

Navigating Polarities: A Personal Journey of Moving towards Life

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Acknowledgments

I acknowledge Claes Janssen, Swedish Psychologist, Author and Researcher whose theory and model, 'Four Rooms of Change' I used as a personal compass in navigating a personal and professional transformation. I have learnt about Four Rooms through my detailed discussions with Bengt Lindstrom, Founder and CEO and Drusilla Copeland, Managing Director International Sector, The Four Rooms of Change Group. I thank them for handholding me through the journey gently, but firmly.

Abstract

We live in a complex world where innumerable factors determine our well-being and cannot be grasped all at once. The complexity inside us is mirrored and enhanced by the complexity of the modern life outside us. The global inter-connected economy demands an ever-increasing speed of constant production and it makes it tough and many times even undesirable to work with ourselves at a level that is needed for a real, rich and deeply experienced sense of well-being.

In the middle of 2016, I experienced a deep personal and professional crisis. While I used all my personal resourcefulness to navigate the crisis and find solutions for the most critical problems of my life (or so it seemed at that time), my own mental health suffered. By 2017, I experienced acute depression. An unexpected meeting with Bengt Lindstrom, CEO of the Four Rooms of Change Group, changed my life. The personal journey shared, highlights the struggle between the polar opposite demands both inside and outside of us and its discovery with the help of the Four Rooms of Change.

I learnt that Feedback and Self-Awareness alone don't lead to Well-Being and it cannot be reached in a linear way. It has its own fundamental cornerstones. Depression has its specific Zero-Point that leads the way.

The model has a variety of applications

1. It can be a starting point for an individual and/or a therapist working with the individual to enquire into the source of unease, stress and even depression.

2. It can be used as a temperature check by individuals, teams, groups, organizations and larger social systems to find out where they are. Sometimes, we don't notice our stress and it is very important to do so.
3. It can be used to navigate transformations post personal crisis, since it provides a clear idea of where one is, and what one needs to do to move forward.
4. It is an excellent tool for management of well-being at all levels, and to live a life with less stress and more flow.

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The Journey

My story though long, is very relevant when connected to the theory

The Trigger

In May 2016, we had a picture-perfect life, living in a fancy condominium with a pool side view from our gorgeous balcony. My work was in a marquee company as a senior management team member. My son went to one of the most prestigious schools in the city. I imagined we would cruise through my son's education, but three months later I wasn't sure if the school would continue or we could afford our home anymore.

When life doesn't go as per plan, everything turns dark. The summer of 2016 came to our life with some very dark plans. As a single mother, raising my son was my sole responsibility.

In the middle of 2016, my manager declared that she didn't want to work with me and if I collaborated with her, I would have a generous six months to find another job. Two weeks later, I discovered that my absolutely fine 13-year-old son was unable to sleep at night and was blanking out at school.

All my efforts to understand my manager and do course-correction failed and it was a nightmare. With no option left, I signed on the dotted line. Meanwhile, at school, I dealt with a fast-declining attendance and performance. My son was forgetful and blanked out in the classroom. He stayed up late desperately trying to sleep and had begun binge eating. The

school counsellor was out of her depth in dealing with this situation and the teachers only wanted grades as before. The school asked us to leave too, if the situation didn't change.

The Decision

Unable to deal with so many critical issues I made a tough, but seemingly wise decision. I worked hard like the job was permanent and continued to host parties at home. I turned my back on my problems and focused on taking care of my son.

The Impact

By January 2017, I decided to seek professional help for my son and found a therapist. During the weekly sessions, we discovered that my son's childhood trauma could be the result of my divorce. I admitted to him that I had messed up. It was therapeutic. He became calmer, more expressive and decided to join the gym. Slowly, his school work improved and he fared very well in his exams. The teachers gave him a standing ovation at the end of term PTM.

My son wanted to move to Sweden after his exams. His father being Swedish, a part of his roots is in Sweden. I arranged for the move in August 2017, as I felt this would remove him from the current stressful situation.

My Personal Health Crisis

Barely a week after my son left, as I was at office working, my head started spinning, my heart was sinking, and I almost blacked out. For a person with robust health, this was a new and scary experience. My doctor diagnosed it as panic attack and put me on medication. I returned home completely shocked.

I was in a dilemma about the pills. What if it became an addiction? I needed to get to the root of the problem for my long-term health and well-being. I wasn't sure if it was because of returning to an empty house or the worry about my job or about my son managing alone in a foreign land. There were no immediate answers. Life had failed me and I felt like I was a zero. The depression was pulling me into a darker and deeper pit from which I couldn't extricate myself.

The First Steps

I needed to slow down. I had to heal and hence stopped looking for jobs. I registered a proprietorship company where I could work at my own pace. I called it '*Shunya Spaces*' the name reflecting my state of mind. I waited for assignments to come to me through those who knew and believed in my work.

A wonderful assignment with a school for urban poor came my way in 2017. However, the fact is that I made more per day post tax in the job I left than I made on the whole assignment, and I had guaranteed work each month. So, the demons were haunting me. Metaphorically, it felt like I was on the edge of a precipice with a beast behind me. Continuing to stand there would mean 100% death, jumping into the sheer drop ahead could mean 50% chances of survival...at least in pure mathematical terms.

Perspective

To put things in perspective, I need to mention that I have had strong suicidal tendencies for long. At the age of 15, I attempted suicide for the first time, but survived, thanks to my mother. I continued having thoughts of self-harm once or twice in a month while things did not go

as planned. I managed that by pepping myself up, using addictive substances to manage my anxiety e.g. nicotine, alcohol, work and also exercise. But these thoughts were at an all-time high for me at this moment.

The Fateful Meeting

When you really want something and trust the Universe, you get it.

In September 2017, a message for an old-time friend and OD colleague from Sweden, Bengt Lindstrom was to change my life forever. We hadn't spoken in 15 years and decided to meet soon as I was visiting my son in Sweden. I met him in Stockholm and he asked me how I was. No sooner he asked me the question I told him about my life amidst tears. My mind and body felt very light in a very long time.

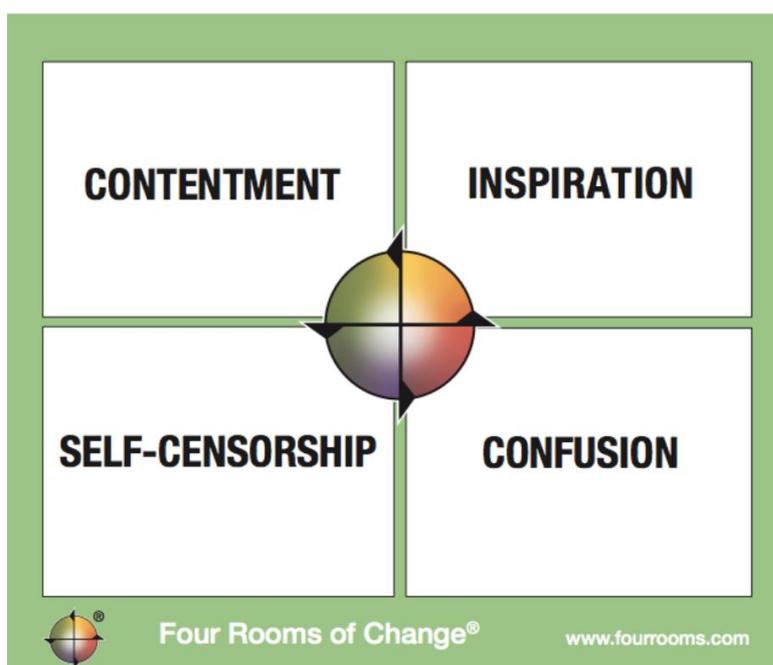
He wanted to meet again and I learnt about 'The Introduction to the Four Rooms' and 'Personal Dialectic.' It was a life-changing moment. It's important to know the theory a bit to understand how and why it worked.

The Introduction to The Four Rooms of Change

The Four Rooms of Change is a psychological theory of change developed in Sweden by Claes Janssen, Ph.D., a Swedish psychologist, Researcher and Author. The Theory helps describe what happens to people, groups and organizations in transition and provides analytical instruments and models related to the theory. It is based on the presence of two different ways of approaching life, ourselves, others and society as well as the consequences of change during crisis situations, development phases and times of stability.

What Claes Janssen discovered during the 10 years of his research between 1964-75 is that these two different ways of approaching life are polarizing. Moreover, these completely different conceptions of reality are a fundamental psychological predisposition that humans have. They are potentially detrimental if not recognized. The conflicts between individuals having this polar opposite personality predisposition can be so destructive that they render growth, development and conflict resolution nearly impossible. Psychologist Claes Janssen called this phenomenon ‘The Conflict Between NO and YES’.

These two exceedingly different approaches to life drive each individual in every situation and decision-making. These drives are the Need to be content and to belong and the Need to go “outside of the box” and to search for the truth. For example, people with these drives will be different in terms of creativity, authoritarianism, conception of reality, acceptance and maintaining of status quo, attitude towards rules, art etc. If we imagine them together, we can make a good guess about the dynamics of the room. It becomes possible to imagine the nature of disagreements and also agree that these disagreements exist. We can now see the psychology of the people as well as that of the group.



Each side of the polarity has a distinct psychological nature. Seen from the same side the positive aspects of it are clearer and more seen from the other side the negative aspects of it get accentuated. This results in the four psychological states of mind or “Four Rooms”. Claes Janssen named each room as CONTENTMENT (NO+), SELF-CENSORSHIP (NO-), CONFUSION (YES-) and INSPIRATION (YES+)

So, polarities, as we can see, is fundamental to our nature. The “Yes No” polarity or conflict exists inside us too, just as it exists around us in families, organizations and social contexts. When we are unaware, it is easy to misjudge, misinterpret, and miscalculate others and their intentions leading to breakdown of relationships and unaccomplished tasks. Working with the instruments is one way to bring the “YES NO” Conflict to the surface. In Janssen’s attempt to ‘make them one somehow’, he created the theory and concept now known as the Four Rooms of Change. Thus, each person’s perception is shaped by his/her experience.

And the insight about the YES NO Conflict helps us accept the other perception. The task is integrative. The theory of the Introduction to the Four Rooms exercise is built on the experiences of people in the room. It is similar to playing with the dog instead of just looking at it. We can either resolve or ignore the problems. In either case, the experience is that of flow and moving forward where one has been stuck for a long time.

My Introduction to the Four Rooms of Change

I constructed the Four Rooms Model with the help of my own experiences. I began to feel the integration of my emotions, thoughts and feelings. I had a wonderful lens with which I could look at my own debilitating life events. Many questions had answers now.

I was in the room of 'CONTENTMENT' before the crisis hit and had every reason to be so. When things start going downhill, as it did for me, it is as if a trapdoor opens and CONTENTMENT disappears instantly. Sometimes it can be gradual. We humans want to hang on to CONTENTMENT, so we wear a mask and act as if nothing has changed, even trying to fool ourselves. This is why we call the next room SELF-CENSORSHIP. I could not be in UNCONSCIOUS SELF-CENSORSHIP as the crisis had hit me so hard. I could not brush it under the carpet even if I wanted to. By choosing to take care of my son, I stayed in the CONSCIOUS SELF-CENSORSHIP. Thus, I had pretended that I will continue to have my job and we will stay at home forever.

With the help of the model I could see the YES NO Conflict inside me. Being an extreme YES sayer, to 'seek the truth' was natural to me. Being highly Self-Aware, I had consciously chosen a NO way out of my crisis i.e. CONSCIOUS SELF-CENSORSHIP.

There are two ways of moving through between SELF-CENSORSHIP and CONFUSION like walking through a saloon door. You can have a strong sense of SELF-AWARENESS or receive FEEDBACK with EMPATHY from someone. The model notes that if that was to be the case the psychological response one experiences is DEPRESSION. I now had the explanation to my medical condition. While I appeared to be cheerful and productive on the outside, I was crumbling from within. The Four Rooms Model and Bengt's EMPATHY, helped me slow down, notice my inner state thus preventing me from turning insane.

SELF-CENSORSHIP is defined by key word - Pseudo-adjustment. Strenuous self-discipline to maintain a pattern that feels empty or complete a task that feels dubious. The 'here and now' feels strained, hollow and mechanical. With no clear feelings, I was concerned about

how others see me, kept the mask on and played the game. Clearly up until the point when I visited my doctor and was diagnosed with depression, nervousness and anxiety, I was clearly in the room of SELF-CENSORSHIP. This was my 'Aha' moment. I could now see that my acceptance of having messed up while handling my divorce, had helped my son come out of his UNCONSCIOUS SELF-CENSORSHIP. He was able to hit his ZERO-POINT, get over his symptoms, and put his life back on track. His clarity of thought and decision-making shows that he navigated from the Room of Confusion to the Room of Inspiration by making some Conscious Realistic Choices showing immense courage.

Through the model, I realized that when I was alone, I began feeling the impact of that I had lost, more than ever before. The depression hit me hard and I was prescribed medication. Depression was at the doorway out of SELF-CENSORSHIP. It is when the NO Sayer inside me can no longer ignore the voice of the YES Sayer. If I had taken the drugs, I guess I could have prolonged my CONSCIOUS SELF-CENSORSHIP. The drugs after all are just ways to block our physical sensations so they become manageable - that's CONSCIOUS-SELF CENSORSHIP as well....that is shutting down the YES Sayer inside.

From that point onwards, a different set of words described my exact psychological state. Maladjustment, Doubts, Self-absorption, Chaos, Anger, Sadness, Fear and Inferiority Complex This resulted in poor contact with others. Something felt wrong and it wasn't clear. These are key-words that describe the Room of CONFUSION.

In the middle of the CONFUSION Room there is a ZERO POINT where a person fully realizes what is lost and understands that he or she cannot get it back. The person is prepared to leave the past behind and move forward to find a new INSPIRATION. I had indeed hit the

ZERO POINT of my existential life crisis. That's why I had called myself SHUNYA and named my company after. The question now was, if the Four Rooms Model described my life in 2016 and 2017, then could I use it to write my 2018? Will the Four Rooms Model help me to navigate myself out of the crisis, just as it had helped me understand the crisis? Again, I had questions but this time I also had hope.

The Outcome of Meeting the Four Rooms

Together with the INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUR ROOMS where I learnt all of the above, I also used the PERSONAL DIALECTIC, a self-level analytical tool which gives one clear information about one's own psychological orientation. These are core analytical tools connected with the theory that we learn during the certification. Am I a YES Sayer or a NO Sayer? Either way, to what extent? This has an impact on my perception of reality, my core motivation — 'to search for truth' or 'to belong', my relation to change etc. These answers were important for the understanding of the nature of conflict I faced at work. As I understood myself more through The Personal Dialectic Lens, I was able to see why there were so many irreconcilable differences between me and my manager. We both felt the other person was wrong and had to part ways. The experience would have been less traumatic and more productive had I gained this knowledge before and worked towards an amicable solution.

The Four Rooms Model helped me notice my tendency to stay on one side characterized by "Going outside the Box". Thus, I had a way of throwing up CONFUSION and saw others who were motivated by Belonging and CONTENTMENT as those who were never spoke the truth. Without Four Rooms, I judged people and with Four Rooms, I began to understand them.

With a YES NO conflict on the outside, I always wanted to push boundaries and was impatient with those who wanted to harmonize. I was labeled as a ‘person who was task-focused than People-focused.’ This impacted my reputation. When the YES NO conflict inside me was unresolved, it impacted my ability to freely flow with the happening changes. There was light at the end of the tunnel. I had found the key to unlock a future based on my nature.

By end 2017, I was willing to go on a Four Rooms adventure and risk everything. When all is lost, you get courageous and there is no looking back. I had hit the ZERO POINT. It became clear that letting go of the pretense is the only way forward.

One fine day, in December 2017, I decided to let go and build a new life. The Four Rooms Model led me to the Room of Inspiration. Like my son, I needed the courage to make realistic choices. Now the question was what and how!

Life with Four Rooms after Hitting ZERO POINT

I started with a clean slate in January 2018. I decided to rent out my apartment and move in with my parents. I sold my car and began using public transport. Now, I had some money with which I could survive and invest in building a new life. I went to Sweden in search of the right job. Being aware of my psychological condition and orientation, I became choosy about my job. I was certainly in the room of INSPIRATION. It was a new high and it was visible in the excitement I felt. On my second trip to Sweden in April 2018, Bengt and I decided that working with each other would be a Win-Win for both of us. There were many road blocks in making this a reality, but given the deep understanding of the choice we were making, our commitment to see this through was high. By August 2018, Four Rooms invited me to present my life story at their Annual Global User Conference and offered me a job in

Sweden. I finally moved to Sweden in May 2019 with my new job as an Organizational Development Consultant with The Four Rooms.

In 30+ years, for a whole year I haven't had any suicidal thoughts and I have Four Rooms to thank for. I understand that I need to change my life-style and I am prepared to do it. Being alive is after all a pre-requisite to everything else in life.

I am now very CONTENT with my life and proud of the journey I have taken. I continue to be inspired by the work I do and the life I lead. But, most importantly, I know that CONTENTMENT can go away anytime so while I enjoy it, I no longer cling onto it. Whenever I feel discontentment, I start a new Four Rooms adventure.

Learnings:

1.Feedback and Self-Awareness by themselves don't lead to Well-Being: Empathetic feedback and hand-holding till you feel safe to let go of self-censorship is essential.

2.Well-Being cannot be reached in a linear way. It is circular in nature and Flow is it's characteristic: By accepting loss of contentment and be willing to go through the circle of change is the way to well-being.

3.Well-Being has some fundamental cornerstones:

- A. **Ability to see the true nature of reality:** Which room of change I am in?
- B. **Visualizing realistic choices:** staying at Zero Point till one is clear
- C. **Having courage to try those choices:** Only actions yield to results

D. Letting go of Inspiration when it's time to harvest 'The Choice': else burn-out will be the consequence

4. All depression has its specific Zero-Point where we accept truth. Hitting and staying at the Zero-Point is critical to finding the way out of that depression: Only with acceptance we move forward, otherwise, will keep occulting and go deeper into depression.

Applications

This knowledge can be applied in the area of stress management to ensure overall mental and physical wellbeing.

Getting a navigational tool to use as an internal compass keeps one alive and kicking.

It can also be used effectively in individual and coaching/ mentoring contexts specially to navigate change and transition. I used the Four Rooms to navigate a very critical existential life change. Thus, it is logical that it can be used in any Change situation e.g. creation of teams or projects, reconstitution of teams, running a prestigious event, dealing with market downturns, losing competitive edge etc.

As the nature of the model is psychological and archetypal, it shows results in any human systems irrespective of the nature of the industry, organizational form, age or role etc. Four Rooms has been used in these contexts:

- Before stages of change and development (Personal and Business)
- For individual support, coaching, individual tutoring, mentoring etc.
- For Well-Being and Stress management
- In Leadership programs
- In Self-Development programs

Conclusion

I would reiterate that staying in SELF-CENSORSHIP has a huge cost that goes undetected. In my case staying in SELF-CENSORSHIP about my Suicidal Ideation since I was 15 has had a devastating impact on my life. The seeds of the personal and professional crisis I faced in 2016 were sown long before the ship of my life capsized.

Cost of SELF-CENSORSHIP

Censoring from Self: When one censors the experience of something is not OK then one denies oneself the care that is needed. This can result in:

1. Long periods of rehabilitation
2. Possible irreversible damage to the brain due to long term stress
3. Health impact like hypertension, high blood pressure, malfunction of thyroid, loss of memory,
4. Severe addiction to smoking and drinking.

Censoring from Others: When one censors their feelings and reality from others, they set wrong expectations and others perceive them as having no integrity, resulting in the following.

1. Losing relationships
2. Losing personal brand value
3. Losing trust
4. Thus, losing opportunities
5. Losing business due to not lack of opportunities

6. Incurring financial losses
7. Possible isolation and abandonment
8. Losing support

Finally, it is wise to use Four Rooms of Change to minimize the cost of censorship, because if left unattended, the consequences come at a cost that we cannot afford.

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