

The Life Coach

Francine Campone

Dandelions

Weeding out persistent habits of mind

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED THAT DANDELIONS have a great survival strategy? Keeping up with the little golden heads this summer I've noted that a few clever specimens increase the likelihood of enduring by situating themselves root to root with a deliberately planted item like a perennial flower or bulb. Thus, to uproot the dandelion a careful gardener must be sure to leave the desired specimen intact while disentangling the long taproot of the weed. Unproductive habits of thinking and ways of being have some of the same strategies as the dandelion. Let's compare.

A couple of centuries ago, dandelions were deliberately grown on the east coast of the United States. Dandelion farms provided the raw materials for food (the young leaves), medicine (the roots), and even intoxication (dandelion wine). So the context in which a plant exists contributes to how it is viewed. In modern times, the dandelion is no longer regarded as a beneficial source material; in fact it's viewed as an invasive pest by many. The usefulness of the modern dandelion is generally restricted to the role of a "pretty flower" which children can pick freely and weave into crowns or hats for each other and the dog. Eliminating the flower alone, however, may improve the view of the law for the short term but it does nothing to get to the root of the problem.

Similarly, when someone comes into a coaching conversation wanting to eradicate an inner weed, we spend some time considering exactly what needs to be dug up. A client who wants to figure out a way to escape from a challenging supervisor, for example, may- on reconsideration- come to see that what that person wants is not too different from what the client wants for the organization. Where they differ is in strategies to achieve what is, in fact, an overlapping set of goals. In this instance, the coaching goal may shift from avoiding the supervisor to

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having a constructive and mutually beneficial conversation about their commonalities and building a basis for resolving their differences. What was initially a weed has a place in that particular ecology. On the other hand, a work situation that's draining the life out of someone, that rubs up against that individual's core values and beliefs is not likely to benefit from a reframing. In that instance, we'll figure out how to disentangle the roots of an unhealthy job from the desired plant that is the rest of the client's life.

One of the things I'm sure we all notice is that dandelions thrive in poor soil- stuff that hasn't been nourished or replenished in a long time, soil that's bordered by big old trees with taproots that suck the life out of anything that's planted. Some of the folks who come to coaching with personal dandelions also tend to bring a life ecology that's a little like that poor soil. The demands of work, a desire to please and to meet other people's needs, a constant feeling of stress all suck up whatever "water" they pour into their lives leaving them with little to nurture healthier growth. Some initial steps toward eradicating the life weeds involve cultivating the soil a little- figuring out what nutrients are missing and adding them in while significantly trimming back the surrounding materials which would steal the benefits. This is often harder than it seems. It's not uncommon to find a person so acclimated to thin topsoil and deeply rooted weeds that the "soil amendment" task takes much longer than anticipated. Nonetheless, it must be done in order to ensure that any newly planted material is able to survive.

Perhaps one of the most complex challenges in addressing dandelions is how to disentangle the roots without doing any damage to the plant we're keeping. When people change, it sometimes takes a while for the change desired in the head ("I know I want to do this, that, the other") and the change the heart is willing to make. When we dig a little more deeply, it becomes easier to see how one fits with the other. For example, a client who has actively practiced empathy and compassion for others in her professional life has been struggling with developing more assertiveness in personal relationships. While she knew what she wanted to do, she found reasons week after week to not carry through on the difficult

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conversations we had practiced in her coaching sessions. She really wanted to uproot her old habit of being always agreeable at a cost to her own feelings of integrity. We poked around a little and found that plucking out her unassertive stance threatened the security of knowing she was a compassionate and empathetic person. So we then were able to figure out a way to keep those desired traits firmly in place and to make the weeding process more reassuring.

Dandelions, both literal and figurative, are likely to be with us as long as there is soil on this good green earth. And unproductive traits, habits and perspectives will keep popping up within our own hearts and minds, well-tilled and otherwise. A few bright yellow flowers on the lawn make it a welcoming place to a passing child. A few imperfections make us interesting and may even lend a little brightness to another person's life. When the weeds start to take over the lawn, however, it's time to turn on the hose, work some good new soil into the dust and get out the digging stick.

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