

Follow your heart, it's always right...part 1

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Our senses are our antennae to the outside world. They allow us to experience the world around us. Together with our nervous system our senses help us to test and (in)validate our experiences against our inner stories, that we consider as our truth. Are our experiences in line with our inner stories, our worldview? And if not, where do they diverge? And how do you handle the inner conflict that develops within you once you identify a mismatch? Do you ignore it, or do you further investigate the signals as well as the inner stories and paradigms?

Through our senses we experience the world around us. Our senses form our antennae to the outside world, with which we can pick up all kinds of signals. Signals that are then translated by our nervous system. This translation happens almost automatically. Given the vast amount of information that we get to process nowadays, the fact that this act of translation happens automatically is helpful. Automation helps us handle the amount of information that would otherwise be overwhelming. In case of experiences that occur repeatedly, a part of our neurons form a strong local connection around that experience. The next time a similar event occurs, the strong neural connection that is already present is triggered. And that trigger also immediately triggers your previous reaction to the experience. Voilà: the well-known autopilot. Things you do repeatedly are automated by our nervous system so to speak. Take for example cycling or swimming. Similarly, experiences that have had a great emotional impact appear to be deeply engraved in our (nervous cell) memory. And here as well, old memories and the reactions associated with these memories get triggered automatically.

A matter of 'translation'

How people internally process what they experience with their senses is extremely personal and unique. Exactly the same event is interpreted differently by each and every individual. As much as we have in common, we are also all unique and different. Genetic differences, upbringing, culture and previous experiences all play a role in the development of this unicity. For example, the values and norms that you have been exposed to in your childhood and your culture of origin are anchored within you, in the form of your specific unique neural connections. Together, the individual internalization processes of specific norms and values, form the foundation for the collective story of a group or culture. Culture influences us, and together we form, influence, culture.

Collective stories

Collective stories, no matter what stories, are a part of each of us since all of us grown up in some sort of culture or societal group. Hence, stories are inherent to people and of vital importance as well. They provide a frame of reference and guidance in interpreting the world around us. In our world, many different collective stories, worldviews, exist. Traditionally, the world has always had a wide variety of cultures, physical environments, languages, customs and schools of thought. For example, many of us are familiar with communism and socialism. And many of us also have learned about the collective story of neoliberalism, in which control, profit, market mechanisms and a small role for the

government play a central role. Since the rise of that ideology over at least the past fifty years, the diversity of our living environments and living systems has been impacted extremely negatively. By consistently and forcefully using and spreading the associated paradigms neoliberal thinkers and the regimes embracing this school of thought, neoliberal regimes have spread globally like an infectious disease. In addition to the above paradigms, there are also many other, albeit mostly marginalized ecocentric stories. Stories by various indigenous people and cultures worldwide that have been oppressed. However, because our collective stories have traditionally been so diverse, the same events can and will be 'translated' in very different ways by people from different cultures and groups. This diversity continues to exist today. After all, how much in control of life do you really feel you can be when your family cannot afford you to practice a sport, or when it remains uncertain whether there will be food on the table at the end of the every day? And, how can you imagine the existence of poverty when your parents own three houses and more money than they can ever spend in thier lifetime? And what good is a government subsidy policy that advocates self-reliance to someone who is illiterate? In short: it's all a matter of perspective. Perspective gained in your earliest years of life, dependent on where on this earth and in what circumstances you were born and raised.

Experiences and reflection

The question is how aware are we of the collective stories that have taken root within us? And, furthermore, how aware are we of the individual 'translation' of our individual experiences? A translation that takes place automatically against the background of those collective stories. It is our awareness that allows us to become conscious of the individual and collective story that we have internalized, and the values and norms underlying that story. Our awareness is our ability to reflect on what our senses are experiencing and what this triggers within us. Only when we take time to really consider what we experience can we sense what is truly there. And oftentimes, only then do we become aware of the outcome that our automatic translation yields. What does this tell us about our senses? And what does it tell us about the (in)validation of the translation of our experiences against our values and norms, against our collective stories? And how do we then use this all in becoming more aware of what is truly there? Of that which lives within us?

Incongruence

If our sensory perception no longer matches the automatic translation that our own autopilot generates, doubt arises within us. First of all, doubt whether our personal experience is correct ('I must have seen/heard/felt it wrong'). However, when the incongruity between one's own experiences and the translation can no longer be denied or brushed off as incidental, it starts to shake your worldview. You start to question your own internalized, and partly collective, story. Many of us will know how unsettling this can be. How do you renounce some or most of the things that you, and the rest of your friends/family, have believed in and relied on for so many years? How do you adjust your opinion(s) and beliefs without being perceived as inconsistent, unsure of things or a renegade? What if your inner compass feels like it's malfunctioning, and you have to or feel you want to adjust your own 'truth'? What if the story that has felt so familiar for so long, with which you identified, no longer rings true for you? Because who are you, who are we, without our collective stories? And how afraid are we all of being ostracized from the group, our community, when we change our opinions? How painful and scary does it feel to be standing alone, separate from the group?

What story rings true to me?

When we consider the profound behavioral changes that many of us have integrated in the past year and a half of crisis, the above may give us pause for thought. Are you aware of the behavioral changes that you have integrated? And do you want to integrate the new behaviour in the long term? And do you ever wonder what these changes, some externally imposed, actually bring you in the long term? For you, your community, the world. Perhaps you have started to doubt the usefulness of some of your own adapted behavior, and the ever-growing stress and polarization in societies worldwide due to ever more far-reaching measures and a growing number of crises? Please reflect consciously on some of these collective behavioural changes, implemented bit by bit and persistently labelled as 'normal' by the mainstream media. Do you experience these measures and their consequences in society, within your family and social groups as 'normal'? What behavior feels right to you? And what behavior does not? And if you have become aware of your own perspective, how do you act on it?

Awareness and change

The strong connections between certain clusters of neurons in case of ingrained behavior, means that behavioral change requires a great deal of attention. Those deeply ingrained familiar pathways feel oh so familiar and self-evident will not simply dissolve by themselves. On top of that, practising new behavior always feels awkward and uncomfortable at first. It is actually hard work! The good news? If there is one part of our human body that can adapt through repeated exercise, it is our nervous system and brain. Practice does really make perfect. The nervous system forms an extremely complex and adaptive system. Human beings are thus 'magically' equipped to continuously adapt to an ever-changing environment. When you can manage to hold your attention in the present moment and consciously notice what you are experiencing, you create space for reactions and perspectives other than those that pop up automatically. Is being aware perhaps nothing more or less than knowingly staying in the space between an incoming experience and our response to it? So that within that space, the 'not knowing' can emerge? And perhaps, could there be a multitude of perspectives and possibilities hidden within that space, within the space of not knowing?

Crumbling worldviews?

May I suggest you pause for a moment? Pause in the space between question and answer, and postpone your opinion, judgment or reaction. Do you start to feel that there may be a multitude of answers to most questions? That there are multiple views, perspectives, on matters? And can you entertain the insight that some of your newly 'acquired' behavior may be wholly or partly incongruent with the collective story that you lives inside of you, or once lived inside of you? Do you also sense that the old, neoliberal narrative of growth, control and manufacturability may be coming to an end, or has already come to an end? And can you endure the uncertainty of not knowing which story or stories will replace it? Asking yourself these questions, regardless of the answer, takes courage. And when these questions lead to feeling uncertain or doubtful, trust is needed to endure the discomfort of those feelings. And trust is also needed to feel that answers and solutions will emerge and present themselves in due course. Despite all doubt, uncertainty and not-knowing. And perhaps, above all else, asking these questions is asking us to let go of the old story. And accepting that this story has had its longest time. Let go of it consciously, despite the uncertainty that inevitably follows upon letting go. Fortunately, as human beings, we have the capacity to learn from our experiences. That in itself should give us hope for the future. After all, if the past year and a half has been a demonstration of behavioral change on a collective scale, perhaps our take-out should be that we can unlearn old

unsustainable behaviour and develop new behaviour. So as to allows us to move towards sustainable, just and inclusive societies. It's probably worth trying, isn't it?