

Chinese Handcuffs.

I must have been in about the fifth grade, maybe eleven years old, when my little rural grade school out in West Texas had a Halloween carnival. One of the junky prizes I won that night was a woven straw tube about five inches long. The red, green, and yellow bands of straw were threaded together in diamond-shaped, diagonal patterns. The toy puzzled me. I had no idea what I had pulled out of the carnival's "Fishing Pond." I threw it into the sack with the rest of the trinkets and cheap candy I'd won, forgetting about it until I saw an older kid waving one of the same things around on his finger.

"I got one of those," I said. "What is it?"

"Chinese handcuffs," he said. "See, you stick a finger from each hand into it, and when you try to pull them out you're trapped. Here, let me show you."

"Wait...how do you get out of it?", I asked, although the thing looked harmless. In fact, it looked plain boring.

"Oh, don't worry," he said. "It's just made out of straw."

I was skeptical. Something about this bothered me. "Let me see *you* do it," I said.

"Sure," he said, inserting a finger into each end of the hollow straw cylinder. Then he pulled his hands apart and, sure enough, the weave tightened around the two fingers. "Straw handcuffs...I can't get loose." He grinned as I stared at the woven strands clutching his two index fingers. Then he wiggled his hands and was free.

"Now you try it," he said. "Make sure your fingers are in all the way, so you can make it work."

It worked.

I crammed my index fingers in as far as I could, then tried to pull my hands apart. The straw tube gripped my flesh and held my fingers close. I was surprised — even stunned — at the straw’s refusal to yield. The more I struggled, the more firmly the Chinese handcuffs held me. I pulled so hard my knuckles popped, but the straw just dug deeper into my skin.

The harder I tried, the worse it got. I started sweating and my face turned red. My fingers ached, along with my pride, but I kept struggling. I knew it was somehow possible to break free because I had watched the older kid do it. He was bigger and stronger, so I assumed more effort was the answer.

As it turned out, trying harder was the trap.

Eventually the other boy lost interest in the trick and shared the secret with me. “Take it easy,” he said. “Relax. Now push your fingers in instead of trying to pull them out. Give it a little twist. Now just ease your fingers out of the holes.”

It sounded all wrong, pushing my fingers *into* the Chinese handcuffs in order to get them *out*. I did as he said, though, and all of a sudden my left hand slid out of the straw’s clutches. Then I slipped the toy off my other finger, amazed at how easy it was to break free when I made the right moves.

That happened 38 years ago. Looking back, I can see how sometimes life is a lot like Chinese handcuffs. It can happen to anybody — you get caught in habits that look innocent enough, and don’t realize you’ve trapped yourself until you try to break free. It confuses and frustrates you when your struggles to get unstuck don’t help. You see other people enjoying personal breakthroughs, and assume they must be

stronger, more capable, or somehow better than you. You conclude that you need to try harder in order to break the bonds that hold you back.

Let me share with you an old secret about breakthroughs: Consider trying easier.

Relax. Take the pressure off. Try a new twist. The solution may be as simple as slipping free from the straw bonds of Chinese handcuffs.

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