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## The Four Agreements: Don't Take Anything Personally

How did everyone do this past week with “being impeccable with your word?” For those of you who weren't with us last week, we started a four part series based on the book, The Four Agreements, by Don Miguel Ruiz. Today, we continue that series as we investigate the second agreement, “Don't Take Anything Personally.” Last week, we handed out Four Agreement cards for you to carry in your Day Timer or wallet. If you didn't receive a card, please raise your hand and an usher will bring one to you.

The Four Agreements is based upon the Toltec belief that we are all dreaming the same dream, called “the dream of the planet.” Part of this dream includes making thousands of agreements about life. All of our agreements make up our personal Book of Law. Our agreements are about the nature of reality, as we perceive it. These agreements were taught to us as children by our parents, teachers, and the culture we were raised in. We accepted them without question. Through this process, termed “domestication,” we learned how to live and how to dream the same “dream of the planet.”

Our agreements include: what is right and wrong; what is good and bad; what is acceptable behavior and what is not. We also learned how to judge others and ourselves. We all have an internal Judge. Our inner Judge uses our Book of Law to judge everything we experience. And the part of us that receives the judgments is called the Victim.

The Victim carries all the blame, guilt, and shame. The goal of The Four Agreements is to help us be aware of the agreements we've made over the course of our lifetime; to let go of the agreements that no longer serve us; and to create new, healthier agreements.

Last week, we discussed the first agreement, "Be Impeccable With Your Word." We learned the word "impeccable" is Latin and means "without sin." Ruiz defines "sin" as: "anything that you do which goes against yourself." Being impeccable with your word is not using the word against yourself or anyone else. We also learned that words have power; the power to hurt and the power to heal.

Concerning the second agreement, "Don't Take Anything Personally" Ruiz writes: "Nothing others do is because of you. [Repeat.] What others say and do is a projection of their own reality, their own dream. When you are immune to the opinions and actions of others, you won't be the victim of needless suffering." While this sounds wonderful, it's been my experience that it can be quite challenging to do. Why is that? Why do we take things personally? There are several explanations.

Ruiz writes: "What causes you to be trapped is what we call 'personal importance.' Personal importance, or taking things personally, is the maximum expression of selfishness because we make the assumption that everything is about 'me.' But, the truth is, nothing other people do is because of you. It is because of themselves." It is a choice they make, either consciously or subconsciously. On the lighter side, my

grandmother use to say: “Everyone wants to be the center of the universe, but that job has already been taken.”

A second explanation is that, as part of the “dream of the planet,” we were taught, as children, to accept and believe, without questioning, what adults told us about ourselves. Over time, our Victim has conditioned us to feel hurt or offended by other’s judgments or criticisms.

A third explanation is, we don’t love ourselves enough. When we hear another’s criticism, it matches with what we subconsciously believe about ourselves. It validates what we believe to be true. Remember, a thought, or in this case, someone’s judgment or criticism, has no power unless I give it power. If I feel hurt or offended, then I must believe what was said, on some level, or I wouldn’t have reacted.

And, a final explanation is, we take things personally because we are in fear. Remember, part of the “dream of the planet” is to appear perfect. We are, subconsciously, afraid that someone will see beyond our mask of perfection. They will see into our imperfection.

Then, how do we stop taking things personally? How do we change this learned behavior? The first step is to understand what’s going on in our mind when someone judges us. For the sake of convenience, I’ll use the example of a painter and his or her painting. But please let this example represent any time you’ve personally felt judged or criticized.

Imagine you are the painter. You proudly display your painting to a close friend, asking for their honest opinion. And they tell you: “I don’t like it.” You respond by feeling offended. But, why do you feel offended? The answer is, your mind immediately begins to interpret your friend’s remark on three different levels, simultaneously.

On the first level, your mind interprets what was said as being true. You must, on some level, have agreed with their statement, or you wouldn’t have felt offended. At the second level of interpretation, you believe this isn’t just a painting. It represents you; your entire being. This is called “associative interpretation.” In other words, I believe I am my work. I am what I do. As Ruiz was suggesting, we make this about us. It is no longer just about the painting. Now, it’s personal. At the third level of interpretation, I evaluate myself, not just the painting, as a failure. If I am my work, and my work is rejected, then I must be a failure. Part of the “dream of the planet” is the fear of being rejected; the fear of being less than perfect. When our inner Judge interprets another person’s comment as rejection, we then reject ourselves. We are now the Victim. We are not measuring up to our own image of perfection. In the end, we create our own emotional pain. Again, all of this happens automatically, without our conscious recognition.

We can respond to our emotional pain in a variety of ways. We can: 1) try harder; 2) be even more of a pleasure; 3) feel angry; or 4) defend ourselves. None of these strategies work.

Then, how do we learn not to take things personally? The first step is to become aware of these three levels of interpretation. You don't have a choice to not take things personally until you realize you have a choice. The goal is to re-interpret what we say to ourselves. This can take time and practice. At first, you'll do this more from hindsight than being in the moment. But, over time, you'll get better at recognizing the voice of the inner Judge and Victim sooner.

When you catch yourself saying to yourself, "this person is rejecting me. I'm a failure." Stop. Say to yourself: "I choose to see this differently. What I'm saying to myself is a lie." Become a compassionate observer of your own thoughts. Watch, don't judge, as your mind interprets. Be a witness to your mind taking things personally. Be a witness to how your mind wants you to punish yourself. And then, take a stand. Make the choice to disagree. Make the choice to not punish yourself. And so, how do we do this? We do this by interpreting the other person's judgments or criticisms differently. We start by remembering it's not about us. It's about them.

There are two ways to change your interpretation. The first is to see or realize that the person judging you is projecting his or her own pain on to you. If someone judges me, it's because I have touched some unhealed part of themselves. Instead of owning this and feeling their own pain, they project it on to me. But, this can be an over generalization. Their criticism about me may or may not be accurate.

It will ultimately be up to me to discern. I'll share more on this in a moment.

The second way to re-interpret their judgment is to see the other person for who they are. Or, more importantly, remember that the other person is coming from their own agreements they made about life. Ask yourself, what agreements are they living from that calls them to make this judgment? Let's take a closer look at how they formed their opinion. And let's return to our painting example.

When your friend looks at your painting, they have an emotional reaction. Their own internal Judge and Victim are judging your painting. But, your friend is not actually seeing your painting. They are seeing an image, in this case, a work of art, they created in their own mind. They are seeing their painting; the one they created through their Book of Laws. They are not judging your painting. They are judging the image of the painting they created in their own mind. When they say: "I don't like the painting" they are actually saying they don't like the painting they created in their own mind. Ruiz goes on to say: "Even if others insult you directly, it has nothing to do with you. What they say, what they do, and the opinions they give are according to the agreements they have in their own minds. Their point of view comes from all the programming they received."

This is really important to hear. Their opinion has nothing to do with you or your painting. Therefore, there is absolutely nothing for you to be offended about. It's about what they see in their mind's eye. When

someone is being critical, it's really about the dream they're dreaming; how big an inner Judge they have; and how big a Victim they have. The end result- you have total immunity from creating your own emotional pain or emotional reaction.

Something else you can do to not take things personally is to stay prayed-up and well rested. When I'm struggling with taking something personally, it's usually a sign that I'm overly tired and have been inconsistent with my prayer time. When I'm not praying on a regular basis, I tend to forget who I am and who the other person really is. I forget that we are all children of God.

Does this mean we should never pay attention to other's judgments or criticisms? To me, the answer is, no. And this is where I have a different perspective from Ruiz. Some feedback may be absolutely accurate. For example, I receive lots of feedback about my Sunday messages. Sometimes, this comes in the form of a judgment or criticism. My first challenge is to genuinely listen with an open heart and open mind, and to not immediately feel defended. I'm working on having an attitude that says: "Tell me more. I want to have a deeper understanding of your point of view." Once I've really heard and understood what was said, I then have a choice. On one hand, the person's judgment or criticism could be a projection. It could be about them. It may not be about me. On the other hand, their feedback may be valid, even if it is a projection. They may see something I don't see. This requires a high degree of integrity and the skill of self-observation. I have to be willing to see and own my own

issues. I can be in denial and always reject other's judgments and criticisms as their issue. Or, I can take what's been offered into prayer and meditation to see if there is any truth in it. I ask God for guidance and divine wisdom. And, the answer is always there, in my heart. If it's mine, then I get to wear it and decide if I want to keep it or trade it in for a behavior that's more effective.

But, here's the rub. All this information not only applies to negative judgments and criticisms, but also to praise and compliments. When someone says something constructive or positive, I really want to take that personally. But, if I apply this second agreement consistently, even compliments are still projections. Once again, I need to decide for myself if what was said fits or belongs to the other person.

There is nothing wrong with offering either praise or judgments. But, before doing so, ask yourself, is this about me or about them? And there is nothing wrong with receiving compliments and feeling good about what was said. The trick is to not let your personal sense of well being be dependent on other people's praise. It's okay as long as you're being your authentic self, and not being who you think others want you to be in order to receive their praise.

Ultimately, taking things personally comes because we have forgotten who we are. There is a wonderful story in Luke chapter 9. Jesus has set out for Jerusalem. The disciples go ahead through Samaria to get things ready for him, but the people do not receive them. They don't offer food or shelter. Remember, this is not unusual. The Jews were

not often received well in Samaria. But nevertheless, the disciples were mad. James and John ask, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them saying: "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of." Most of the time when we take things personally, it is our small self that does not remember who we really are. We have forgotten our divinity.

In conclusion, Ruiz writes: "If you keep this agreement, you can travel around the world with your heart completely open and no one can hurt you. You can say, "I love you," without fear of being ridiculed or rejected. You can ask for what you need. You can say yes, or you can say no – whatever you choose – without guilt or self-judgment. You can choose to follow your heart always. Then you can be in the middle of hell and still experience inner peace and happiness. You can stay in your state of bliss, and hell will not affect you at all."

Next week, we'll look at the third agreement, "Don't Make Assumptions." Until then, have a blessed week!