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Rideng the Waves

Exercise: Slow down to ride the waves

Talk for 20 minutes using the same topic you have been practicing with. Building on the skills from Slowing it Down and Aperture Awareness, you are going to experiment with paying close attention to the changes in your aperture each time your partner speaks. Sometimes, in response to what your partner says, your aperture will open; sometimes it will close. Maybe a little or maybe a lot.

If you notice that your apertures are stuck below five, the conversation is probably too hard. You may need to try an easier topic. On the other hand, if your apertures are not closing at all, the two of you may be playing it too safe. You might try a harder topic or consider whether you can take more risks in the way you're talking about the current one. (For more on taking risks in conversation, see "Working at Your Edge" on p. x.)

Set the timer for 20 minutes. Each time you speak, you'll allow yourself only one or two sentences. Then each time your partner speaks pause in silence and pay attention to your aperture. When you notice your aperture closing, stay attuned to it, see what happens next, and wait for the re-opening. Speak only after you've felt your aperture open again. So your pauses may be longer this time around. When the timer goes off, stop the conversation.

Reflect and write.

How much time did your waves take to pass?

Was it longer or shorter than you expected?

What was it like to watch your reactions come and go?

What was it like to wait for your partner's reactions to pass?

Were you able to use this method to keep your apertures open over the course of the conversation?

Were you able to notice the difference between your first response and your second response?

Discuss.

If you find this exercise challenging, you are not alone. The instructions are deceptively simple—slow down and pay attention to apertures. But let's look closely at what's going on as you practice with this exercise. You are attempting a complex set of shifts in behavior and attention. The exaggerated slowing down and the pauses are in themselves challengingly different than your usual conversations, requiring discipline and attention. Then you are practicing aperture awareness and trying to notice subtle shifts in your aperture. Finally, you are, probably for the first time, practicing the new skill of observing moment-to-moment changes and waiting until a wave of aperture closure passes so that you are open enough to speak. All of these skills involve developing mindfulness. If you are new to the practice of mindfulness, you may find this challenging. (Indeed, you may find it challenging even if you practice mindfulness regularly!)

Plan to spend some time with this exercise, repeating it several times. Notice what's hard about it. Perhaps go back and practice more with the previous exercises, then return to this one. In any case, try to recognize that you're developing new abilities that can't be rushed. Take your

time, and be gentle with yourself. You are building the foundation for dialogues that will strengthen your abilities to connect more with less difficulty and injury.