

"My lawn mower made me do it!"

An event is neither good nor bad; only thinking makes it so.
Shakespeare

Not too long ago, a man in Milwaukee, WI loaded his shotgun and shot his lawn mower because it wouldn't start.

Before moving on, let's do what many probably have done roll our eyes, shake our heads and perhaps snicker a bit. Now, for the serious side.

For the fellow in Milwaukee, it was about his lawn mower. What about the rest of us? What brings us to, or close to, the breaking point, where we want to shoot something, or smash it, or kick the stuffing out of it? How do you react to: your alarm clock, a malfunctioning stapler, fax machine, computer, DVD, copier, washing machine, or iPhone, an elevator door that takes forever to close, coffee that brews too slowly, a red light or stop sign, dew on the car windshield in the morning, a faucet that springs a leak, a cell phone that drops a call, a dirty dish or utensil, an accident like a spill, an ATM that's out of cash, etc.? I'll bet you can come up with your own list of irritants in a very short time.

Carl Jung said, "Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves." So, let's take the liberty of stretching this thought a bit and paraphrase, "Everything that irritates us about inanimate objects can lead us to an understanding of ourselves." Why?

First, consider two definitions:

- Inanimate 1: not animate: **a**: not endowed with life or spirit **b**: lacking consciousness
- anthropomorphic 1 : described or thought of as having human attributes 2 : ascribing human characteristics to nonhuman things

So, what's at play here? Nothing can make us feel what we don't want to feel. This bears repeating. Nothing can make us feel what we don't want to feel. While blaming and feeling the victim are an art form in our Western culture, this fact remains a fact nothing can make us feel what we don't want to feel.

So, to our definitions.

When walking through Home Depot and coming upon a lawn mower, my sense is you wouldn't rush over to beat it senseless. When coming upon the words fax machine in a dictionary, my sense is you don't immediately go into a tirade. Inanimate objects. No life, no consciousness; just objects, things.

When we become reactive, what's most often operating is our need for security, control or recognition. When something takes us out of our comfort zone, when something happens that makes us feel or believe we are not in control, or we don't feel safe or secure, then we (consciously or unconsciously) become reactive. Reacting means to do without thinking,"to

become emotional.

Lest you begin to think you are "justified" in becoming angry, frustrated, emotional or irrational and grab on to the notion that some object caused your reaction, consider this.

Stimulus and cause

The *stimulus* of your reactivity is possibly, yes, an object or event outside of you. However, the *cause* of your reactivity is inside you. It is all about *you*. Feeling the victim, feeling out of control or put upon, whatever you feel, you are responsible for your emotions and for your reactivity.

Remember what Shakespeare said, *An event is neither good nor bad; only thinking makes it so.*

Emotions don't come from nowhere. They bubble up from inside ourselves. Our reactivity begins the instant we tell ourselves a story about an event and this is where the inanimate object becomes animate as we ascribe anthropomorphic qualities to it. We create a story in which we allow the lawn mower, the fax machine, the elevator door to take on actual qualities and a personality that are doing something to me *it's* making me uncomfortable; *it's* ruining my day, *it's* making me late, *it's* making me unhappy and interfering with my life and my need for control or security in some way, shape or form. Somehow, *it* has acquired all these personality qualities and intentionality that are out to get me and make my life miserable.

We experience the event, we are catapulted out of our comfort zone and we create a story - all happening sometimes in a nanosecond. Our adrenaline begins to flow, energy pours into our head, anger-based chemicals flow from the brain, emotions flood our body and, well, we load the shotgun and blast the lawn mower to pieces, or become verbally violent and explode.

Lets review the Jung paraphrase: Everything that irritates us about inanimate objects can lead us to an understanding of ourselves."

When the event occurs and I feel myself becoming reactive, the immediate questions to ask myself are: So what's going on with me, right here and right now? and How am I feeling?

Name it and claim it

It's critical to be able to name what you're feeling. If you can't name it, then you can't work with it. So in addition to reacting with "I'm angry or I'm pissed," you'll gain much more insight into your story if you can say, for example, "I'm feeling all alone (or afraid, ashamed, cheated, confused, controlled, dejected, despairing, desperate, destructive, disgusted, exasperated, exploited, foolish, frightened, hopeless, helpless, humiliated, ignorant, intimidated, irresponsible, lost, lonely, manipulated, mistrusting, outraged, panicky, paranoid, rejected, resentful, ridiculous, sad, self-pity, shut-down, stupid, terrified, trapped, unhappy, useless, victimized, vulnerable, worried..." etc.)

Naming your emotions in this way and exploring why you feel the way you do, will give you a greater understanding of the historical nature of your reactivity, of your story, and support you to

see what's really underneath your reactivity. You'll see how your immediate reactivity is not about "now" even though right now you think it is. It's deeper.

When you understand the nature of your reactivity, and work on your self to understand the history of your feelings and reactivity, then you'll be better able to witness an event for what it is, an objective event, without needing to attach your history to it and become reactive (that was then; this is now...and there's no connection). Why? With a deeper exploration of who you are and how you are, you'll discover and be able to call upon your internal, heart-felt (and not ego-reactive) essential qualities such as: courage, strength, wisdom, compassion, love, clarity, steadfastness, discipline, patience and will that can support you to cope with life's vicissitudes, misadventures, missteps, circumstances and events without getting knocked out of the box or becoming reactive.

With this deeper, conscious and sincere exploration we develop the capacity to respond to events with considered reflection, thinking, discernment and contemplation rather than with knee-jerk reactivity.

Look inside for the clues

We get clues about our unconscious programming if we watch, witness and consciously observe our reactions, responses, feelings and thoughts about events (and other people). Until or unless we take the time to look inside and explore the nature of our reactivity, life will continue to give us a series of events in which we play the victim and martyr and remain reactive.

Asking yourself, for example, How do I judge or stereotype events (or people)? What pushes my buttons? What makes me angry or fearful or sad? will support you to see what it is that you need to work on inside you that attracts events that continually push your buttons. If you didn't have beliefs, expectations, assumptions, and preconceptions about the circumstances and events that trigger your reactivity, then, pure and simple, you wouldn't become reactive.

When *outer* events spark a reaction, we need to look *inside* to explore what's going on.

Remember:

*An event is neither good nor bad; only thinking makes it so.
"Everything that irritates us about inanimate objects can lead us to an understanding of ourselves"*

Remember, finally, it's *never* about the lawn mower ever.

Some questions for self-reflection are:

- What negative experiences or events do you consistently or frequently have?
- What do you not know about yourself that is manifesting in a negative way? Who can help you to explore and see more clearly what you need to discover and see?

- What internal, essential, heart energies or qualities do you need to express that would, as a result, remove the need for these negative experiences and your reactivity (remember, this exploration is about you, and not about anyone or anything else)?
- Do you consider yourself to be a "blamer?" How would your colleagues, family, and friends answer this question about you?
- What are your "lawn mowers"? How do you react to it/them?
- What are you like when you become reactive? What would others say?
- Have you ever explored the sources of your reactivity? Your history around reactivity? How does suggesting that you do so make you feel?
- On a scale of 1-10, how positive are you, generally? What would others say about you? Would you feel comfortable asking some of them today, tonight, this week?
- What was childhood like for you, generally? Happy, sad, fearful, frustrating, lonely, joyful, confusing, just OK, a blank...?
- What one or two baby steps can you take in the next week or two to become less reactive and more responsive to (one of) your "lawn mower(s)"?

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