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What is needed is an unfamiliar sensation

Recently I had an interesting exchange with a client I will call Margie. Afterwards I asked her if I could share it with you, and she said, “Absolutely!”

Margie has been coming to private sessions in my office for several weeks to get help with neck and shoulder pain. During this most recent session we had begun with some movements of rolling and reaching, and now she was lying on her back, resting. I noticed that her breath was easy, her neck and shoulders were relaxed, her hands were at ease and her low back was comfortable with her legs outstretched. All this was a big change.

So, I decided to tell her a story.

Sitting next to her I said, “Margie, I’d like to tell you a story.” She nodded yes and I continued. “Last night after dinner I was amusing myself like this.” I stood and extended my arms sideways to shoulder height and turned the palms up. “I was holding a ball in my left hand, it’s about 5 inches wide, and I was trying to roll it across my shoulders to arrive in the other hand.” Margie gave me an encouraging smile; she knows that I like juggling and related things. I continued: “At first I was having fun. It’s a new trick, so I kept dropping the ball. I was cheerfully picking it up and beginning again. But then something changed, and I started to get frustrated.”

“Fortunately, I was in a quiet space inwardly, so I was present to the beginning of frustration. A picture came into my head of a slide, like at a playground. I felt, ‘Oh no! Here I go, sliding downward into a negative state.’ Another something inside me SO MUCH did not want to take that downward slide.”

I paused in my account as I remembered the next moment. It was unusual, and I was having trouble finding the right words. Resuming, I said, “Next there was an inner pause. Silence. It lasted for a while. In that silence I felt, *‘I don’t know what to do.’* But after a while another inner voice arose. It spoke with authority and said: ‘What you are looking for is an unfamiliar sensation.’ “

“After that there was a rush of insight. Several thoughts arose at once. One said, ‘I think I can succeed at rolling this ball across my shoulders by using the sensations I already know.’ Another responded, ‘Yeah, but that won’t work.’ A third added, ‘This trick needs sensations I do not yet know.’ ”

Margie’s eyes were wide open and she was giving me a big smile. She said, “That’s what’s going on with me, isn’t it? I feel so good right now. This is what I hoped to get by coming here. And now, if I understand you correctly, it will help me to sustain this good feeling if I recognize that -- in relation to my usual sense of self -- these are unfamiliar sensations. The familiar leads me back into trouble. The way out of pain is through what feels, in the beginning at least, unfamiliar.” She paused and then asked, “Did I get it right?”

I said, “Exactly!”