**How Skillful Check-ins Help Liberate Us from Old Painful Identities**

*Bringing wise awareness to our motivations and check in practices*

We can awaken from our painful old mental habits and reactive patterns. To get this new freedom may take recovery disciplines, therapy, reading, reflection, meditation, and wisely talking with others about our healing process.

This sharing of our deepest process work with others is one of the most courageous and helpful things we can do on our road to healing. However, learning *how* to share our most vulnerable selves *skillfully* is also a place where we can get hurt or lost on our journey. We humans are social animals. We can take both our greatest gifts and greatest wounds from other people. So learning how to wisely and safely communicate our authentic selves with other people is a large part of growing into our true selves.

On this journey we pass through stages in our recoveries where the medicine that is most helpful for us changes. And there are predictable places where we can get stuck. Sometimes a new spiritual practice can give us such a good breakthrough or release that we may understandably go a little bit overboard on doing it.

For example it's a huge breakthrough when we take a risk and show up to meetings admitting that we have a problem we need help with.  It's so powerful to discover that we're not alone.  It's huge when we share our stories and find that we're not rejected but honored for being honest about our experience. It's an enormous relief when we share our feelings and let out those powerful repressed emotions. And we get an even greater gift when we deeply study our past and *understand* the trauma we experienced plus any dysfunctional reactive patterns we took on.  If we get all the way to this place we are finally able to start re-parenting ourselves…mindfully and compassionately able to hold all parts of ourselves.

However, many people never get to that place of spacious trusting self-acceptance, of owning their own inherent worth. There's so much love and understanding needed it can take a long time and a lot of support which many of us may not have available or have the capacity to receive.

In early recovery we may be completely identified with our wounds and limiting beliefs. We may check in with motivations we're unaware of and "puke out our process" in ways that are not helpful to ourselves or others. We may spend all of our time on telling our story instead of searching to understand and be free of the reactive patterns which still imprison us.

One place we often see people get stuck in their recovery is in a partially awakened trauma identity. They've shown up, shared their story and learned to share their emotions. And this courageous vulnerability is vital and healing. However the release and witnessing that happens can itself be addictive. That's not so surprising is it?   We've shown our inner wounds in a safe environment and found that we were received completely.  So why wouldn't part of us believe that the key to being connected is continually sharing the painful parts of our story?

However that first period of telling our entire stories and releasing our powerful emotions is just a stage. We need to move onto the liberated maturity of seeing the most wounded parts of our personality from a less identified and more equanimous emerging Self. To use the language of *Internal Family Systems, (IFS,)* we stop showing up as our wounded parts and start showing up more in our true Essence.  This true Self is increasingly able to be with our ever-changing thoughts and emotions in more loving and healing ways.

To put it another way, when we first show up in recovery, many of us have been living in an unconscious battle with ourselves for as long as we can remember. Through practicing mindful compassionate inventory like meditation or therapy systems like IFS, we learn how to be in a loving respectful internal dialogue with all the parts or patterns within us.

A key breakthrough is fully witnessing the reactive parts that have been taking us over unconsciously. It may be that a single part of us has been in control trying to keep us safe for so long that we really don't know the fullness of who we are.

So, when we first show up in peer recovery circles we're mostly telling the story of what happened to us, and how we feel.  But eventually we start to see our past, the people that influenced us and even parts of our personalities from a wiser, more compassionate and trusting distance. In effect we start to live from our true Self which has the capacity to re-parent the parts of our personalities that have been struggling for so long.

Many people in recovery circles do not fully reach this place. Heart Lab circles have the specific mission of supporting advanced recovery and awakening.  We ask that new members already be diligently working one of our five primary recovery modalities.  The five complimentary Heart Lab practice areas are; trauma recovery, addiction recovery, therapy, mindfulness and self compassion  practices. Practicing these complementary modalities are vital for us to break out of the heavy gravity, the momentum of our old identifications and habits.

In Heart Lab meetings, our opening and closing check-ins are structured with questions like; *What emotions are you experiencing and where are they in your body? What do you want to set aside so you can be more present during this meeting? What is the primary practice that's working in your healing right now?* There are many specific healing intentions behind each of the questions.  However they are all invitations to practice checking in about our experience from a more objective, mindful and compassionate place…not so identified with our wounds.

In our Heart Lab toolbox there are many practices which help shift our identification towards our growing wholeness.  For example we simultaneously work a program of recovery from dysfunctional habits of codependence which are widely acted out in our culture.  We first practice kindly becoming aware of our codependent habits like people pleasing, enabling, discomfort with conflict, perfectionism, plus all the shameful ways we may view ourselves and others. We practice being aware of our own motivations so that we're not so unconsciously driven by hungers that can't really be filled by other people. We notice more if we are checking in to be seen, want people to feel sorry for us, or to confirm our victimhood/martyrdom. We notice when we're being hard on ourselves or wanting to be seen as special.

Then we make an effort not to check in from those old identities but rather to compassionately see and describe them from a growing more separate sense of self that is not so identified with passing thoughts and emotions. We start to intentionally keep the story part of our check-in very short and spend our time instead on the liberating insights that we're learning from living in this wholesome process.

This is a service not only to us and our own recoveries. This is also a service to every other person in our Heart Lab groups and throughout our lives. Human beings resonate with one another. As trauma recovery pioneer Bessel Vandercolk says, "We *co-regulate* with each other in both helpful and unhelpful ways." We are deeply connected and affect each other. So to keep our Heart Lab circles healthy, it's healing to practice being very mindful even while we check in.  Immediately and over time this creates the safe people and places that we all hunger so deeply for.

So, as we learn to focus on our lessons, we might check in saying for example, "*Part of me was really triggered when you said that. I noticed these emotions arising. But I understand that this is an old habit that I don't have to identify with."* Or *"I'm noticing parts of me are experiencing difficulty seeing myself as different, whole, and healed.  But I'm also able to have compassion for that's the way it is for me now. I know this will pass."*

Getting space from some of our deepest patterns or parts can take a long time. For example if we really *believe* we're not okay, that our life is unfair and we're not going to be okay we may continue to unconsciously filter our perceptions in ways that confirm those beliefs. Then our words and actions may come from the motivation of *maintaining* our old dramas. Thus, we can be working hard on our path of awakening and still have another part that is unconsciously sabotaging our work…perhaps not really believing that a different mind, heart and reality are possible for us.

We all have some unfinished business. And when we are checking in about our unfinished business is when we are most likely to be triggered by and identify with our unhealed places. That's when we are most likely to check in in a way that reinforces our brokenness or "puke out our process." We can be triggered into our own unfinished process by other people's actions and words or our own. When we're triggered into reactivity, fight flight or freeze, we are then disconnected from our Essence.  Fortunately, our recovery and awakening practices are building new liberating habits that help us at these moments of challenge. The more we practice these tools of awakening, the more we will remember to call upon them to get grounded in our difficult moments.

Our Heart Lab check-ins are an important part of this process.  Following our check-in structure provides opportunities to relate to our stories and habitual reactivities in new liberating ways.  That is why we ask anyone leading a check in round to read the entire guideline and respond to each of the questions within the time format.

May we all be kind and generous about the time it takes to be healed!