



What does it mean to Observe Differently?

By Alan Sieler

“Observing Differently” is the tag line of the Ontological Coaching Institute, which specialises in the applications of an ontological approach to coaching, leadership, personal development and business improvement. On the surface, the expression Observing Differently can sound insignificant; however it has surprising depth to it that can be very beneficial for enhancing the quality of our lives and the lives of others.

One of the claims of the ontological approach is that by expanding our ontological awareness we can *become a different and more powerful Observer*,¹ able to see, hear and act on more possibilities and opportunities in life, thereby enhancing the quality of our existence. But, what does all this mean?

The notion of becoming a different Observer

Being human means that we are inevitably an Observer of the world and life. What comprises the world for us is what we observe. But being an Observer does not mean passively seeing and hearing what is happening in our environment – what we observe is very much influenced by what we do in life. Our world consists of the familiarity we have with what we do and our habitual ways of thinking and doing things. These are our experiences and we build or create what consists of the world for us through what we do, how we think, and also how we feel. Therefore, being an Observer is an active process of engagement.

Part of being an Observer is that we have the amazing capacity within us to continually change ourselves² and *become a different Observer*. Essentially this occurs by engaging in different life experiences, from which we can learn and change. For example, going to a hear a symphony orchestra for the first time can begin to open up a different awareness of an area of life that we were largely ignorant about. Life is continually presenting us with opportunities to have different experiences, either ones we deliberately create for ourselves, such as enrolling in a course, or ones that simply occur, for example meeting new people. Every experience is an opportunity to learn and change.

Becoming a more powerful Observer

When we turn to the notion of *becoming a more powerful Observer*, it is important to acknowledge that the words “power” and “powerful” can have negative connotations for some people. An ontological perspective on power is that it is the ability to take more effective action. Ontologically speaking, the spirit of power is not about having power over people in a negative sense, but having “power to ...” and “power for ...” for the benefit of self and others.

This ontological perspective on power can be coupled with the words “freedom” and “liberating”. Engaging in different experiences can enhance our learning, and therefore expand our awareness of possibilities and opportunities for how we can participate in life, liberating us from our habitual ways of perceiving, thinking and behaving. The expression of “stepping into your power”, which you may have heard, is aligned with the ontological spirit of power.

The crucial relevance of Way of Being

You may be aware that the word Ontology means the study of being, or the study of existence. In Ontological Coaching we refer to *Way of Being*. We each have our own Way of Being, which consists of how we are engaging with *language*, what is happening with us *emotionally* and what is occurring in our *physiology or body*. These three areas of language, emotions and physiology (or body) are referred to as existential domains – aspects of being that we cannot avoid and are an integral part of being human.

When we consider life from an ontological perspective, it becomes readily apparent that the only place from which we can observe, deal with life’s ups and downs and create a different existence, is from our *Way of Being*. This is because our *Way of Being* can be seen as the location and source of our perceptual and behavioural habits, many of which are deep-seated and out-of-awareness. Way of Being is also the underlying driver of behaviour and communication. Without realising it, we can be trapped in deeply entrenched perceptual and behavioural habits that limit how we are as an Observer and do not sufficiently position us to respond adequately to the challenges that we encounter.

Shifting our Way of Being

Learning and understanding how to observe and shift our own *Way of Being* is at the heart of being flexible, able to adjust and adapt to different circumstances, all of which are bound up in what is often referred to as being “resilient”. It is about knowing how to tap into the resourcefulness deep within us that we have acquired through lifelong learning, but may not be able to utilise because of our ineffective perceptual and behavioural habits. Otherwise, we can experience life like a cork in rough seas, constantly being tossed around at the whim of the ocean. When this occurs, life circumstances write the script for our lives, the quality of our lives is compromised and we can experience far too much suffering.

The ontological approach is a powerful means to *embody a self-authoring existence* in all aspects of life, which is essentially no longer automatically living from, and being authored by,



the “life scripts” we learned in growing up. Instead, we play an active role in re-writing the script we will live from, choosing what we want to keep from the scripts we have learned and replacing obsolete aspects of this script with new script about how we choose to live and create our future.

Learning to shift our *Way of Being* can enable us to not only develop more adequate responses, but also to see more possibilities and recognise opportunities that we previously would have missed. And, it goes without saying, to alleviate much of our suffering.

Ontological coaches are specialists in supporting clients to make shifts in their Way of Being that support them to become different and more powerful Observers and therefore more self-authoring.

The pivotal importance of moods in our Way of Being

In what seems to be an increasingly volatile, uncertain and unpredictable world, anxiety has become all too present in the emotional lives of many. The word anxiety can typically be associated with psychological matters and the related themes of mental health and mental illness. There can also be an *existential perspective* on this and other emotions, and such a perspective was provided by German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger wrote about the inevitable presence of moods³ in our emotional existence and one of the moods he highlighted was anxiety. Part of his approach to anxiety was through the German word *unheimlich*, which means “not feeling at home” in the world – when far too many of life’s experiences have become uncomfortably unfamiliar. He also suggested the word “unsettlement” (when we simply do not feel settled in our being) is part of *unheimlich*. Therefore, a life of continually being unsettled in dealing with a constant stream of uncomfortably unfamiliar experiences indicates that the stable ground of meaning from which we have been living has crumbled, fallen away or collapsed. One of inescapable implications of this aspect of Heidegger’s philosophy has been that emotional wellbeing is at the centre of the quality of our existence.

Since the mid-1990’s, the gradual recognition of the significance of moods and emotions in our quality of life has included the development of the expression “emotional intelligence” (EQ). Derived from the notion of IQ and the assignment of a number to the supposed level of someone’s intelligence, this may not be the most helpful expression for supporting people to enhance their emotional wellbeing. Perhaps more useful for supporting the development of emotional wellbeing could be the notions of *emotional learning* and *being a continual emotional learner*.

We are all learners, as has been previously mentioned, having the remarkable capacity to continually change ourselves. Perhaps thinking of ourselves as *emotional learners*, who have the innate ability to continue to learn about our emotional existence by (i) expanding emotional awareness and (ii) learning how to manage our moods and emotions, will be more helpful than thinking of ourselves as having a certain EQ. This is the approach we take in our ontological coach training as our coaches become skilful in enabling clients to explore and improve the quality of their emotional worlds.

Ontological Coaching and ontological security

The ontological approach continues to be one of world's leading approaches to coaching, and has become increasingly relevant in a time when there is heightened uncertainty about the future, with humanity in a seemingly unpredictable drift. We face an individual and collective existential challenge to live meaningful and fulfilling lives and create better communities and societies.

Each person can only make their contribution to this challenge from their Way of Being. What is at stake in dealing with the challenge is our *ontological security*, in which we develop *deep resourcefulness within our Way of Being* and are self-authoring, enabling us to live a life of meaningful contribution. This is especially true for ontological coaches whose essential task is to facilitate clients enhancing their ontological security.

While we are highly unlikely to feel perfectly secure in our Way of Being and our existence, because of the plasticity of our nervous system and its ability to self-generate learning and change,⁴ the ontological approach to life, leadership, personal development and coaching can continually support us in moving towards greater ontological security. In this process, we create ourselves to be a different and more powerful Observer, capable of leading a more meaningful and fulfilling existence.

To close, here are some questions that will hopefully support your reflections:

- what happened with you in reading this article – what did you notice occurring in your language, emotions and physiology?
- what do you agree with and what do you not agree with?
- what questions are you left with – is it worthwhile make notes of these?
- what aspects of your Way of being would you like to shift so that you can become a different and more powerful Observer
- how will you begin to make this shift – what are the first few steps you will take?

¹ The notion of the Observer comes from the discipline Biology of Cognition, developed by Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela

² Biologically this means changing the structure of our nervous system, which is formally referred to as plasticity or neuroplasticity.

³ Moods are long-term emotions that "stick around" and take up residence in our Way of Being, quite often lasting for a year or more, even decades, dominating our existence. Moods are individual and collective (social)

⁴ The nervous system is that part of our biology where learning and change happens, and is responsible for our perception and behaviour.

You may also like to read "Becoming a Different and More Powerful Observer"

http://www.ontologicalcoaching.com.au/html/articles_OCCT_008.html

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