

Change the world, start with yourself first... part 1

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Change is everywhere, and never ending. When we learn to use our special human equipment, our 'consciousness', we can learn to deal with the marathon of changes that has been triggered by COVID-19, and which is unlikely to blow over quickly. Just like during a real marathon, you can train behavioral change, day after day and week after week. In contrast with operating on auto-pilot, this however requires attention and awareness. How do we wish to live in an ever-changing ever more complex world? And what does that require? From me personally, and of all of us together?

Who am I?

Many of us have been raised with the expression: "Change the world, start with yourself first". But where do you start? Who are you after all? The sum of your ideas, insights and your actions? Or are those thoughts, insights and acting on them just the outside, the layer of varnish? "Who am I?" is one of our favorite questions, to which a really clear answer seems difficult to formulate. And just when we think we have formulated an answer, something changes again which impacts our selfperception. In our work, in our family or in our community, which asks from us to learn to relate to that new reality. This first of all requires an adjustment in behavior, because our previous behavior simply no longer fits the changes in our environment. Your behavior directly influences how you perceive yourself and how others perceive you: your identity. Or more accurately stated, it influences one or more of the roles, sub-identities, that make you 'you'. Sometimes the adjustments in our behavior, and the changes in the roles we play, are clearly visible. For example, when you become a father or mother a completely new role is added. More often however, the changes are less obvious, and are simply minimal adjustments in response to the continuous changes in our environment. Continuous change that is inherent to life. After all, how often do we find our children in the exact same state of mind at the end of the day? And how many days have you had with no unexpected changes or adjustments to your schedule?

Change is the only constant

And that is what makes change so interesting: it is the most natural phenomenon since nothing is entirely static, and yet it is often almost invisible since it is often a slow continuous proces. The rate of change may vary though, somewhere between highly dynamic and nearly static. Our behavior also changes continuously. It is not surprising that for many years there has been growing attention for the behavioral sciences. Books on behavior seem more popular than ever. 'Who am I?' seems to be one of our favorite questions. From within ourselves we feel, think and act. From our own perspective, the world seems clear, manageable and safe. But what if the view that our own perspective offers, gets foggy? What if our own 'glasses' become clouded? If our knowledge, skills and experience no longer suffice to effectively deal with the complexity in our environment? Or, if the changes around us are so rapid that our ways of dealing with them fall short, or prove to be outdated? Do we simply avoid confronting the new reality, do we bury our heads in the sand? Or do we recognize and acknowledge, however painful that may be, the changes that are taking place? Can we accept the reality that the world around us turns out to be less manageable and is changing ever faster than what we were ever used to?

Change, loss and grief

Just as we sometimes need to get a new pair of glasses when our eye defect changes, we can also adjust our 'glasses' and relationship to the world around us when the outside world changes. After all, it is our willingness to change, our adaptability that helps us relate to new realities. The corona crisis forced us to face a new reality: our world suddenly looked completely different from before. With no idea how long the situation would last, it has given many people, in addition to an initial short period of rest and relaxation, considerable stress. This is because our lives did not change gradually, but were turned upside down very unexpectedly and dramatically. The new reality therefore tests our adaptability, our resilience, to the maximum. And all of that at a murderous pace too. We could not escape the 'new digital way of working', and home schooling our kids in between meetings was inevitable for many of us. With mixed feelings, we accepted how our fathers and mothers were locked up in their nursing homes. We changed our behavior, collectively and drastically, from one day to the next. Because we were told to do so by those in charge, but possibly also out of solidarity with our fellow citizens. After all, no minister or law had imposed on us to do grocery shopping for our fragile neighbors, nor had they instructed our children to color beautiful drawings for people living down the street, or to hand out tulips in the neighborhood.

Yet, the amount of change has been, and often still is not easy for many of us. So, simultaneously we searched for and struggled with new ways of being, while we also mourned the loss of our so-called "normal" and our old freedoms.

Hope and a new perspective

Many of us also saw small beams of light after a period of great loss. Often as a result of positive experiences and emotions. A walk in nature with our teenage children that resulted in movement and special conversations. Compassion for our single team members or colleagues who felt lonely. Gratitude for our garden or balcony, and the peace we collectively found in nature. Nature that bloomed all around us, undisturbed by the sea of change. Unnoticeably, we occasionally learned, for a few brief moments, to exchange our familiar pair of glasses for another pair. Sometimes because we had stood in the other person's shoes ourselves at some point in our life, but often simply because we realized that everyone of us can be affected by illness, sadness, loneliness and death. And we saw and felt that what connected us, our humanity, is so much stronger than the differences that so often divide us. How wonderfully and quickly did we connect when it was most needed. Do we want to, and can we, maintain this sense of community and solidarity?

The benefits of behavioral change

As human beings we can consciously adjust our behavior if the situation requires us to do so. It's not easy for most of us though. We like to stick to whatever feels familiar because our brain are partly wired that way. Nevertheless, as humans we do have the choice to reflect on what is happening in our surroundings, and then consciously choose how we wish to respond to it: from our old familiar perspective, or from a new viewpoint? Reflecting and choosing your response is always possible, and something that we have been challenged on in recent months. The adjustments in our behavior have been difficult and stressful on the one hand, and on the other hand have often yielded positive outcomes. More time spent in nature, more attention for your partner and/or family, more 'authentic' conversations with family and friends and more appreciation for and connection with colleagues and team members by sharing personal stories. These 'gains' on an interpersonal level in particular have prompted us to reflect on the ingrained paths that we had often walked for years, the choices that we had made day in and day out...mostly unconsciously. And it made us wonder if life doesn't involve more than traffic jams and rushing to catch a plane to a remote holiday destination while feeling exhausted or even burn-out. When the Netherlands gradually 'opened up' again after the lockdown, we thought about and discussed which insights and new habits we wanted to maintain now that we

had experienced new 'realities'. Who do we want to be in the future, how do we wish to live, work and which relationships matter most to us? And so it is that our reflections on our behavior turned into reflections on our values and beliefs. The 'Who am I?' increasingly changed to 'Who do I want to be?', oftentimes followed by the question which behavior would match that new identity. After all, we had deeply experienced that it is our personal behavior that determines our living environment and our (self)image.

Who do I want to be?

Fundamental changes in our environment, such as a major disasters or a major personal loss, often gives rise to a personal transformation. The corona outbreak and the containment measures resulting from it undoubtedly count as such a drastic impactful event. The covid19 pandemic, like 9/11, the 1930s of the 20th century and The Second World War, can be classified as experiences that resulted in collective trauma. Known consequences of collective trauma include: increased anxiety, both on an individual and collective level, increased feelings of vulnerability and identity crisis. And it is exactly this identity crisis that is relevant in the context of self-awareness and behavioural change. After all, who we had always considered ourselves to be suddenly seemed less clear. What we derived our identity from was suddenly called into question as a result of virtual team meetings from the living room, with children happily dancing in the background or asking for help with their homework, or as a result of care for elderly parents that suddenly fell away. Weekly pub visits, bridge and book clubs that were cancelled indefinitely, and sports activities, whether team related or not, that were put on hold. And so, the outbreak of the corona virus gave many of us the opening to regularly ask ourselves: 'Who do I want to be?'. Not because we wanted this per se, but mostly because our personal identity crisis as a result of the world that had suddenly changed prompted us to do so. When you ask yourself this question regularly and actually test your own behavior against it, you slowly become more self-aware. More self-aware of your behavior, and also more aware of your own beliefs and values that underlie that behavior. By adjusting our behavior and recalibrating our values and beliefs, we as people change overall.