Appendix D

Person-in-the-Hole Metaphor


Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An Experiential Approach to Behavior Change.
New York: Guilford Press, pp. 101–102

The situation you are in seems a bit like this. Imagine that you’re placed in a field, wearing a blindfold, and you’re given a little tool bag to carry. You’re told that your job is to run around this field, blindfolded. That is how you are supposed to live life. And so you do what you’re told. Now, unbeknownst to you, in this field there are a number of widely spaced, fairly deep holes. You don’t know that at first. So you start running about and sooner or later you fall into a large hole. You feel around and sure enough, you can’t climb out and there are no escape routes you can find. Probably what you would do in such a predicament is take the tool bag you were given and see what is in there; maybe there is something you can use to get out of the hole. Now suppose the only tool in the bag is a shovel. So you dutifully start digging, but pretty soon you notice that you’re not out of the hole. So you try digging faster and faster. But you’re still in the hole. So you try big shovelfuls, or little ones, or throwing the dirt far away or not. But still you’re in the hole. All this effort and all this work and oddly enough the hole has just gotten bigger and bigger and bigger. Isn’t that your experience? So you come to me thinking, ‘Maybe he has a really huge shovel – a gold plated steam shovel.’ Well, I don’t. And even if I did I wouldn’t use it, because digging is not a way out of the hole – digging is what makes holes. So maybe the whole agenda here is hopeless – you can’t dig your way out, that just digs you in.