**Frustration on the Golf Course

Podcast #14 (14 minutes)

Today I want to talk about why the game of golf is so frustrating to so many people. Now, I'm going to talk about *golf,* not because golf is so special, but because it isn't. If we can understand the psychological reasons that golf is so frustrating, we can understand a lot about why learning new skills in general can be difficult, as well as adding to our understanding of the mind.

So here we go with golf.

People joke that "golf is a four letter word". A game that can bring a player such joy has the capacity to create equally unbearable frustration.

And that's not just my personal experience.

Mark Twain call golf "a good walk spoiled." The Reverend Billy Graham preached, "The only time my prayers are never answered is on the golf course." In fact, more adults in America give up golf than take it

up—and a lot of this trend is due to the frustrating nature of the game.

But unless we understand the unconscious mind, what's called the "mental game of golf" will always be mysterious

First, some observations about the obvious. Golfers care about outcome – – the outcome of one swing or of their overall score. And they care in a way that's too often devoid of joy. One golfer I know said simply, "I can't enjoy myself if I'm not playing well." The problem is that most of us amateurs don't really play that well much of the time.

But let's also begin by facing a simple reality: It's absurd, ridiculous, ludicrous, irrational, unreasonable, and just plain silly for anyone to make his or her mood or self-esteem dependent on the outcome of a golf swing or score. And consider how especially absurd it is for amateurs to get this upset----which they too often do--when something

goes wrong, since for most amateurs something is almost always going wrong

And so right away we begin to see the problem – – it's the way that we, all of us, have trouble facing the truth, facing reality, and facing our limitations. This problem is not just one inside us as individuals but in our culture. We have a problem in our culture with limits, with the limits placed on us by time, work, by health, aging, and even by other people. We work too much, fail to recognize the vulnerabilities—the limits, in other words--of our bodies or heed their distress. In fact, we tend to view stress as a motivator or even, at times, a high. This is a disease in our thinking and feeling. It's what addicts do. We're addicted to unrealistic and sometimes even omnipotent views of our capabilities and ourselves.

Too often we react to the limits placed on us by reality him with anger, as if we are damaged and need to be fixed.

And nowhere is this truer than on the golf course.

But here's the bottom line. You can't learn if you can't fail, or if you can't tolerate failure. This problem especially afflicts golfers who routinely respond to mis–hits and high scores as if a jury has just returned a guilty verdict. The problem is that the only crime they're guilty of is human error. Failure is the crime and misery the punishment!

We know that learning takes practice – – deliberative practice, aided by good coaching. People acquire skills when they persist in practicing those skills in the face of inevitable failures.

Such persistence isn't easy to practice. Sometimes, of course, persistence comes from an innate drive to learn, to improve. For example, watch children learn how to walk. At first they look like little wobbly Frankensteins, legs wide, stepping forward tentatively with high steps and flat feet.

Gradually, they cease thinking about it. They become *walkers*. But in the meantime they fall—repeatedly. They protest, sometimes cry, but always get up and resume their march toward ''walker-hood.' They persist. They have to – the desire to walk is hard-wired into their brains. They need to walk. The goal is all-important and no amount of frustration or "failure" can change that.

But if the need to master a skill isn't inherently strong--in other words, if it's more optional, requires more of an intentional choice—you know, like learning to eat with a fork--then when faced with frustration and failure some children will break down and helplessly protest, others will simply give it up entirely while still others will tolerate their failures and gradually master the skill. In large part, this depends on the presence of a facilitating and rewarding environment.

Another great example of the importance to the learning process of a facilitating environment can be

seen in an experiment child development experts devised in the 1960s.-- an experiment called the "visual cliff." Picture this now: A table is covered by a piece of clear glass long enough to extend 2 feet over one end. A 6-month-old baby is put on the table and encouraged to crawl to the end of it. Her eyes tell her that the table ends, and that to continue, therefore, is to fall off the "cliff." Her tactile senses suggest that it's safe. What determines whether the baby has the confidence to risk continuing? Researchers found that it was the response of the environment. If the baby's mother stands at the end of the glass, happily and confidently encouraging the baby to risk it, she will. If the mother looks worried or isn't paying attention, the baby stops and refuses to advance.

Thus, the degree of patience and frustration tolerance that we each have when it comes to mastering a difficult skill has something to do with the ways our past environments either nurtured or inhibited our capacities to learn, how they reacted to

failure, and how realistic their expectations were about the probability of our success. For example, a family that reacts negatively to a 4 year old child's failure to master the use of a knife and fork sets up in the child an unreasonably negative attitude toward learning. But, similarly, a family that expects too little and, say, praises a *ten* year old child for the same thing sets the bar so low the child doesn't develop the discipline and motivation for taking on hard challenges.

If we really want to understand the deepest sources of the frustration that accompanies learning, particularly the learning of a physical skill, we have to look more deeply into the unconscious mind.

Fortunately, my work as a psychotherapist with dozens of dozens of athletes, musicians, and others trying to learn and master complicated physical skills, has led to my view that the core of the issue of coping with failure is a concept that psychologists call *narcissism*. Unlike its more popular usage, as in "you

narcissistic self-centered SOB," the real meaning of narcissism is simply the self-regard or self-love with which we invest both our personal and physical selves. It follows that there is healthy narcissism and unhealthy narcissism. If our investment is unrealistically high, we become obnoxiously grandiose; if it's too little, too low, we become self-hating and depressed. In order to enjoy learning, including learning how to play golf, we have to have the right balance of narcissism.

In the earliest years of our growing up, our narcissism is especially focused on our bodies. When our bodies are working well, we feel good; when they don't, we feel bad. "Working well" means *they do what we want them to do, what we intend for them to do.* Notice the sheer joy of a child running across a field. It's as if the body's movement itself is the real source of pleasure. Then notice the frustration of a child unable to make his or her body work properly, say when unsuccessfully trying to climb steps. The

body's physical limitation can trigger a painful outrage.

This investment—this *narcissistic* investment—in our bodies continues throughout our lives. Consider the experience of aging: At the heart of the frustration and despair of aging is the awareness that our bodies can no longer do what our minds tell them to do. In other words, aging can be a blow to our narcissism.

This discrepancy between our beliefs about what our bodies <u>should</u> do and what they <u>actually</u> do lays at the heart of the frustration that golfers and other learners experience.

So-- back to the golf example: What happens when the amateur golfer's intention goes awry? When he or she makes a bad swing?

We have failed to execute our will, our intention. Having to confront the disconnect between our imagined bodies and our real bodies puts us into the same psychic space as that child falling down. And in that space, self-esteem takes a beating.

But we should also remember that human beings are also—always--creatures that make meaning. When our bodies let us down we react with a *story* to help us make sense of the helplessness inherent in that experience. And we're eager to do so because helplessness is the most toxic of human emotions. The learner—in this case, the golfer—tells a story that seeks to "explain" the failure. It was an accident, a freak of nature, an indictment of one's instructor, a symptom of fatigue, a result of feeling rushed or of waiting too long, or that it's a failure, a sign of weakness, an expression of incompetence, personal failure, or just basic badness in the very core of our selves.

These stories appear in a nanosecond, often barely reaching awareness. But they're what lay beneath feelings of irritation, or of a slump in our energy, or of a deflation of our mood. But they're definitely stories and each of us has characteristic

ones that we tell ourselves when we encounter an obstacle we can't magically eliminate.

One golfer I saw in therapy used to tell me that when he hit poor shots he'd feel angry with himself, and occasionally threw his club. At the deepest level, his "story" was that his golf swing was the same as his self—bad swing, bad self. He heard someone saying to him, "You suck!" That was his story. Another patient told me that when he was on the golf course he sometimes worried that there might be something physically wrong with him that accounted for the abbreviated length of his two shots. His story was that his body was somehow damaged or broken. In both these cases, there were ample reasons in their personal histories for such stories to now present themselves. Nevertheless, they were stories; they felt real but weren't.

So the worst reactions experienced on the golf course—or whenever we're trying to learn to do something new--involve stories intended to explain

away the helpless sense of the discrepancy between a wished-for and actual reality. Too often, we rage—and anger is one of the most common responses to helplessness. Anger is what I call an "energetic protest" against helplessness, containing in it a furious refusal to accept a loss of control. We rage against our fate, our failures, our selves, and our bodies rather than face the ways in which we are thwarted by our own imperfections. All of these strategies are common in the psyches of golfers and in the psyches of anyone struggling to learn and master a new skill.

It's easy now to see the problem, right? What if the force we can't control *is* our own bodies? And what if we associate our bodies with our selves? Then we blame our selves, we hate ourselves, or we simply become depressed. This is what we see every day on the golf course.

Of course, there are other, healthier ways to cope with helplessness. We see them all the time.

Mastering anything requires the ability to tolerate failing long enough to improve. This process has been so woven into everyday life since infancy that we hardly notice it. Whether it's learning how to drink from a cup, use a spoon, jump rope, throw a ball, write with a pencil, drive a car, or waltz, we're wired and, at our best, encouraged to tolerate the "error" part of trial-and-error learning enough to develop mastery.

Another way to describe the process of tolerating errors, failure, or the moments of helplessness inherent to both, is that we learn to cope with and appreciate *reality*. As children, we tend to feel grandiose. We go through a phase in which we feel that we can and should control everything and everyone, our own bodies and those of people around us. This grandiosity gets regularly shattered, of course when we encounter the limits of our wills, our wishes, and our bodies. Our exaggerated sense of ourselves gets deflated. And then we naturally rage

against this powerless state and attempt to regain control. But gradually, we learn. When things go well, we learn that we're neither omnipotent nor truly helpless. We develop real skills and competencies that help us get what we want without having to resort to magical flights of fancy or else crash-landing in defeat.

We all complicate learning with stuff that comes from our childhoods and our unconscious minds. We can't help but do so. The only important question is how much we're aware of it and how we relate to it.

Psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman put it well when he said,

"We're beautiful devices. The devices work well; we're all experts in what we do. But when the mechanism fails, those failures can tell you a lot about how the mind works. "