

## Week 7: You Aren't Your Thoughts (You Are the Observer of Your Thoughts)

If it hadn't been so annoying, it would have been hilarious.

The American Psychological Association Practice Organization (APAPO) started a new listserv. The problem was, they didn't ask permission; they just automatically added everyone in the organization to the list. Then, several weeks later, they sent out the first email—a relatively innocuous, informational correspondence. Useful to some. Spammy to others.

And the listserv exploded.

It started with a handful of people asking to be removed from the list. Then, people who weren't annoyed by the original email got annoyed by the extra emails, and they began demanding to be removed as well. Next, people who had ignored the first round of complaints got angry at the exponential increase in messages, and they too replied to everyone, lambasting the whole community. My inbox was overflowing, *even though the APAPO had only sent a single email*. The problem wasn't the original email; it was the *reaction* to it.

This is how our minds work, too.

We have an original thought or feeling, something like, "I'm sad today" or "That memory makes me want to cry," and it is rarely a problem in and of itself. Sadness happens—a relatively routine part of being alive. It is our slew of ensuing thoughts *about* that thought that becomes the problem: "I have no reason to feel sad—what's wrong with me? Quit being weak. Oh, no, I'm feeling worse—what if I get depressed again? I can't handle this right now and I'll let everyone down if I'm not my usual happy-go-lucky self and then no one will want to be around me and I'll be alone." And so on.

Or we might have this ordinary, relatively harmless initial thought: "I'm scared." But then all our inner voices begin flooding our mental inbox with their reactions: "I want to unsubscribe from this mind of mine! Get me out of this head! Why can't I be brave? Why do bad things always happen to me? Am I being punished for something? Oh no, my heart is racing—am I having a heart attack? Am I going crazy? Surely everybody can see I'm totally losing it."

Or maybe your initial mental message reads a little more like mine typically does: "I messed up." It's a relatively mundane statement of fact: you're human, imperfect, so you make mistakes. But then the reactive thoughts start filling up your mind: "I made a mess, so I *am* a mess. I never get it right; I'm never good enough. No wonder I always disappoint people. I'm worthless and who would ever want to be with me and I'll never amount to anything and what's the point of this life if you're a nobody?"

Somewhere in the midst of the APAPO debacle, my annoyance actually did give way to humor, as I watched us replicate in electronic form what our minds do in thought-form every day. I chuckled to myself as I quietly unsubscribed from the list.

Of course, you can't quietly unsubscribe from your mind.

Around the time I unsubscribed from the APAPO listserv, I created a listserv situation of my own: I accidentally scheduled an UnTangled blog post for the wrong day. I awoke to discover the error, and my initial thought was, "Whoops, I messed up." But then the mental reaction began: "You also sent out an Artisan (my professional business) blog post this morning. People won't like having their inboxes jammed up by your words. They'll unsubscribe." And then the voice of my shame chimed in, "When people unsubscribe from your email list; they're unsubscribing from *you*. Why do you even bother to write at all?" As the morning wore on, this stream of thoughts filled up my mental inbox, making it difficult to get anything else done. So I went down to the river.

Literally.

I drove to the river that runs through our town, and I watched the water flow past. And I pictured my thoughts like that river, flowing past me. As I watched them, I began to feel separate from them—just as my body was sitting next to the river of water, I knew my *self* was sitting outside the river of my thoughts, watching them, observing them. My thoughts weren't *me*.

Within an hour, I could chuckle at the absurdity of my thought stream.

In life, unlike a listserv, you can't unsubscribe from all the unwanted messages, experiences, thoughts, and feelings it sends you. What you can do is stop *trying* to unsubscribe from them. Instead, you can attend to them, you can watch them fill up your inbox. You can pay attention to them until you see them for what they are: a little absurd, maybe even a little comical, but most definitely not *you*.

Then, as you watch the flood of thoughts subside, you will be free to read the *original* message again, to deal with your ordinary humanity, with all of its sadness, anxiety, mess, and illness. Instead of being swept away by the flood of life, you will be free to drink it down. Until you've tasted every last bit of it. The bitter. The sweet.

And everything in between.