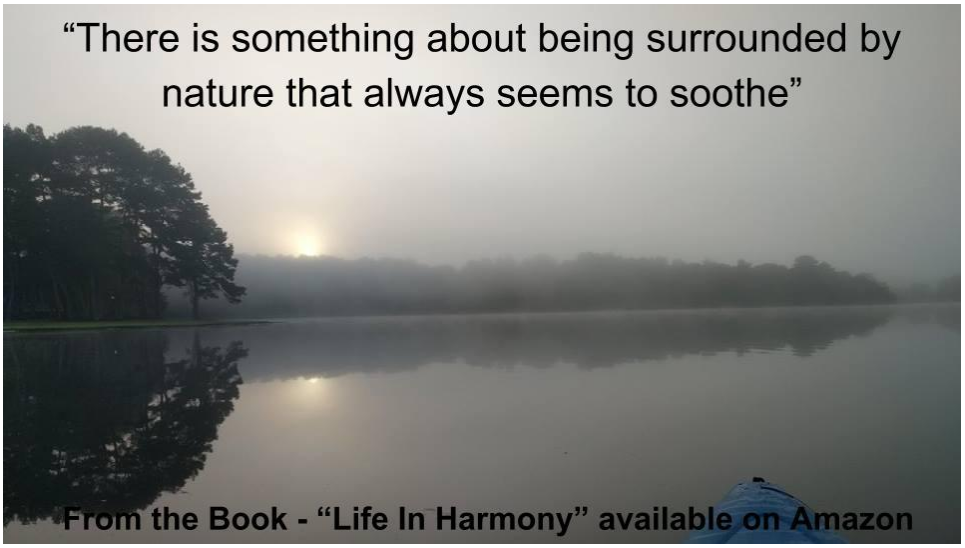
Life In Harmony



The Sandman



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The Hut

Chapter 2

Subtraction

(abridged version from the book "Life In Harmony" available on Amazon)

"A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone."
Henry David Thoreau

There is something about making something with your own two hands, especially something like the Hut that is … very satisfying.

One of my favorite authors is E. O. Wilson. He emphasizes the importance of a defensible nest as a foundation for creating social cultures (whether it be ants, bees, or humans). I felt a sense of satisfaction (perhaps in answer to some inward instinct), as well as pride, that I had built a place to sleep (a defensible nest), to relax, and to escape inclement weather all by myself with no other help.

Shelter is not required for survival (at least not in our Florida climate), but for me, it is required for a good quality of life. Having a place of protection from the wind and rain provides a person with a sense of security, especially if there is possible potential danger from animals. A strong shelter provides a place for physical safety, which translates to a feeling of security, leading to a more satisfied life.

I built the Hut primarily to replace my tipi, but this … structure made from sandbags, made with my own two hands was becoming much more than a space for quiet meditation. The Hut was a sanctuary, a refuge. It was **a place where I could listen to an - inner voice - saying you do not have to follow the same path as other people. It is okay to be different.**

At the core of my thinking was an idea that was in sharp contrast to what seemed to be the norm of the culture surrounding me. **Subtracting things rather than accumulating things.**

What do you want in life? What do you think will make you happy? Maybe these are the wrong questions to ask. Perhaps better questions might be - what do you not want in life? What does not make you happy?

When I applied the same logic to what would make me happy, it seemed **easier to remove or subtract the things I did not want in life, than to seek something I did want in life.**

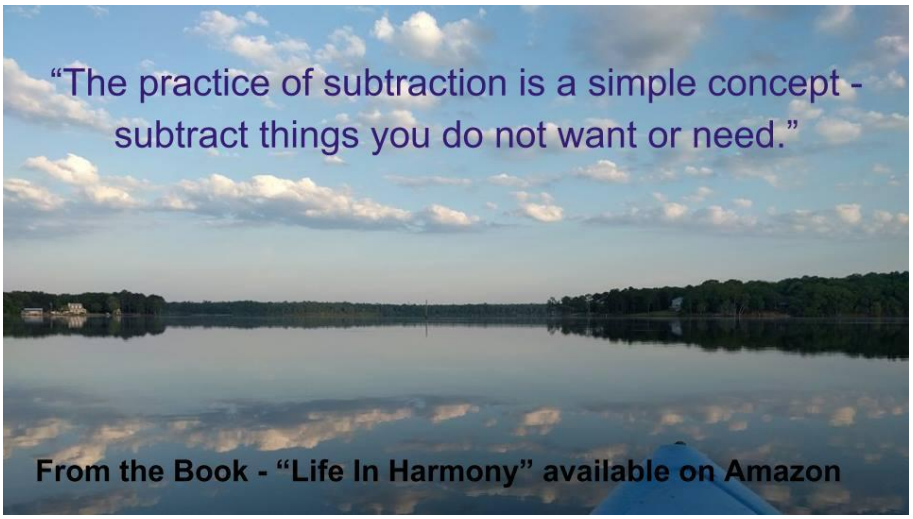
And so began a practice of subtraction in my life. The more time I spent down by the lake, often sitting beneath a pile of sand (the Hut), the more drawn I was to living simply which fell in line with the concept of subtracting things in my life.

I wanted simplicity in possessions, meals, transportation, finances, entertainment, relaxation, and even my thoughts and desires. I wanted to remove anything that was not necessary, that I did not want, or that made me unhappy.

I stopped allowing what others did for "happiness" to influence my choices. **I stopped looking for new things that might make me happy and began subtracting existing things in my life that I knew did not make me happy.**

Practicing subtraction in my life seemed "right" somehow. At some deep inner level I sensed it was creating a new direction in my life for the better. Mentally and emotionally I felt stronger and more satisfied.

I began to listen to an inward voice that reflected complete self honesty (often painful to hear) that was both accurate and simple, based on experience and sound reason. That still small voice within (as I prefer to call it), not only helped me know right from wrong, but also helped me to know what I truly wanted (or in this case, did not want) in life. But to hear the still small voice within, required silence and listening.



Chapter 5

Things I Don't Know

(abridged version from the book "Life In Harmony" available on Amazon)

"A man should look for what is, and not for what he thinks should be."
Albert Einstein

I enjoy learning from reading books and nonfiction articles. Most of what I read is science related and often on topics sharing the latest research in physics, chemistry, biology, genetics, psychology, or computer algorithms.

As a computer programmer, I like learning about genetics and the wealth of information we are discovering every day through genetic research. I have always been fascinated by computer code. Genetic code grips my interest to the point, where some people I know have to ask me to stop talking about DNA. I tend to go on and on when talking about it.

I also love learning about the trillions of cells in the human body and how they function and communicate. Our incredible immune system and the neural connections in our brains boggle my mind. And don't get me started on protein folding, amino acids, and cell growth. Reading and thinking about genetics and DNA replication and transcription would occupy much of my free time, if I allowed it.

Yet, **I am forced to admit my ignorance about genetic code. It seems like the more I learn about some topics, the more I realize there are so many more things I don't know.**

Even though I admit, I know very little about how cells actually work, it does not stop me from trying to learn what I can. There are online videos showing the replication and transcription processes of DNA in real time animations, with facts that completely astound me. From the number of genes in a species, to a better understanding of our own regulatory DNA, the internet allows people to share their discoveries and research, allowing everyone to learn.

I often feel like a kid in a store being pulled into several competing directions for my attention when I am exploring the internet.

The wonder and fascination of it all is not restricted to genetics, biology, and life. The shear size of the known universe blows me away. I find it odd that most of the people I am acquainted with usually don't know that the Milky Way has billions of solar systems and that it is but one galaxy among billions and billions and billions of galaxies. Just the comprehension of a light year and the distance between solar systems in our galaxy, not to mention **the distance (in both time and space) of 13.7 billion light years, never fails to leave me in awe and feeling like there is so much I just don't know.**

The scope of our knowledge extends from the macroscopic scales of the known universe all of the way down to the submicroscopic scales of particle physics that is equally mind blowing. Lee Smolin is one of my favorite physics authors. His books always expand my awareness.

If more people only knew the unbelievably small scale of a Planck length and our current understanding of the weirdness of quantum mechanics - they could not help but to live in a state of wondrous admiration, if not utter disbelief!

I also enjoy following the flow of computer algorithms, especially those used in artificial intelligence. I love technology! I tell people I have always had a passion for ones and zeros. Few people understand that the basic foundations of our technology and playing an enormous, fundamental role at the heart of it all, is a long series of ones and zeros.

I never want to stop learning. I do not like the idea of not learning. While I love researching and exploring the internet or reading current nonfiction books, **I fully acknowledge there are far more things I still don't know than things that I do know.**

Sitting by the lake, I am often caught up in thinking about biology and about the dna of mosquitoes, dragonflies, pine trees, and turtles. **The code for life is all around, as are the mysteries of life. There is so much we still don't know.** My curiosity about some of those mysteries, fuels the drive to read and learn more.

Here **the practice of subtraction has brought balance in my life between the desire to learn and the need to be still and listen.** Mysteries about life will outlive us. And while I enjoy learning, I do not want it to consume me or to take up all of my time. It is okay to admit there are some things I don't know.

Sometimes I think **mysteries (and what we don't know) can be better understood, by subtracting speculation about them** (unless you are a theoretical scientist) and accepting that it is okay to have a mystery. There are benefits in accepting what is not known. **I have learned to be content with the idea that, I don't know (and possibly can not know) many things.**

All living things have their own set of internal instructions. A bird knows how to be a bird just as a germinated plant seed knows how to orient itself toward the sun to grow. **Even though I do not know much about the instructions on how to be a human being, I can still be one**, just as a cat can be a cat without actually knowing how that happens. I tell myself it's okay (if not even beneficial) to not know (or try to know) some things.

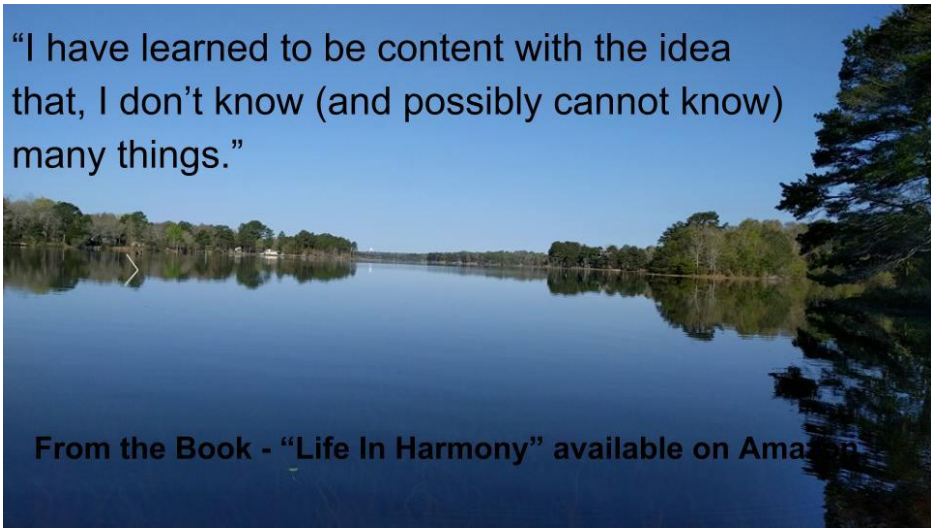
I love reading and learning and if not careful, I could spend much or most of my time researching the enormous volumes of information on the internet. But there is a limit to the number of hours in a day.

The practice of subtraction led me to a place where I learned to monitor (and thus reduce) time spent reading (and researching). That allowed me to find time for simple, quiet, observations in nature, and exploring my own internal instructions, on how to be and what it means to be … a human being.

I have found sitting in nature and being silent, allows me to better hear that still small voice and gather a sense of what direction to take (sometimes without fully understanding the direction).

Much of what I have done with sandbags came from common sense and trusting instincts.

I research what I can, but I also trust my own experience. The Hut was built using common sense, with a general plan coming from ideas in two books I read. That process worked. The Hut is still standing and it is stronger than ever.



Chapter 10

Things I Do Know

(abridged version from the book "Life In Harmony" available on Amazon)

"To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."
William Shakespeare

While there are many things I do not know (enough to write a chapter in this book), there are a few things that I do know with a high degree of certainty.

As this book began to take shape, I realized, even though there are better books about sandbags, what I have done with sandbags is far more than just building a sandbag structure. I felt like I could share some of the things I have done and how filling one sandbag at a time, eventually turned into my own little private resort. I could also share some of the lessons learned along the way like how I practiced subtracting things I knew I did not want and removing unwanted or unnecessary clutter (still working on that). We all have unique experiences, so maybe there is some value in sharing a few of the things … I do know, that at least work for me.

The idea and desire for simplicity has been part of my life for many years even though I often strayed from it, especially when Kathy and I started our family. Yet it was always there (including during my meditation times). Simplicity resurfaced in a big way around the time when I built the Hut. **Simplicity has stood the test of time** over the course of my life.

I was a firm believer in the power of love (for a simple definition, I used - love does no harm). So in my first year of college I adopted a rule of "**to each his own - as long as it does not harm others**" as my main philosophy of life (I was far from alone in adopting this attitude with many current and historical champions urging and living in freedom without harming others).

When I began the practice of subtraction, I found myself removing speculation about things (including ideas) I was not certain of. I wanted to let go and remove all notions that "might" be true and only hold on to those I "knew" to be true. Once the dust settled from the wrecking ball from that laborious process, I was left with 3 firm rules for life, that had stood the test of time for me:

1. **Primum non nocere (first do no harm).**
2. **Suum Cuique (to each his own)**
3. **Do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself.**

These simple rules, if practiced by more people could improve our world even more. I say "even more" because I think the time we live in is the best time in history. I am not only fortunate enough to be living in the age of the internet, but I also live during one of the best periods of humanity. Thanks to the internet alone, education is available to more people than ever. There is less violence world wide and people are healthier and living longer more now than ever before.

I've read Michael Shermer's "The Moral Arc" and Steven Pinker's "The Better Angels of Our Nature". They both offer compelling evidence that - these are the best of times. I fully agree there has never been a better time to be a human being. Many people think and say just the opposite. It is easy to long for the "good 'ole days" and fond memories while forgetting the many hardships the average person faced compared to today. We can get so wrapped up in the few negatives of modern living that we are blinded to the overwhelming positives.

My friend Sinder is fond of saying "**There's a right and a wrong and you ought to know the difference**". That is in line with Jonathan Haidt's book "The Righteous Mind" where he argues morality is not found in reason, but from instinct and innate sources. No doubt there are clear moral dilemmas that are challenging and can be viewed from opposite perspectives, but at a basic level most people do not need to be told it is wrong to steal from others. **Deep inside, they … know it is wrong.**

Sinder also says "**ask yourself if the payoff is worth the price, if it is not, walk away**". That is not a bad set of criteria for anyone to follow. I found myself asking this over and over during my initial period of removing things in my life that were not wanted or not needed. Do I really want this? What will it really cost me? Was it worth the price?

I have read Henry David Thoreau's "Walden" (something of a manual for self reliance) many times since my college days in the mid seventies. One of the ways he evaluates the cost of something is to ask how many hours of work will it require to pay for it? This remains a good litmus test for me today, when making decisions on what to purchase (or not to purchase). I avoid buying things that require many hours of work to purchase.

One of the things I absolutely love about Sinder (in addition to her ability to speak her mind and tell it like it is) is how she makes me (and others) laugh. **Another thing I do know is - laughter is good medicine.** It can cure what ails you and will help keep you healthy.

I have been fortunate to have Sinder (who has given me more belly laughs in 15 years than I had all the other years of my life combined) remind me of the value of laughter, but I have also been lucky enough to have a mother who has smiled and laughed all of her life.

Every memory I have of my mother is a memory of her laughing or smiling. She helped me to learn to not take things too seriously as well as to be able to laugh at myself. She has been a tremendous influence in my life (I will not go into how she treats everyone with love and respect

and is one of the kindest people you would ever want to meet). **One of the things I do know is the value of laughter,** thanks to these two ladies.

We have frequent family gatherings with all four of our adult kids, their spouses, and our eight grandchildren (including an annual family camping trip at a beautiful state park on the Gulf of Mexico). I am very, very proud of our children. I always felt our biggest job as parents was to keep our children healthy and safe. We managed to do that. Now they are all married and well on their way with their individual journeys of life, not only healthy and safe, but in their own unique ways successful and happy.

One of the things I enjoy doing at family gatherings, especially with our children and grandchildren, is to retreat to a corner some place and just listen to the conversations and … the laughter. **Laughter (especially in large doses) warms the heart and creates bonds that can seldom be broken, which is something else I do know.**

I also know - the value of freedom. I've regularly visited and written to prison inmates for many, many years. I think one of the hardest things to endure in life (other than maybe extremely poor health and constant pain) has to be long term incarceration.

Many times I am in Harmony and I think about those who do not have the freedom to enjoy living as they choose. To be locked away day after day, year after year robs a person not only of time, but also their dignity. I always try to keep my letters and visits on a positive note because so much of their existence is surrounded by feelings of defeat and loneliness. Sadly there are some people who are not incarcerated but are still in a prison of sorts because of addictions, relationships, finances, circumstances, or self imposed restrictions.

I am grateful for the freedom I have. It was my choice to fill sandbags and adopt simple living and I have had the freedom to do that. People who do not want to live simply, should also have the freedom to do that!

I am grateful for the freedom that comes from being born in the United States, although increasing regulations seem to restrict that freedom more and more each year. In looking back over my life - I have always had the freedom to come and go and do what I liked within the United States as I pleased (with only limited restrictions). For the most part we are free to pursue whatever path to happiness we like so long as it does not violate or restrict other people's freedoms or well being.

Yet, **being born in a democracy does not ensure freedom. If you are chained by the economic slavery of massive debt can you really call yourself free?**

Financial freedom translates into lifestyle freedoms. To choose lifestyles we cannot afford means we must go into debt. **No matter what you might want to do, if you are restricted by financial debt, you are not completely free.**

Good health, a good quality of life, and spending time with family are at the top of my priority list, but none of those things can really be fully achieved without freedom. I am talking about much more than political and financial freedom. Freedom and honesty in my thinking and opinions are also important to me.

One of the hardest things for me to do over the years, has been to be as honest with myself as possible. It is very easy to be influenced by other people or things I read or watch. Our brains have a way of spinning things that can be downright deceptive. If I do not keep my skeptical guard up, I easily fall into beliefs, choices, and opinions that come from sources I cannot always trust (sometimes including my own default way I look at things and people).

In several of Michael Shermer's books he points out our cognitive biases, such as our confirmation bias, where we tend to favor information that supports our beliefs and opinions. I have to pay close attention to the hindsight bias, described by Ralph Lewis in "Finding Purpose in a Godless World" as "the inclination to see an event as having been meaningful or predictable after it has occurred". It is too easy for me to look at the past and give it more meaning than it actually warrants.

If left on autopilot, we are prone to be influenced by many of these biases without realizing they could be wrong (often providing our minds with inaccurate information). **It can take a lot of hard introspective work, to honestly examine my biases, current beliefs, opinions, choices, and habits. A good dose of skepticism is helpful, along with disciplined, critical thinking skills. Ultimately, it is my love for freedom that motivates me to be as brutally honest with myself as possible.** I want to break any chains that keep me from being free, and being as true to myself as possible.

I do not plan to ramble on and on about the things I do know that have worked for me. Since I had a chapter about the things I don't know, I felt it only right to balance it with a few things that I do know, from my experiences.

Perhaps the **one thing that I do know is - the importance of listening to the still small voice within.**

Many times in my life I have had a strong sense to make a particular choice, or go a specific direction (not always with a clear understanding of the reasons). Nor was I always able to articulate that sense with words. Sometimes it was just a sense that something "felt" right or "seemed" right.

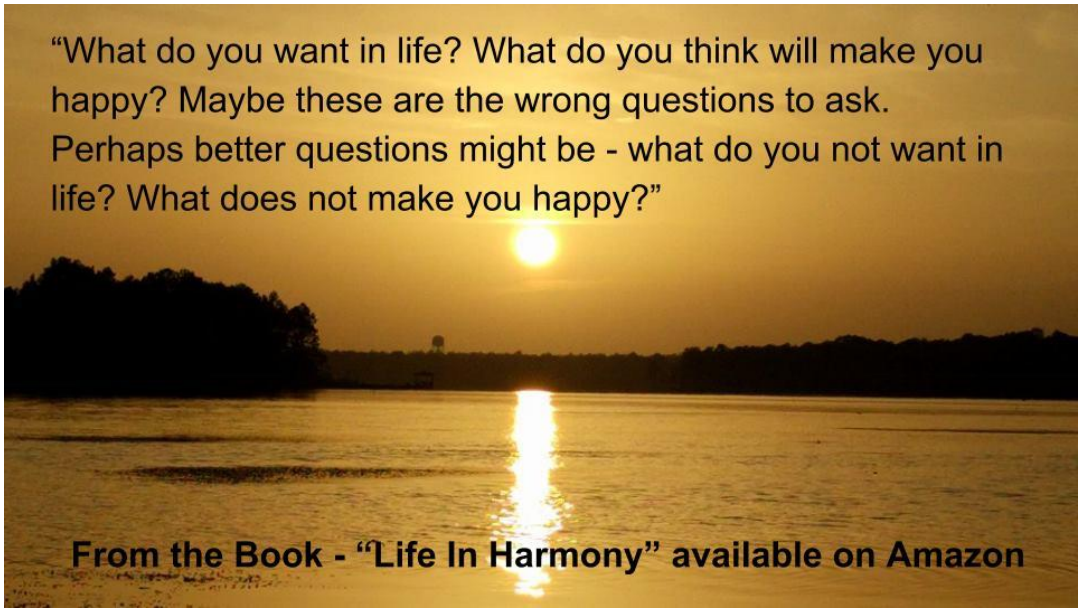
That voice always reflects my 3 rules of life. It is usually the voice of reason, love, experience, encouragement, inspiration, or understanding. I know that voice from hearing it over and over through the years. I do not always grasp the meaning of some of the promptings, but I have learned to trust the still small voice even without fully knowing the meaning.

There is no doubt, one of the things I do know (for me) is - I need to find quiet time each day to settle my mind and be still and listen for both daily guidance and long term direction, even if that means obeying the promptings to fill sandbags.

One more thing I do know, that everyone else knows as well, is that time is limited. There are only so many hours in a day. **How we spend our time is even more important than how we spend our money.**

I never saw the hours and hours it took to fill sandbags as a waste of time. In fact, for me it is just the opposite. I viewed filling sandbags as a good investment of my time. Now, as I enjoy retirement, I am able to spend my time doing things I truly enjoy, thanks in part to the investment of time to fill sandbags over the past few years.

I know that time is to be treasured, spent wisely, and not wasted. Time can easily and quickly be wasted, if we are not honest and true to ourselves.



To learn more about the book:

Life In Harmony

Visit my website:

https://sites.google.com/view/life-in-harmony/home

Appendix E:

MIA

Managing Internal Awareness

(abridged version from the book "Life In Harmony" available on Amazon)

"I have often regretted my speech, never my silence."
Publilius Syrus (~100 BC), Maxim

There are different ways to help prevent our minds from wandering. Mandalas, candles, incense, chanting, music, and using breaths all help us manage our attention. Models can also be added to the list.

Writing in "The Grand Design", published in 2010, Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow suggest how valuable models can be to help us understand reality. They coined the term "model-dependent realism" to show the value of a model is its usefulness. Different models allow us to work with different levels of reality. That does not mean we treat the model as reality. The model only helps to represent what is known about reality.

MIA (Managing Internal Awareness) is my own fabricated model to help me stay mentally focused. The model helps reduce anxiety and fear of the unknown. It helps me view life from different perspectives. It reminds me to monitor my mental health on a daily basis.

Normally, I stay distracted throughout the day. Without conscious effort, my mind tends to run on "autopilot" but thinking of the MIA model during the day, helps me manage my attention and reduces the amount of time I spend on autopilot.

Over the course of time, I have found value in specific techniques, or tools that I use to help me manage my awareness. I use 9 graphical images to represent each of the 9 "tools" or control points used in my MIA model. I like the graphical images because sometimes my brain can focus on an image much better and faster than words.

At times, I imagine myself in a control room like you would find at a power plant. Other times, I imagine I am a captain on the bridge of a starship. I visualize the graphical images as lights on a panel in front of me, allowing me to press one of the images to monitor and control my thoughts.

I try to begin each morning, in silence, thinking of each of the 9 tools. I mentally envision the 9 images and repeat the word for each image (the label for each of the images). Some days one specific tool might stand out and stay in my mind throughout the day. Other days, I may use any one or combination of the 9 tools.

I use MIA the most when I feel stressed, disoriented, or anxious. Usually one of the 9 tools will help me to focus and provide a sense of calmness.

Leonard Mlodinow wrote one of my favorite books, “The Drunkard's Walk” where he emphasises the role of randomness and the dominance of the bell curve. Our cognitive biases often lead us to misinterpret random events in our lives. By using a useful model (such as MIA), I try to counterbalance my tendency to assign meaning to a random event, by keeping my attention grounded in multiple ways of viewing reality.

By trying to stay focused on my MIA model each day, I am reassured of the lessons I’ve learned over the years as well as providing my mind with specific tools to stay focused and avoid innate cognitive biases.

Here is a list of the 9 tools and controls, I use in my MIA model. Some of them are active techniques I use, others are simply reminders of lessons learned over the years, from experience. All of them, help me manage my awareness.



Mindfulness - By managing your attention, you can choose what you give your attention to, as well as what you do not. You engage in many different activities each day, often without giving them any attention at all. By managing your attention, you can become mindful whether you are meditating or kayaking or doing any activity.

Breathing - Breathing is something you always do, even without giving it any attention. But when you do pay attention to your breathing, you will immediately find yourself, relaxing.

Condition - Take time to check your condition. Pay attention to your different states of being throughout your day.

Senses - You can adjust the attention you give your senses anytime. Pay attention to your senses to learn how to watch yourself and the world around you.

Perspective - You can quickly change your perspective in time, by thinking of the past or of the future. You can always bring your attention back to now and this present moment. You can also use knowledge and information to change your perspective of space, both at a macroscopic level and a microscopic level. Atoms are made mostly of space as is the universe.

Emotions - Pay attention to fear, anger, and sadness. By giving your emotions some attention, you can reduce stress levels caused by negative emotions. Let visions of the future be full of joy and peacefulness.

To Do List - There is always a to do list. Keep it short and give it attention when necessary, but do not constantly dwell on things that need to be done. Remember to keep the fun things near the top of the list.

Roles - You have many roles in your life. Everyone wears a mask at different times. Remember to use your imagination to view your life and your day, as if it were a play or a movie and you are in the audience watching. Sometimes you may imagine who is in the audience also watching you play your role.

Reality - Reality, it is what it is. Pay attention to your rules, your activities, your habits, and your routines. Give attention to desires and things that bother you. Once you focus your attention, you can change, reduce, or eliminate what is unwanted.

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"What do you want in life? What do you think will make you happy? Maybe these are the wrong questions to ask. Perhaps better questions might be - what do you not want in life? What does not make you happy?" - The Sandman

Join the Sandman on his journey of building simple shelters with sandbags. Follow him on his path of subtraction, removing unwanted things from life, as he carves out a simple lifestyle without sacrificing the conveniences of technology. Over the years the Sandman has found ways to simplify - transportation, finances, shelter, food, clothing, recreation, and possessions.

Take a glimpse and see how the Sandman spends time in a quiet retreat (made from sandbags), balancing an insatiable curiosity with silent listening. His thirst to learn continues to nourish him each day. Yet, he makes time for daily quietness, to help him stay grounded in his goals, intentions, opinions, and choices.

In this book, the Sandman describes how he started filling sandbags in 2004 and how something so simple, transformed his life. He shares his love for bicycles, bamboo flutes, reading, learning, hammocks, technology, and kayaking. His narrative has dozens and dozens of photos. He shares information (including costs, menus, and recipes) on what has worked for him to keep life simple, as he listened to the still small voice within.

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