

# An Introduction to The Work of Byron Katie

Robin Shohet

In this short article I would like to introduce you to the Work of Byron Katie, a woman in her late 50's from Barstow, California who, at the age of 43, in a half way house for people with eating disorders, had a spontaneous awakening into her true nature. Since then she has travelled the world teaching. Her method is simple, yet powerful and can be learnt in minutes. I have been able to demonstrate it to counsellors, therapists, supervisors, management consultants and ministers around the world, even whilst recognising that Katie can speak with far greater authority and fluency that comes from her own personal experience.

What I have enjoyed is how quickly people 'get' it, often translating it into their own language - be it Transactional Analysis, Gestalt, Narrative, Rational Emotional or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy - therapists from all these schools have recognised similarities. I do believe, however, that The Work is different from therapy, although there is no question that it is therapeutic, and I will explore why I believe this. As well as introducing you to what she calls The Work and its application to us in the different therapy professions, I will also look at her work in relation to the victim archetype which I have spent the last seven years researching through the notions of revenge and forgiveness.

As I see it, one of the cornerstones of The Work is the understanding and acceptance that we continually judge others and ourselves. Katie (she was given the Byron bit as a precondition of her family inheriting some money) says we have been told not to judge for thousands of years and it hasn't worked. So we are invited to judge another, say what makes us angry, disappointed, frustrated; how we think they should be different or what they should do differently; what we think of them - really letting rip, labelling them in any way that comes to mind. We are invited to do this on paper, on a specially designed worksheet. The writing is important because the process is an enquiry into our thinking and our minds work so fast. By writing

we commit ourselves and cannot subsequently wriggle so easily. The enquiry takes the form of four questions and a turnaround. The turnaround, and there can be more than one, is similar to reowning the projections which we have been asked to make. This can be very powerful when we see how the label, which we have been so sure fits the other, applies to us. The questions and the turnaround help us begin to loosen our attachment to erroneous core beliefs about ourselves and the world.

### **The four questions are:**

- 1. Is it true?**
- 2. Can you really know that it's true?**
- 3. How do you react when you attach to that thought/belief?**  
**3a can you see a reason to drop it?**  
**3b Can you see a peaceful reason to keep it?)**
- 4. Who or how would you be without that thought/belief?**

Another cornerstone of her work is 'what is, is', encouraging us to embrace reality as it appears moment to moment. So simple, but it is the arguing with reality that gets us into trouble. 'He shouldn't have done that' or 'the world should be different' or whatever. She says, 'When I argue with reality, I lose, but only 100% of the time.' This non-acceptance of what is often combines with a core belief. So, for example, if someone misses an appointment, this of itself is not such a huge deal unless it combines with a core belief of, say, people always let you down in the end. We use the simple fact of a missed appointment as proof of our core belief. Through enquiry - or The Work, we investigate. For example:

I am angry with X because he let me down.

#### ***Is that true?***

Well he failed to keep his word.

#### ***Is it really true he let you down?***

Yes, I felt really let down.

#### ***You felt let down, but is it true he let you down? Can you really know that?***

No I can't really know that. He may have had good reasons and no intention of letting me down. *(It's fine if the person says yes to this bit. We continue with the questions)*

#### ***How do you react when you attach to that thought he let me down?***

I feel disappointed and hurt.

#### ***Do you see a reason to drop this thought/belief?***

Yes.

#### ***A peaceful reason to keep it?***

No.

#### ***Who would you be without it?***

More relaxed around him. I would just ask what happened.

We do this with the whole worksheet, with up to ten or fifteen statements. After we have done it for a few statements, the person often begins to see how they have been jumping to conclusions that do not serve them. What is a wonderful feature of this process is that as the penny drops, and we realise how much of our problems are self created, we begin to laugh at ourselves. Humour often features prominently, and it is an aspect of the process that really attracts me.

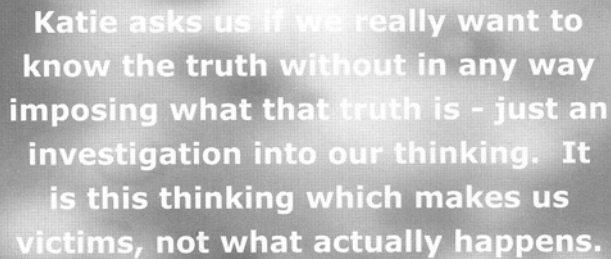
A few examples from my own life. Someone had not kept what I considered an agreement. I felt totally conned. My partner said, 'X is conning you. Is

that true?' I said, 'No. I can't know that.' Most of the anger dissolved. What was upsetting me was the story about conning, attaching to a core belief around what happens when I'm not on guard, more than the actual breaking of an agreement. This was not theory. The simple investigation was enough to distance me from my obsession. Recently my son could not get to sleep. I had tried hypnosis successfully with him before, but this time it didn't work. In the hypnosis as I relax him, I tell him that he is deeply loved and all is well. Anyway, this time my induction had the effect of making me sleepy so I asked him if he would

adamant that her story about him was true, saw no reason to drop her story, until the final question who would you be without it. She suddenly realised she would be more peaceful and from that understanding her whole relationship changed.

***Who would you be without your story?***

- one of Katie's questions that challenges us to the core of our imagined identities. For, according to her, it is all story. Even Robin is a story, never mind the stories of betrayal, hurt, disappointment and even love that we attach or velcro

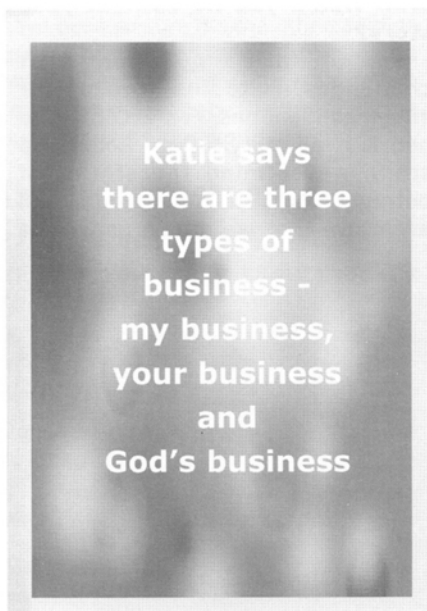


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mind if I went to sleep. I awoke about two hours later and he was awake. I asked him if he had gone to sleep at all and he said no. But it was fine, he added. Byron Katie was right about accepting what is. He realised he could have got very upset at not sleeping, but what was the point? In that moment he had, I thought, understood something which has taken me years to glimpse. A final example is a friend who was doing The Work with a woman and her husband. The woman was

ourselves so readily to. This has, I think, profound implications for therapy as it goes to the root of the Robin I consider myself to be who has problems to be fixed. No story of Robin, no problems. Just thoughts arising to be investigated. Here she seems similar to strands of Buddhist thought and the Advaita Vedanta non-dualists (Ramana Maharshi, Nisargadatta, Ramesh Balsekar). Seven years ago I began a study of revenge. I see it now as an attempt

to understand the victim in me - a powerful voice that seemed to have a life of its own rooted in Jewish identity and an Old Testament God. The destructiveness of revenge led me to study forgiveness which has put me in touch with remarkable people who



have shown great courage and compassion. The Work, however, as I understand it takes us beyond forgiveness to a place where there is nothing and no one to forgive. This statement may appear outrageous to some, and certainly I do not live it, still cocooning myself in stories of right and wrong, with of course me in the right. I glow in the artificial light of miserable self righteousness - like when I was so ready to feel conned. But Katie asks us if we really want to know the truth without in any way imposing what that truth is - just an investigation into our thinking. It is this thinking which

makes us victims, not what actually happens. In this way we create our own realities, not through visualising big cars or new partners, but noticing whether we make heaven or hell for ourselves each moment by either welcoming or resisting what's happening.

Katie says there are three types of business - my business, your business and God's business. When mentally we are in someone else's business, there is no-one 'at home', and therefore any so called help will miss the mark. We are simply not there to give it. This has implications for us in the helping professions, as we discovered on a workshop in New Zealand looking at the whole spiritual dimension of helping. People saw how much they left themselves behind, supposedly to be with the other, but in fact often attempting to rescue themselves vicariously.

There is no way I can do justice to Byron Katie and The Work. The state of non-duality I believe she lives in is beyond my current understanding. However, if something about her or The Work appeals, then consult her web site which is [www.thework.org](http://www.thework.org).

*Robin Shohet is (and isn't) a management consultant and trainer in supervision. He is co-author with Peter Hawkins of Supervision in the Helping Professions (OU Press 2nd edition 2000). He offers free demonstrations/sessions of The Work and can be contacted via the Findhorn Foundation, By Forres, Moray IV36 3TZ*

