

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# The Art of Living



### Pulling it Together

Working with Bruce's system over the past couple of years offered a maddening paradox. I had answers while at the same time I had no answers. From the minute he started describing his system in the first phone call, I could track with what he described. He was a practical scientist, sharing what he had discovered empirically over the years. So, when he went through the pieces, they lined up with my experience and that of the brain science of dealing with the survival mode of mammals.

Yet my insight that pressure is the catalyst, not a test, did not line up with the experience of the clients I brought to work with Bruce. Time after time, I brought them to Camden for a daylong session outdoors with the horses, excited for them to experience working on fear, being better under pressure, and learning to develop trust and connection. Time after time I left the session hearing Bruce say the same things over and over again. *"When will he ever say something new!?!"* Time after time, the clients told me some version of the same thing: *"It felt like I was in a test. I can tell there is a system there, and if I could just figure out the system, then I would be able to give him the right answers."*

They wanted definitions of the terms, such as Picture, Frame, Negative/Positive Pole, Mental Tools, and Conduit. They wanted instructions on how to tie a halter, and work with a lead rope, and understand the inner workings of a lariat.

Initially, I explained away their frustration as part of Bruce's method. I believed it was a one-off, nothing to worry about. However, I recalled a lesson from many years before. The teacher in one of my facilitator training sessions gave some guidance to those of us who were struggling to decipher which feedback we should ignore and accept. He said, "Look, if one person calls you a horse's ass, it's probably about them. If six people call you a horse's ass, it's time to saddle up."

Given that we were up to six clients struggling with the same belief about the pressure test, I realized it was time to saddle up. (Notwithstanding the fact that Bruce would not let me saddle up for the longest time!) One day, with a client having his first session, we started as always with a porch session. I had brought my iPad and pencil to take notes. Bruce went through the same spiel he had done many times before. Instead of internally bemoaning the repetition, I listened with the ears of a beginner. Soon, my pen started moving, as a picture began to emerge on the tablet. Over the next hour or so, the following drawing came together:

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Finally, I had the beginnings of a “picture” of what I had been experiencing in this work. The quest to be “perfect” diagrammed at the top. The point of choice in the middle, offering a moment of truth to exist or live. The bottom depicting me living from my true center. Bruce’s method put us through the bottom over and over again. Seeing it on paper made me welcome the agitation all the more.

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There it was, drawn by my own hand: the reason

I kept coming back, even though Bruce had been so slow to put me on the horse. I was chasing the option to live. To be fully alive while I was alive.

The Tools are as natural as the air we breathe. Curiosity, feel, timing, patience, discipline, observation, listening, hearing. I can imagine one of my ancestors, living in the pre-modern age. Perhaps he knew how to set a trap to catch dinner or gather fur for a coat. Living off the land, he didn't have Google to tell him where to find the animals. He watched. He waited. He discovered. He learned. He felt.

When his Negative Pole went up, it might have been because he realized the trap had failed. Or he had chosen the wrong place. Or he was being watched. He followed his instincts with a well-developed sense of the subtle cues of nature. He knew how to play the game of Warmer-Colder until he got it right. The same was true for those growing and gathering food. Where did the plants grow the best? When was the right time to plant? What kind of soil was needed? Knowledge of the land and the seasons was passed from one generation to the next and that knowledge was amplified in each generation until dawn of the modern age.

I'm old enough to remember our milk being delivered in glass bottles and our diapers being cloth held together with safety pins. When we left the house in our old cars, our parents usually had no way to contact us until we came back home. We got our news once or twice a day and then went out to play until it got dark.

Dang, I'm starting to sound like an old timer, "Remember the good ole days?" No, I'm not going to say we walked miles and miles to school in deep drifts of snow – but the modern age that was supposed to make our lives simpler and easier has taken us away from our nature.

We've outsourced almost every aspect of daily living that our ancestors did with their own hands. Grocery stores have replaced our gardens and cars have replaced our horses. For the past several thousand years, until about a hundred years ago, horses were the primary form of transportation. A family without a horse suffered huge disadvantages in living, much less surviving daily life.

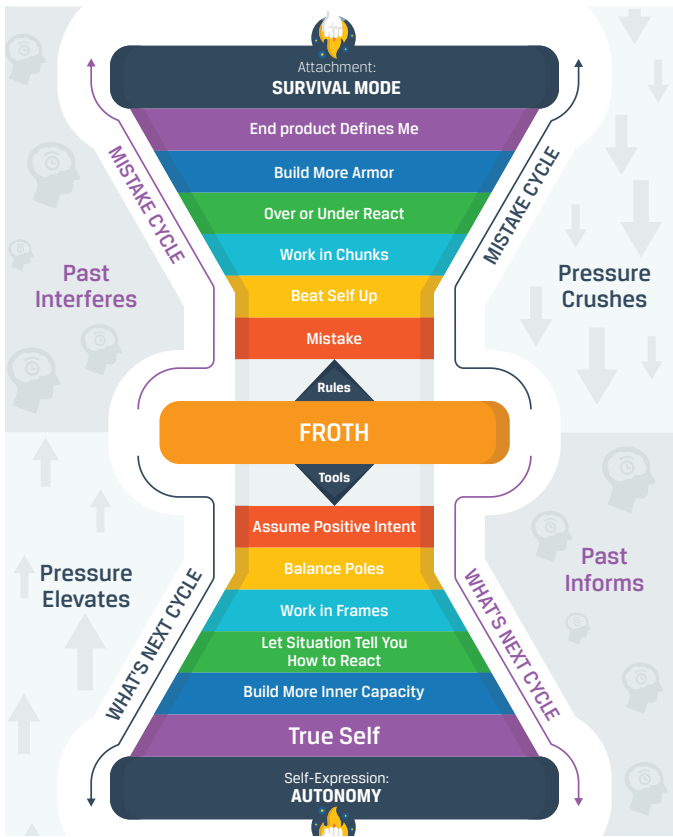
Living in the natural world offers pressures that are often more consequential than the pressures of modern living. Nature's world demands that we respect it. The ocean, forest, and plains don't care if we are not up to the pressures of waves, weather, and wind. In nature's world, we reach for our Tools or die.

Man’s world perverts our natural responses to its own end. Survival mode gets triggered in work settings and our brains at the deepest level don’t know the difference between the threat of death and the threat of not getting the next promotion. We do what we must to show others we deserve to be there and quell the Homeless Sequence, which goes something like this: *I need this job. If something happens that threatens this job, I need to do everything in my power to keep this job, because if I lose it, I won’t be able to pay my rent or buy food. If I can’t pay my rent, I will end up homeless and then they will find me dead on the street in a dark, sad alley.* We feel the pressure and take it the wrong way.

If pressure is a test to show others we are good enough, we are doomed to live at the mercy of those whose approval we seek.

If pressure is a catalyst to unleash our true nature, we can truly live while we are alive.

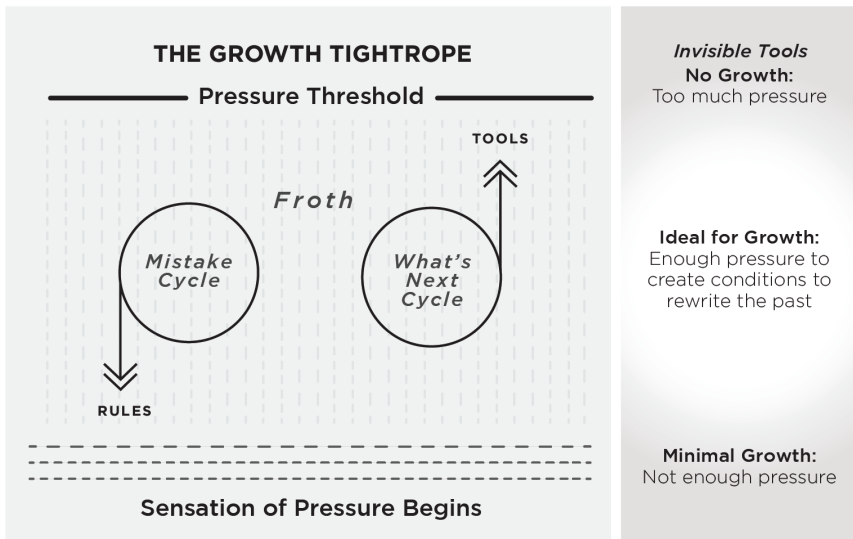
The chicken scratch drawing eventually evolved into this:



Over the next couple of years, I began to use this drawing with clients, both before and after they worked with Bruce. The simple choice point in the middle offered a clear picture of the challenge they faced when the pressure got high. More importantly, the bottom half showed a path to becoming mentally stronger, rather than mentally “scolded” on the path of the Mistake Cycle.

Research on breaking habits has taught us that stopping a behavior doesn’t work. What works is starting a new behavior. I can attest to this practice. When I quit smoking many years ago, I began building model airplanes and needlepointing to give my antsy hands something better to do than reach for a cigarette.

The Mistake Cycle may have bigger consequences than smoking. It consumes the mind with all the ways we are no good, permeating our very being. The What’s Next Cycle offers an alternative. We don’t have to fix the Mistake Cycle. We simply have to turn in to the agitation of pressure to propel our energy into the What’s Next flywheel.



## The Five C'S

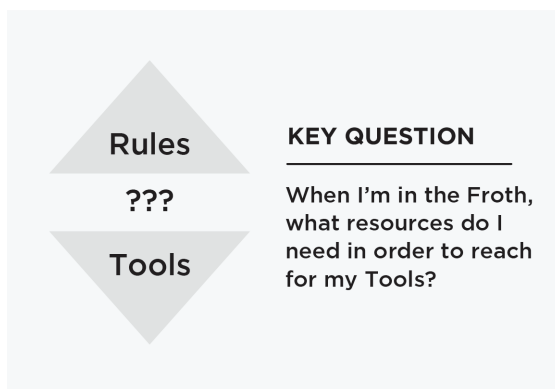
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Navigating the summer of 2020 gave me many chances to turn in to the heat. Having the picture of his method down on paper made a huge difference in being able to reach for my Tools when the pressure was high. The diagram became a central piece in my coaching with clients. I learned more about using pressure as a catalyst as I began bringing these insights to my clients. In doing so, I recognized yet one more missing piece. Or should I say missing pieces. In some ways, the journey had come full circle.

Just because we could clearly see and understand the difference between reaching for Rules versus Tools did not mean we could do it consistently. In that moment of choice, something else was at play.

That something else was tipping the scales in favor of doing things the old way. The Rules still ruled. Something in my Rules weighted the balance in choosing between Tools and Rules, especially when the pressure became greater than my mental tools.

But how? Why?



The answer was a paradox. I had to be AWARE of the choice. Indeed, self-awareness anchored every choice. Yet under pressure, awareness was elusive. There was a direct correlation between my level of self-awareness and my ability to reach for my Tools under pressure.

How deep was I willing to dig?

It's one thing to change the story in my conscious mind and quite another to put that story into action when the pressure is intense. Remember, the

Rules are automatic. They live in the subconscious survival brain. The flywheel of the Mistake Cycle spins with a lifetime of stored energy. Making the difficult choice in the heat of the moment requires a higher standard of awareness from me.

Or should I say a deeper standard. If I were to gain more internal fitness and capacity, I had to acknowledge what the horses were showing me about myself.

Just because I was committed to change did not mean anything would truly change. Nope. Commitment may energize me to sign up for gym after my New Year's resolution, but I need much more to stay after it. Commitment is just the first level.

From the first moment I recognized that I need more self-awareness, and in all the wake-up calls I had over the years (remember my first ambulance ride where I thought no one else could do my job?), the question has always been: How deep am I willing to go to find the truth of who I am?

Parsing what is true about me versus what is part of my armor feels scarier than it really is. The Rules are born from fear, and they use fear like a perpetual motion machine. The armor of my Rules is all about protection, and I would argue that some Rules are necessary. Many years ago, when I took flying lessons, the rules of flying kept me safe. There was a checklist for everything from the pre-flight to starting the plane to how to recover from a stall. All those rules were the product of other pilots learning what works and doesn't when operating a vehicle that can fall from the sky. However, just following the rules doesn't make anyone a good pilot. Good judgment plays a critical role. The overconfident pilot who takes a plane up when the conditions are sketchy might discover the adage "It's a whole lot better to be on the ground wishing you were up there than it is to be up there wishing you were on the ground." On the other hand, the underconfident pilot who stays on the ground because of lack of trust in him- or herself to handle the inevitable surprises of flight is no pilot at all.

Unless we challenge the hidden fears in the Rules, we will use those fears to fix the fears, without being aware that we are stuffing those fears in the basement of our inner world. Releasing my armor involves developing self-awareness. No more fear hoarding! Self-awareness involves a constant cycle of going ever deeper to clear the basement of old musty fears that are no longer serving.

Here's where the paradox comes in. Trying to develop self-awareness

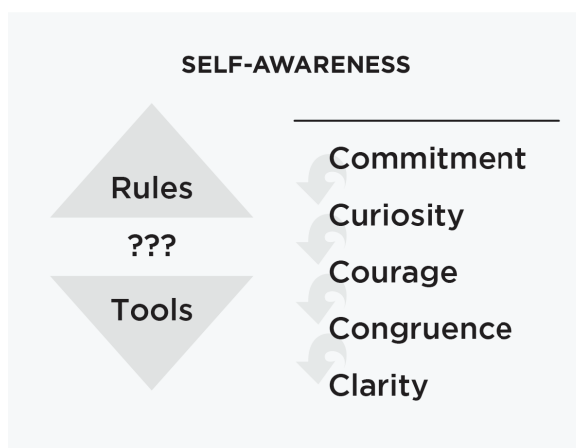


alone is like standing in a bucket and trying to lift it up. The weight in the bucket and the strength of the person in the bucket offset each other and hold the bucket in place. The protective inner self will offset the seeking self, maintaining a sense of equilibrium, which perpetuates the same old pattern.

We need an outside mirror to help us see the truth of ourselves if we expect to bring our best to the journey.

While I cannot be my own mirror, I can bring a willingness to learn about myself.

Dancing the Tightrope involves developing a fair bit of self-awareness, through five stages of self-awareness.



- **Commitment** – Want the truth. How willing am I to understand more about my inner self and my impact on others? *Chapter 14*
- **Curiosity** – Seek the truth. What’s in there? What’s out there? *Chapter 15*
- **Courage** – Face the truth. What will it take for me to face what’s in there? What’s out there? *Chapter 16*
- **Congruence** – Show my truth. What will it take for me to own what’s in there? What’s out there? *Chapter 17*
- **Clarity** – Live my truth. How can I begin to unleash what’s true about me? How can I create the space for others to be true to themselves? *Chapter 18*

We can only allow others as much freedom as we allow ourselves. Armor locks us down. If we are locked down, we will lock down others, whether we mean to or not. We owe it to ourselves and our horses – and others – to open up to a dance where we each have a voice, where we give and take in a rich exchange of trust and connection.

In my story about Diane, I went through all of these levels in short order. Initially, I had committed to the project because it was my job. That kind of commitment is actually compliance. When it became clear that I would have to look at myself, I bailed out. Until Diane committed suicide. The shock of her act – whether it was defiance or premature perfection – energized me to my core. When I told Steve I was back in, it wasn't a small commitment. I was IN. Suddenly, I wanted to know why – curiosity. I was determined to walk through fire to learn what was driving me – courage. I dropped some of my pretenses, acknowledging what I didn't know – congruence. My inner eyes pierced through the opaqueness of my armor to know that Diane's fate would not be my own – clarity.

The many steps in a self-awareness journey take us through these levels over and over again. We can often recognize where we are by simply asking, "Where am I not ... Committed ... Curious ... Courageous ... Congruent ... Clear?"

These five C's or my "steps into my basement" took me across the summer of 2020 as I dove deeper into getting over my fear of having another accident like the one that set all of this in motion.