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Coaching Myself Beyond Self-doubt **The Significance of the Subconscious Mind in the Sociological Imagination**

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Abstract: Although it appears that I have been blessed with a successful life and enjoy many of the benefits our society values, I struggle with a constant companion, or should I say enemy—self-doubt. A life based on confidence and trust in my abilities seems illusive. Writing this research paper has offered me a chance to gain a deeper understanding of this life-long, unresolved issue. My hope, although tempered with realistic expectation, is nothing less than life-changing insight. I will apply various sociological perspectives to understand an issue that I believe has plagued and limited me to a significant degree most of my life. My intention is to gain a better understanding of its primary and contributing causes from both a personal as well as a larger scale macro sociological point of view. Through this exploration, I've come to understand that my thoughts are a critical component contributing to the direction of my life. While tuning my attention to better understand my inner critic, I began hearing something else for the first time. Almost as if adjusting the tuning on a radio, I began picking up a new frequency. I began noticing my ability to analyze situations from a healthy, critical perspective. I soon realized that I use this ability quite often. I now see how this ability has saved me from making poor decisions and has directed me at pivotal times in my life. I will work to clearly distinguish my inner critic and self-doubt from my ability to critically analyze in a healthy and helpful way.

It is a beautiful spring day in April 2002 and the crowd cheers as runners cross the finish line at Boylston Street in Boston for the 120th running of the Boston Marathon. Just now a woman crosses the finish line into the arms of a relative who is holding a dozen roses in celebration of her achievement. Among her cheering section are several special friends, three sisters, and a handful of members from the running club she has trained with for several months. To

the outside observer, she is a woman in the prime of her life. She has a successful career, a great husband, two healthy children, many friends, a large extended family, and lives in a desirable middle class, suburban neighborhood. She has just completed her second marathon; she is healthy, smart, successful and accomplished.

Yet, things are not always what they seem. Although it appears that I, the marathoner depicted above, have been blessed

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with a successful life and enjoy many of the benefits our society values, I struggle with a constant companion, or should I say enemy—self-doubt. I am constantly trying to prove myself, achieve more, and be more, in order to finally move beyond this doubt. A life based on confidence and trust in my abilities seems illusive.

Writing this research paper has offered me a chance to gain a deeper understanding of this life-long, unresolved issue. My hope, although tempered with realistic expectation, is nothing less than life-changing insight. I will apply various sociological perspectives to understand an issue that I believe has plagued and limited me to a significant degree most of my life. My intention is to gain a better understanding of its primary and contributing causes from both a personal as well as a larger scale macro sociological point of view.

The early planning of my approach and strategy in researching this paper has taught me the importance of sociological theory in everyday life. What I mean by this is the way social theory is portrayed as having “everything to do with the world—how we see it, understand it, and explain it, as well as how we act in it and thus what it becomes” (Wallace and Wolf, p. 3). I will try to view myself and my behavior through the sociological perspectives of Phenomenology, Symbolic Interaction, Exchange/Rational Choice Theory, Conflict Theory, Functionalism and Postmodern perspective in order to gain understanding and knowledge about my dilemma. Each perspective consists of a variety of concepts developed by various sociologists within their fields. Concepts are defined by Marcionis as “a mental construct that represents some part of the world in a simplified form” (p. 650). I will apply numerous concepts to my issue in an attempt to gain an in depth understanding of it. As described by Wallace and Wolf, “To read sociological theory is to understand a great deal more about what we and our world are like and how unordinary

and ambiguous the most taken-for-granted and everyday aspects of our lives may be” (p. 2).

In this essay I want to understand my self-doubt and what I believe to be that which sets it in motion—my inner critic. My goal is to learn more about its voice and why and how it was developed. What are its root causes? What questions do I ask? What assumptions will I make and then attempt to prove or disprove? These questions begin my approach.

As far back as I can remember I have struggled with self-doubt regarding my capabilities and self-worth. As a young child I was convinced there was something wrong with me. I always came up short when comparing myself to others. Whether it was within my own family, the classroom, or in social settings, I seemed to be lacking something. I believed that the consistent message communicated to me by almost everyone in my life was that “I wasn’t good enough.”

This belief began early on in my life and was just part of the fabric of my personality that defined my feelings of self-worth or lack of it, while it also dictated my behavior in any given situation. I never questioned it—it just was. I wasn’t good enough! I doubted my abilities in most situations and readily developed compensating strategies to cover up for my perceived disabilities. This can be exhausting and most often had me focusing on the wrong things or expending more effort than was necessary.

Lately I’ve begun to question the validity of my self-doubt and started to seek any real evidence that could provide valid proof of my deficiencies. To gain insight, I began my journey by a **phenomenological** approach to my sociological self-inquiry. According to this method, “I would assume the role of a stranger, like a visitor from a foreign country” (Wallace & Wolf, p. 262). Using this perspective, what I began to notice was the absence of any true evidence

for my alleged deficiencies; however, what I did notice was a strong, negative inner voice. This voice is constant and has only one track—it criticizes and belittles my efforts and takes away my power and any possibility I may have of developing a good sense of self-worth and trust. I am now beginning to understand that my inner dialogue has been sabotaging any possible feelings of accomplishment or competency. Could it be that this voice, my inner critic, is the creator and perpetuator of my self-doubt? I became curious about the notion that if in fact I am the creator of my self-doubt, and I have been perpetuating my self-doubt, isn't it possible that I can change this belief, change the voice of my inner dialogue, and reframe my self evaluation? Charles Henderson in his book *Self Hypnosis for the Life You Want* (2003), describes this phenomenon as *conditioning* and further explains the result, "If you have ever been repeatedly subjected to be-anything or be-nothing kinds of messages over a prolonged period of time, be aware that your mind has probably been conditioned (at least somewhat) by those messages. They have influenced you in ways that skew your opinion of what you are capable of doing" (p. 95).

My self-doubt has also been fueled by what I thought others were thinking of me. This concept developed by Charles Horton Cooley is known as the **Looking Glass Self**, whose three elements Cooley identifies as, "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Wallace and Wolf, p.203). I realize how pervasive it has been for me to look to others for validation. I take on what I believe are others' feelings and beliefs about me. I most often perceive others to be thinking negative thoughts or looking at me and wondering why I couldn't do something better, faster, or more competently. Consequently, this way of being has caused a **self**

fulfilling prophecy, resulting in my believing that others agree with my inner voice and the collective opinion is that I am not good enough.

In the process of noticing my habits in order to clearly identify this issue, it became evident that my self-doubt knows no boundaries. It shows up in all areas from academic, intellectual, emotional and spiritual life, and physical capacity and appearance. It is also manifested in interpersonal relationships both intimate and social.

Thomas's concept of the **definition of the situation** now helps me understand that I defined and interpreted many situations incorrectly. Although my perception of a situation may have been wrong, I believed it to be true and it therefore became my reality. Thomas's theorem states that, "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (p. 202). If someone was angry or upset with me, I believed it was my fault. I believed their anger or disappointment must have been the result of my actions. I didn't have the maturity to understand that in some situations, an adult's response might not have anything to do with me, but be due to their own personal concerns.

As a young girl, I remember feeling that I was invisible to my parents. They didn't seem to have much interaction with me other than making sure I ate my meals, went to bed and got up for school on time and performed other basic daily functions. I noticed when studying Blumer's concept of **interpretation**, as contextualized in the **stimulus-interpretation-response** mechanism, that I had interpreted my parent's lack of connection as affirmation that there was something wrong with me. The stimulus was my loneliness and craving for warmth and connection. I wanted them to talk to me, play with me, laugh with me, hug me, and when I looked into their eyes, I wanted to see their love for me reflecting back at me. My interpretation was that their inability to provide this type of parenting

and nurturing was my fault. I decided that I was bad, unlovable, difficult, and undesirable.

It was during this time that I was developing my sense of **self**. Mead defines the self as, "a process of self-interaction in which the human actor indicates to himself matters that confront him in the situation in which he acts, and organizes his action through his interpretation of such matters" (Wallace and Wolf, p. 205). According to the concept of **self-interaction**, which is defined as, "the conversations one has with oneself" (p. 208), I was attempting to make sense of my environment. My inaccurate interpretation was laying a strong foundation for feelings of self-doubt and low self esteem. The acted upon "me" was internalizing the attitudes of my parents and resulted in behavior that demanded attention. If I wasn't going to be noticed, then I must do something to be noticed. It didn't matter what I did, but I quickly learned that bad or unacceptable behavior seemed to get the most attention. I had consciously applied meaning to a situation and my behavior was a result of my interpretation. I used this lens to construct my own social reality.

This same principal of interpretation played a major role in the movie *12 Angry Men*. Applying Weber's **action theory** which emphasizes "the individual's interpretation of a situation and on the importance of subjective meaning" (Wallace and Wolf, p. 200), each of the twelve jury members came to the courtroom with their individual experiences and history impacting their interpretation of the information they had received. What we witnessed was people from varying age groups, social classes, and differing levels of education, coming together to make sense of information, using their internal evaluation systems and filters. These twelve men all heard the same testimony, yet they interpreted it differently. They formed decisions based on assumptions born out of discrimination and racism, in some cases. As one jury member

put it, "kids who grow up in poverty are always in trouble." Due to his race and **social class** most of the jurors decided the boy was guilty. Weber defines class as "people who share the same position in economic life" (p. 74). The attitude adopted by the character played by Henry Fonda seemed to best exemplify the Phenomenological approach which is to "not take notions we have learned for granted, but to question them instead, to question our way of looking at and our way of being in the world" (Wallace and Wolf, p. 262).

My family dynamic was what I later came to understand as highly **dysfunctional**. This meant, if we apply Talcott Parson's definition, that we were not a cohesive unit working together for the good of the whole. Unfortunately, my father was unreliable and undependable due to his ongoing dependence on alcohol. His issue with alcohol seemed to dominate the dynamics of my family. My parents were either fighting over his drinking or the results of it which included financial challenges, car accidents, frequent absence from the home, or his general lack of responsibility. If there is any truth to the theory that a child's development is influenced by the environment, there is little doubt that the development of my sense of self and trust were negatively affected by my home environment. I learned that you couldn't trust anyone or anything. There was no such thing as structure or routine and life was unpredictable and inconsistent.

In her book "Struggling for Intimacy," Woititz (1985) confirms this theory and states, "the child who experiences living with alcoholism grows into an individual with a weak and very inconsistent sense of self" (p. 27). Her reasoning for this belief is that the child has never been sure what his or her environment would be like from day to day. Woititz also explains that "once the drinking began, you simply did not exist. Your needs would not be met until the drinking episode and any accompanying

crises were over” (p. 27). The lack of **routinization** caused tremendous stress and anxiety for me. Anthony Giddens argues that “routine, psychologically linked to minimizing of unconscious sources of anxiety, is the predominant form of day-to-day social activity” (Wallace and Wolf, p. 266). I never knew what I would walk into when returning home from school. The experiences in my home environment instilled certain beliefs about families, parenting, relationships, trust, and love. My beliefs were wrought with misguided understanding, yet they became my **stock of knowledge** from which I drew to make sense of interactions and situations throughout the course of my life. Alfred Schutz defines the concept of stock of knowledge as “the social recipes of conceptions of appropriate behavior” (Wallace and Wolf, p. 264).

In our small town community, many others knew what was going on in my family. They knew that my father had a problem with alcohol and you could tell some pitied us. Having an alcoholic parent created a **stigma** that hung over our family reputation and I believe affected how people related to us. A stigma is defined as “a powerfully negative label that greatly changes a person’s self-concept and social identity” (Marcionis, p. 265). My father’s inability to function effectively in his role led to a lowering of our socioeconomic **status**, “a social position that a person occupies” (Marcionis, p. 655). I was ashamed of the breakdown of my family. Eventually my parents divorced and this wasn’t an easy decision for my mother, who grew up among a generation of women who just didn’t get divorced. The stigma and dynamics that resulted from my parent’s divorce contributed significantly to my feelings of not being good enough.

School was another arena that became a fertile ground for further growth of my self-doubt. In the Irish, Catholic community where I grew up in the 1950’s, many of us went to parochial school where catholic

nuns served as teachers. In my experience they were strict and inflexible and as a student, my goal was to blend in. If a pupil was called on to answer a question, they better be paying attention, and they better know the answer. For me this created a very stressful environment and I became anxious and nervous when it was time to go to school. I would do my homework to ensure I was prepared, but inevitably, I would end up being ridiculed and berated for not knowing the correct answer. I struggled and believed I was noticeably slower to grasp new concepts and information than other students.

I learned early on not to ask questions. I had to hide my need for additional instruction and pretend that I was keeping up. I would sit there and pray that I would not be called on if I didn’t know the answer. I’ll never forget the time I gave the wrong answer and the nun took a wooden pointer and smashed it against the blackboard. I was frozen with fear, but the fact was that I was trying, but I just didn’t understand it.

This public ridicule of my cognitive abilities made a lasting impression on me. In the classroom the nuns had power and authority and they took advantage of it. Power, control, and authority are concepts that are defined differently by various sociological perspectives. Max Weber, a Conflict theorist, was concerned with power and distinguished between two forms of domination; legitimated and unlegitimated. He believed the distinction related to “authority and the claim that certain people have the right to be obeyed” (p. 73). According to his theory, the nuns practiced **legitimated domination** over the students due to their role of authority as the teacher. Rational Choice theorist George Homans saw power as either coercive or noncoercive. His distinction of these two forms of power was “coercive power depends on the ability to punish, and non-coercive power occurs when both sides obtain some degree of extra reward” (p. 326). However,

what I've realized is that due to their negative and demeaning approach, the nun's power was never **legitimized into authority** as rational choice theorists describe successful interactions. It seemed that order and control were of higher importance than creating an environment that fostered an interest and excitement in education and learning.

The oppression, domination, and abuse that I felt at the hands of the nuns were similar to what was described by Annie Roper in her paper "From Alienation to Exploration: Breaking Free From the Iron Cages of my Life." While reading her account of terror at being locked in the cloakroom and the level of fear she lived through each day in a parochial school setting, I was brought back to memories I had hoped were erased. I experienced similar abuses and also developed the art of, what Erving Goffman calls, **dramaturgy**. My **back stage** was the place where I perfected my performance and determined how others would view my performance. I appeared to be an interested learner—a good student who worked hard and wanted to please. I pretended to keep up with the class, always acting as if I knew the answer to the question being asked.

My behavior as a result of the misuse of power was to withdraw my interest in learning and my desire to be a successful student diminished. This withdrawal can be explained in terms of **social exchange**, which sociologists define more broadly than economists, involving "exchange of tangible and intangible goods and services, ranging from food and shelter to social approval and sympathy" (Wallace and Wolf, p. 304). Viewing my behavior through this concept, I now understand that I made a choice that resulted in an exchange of my interest in learning and potential education for some control over ridicule and lack of respect when giving the wrong answer. Today I realize that all I needed was patience and understanding. With additional prac-

tice and review I am able to gather knowledge as well as anyone else does. My learning style may be slightly different than some, but the end result will be the same.

As part of the curriculum in parochial school, religion was an academic subject on which we were graded. In addition, we spent an inordinate amount of time in church attending daily mass, participating in the sacraments, and attending services on religious holy days and holidays. As a young grammar school aged child, I felt that much of what we were being taught was hard to grasp and very hard to believe. I questioned what I was told and the response was most often the same. I needed to believe because I was told to believe. I felt as though I was being brainwashed and it seemed that I was alone in this belief. My friends and family members believed the doctrine and didn't question what they were taught. When I would ask about various things, I was treated like there was something wrong with me that I would even raise a question. I very soon learned to keep my doubts and questions to myself. It was not acceptable to question or to attempt to make sense of the stories we were told.

I still remember the preparation for receiving the sacrament of confession. As a 7 year old child, I would have to go in to the confessional and confess my sins to a priest. He would then dictate a penance that should absolve me from my sins. Most often I didn't have any sins to report but this would be unacceptable. I would become afraid and my anxiety would rise because of this conflict. If I didn't report sins to the priest, I would be seen as resistant and would be punished. We were given a little book that included a full list of what were considered mortal and venial sins. I developed a strategy where I would read through the list and pick out a couple of sins and pretend I had committed them in order to meet my obligation and have something to confess. This seemed wrong

to me at the time, but I was not allowed to question this practice. I felt like a fake—I didn't fit in here. This was again yet another situation that reinforced the notion that there was something wrong with me. I was convinced that my lack of faith or conformity was yet more evidence that I was not like everyone else. I distinctly remember feelings of incongruity. I was becoming **alienated** from myself as a mechanism of defense. How I felt about this situation was similar to what is portrayed in the movie *The Matrix*. We are led to believe that a particular situation is reality, and we learn never to question this reality. What if we accept this as real and then find out that this is no more than someone's idea of reality and we have bought into it? I decided that in order to survive and function within this school for the next seven or more years, I had to accept that for now, this was the truth—this was my reality.

I married at a young age, had my first child at the age of 17, and as a result was doomed to perpetuate my family history and remain stuck in my existing social class. This perpetuation is what Anthony Giddens implied in his **theory of structuration**. Wallace and Wolf describe the latter in terms of how "human actors recreate through their actions the very social practices (and institutions) that in turn constrain their actions" (p. 187). My marriage was impacted by world events, namely the war in Viet Nam. My husband was drafted into the military when our first child was only two months old. At that time in history, early 1970s, the military enforced a draft program which ensured adequate levels of enlisted soldiers. There was no choice, if you were a male and older than 18, if your number came up you had to go to war. My husband's entrance into the Army left me as a single parent, without adequate financial resources to take care of myself. I was forced to move in with family and this came with its own set of consequences. While in the service, my husband devel-

oped a problem with alcohol and when he was finally discharged, he was a completely different person and we had constant problems from that point forward. He was never the same and was not able to care for us emotionally, financially, or spiritually. All of a sudden history was repeating itself and I found myself divorced and solely responsible for two children.

Lacking formal education and any transferable work experience affected my options. Fortunately, I was able to get my first full time job and was hired into a job for which I was not prepared. Although I didn't have the necessary skills required for this administrative position, the hiring person was a family friend and was committed to helping me. He had a senior level position and hired me as his executive secretary. I continued to learn and grow and although I did the very best I could, my boss suffered because he really needed a top notch assistant and I was learning on the job. The good news was I was making money and was able to take care of my kids. The bad news was I was struggling to learn and grow professionally without adequate training and development. I continued to work hard and eventually became proficient in the business environment but my self-doubt didn't understand my development. It continued to grow and remind me that I was never going to be good enough.

I knew upward class mobility was important to me. I wanted an education and all that went along with it—social status, income, material possessions, and most of all—proof that I was good enough. I wanted to improve my children's social position and expose them to educational opportunities that would enhance their future career choices. To work hard at my job, take college classes in the evening earning an Associate's Degree in Business, and also take care of my home and my children, my **consciousness had to split**. This splitting particularly affects women who take responsibility to work both at home and outside. In

order to maintain this challenging schedule, I was forced to become efficient and competent in every aspect of my life. At the end of the work day, I went home to begin my “second shift,” explored by Arlie Russell Hochschild’s book in a book of the same title. Although her book highlighted the struggle of two-parented families sharing the duties of child-rearing and house-keeping, I was managing all of these responsibilities on my own. In our society women continue to take care of the majority of the household responsibilities even if working full-time outside of the home.

I was able to earn promotions and increase the level of my position within the companies I went to work for. I was eventually functioning in a professional position and after several years I switched from a low level employee with no power, to a position within management that came with a certain amount of power and greater financial reward. According to Parson’s **theory of action**, my movement from job to job demonstrated my desire and motivation to reach a desired goal. His theory portrays “purposive actors who were oriented to goals but had to fulfill certain conditions—themselves defined by normative expectations—before they could be gratified” (p. 29). Parson’s theory of **differentiation** within positions explains why my career evolution was necessary if I were to enhance my social status. My progress increasingly necessitated that I partake in **anticipatory socialization**, a concept coined by Merton. One aspect of anticipation involves “the process of role exit—disengagement from a role that is central to one’s self identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role” (Wallace and Wolf, p. 50). My children were now living in a safer environment and my hope was that additional opportunities would be available to them. I was earning more money than I had ever dreamed possible. It afforded me the ability to feed my inner critic in an attempt to quiet its voice. This attempt did not

prove fruitful.

I jumped into the American Dream with both feet. I became the consumer we felt sorry for in the documentary *Affluenza*. I bought into materialism, consumerism, and any other “ism” that was available for a price. Clothes, cars, furniture, trips, gifts—I bought it all. What I found out was that it was never enough. I couldn’t buy enough stuff to quiet the growing noise inside me that knew I was exchanging myself for a price. Yes, I was now the epitome of what our society says is valuable. I looked good from the outside and others may have envied my lifestyle, but I was becoming more and more unhappy. The work I was doing was providing social rewards, but I was enjoying the work and the corporate environment less and less.

While reading the article “Why I Smoke: Sociology of a Deadly Habit” (2003) by Emily Margulies, I found myself agreeing with her discussion of the **generalized other** shaping the way we portray ourselves in order to arouse a desired response. She was relating this concept to why she smoked and how society viewed smoking as cool and rebellious, and those who smoked looked sexy, attractive, and it was supposed to associate the person with a higher, more successful class. This concept applied to me in the way I functioned at work. I internalized the culture I worked in and learned the rules and studied the prevailing attitudes and from that perspective determined my behavior. I wanted to fit in and blend in so as not to call attention to myself. I found myself most often concerned with how my boss would want something accomplished, what she was looking for. Once I determined what I thought she wanted, I could proceed. Any opportunity for my own creativity to emerge was not possible. According to George Herbert Mead’s theory, the generalized other which in my case was “the boss,” was shaping my mind and my behavior. As a result I lost, she lost and the organization

lost. I presented myself as that of a confident, capable individual who truly belonged. Whatever situation I found myself in, I would attempt to determine what I believed the other person was looking for, how they felt I should act and behave. I utilized **impression management** which according to Erving Goffman is the way one guides and controls the impressions others form of them.

My career path ultimately landed me in a position in management for a newspaper company. During this time period the newspaper industry was experiencing serious economic threats to their growth and profitability. The changes were due to the evolution of our culture in terms of technology and individual habits regarding how one chooses to receive their news and information. The internet and other media were gaining in market share and the newspaper industry was losing. Responding to these economic changes in true capitalistic style, the company made strategic moves to reduce operating costs and always kept their stockholders' interests in mind. Corporate tightening resulted in my job requiring that I spend less and less time with the people in my department and more and more time writing reports, modifying budgets, and creating systems that enhanced efficiency. The truth was, the people contact was what I enjoyed the most. Partnering with an employee to create a goal and develop a plan that ensured success gave me great satisfaction. As all economic indicators dropped, so did my job satisfaction and personal fulfillment.

At about this same time, I started to hear about a new phenomenon called Life Coaching. Schools were being established that claimed to train individuals to work with people in the capacity of a Life Coach, to help them achieve personal goals. This was a new field that was getting lots of buzz and it attracted me strongly. Working as a coach would enable me to work closely with people and make a real difference in

their lives. What happened to me during my training was a by-product I hadn't anticipated. As coaches we are trained to help people identify their core values and help them see where they are and are not living in line with those values. I was exposed to a concept called "powerful questioning" which is a process of asking provocative questions helping people think about things they may not ordinarily think about. One set of questions I encountered that hit me was, "What do you want your loved ones to be saying about you at your funeral?" "What do you want to be remembered for?" This training was forcing me to look at my own life, my impact on others and the world, and I knew I had to make changes.

I could relate well to the article, "The Complexity of Naïve Acceptance of Socially Manipulated Beliefs" (2003/4) by the UMass Boston student Ayan Ahmed. She wrote about how "a notable crisis occurred when she started to question the social manipulation...teachings or principals that were previously passed down as a matter of fact" (p. 1). She questioned basic principals that her family and her society imparted on her. I had a similar experience when I started to question my happiness at work and the reality that my career was not connected to a value or passion that I held dear. I felt that I was selling my soul for a paycheck, yet, family and friends would convince me that I had a great job. I had a job many envied, I had great benefits, made good money, and my life looked like it was supposed to. I was consistently socialized to the capitalistic, corporate, drive for more and more wealth. I felt like I was on a gerbil track running and running for more money, and feeling less and less fulfilled.

A line in the movie *Tuesday's with Morrie* brought me back to the time in my life when I was questioning my decision to stay in my job even though I was unhappy. Morrie Schwartz told Mitch Albom that "dying is one thing to be sad about—living unhap-

pily is another.” I was living according to cultural values and consequently felt that I was sacrificing my life to them. There were several themes in this movie but what I consistently heard Morrie teach Mitch was that love, relationships, communication, and being happy were what truly mattered in this life. He renounced that which had me trapped for many years, capitalism, our societal values around wealth and success.

The economy continued to have a significant effect on the profitability of my employer and as a result I became a statistic. My company was behaving exactly as those portrayed in Michael Moore’s movie *The Big One*. They continued their strategic streamlining and downsizing in order to show enough **profit** to keep the value of their stocks up. Their market share and profits continued to shrink, so as a result their labor force also had to shrink. This meant many of us would lose our jobs.

Ultimately I was laid off. This news generated mixed emotion within me and the first thing that happened was my inner critic began to work overtime. This voice and my self-doubt were having a field day. The message was that I had lost my job because I wasn’t good enough. All that I had learned to value in terms of social status and financial security was now at risk. At the same time, I was struggling to remind myself of how unhappy I was in that job and I now had some freedom to explore other options. I wrestled with this conflict and eventually was able to see it as a gift. I received a severance package that allowed me ample time and financial freedom to decide on my next step.

It is now almost three years later and I am happy to report that I took advantage of this time period and began to build my own business doing Life Coaching. It has been a process from which I’ve learned valuable lessons—most of them having to do with living in alignment with my personal values. At the same time I took a step that has brought me great individual re-

ward—I enrolled in a Bachelor’s program, and was recently accepted into a Master’s program, and am finally pursuing the degree I have always wanted. Pursuing my education is probably the most empowering step I’ve ever taken in my life. I feel as though I have matured more as a human being and am now for the first time in my life able to see a bigger picture. What I mean by this is that I have stepped out of the micro view of only seeing my life, and expanded to a macro view with the ability to see the world.

This issue of self-doubt continues to plague me. Currently, as a full time student at UMass Boston, I have been able to maintain a grade point average that places me in the top percentile of my class. Yet, when I start new courses and review their syllabi, most often my inner voice starts up right away. It tells me I won’t be able to handle this work, I don’t have what it takes to handle this new challenge. Repeatedly I have been able to prove this voice wrong yet my doubt shows up with regularity. Over the years I’ve worked on it in therapy, I’ve read books about various topics that claim to have the answer, I’ve used creative writing, and feel as though I have worked hard to understand this unfounded doubt and its strength and power.

What I didn’t realize was that this impression of me as a failure and being deficient may be a belief that is locked in my subconscious mind. Henderson explains in his book “Self Hypnosis, for the Life You Want” that the subconscious mind holds certain beliefs that may not be based in logic, yet they are powerful enough to control our behavior. What I have read so far about the conditioning I have been doing to my mind offers me a certain level of hope in transforming my inner critic into a more powerful message. I have made a decision to confront my self-doubt using the process outlined in Henderson’s book and attempt to unlock some of my limiting beliefs relative to my abilities. The goal is to align my

subconscious beliefs with my conscious desires. Using self hypnosis I will attempt to communicate (using a technique Henderson calls “auto-questioning”) to identify the beliefs locked in my subconscious mind. Then, using the power of suggestion, I will communicate the change I want to make to my subconscious.

Through this exploration, I’ve come to understand that my thoughts are a critical component contributing to the direction of my life. While tuning my listening to better understand my inner critic, I was hearing something else for the first time. Almost as if adjusting the tuning on a radio, I began picking up a new frequency. I was noticing my ability to analyze situations from a healthy, critical perspective. I soon realized that I use this ability quite often. Whenever I am approaching a decision, or evaluating a situation, this innate process automatically begins. It enables me to see things from a 360 degree angle where I can truly evaluate it, uncovering potential pitfalls. I now see how this ability has saved me from making poor decisions and has directed me at pivotal times in my life.

My inner critic and negative thoughts have been implicated in the social construction of my reality which created my self imposed limits. I will begin to unravel these beliefs and empower my positive thoughts by consciously imprinting my subconscious mind. Through this new knowledge and insight I have made a commitment to allow my new found, healthy critical self to assist me in making decisions. I will work to clearly distinguish my inner critic and self-doubt from my ability to critically analyze in a healthy and helpful way. The powerful question I will ask myself going forward is, “Where is this internal voice speaking from? Is it speaking from fear and self-doubt, or is it the voice of reason and good judgment?” Understanding the power of my thoughts brings me back to the important line with which the book *Conquest of Mind* begins, “All that we are, the Bud-

dha said, is the result of what we have thought” (Easwaran, p. 7).

Using my critical mind, I should also beware that all theories, sociological or otherwise, are also social constructs, and subject to criticism and not gospels of truth. By this I also mean that I didn’t view my self-doubt by taking the lens of any one sociological perspective to be the only valid one. Delving into this personal challenge and researching this paper has therefore forced me to also appreciate the **postmodern** perspective. As Wallace and Wolf state, “Post-modernism presents itself as fundamentally different from other approaches to social science; but where other theoretical perspectives are concerned, the trend among sociologists is to adopt insights that seem appropriate to the problem at hand rather than confining themselves to one predetermined approach” (p. 426). Using applying what C. Wright Mills called the **sociological imagination**, I looked closely at how my early life, family, school, church and community had impacted me as well as being themselves shaped by larger social forces. I looked at the bigger picture and how history, the world and our society at large affected me.

Writing this paper has provided me with a tremendous understanding of not only the content of this course but of my deeply rooted self-doubt. This exploration may even prove to meet my initial desire which was to gain life-changing insight. My hope is that the tools gained during this process will assist me in my transformation.

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