, being grounded is different. It has to do with your thinking, the way you experience what is going on around you and what you think about it. Your thinking will affect how you are able to engage with others, or not. Your thinking will affect how you are able to remain centered, or not. A lack of groundedness can completely undermine your best efforts to be relational because your expectations for yourself and others are out of line with reality.

You may be caught up in thoughts that create much of your suffering and your frustration with your life and the people in it, thoughts that are essentially untrue, thoughts that are not grounded in truth, thoughts that become beliefs which limit your ability to see your world as it truly is. This negatively affects you

and others, gets in the way of positive relationships, and often needlessly escalates conflict.

You will know that your thoughts are in fact delusions, disconnected from truth, when:

- You think some situation, some thing, or someone, including yourself, will *never* change or will *always* be a certain way.
- You give up and passively become a victim to your circumstances.
- You are mired in thinking about what you deserve, what should be, what ought to be or could be, if only . . . .
- You are lost in dreaming about a wonderful future without doing anything to create it.
- You are stuck in the past and how good it was compared to now.
- You obsess about the past and what could have been, should have been, or ought to have been, if only . . . .
- You judge a person or situation on a mere snippet of information—a blink.
- You apply labels to individuals, groups, and organizations and believe them.
- You act habitually based on your coping strategies and without self-awareness.

On the other hand, when you are grounded, you have the sense that *you are in touch with things as they are*. You are grounded in reality. In addition to the mental aspect, there is a physical sense to

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it. You feel the earth beneath you. You shift your attention literally to your feet. You feel the floor of the car with your left foot, or the rug or the pavement beneath your feet,

wherever you are—even the sand or the forest floor. Or you use your imagination to feel the solid ground beneath you. Using the focus of your mind to re-ground your thinking brings you back to feeling solid. You have a sensation of support and well-being and indeed you are in that moment well supported by the ground beneath you. You are full of awareness, without anticipation, analysis, or evaluation. You are joyful, at ease. Let's look at the mental discipline that can help you find this state.

## Being Grounded is Embracing the “Maybe, Maybe Not”—Being Open

One of our favorite expressions in our mediation practice is “maybe, maybe not.” We use it to help convey[s] the idea that situations faced, options considered, and judgments made are rarely absolute and fixed. In mediation, participants often are making judgments about themselves and others, and about their options, motivations, and so on. The concept of *maybe, maybe not* helps them see that other realities are possible if they can relax their attachment to the one that they have seized upon. This helps them remain open and can do the same for you. When a statement is made by another person or when you feel the urge to make a statement assessing a situation or passing judgment, you can give yourself space and time to consider alternatives by thinking to yourself or possibly saying out loud to another person, “Maybe, maybe not.” By doing so you remain open to other possibilities, other views, other judgments.

“Maybe, maybe not” convey[s] the idea that situations faced, options considered, and judgments made are rarely absolute and fixed.

You do not commit to a particular version of the truth. You do not align with another in a possible destructive triangle, nor do you set yourself in opposition to them.

The *maybe, maybe not* concept, when you use it with others from a place of center, also lets them know that you respect their ability to decide for themselves and make their own judgments. So when giving advice to another person or presenting them with an option, you give them your input and opinion, but you don't substitute your judgment for theirs, you don't override their judgment with yours. In this way you are a better sounding board for others. You are a better listener. You are relational. You might say to a friend who is considering an important decision, such as moving to a new town, "So you are thinking about moving? Maybe? Maybe not?" This preserves their sense of self-determination and helps them own the decision that they make. It helps them with their discernment of a path rather than feeling like a path was chosen for them. It invites them to look closer at the situation. It's not demanding them to, "Look closer at that." It is saying, you **might** want to look closer at that—maybe, maybe not." You are not attached to the idea of guiding them to a particular decision, instead you are fully committed to quality interaction and dialogue

Being grounded means you acknowledge for yourself and for others that you might *not know* what is, **in fact**, true or best.

and informed decision-making. It is supportive and encourages active discernment, slowing down the rash judgment and decision process, which makes for better,

more reasoned judgments as compared with judgments made out of personal reactivity which are, as we have discussed, not made from a place of being centered.

Being grounded means you acknowledge for yourself and for others that you might *not know* what is, **in fact**, true or best. If you state a viewpoint, it can be strong, yet still open to inquiry. If you make a statement and the response is “That’s not true!” you pause and you are rigorous about truth. That means that you acknowledge that what you **think** could lead you to conclusions that might **not** in fact be true. You are open to the possibility that your analysis may be flawed, based on too little information, or unduly influenced by past experiences, by others’ influence, or by cultural biases. So, instead of jumping to conclusions, instead of making a “blink” judgment, instead of assuming you know something, you choose to **suspend judgment** for a period of time.

Being grounded means you acknowledge for yourself and for others that you might *not know* what is, **in fact**, true or best.

You embrace the idea that there are other possibilities and that the version of the truth that seems most likely to you *may* be true, but maybe *not*. This leads you to interact with others in a different way. You are engaged. You remain curious. You seek information. You use your creativity and imagination to help you consider different versions of truth that might be possible. When you do this with others it is an act of generosity on your part, but it will also pay great dividends back to you because you will avoid a great deal of suffering and conflict that is fueled by your flawed judgments.

Embracing the *maybe, maybe not* will help you avoid needless suffering. Why do we say that? Ask yourself, “What does my suffering look like?” It is you *arguing with reality*. You become agitated, you are not centered, when you look at the people in your life, the situations in your life, the cards that you are dealt,

and say that they *should be different* than they are. Or you might say that they *could* be different and better if only . . . Or that they *would* be different and better, if only . . . You also create suffering for others by imposing upon them your view of how they should or should not be, what they should or should not do. That doesn't mean you have an *anything goes* mentality, as we discuss below with regard to healthy boundaries, but it does mean that you let go of the woulda', coulda', shoulda' thinking you have that separates you from finding joy and contentment in what *is*—the way things **are**, the way people are—not how they would, could, or should be. You are more open.

When you change your thinking in this simple but powerful way, you can be centered and engaged with any situation. But you may find this very hard to do, because, without realizing it, you may be very attached to your thinking. Some of your thoughts that cause you the most suffering may have become strongly held beliefs. You may have very deeply grooved habits of mind.

Much has been written in philosophy, theology, psychology, and self-help literature about the problems associated with becoming attached to thoughts that argue with reality.<sup>5</sup> You have beliefs and thoughts that you have attached to, you identify with, and you have come to hold as *truth* in your heart and mind. Sometimes they are very simple like, “fish gotta swim and birds gotta fly,” or more complex like “kids need a father and a mother.” Or really complex like “Jesus is the Son of God,” or “people should be kind.” Being grounded doesn't mean you give up everything you believe in, but it does mean that you care a lot about not getting attached

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Katie, Byron, *Loving What Is* (2002).

to thoughts and beliefs that you do not *know* are true, particularly if your attachment to the belief causes you suffering because it is contrary to reality or if your belief imposes suffering on others because it is not believed by them. You show you care by being attentive

to your thoughts and how they affect you and others around you.

Being attentive to your thoughts literally means observing them rather than being ruled by them. You are not trying to control your mind so as to totally block out your thoughts. Thoughts happen! You have a brain and it thinks.

So you notice your thoughts as they appear and disappear, as they shift and change. They are like clouds in the sky or waves

breaking on the shore. They appear. They pass. You let them pass. You make internal space for the energy associated with those thoughts to flow around barriers so they do not get blocked and backed up in your consciousness.

Some thoughts will come back to you over and over again because they are interesting to you or because something or someone in your life stimulates you to think them. The thoughts may be positive and joyful. The thoughts may be negative or troubling. The thoughts may be evil or dark. You pay attention to that, but you don't resist it, you don't get lost in it, and most importantly

Being grounded doesn't mean you give up everything you believe in, but it does mean that you care a lot about not getting attached to thoughts and beliefs that you do not *know* are true, particularly if your attachment to the belief causes you suffering because it is contrary to reality or if your belief imposes suffering on others because it is not believed by them.

Being attentive to your thoughts literally means observing them rather than being ruled by them.

you do not attach to the thoughts in an unhealthy way. The thoughts are not you. You are much more than your thoughts. With thoughts about positive experiences, fantasies, and desires, you do not become so attached to them that you develop a craving for more of them and more of the things that created them. That kind of attachment leads to disconnectedness from others. You know the craving can become an addiction— obsessive thinking about something you become very wrapped up in. With negative thoughts, you do not harbor them in a way that grows resentment and fear like a cancer within you. You know that fear and resentment can manifest themselves in illness, anger, and even violence.

So you observe your thoughts, and when you feel your thoughts adversely affecting your ability to be centered, when you notice yourself stuck on a thought, you shift your attention to being grounded, finding your feet on the ground, and you remember the idea of *maybe, maybe not* and ask yourself, *Is that thought really true? Do I know that it is true? Is there another possible reality or way of looking at the person or situation that I am not seeing?* You choose to look at it harder. Like Rafiki invites in *The Lion King*, “**Look harder**, Simba. You see?” And what you see when you look harder is the reality that what you think is maybe true, but maybe not. Knowing this, you are willing to make room for other possibilities, reality as it is—good, bad, ugly, disappointing, sweet, tender, or joyful.

It takes practice and a change in your mindset and, perhaps even your entire worldview, but you are committed to being grounded, and one of the beliefs that you are now open and receptive to is the belief that being grounded can help bring you greater contentment and an enhanced ability to collaborate with others and

create positive outcomes. With this belief in mind, let's take the invitation to 'look harder' at some of the types of thinking that get in the way of being grounded, the type of thinking you might be attached to that can lead to your suffering and suffering for others you interact with.

## Being Grounded is Letting Go of Always & Never

Another side of the *maybe, maybe not* coin, is the idea that, in being grounded, in considering whether what you think is in fact true or not, you *let go of absolutes* like *always* and *never*. You know that when you say to someone, "You always . . ." or "You never . . .," that you are goading them into an escalation of conflict. Why? Because the statement you make is false and it triggers a reaction on the part of the other person to defend and perhaps fire back at you their own always or never statement—thus engaging in the energetic reciprocity of conflict. It is unproductive in conversation with another person, and it is equally unproductive in the conversation you have with yourself in your thinking.

When you are grounded, you *expect change*, even those changes that might not be welcomed. You have a stance, a rootedness, that can accept change because you know that nothing is permanent,

When you are grounded, you *expect change*, even those changes that might not be welcomed. You have a stance, a rootedness, that can accept change because you know that nothing is permanent, everything is transitory.

everything is transitory. The words Catholics hear when receiving ashes on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday come to mind,

“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” You know that there are a multitude of simultaneously interacting factors in your world and your life that guarantee only one thing, that everything will change and will not be as it is at this moment. With many of the circumstances swirling around you, you remind yourself, *This too shall pass*. It does not mean you avoid reality. Just the opposite, you engage with reality tempered by knowing it is temporal and each moment, each interaction, is just one moment in the grand context. But, consider all the times when you get spun up in a situation as if it is absolute, as if it will never change or go away. Notice how quick you are to move into never or always thinking. Particularly when the situation brings you pain, triggers frustration, or incites anger.

Here is an example. As a winner, you might be an employer with people working under your supervision. Something goes wrong at work and you think, *That employee has screwed up again! She just doesn't get it. She'll never improve. I'm going to fire her.* A grounded way to approach that thought, as we discussed, is to suspend judgment and look harder. You think, *Hold on. Maybe she could improve, maybe not? Maybe it's best to let her go, maybe not?* Remember, when you are grounded, the energy in your frustration or anger or despair has a place to flow around barriers rather than get trapped. You think, *Okay, so I want to fire her . . . What would happen if I fired her? What would be necessary to fire her? What would I do to replace her? What might she do when I fire her? Does she do anything valuable so that I would not want to fire her? Can she be trained? Can her duties be shifted around so she can succeed? Is there something I can change about how I manage her?* There are many more questions you might ask. This is much

more active discernment. It is not procrastination or avoidance. It has intention.

Your act of engaging in that discernment comes from your commitment to being grounded and open. You are centered, so you don't complain to others and you decide to take your concerns directly to the employee for an open and honest discussion. As we discuss in later chapters, that is an act of generosity, kindness, and humility. You give of your time, your intellectual and emotional energy, and your patience. You set aside your pride and ego to be engaged with her, believing in the capacity that you and she have together to move through conflict with quality interactions and dialogue, even over uncomfortable topics. You do this because you are relational and it is good for her, good for you. It's just plain good, even if the outcome is painful and difficult and you decide it is best for her to find other employment. You may part ways, but you do so with integrity.

Being grounded works in the other direction of interaction as well. Take the situation of an employee who is miserable, hates her boss, hates her job, feels stuck, and sucks it up until she cannot take it anymore. She walks out one day saying she quits. Had she decided instead to stay grounded and engage her boss, she may have found in their face-to-face meeting that the boss had no idea how miserable she was, that the boss finds her valuable and that there are other tasks or jobs for her had she asked. Or, perhaps the other tasks or jobs are not available, and so they discuss her resignation. They find that she has no other job lined up and the boss offers her the chance to stay until she finds new employment so long as she gives the boss two weeks notice, helps to train a new person, only spends lunch hours and breaks in the job search and does not triangle with

other employees. They re-established their connection, she lets go of her attachment to “I hate my job and my boss; I’ll never be happy here,” and when she parts, it is with integrity for both.

## Being Grounded is Refusing Labels

Another form of thinking that can create suffering for you and others around you is thinking in terms of labels. Labels can sometimes be helpful as descriptive words or phrases that are applied to people, places, things, and so on to classify them generally. But, being grounded in truth, you know that labels, especially when applied to people, are often false and divisive, particularly when they are negative. So you reject labels. Here’s why:

Look at the labels that might be applied to you. Look at the myriad of classifications: gender, age, sexual orientation, race, religion, nationality, geographical region, birth order, family background, income. How do you feel about them? Are they true? List a few and **look harder** at them. You might feel good about certain labels because you think they reflect well upon the way that you see yourself and your image in the eyes of others. You might feel that they are accurate when applied to you. But there are other labels that you do not like. You don’t like them because they are false. You don’t like them because they are negative. You don’t like them because they are too narrow. They may even be stifling. You don’t like them because they place you in a group you feel you do not associate yourself with. You don’t like them because they are limiting, you are much more dimensional than the label.

When others apply labels to you, it diminishes your individual identity. It defines you in ways that you might not define yourself.

It creates a separateness between you and others that might not really exist and which you do not want because, when you are defined as one thing, it means that you are not something else. So, if you're white, you're not black. If you're conservative, you're not liberal. If you're gay, you're not straight.

Being grounded means you recognize the many problems with labels, starting with the fact that they are inaccurate as applied to many people. Race labels for instance. We, your authors, are considered "white." But what does that really mean? Does it strictly have to do with skin color? Or is it more about ancestry and geographical roots? Is it really helpful as a classification? Does it help to classify a man or woman with five generations of family living in Moscow, Russia in the same group with a man or woman with five generations of family living in Baltimore, Maryland, just because they have the same complexion? So maybe the label white is not helpful. First, from a relational perspective, it serves no purpose except to separate us from other people. We are white, so we are not black, Asian, Native American, or anything else. The label white does have historical significance. We don't need or want to deny that; we just accept that it is true because we are grounded. However, when the label white is applied to us, it actually goes beyond separating us from others; it puts us in opposition to others. That is not a place where we want to be. Secondly, it says nothing to help others understand who we consider ourselves to be. It is not a label we would choose to apply to ourselves, so maybe we don't want the label applied to us by others.

A woman told us a story of her experience in coming to America from Spain. She was asked to declare her race on an immigration form. The categories were confusing to her so she went to the

clerk to ask for help. The clerk, looking at her skin color and facial features, said, “You’re white, check that.”

The lady said, “Well, I’m from Spain, should I check ‘Hispanic?’”

“No, that’s for Mexicans.”

The clerk took the card from her and checked “White.”

She said she shook her head and thought, “Isn’t a person from Spain considered Hispanic?”

Or consider the racial label, “black.” Does it help to classify a recent immigrant to the U.S. from Nigeria in the same group with a man with five generations of family living in Chicago or a man recently immigrated from Jamaica just because they have similar skin color although perhaps many shades different? The recent immigrant, forced to check “Black” might feel proud to do so, but maybe not. They might feel like, by checking a box they just became part of a group that they had not decided they wanted to join.

Or “Asian.” Does it help to lump into one group people from such diverse cultures as Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and China. What about India? Pakistan? Mixed racial people? Aren’t we all mixed race really? Maybe? Maybe not?

Looking harder at this, you can quickly see how false, or at the very least limiting, it is to apply these labels. Yet our society insists on attaching race labels to people. You are asked to check a box to declare your race many times in your life. Racism does exist. You are grounded and recognize this. But by continuing the practice of classifying people into racial categories that many feel are inaccurate or negative, does our society embrace differences and heal racial division or perpetuate it?

Being grounded, you might check “Other,” or nothing at all on forms that ask you to identify your race. You are also well aware

that it is not just in the realm of race where labels create conflict. As we discussed, triangling can be a very dangerous form of interaction, and labels are used powerfully to escalate destructive triangling into full-scale divisions between large groups of people.

Here's how that works. A person wants things to be a certain way. Others have different opinions. The person looks for a common label to apply to those in opposition, applies the label, and uses it in making a general statement complaining to others. Just listen to talk radio. You will hear numerous examples daily. The complaints are designed to build a coalition to gain power in opposing, gaining power over, or even wiping out the other. Labels are used as the shorthand for identifying large groups to make it appear as if they are homogenous, monolithic, stripping people of their individualism, lumping them all together as mere members of the group in which they are placed. They also make individual actions and thoughts seem much larger and perhaps more threatening because, instead of being the thoughts and actions of an individual or a small group, they become the thoughts and actions of an entire class of people, unknown in size, without individual identity, and whose bad intentions are easily exaggerated.

Through history you can think of hundreds of examples where scapegoats are created and oppressed and it begins with assigning a label. Being grounded, knowing that labels are inherently limiting and usually false, you don't use them. You are aware of how powerful—negatively powerful—they are. You stay centered and resist joining in destructive triangling when others use labels.

Being grounded, knowing that labels are inherently limiting and usually false, you don't use them. You are aware of how powerful—negatively powerful—they are.

## Being Grounded is Having Healthy Boundaries —Especially in Relationships

As we have seen, being grounded is having a real love for reality and truth and accepting what is rather than what should be or could be. It also means you are rigorous about truth in not making statements in absolute forms like always and never statements, or in not applying labels to lump large groups of people together. So does being grounded mean that you have no opinions? Does it mean you just give up on trying to have any influence on others? Does it mean that you are a doormat and just accept when others act poorly? It might be easy to rationalize that how others behave is just *who they are* and that the best choice is to accept them and let them be. Well, maybe, but maybe not!

You may be familiar with the Serenity Prayer, brought into popular consciousness by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the

Being grounded means you accept things and people as they are, but you don't just give up on having influence to create the world that you wish to live in.

difference.” Being grounded means following the path this prayer encourages. Yes, you accept things and people as they are, but you don't just give up on having influence to cre-

ate the world that you wish to live in. You discern how you should respond and use your influence, but you don't let your attachment to your thinking about the way things *should* be cause you suffering. It's not trying to control everything, but it's also not being passive. You have healthy boundaries for yourself, your thinking, and how you permit others to affect you.

Here's an example. You have a spouse who acts poorly according to your idea of what is good behavior. It could be an extreme case. It might not be. But the point is that you don't like their behavior and you wish it would change. If you are not grounded, your thoughts about how your spouse should behave might cause you sleepless nights, constant worry and pain, and give you a gnawing feeling in your gut. Their behavior might also cause you to suffer because they reflect poorly upon you and your family and make you look bad. They embarrass you. However, you are grounded, so it's not like that. You accept them for who they are, but you have influence and the courage to use it. So instead of nagging and complaining to others, you stay centered and directly ask your spouse for the change that you want.

Now comes the hard part. You might not get what you ask for. You might get a positive statement, but then they revert back to the same behavior. You might be rejected entirely. You might get a very angry reaction. We will talk about how to work with bullies and those who are not relational in their interactions with you, but right now we are focusing on you, your internal mindset, and being grounded. You know that you have choices. You look harder at them. You get clear about what they are and their consequences to the best of your ability. You might leave the relationship. You might stay and continue working in a relational way for the change you desire. You might accept that the change you desire is not going to happen and decide that you want to stay anyway.

It's your decision. You take responsibility for your own happiness and peace of mind. You consider others whom your decision will impact and whether your decision might be good or bad for them. You don't choose to suffer unless you decide that is what you

want to do for the well-being of others. Then your suffering has meaning and you are at peace with it. You don't let your thoughts about how your reality should be different than it is consume you with resentment.

However, sometimes your choices might seem very limited or you may feel forced to choose between options that *all* look bad. This may occur in a relationship that you have a great deal of attachment to—with a spouse, sibling, parent, or child—or in interactions with others where you have very little power. Let's look at how you stay grounded in those circumstances. It requires slowing down your thinking and engaging deeply in inquiry about your options. It is similar to what we discussed earlier in being centered as being complaint free, but it is different because now you are looking at your own thinking and how, in staying grounded, you set healthy boundaries and make informed choices. Here's an exercise to help your discernment.

### **Step One—The Other Person**

There's someone in your life who you love, but you are very frustrated with their behavior. Cutting off the relationship with that person might be an option that you just don't want to consider. There are a hundred reasons why you might not want to sever the relationship. You have looked hard at that option and decided it is not a good one. This person is going to remain in your life. Think of that person.

Or . . .

There might be someone in your life whom you don't love, in fact you may dislike them intensely, but they have power to affect you on a daily basis—a partner, a boss, coworker, political or

organizational leader, business owner, neighbor, parent, a sibling or family member. For any number of reasons you might not want to get away from the situation that allows the person to have power over you. Think of that person.

## **Step Two—The Other Person’s Behavior**

Think now—What does the person do or not do that you wish would change?

This is not about who they are. This is not about what they should do or could do. Stay grounded. Don’t use labels. Avoid never or always thinking. Don’t make big factual statements.

Describe the behavior. Be specific. It’s not, “You treat me like shit” or “You act as if I don’t exist.” It is, “I don’t like it when you cut in on me when I am talking.” This is what is referred to in the field of conflict resolution and non-violent communication as an “**I-statement**”—something you say about yourself, your experience, your feelings. I-statements are useful when you engage in difficult conversations with others, but also as you discern your own thoughts and feelings in your commitment to be grounded. Here you might have multiple behaviors that you don’t like. Write them all down.

## **Step Three—Is it Abuse? If not, so what?**

As you look at the behaviors of the person, you get clear about how you view them. Just the act of being very specific about describing the behavior will help you get clear. You also get clear about how to respond to the other person or why you might choose to stay in the relationship even if the behavior does not change.

In setting healthy boundaries, you ask: Does the behavior hurt me? How? Does it hurt others? How? Is it momentary and you can forgive it and move on? Or is it repeated and ongoing, and beginning to erode your personal or working relationship? If there is abuse, you may want to take a hard look at leaving the relationship. You might ask yourself if the behavior is abusive to you or others you care about, will staying in the relationship only perpetuate the abuse? Maybe, maybe not. You may have many thoughts about why you can't leave the relationship. Now is the time to look at the truth of those thoughts. For instance, if you look at your relationship to an abusive spouse you might say, "I can't leave because it will be bad for the children," or "I can't leave because I have no place to go." Or "I can't leave because my family will never speak to me again." If you look at your relationship to a tyrannical boss you might say, "I can't leave because I won't be able to find another job." Stay grounded in the maybe, maybe not. For each thought you have, ask yourself, "Do I know that is true?" If your reasons for staying in an abusive relationship are based on your assumptions about what will happen in the future if you leave, then, as we said earlier, *Look Harder* and you may find that a path exists for you to set a healthy boundary and leave the relationship.

You *take responsibility for your own well-being*, not subordinating yourself to others who are abusive. If your attachment to an abusive person is so strong that it won't let you do that, then ask, "Why am I so attached to this abusive relationship? What makes this abusive relationship worth staying in? Why?" Answer truthfully from that place of groundedness.

On the other hand, if the behavior is not harmful to you or to others, or does not rise to a level of ongoing abuse, and if you

have decided to stay in the relationship, then, ask yourself, “So *now* what?” If you allow the behavior to adversely affect you, then you are responsible for your own suffering. You can make a request for change—staying centered—directly to the person as we just discussed. If the behavior affects others, you can talk to them, being careful not to negatively triangle with them, without complaining, about the change you want. It’s okay to persuade and influence others if done in a relational way. In fact, it’s one of the best ways to persuade and influence others because it is authentic. That’s a lot of what quality dialogue is about. And you can do it with a lot of energy. You do it in a spirit of positive hopefulness about the change that you want, not attacking or judging the other person.

If the behavior is neither harmful to you or to others, yet you are still attached to the idea of leaving the relationship, ask yourself, “Why am I so attached to the idea of leaving? What makes me think it is better elsewhere? Is that true? What will I do? Where will I be? What makes me think it will be better in a year if I leave now? What makes me think the other person is the problem? Is that true? Am I part of the problem? Am I the problem? Is it my thinking that is the problem?” Answer truthfully, from that place of groundedness.

Another option, of course, is that you might just let it go. Accept the behavior and *instead of trying to change them, change your thinking*. If your fear, resentment, or frustration is based on your thinking that refuses to accept a reality you cannot change or do not want to take action to change, then see how you feel when you let go of that thought. You, without that thought, with more peace in your heart, are more relational.

## Being Grounded is Living in the Now—Mostly!

So, as we have seen, being grounded is all about your thinking. Another helpful way to get a handle on your thinking is to consider it from a temporal perspective. How much of my thinking is about the past? How much of my thinking is about the future? Some of that thinking is helpful and necessary, but much of it will lead you to unnecessary suffering and will create real barriers to your ability to be relational in your interactions with others. So, mostly, being grounded means living in the now.<sup>6</sup> The challenge lies in knowing when and how to use thinking about the past and future and in knowing when that thinking is not helpful. Being grounded allows for this discernment.

Winners interested in maximizing self-interest might urge, “Stay away from the past. It’ll bog you down, lead you down rabbit holes. It’s irrelevant. It doesn’t matter. Focus on the future.” A relational approach brings a different perspective. Your past may or may not have meaning for your present. Thinking about the past, what happened then, what may or may not have gone right or wrong, and how you feel about it obviously can be valuable to your decision making process today. Experience is a great teacher as they say. You use your past experience every moment of your life on some level of your consciousness. It comprises much of the information upon which you make decisions. The problem is not thinking about the past. The problem is the attachment to thinking about the past when you let it define and limit you, and when you let it define and limit how you interact with others.

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Tolle, Eckhardt, *The Power of Now* (1997).

With regard to how you view yourself, being grounded means that you do not let events in your past define who you are as a person. You reject the idea that you are doomed to some fate or that your destiny is fixed because something happened to you or in your family in the past. If you were the victim of crime or abuse, that is not your identity; it is something that happened to you. If you were fabulously successful and famous sometime in your past, that is not who you are, it is something that happened to you. Being grounded, you reject labels for others, so you reject putting labels on yourself. Yes, what happened informs your judgment, but when it is the thought that visits you constantly and limits your ability to experience and live in the present moment, then it is a thought that you want to let pass. So that is what you do. You let the thought pass through your consciousness. You don't feed it. It is just a thought and it will pass. You are not going to let it interfere with your ability to experience the present fully, to focus your attention on the present and make the present joyful—even if you are in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Being grounded means that you do not let events in your past define who you are as a person.

You also do not let your thinking about the past define and limit how you interact with others. You are open to the possibility that others might not do or feel what you anticipate. Maybe they will, but maybe they won't. You do not let events from another person's past define who they are and limit your ability to be ready

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for them, in the moment, to do something different from what you expect. You do not assume the worst. You are open to being surprised by a change in their behavior.

You also do not let prejudices arising from past experiences with others who remind you of the person in front of you now, limit your ability to be open. This refers to situations where you expect a person to act in a certain way based on some limited information you have about them—their appearance mainly—that makes them like someone else you dealt with in the past. You don't make those blink judgments of a person based on very limited information.<sup>7</sup> You stay grounded in what you know to be true about the person. Mostly, your generosity will give others the benefit of the doubt, expecting a positive interaction with them. Your anticipation of what might happen is not something that interferes with your ability to be relational with the person *now*. This leads us to a discussion about the other form of temporal thinking—your thinking about what might happen, your hopes and fears about the future.

Future thinking is necessary on a very practical level. You need to make plans and it is healthy to set goals. As a winner you probably know how to do this well. Recognizing that you need to do some things before others in a particular sequence is just common sense and that requires some degree of planning. In order to plan you need to think about the future. After just a few moves in a game of chess, if you are a very gifted player, you might say to yourself “checkmate” because you can see ahead all of the moves that you can make, how your opponent can counter, and how the game will resolve itself. That requires future thinking. It is part of

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<sup>7</sup> See Gladwell, Malcolm, *Blink* (2005).

what makes the game of chess fun. But your life and your interactions with others are not a game of chess and you don't want to be so obsessed with the possibilities that your thinking is routinely scattered or paralyzed.

Being grounded means knowing that the variables affecting your future are infinite; unlike a game of chess, however, which has a limited number of pieces and a limited number of possible moves, you have a very limited ability to predict outcomes. So you don't let your healthy planning and goal setting become an unhealthy attachment to a particular vision in your mind of your future. You don't obsess about achieving a certain status level—in wealth, health, power, reputation, comfort, spirituality, relationships, or personal appearance—because that obsession robs you of your ability to find joy in the present moment. You don't get tunnel vision, restricted thinking that gives you relentless drive toward your vision of the future, but excludes or tramples other's well-being. Your thinking about the future may create suffering for others when you impose your vision of the future on them, including your vision of *their* future—particularly for those close to you like your spouse, children, and coworkers.

This does not mean that you give up all your desires. We are not advocating the concept of slavishly surrendering all your attachments. We also are not saying that it is inappropriate to defer gratification and better to seek only immediate contentment. Nor are we saying that it is not good to have goals and work hard to achieve them. Being grounded means that you recognize that most meaningful achievements require hard work and dedication. But when your desires make everything that you do now just a means to an end, with the focus on obtaining something that is not with

When your desires make everything that you do now just a means to an end, with the focus on obtaining something that is not with you now, something that promises to be better and more fulfilling, then you have subordinated the importance of the present so completely to the potential of the future that the joy of the present is lost

you now, something that promises to be better and more fulfilling, then you have subordinated the importance of the present so completely to the potential of the future that the joy of the present is lost. Worse, when you

use your power to impose your vision of the future upon others, exploiting or abusing them in a way that sucks the joy out of their experience of the present, then clearly you are not relational in your interaction with them. So, being grounded means that even when you are working toward a future goal, you have discernment of what is too much or too little, real or imagined, and remain focused on making the present the best it can be. The journey is as important as the destination. And thus your interactions are not mere transactional means to an end. Being grounded means that when your vision of the future involves the participation and support of others, you moderate your use of power and influence with humility, generosity, and kindness. The future is worth working toward, but not if it means routinely sacrificing the joy in your or other's experience of the now.

You might be saying, "Yeah, but what if my *right now* is miserable?" If you are in very difficult circumstances—pain, disability, grief, or personal crisis—your ability to find peace in the present is greatly challenged. Some of that misery is readily within your power to overcome. For instance, you may be caught up in the past, thinking how this situation occurred and perhaps feeling guilt or

remorse. You might be inflicting blame on someone else. You may be caught up in thinking about the future and how it will be limited by how long this emotionally painful situation is going to last. Or you may be out of touch with the true seriousness of the situation and thus causing undue suffering for others with your lack of attentiveness or responsiveness to that situation. Being grounded means you can recognize these thoughts and you are able to discern which ones carry insights and which ones you can let pass while you work to remain in the present, responsive to the now.

If you are saying, “My *right now* is miserable,” the bigger challenge lies in the **pain** you are presently experiencing. It feels very real and very present—right now. It is likely magnified and made larger than it really is by the way you think about it, fearful that there is no end in sight, fearful that it will scar you long term, fearful that if you make a move, it will make things worse. But you can transform even these moments—from times when you are miserable and you make those around you miserable to moments when you transcend the pain with your ability to stay in the now. It’s not easy, but you can do it by entering into the intensity of the pain, sensing it fully, being curious about it, knowing that the pain and its source are not your identity, that it will pass. A perspective that your soul can endure anything because it is truly immortal draws on your spiritual strength

Being present in the moment in many cases means—**Just Relax Your Thinking**. That sounds very strange. Especially to winners, when you may have been taught that your thinking, your intellectual ability, is perhaps your most important attribute. And yes, it is important to think and analyze the past to learn from it and look to the future to plan, but, to truly find joy in the present, in

the now, you can't be obsessively thinking about the past or the future. Next time you find yourself caught up in an obsessive loop about something that happened or that you anticipate might happen in the future, pause, breathe, have the intention to relax the thoughts, but without the effort to make them go away. Instead, befriend them. Don't fight them. Give them space to flow. Don't wind them up with energy. Focus on your breath where the thinking can co-exist, set aside, relaxed. Take another deep breath and focus your attention on what you are experiencing *right then* and make it the *best* experience you can. If you are with someone, focus on being with them fully, listening to them, giving them your full

Joy is waiting for you in the moments when you can be in the now.

attention. If you are doing something, focus on doing it really well and being grateful that you have the ability to do it. Joy is waiting for you in the moments when you can be in the now.

## Being Grounded is Being Self-Aware

The final aspect of being grounded goes beyond awareness of how your thinking separates you from truth and reality. It extends to your becoming fully self-aware of all of the aspects of your personality that drive your decision-making and affect your ability to be relational with others. This involves not only awareness of your thinking in particular moments, but the pattern of your actions and thoughts over time as you experience situations. Noticing where you place your attention, habitually, is an important first step as well as an ongoing skill for developing and deepening your self-awareness.

You have tendencies, habits of mind, and go-to strategies for situations that arise. You have an internally wired view of the world, your way of understanding and making sense of it, a view that is both insightful and flawed. You have developed these strategies and views through the course of your life as means to cope and thrive in your environment. Your strategies stem from what you have come to believe you need to survive. They are ancient and primitive and also very alive and in your now. Many of your habits are defense mechanisms that served you well at one time as a child, but no longer do. Being grounded means being aware of your tendencies when they assert themselves in your thinking, recognizing when they are leading you to behavior that is not relational, learning to relax them when they are in excess, and acting deliberately instead of reacting based upon your habits.

Understanding your tendencies and taking action to moderate them requires a strong desire to examine what is true about yourself with honesty and humility. However, it is hard to be objective when you look at yourself. You may not be at all in touch with your patterns of behavior, feeling, and thinking. You may not have any sense of the motivation within you that drives your way of operating in relation to others, or where that motivation comes from. You may think you do not have the powers of imagination needed to see yourself as others see you. So, on your own, becoming self-aware is truly a daunting task, but it is also such a valuable journey to embark upon because it can unlock for you many secrets to your happiness and the ability to find happiness in relation to others.

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Because it is so interesting and so valuable as well as so complex and difficult, the study of personality has grown through the years and much scientific research has been applied to it. People gain self-knowledge through personality typing systems and assessments which offer to help you identify your type. You probably have experience with one or more of these personality tests or systems—Myers Briggs or Jung, for example—in college, graduate study, or in connection with your work. You may even use one to assess the personalities of your employees, job applicants, or clients. We have used a number of these personality systems in our mediation training practice to help those who are intervening into other people's conflicts to gain insight into the patterns of their own thinking, feeling, and behavior to allow them, as mediators, to understand themselves better so they can be more open to others as they are to themselves. In addition, when people share information about their personality types, it often helps build understanding between them and fosters a compassionate response to some behaviors of others that can, with personality type information, be seen as a result of how the person is wired, rather than judged or passed off as behavior that is “just because they are a (insert epithet here!).”

The study of your personality, *how you habitually function in the world and your habitual thinking **and corresponding emotional energy about*** things, people, and situations you encounter, is important because it has a lot to do with how you think, how you think about yourself, how you think about others and how you present yourself to others. But your personality is not who you are. It is not your identity as a person. Your personality is something that—if you learn to practice self-observation by using

good clues provided through evidence-based personality typing systems—you can look at objectively. Then you can see when your tendencies are positive influences on your behavior and when they are not. You can see when defenses and coping strategies learned early in life are no longer needed, and you can discern when they become barriers to your ability to be centered and to your ability to relate to others in a healthy way. You can also see when your patterns of thinking are actually mentally created illusions that lead you away from truth and away from being grounded in reality. Ultimately, study of your personality can help you better understand and change your ways of being to be more relational for the sake of your happiness and the happiness of others.

In pursuing self-awareness, we have found that the **Enneagram personality typing system** is very helpful. If you have never heard of it before, you are not alone. Many people haven't, as it is not widely used. However, we have been using it in corporate and educational settings, and Louise has taught it at Harvard's Program on Negotiation, and at the University of Maryland School of Law for many years. There is a large body of writing about it, most notably for us the work of Helen Palmer<sup>8</sup> and her community of Enneagram teachers in the narrative tradition. Louise has studied extensively under Helen's mentorship and has been pioneering the Enneagram method for self-awareness in negotiation and conflict transformation training courses and in mediation practice for over two decades. We have seen time and again its usefulness—offering our clients insights into habits of mind and patterns of behavior for both themselves and others. If you are not

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8 See Palmer, Helen, *The Enneagram: Understanding Yourself and the Others in Your Life* (New York 1988)

aware of it, we would like to introduce it to you briefly and invite you to explore it further.

The Enneagram is unlike any other personality typing system in many ways. First, it has been developed primarily through oral tradition and is not the product of the psychology department of a major university, although there are many faculty members at many prestigious academic institutions such as Harvard and Stanford who fully embrace the effectiveness of the Enneagram. It has a somewhat controversial history in the United States and there are many who look to it to provide a framework for understanding into the realm of theology and spirituality. Also, unlike other personality typing systems, generally you do not discover your Enneagram type by taking a test after which you are told what type you are. Tests do exist, but the preferred process is to listen, face-to-face, to panels of people speaking about their lives who identify with particular type structures as they answer questions and talk about their experience. The Enneagram is more about a person's motivations than their behavior. Those who are practiced self-observers are able, in panel discussions, to talk clearly about their patterns of feeling and behaving, and the corresponding mental preoccupations and the very personalized ways in which their patterns show up. This allows you to see fully a person in all their complexity, helping you to discern for yourself which type you most identify with. That process—choosing your type by observing and listening to panels and self-observing what goes on “on the inside” for yourself—provides valuable insight as you come to appreciate your own worldview, what you came to believe you needed in order to survive, and the worldview of others.

The Enneagram is also unique in that it does not put you in a personality *box* where you are confined and labeled. Many personality systems simply tell you what your type is and then a few things about you that seem more for entertainment than personal growth. The Enneagram recognizes that there are no neat little personality boxes and fully embraces the mystery of each person's individuality. Stated another way, through self-observation, you can find your box so that you can then live outside your box. It takes into consideration the influence of stress and security on personality development and at given times in a person's life. It takes into account that personality behavior, as it appears to others in their dealings with you, can change as you evolve and develop personally on your journey of self-compassion and self-mastery. It allows for all the types to manifest in different ways, as either introverted or extroverted for instance. So it is richer, more complex and also in many ways more difficult to grasp, but therein lies its value. Your type is not who you are, you are much more than a type structure.

The value of the Enneagram is in the way it helps you to be grounded in the reality of who you are and what your essential nature is. It helps you work on your understanding of the conditions under which you thrive as a person so that you can lessen your own suffering and the suffering you create for others when you act and think based upon your habits of mind—habits you developed at an early age in order to cope with and make sense of your world. Through it you can gain clarity about your impulses, your patterns of thought and feelings, and

The value of the Enneagram is in the way it helps you to be grounded in the reality of who you are and what your essential nature is.

the thoughts and feelings that are your preoccupations; and you can learn to detach from them. In developing your consciousness of these preoccupations, you can learn to set them aside. You can learn to see and relax your personal reactivity to situations that trigger your defensive responses. At first sporadically and for short times, but eventually more consistently and longer, you become a different person—a person who has the capacity in the moment to be free from enslavement to their automatics in thought and feeling, habits that drive unconscious living and lead to suffering.

You can also develop a better understanding of *others* and how they function in their type, not so that you can manipulate them or put them in a “box,” but rather so that you can *see the reality of your own blindness to their point of view and their motivation*. [CALL]Study of the Enneagram can help you be grounded in the reality that your point of view is not the only point of view and is not the same as another person’s and build your capacity for *compassion*[ENDCALL] in response to the thinking and behavior of others that is outside of your understanding of what is rational or expected. You see that their way of looking at the world, although it may be very different than yours, is equally valid. You see that they, like you, have their own patterns of thought and feeling that drive their behavior.

Start by visiting [www.EnneagramWorldwide.com](http://www.EnneagramWorldwide.com). Through inquiry and perhaps through attending an Enneagram panel workshop, ours or one offered by others in the Enneagram Association in the Narrative Tradition, choose a type that fits for you. You might change your mind, but eventually one of the nine types will seem to fit best. Encourage those closest to you to do the same for the sake of your enrichment and theirs and your relationship

whether it be personal or professional, at home or in the workplace. Then choose from among the wide variety of writing and workshops to help you further understand your type and how you operate in certain situations and in response to others. Build your self-awareness. Practice relaxing your habitual thought patterns by being centered, pausing and shifting your attention to your breathing so you can be more grounded and experience others as they are to themselves and reality as it really is. Learn to recognize your patterns of thought and feeling and impulses and make space in your thinking for maybe, maybe not. Free yourself from the limiting habits of your thoughts and find a new sense of who you are, the authentic you. Discovering this new truth about yourself will allow you to be more open to others as they really are. Relational reciprocity will increase the chance that they in turn will be more open to you, as you really are.

## Questions for Your Consideration

In exploring Being Grounded, consider the following questions. If you are not sure about your answers, go back and visit the chapter.

- What's the problem in thinking that someone or something will always be a certain way or will never change?
- How does focusing on what happened in the past cause problems?
- How are you open to versions of the truth that are different from your own?
- What do you do when you feel the urge to pass judgment?

- What deeply held beliefs do you have that limit your understanding of others?
- How are labels that you apply to others helpful, or not, in your understanding of them?
- How do you discern or look harder at someone or something you are unhappy with?
- How do you examine your personality, your tendencies and habits, to gain insight into how they affect your interactions?
- How do you gain insight into the habits and tendencies of others to help you understand them better?