Practice is Not Fake

A person in New York city stopped another on the street to ask for directions.

“How do you get to Carnegie Hall?”

“Practice, man, practice.”

While I do not know the author of that joke, I know that I like to adopt that mindset when working the program. Practice is the act of attempting something that you previously did not know how to do, and repeating it until you are able. I prefer this to the phrase ‘fake it until you make it.’ Both convey the same meaning, but the latter feels negative to me.

I have found through experience that I need to maintain a positive inner dialogue. Life is going to throw enough challenges at me to keep me busy. I do not need to add fuel to the fire by replaying negative tapes inside my head. Perhaps this is a consequence of growing up in the eighties when positive affirmations and self-help books were all the rage. However, even after the trends changed and the fads disappeared, one kernel of truth persisted for me – my subconscious believes what I tell it.

It is easy for me to forget this when thinking with my logical mind. Phrases like “I can’t do that" seem harmless, after all I know better. If I am working on something that is difficult, I expect it to take a while and that progress may be in small increments. However, the rest of me does not know better. My emotions and subconscious only hear “I can’t.” If that message gets repeated enough, I risk believing it

If I fall into this cycle of negative feedback it prolongs the learning curve, or can sometimes sabotage it fully. On the other hand, if I choose my words more carefully, more accurately, then the situation can play out differently. I am working on that. I’m improving slowly. Seemingly insignificant choices like that result in my innermost self committing these words to memory: “I’m improving.”

For these reasons I do not use the phrase ‘fake it until you make it,’ since my mind hears ‘it’s fake.’ Instead, I choose to say ‘practice.’ I am practicing how to be a real human being. I am practicing how to be kind. I am practicing applying these principles in all my affairs, not just in meetings.

If I think back to some of my most formative experiences many are centered on this theme. As a kid I played in youth football leagues for a half-dozen years. One year we had a tough-as-nails coach, Mr. Wilkins. He was stern, and he worked us hard. I recall standing many times with my hands on my knees, sucking in long breaths after running laps. But he was also fair. He did not judge you based on your starting point, he just got busy helping you improve. That year he took us to the city championships. He helped elevate us to a level we did not know we were capable of. If I look back the main difference that I see between him and other coaches was his relentless passion for practicing. Practicing with Coach Wilkins was more intense than game day with many other coaches.

The people in the program are my current coaches, and they have helped elevate me into a person I previously did not know how to be. I have learned not to judge myself for my starting point. I am learning to shed thoughts like “You really should be better at that by now.” I am replacing them with an acceptance of where I am, and just as with Coach Wilkins, my sponsor helps me get busy improving.

Today I rely on a daily checklist to ensure I do all the things I need to. At the top of the list is the item ‘Think of others.’ I no longer judge myself harshly for needing the reminder, despite nearly a decade of sobriety. I’m still practicing that one. When I am prompted by the list rather than my own memory to ask my wife how she is doing, it is genuine. Life does not care how I got prompted, it only matters that I took the action.

After all that, if you still prefer ‘fake it until you make it,’ that is OK too. In my head I'll quietly be translating that into ‘practice, man, practice.’ And we will both stay sober another day.