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The story of the Man, the Bracken, and the Sport Psychology

(A metaphor for skiers)

I know a man who owns a small country estate. He became very unhappy that areas which he wanted kept clear were being invaded by large quantities of bracken, which killed off everything else that he wanted – the blue bells, the bugle, and loads of other wild flowers and seeding plants the birds needed.

He asked his neighbours' advice about this, and they all said that the only possible answer was to slash everything down to ground level and repeatedly spray chemicals on everything. When he said this was not what he wanted, they all said it was the only way. They were mostly third or fourth generation farmers, and assured him that they knew about these things. They were experts.

Later, after he had thought it over, he went back to them and said that he intended to buy a hand-held slashing tool and see if he could get rid of the bracken by selectively cutting it. The mirth echoed round the village for days. "It won't work" they told him. "You won't succeed". "It can't be done". "My cousin tried cutting bracken once, and it just made it grow even more". "You 'townies' eh?"

Nevertheless, and perhaps because he was not an "expert" like they were, and therefore didn't really fully believe that it had to be impossible, he bought the tool and one morning he set out to the first field where the bracken was encroaching. It was absolutely daunting. It looked

like there were literally acres of bracken coming through already and some of it was already three feet high. He was tempted to give up before he started. The goal just seemed too big, and too far off.

However, he decided to give it a go for an hour, and see how he got on. It was hard work and hot, and it was tempting to give up and get in a neighbour with a spraying machine, but something inside him rebelled against surrendering, so he kept at it. As he got hotter he got more flustered, and as he got more flustered he slashed harder and harder, attacking the bracken as if it was a sentient enemy. It was typical of much Western culture – once you find something you don't do very well, do it *harder!* All this did was make the job less pleasant, and it got to be real hard work.

But at the end of the hour, he was quite surprised at how much he had cleared, and enjoyed some slight satisfaction from his achievement.

Two days later he resolved to renew his efforts, and when he got to the first area he found some re-growth, but not as much as his neighbours had predicted, so he first cut that, and then moved on to the next area. He began to find that his technique was getting a little better; the amount of effort required was a bit less, and he was a little bit less in a hurry to get the job over with. In fact rather than just do the work and wait until the end of the session to get some satisfaction, he began to find some satisfaction in the *process*; he could take a little pleasure in each stroke.

It occurred to the man that he had come across precisely this reported effect while studying psychology, but had not made the translation into everyday living such as this bracken clearing work.

As each day passed, he found that he was less and less impatient for the end result, and more and more involved and interested in the daily process. He noticed that almost inadvertently he had made the early decision not to “over-face” himself with the job, but to “chunk” it into workable segments. It was like eating an elephant; lots of people told you it isn’t possible, but they are wrong he thought; it is perfectly possible if you do it a bite at a time. It also reminded him of some readings in Buddhist Mindfulness Meditation. He had sometimes thought - “perhaps all this stuff is really just ‘psycho-babble’”, and “American Positive Thinking Rubbish”, but now he realised that it worked if you did it.

He had read in the Buddhist writings that if you scratched the surface of impatience, what you found underneath was anger. Remembering the start of his project he recognised that without realising it, in his unconscious mind he had been angry about the bracken. How ridiculous to be angry at bracken! He had been unaware of his feelings of “unfairness”, angry at having been made to almost fear the up-coming job, belittled by his supposedly more knowledgeable neighbours. Afraid that if he started it he might “fail” and perhaps be laughed at for even trying.

As the days wore on, and he made more and more forays into the bracken, he began to see real results. The bracken came back more slowly, and weaker. He could clear larger areas with every visit. He took pleasure in being selective, working round the plants he wanted and only selecting the bracken shoots. He was becoming skilful with the techniques. He was able now to relate it to sport psychology – you can achieve your goal if you have three things in place: you must *want* it, you must *believe* that it is *possible*, and all you then have to do is to *persist*.

Another wonderful discovery was that he began to become aware of the moments as they passed. He realised that at first while he was slashing the stalks, he actually *noticed* almost nothing. Then one day, while pausing, it

dawned on him that during the previous session he had noticed nothing, he had not heard the birds or the river, he had not noticed the smells of the flowers, he had not “seen” the beauty that surrounded him, even though he had looked at it.

It seemed to him that to all intents and purposes he had been sleep-walking through that bit of his life. He might as well have been dead. Then the realisation came to him of the true importance of staying aware of your every living moment. Those moments he had somehow missed would never come again. It was true, you only have one life, and it *is* soon over. It was important to be aware of your moments, good or bad, rough or smooth, “successful” or “failures” – (whatever those are!).

He even got to the point where he felt that he would be disappointed when all of the job was done. How much he would have missed if one magic wave of a wand (or a slasher) could have permanently removed all the bracken. He would have missed the bits that went easily, and he would have missed the harder times, and the struggles. Now, the final end-result could either come or not come, it really didn’t matter, provided that he could enjoy the *process*. That process was *his*, the ups and the downs; he wanted all of it. Strangely, he felt sure that the achievement of the original goal was probably now more, not less likely, and all because he was living for this moment, not some future moment.

And so it proved. The bracken was eventually cleared. His neighbours were wrong, but then they had never tried it because they *knew* it couldn’t be done. They were experts.

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