

The Pause Before Your Reaction

Nothing reaches you fast. Something arrives, and then you pick it up. The gap between those two things is the only place an old wound ever loses its grip.

Something arrives and you are already halfway into the reaction. A message. A tone of voice. A look across a table. You did not decide to be upset, and by the time you notice, your shoulders are already up around your ears and your chest has closed like a fist. It feels instant. It feels like the thing did it to you.

It is not instant. It only feels that way because the gap is small and you have never been asked to stand in it. Something is said, and then there is a moment, and then you pick it up and give it meaning. That middle piece is where your whole life happens.

I want to argue with this before I land on it, because the way it usually gets taught is useless. *Pause before you react* sounds like a manners lesson. Count to ten. Do not send the email. That version is only about the outside — about keeping your behaviour presentable while everything inside you stays exactly as loud as it was. You have probably become very good at that, and it has not freed you from anything. You have just learned to suffer politely.

The pause I am talking about is not restraint. It is a place to stand.

“And I realized that the pause that I give myself, the pause before my reaction, is where the old wound loses its power over me.”

TIM O. DAVIS

Here is what is actually happening in those seconds. The mind is always operating from old data. It has no other material. So when something lands, it reaches back into everything that has ever hurt you, finds the closest match, and hands you that. The reaction you are about to have is almost never about what just happened. It is about what it resembles. The old wound is the engine, and today's event is only the key turning in the ignition.

If you react inside that gap, the wound gets to drive. It also gets fed, because a reaction is confirmation. Every time you respond to a fresh moment with an old defence, you teach yourself again that the defence was needed.

When you stand in the pause instead, something very ordinary and very strange happens. The energy is still there — the heat in the throat, the tightening in the hips, the noise. You are not making it go away. But the wound does not get its usual turn, and without that turn it cannot keep proving itself. That is what I mean when I say the pause is where it loses its power over you.

Not that the feeling disappears. That the feeling stops being an instruction.

Notice how few words it takes. A handful of words strung together can cost you six hours. Six hours of not being able to breathe properly, of walking fast to burn it off, of a mind that has become deeply uncharitable to somebody and also to you. Somebody threw the words out there. You are the one who picked them up and ran. That tells you where the leverage is. It is not out there. It never was.

So what do you actually do in the gap, given that you cannot think your way through it? You come back to the body, because the body is where the energy is and the story is not. Breathe, and let the out-breath be longer than the in-breath. Feel your feet. Feel the tension and soften around it rather than arguing with it. **Soften, not surrender** — you are not giving in to anything, you are just stopping the contraction you are adding on top.

Then ask the one question that separates the two possible sources of any response: *am I coming from fear or from love?* Fear wants to be right, to get ahead of it, to make somebody the villain so you can be safe. Love can hold the same facts without needing them to mean something about your worth. Both answers are available in the pause. Only one of them is available in the reaction.

And expect discomfort. This is the part people are not told. It went in with pain, so it comes out with some discomfort. When you stop reacting, the energy that used to leave through the reaction has nowhere convenient to go, and for a while it circulates. That is not a sign you are doing it wrong. That is the release. Mine came out on a long walk and then on a mat with music on, moving whatever wanted moving.

The pause does not make you slower or softer in the world. It makes you accurate. Everything you do from inside it is a response to what is actually in front of you, rather than a rerun. And the hour you spend not reacting is repaid many times over by the six you do not lose.

THE PRACTICE

The next time something lands, do nothing for three breaths. Longer exhale than inhale, feet on the floor, soften the place that tightened. Then ask: am I coming from fear or from love? Respond from the answer, not from the heat.