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Inner vision

Follow these steps to restore the person you were meant to be

By Jo Hawkins Donovan, for *Small Business Times*

Recently a coaching client recommended a book that I found so valuable, I want to share it with all of you. Now it falls in the genre of self-help, and most of those books make me a little nauseous. If a space traveler arrived and spent some time in our bookstores, he would probably think the national pastime is self-improvement, to the extent that there is no time for living, much less celebrating ourselves just as we are.

The Four Agreements, by Don Miguel Ruiz, is a gem among all the “how-to” books. For one thing, it is succinct, less than 200 pages. Those pages are filled with good, straight writing that rings of truth. Perhaps it appeals to me since I’ve incorporated some of the same truths into my coaching over the years, albeit in language different from his.

Ruiz’s premise is that we’re programmed from childhood with a belief system that has nothing to do with who we truly are. Those beliefs are planted into the fertile child mind, governed by the need for approval. Then they’re etched even more into the psyche by repetition. I’ve seen hundreds of clients who are made miserable by those phony belief systems, really stuck and not living their own lives. They are slaves to fear-based beliefs (lies, says Ruiz). Reminds me of Auntie Mame’s line, “Life is a banquet and most S.O.B.s are starving to death.”

So Ruiz tells us to adopt new truths that will free us up to live authentically. He says this is very difficult and takes much practice.

Part of the difficulty lies in a belief held by startling numbers of people, including many of my clients. That is a belief that they have no control over their thinking. The steps outlined by Ruiz lead to spending time in positive emotional states, whereas “stinking thinking” inevitably leads to feelings of inadequacy, anger, jealousy and, most of all, fear.

So to use the wisdom in *The Four Agreements*, we must be open to learning that indeed we can take control of our own thoughts — imperfectly — yet to a much greater degree than most of us realize.

1. Be impeccable with your word. This is the first agreement Ruiz lays out. Impeccable comes from the Latin *peccatus*, which means “sin”. So impeccable means “without sin”. Ruiz says that what

it really means is to sin against yourself, so that self-rejection is the biggest sin you can commit. And we deny the self every time we fail to say what we mean, stand for ourselves in our word, or when we poison our relationships with gossip. Impeccable communication in the workplace would change the culture in a lot of organizations.

2. Don’t take anything personally. Ruiz says we agree with words that come our way because of our “personal importance” trap. We think everything is about “me”. When, actually, what other people do and say is about themselves. Learning not to take everything personally liberates us from the weight of anger, jealousy and envy. We can shed guilt and self-deprecation as well. That sounds inviting.

3. Don’t make assumptions. I’ve seen clients who filled their thoughts with assumptions, worrying about the meaning of every word or gesture expressed by people they care about. Ruiz admonishes us to give up the idea that we can read minds, and get into the habit of asking clarifying questions. As I’ve said many times, stay in reality.

4. Always do your best. This was good reading for me, since I’ve generally coached people to choose when and where they want to do their best, and accept that they can’t get an A in everything. I like Ruiz’s approach better. He says our best is going to change from moment to moment; it will be different when we are sick or tired, for example. He promotes doing your best every day in your job, rather than living for the weekend. And he recognizes that might mean changing your job.

This book promotes four very clear and simple principles. I know very well how hard it is to break old habits of thinking. If you’re open to these four agreements, it will take lots of practice and repetition to really experience the joy that comes from being true to yourself instead of a slave to someone else’s belief system. Quite a gift to give yourself this holiday season. As John Lennon sang, “Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see.”

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