Jenn was telling me how her team had adapted to the work-from-home order. “I’m so proud of them. They started these morning meetings. To tell the truth, at first, I wasn’t all that fired up about them, but there was no way I could tell them no. Well, I have to tell you, they’ve become the best part of everyone’s day. Mine included!”

Many years earlier, Jenn had been my coaching client. Nowadays, she and I had catch-up calls three or four times a year that were deeply satisfying for us both. This conversation was the first time we’d spoken since the lockdown began. There was much to catch up on.

Continuing about her team, she said, “They declared we were going to have thirty minutes when we wouldn’t talk business and we wouldn’t talk virus. And not once a week. Every morning! You can imagine, I’m sitting there smiling because I know they all can see me, but all I was doing was counting up the lost hours in my head. But really, Tom, it’s been such fun. They’ve been so creative. I don’t think we could’ve ever had a connection like this in the office. The time is well spent.”

“I’m so glad for you, Jenn,” I said.
“Personally, I miss being in the office. I miss all those little hallway moments. I always felt that was when the real work got done, not in meetings. Dropping by someone’s office. Certainly that was how I managed my team. Now, they could be planning an armed revolt and I’d never know it.”

“But you’ve managed remote employees before,” I said.

“Sure. But I get so much juice from the team when we’re together. Someone showed me some research recently that says projects reach more creative solutions when more people get involved. I think I’ve known that since I was a little girl. Being part of a team always made me happy. Now, being stuck all by myself in this stupid laundry room? My creativity is in the trash. I miss my team.”

On the video, I saw a wave of emotion come over her. Her hand came to her mouth as a sob rose.

“I worry about them,” she said, her voice trembling. “I worry about all of us. They worry, too. About each other. About me! We’re all worried, right? I’m prone to dark thoughts anyway, so I’m just trying not to drown in worry here. And to make sure they don’t drown either!”

“How’re ya coping?”

She laughed through her sadness. “Thank the team once again for figuring out how to overcome all those feelings. They were completely up front about the fact that everyone’s a little crazy these days. They began making time for people to talk about how they’re coping. That was the question they started tossing out. ‘Hey! How’re ya coping?’ I have to say, they have amazing stories. And they’re so kind with each other. They really do inspire me.”

“Have they asked you?” I wondered.

“How I’m coping?” she laughed. “Yes, they asked.”

“What’d you say?” I asked.

“That I’m not so great at it. I do a little yoga when I can. I meditate when I can. But our house is busy, with all of us in it. When I finally manage to grab a moment to myself, I
just want to sit down and organize things. Old books. Socks. It doesn’t matter. It’s so soothing for me.”

“What did the team say to that?”

She stopped and smiled at me, like an old friend would. “I thought maybe they’d think I was like some crazy old lady in the corner of a shop somewhere, talking to herself. But they told they were proud of me,” she said, smiling happily. “They told me I was doing great. They really bucked me up.”

“Your team sounds pretty amazing,” I said admiringly.

“They are. I’m lucky to have them. They help me a lot.”

“Can I give you something to take to your team? It’s just a little video ritual but they might like it. I think there’s a little magic in it.” I said.

“Sure! What is it?”

“I learned this from Anne Gottlieb who does presence work with Mobius Leadership. Here’s what happens. You ask everyone to get on gallery view. So everyone is in a little box next to another little box. You ask everyone to put their palms out slowly past their shoulders until they ‘touch’ the edge of their own frame. And try to connect your palms with the palms of the people next to you. It’s a fun way to bring the focus to each other.”

“Oh, I love that. I can imagine it feeling like magic,” she said. Then, “If you were on the call and we asked you for a coping tool, what would you tell us?”

**Three questions to get present**

I stopped, considering. Finally, I said, “I think I’d suggest something that would bring people into the present moment. You talked about drowning in sadness and being anxious with worry. I think we all are grieving for the life in the past that we’ve lost, and we worry about our life in the future that we can’t see. All that grief and worry get softened when you come into the present moment.”

She nodded, saying, “Like yoga does. Or meditation does. If I ever did them. So do you have a way to help people be present?”
“Here’s an exercise,” I said. “Set a timer for thirty minutes, then forget about it. Go do whatever you do. When the timer goes off, stop and notice three things.” I ticked on my fingers. “What am I doing right now? What feelings am I having right now? What do I notice in my body right now?”

“Am I supposed to do anything about whatever I notice?”

“No. Just notice. Don’t judge. Just look. Like from a balcony. Be a focused observer. Really ask yourself, ‘What feelings do I have right now?’ Noticing your feelings forces you into the present. Same with noticing your body. Your body and your feelings can only exist in the absolute right now.”

“Naming my feelings has never been my strong suit,” she smiled. “I remember you sent me that grid with all those feeling words. You wanted me to get more comfortable talking with people about feelings. It’s helped a little, actually.”

I said, “You know, in this case, when you’re trying to be present, the only real goal is to disconnect from the past and the future. Whether you’re able to accurately name your feelings isn’t so important. I mean, yes, of course, if you ask yourself those questions repeatedly during this period, you’ll build self-awareness over time. But that would be a by-product. This exercise is just trying to quiet the anxiety when it’s happening.”

**Quiet the critic’s voice**

She took in a breath, shaking her head. “My husband and I have this image about what’s happening to all of us right now. The earth as we know it is tilting upwards. And all of us, every one of us, are beginning to slide downhill. Some people think they can hold on, but they won’t be able to because it’s the whole world that’s tilting. We’re all falling. And no one knows how far we’re going to fall, or what it will be like when we finally come out at the bottom, or who will have survived. We’re all just sliding off our old lives. It’s scary as hell. It’s why I worry about my team.”

“That’s quite an image. Have you shared that with your team?” I asked.
“No! I’d like to cheer them up a little, not scare the bejeezus out of them! But if you don’t mind, I’d love to tell them about the exercise with your three questions.”

“Please do,” I answered.

“You know what’s nagging at me when I think about those questions? I worry that if I ask them to myself, I’ll just get all self-conscious. I’ll be busy thinking, ‘Ooh, I shouldn’t be feeling that.’ Or ‘What’s wrong with me? Look at my body!’”

“You? Self-critical? That’d be shocking!” I smiled at her.

“Wouldn’t it, now?” She smiled back.

“I have an antidote that might help quiet that critical voice. It might work for you.”

“Great! Let’s hear!” she said.

“OK,” I said. “Let’s say you notice a feeling. Suppose you notice that you’re angry about something that happened. And as soon as you notice you’re angry, your critical voice kicks in. You think, ‘Well, that’s terrible. I shouldn’t be angry. That’s nothing to get angry over. I’m just being silly!’”

“You’ve known me too long if you can quote my demons that well!” she said with a big laugh.

“You don’t have exclusive rights when it comes to being self-critical, Jenn!” Then, I said, “One antidote to the self-critical voice is to ask yourself an entirely separate question. It goes like this. ‘OK. I see my feeling. That is what I notice. So what? What do I choose to do about it? What is my next action?’ Ask, what do I want to do about what I noticed? Considering action can lift you out of the reaction phase and move you towards being intentional.”

“This reminds me of that model you showed me a long time ago. With the crank.”

**Self-Awareness & Self-Management**

I smiled, saying, “Oh! Yes! Self-awareness and self-management. You remember that?”
“I didn’t remember the names. I just remembered this.” She put up her fist, then cranked around a circle and
down, jerking to a stop at six o’clock. Then she cranked it up and around to twelve o’clock, stopping with a jerk.
Then quickly six, twelve, six, several times.

She gave one more crank around. “Remind me what the words mean again.”

“OK. It starts at any given moment when you want to quiet yourself. You ask yourself the three questions: What
am I doing? What feelings do I have? What’s in my body? Those questions are all self-awareness questions.
Self-awareness is up here.” I put my hand up high, as if at twelve o’clock on the crank. Then I circled my hand
down and around the dial to six o’clock. “Use that self-awareness to lead you down here, to self-management.
Self-management is asking yourself the question, ‘What do I want to do about it?’ Do I want to send this flaming
e-mail? Do I want to yell at my kids? Do I want to blame someone? Do I? I get to choose. I get to self-manage.
Self-managing, by default, makes you intentional. And when you’re intentional, it naturally leads you back here,
asking how am I doing?” I cranked the imaginary handle up and around to twelve. “And it can go ‘round and
‘round as often as is productive.”

Jenn worked on being intentional. With a laugh, she told me she forgot to do it more than she remembered. But
when she did remember, it made a difference.

“I’m grateful when I remember,” she said. “It’s not always easy remembering to be intentional when you’re stuck in
a laundry room that’s sliding off the planet with you inside.”

In fact, Jenn was more intentional than she gave herself credit for. It was actually a core skill of hers, which is why
I’d always felt she had a quite natural display of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*. 
Core Concepts:

- Teams can support each other in many ways while sheltering-in-place
- Worry about the future is natural. Becoming present can reduce worry
- The practice of being present often raises your self-awareness
- Use increased self-awareness to engage your self-management
- Being intentional creates a loop of self-awareness and self-management

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