



Stepping Stones for the Good Life

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Opening the Door To Our Emotional Guests

From the Desk of Glenda Haskell, *Life Coach*

In his book *Be Happy*, Robert Holden offers up the notion of emotion as guest. Below is a poem by Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi (from *Essential Rumi*, 1997, HarperOne 1997), which Holden includes in his book:

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
[The guest] may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Day in and day out we must find ways to deal with our emotional “guests.”

How is this topic related to life coaching? There are many obstacles that can get in the way of our goals. Negative emotion is definitely among them, especially fear, including fear of failure and fear of the unknown. (To protect ourselves, we sometimes put on a face of anger to mask the fear within.)

Mistakes We Make When An Emotional Guest Shows Up At the Door

In Chapter 7 of *Being Good*, Dr. Robert describes three mistakes we make when a difficult emotion shows up at the door. Below I offer my version of them, along with what I call “antidotes” or ways to respond to these guests.

1. I *am* this guest (emotion) who has come into my “home.” (Misidentification)

I *am* sad. I *am* upset. And we also respond the same way to guests on the opposite end of the emotional continuum, as in I *am* happy and I *am* excited. Holden suggests that when we label ourselves in this way, we turn an experience or a feeling into our identity—who we are, whereas we would never think of making a similar leap with physical injuries. I *am* high blood pressure, for example, or I *am* a cold. I’m reminded of what David Burns refers to as emotional reasoning in his list of ten forms of “twisted thinking” (a phrase that has always made me smile) in *The Feeling Good Handbook*. If I *feel* a particular way, I must *be* that way.

Antidote: Just because I’m feeling a certain way doesn’t mean this is *who I am*.

Antidote: Ah, [emotion]. I see you’re here for a visit. What are you here to tell me?

2. I [this guest] should not be feeling this way. (Judgment)

I should not feel sad. I should not feel upset. Instead, I should feel happy. I should feel calm. Often we judge our negative emotions as unwelcome intruders. Be gone, unwanted guest! At the same time, we apply very different rules to the positive emotions in our lives such as joy, satisfaction, and pleasure. This type of emotion or experience we welcome with open arms. *Come in! Make yourself at home*. What Rumi reminds us of through his poem, and which we all experience, is that emotions all across the scale, positive as well as negative, are guests—*temporary* guests.

Antidote: [Emotion], I knew we would meet again. Come in and have a seat. Let’s talk. Let’s get to know each other.

3. At times when a guest [emotion] shows up, I close the door and pretend either that it isn’t there or hope it will go away. (Resistance)

Unfortunately, that’s not how emotions work, especially emotions on what Holden calls the darker side. Even when we close the door, our emotions generally have great stamina and can stand there on the other side of the door for a very long time.

I offer an example of such a guest in my own life. At the end of May 2011 after almost many years in university administration, I retired. By most standards, I had hit the jackpot in terms of the jobs I held at the university during my 26 years there. I was part of an organization that gave me a deep sense of pride and belonging, worked with terrific colleagues, did interesting and challenging work, had a good share of autonomy in how I carried out my responsibilities, had a great relationship with my supervisor, and received positive feedback.

But despite all this, I was in a position that wasn’t a good fit for me in several important ways. Although I drew upon a number of high-level strengths in carrying out my responsibilities, unfortunately they didn’t include the strengths that most bring me alive.

Consequently, there was an emotional guest at my door that represented a low-level but persistent unhappiness. It felt as if I were wearing someone else's shoes. For years I closed the door on this "guest." Again and again I laid out the many valid reasons why I should be and was grateful for my job. But despite how good I was at convincing myself, the shoes still didn't fit. This was true right up until I discovered life coaching, which I'm passionate about, and retired from the university. And in all those years, my emotional "guest" stood patiently and persistently outside the door until the day I finally listened and took steps to change my life and my work. As my emotional guest walked away, she whispered, with a smile, "Finally!"

This story illustrates the point that the sooner we pay attention, listen, and learn from our more difficult "guests," the sooner we can try to honor them, learn from them, and send them on their way.

Gifts from the Guests

Robert Holden also touches on the particular gifts (Holden calls them lessons) that the more negative emotions bring to us. As a life coach, I base my practice largely on inquiry—asking powerful questions. I believe people need good questions to explore—far more than they need advice from other people, which as human beings we're not usually all that interested in anyway. Below is one possible question that each of these "guests" might be bringing to us. Since the conversations we hold with our individual guests are unique to who we are and to our circumstances, I offer them only as a springboard. I have drawn upon Holden's list of lessons in writing these questions.

Fear: How can others help me? How will I let them?

Anger: Where could I keep my power rather than giving it away?

Stress: What better choices could I make?

Resentment: What's important to me?

Guilt: What could I do to be more aligned with who I am?

Exhaustion: What is my wisdom telling me about what I need?

Envy: In the full sense of the meaning of *beauty*, what type of beauty do I uniquely offer the world?

Depression: What could I do to love myself? Who in my life wants to give me more love, if I would let them?

Wounds: How could I set myself free through forgiveness?

Grief: What is really true?

Pain: Who am I really? What is my purpose?

Anxiety: What could I do to open myself to receiving help from others?

Emotional Guest Exercise

1. Is there an emotional guest at your door?
2. How will you respond?
3. If you ignore it, what do you stand to lose?