



above the line

living. leadership.

## Monthly Musings—Learning from Worms

One of my clients sent me a lovely email the other day likening her negative thoughts about an old boyfriend to “worms in the garden surrounding my flower self.” She went on to say “*While I bask in the sun, I can welcome the worms (my negative thoughts) since they nourish the soil....but at the same time these aren't things I want to touch. I'll just acknowledge them with gratitude and let them burrow back down in the soil to help me grow.*”

Her poetic metaphor reminded me of comments made by energy healer Carolyn Myss. At a conference in 2006, she shared that Worm, somewhat to her chagrin, had become one of her totem animals. Worm, she said, teaches us to eat and digest everything we've ever been—to thoroughly chew up and assimilate our past experiences and turn them into the soil for our growth.

When I am gardening, I love to see fat, juicy earthworms as I turn over the soil. Maybe I don't caress them and clutch them to my bosom, but I do pick them up and tenderly put them next to my favorite flowers and shrubs, knowing that they will aerate the soil, making it more nourishing. I think this is a wonderful metaphor for looking at the world of “below the line.”

In our Above the Line workshops, we talk about the trap of either *avoiding* or *indulging* negative thoughts and emotions. When we avoid an emotion, we find ways to keep from looking at it or even acknowledging that we have it. Avoiders steer clear of conflict and use distractions to stay too busy to notice what they are feeling. The avoider's motto is “if I ignore it, maybe it will go away.”

When we indulge, we act out and over-dramatize the emotion. Indulgers either try to draw others in by emphasizing their own victimhood, or else “share” their own internal discomfort by yelling or hitting. The

indulger's motto is, “if I'm feeling bad, so should everyone else.”

So if avoiding or indulging isn't the answer, how do we actually chew up and digest all that we are? The only way is to *be present*—to acknowledge the negative thought or emotion and allow it to be. This is not so easy to do; we are not accustomed to simply *being with* uncomfortable emotions and negative thoughts. The best tool I know of to help with this is simple curiosity. Don't make yourself wrong for having the thought or feeling, and resist the urge to figure it all out. Just take a deep breath, notice the negative thought or emotion, and ask yourself some questions. For example, what does this feel like in my body? What does this remind me of? Try to explore any question that allows you to be present without judgment or the need to change anything.

From my own experience, I know that when I do this consistently, I am able to integrate the negative thought or emotion into who I am, to own it as also a part of me. Like a worm in the garden, making the soil richer for my growth, all below the line emotions and thoughts have something to teach me. I become stronger, more compassionate, and a richer human being by embracing all that I am, especially the difficult parts. Paradoxically, when I embrace these “negative” aspects, they lose their power, and I am less reactive and more able to act from choice.

Nothing comes that is not in some way for our highest good, even if we can't see it at the time. Our negative thoughts, like the humble worm, are simply part of the process. Rather than resist, pretending they don't exist (“me? I'm fine”) or bemoaning our fate to the four winds and making everyone around us miserable, we can chew and swallow, and digest, and grow.