

How to Intentionally live an Authentic Life

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Part 1
The Self Mastery Challenge

The Self Mastery Challenge

#1 Existential Philosophy



"I shut my eyes

In order to see"

Paul Gauguin

So grasshopper now you have done visioning but can't do it, you have worked out your aspirational values but fail to put them into action, you have a well being plan but can't follow it, you're great at giving others advice but can't help yourself...

Ho hum... welcome to the challenge of the spiritual warrior – the battle of the self versus the self

"The sage battles his own ego;

The fool battles everyone else's"

Pir Vilayet, Sufi Master

How can we achieve self mastery is the real challenge, and in the next 8 sections I will describe how to put together a self mastery plan. This process arose out of working with really successful people who were struggling in the crazy post covid context. It draws on theory and research from inter-disciplinary fields including existential philosophy, complexity theory, neuro-cognitive science, collaboration theory, positive psychology and happiness research.

Your self mastery system is like your operation system and the key question is – If you want to put together a self mastery system to enable you to be happy and fulfilled in a complex changing environment, what would the elements be?

#1 An Existential Framework

Specifically an understanding of how we create our reality.

#2 Complexity and Change

Tools to understand how a complex uncertain environment affects us and how can we create sustainable change – systems thinking, complexity theory, and intentional change theory.

#3 Happiness and Habits

How can we be happy and how can we create habits that sustain us? How do you get into a Flow state?

#4 Collaboration and Influence

How can we collaborate with others for mutual benefit? Who do you want/need to influence?

#5 Reset, Pivoting and Leverage

How can you reset when you're off track? How do you find leverage points? What's your step by step process to get back on track?

#6 Reviewing the System

How can you engage systems thinking and embed circular feedback loops that enable you to review and improve your system?

#7 The next BIG experiment

What do you need to experiment with now that will give you the biggest leverage? How can you design your next experiment?

#8 Putting it all together

How to work out if it all fits together? if not what's missing? Most importantly does it enable you to ACT

So, let's start with Existentialism - Existentialism is the field of philosophy that considers the nature of existence and it explores concepts including: -

- nothingness – the idea of an absence of being
- freedom - the ability to create our reality
- choice – and its position before logic
- authenticity – and the idea of striving towards it
- intentionality – and the direction of consciousness towards something

- action – as intentional and authentic
- angst – the uncertainty that leaves us with anxiety about the future

The key question is “How am I creating my reality?” and the position of existentialism is that we create our reality through the choices that we make and the way in which we act upon those choices. The authentic being acts from a position of freedom and with pure intent.

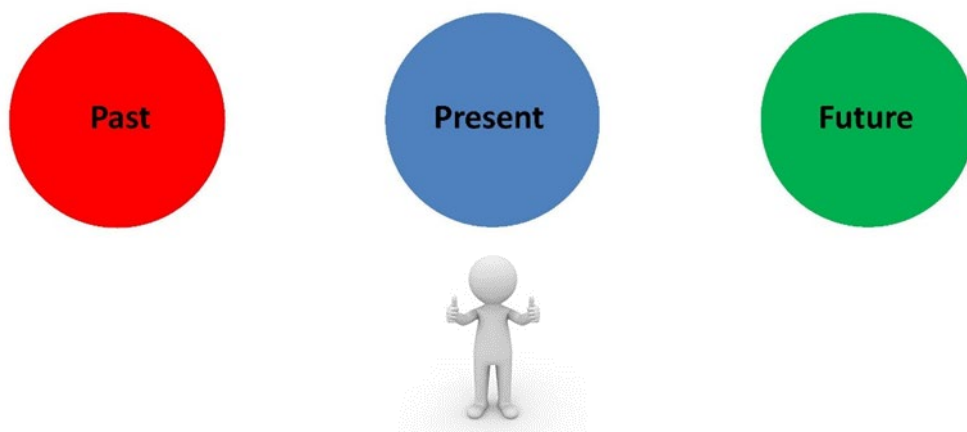
“It is the act which decides its ends and motives, and the act is the expression of freedom.”

Jean-Paul Sartre

The critical concept to understand with regard to Existentialism is the temporal nature of reality – what that means is that reality is always changing and is fleeting in nature – it is temporary. For example what is the present moment? Is it this moment now? or this one?

Consider the model shown below

We exist in three realms



So let’s start with you as a baby – the moment you come into the world is the present at that time – your first question to ask is ‘Do you come into the world as a blank slate ready to be written upon – or do you come into the world with some pre-determined purpose?’

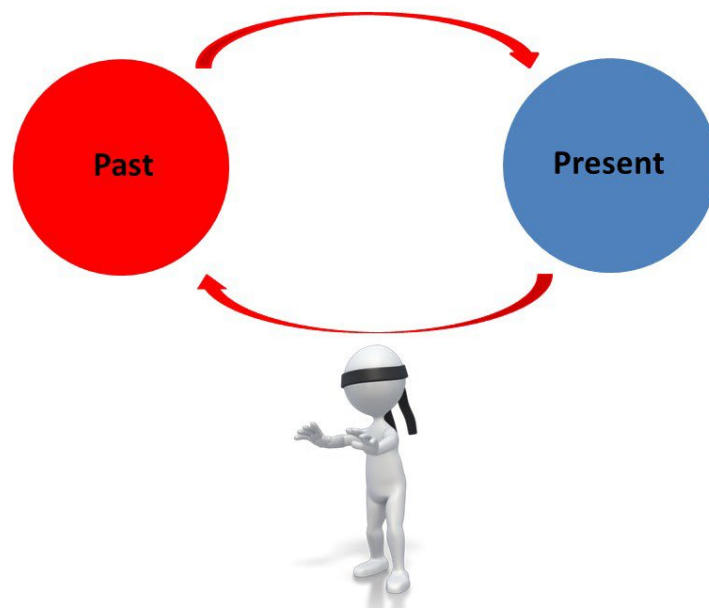
Interestingly enough apparently about 70% of people believe they come into the world with some specific purpose – the kicker is that when you ask if they know what this purpose is a much smaller percentage of people say yes...

Anyway – go back to you as a baby – so maybe you have a purpose and if so let’s assume that as a crying baby in human form you have no idea what this is or no opportunity to act on it. So as you sit there being a baby significant people around you – parents and others begin to tell you stories about who you are – you’re happy, gorgeous, cute, chubby, active,

alert, calm – you resemble your Mother, your Father, your grandparent, your long lost aunt, the gardener (just kidding) – anyway these stories are interpretive stories about reality that tell you who you are.

Now, remember reality is temporal so as time passes these stories become the past – you know ‘Remember when ...’ – so you can see that time flows from the right to the left – the present becomes the past. These interpretive stores that live in the past become the evidence that supports answers to two key questions – 1. Who you are? and 2. How the world works?

As you grow older and become more conscious and self aware – when faced with an issue in the present moment you reflect and draw on these interpretive stories to determine how you should respond or react. So, you reach back into the Past and bring it into the Present – in this way we react to events rather than choose. Our rational mind draws on who you ‘think’ you are – the personality self – and projects from the Past.



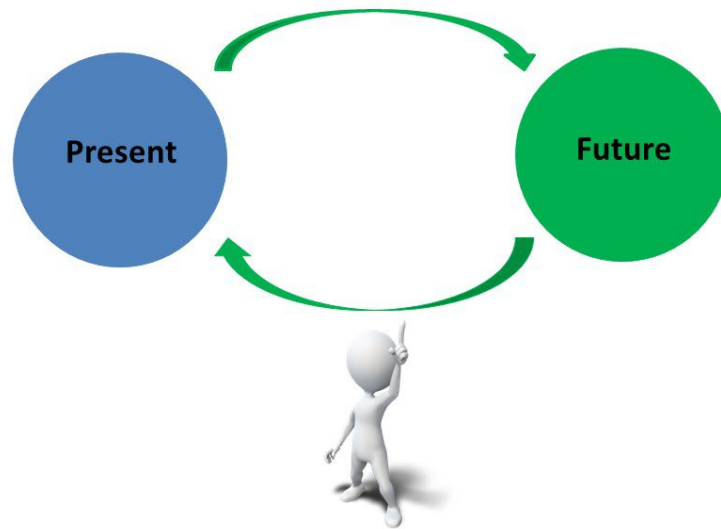
When Heidegger and Satre talk about ‘them’ and being free of ‘them’ they are talking about being free of these interpretive stories.

Remember that the personality self has lots of evidence based on the Past about who it is, how it fits into the world and how the world works – it’s all very logical, rational and safe.

So what is this part of the self battling against?

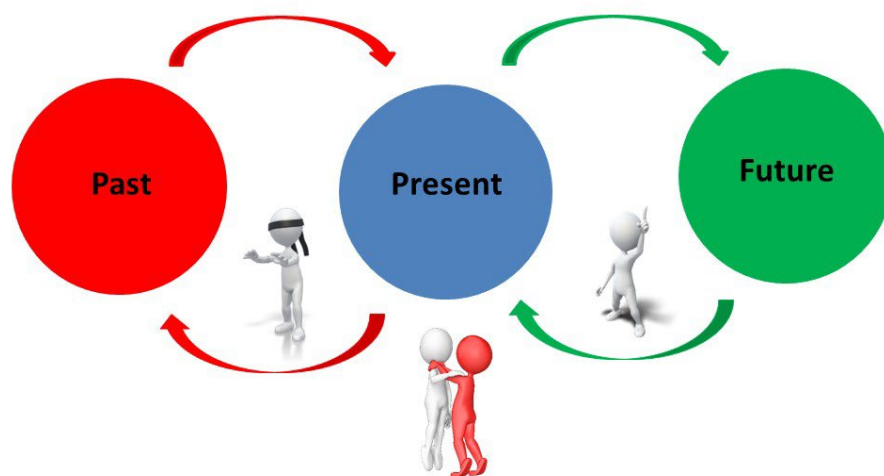
Let’s go back to the start with the baby – what if the self does have a pre-determined purpose? What if the soul really is eternal? What if part of you does travel between lives or maybe even between realms? What would this part of you be trying to do?

If you do come in with a purpose then this part of you is trying to project forwards in time – into the future



So, this part of yourself is who you REALLY are – this is the 'higher self' and maybe you can see that the issue is that we forget who we really are. The existential momentum is in conflict – who we think we are – as told by interpretive stories and the Past projecting into the Present – and who we really are – as held by higher self, intuitive feelings, essence, hunches, gut – projecting from the Future and back into the Present.

See the conflict?



This is the conflict of the self versus the self and you might experience this conflict as something like a job and a career that makes perfect logical sense but just doesn't feel right and is not fulfilling even though you're making tons of money and getting lots of accolades.

The challenge in all of this – from an existential perspective is to find true freedom from the Past – from all of the interpretive stories we have gathered in our lives – and to truly connect with and remember who we really are.

The personality self will try to control through fear – you can't do this, that's risky, be careful... The real self will resonate through love – this makes no sense whatsoever but I just love it...

If you're going to create a self mastery system that empowers you to be happy and fulfilled then the first challenge is to unravel some of this stuff and find some space in the middle to actually be present. Hence meditative practices, walking in nature, watching sunsets, cloud watching – presence... Take some time to gather all of the interpretive stories about who you are and how you believe the world works – then check what feels right to you. Are you living a life aligned to what 'they' have told you or aligned to who you really are?

Do you believe it's possible to be truly free?

To create something you must first see it as potential.

“Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.”

Khalil Gibran

The Self Mastery Challenge

#2 Complexity and Change



*"If you only do what you can do
you'll never be more than you are."*

Kung Fu Panda 3

From Section #1 you should now see that from an existential perspective there is tension between who you think you are and who you really are – and hopefully you see the idea that reality is temporal – hence it changes as time goes by.

Now consider that we are all born into a specific context – the context is the bigger picture environment that you are born into rather than the specifics of your life. Remembering that reality is temporal, I would propose to you that Context has shifted and we are now living in a complex environment. It is the impact of complexity that I would like to address now, and in relation to answering the question of ‘How to create a self mastery system in such an environment’.

Let’s start with a simple context – you are born into a stable isolated family where you are the only child – you get hungry, you cry, you get fed, you sleep – simple see? The cause and affect relationship is stable. Similarly, a simple problem could be putting Lego blocks on top of each other to make a tower.

Now let’s consider a complicated environment – you are born into a family where you are the youngest child of 5 – you get hungry, you cry but you are competing with siblings for attention so maybe eventually you get fed and when you sleep you share a room with others who maybe wake you up – complicated but still manageable – the cause and effect relationship is still pretty stable. The Lego problem now progresses to building a bridge set from numbered instructions with pictures.

So now let's go complex – you live in a house with one biological parent and one step parent – you share the space with siblings and step siblings – your Grandparents also live with you and both your parents work – you get hungry, you cry – someone will feed you eventually but it could be one of several people. The cause and effect relationship has now been messed up – you do A (cry) and sometimes you get B (fed by parent) but also you may get C (fed by sibling) or D (fed by Grandparent) or maybe other options. The Lego quest has now developed into – you have a box full of pieces and your task is to build an aeroplane.

See the progression?

Note too that complexity theory adds another type of context – CHAOS!! – maybe this resonates but let's stick with complexity for the moment.

OK so what's the effect of this complex context on your self mastery plan?

So, remember from an existential perspective you've built an understanding of how the world works based on rational logical thinking and supported by experiences that are now the Past? You think you know who you are and how the world works based on this – however in a complex environment the cause and effect relationship has now broken down and hence – guess what – now the past is no longer the best predictor of the future – you cannot simply project forwards.

Pause that train of thought for a moment and let's flip to Neuroscience – so this is the study of the brain and how it works. Neuroscience says that put simply – our brains are lazy! The brain uses a lot of energy so from a survival perspective we try to save energy by not using it – ha ha!

There are two distinct decision making process in the brain – a reflexive pattern matching process and a higher order conscious reasoning process. We default into reflexive pattern matching because it uses about a quarter as much energy as higher order conscious reasoning. When we experience something in the present our reflex is to search through our past experiences to see if we can find a match – a similar experience – and if we do then we default into exactly what we did last time. But see above, in complexity the past is no longer the best predictor for the future – so note again that your brain is lazy and I would say a bit dumb (sorry) – yes you're not as smart as you think you are! Me too (sic)

"It's the best possible time to be alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong."

Arcadia – Tom Stoppard

This desire to continually and reflexively pattern match will cause stress because you won't understand why what you've always done isn't working. Your personality construct based on the past will struggle – your internal dialogue may shift to considerations as to whether you are losing the plot – fight or flight response may arise...

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”

So – remember why we’re having this conversation? How to create a self mastery system.

In complexity then your task is to shift from being reactive – past orientated – to being intentional – future orientated. You also need to find ways of becoming comfortable in uncertainty.

Back to the temporal nature of reality – we are not living in a simple environment anymore so some of the theories and philosophies that have been around for thousands of years are not directly applicable. A thinking shift is required – so now let’s bring in systems thinking.

Systems thinking says that with a complex system you can’t understand the whole – it’s just too much to take in. So, to work out what’s going on you need to examine the relationships between the parts, how they are inter-related, and how new events emerge from these relationships. Critical also is to let go of the notion of certainty and embrace curiosity.

In such a complex and uncertain environment – and with the intent to become comfortable in uncertainty – curiosity leads to “I wonder what would happen if?” and our thinking needs to shift from linear – fixed mindset – problem solving to circular – growth mindset – experimentation. Got it?

The implications for creating a self mastery system are significant – first make peace with where you are at right now – whatever has led you here is all good – no amount of beating yourself up and trying to ‘work it out’ will really help. Reactiveness will cause a flight or fight stress response and down the spiral you will slide.

Peace

Peace with self.

“A life of the spirit higher still than that of the mind,

And that is the only life that can satisfy a person.”

Saint Exupery

Now from this point let’s go intentional – but wait – it can’t be along the lines of what (materially) you want to create – because you can’t accurately predict the future in this uncertain complex context (damn!) – it has to be who do you want to BE – what’s your Moral Intent? What sort of person do you want to be? What sort of world do you wish to create? What Values and Principles will provide the moral boundaries for this?

Peace

Freedom
Love
Respect
Honour
Justice
Fairness
Oneness

Now remember in a complex uncertain environment you don't know what's going to happen next so how do you drive this?

"Uncertainty is an uncomfortable position. But certainty is an absurd one."

Voltaire

I've written before about Richard Boyatzis's Intentional Change Theory – so a quick recap as it may make more sense now.



It's a circular iterative model – no beginning no end – everything you do changes what happens next and so on. So – make peace with now – think about what the ideal looks like (your intention) – work out where you're at now (self asses) – what the gaps are – make a plan to experiment based on curiosity ("I wonder what will happen if I do...") – circle back around and go again.

Always being bound by your Moral Intent – who do you want to BE?

Got it?

One more thing – you must protect your Moral Intent from reactive fear based thinking – it's easy to say "I aspire to freedom and respect but they did so they deserve to be treated like X even though it's in violation of how I aspire to BE"

Be careful what you justify and ask instead of yourself and others "What is it that you wish to create? What is your Intention?"

"You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean, if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty."

Mahatma Ghandi

Next we look at Happiness and Habits 😊

The Self Mastery Challenge

#3 Happiness and Habits



‘Alfredo Ramos Martínez (Mexican, 1871-1946), Vendedoras de Frutas, about 1937

“I think one may contribute (ever so slightly) to the beauty of things by making one’s own life and environment beautiful, so far as one’s power reaches. This includes moral beauty, one of the qualities of humanity...”

Robinson Jeffers ‘The wild God of the world: An anthology of Robinson Jeffers’

Would you like to be HAPPY?

Dumb question eh?

But does that mean happy for a moment? Happy for a day? A month? A year? A lifetime?
Generally happy? Mostly happy?

Daniel Kahneman says the experiencing self may experience happiness in the moment but if the remembering self doesn’t remember that you have been happy then you won’t be a happy person.

Imagine you go to see an Opera by a renowned performer – you’ve booked tickets well in advance, you’ve waited patiently in anticipation and when the night arrives you have put on your best outfit gone to the pre-show gathering to mingle – you’re having a great time. The opera begins – you’re in raptures – the experiencing self is having a great happy time – but then 5 minutes before the end someone starts tapping the back of your chair with their foot – you get distracted – it irritates the hell out of you...

When asked the next day how the show was – what do you say? Does your remembering self remember all the great stuff or does it focus on the 5 minutes of tapping?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi was born in 1934 in what was then the Kingdom of Italy – at an early age he saw bad stuff – one of his two older half-brothers was killed in the Siege of

Budapest, and the other, Moricz, was sent to labour camps in Siberia by the Soviets. He saw how war affected the adults around him and he wondered why some coped and some didn't. He immigrated to America and focused his studies on happiness – his seminal work is *'Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience'* – and he says,

"Repression is not the way to virtue. When people restrain themselves out of fear, their lives are by necessity diminished. Only through freely chosen discipline can life be enjoyed and still kept within the bounds of reason."

A flow state is one which allows us to disconnect from the space time continuum – it's an activity which allows you to 'lose' yourself – it may be running, dancing, singing, walking in nature – whatever rocks your boat.

Csikszentmihalyi says that to be happy and to be able to 'cope' with the stresses of life we should engineer flow activities into your lives.

Martin Seligman is widely considered to be the father of positive psychology – he started studying depression way back in the 1960s and proposed a theory of learned helplessness. Experimenting with dogs he realised that after conditioning, the dogs exhibited unexpected behaviours – when given opportunities to escape from unpleasant situations they did not – hence learned helplessness. Seligman proposed that depression resulted in part from a perceived lack of control over a situation. His work then pivoted into addressing what could be done to create authentic happiness. Essentially he says that there are specific attributes you can work on – positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. The idea of positive psychology is that the practices become self reinforcing so the more you do them the more embedded they become and your happiness levels increase. Of note he says that happiness is about 40% hereditary – so if you have learned unhappiness from your parents you begin behind the eight ball. Seligman says we all go up and down in a band – for some of us the band is high – you know those people who even if they are having a bad day they are still smiley? – for others of us the band is low – a good day is ok but we're not ecstatic. Simple practices like gratitude can bump your band up by 10-15%.

Arthur C. Brooks is a bit later to the party – he was only born in the 1960s but his claim to fame is that not only has he taught happiness at Harvard – he's also co-written a book with Oprah Winfrey!

Brooks says that happiness is not an absence of unhappiness and in fact we can be happy and unhappy at the same time – confusing eh? Anyway, he says first we should work out where we fit on the effective scale – high in happiness means you have high highs, low in happiness means when you're happy your ok but not jumping up and down – so you're one of the 'low band' people Seligman refers to. High in unhappiness means you have low lows that are pretty depressive, low in unhappiness means your bad days are sad but not really really low. So you can be high happiness AND high unhappiness – maybe bordering on

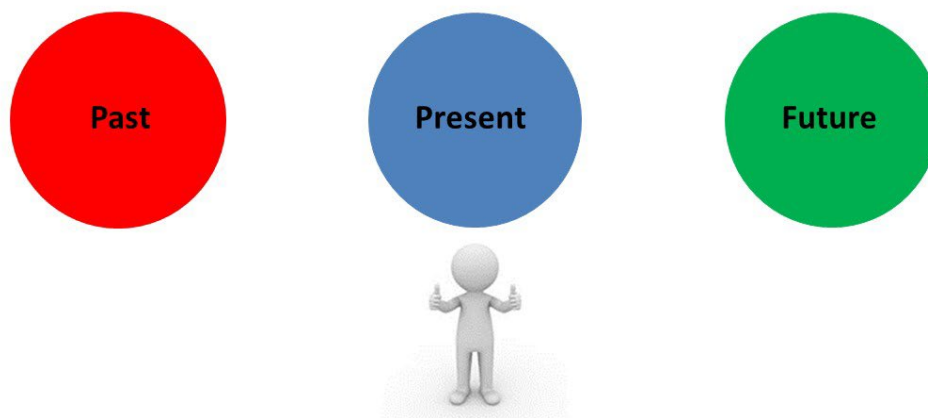
bipolar? High happiness and low unhappiness, low happiness and high unhappiness, low happiness and low unhappiness – get it?

Trick is, once you work out where you're at then you put in place actions to increase your happiness and actions to decrease or manage your unhappiness – again remembering that happiness is NOT an absence of unhappiness – it's all good see?

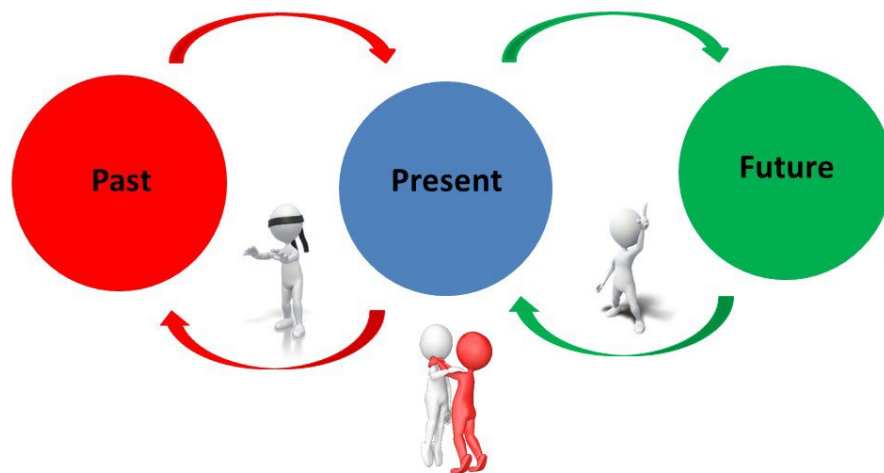
SO

How could we incorporate these theories into our Self Mastery Plan??

Let's consider our epistemology (our understanding of how the world works) and go back to Existential Philosophy – so remember that the key is to embrace the temporal nature of reality. Time flows from the future to the present to the past – aspirations, dreams or ideals collide with the present moment and we take actions – as they fade into the past we tell interpretive stories about what just happened.



If remembering self doesn't remember good stuff then self isn't happy – internal dialogue is bad – internal conflict may result.



+ remember neuroscience – our brain is LAZY and loves to pattern match – it wants to be right more than it wants to think so even if it's a shitty story it's still going to pattern match against it. Then the neurons that fire together wire together – so imagine a horse and cart going down a muddy track – first time it goes down the track it slips all over the place – next time there are ruts in the track so the wheels go into the ruts which in turn makes the ruts deeper – next time even deeper and so on – until as soon as the cart starts going down the track the wheels go into the ruts and the cart goes all the way to the end of the track – the little bits of the track have all joined together so now it's ONE action – the neurons that fire together wire together. A series of small actions have become one routine, ritual or habit. To get the cart out of the ruts and change direction takes lots of energy. To change a habit and a neural pathway takes lots of energy and is very uncomfortable – it's easier to keep doing same old same old AND remember the brain is LAZY!!! So being right is easier than changing.

So, see the dog in Seligman's experiment and the learned helplessness idea? See the self and the interpretive stories about who you are (or maybe who you THINK you are) and what impact that has on your ability to be HAPPY! OH?

So Csikszentmihalyi says – can we escape from this space time continuum and find some PEACE? Yes please...

You are not who you THINK you are – so habitual practice is needed here.

*“Be regular and orderly in your life like a bourgeois,
So that you may be violent and original in your work.”*

Gustave Flaubert

Lots of great work has been done on habits and habit formation but the simple bit is to understand the process – ha see how we are back to the temporal nature of reality? – the bits go in order – Trigger event – Routine – Reward. Something becomes a habit when upon experiencing the trigger event the brain ANTICIPATES the reward – the wheels drop into the ruts and the brain is already thinking about what’s at the end of the track. Obviously, this can go both ways – habits can be good and bad. But the brain is LAZY remember so the brain wants habits – the brain finds comfort in ROUTINE.

What should these routines be? And how could we drop them into our Self Mastery Plan?

Kahneman says remind ourselves to remember the good stuff – so let’s embed a reflective practice where we intentionally ask – what’s good.

Csikszentmihalyi says find practices that enable us to get into flow states – recognise that these activities have massive flow on benefits for the other parts of our lives – and in many case they will enable us to balance out more stressful experiences.

Seligman says positive emotions – be intentional about what you focus on – same as Kahneman – embed reflective practice and ideally gratitude practice + engage with stuff – this is Flow + relationships – don’t stay in bad relationships!!!! Put effort into building positive ones + meaning – what the heck are you doing here? Something bigger than self would be good! – do your Visioning + achievement – have some sort of measure of success and track it – reward self.

Brooks says – habitual practices to increase happiness – Flow states, exercise + all of the above – and practices to decrease unhappiness – reduce any practices that affect you negatively.

That’s enough for now – maybe you have work to do?

“Breathe, breathe in the air

Don’t be afraid to care

Leave but don’t leave me

Look around and choose your own ground

For long you live and high you fly

And smiles you’ll give and tears you’ll cry

And all you touch and all you see

Is all your life will ever be.”

Breath, Pink Floyd

The Self Mastery Challenge

#4 Collaboration and Influence



Antonio Gaudi, Park Guell

*“It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated.
We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,
tired into a single garment of destiny.
Whatever affects one destiny, affects all indirectly.”*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Why should I care about you? - is really the root question here – I don’t know you, I’ve never met you – Why should I care what you want? What you do? Why can’t I just focus on my own stuff?

Well... I guess I can but – yeah there’s always a but...

As Martin Luther King Jr. points out above, we do actually live in an inter-related world – from a simple physics perspective we live in a closed system on planet earth and so we are in this together. From a quantum physics perspective we live in an inter-related quantum field that links us all together and the field both influences us and is influenced by us – yes by us – see weird experiments such as ‘The sense of being stared at’ then dig deeper into quantum physics and see how a wave can turn into a particle because it’s being observed. Cross this over into the work of Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist Carl Jung and his concept of the collective unconsciousness then mix in a bit of theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking’s work and his proposal that time flows forwards and backwards and maybe we live in a world which is part of 11 different realms as described by String Theory – if you still have capacity to think then just ask yourself whether or not you believe that ‘What goes around

comes around' or 'As you sow so shall you reap' or simply put Karma – which apparently is a bitch.

Point is – maybe the idea of separation from each other is a flawed belief that leads us down a fear based path? All of this of course goes back to your epistemology – the way you think the world works and what you have decided are the key Values that you would like to live your life by. I'd suggest to you that all of the big problems now facing the world are problems that influence us all – climate change, inter-generational issues, the gap between the rich and poor...

Win – lose, us – them, right – wrong, blame – judgement, type thinking isn't going to cut it – we need to find ways of working together for mutual benefit – whether it be in relationships, workplaces, communities, countries or globally. And remember of course our task here is Self-Mastery – how do we create a system for self-mastery that will give us happiness and well being in a complex environment?

Back to Existential Philosophy and Intentional Change – our first task in all of this is to shift from being reactive to being intentional. So first, stop FREAKING OUT about all the problems in the World, your country, your company, your community, your life – breathe – make peace with right now – see how your brain wants to pattern match against the past and fix things? Stop this temptation – breathe – find some peace – remember what Csikszentmihalyi said about Flow? Try and find a way to disconnect from the space time continuum – stop the world.

Now, let's become intentional – what would you like to create? what would GOOD actually look like? How about people working together for mutual benefit?

“A rising tide floats all boats”

What would that mutual benefit be? What would the IDEAL look like? Happiness, well being, joy – fill in the blanks...

Remember here though that the past has momentum, Boyatzis talks about dynamic systems within systems that go in and out of equilibrium – to shift a system out of equilibrium you need to either have a disruptor – some sort of unexpected left field event – or an attractor – something that draws the system out of equilibrium into a new state. Because of the way the brain works in trying to pattern match all of the time and because the personality self is creating and interpreting the present based on the past – in a very evidence based, rational, logical way – the attractor MUST be an emotional attractor – so WHY do you want to create this?

So, now maybe you have an ideal and a why but this means nothing because we are still in the future – to bring the future into reality we have to act.

The African concept of Ubuntu says “I am because we are, we are because I am” BUT as Lion tracker Boyd Varty says – Ubuntu consciousness is activated through action and when we let go of control.

So what action do we need to take?

Hopefully now you are bought into the idea and benefits of collaboration? If yes – then what does this look like and how do we incorporate collaborative practices into our system?

First, begin with intentionally shifting out of a reactive state – note here that if you have, like most of us, lived the majority of your life with a win-lose mentality – and/or dealt with people who have a win-lose mentality then upon entering pretty much any situation your expectation may be win-lose and your actions will follow.

Stop! Yes we are back to stopping the world again! Think standard operating procedures applied to the mind – we need to retrain our default mode – before any meeting, gathering or interaction take a moment and ask – what’s my intention here? What would good actually look like if we were collaborating for mutual benefit? What’s the highest possibility?

Then go into the meeting remembering what Boyd Varty says – you need to activate it through action and by letting go of control. So always think – what action will drive this forwards? and note that – as per complexity theory – you don’t know what’s going to happen in the future so you need to LET GO OF CONTROL.

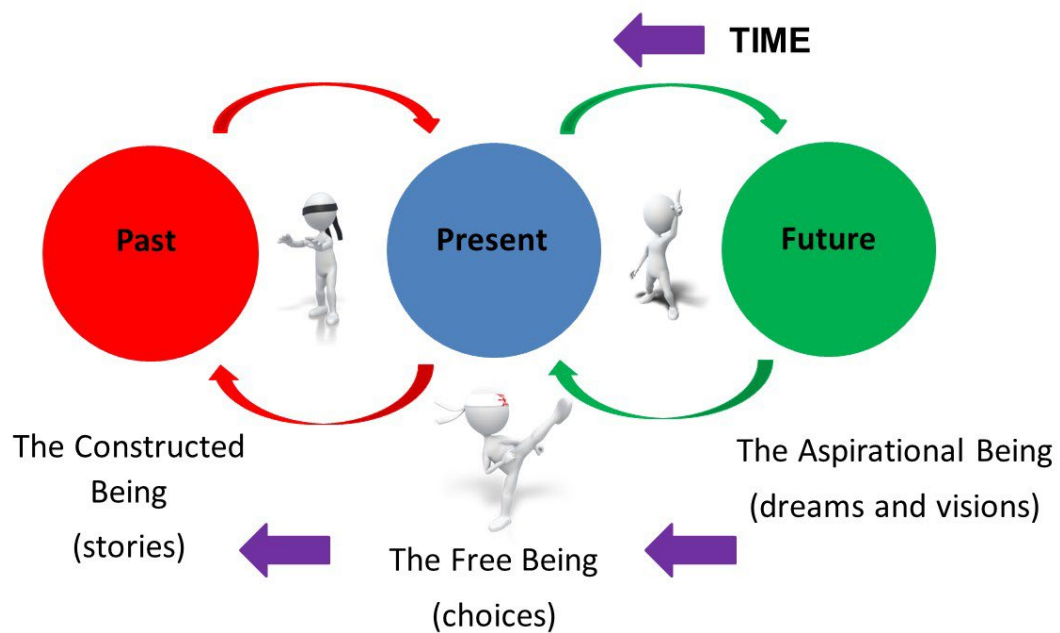
“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world – indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

But there’s more – and here we could dive more deeply into collaboration theory for some basic stuff – people collaborate better if they actually LIKE each other (go figure...) – so you may wish to consider the benefits of small talk, socialising and mingling before trying to race to get things done. Diverse groups do better than groups that are dominated by super chicken type thinking (Google the TED talk by Margaret Heffernan) – so we need to hear from EVERYONE. In collaborative meetings people all talk for roughly an EQUAL amount of time – imagine that! – and there’s lots of eye contact (although note cultural sensitivities here).

Back to our Self Mastery system – ask – Who do you want to collaborate with? Why do you want to collaborate with them? What would good actually look like? Why would you and them want this? What action could you take to move this forwards?

And then to influence – no not coercion as this would be fear based and emotionally manipulative! Influence – through aspirational creative ideals. What you need first is a personal aspirational ideal – what is it that you wish to create and why? Then if you want to influence what you are looking for is a basis of relatedness between your aspirational ideal and the other persons – get it?



Now you can connect the dots of some of this stuff – remember what Seligman says about happiness and the importance of relationships – see how we’re building collaborative relationships? My happiness is linked to your happiness. Then tie all this into the change process, the remembering self and reflective practice – noting of course that – oh yeah – it may take a while to change the default mode of us and them separation thinking – Boyatzis says 6 – 12 months (damn! I’m sure you, like I, really wanted a quick fix solution here!!) – so that means perseverance and of course gathering together some allies for the journey – and realising and accepting that you will fall down along the journey – so next week Reset, Pivoting and Leverage.

*“When you find the way
others will find you.
Passing by on the road
they will be drawn to your door.*

*The way that cannot be heard
will be echoed in your voice.
The way that cannot be seen
will be reflected in your eyes.”*

Lao-tzu in Tao te Ching

The Self Mastery Challenge

#5 Reset, Pivoting and Leverage



“The one thing that I always learned in acting is that failures are inevitable. And it’s then a series of failures. And then it just becomes about failing better the next time and to embrace that and not to be afraid of failure. And just to attack it with everything, every fibre of my being and to just go for it.”

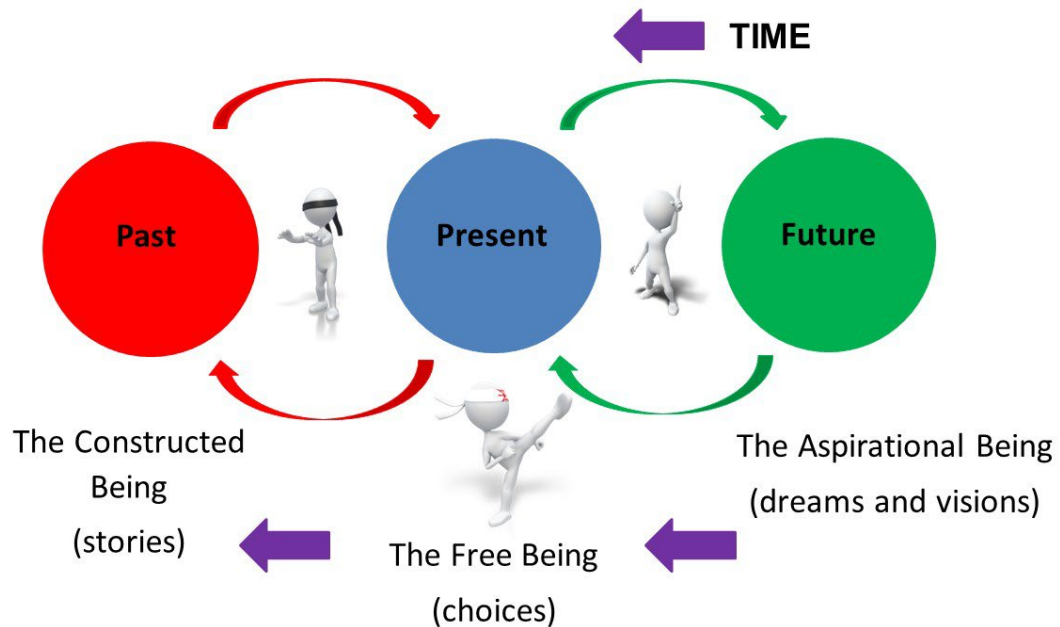
Michael Fassbender, Road to Le Mans

I love Michael Fassbender’s work and I really enjoyed the amazing series ‘Road to Le Mans’ which follows his journey to pursue his childhood dream of being a race car driver and competing in the 24 hours of Le Mans – the premier and legendary long distance motor race. Without wanting to spoil it for you if you haven’t watched it – he has a few setbacks – and there’s one bit where he has crashed and it really dents his self confidence but he still has to get back into the car, after they fix it, and drive through the night at Le Mans. He describes it as being out of his body, not really there – his dream has become a nightmare – so, I get the quote, I dig the idea of facing failure and getting back up – many great people espouse the same advice – even Nelson Mandela (when commenting on Bill Clinton’s personal failings) – said

“The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

BUT! – yeah but! – how do you actually do it?? Is there a process we could apply in our self-mastery system to enable us to *“Face the fear and do it anyway”* ?

Let's go back to epistemology – what is actually happening here when we go into a reactive funk and our dreams have become a nightmare?



Fassbender is a good example – he starts off as a kid loving cars and dreaming of being a race car driver but he and his family doesn't have the money so he goes into acting and says to himself that when he's 40 he'll have another go at it. If you look at the diagram, his childhood dream has faded way back into the past and at 40 he's most likely collected a whole lot of interpretive stories about the validity of becoming a race car driver at 40 – "he's too old", "what does he think he's doing", "he's putting himself at risk" – all of these stories are rational and logical. His dreams live in the future – unsupported by any rational and logical evidence – it is only his Will that holds him there - when things go bad he goes reactive - he has a good life, all of these stories foisted on him by others make sense – he should quit and go back to acting...

"Our doubts are traitors and make us lose the benefit we oft might gain by fearing to attempt".

William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure

From a neuroscience perspective we are at a fork in the path of life – imagine that you are walking along a trail of time – as you walk the future comes towards you. You reach a fork in

the path caused by a trigger event (maybe imagine a Tiger jumps out in front of you!) – to the left is the trail down the hill – you’ve walked it many times before – you know where it leads and you even know that at the end of it are many friends and family of yours waiting for you – it’s easy. To the right the trail goes up the mountain – it’s steep and you don’t know what lies ahead BUT – yeah BUT! – you can see the top of the mountain in the distance and it looks really good and really appealing.

But before you have a chance to choose, your mind has reacted to the Tiger and down the hill you go...

You’ve gone into a fight or flight response – your Amygdala has hijacked your rational mind and you’ve acted before you’ve even had time to think. So now the internal conflict begins – as Fassbender says – he’s there but not really...

*“And never have I felt so
deeply at one and at the same time
so detached from myself
and so present in the World.”*

Albert Camus

So FEAR has taken over, but where does fear live? and what is it’s nature?

Surely FEAR is interpretive? Surely it lives in the past and arises from past painful experiences?

Fear arises from our REACTION to the events in front of us and prevents us from being INTENTIONAL or ASPIRATIONAL about what we wish to create – and don’t get me wrong here – some fears are perfectly valid – if a Tiger does jump out in front of you RUN! But, lots of the fears we have are learned and ingrained from the past.

“Flap your wings, let go of the story and return to the only place of power – The present”

Eckhart Tolle

Back to how?

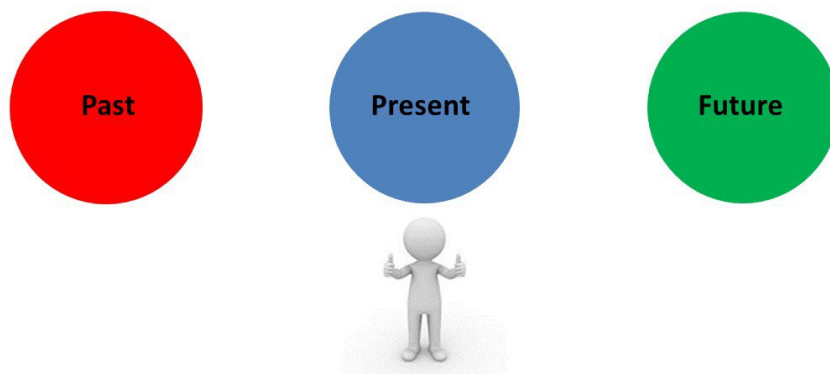
From a neuroscience perspective we make decisions using two distinct processes – a subconscious pattern matching process which is reflexive – that is – it’s a reflex – and a

higher order conscious reasoning process. Higher order conscious reasoning is a slow process that takes about four times as much energy as pattern matching – so from a survival perspective we try to save energy by defaulting into pattern matching. Tiger – run – simple!

Trigger event – reactive pattern match – open the pandoras box where we have neatly and carefully placed all of those fears and doubts from past experiences and crap other people have thrown at us – and bingo – get ready to be run over by the freight train of fear...

Retrain time.

Put your Past Present Future glasses on



Dreams and aspirations live in the future.

Reality lives in the present

Interpretive stories live in the past

Where does fear live?

If it's a Tiger it lives in the present

If it's a past negative experience or failure it lives in the past .

Note again - neuroscience tells us that before we've even thought about it we've reacted – if we try and think about it in the moment – that is when the trigger event is occurring – we won't be able to - so it would be good if we could choose in advance what we are going to do when a trigger event occurs.

First task then is – work out what the trigger event is. This will be an event that either causes an old fear based reaction or paralyses you into inaction – either way it prevents you from acting in a way that is aligned to creating what you really want to create in the world. So Fassbender – trigger event – crash – reaction – can't be present – can't enjoy what he really wanted to create – dream becomes a nightmare...

Process – when the trigger event occurs STOP – see how we're back to stopping the world – stop the temptation to react and go back into the past and down the rabbit hole of self deprecation and loathing and pattern matching against all negative past experiences that support the view that what you are attempting to do is wrong and that you should give up on your dream...

"I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain."

Frank Herbert, Dune

I think of this quote like a Ninja – the arrow is coming towards you but you do not turn away, you see it coming and stealth like twist out of its path, watching it pass harmlessly by – get it?

Only I will remain.

Breathe.

Now with the Past Present Future glasses – what's the story and what are the facts?

Story will be blah blah blah and then blah blah blah – get the poison out!

Then when you're done – what are the facts? What is undeniable objective fact?

See the distinction?

Power lives in the Present moment – reclaim your power – reclaim your Intent – what do you actually want? Fassbender – race – and ENJOY – Le Mans

Are you still committed to this?? Yes?

So, are you empowered??

*"Without courage we cannot
practice any other virtue with*

*consistency. We can't be kind,
true, merciful, generous or honest."*

Maya Angelou

If YES – and it may be NO – you might realise that actually you are NOT committed – which is all ok because in uncertainty we don't know what we don't yet know and it's only when we get there that we begin to understand – so yeah it's ok to change your mind.

Either way your next task is to ACT

"It is not how you look at the world that matters but how you act."

Buddha

So now you have pivoted out of reactivity and into intentionality – your task is to look for the leverage point – what opportunity does this challenge present me?

How can I act in a way that is aligned to what I really want to create? What can I play with now knowing that in an uncertain environment I don't know what the future holds?

And now you are back in ACTION

"The World's greatest lie: That at a certain point in our lives we lose control of what's happening to us and our lives become controlled by fate."

Lanza de Vasto, 'A revolution takes time to settle in'

So a quick summary

Remember what we are trying to do is to create a self-mastery system that enables us to live a happy and fulfilled life in an uncertain environment. Happiness lives in the present moment so if we are in a reactive state then the metaphorical train's off the tracks and not going anywhere so we need a process:-

#1 Recognise when the train is off the tracks and call it – Stop and Breathe

#2 Distinguish between the story and the facts

#3 Re-present your Intention – what are you actually committed to?

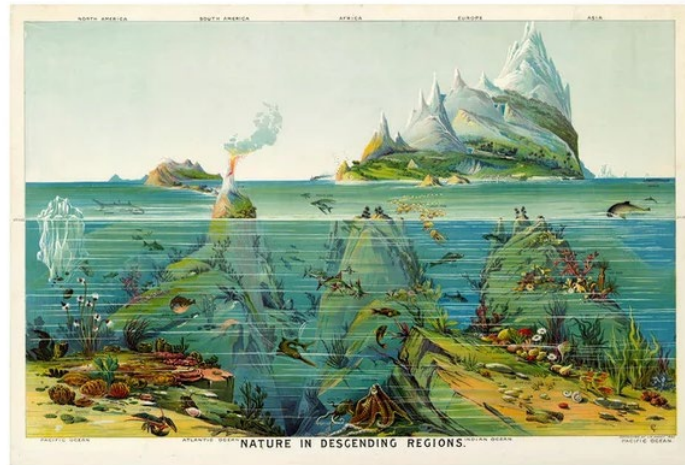
#4 Check you're still committed

#5 Find your leverage point

#6 Act

The Self Mastery Challenge

#6 Reviewing the System

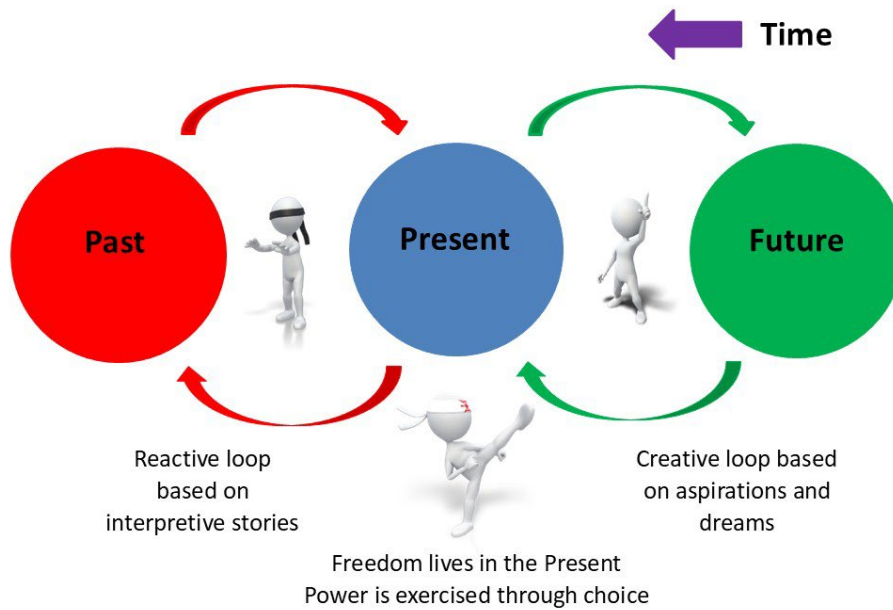


Art from Geographical Portfolio — Comprising Physical, Political, Geological, and Astronomical Geography by Levi Walter Yaggy, 1887 – sourced from ‘The Marginalian’ by Maria Popova (which I highly recommend!)

“There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit from the old order, and only luke warm defenders in all those who would profit from the new.”

Niccolo Machiavelli.

This Machiavelli quote may seem like a strange place to start from when considering the notion of systems thinking but really I think it gives some insight into what’s happening within you. If you recall the existential framework from part #1 you can see that the past has momentum – think of a heavy flywheel that has been turning for a while – regardless of whether or not you keep turning the flywheel it will continue to spin for a long time due to the momentum behind it.



When you start wanting to change something you are trying to create something new and hence beginning to spin a new flywheel which goes around the future present loop – but part of you – the personality self that you have constructed over a long period of time has a vested interest in things remaining exactly as they are – regardless of whether or not they benefit you! So – as Machiavelli says initiating a new order of things is difficult and there are enemies (within) that would profit from the old.

A simplistic and rational approach to this would just assume that you can fix things – but – this of course assumes that we humans are simplistic beings and can be repaired like fixing a broken bicycle. Maybe you see from the previous post on Complexity – part #2, that it's not that simple and not only are you not that simple – the world is also not that simple but is rather complex and uncertain.

Enter Systems thinking – and maybe let's just touch back on the work of Richard Boyatzis who proposes that we are living in a dynamic changing environment which is comprised of complex systems within systems all of which can influence each and influence the system independently of each other – oh shit!!

The nature of dynamic systems is that they flux in and out of equilibrium – so they find a stable mix which they flow along in for a period of time and then something happens to

push them out of equilibrium so they ebb and flow for a bit until they drop back into a new state of equilibrium and so on.

Does this sound like your life??

HA!

Ok – so you might wonder what shifts the system in and out of equilibrium? Either disruptors or attractors. Disruptors are left field unexpected events that shock the system – for example in your life – you lose your job, your partner dumps you, you have an unexpected health crisis – get it?

An attractor is something that pulls the system out of equilibrium – so think about herding cats – no amount of herding works but if you have a little treat in your hand maybe the cat comes to you? Same here – an attractor cannot be logical and rational – so yelling at the cats and telling them why they should come to you won't work... Likewise telling yourself from a rational and logical perspective won't work either because you have a whole history of past interpretive experiences that has its own momentum. The attractor has to be emotive – it has to draw the system towards it – so see back to the existential model – it must live in the Future – it's a desired state.

Back to systems thinking – and yes let's re-presence – we're undertaking a challenge to see if we can put together a self-mastery system to enable us to self-regulate and live a happy and fulfilled life in a complex and changing environment. So far the elements of our system include:-

#1 An epistemology – how we think the world actually works – so we can make sense of the world

#2 An answer to the question of what we think we are doing here – our purpose

#3 An answer to the question of what we think constitutes a good life – our Values

#4 Some practices and habits around holistic well-being – so physical, mental, emotional, material and spiritual

#5 A happiness strategy

#6 An answer to the question of whether or not we think we are all alone or linked to others – and a strategy for collaboration

#7 An acceptance of the fact that sh*t is going to go down and hence we need a process for calling it out and resetting when needed

So now we can add #8 A circular feedback loop aligned to systems thinking.

“At the end of our journeying we shall return to the place from which we started and know it for the first time.”

T.S. Elliot (on the paradox of enlightenment)

So we have the bones of the system now – how do we run it?

Systems thinking requires some thinking shifts and I’d propose that there are 8 key shifts you need to make.

#1 Curiosity – release certainty

We already talked about this – curiosity and gratitude are the super powers that will keep you going. Your brain will strive the whole time for certainty but in a complex changing environment that can cause you great stress – that’s the bit about doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. The feeling will be frustration about ‘why this isn’t working’ and can result in more frustration and eventually burnout. Adopt a light touch and gravitate to ‘I wonder what would happen if?’ and ‘Hmmm that’s interesting...’

#2 Disconnection to Interconnectedness (mindset)

So, this goes back to your central belief about whether you are separate from all others or if we are all interconnected. It’s very much a mindset that will drive collaborative type thinking rather than win lose type thinking – are we all in this together or not? If yes then think longer term – a rising tide floats all boats remember.

#3 Parts to Wholes

The shift here is to think about the whole system and not just the parts – at various times some parts won't be working and that's ok if the whole system is ok – don't obsess about the parts.

#4 Linear to Circular (feedback loops shape the future)

Your brain generally wants to think in linear ways – straight lines – how do we fix it etc – uncertainty and complexity means we can't accurately predict forwards so we can't keep striving for THE answer because as time rolls forwards THE answer may not be relevant anymore. We need to shift to circular feedback loops and circular thinking – engage with curiosity – 'I wonder what would happen if I did this?' – then circle back around as time passes and check in to see if anything has shifted.

#5 Analysis to Synthesis (are you a bicycle or a frog?)

So this is – the whole is greater than the sum of the parts – if you think the world is a bicycle you can pull it to pieces and put it back together and it still works – if you think the world is a frog you can pull it to pieces then try to put it back together but obviously it won't work. I'd suggest the world is a frog – and if that's the case we need to shift our thinking from analysis to synthesis – how do we put things together for a greater benefit?

#6 Silos to Emergence (larger things emerge from smaller parts)

If you adopt a growth circular mindset then from a complexity thinking perspective you need to be looking for emergence. Imagine a garden where you have planted seeds – when you go to look at the garden you're not looking for a tree – you're looking for a sprouting seedling – same here – look for the tiniest little sprouts of emerging stuff.

#7 Isolation to relationships (explore relationships to understand the system)

Remember the system is too complex for you to understand the whole thing in one go so what you need to look at is the relationships between the elements in your system. How does your happiness relate to your physical well-being practices for example?

#8 Solutions to Experimentation and Play

Hey – come on – it's meant to be a light journey not a heavy journey! The more you try to work things out and fix things the harder and more serious it can get. Shift your mindset to experimentation and play – so back to curiosity – I wonder what would happen if?

So – now’s a good time to lay your system out on some paper and review it – the last two bits that we will cover are experimentation and putting it all together.

“Before you study Zen, mountains are mountains, rivers are rivers.

After the first insights into Zen, mountains are not mountains, rivers are not rivers.

Then – after enlightenment – mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers again.”

Seigan (740)

The Self Mastery Challenge

#7 The next BIG experiment



Sourced from <https://futurumcareers.com>

"Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

'Through the Looking Glass', Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson)

My Uncle was a tail gunner in the second world war. He'd signed up, like many young people did, in his early 20s because he thought it was an exciting and noble thing to do. The fighter planes however were very good at shooting down the heavier and slower bombers so they worked out that rather than shoot at the fighter planes when they saw them, and reveal the position of the bomber because of the tracer bullets, it was better to do a corkscrew roll and avoid the fighter planes all together. The trick then became who saw who first and to make it easier for the tail gunner (my Uncle) to spot the fighter planes first, they decided it would be a good idea to completely remove the perspex bubble that enclosed him – hence enabling him to be able to see more clearly. So, imagine it – here's my 20 year old Uncle perched in mid air in the freezing cold, not allowed to fire his gun but instead madly looking as diligently as possible for fighter planes knowing that if they saw him first they would shoot to kill!

Statistically he should have been dead many times over. In his later years I was fortunate enough to spend a bit of time with him so I asked him what advice he would give to a young

person in order to live a happy and productive life. His advice? “Never lose your sense of humour” – classic eh?

So, that brings us to part #7 of the Self Mastery Challenge – and my Uncle’s advice is pertinent because it relates to the notion of how one should cope in a constantly changing uncertain environment. In uncertainty remember, you can’t accurately predict the future – even though your brain desperately tries to, and the uncertainty can cause internal stress as you maybe feel a bit overwhelmed and default into (again) trying to work it out.

Recall from part #2 that what we want to do is flip from reactive processes to intentional processes and ideally be clear about what our Moral Intent is – in other words – what sort of world we wish to create and how we wish to BE in the world.

Now remember as well from part #6 that we are driving our processes with systems thinking which means that we need to adopt circular type thinking instead of linear type thinking.

The aim of all of this is to become comfortable in uncertainty – so, comfortable in the environment that we are now all living in. The trick then to be able to shift things is to start to play and to – yep – keep your sense of humour!

Remember as well – from part #1 that an existential view of the world will indicate that your learned behaviours and interpretations of the world will actually trap you in a fixed and limited way of looking at the world. So we are back to the Jordan Peterson quote:-

*“Remember that what you do not yet know
is more important than what you already know”*

Just take this in for a sec – what you do not yet know is more important than what you already know – why would this be the case? What you already know traps you in a limited way of thinking because by definition it is rooted to the personality self which only knows itself through history and through past experiences. The assumptions that it makes about how the world works and who you are will limit your ability to see true possibility. What you do not yet know is more important because it gives you new ideas and new ways of seeing yourself and the world.

“Imagination is more important than knowledge”

Albert Einstein

So, how would we truly do this? Considering of course that we are all dumbly limited by the knowledge we already have and deluded into thinking that we already know best + the default pattern of our brain is that we want to be able to understand – or at least believe we understand – how the world works – because insanity (as a simple definition) is the inability to make sense of the world. OK?...

Start with controlling the intention – what do you wish to create in the world? How do you wish to BE in the world? – let go of the - what does that mean you DO? get it?

Shift to circular feedback loops and begin experimenting. What should you experiment on and why are you actually doing this anyway? Back to context – remember what we are trying to do is see if we can create a self-mastery system that will enable us to live a happy and fulfilled life. By now you should have put together most of the elements of your system (see part #6) if you haven't done this stop reading and go back as what I'm writing now won't make sense!

Remember systems thinking – and Richard Boyatzis – says that we are living in this dynamic changing environment of dynamic inter-related systems within systems that all influence each other and can influence the whole system independently. We've done work now to work out what the ideal actually looks like and we've embedded circular feedback loops so we can check in with what's working and what's not working. From our systems check process we can identify any blocks in the system or things that are not working the way we wish them to – these are the elements of the systems that we are now going to experiment with.

A good experiment begins with letting go of what you think the answer is – ha! This seems obvious doesn't it but because of the way we are trained to think with Socratic type thinking most of us default into this position. We identify a problem or issue and the first thing we do is go into root cause analysis to try and identify why this happened so we can then determine what the solution is. This by definition drives us back into the past and into what we already know and hence back into the stuff that is less important to us than what we are yet to know – exhausting!

“Genius is the art of non-habitual thought”

William James

So, step 2 is to resist the temptation to fix the problem – and maybe here if you’ve already raced back into the past and think you know what the solution is but now see you are an idiot – adopt my Uncle’s advice – always keep your sense of humour. Back to step 2 – make peace with where you are at – don’t waste time berating self on any level – what has brought you to this point is all good – see part #5. Step 3 then is jump into the future – what would the ideal actually look like?? Now you can adopt the Queen’s process and start imagining impossible things – and there are lots of different ways of doing this – walk in nature, cloud gazing, day dreaming – all of it’s good. Step 4 is – if this ideal reality was happening what would it actually feel like? (see part #6 and the herding cats analogy) – you need to ask this question because this is providing the emotional energy that will enable you to act and overcome the inbuilt rational logical thinking that is based on past events and that will trap you in the past – remember change is only going to occur at the optimal pint of DISCOMFORT. So – step 5 – why do you want this?? Back to life purpose and Vision and the question of what the hell are you doing here anyway!!

Now you’ve done the prep work for the experiment – next is to ask what is actually working now with regard to the issue you are addressing? And maybe consider – is there anywhere in your life where it’s working?

Finally we are on to – what are the blocks or obstacles or what is not working? and here’s where we come back to curiosity and the importance of letting go of what we think the answer may be. Experimentation time – I wonder what would happen if I did this??

What do you think might shift?

How would you measure that?

What’s the timeframe for your experiment?

When are you going to review things?

How could you reward success?

Now you have set up a playful experiment – however – two quick points – your experiment may not work – DAMN!! – but that’s ok – if you are stepping out of your comfort zone where you know everything then you are going to have more setbacks and fail more – be prepared for this – hence have a reset plan (see part #5). Secondly, note that the horizon doesn’t have to be far away. When you are in a challenging space then it’s hard to see very far ahead at all – maybe even as short as next week or even tomorrow – so your experiment horizon can be very very close – “I wonder what would happen if I do this tomorrow?”

And the last bit – PLAY!

“It is not the critic who counts, not the one who points out how the strong [person] stumbled or how the doers of deeds might have done them better. The credit belongs to the [person] who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred with sweat and dust and blood; who

strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions and spends [themselves] in a worthy cause and who if [they] fail, at least fails while bearing greatly so that [their] place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory or defeat."

Theodore Roosevelt, 'History as Literature' (1913) IV Citizenship in a Republic

(my edits in square brackets to update gender)

The Self Mastery Challenge

#8 Putting it all together



"Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one."

Albert Einstein

In Tuscany, Central Italy, near to Pisa, there is a walled city called Lucca which traces its origins way back to Roman times. Within the walls is the Cattedrale di San Martino – the San Martino Cathedral – construction of which began in 1063 – and carved into one of the pillars in the portico is the Labyrinth pictured above.

The Latin inscription says “HIC QUEM CRETICUS EDIT. DAEDALUS EST LABERINTHUS . DE QUO NULLUS VADERE . QUIVIT QUI FUIT INTUS . NI THESEUS GRATIS ADRIANE . STAMINE JUTUS” – which translates as - “This is the labyrinth built by Dedalus of Crete; all who entered therein were lost, save Theseus, thanks to Ariadne’s thread.

In Greek mythology, Theseus is a divine hero famous for slaying the Minotaur – a half-man, half-bull monster that lived in the Labyrinth created by Daedalus. Theseus entered the Labyrinth with the intent of killing the Minotaur and was given a ball of thread by Ariadne which he tied to the entrance so he could find his way back out.

The story of the labyrinth and Arianna's thread carries within itself a metaphorical message – that the path of life is like a labyrinth and that many of us are searching for a way out of this superficial and materialistic world – an awakening.

Our existence is a continuous search for the light indicating the way out, similar for the search of the Grail, enlightenment, seen as the roaming in the labyrinth synonymous to roaming in the dark. Only if we follow the thread of Arianna, a thread which appears to us in everyday life with its dead ends and uncertainties, only if we can find this leading thread and follow it, only then can we find a way out. Everyone has the possibility of a way out, because everyone has the help of Arianna's thread – it's all in recognising it. The consequences that appear to us in everyday life, those are the signs that invite us to follow them, alas most of the time people decide to take other roads, remaining trapped in the labyrinth of their sad existence.

You may relate to this story – you may have been through experiences in your life where you thought you were on the right track only to find that it was a dead end and you had to retrace your steps and find your way again. From the perspective of this analogy – the question that I am interested in is – how do you find the thread? As noted above, all of us have the opportunity to have help from Ariadne's thread but often we don't recognise it – you know those situations where when you look back you and think – oh no it was right in front of me all along I just didn't see it!

“All of us, whether or not we are warriors, have a cubic centimetre of chance that pops out in front of our eyes from time to time. The difference between an average [person] and a warrior is that the warrior is aware of this, and one of [their] tasks is to be alert, deliberately waiting, so that when [their] cubic centimetre pops out [they] have the necessary speed, the prowess, to pick it up.”

Carlos Casteneda in 'Journey to Ixtlan' (my edits to update gender in square brackets)

Putting together a self-mastery system is all about increasing our chances of being able to see Ariadne's thread or the cubic centimetre of chance, when it is right in front of us. I have written about the following elements: -

#1 An Existential Framework

Specifically, an understanding of how we create our reality.

#2 Complexity and Change

Tools to understand how a complex uncertain environment affects us and how can we create sustainable change – systems thinking, complexity theory, and intentional change theory.

#3 Happiness and Habits

How can we be happy and how can we create habits that sustain us? How do you get into a Flow state?

#4 Collaboration and Influence

How can we collaborate with others for mutual benefit? Who do you want/need to influence?

#5 Reset, Pivoting and Leverage

How can you reset when you're off track? How do you find leverage points? What's your step by step process to get back on track?

#6 Reviewing the System

How can you engage systems thinking and embed circular feedback loops that enable you to review and improve your system?

#7 The next BIG experiment

What do you need to experiment with now that will give you the biggest leverage? How can you design your next experiment?

In all of these elements there are challenges in the theory that can cause us to become delusional and to miss Ariadne's thread.

With regard to Existentialism and the question of how we are creating our reality we can be challenged by the question of Fate versus Destiny. We can carry blocks from negative stories arising from past experiences that become baggage – crap that we carry forwards into our future. This in turn can impact on our Self-worth causing things like Imposter syndrome and procrastination!

When considering Complexity theory we are challenged by our brain's need for certainty. Instead of being able to jump into the 'what if?' we strive instead to determine 'what is'.

Neuro-cognitive science adds to this dilemma as it tells us that from a survival perspective we are always trying to save energy and hence we effectively have a 'lazy brain' which wants to default into reflexive pattern matching the whole time!! AH! – this in turn can cause us to miss the metaphorical cubic centimetre of opportunity – which we generally only realise when it is too late and hence Ariadne's thread slips through our fingers.

Systems thinking encourages us to adopt a whole lot of different ways of thinking – central of which is switching from linear to circular thinking and again – of course – adopting the whole notion of being comfortable in uncertainty.

Intentional Change Theory – remember good old Richard Boyatzis – implores us again to become curious and experimental in our thinking whilst tackling the challenge of the brain's need to set and forget and catastrophise things into a long time horizon. Oh yeah – and of course we forget to ask for help!

Load onto this, insights from happiness theory which essentially says that often we focus on the wrong thing!!!!

So Self Mastery – I would humbly suggest to you – is really a challenge of rewiring some learned habits and remembering who we really are – creating habitual practices that emphasize the importance of play and reward and then collaborating with others by communicating for truth. Most importantly, I suggest that it is an awakening of the human spirit.

“Where spirit does not work with the hand there is no art.”

Leonardo Da Vinci

Now, you have some bare bones trainer wheels in place, it is worth asking how do you actually walk this path?

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it.

Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.”

Goethe

Part 2

WALK A SACRED PATH

Walk a Sacred Path

#1 Becoming comfortable in uncertainty



“Anyone who lives within their means suffers from a lack of imagination.”

Oscar Wilde

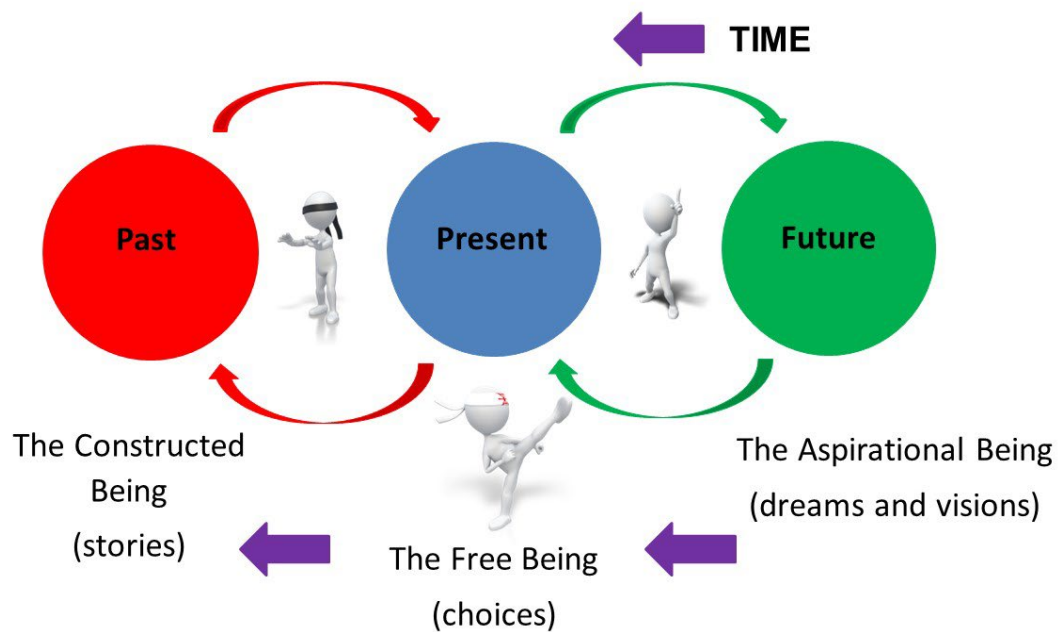
In the classic C.S. Lewis story ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’ the four Pevensie siblings – Lucy, Edmund, Susan and Peter are evacuated from London in 1940 to escape the bombing blitz. They are sent to stay with Professor Digory Kirke at a large house in the English countryside and whilst playing hide and seek one day, the youngest child Lucy, hides in a wardrobe. Fearing she will be found, Lucy goes deeper into the wardrobe and to her surprise ends up in a mystical land called Narnia where animals speak and a battle between the evil White Witch and Aslan the Lion unfolds.

Books like ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’, the Tolkien books ‘The Hobbit’ and the ‘The Lord of the Rings’, and all of the films like ‘Star Wars’ that have come since talk to us about worlds where there is more to life than what we experience with our five senses. There is a battle between Good and Evil, there are unseen forces that shape destiny and there is a quest that must be undertaken.

Mystical teachings of many different faiths speak to such a world where there is more to life than the mundane – so what is the essence of these teachings and what can we practically apply in our lives in our quest to live a good and happy life? In the next 8 parts I will explore some of these concepts and consider their application.

In this part I’d like to establish a framework from the perspective of Existential Philosophy.

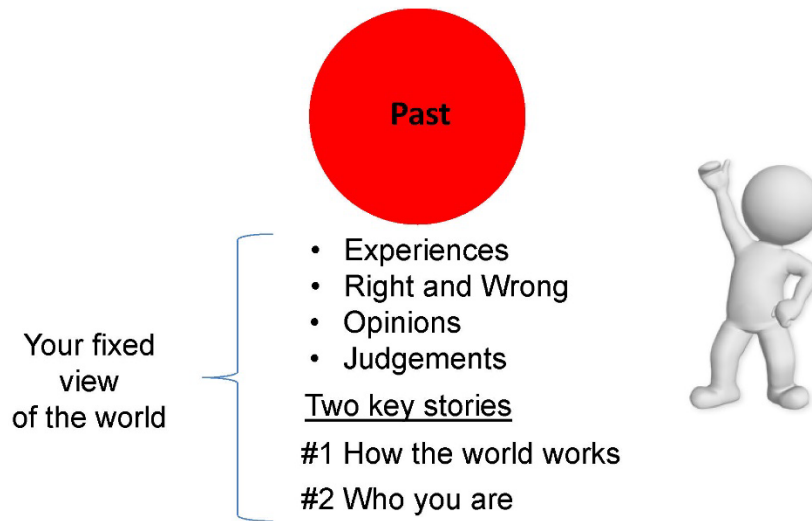
Recall that Existential Philosophy is primarily concerned with the nature of Existence and how we are creating our reality – the key relationship is between Being and Time.



If you consider the model above you will see that there is a distinction between the Constructed Being – or the Personality Self which only knows itself through experience and interpretation – and the Aspirational Self. Also note that from an Existential perspective time flows from the Future and into the Present – the Present of course then becomes the Past.

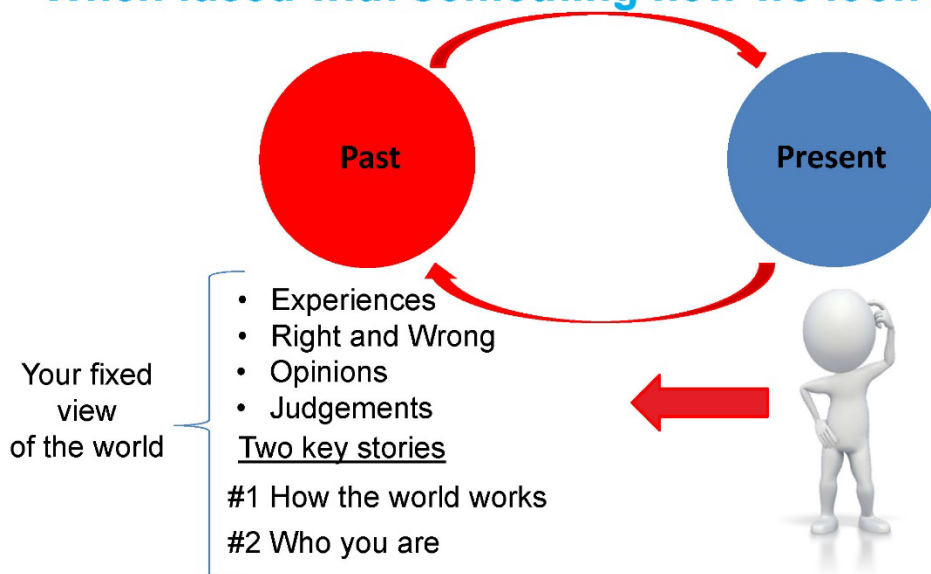
So, the constructed self knows itself through the Past – but in the beginning it is essentially blank – note here that if you believe in Destiny then of course it is not blank – in any case the blank self – or baby – then has experiences and is taught what is right and wrong and develops a fixed view of the World incorporating two key stories – who they are – so this is essence or beginnings of the Self Identity story Richard Boyatzis refers to in his Ideal Self concept (see 'Dynamics of the Ideal Self', 2021) and the second story – how the world works – so this is the Epistemology – the framework for understanding of the World.

We begin as a blank sheet



The Constructed or Personality Self is then reactive to events as they occur – and uses this fixed view of the world as an interpretive lens. See below:

When faced with something new we look backwards



So back to the point - in Mysticism the Epistemology – or the answer to the question of how the world works is – the world is a Mystery that cannot be fully comprehended by us mere mortals and that there is a whole lot of other stuff going on behind the scenes other than what we can experience with our basic senses.

One might consider this to be in contrast to Cartesian philosophy which proposes that the mind is separate from the corporeal body, and sensation and the perception of reality are the source of untruth and illusions. The only reliable truths are to be had in the existence of a metaphysical mind – hence – ‘Cognito ergo sum’ - ‘I think therefore I am’.

In our present age many of us are suffering from disillusion with the current state of the World and the lack of some deeper meaning in life – the term Existential Angst has become more commonly used and I would propose many are searching for more – so it is here at this junction point that we can explore the epistemology that is mysticism and the practical application of some of the key concepts to our lives now.

The first point is that mysticism proposes that the world is a mystery that we are not capable of understanding – there are various versions of this adage throughout religious and spiritual teachings – whether it be the notion that we cannot comprehend the hand of God in action or surrendering to the notion of ‘Great Spirit’ or ‘Pachamama’ – the Earth spirit.

Similarly, we could dive into the weird and wonderful world of Quantum Physics where the most likely explanation for how the world works is String Theory which proposes an inter-related multi-dimensional reality – and this is before we start taking about Schrodinger’s Cat and whether the hypothetical cat could actually be alive and dead at the same time...

Additionally we might consider Complexity Theory (see part #2 of The Self Mastery Challenge on Complexity and Change) and the idea that in Complexity we cannot accurately predict the future so we need to find ways of living in an environment characterised by volatility, uncertainty and ambiguity.

The point?

Let’s apply some of the concepts from the epistemology of Mysticism – the aim is to be able to Walk a Sacred Path through life – a path that honours our Self, other beings, the earth and whatever energy flows through all things – whether this be the Quantum field, spirit, the Force or God.

Recognising that we cannot comprehend and make sense of the World and reality as it occurs – but only as it passes into the Past – our first task is to find ways of becoming comfortable in this uncertainty. Remembering here that the brain desires to understand the world – the brain wants to be able to make sense of things – hence a world of complexity, chaos and change will inherently create internal stress, anxiety and worry.

Does this ring any bells for you?

But yes the challenge obviously is how to actually do this?

The first task is to recognise and accept that you are not going to be able to completely comprehend what is going on – surrender to flow. Now, interestingly part of this requires some level of faith – not necessarily religious or spiritual faith but faith as in belief in

something where there is no direct evidence of it – and that there is some deeper meaning in life. See how we are back to the mysticism epistemology?

From a complexity theory perspective we then need to accept that we are unable to accurately predict what will happen next and/or fully comprehend the cause and effect relationship of what is happening now. We need to shift our mind out of the desire to try and understand the World from a fixed mindset – set and forget perspective. The World is not static it is dynamic.

So let's be intentional – what do we actually want? Well how about to feel peaceful and live a happy life? Pretty simple? – Let's then step into Intentional Change Theory – and the question of how we might go about creating this. Richard Boyatzis talks about dynamic and complex systems within systems and the flow from equilibrium to disequilibrium. The beginning point when starting to create intentional change is to make peace with where you are at right now – whatever has brought you here is all good – no matter how bad you might think it has been (ha ha!) – in other words release the Past and make peace with the Present.

How to?

Adopt a dynamic system to address the dynamic environment – see the first part of this book.

Boyatzis says that the way to make our systems dynamic is to embed circular feedback loops. We know also from neuro-science that the brain finds comfort in routines – remember that our default is to pattern match and that the neurons that fire together wire together so as soon as we begin going down a habitual path the brain effectively shuts down and follows the past path. The trick here is to embed routines and rituals that are supportive to the aim of peace and happiness in life.

So again how to?

Define the aspirational emotional attractors that pull the system towards them using ideals such as freedom, peace, happiness, honour etc. This enables you to be Intentional – this is what you are trying to create – the BEING state first not the DOING function first – get it?

Is the BEING state to be stressed out? Well hopefully NOT!!!

Hopefully the BEING state is to be happy, peaceful, playful, joyous – FUN

So we need some circular feedback loops to stop us dropping into reactive burnout mode.

#1 Daily practice – 3 elements – in the morning – what's your routine that gets you ready for the day – could be meditate, walk, yoga, breathe, cold exposure etc – then set Intention for the day – how do you want to BE today? Part 2 – middle of the day – check in – how's your Intention going? If off track gently reset. Part 3 – end of the day – two questions – what did

you do right today? what are you grateful for? (see the Posts on Self Mastery for more depth on this).

#2 Weekly Reflection – end of the week – take your pick Friday afternoon, Saturday morning, Sunday – 3 questions – what’s working? what challenges are you facing? What ideas have you got to experiment with to move it forwards?

#3 Longer cycles – see all of these previous posts – we are working through the 13 moon cycle journey around the Sun with check in points at the two Equinoxes for Vision and the Solstices for progress – current state is we are heading to the December Solstice.

When you have this structure in place then remember to let go and surrender – our aim is to find comfort in uncertainty.

Next bit is to release the Past.

“This is the miracle: behind every condition, person, or situation that appears ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ lies concealed a deeper good. That deeper good reveals itself to you – both within and without – through inner acceptance of what is.”

Eckhart Tolle, ‘Stillness Speaks’

Walk a Sacred Path

#2 Releasing the Past



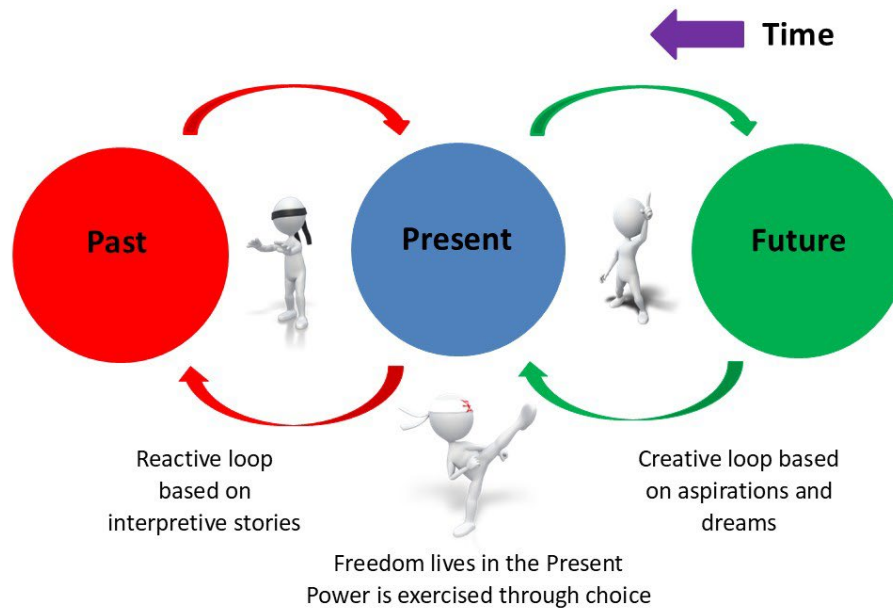
*“Some [people] see things as they are and ask why?
Others see things as they could be and ask why not?”*

John F. Kennedy Jnr.

(my edits in square brackets to update gender)

The biggest operational crude oil tanker in the World is the DHT Colt measuring 336 meters in length and having a deadweight of 319,713 tonnes – it can carry about 3 million barrels of oil. However, because of its size and weight it has considerable momentum and will take about 5 kilometres to stop and roughly 15-20 minutes to come to a complete stop. It’s turning diameter is approximately 2 kilometres!

The human brain can process 11 million bits of information per second however the conscious mind can only handle about 40 to 50 bits of information per second – to cope with this we use cognitive shortcuts to help make decisions – these short cuts can create implicit or unconscious cognitive bias. From an Existential perspective we are making reactive decisions based on how we think the World works based on our Past experience.



Most of us are going around and around the Past Present loop up to 90% of the time with estimates that about 40% of our behaviour is mindless habit. The Past Present loop has momentum just like the massive oil tanker and what holds us in this Past Present loop is fixed thinking. This type of thinking has four key types: Right/Wrong thinking; Blame and Judgment; Us and Them; and, If only...

The Past Present loop is pervasive because it's safe – going around and around here we are walking through Past experiences – we can stay in our comfort zone and argue our position using logical and rational thought and of course evidence from the Past. So, for example we can have an argument about who is right or wrong – we can lay blame for events – we can divide into Us and Them – and we can deny ourselves the ability to take action to move things forward by saying – Yes but if only we had ... we could act, but we don't so we can't...

Stepping into the Future Present loop can be risky because we don't have direct evidence in the form of Past experience to inform and support our choices – we need Will and Courage to hold us there. The challenge is how long it can take to enact change and how long we must therefore be able to hold ourselves and possibly others in the unknown and uncertain space of the future. It's relatively easy to find the courage to act boldly in a moment, however if we consider the change literature then it becomes apparent that it takes 6 – 12 months to create some sustainable behavioural change and up to 2 years to actually reap the full benefits of that change.

Along the way we are faced with challenges and setbacks that can create a fear based reaction in us – this fear sends us straight back to the Past and the continued creation of things the way they have always been.

New aspirations can create internal conflict



Internal conflict manifests as self sabotage

Additionally, as we travel through life we have setbacks along the way that hurt us emotionally and create markers in our brains to alert us to similar events so that we don't get hurt again.

The Past Present loop will trap us in the Past and the way things have always been because it's scary to change and especially when we are operating in a volatile changing environment the future and the World can be scary – fear can drive us to the safe comfort of what we already know – the Past. In this way the momentum from the Past can actually inhibit our ability to create something new and better for the Future. Operating from the safe position of the Past we see options not true possibility and our interactions can become relational rather than intentional.

What this means is that we may start off with heartfelt and good intentions – let's say to create Peace in the World – but then something happens – a trigger event that causes us to have an emotional reaction that makes us feel that whatever has happened is unfair or unjust – maybe someone has abused us for cutting them off in traffic. Our emotional reaction drives us into the Past and into judgement about who is right and who is wrong – we adopt our fixed position or interpretation of the World and we decide that we are right to be able to abuse them back – our justification is simple – they deserved it!

But wait – now we have acted in a way that is out of alignment with our intention to create Peace in the World and instead we have actually contributed to more negativity. The 'Yes but...' reaction will undermine our intentions – "I would really like to be like that..." or "You should really be like that..." - "Yes but everyone else is doing it so I had no choice..."; "Yes but I deserve it..."; "Yes but I'm doing it for you..."; "Yes but it's not hurting anyone..."; "Yes but it's just this one little thing..."

All of these justifications are relational – they are based on our fixed understanding of the World and how it works. The killer defence when this is pointed out to us by others – or possibly internal dialogue – is – “OMG you are so idealistic and naïve – that’s not how the World works, get a grip on reality!” – and that brings us neatly back to the way things are...

Even worse is when you have experienced some setback in the Past that has created a negative emotional marker – the trigger event can bring all of this back up and trip you straight into reactive mode. Again, inhibiting your ability to be intentional.

The point?

Mysticism remember? The World is a mystery that we cannot hope to understand but we must never stop trying. If we want to be able to step into this epistemology, we need to find some way of releasing the Past and the hold it has on us. Only by releasing the Past and our belief that we are right about how the World works can we find ways to step into an intentional and aspirational way of being without being riddled by fear.

That is – to be FREE

How to?

This happens on many levels – personal, social, organisational, country, global.

Remember the epistemology of mysticism is you can’t comprehend the World and there’s a whole lot more going on behind the scenes than you can experience with your five senses. The requirement to get on board is some level of faith that there is deeper meaning in life and that things are happening for a reason. It’s worth noting too – if you recall the last post and the discussion about Narnia, the Lord of the Rings, and Star Wars – there is a battle between Good and Evil. So, it’s not good to do nothing – we must act on our aspirations and intentions no matter how small or powerless we believe we may be.

“Nobody made a greater mistake than [they] who did nothing because [they] could do only a little. The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing. The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse.”

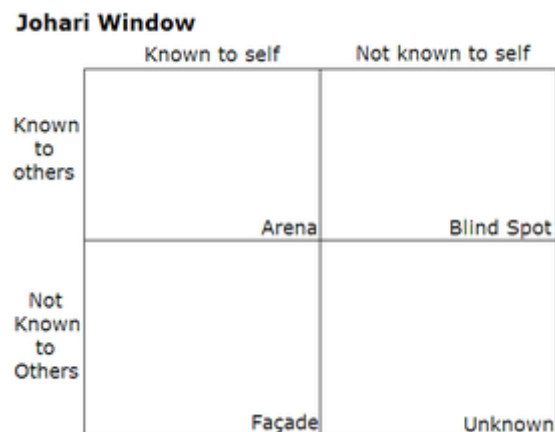
Edmund Burke

(my edits to update gender in square brackets)

Back to the how – and note here the stats above on how much information the human brain can take in compared to how much we can consciously process. We are pattern matching and short cutting a lot!

So, the analogy here is that the little mouse in the head is driving the while body based on the limited amount of information it is actually getting out of the total pool of information the brain is receiving. How do we choose which bits of information go through? Pattern matching – so when we are trying to release this Past stuff we are digging into the hidden

aspects of the self – recall from previous posts the Johari window – a simple tool that divides the self into – the known self, the hidden self, the blind spot and the unknown self.



So OMG we are back to digging into the parts of the self that are unknown – the shadow – Luke in the cave in the Empire Strikes Back – yes feel the Force Luke...

Anyway... How to start when you don't know where to look?

With Vision of course! Jump into the Future – What's your Intention for how you wish to BE?? Ask then listen – part of you will start to tell you what all the "Yes but..." blocks are, part of you will remind you of all of the Past experiences that show you why this is not possible.

In Buddhism there are samsaric loops of craving and aversion that cause us unhappiness – if you consider the Existential framework of Past Present Future these samsaric loops are the loops that go around and around the through the Past. In Buddhism new samsaric reactive loops are always being created which means that the old buried stuff cannot come up. To allow the old to come up the aim is to be still enough so as not to create new samsaric loops – so breath meditation, single point or stillness meditation. Insights will then arise – to heal something we must first be able to see it.

Other mystical teachings such as Toltec teachings tell us that there are strands of energy that link us to Past events and people in our lives and we need to go through a process of recapitulation to be able to release the ties to these events. To recapitulate our lives we can either do it chronologically replaying the events of our lives and reclaiming our lost energies from those events and releasing anything we are still holding onto – or we can do it randomly as blocks from the Past arise. Either way the key is intent – choosing to release the ties to Past events and experiences to enable us to be free, Present and able to create a new Future.

Whichever process you use the trick is to embed routines so you can systematically identify and release blocks from Past experiences.

Next bit is to Assume Responsibility.

"It's the best possible time to be alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong."

Tom Stoppard, *'Arcadia'*

Walk a Sacred Path

#3 Assuming Responsibility



*“Every [person] is the creature
of the age in which [they] live.
Very few are able to raise
themselves above,
the ideas of their time.”*

Voltaire

(my edits in square brackets to update gender)

It’s easy to think that the biggest fear we have is that we are powerless, but Marianne Williamson – famously quoted by Nelson Mandela – says instead *“It is our light not our darkness that scares us most. We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?” Actually, who are you not to be?”*

If we are brave enough to step into the World of Mysticism then once we have accepted the uncertainty and done our best to release our Past, we then need to assume responsibility. Marianne Williamson continues – *“Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.”*

The stories I have mentioned such as Narnia, The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings and Star Wars all include the hero’s journey:



In the tales of Narnia it is the four children who find themselves in the mystical land only to discover that there is a prophecy about the children of Adam coming to overthrow the evil White Witch. In the Hobbit it is Bilbo Baggins who joins a quest to reclaim the Lonely Mountain and its treasures from the dragon Smaug. In Star Wars it is Luke Skywalker, a Tatooine farm boy who gets enlisted to become a Jedi and fight the evil Empire.

Along the way all of these humble heroes have doubts and face challenges – *“We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.”*

Joseph Campbell drew on Carl Jung’s analytical psychology and describes the Hero’s journey as follows:-

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

‘The hero with a thousand faces’, 1949

Marianne Williamson continues –

“And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Assuming responsibility speaks to the interconnected nature of all of us and I think it is fair to say that mystical teachings hold this interconnected nature as a key element of their epistemology. Interestingly, I’d also propose to you that quantum physics could be considered in the same light – it proposes that there is a quantum field that links us all together and that we are always being influenced by the field and also have the opportunity to influence the field ourselves. So, if we consider the idea of a battle between Good and Evil

it occurs within this field. If this is the case, then you and I always have an opportunity to assume responsibility and create good in the World.

What happens in reality however, is that we face situations where we think we know what is going to happen next – due to the projective pattern matching nature of our brains – see the last post on the influence of the Past on our interpretations of the Future and what is possible – this assumed projection into the Future can create Fear and hence cause us not to act. This means that Fear – or without being too dramatic! – Evil triumphs.

For example, we see someone in trouble – maybe two people having a fight – and we think that if we intervene there will be more trouble and hence we don't act – we don't take responsibility – this manifests as the Bystander effect where paradoxically the more people that witness an event such as this the less likely a person is to intervene.

Remember that we are considering the concept of Walking a Sacred Path through life and the idea of acting with honour, to ourselves, each other, the Earth and other beings. If we buy into the illusion of separation from each other then it's easy to justify doing nothing – "It's not my responsibility..." However, from a mysticism perspective everything is our responsibility.

What are the implications for leading a good and happy life and walking a sacred path through life? How do we actually apply this stuff??

Think about this in terms of honour – to Walk a Sacred Path in life is to honour Self, Others, the Earth and Spirit. The application here is to assume responsibility – if everything is connected then you play some part in everything.

So, practically, to honour Self means to stand up for Self and to have the courage to speak truth. If the opposite of Evil is not just an absence of Evil but a presence of Love, then follow the trail – there is no Love without Trust – there is no Trust without Truth. To create Love in the World start with Truth. How do you know what your Truth is – here we are back to Visioning, releasing the Past, embracing uncertainty and taking the time to define what it is we wish to create in the world and how we wish to BE – what is your Intention for how you wish to BE? Defined in the aspirational space as your aspirational Values – Peace, Love, Honour, Respect, Justice, Freedom, Oneness, Acceptance, Empathy – see?

If you truly believe in these things and you really do wish to create them in the World AND you buy into the epistemology of Mysticism then you need to find ways to assume responsibility.

"Yes but..." I hear you cry – yes but, yes but, yes but... then nothing changes... so how much do you want it?? A Value is not a Value unless you are willing to pay a price to uphold it – that price may be your comfort.

"The ultimate measure of a [person] is not where [they] stand in moments of comfort and convenience but where [they] stand at times of challenge and controversy."

Martin Luther King Jr.

(my edits in square brackets to update gender)

Are we in one of those times now? I think yes – so come on let's speak truth.

Now note here the second bit is Honour Others – so, not to speak truth with no care or compassion for others but to speak truth with Intent to create PEACE and FREEDOM for all acknowledging that we are all in this TOGETHER.

Let's go back to Martin Luther King Jr.

“The ultimate weakness of violence, is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you murder the hater; but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate... Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

So – your pain is my pain – your suffering is my suffering – but also, my happiness is your happiness, my gain is your gain – we are in this together.

Honouring others means speaking up when you feel things are wrong – not buying into the “Yes but...” that makes you a bystander. Not holding onto blame, judgement and negativity towards others. Trying to hold a space of highest possibility for others instead.

Others also extends to all beings – in Narnia the animals talk for a reason!!

Part three of assuming responsibility is to honour Earth – in Mysticism Earth is our Mother that holds and supports us. Adopting this position has many implications but how about we start with some really basic stuff – assuming responsibility means little things – if you go for a walk and see rubbish pick it up! Rolling this up and out evolves into how we interact with our economic system – try to think seven generations ahead with regard to how you earn, invest and spend your money. Are you supporting the Earth and it's future or not? If not adjust.

Last bit – honour Spirit – what does this mean? Go back to the epistemology – there are things happening behind the scenes that we are not consciously aware of – there are forces good and bad at play. We are influenced by this field and have the opportunity to influence it back. We don't need to be trippy dippy about this – we can approach it from a quantum physics perspective if it sits better with you. The point is – if you feel intuitive hunches – act on them – don't rationalise them away with the rational mind. The rational logical mind will trap us in the Past with what is – belief in only what we can see, touch, feel and hear will limit us – a Sacred Path involves something greater than self and the super powers in this journey are curiosity and gratitude.

You might think you know what is coming next but reality is YOU DON'T!

Assuming responsibility is to release the Past and surrender to the path that opens up before you without knowing where it leads and with the willingness to act in good faith.

Next bit is Releasing Self Importance.

“As you go the way of life, you will see a great chasm, Jump, it is not as wide as you think.”

Native American Indian Rite

Walk a Sacred Path

#4 Release Self Importance



“My freedom cannot be separated from your freedom”

Nelson Mandela

The last new track recorded by the epic band The Beatles before their breakup in April 1970 was 'I Me Mine' and it was written by George Harrison about his revelations regarding the ego whilst on LSD.

The lyrics go like this

*“All through the day
I me mine, I me mine, I me mine
All through the night
I me mine, I me mine, I me mine
Now they're frightened of leaving it
Everyone's weaving it
Going on strong all the time
All through the day I me mine”*

*“... All I can hear
I me mine, I me mine, I me mine
Even those tears
I me mine, I me mine, I me mine
No-one's frightened of playing it
Everyone's saying it
Flowing more freely than wine
All through the day I me mine”*

Later in 1980 George Harrison's autobiography of the same name he referred to the song and said,

"Having LSD was like someone catapulting me out into space. The LSD experience was the biggest experience that I'd had up until that time...

Suddenly I looked around and everything I could see was relative to my ego, like 'that's my piece of paper' and 'that's my flannel' or 'give it to me' or 'I am'. It drove me crackers, I hated everything about my ego, it was a flash of everything false and impermanent, which I disliked. But later, I learned from it, to realise that there is somebody else in here apart from old blabbermouth. Who am 'I' became the order of the day. Anyway, that's what came out of it, 'I Me Mine'. The truth within us has to be realised. When you realise that, everything else that you see and do and touch and smell isn't real, then you may know what reality is, and can answer the question 'Who am I?'"

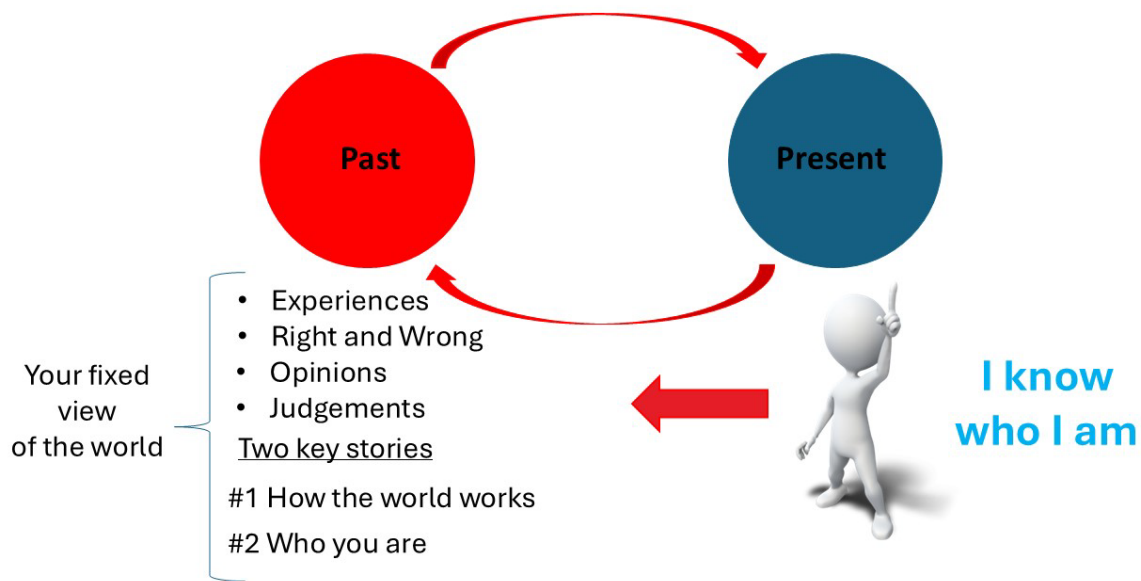
To me the challenge of the ego is a paradox. On the one hand we are challenged by mystical teachings to embrace the notion of the hero's journey and to assume responsibility – on the other we are cautioned by the temptations of power and the lure of what Star Wars would refer to as the 'Dark side'.

What can we learn from this and how could we apply these teachings?

In the first three parts of this series we considered the notion of embracing uncertainty – the idea that there may be more going on in the world than we can actually see, hear, touch and feel. Then we looked at erasing personal history – so being able to release our fixed views about how the world works that are rooted in the past. Finally, in the last post we considered assuming responsibility – that if everything is indeed connected then we are innately involved and hence must step up to the plate with regard to our roles as co-creators in the world.

So, just when you may be thinking – like Luke in Star Wars, Neo in The Matrix or the kids in the Narnia series – time to step up with confidence into my ego self and become The Jedi, The One or the Kings and Queens - now mystical teachings would have us release our own sense of self importance.

In 'The Fire from Within' Carlos Castaneda relays the teachings of the Yaqui Indian don Juan Matus and he says that self importance is the activity that consumes the greatest amount of energy and stops us from being able to see the world in a different way. If we consider this from an existential perspective the ego is constructed by the personality self from the experiences of the Past.



I know who I am

How?

Through my experiences of life and through the identify I have constructed from these experiences. Remember too that the mind wants to know the answer – the mind wants to make sense of the world – the mind does not like uncertainty. But wait – a mystical view of the world requires that we must embrace uncertainty – we must embrace the ability to accept that we do not understand the world and we do not know with certainty what will happen next – oh!

A fixed view of the world will limit us to a future of limited possibilities because our reasoning is based on what has always been. We think for example there will always be war because there has always been war – but what if we could escape the self importance that leads us to self righteousness and diminishes our capacity to imagine something better?

From a philosophical perspective this goes to the heart of our assumptions about human nature. If you believe humans can be inherently bad then you adopt a constrained view of human nature where we must put in place balances and checks to protect ourselves from ourselves – however, if you believe that humans are inherently good then you can believe in an unconstrained view of human nature and hence we should be doing everything possible to uphold the principles of freedom to allow humans to flourish. The challenge in the world now is that there is so much evidence to support the view that humans can be bad – and of course this drives us back into fear and a limited view of what is possible.

So, where to start with all of this?

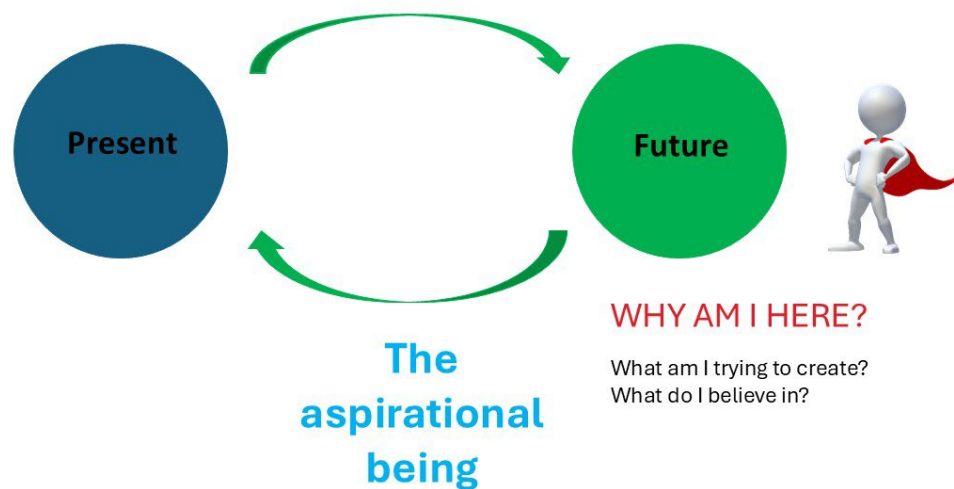
We can tick tack back to Richard Boyatzis and Intentional Change Theory – he says that we are living in a world of dynamic interlocking systems and that if we wish to create change then it must begin within – change the self first and in doing so we create an agitator to others that encourages others to do the same. The change then cascades down through families, groups, communities and into the wider world.

But self importance will prevent this. In Star Wars Darth Vader tempts Luke to the dark side – feel the power of the dark side Luke – imagine all that power...

In all of those movies the bad guy is the one who has been consumed by the lust for power – there is a battle between good and evil - and of course we know what happens in the end (don't read this bit if you haven't watched the end of Star Wars) – good wins - Darth Vader finds redemption, dies as one of the good guys and joins his mentor in the spirit realm.

So yes, releasing self importance. Can you release the idea of who you think you should be and allow yourself to be who you really are?

The practical application of this is to put work, time and effort into connecting and defining the aspirational self.



What do you think you are actually doing here? And importantly – what do you believe in?

As George Harrison says

“The truth within us has to be realised. When you realise that, everything else that you see and do and touch and smell isn't real, then you may know what reality is, and can answer the question ‘Who am I?’”

The 'What you believe in' question is really about what you believe to be guidelines for leading a good life – these are values and principles like freedom, justice, equality, honour. So good to note here that it needs to apply to 'all' not just 'you' or 'me' – so if you believe that you aspire to be free then as Nelson Mandela says – get on board with the idea that your freedom is my freedom – see how we are back to the notion of being inter-linked and hence I would suggest to you that if you thought the idea of a constrained view of human nature was good – along with the concept of protecting humans from other humans because humans are inherently bad – then guess what? – there is an inherent flaw in your argument.

Oh no again!

But wait there's more – self importance also manifests as self pity – what? YES! I me me mine is all about the belief that everything revolves around ME and I am the centre of the universe – so self pity is oh poor me, my lot in life is shit I need people's attention – harsh eh? Yep! But do you get it??

So where to go with all of this and what can we learn in the context of how do we lead a good life and walk a sacred path through life?

Be gentle with self – find ways of letting go of harsh judgements about self as well as ego driven rants. Be humble and aspire to walk a path bigger than self and allow yourself to fail along the way and embrace your fellow travellers along the journey.

This may sound airy fairy but consider the teachings on happiness – one of the keys is to embrace a purpose bigger than the self – to let go of the idea that it is all about you. In releasing self importance and the fixed view of the world that comes with it – your eyes may be open to greater possibilities.

Next bit is Walking between the Worlds.

"Only the most arrogant assume such wisdom."

Anonymous

Walk a Sacred Path

#5 Walking between the Worlds



“Fear, even the smallest fear, is a hacking at the chords of faith...”

Five years after C.S. Lewis wrote the *‘Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe’* he wrote a prequel called *‘The Magician’s Nephew’* and in that book we get to find out how the link to the magical world of Narnia began.

The two main characters in the book are Polly and Digory who meet whilst playing in the adjacent gardens of a row of terrace houses. They decide to explore the attic that links their houses together but get lost and find themselves in Digory’s Uncle’s study. The Uncle, Andrew, is a dabbler in magic and has created four magical rings – two yellow and two green - from a box of magic dust left to him by his godmother. He’s too cowardly to try them himself and is a rather immoral person who tricks Polly into putting one of the rings on – causing her to vanish. Not done with his cowardly acts he then blackmails Digory into putting on another ring and following Polly to wherever she has gone. So begins their journey into other Worlds.

First, they find themselves in a World between Worlds where there are multiple ponds that lead to multiple worlds. They go to the dying land of Charn where they inadvertently awaken the witch queen named Jadis. Managing to escape they accidentally bring her back to their own world where she wreaks havoc before clutching onto a lamppost as Digory and Polly manage to send her back to the world between the worlds.

Finally, they enter the empty world that is soon to be Narnia and the battle between good and evil begins – as Jadis becomes the white witch. At the end Digory brings a magic apple back to his world which heals his dying mother, the apple core is planted in the garden and grows into a tree which is latter felled in a storm. The wood from the tree is then used to make the wardrobe in *‘The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe’* creating the gateway back to Narnia.

Why am I telling you this??

The Past has momentum that affects us in the present in a myriad of ways. If we are stuck in the Past our thinking about the Present is limited but if we fail to learn from the Past we risk creating the same lessons and challenges all over again.

The Future is a mystery, it is yet to be created. To first be able to bring something into reality we must be able to see it as a possibility – to have clear Intent – but our fears will undermine this as the quote says above – they hack at the chords of faith.

Why?

Because the Future is unknown it is uncertain. Faith is simply the ability to believe in something for which there is no direct evidence – it is the ability to believe in something bigger and greater than what we can see, hear, feel and touch right now.

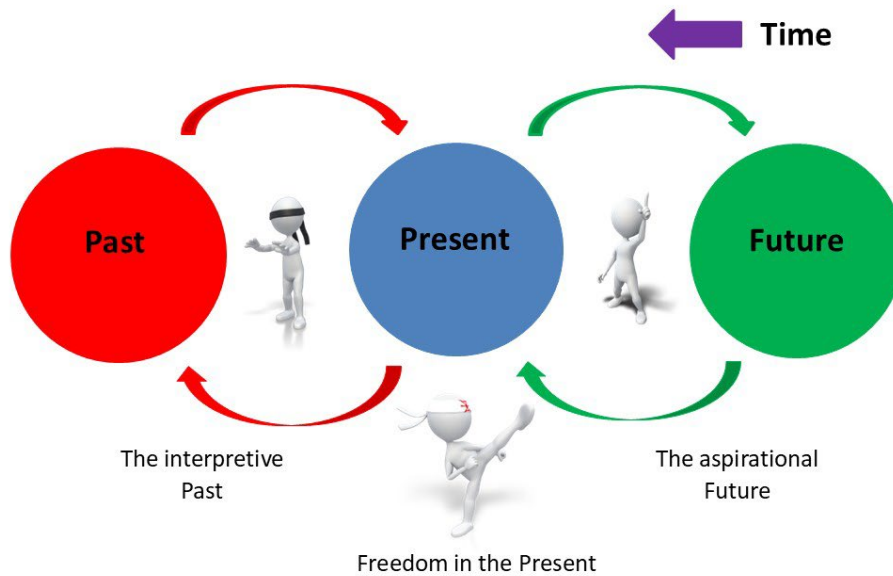
At the end of *'The Magicians' Nephew'*, Digory must atone for his error of bringing Jadis into Narnia. He rides on the back of a winged horse to find a magical garden where the magic apples grow. Arriving at the garden he is confronted by Jadis who has already eaten one of the apples that give her the gift of immortality. She provides Digory with the ultimate ethical challenge – defy Aslan the Lion, steal one of the forbidden apples which he knows with certainty will save his Mother's life and return to his own world.

But Digory knows that his Mother would never condone theft – no matter the consequences – so he sticks to his word and returns to Aslan with an apple. As noted above, Aslan then gives Digory an apple to take to his dying Mother – a reward, I would suggest, for his good faith.

There are similar tests of faith in Star Wars and The Matrix.

The point?

If we wish to walk a sacred path through life we need to be able to walk between the worlds.



In walking back into the Past we can look for the blocks that can prevent us from creating a new future – we discussed this in the post on Releasing the Past – but we can also look into the Past for lessons that will help us in the Present.

It is said that the interpretive stories of the Past – the narrative if you like – is written by the victors. Consider the conquests of lands such as the Spanish in South America or even the British in Australia. Those acts of conquest created an interpretative narrative that erased the validity of much of the indigenous teachings. Fast forward to where we are now and we can see that many people are suffering from existential angst – a lack of deeper meaning in life, there is a fracturing in society between the have and the have nots – or should we say the elites and the rest of us?, and there are significant concerns about what we are doing to the planet from an environmental perspective.

Indigenous wisdom teaches us many of the things that are embodied in an epistemology based on mysticism. That we are all connected across time and space – to the ones that have gone before us – our ancestors – and the ones that are yet to come. That there is indeed much more going on than we can see, hear, touch and feel – that there are spirit realms that influence the material world we live in.

All a bit crazy? Maybe?

In 2023, five years after the passing of eminent Physicist, Stephen Hawking, a new book was published called *'On the origin of time'* in which Hawking and collaborator, Thomas Hertog, claim that Hawking's seminal work *'A brief history of time'* was wrong!!

Hawking and Hertog now say that the Universe is a four-dimensional membrane in a five-dimensional space, and a small part of a much vaster hidden reality.

Got it? No me neither...

In an interview with The Guardian about their book Hertog said

“Stephen and I discovered how physics itself can disappear back into the big bang. Not the laws as such but their capacity to change has the final word in our theory. This sheds a new light on what cosmology is ultimately about.”

According to Hertog, the new perspective that he has achieved with Hawking reverses the hierarchy between laws and reality in physics and is “profoundly Darwinian” in spirit. “It leads to a new philosophy of physics that rejects the idea that the universe is a machine governed by unconditional laws with a prior existence, and replaces it with a view of the universe as a kind of self-organising entity in which all sorts of emergent patterns appear, the most general of which we call the laws of physics.”

The important bit to me is *“rejects the idea that the universe is a machine governed by unconditional laws”* and instead sees the universe as a *“self organising entity in which all sorts of patterns appear”*.

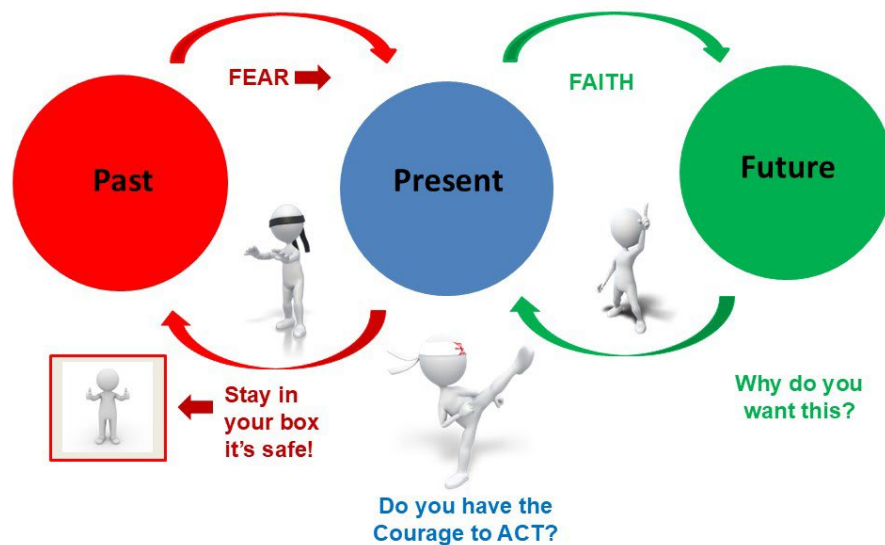
What does this mean?

The Past is not as fixed and certain as we may have been led to believe - we should be letting go of some of our fixed ideas and embracing the teachings and lessons from ancient civilisations.

Then walking forwards into the Future – maybe things are more possible than our limited thinking based on our fixed view of the world would have us believe?

If we aspire what should we aspire to? A peaceful, happy world where all people are treated with respect and dignity. A world where we are caring for the other creatures on the planet and looking after the fragile planet that we all live on.

To create such a world we must first be able to claim it as a possibility and it is here that our challenge begins. If we consider the existential model below



You can see that fear will trap us in the Past because even though the Past may be boring and limited it's safe! Similarly, you may have grand aspirations for the Future but fear will undermine your ability to have faith and believe that it is possible. You may aspire to create peace, love, equality and abundance in the World for example, but part of you may fear what may happen if you act on this – you may therefore be able to consider the Vision but not see that it is truly possible and hence you will be unable to get into action.

To be able to truly walk between the worlds then requires that you are able to walk into the future, ask the question of what you would like the future to actually look like – and then be able to listen to the internal fears and blocks that prevent you from getting into action. Allow the fears to surface and find the courage to face them. To be intentional not relational.

So back to Digory – as the white witch Jadis is tempting him to take the magic apple she tells him

"But what about this Mother of yours whom you pretend to love so?"

"What's she got to do with it?" said Digory.

"Do you not see, Fool, that one bite of that apple would heal her?"

You have it in your pocket. We are here by ourselves and the Lion is far away. Use your Magic and go back to your own world. A minute later you can be at your Mother's bedside, giving her the fruit. Five minutes later you will see the colour coming back to her face. She will tell you the pain is gone. Soon she will tell you she feels stronger. Then

she will fall asleep — think of that; hours of sweet natural sleep, without pain, without drugs. Next day everyone will be saying how wonderfully she has recovered. Soon she will be quite well again. All will be well again. Your home will be happy again. You will be like other boys."

"Oh!" gasped Digory as if he had been hurt, and put his hand to his head. For he now knew that the most terrible choice lay before him.

"What has the Lion ever done for you that you should be his slave?" said the Witch. "What can he do to you once you are back in your own world? And what would your Mother think if she knew that you could have taken her pain away and given her back her life and saved your Father's heart from being broken, and that you wouldn't — that you'd rather run messages for a wild animal in a strange world that is no business of yours?"

"I — I don't think he is a wild animal," said Digory in a dried-up sort of voice. "He is — I don't know -"

"Then he is something worse," said the Witch. "Look what he has done to you already; look how heartless he has made you. That is what he does to everyone who listens to him. Cruel, pitiless boy! you would let your own Mother die rather than -"

"Oh shut up," said the miserable Digory, still in the same voice. "Do you think I don't see? But I — I promised."

The Witch's perspective is relational

- if you really loved your Mother you would do something...
- the Lion does not deserve your loyalty
- you owe your Mother to take her pain away
- you owe your Father to stop his heart from being broken

- look what the Lion has done to you
- you would rather let your Mother die

But Digory promised – he intended to act with honour despite what may or may not happen – the act and the intention has power in itself – he will not submit to the fears being spoken by the witch.

We know what happens of course – Digory is rewarded for his good faith.

So, back to the lessons from all of this with regard to how to walk a sacred path through life. We need to learn the lessons from history and be able to walk boldly into the future but it means nothing if we do not have the courage to act in alignment with our intentions and act in good faith.

Next bit is Stalking the Self.

“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave [person] is not [the one] who does not feel afraid, but [the one] who conquers that fear.”

Madiba - Nelson Mandela

(my edits to update gender in square brackets)

Walk a Sacred Path

#6 Stalking the Self



Vincent van Gogh, 'Wheatfield with Crows' (July 1890)

"Ours is an age of distraction, the background to our lives is a white noise of inconsequential television programmes, pompous pundits, shrill talk back callers, ten second news grabs and the cult of celebrity..."

... the way people think of themselves in the cosmos will affect the way they behave in the physical framework of their lives."

Paul Keating giving the 2002 Manning Clarke Lecture

Social psychology is the study of how individual or group behaviour is influenced by the presence of others and social psychologists have for a long time been doing some pretty trippy research experiments to try and understand human behaviour. Much of the really on edge stuff like giving people electric shocks or putting them in a mock prison, has now been ruled out by the kill joy ethics people – although some may say that this has been replaced by reality tv...

Anyway, way back in the 1960s when our there stuff was allowed two researchers were confused by what is known as the bystander effect – in summary the bystander effect occurs when multiple people see a person in distress – rational thought would have us believe that the more people witnessing a person in distress the more likely it might be that someone would intervene however the bystander effect is the opposite of this – the more people who witness a person in distress the less likely someone is to intervene.

In any case – researchers were trying to work out what the determinants of helping behaviour might be – given that it is generally accepted that helping other people in distress would be considered to be an ethical or good act and something that may be taught to children as they are growing up and be representative of ‘good’ behaviour. Logical thought would further lead one to believe that personality variables that one might expect to correlate with helping behaviour were not predictive of helping. Even more interesting was the fact that this was due to a generalised lack of predictability in the helping situation examined. Variations in the experimental situation, such as the availability of other people who might also help, instead produced marked changes in rates of helping behaviour.

Researchers, Darley and Batson (‘From Jerusalem to Jericho’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1973, Vol. 27, No. 1, 100-108) stated that, *“These findings are reminiscent of Hartshorne and May’s (1928) discovery that resistance to temptation, another ethically relevant act, did not seem to be a fixed characteristic of an individual. That is, a person who was likely to be honest in one situation was not particularly likely to be honest in the next”*

Surprise surprise!

Anyway researchers wanted to test what the influence of personality versus situational factors was on helping behaviour. Now think about this for sec – if you think you are a good person then you would most likely believe that in a situation where someone needs help you would actually help them right?

Of course!

Now this was the 1960s so they chose people who you would assume had personalities that would be on the extreme end of the helping spectrum – seminary students – in other words students at a school of theology. The set up was the students were asked to participate in a study on religious education – they began the study in one building but were then asked to go to another building. To walk to the other building they had to pass through an alley way where there was a person slumped on the ground – the test was whether or not they would stop and help. But wait – there’s more – there were two more variables – some students were told they had to hurry to get to the other building – and then when they got there they had to give a talk – some students had to talk about jobs they thought they would be good at whilst others had to give a talk on – yes you guessed it – the parable of the Good Samaritan (the classic Bible helping story in the Judeo-Christian tradition).

So, come on, of course we would assume that the theology students would all help the victim and that those who were about to teach about the Good Samaritan would be even more likely to help yeh??

The good news is that 40% of the students offered to help – the bad news is of the ‘high hurry’ students only 10% did, and that whether the subject was going to give a speech on the parable of the Good Samaritan or not did not significantly affect helping behaviour.

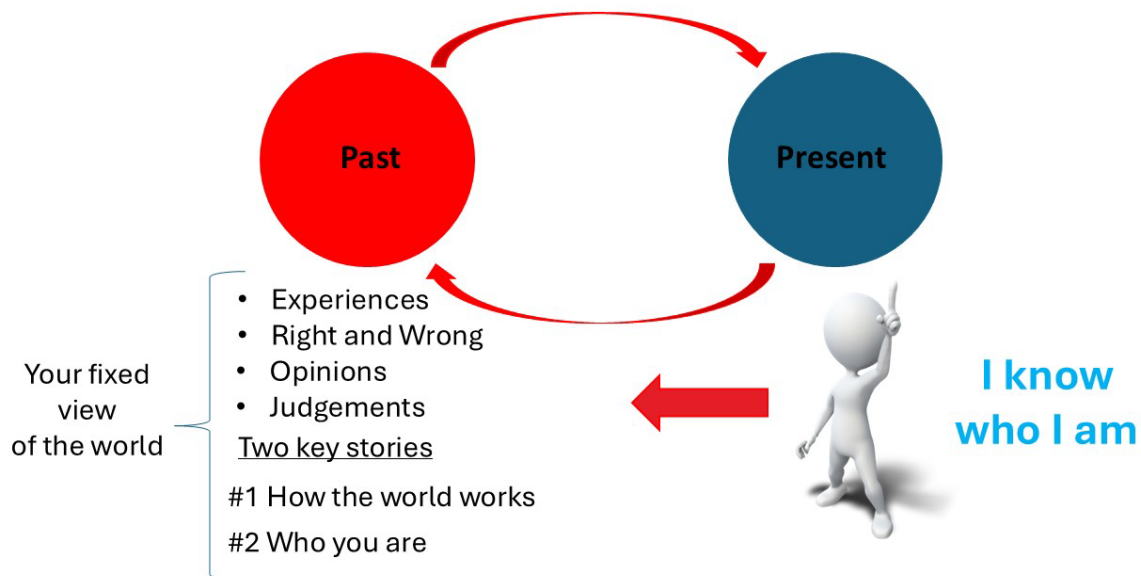
The researchers concluded, “...the frequently cited explanation that ethics becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases is at least an accurate description.” and “whether a person helps or not is an instant decision likely to be situationally controlled. How a person helps involves a more complex and considered number of decisions, including the time and scope to permit personality characteristics to shape them.”

Since the 1960s there have been many more weird and wonderful experiments and much of it defies what a rational logical person may believe to be true – often when people read this sort of research their response is – yes that may be true of them but that’s not me...

Think again...

And remember here that the context of why we are discussing this is to consider the application of mystical teachings to the question of how to walk a sacred path through life and how to lead a good and happy life. And consider of course the question of whether or not your life has become ‘faster’ and if so has ethics become a luxury for you?

If it was as simple as fixing the bicycle all would be good – however mysticism proposes that it’s all a bit more chaotic and complex than that. Switch back to existentialism – see below



I know who I am – in social psychology this is Self-Identity theory – it says that we tell a story about ourselves and who we are and as a subset we have a moral self-identity story – so we tell ourselves that we are a good or a bad person. Now most of us are attached to this story of who we are and we don’t want to admit it when we do anything that is bad – so think of those seminary students and what might happen if you asked them why they didn’t stop to help the person – they would have a whole lot of reasons for their behaviour – none of which would be ‘I didn’t stop because I’m a bad person’ – do you get it? Our rational mind will act to protect our self-identity.

Now the issue here is that it means that we are delusional. Other research shows that we rewrite history for our own benefit – see Part #5 and the bit about how the victors control the narrative of the Past, we think we are more ethical than others, and we use a series of flawed justifications to allow ourselves to do bad things without having to re-assess ourselves as being bad – oh!

So this brings me to the point and the topic of this post Stalking the Self.

You can do the bits from the previous parts of this book and establish intentions for the future but part of you will cling to what it sees as ‘reality’ and will do everything to protect that version of reality even if it involves effectively lying to you and deceiving you.

The deception will appeal to your rational mind and as noted in the last post – remember Jadis the white witch and her attempts to convince Digory to take the magic apple? – they will be relational and emotive in nature.

They did this to you – which was so unfair – so you deserve to get this!

They did this terrible action so they deserve to be punished!

Everybody else is doing it so you’d better get on board or you will miss out!

This stupid rule must be broken otherwise you will miss out again!

Protect yourself from harm!

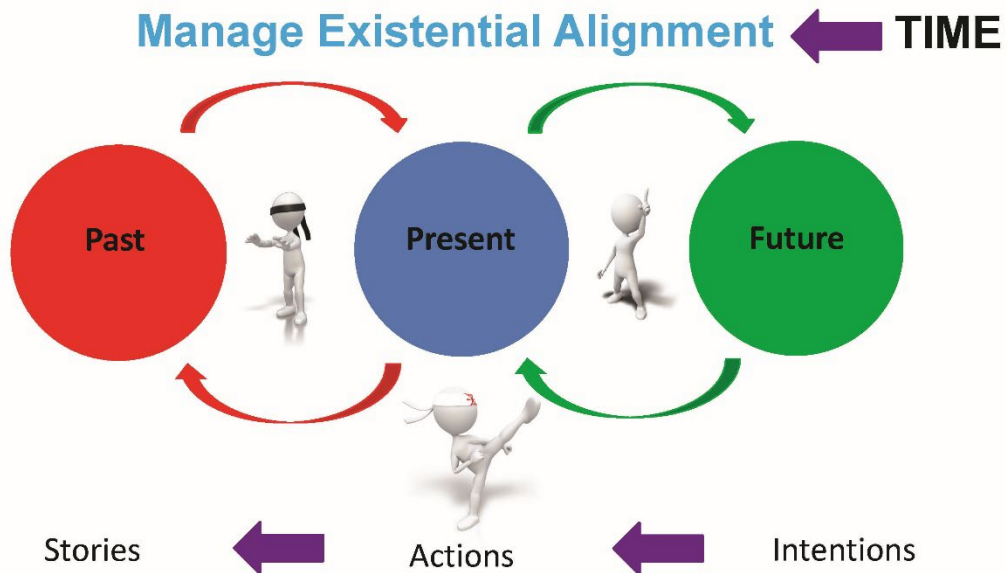
Note that an extension of this is vigilante behaviour...



These rationalisations will trap you in the Past and present you from walking the sacred path into the future.

So how to stalk the self??

We need to line up who we aspire to be with how we act and the story we tell about what just happened.



Let's walk through this – it's relatively easy to do the aspirational bit – I believe in freedom, justice, peace, love, unity, respect etc

But then life happens – and specifically what happens is injustice – unfairness – Digory's Mum gets sick – an emotional response arises and the rational mind then proposes a perfectly logical reason why you should give up on your aspirational values and lie instead... besides you deserve it...

The even more challenging part is that when the emotional response arises in the brain we can be subject to amygdala hijack – when the brain decides that it would be better for the reptilian limbic older part of the brain to take over and create a fight or flight response. When this happens the neuro cortex – the newer part of the brain is effectively bypassed. We have become an emotive being.

Stalking the self is about observing the machinations of the brain and trying to pick up on when you are going down this path. The three levels in the process are:-

#1 An emotional response characterised by a feeling of injustice or unfairness

#2 One of 4 types of thinking that derails your ability to think aspirationally and makes you reactive – right wrong, us and them, blame and judgement, if only...

#3 Invocation of one of the eight flawed justifications which neutralise your aspirational values and allow you to do a bad thing without having to reassess yourself as being bad...

Awareness is the first step to wisdom – so be aware of the process and embed circular feedback loops to check in with where you are at. This is why daily practice, weekly reflective practice and other rituals for checking in are critical.

Next bit is Mastery of Intent.

“Of all the creatures of the Earth, only human beings can change their patterns. We alone are the architects of our destiny.”

William James

Walk a Sacred Path

#7 Mastery of Intent



*"If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."*

William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

The trilogy of Matrix movies has influenced a generation with its fantastic action scenes and philosophical insights. Much has been written about these movies but let's focus on the notion of Intent.

There's a scene in the first movie when Neo goes to see the Oracle to find out if he is 'The one' – whilst waiting to see her he watches a young boy bend a spoon – the boy says,

"Do not try to bend the spoon. That's impossible. Instead... only try to realise the truth. There is no spoon. Then you'll see that it's not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself."

Escaping from the illusion that Neo thought was reality allows him to see 'The Matrix' in a new light and as an artificial construct made by machines who think in a binary 1 or 0 way it is a very mechanical cause and effect world – it is not real but it creates an illusion that it is.

We search for meaning in life in the same way that Neo searches for meaning in the Matrix but Trinity pulls him up,

"The Matrix cannot tell you who you are"

OMG where does that leave us?

Post modernism would like us to believe that there is no objective reality, there is no objective truth, reason and logic are not universally valid, there is no human nature and no general theory of the natural world can be true or valid – all are illegitimate meta-narratives...

Are you swimming yet? But there's more...

There is no intrinsic meaning outside of what we give it and the world is essentially just meaningless and machine like and keeps self-perpetuating due to its own elaborations. Just action and reaction – no choice – a la The Matrix...

"There is nothing new under the sun."

Mysticism, however, says there is more to it than that – somewhere deep inside the Matrix – or the world is some sense of deeper meaning and purpose.

How do we unlock that?

The ultimate freedom – choice.

In the Matrix, Neo finds freedom by choosing not to react – to release ourselves from the endless wheel of karma and cause and effect we need to engage our power of choice. The weird bit though is that we can't wait to get the evidence first – we need to choose first.

Think about the scene in the Matrix when Morpheus is training Neo in one of their first simulated fights. He keeps beating Neo and taunts him saying,

"Do you believe that my being stronger or faster has anything to do with my muscles in this place?"

Midway through the next match, he goes further saying,

"What are you waiting for, you're faster than this. Don't think you are, know you are."

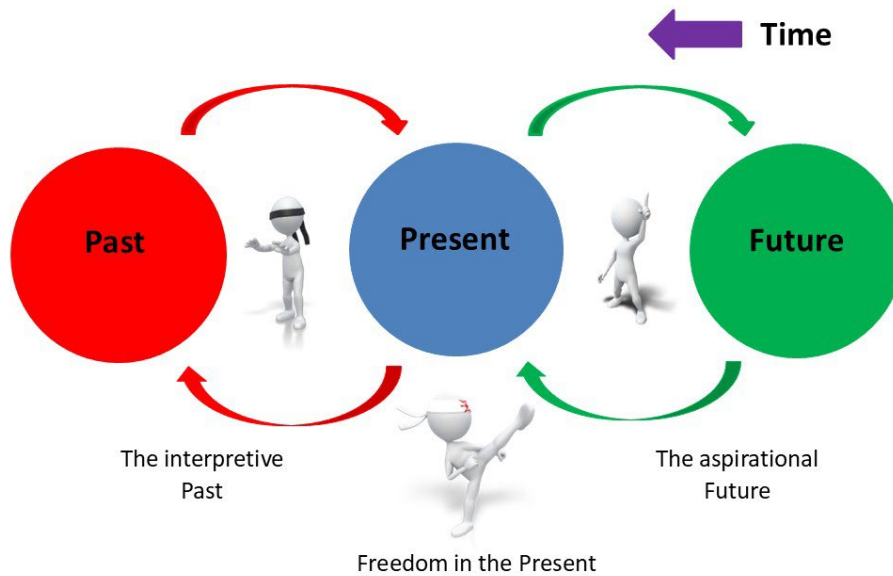
See the shift?

From thinking to knowing.

From an existential perspective it relates to the position of choice before logic.

Bear with me and let's step through it slowly.

Go back to the existential model below



One of the key foundations in existentialism is that reality is temporal – meaning temporary – for example what is the present moment is it this one? or this moment? or this moment? Or any of them?

Reality is fleeting – before you are aware of it, it is gone. So, the key relationship from an existential perspective is between being and time – recognising that being changes as time flows – being is temporary. See how different this is from a post-modernist take? Post modernism I think would delete the Future circle and would propose that the present is a perpetuating reactive cycle subjectively created from the past.

So let's go back to the choice before logic bit.

Logic is like building Lego – each new deduction you make is based on what you have already built – your house stands on the foundations you began with. If you stand in the present moment and you experience something your brain wants to pattern match against the past see? – remember the neurocognitive science stuff? In pattern matching against the past the brain is by definition looking backwards – it is going from the present moment and back into the past to search for previous experiences that match what it is experiencing now – the methodology it uses to find these is logic – get it?

If choice comes before logic, then when experiencing something in the present moment BEFORE reacting and searching back through the past for an experience that matches one must CHOOSE. So, see how from an existential perspective to break out of the reactive cycle, to escape from the Matrix, to break the samsaric loops, to be intentional – is to CHOOSE. Choose enables freedom.

“All of us whether or not we are warriors, have a cubic centimetre of chance that pops out in front of our eyes from time to time. The difference between the average [person] and a

warrior is that the warrior is aware of this, and one of [their] tasks is to be alert, deliberately waiting, so that when [their] cubic centimetre pops out [they] have the necessary speed, the prowess, to pick it up."

Carlos Castaneda, *'Journey to Ixtlan'*

(my edits in square brackets to update gender)

Existentialism proposes that we can be free of the mindless and self-perpetuating loop of reactivity based on what has always been. From a Buddhist perspective this is karma – cause and effect. Freedom comes from being able to erase personal history and be free of 'them' – and we do this by choosing not to react – we do this by choosing to master our Intent.

Not try to bend the spoon – bend yourself.

What then do we intend if the world is an empty subjective construct as proposed by post modernism? – not much...

But if we adopt a mystical view remember there is more going on behind the scenes and there is deeper meaning in the World – our aspirational being relates to higher self or ascended self – or if we break this down further – our true nature or essence – our Christ like being, Buddha like nature – what we actually are beneath all of the dross we have laid over the top as we have lived our lives.

See?

Freedom then lies in embracing our true nature and the true nature of reality – there is no spoon – there is all of us and we are all connected together so if that is the case freedom comes from enacting the highest of the virtues – love.

Sounds trite? But what are we afraid of?

FEAR

Feel the Force Luke? – what is that then?

Align to the quantum field that links us all together – what is that?

Maybe here we take a deep breath and remember why we are having this philosophical discussion – to see how we can apply mystical teachings to the question of how to live a good and happy life yeah?

Mastery of Intent then gives us freedom from the reactive cycle that holds us in the pattern of repeating the past – the karmic wheel.

So back again to the idea of choice coming before logic.

Why should we care?

Well, what do you want?

Peace? Happiness? Joy?

Choose

I choose PEACE in the world.

Yes but... see?

Past logic says – this will never happen because there are bad people in the world who need to be controlled and besides they are wrong and we are right, plus everyone else is doing it and of course it's not my responsibility so there's nothing I can do about it.

All very logical yes? I can justify more violence to stop violence – more killing to stop killing – ridiculous eh?

Choice before logic.

I choose peace regardless. I am in peace. I operate in peace. I act in peace. I call peace forwards.

The past does not have to dictate the future.

Be a lantern not a torch – sort your own shit out first and stop telling others how much they are wrong.

So, now of course we get to the tricky bit – how to actually do that? Given that we are playing with a self-regulating patterning system (our brains!!) that wishes to default into reactive pattern matching mode at every conceivable opportunity...

Ha ha here goes...

CHOOSE

I choose to go on the journey – the first bit was embrace the notion of uncertainty

Then release the Past

Assume responsibility

Let go of your self importance

Walk back into the Past and then into the Future

Check that you are actually doing what you say you are doing and living how you want to live not being a hypocrite!

Then yep – stop trying to bend the spoon!

Last bit is Embracing death as your advisor.

*“Walk in the rain,
smell flowers,
stop along the way,
build sand castles,
go on field trips,
find out how things work,
tell stories,
say the magic words,
trust the Universe.”*

Bruce Williamson

Walk a Sacred Path

#8 Embrace Death as an Adviser



"The life committed to nothing larger than itself is a meagre life indeed."

Anon.

At the end of Shakespeare's play 'Julius Caesar' the opposing armies confront each other at Philippi. Before the battle, Cassius is troubled by an omen of defeat, and he and Brutus say farewell in case they die as a result of the upcoming battle.

Brutus

"...this same day must end that work the ides of March begun;

And whether we shall meet again I know not.

Therefore our everlasting farewell take:

For ever, and for ever, farewell, Cassius!

If we do meet again, why, we shall smile;

If not, why then, this parting was well made."

Cassius

"For ever, and for ever, farewell, Brutus!

If we do meet again, we'll smile indeed;

If not, 'tis true this parting was well made."

Brutus.

“Why, then, lead on. O, that a man might know

The end of this day's business ere it come!

But it sufficeth that the day will end,

And then the end is known. Come, ho! away!”

The last bit in this exploration of mysticism and we are at Shakespeare!

“O, that a man (let's update the gender to person!) might know the end of this day's business ere it come!”

This speaks to the nature of uncertainty – remember that is where we started on this journey by embracing the notion that we are living in a changing uncertain world and we need to be able to step into the discomfort of uncertainty. If only we could know what is going to happen next then life would be so much easier – maybe? – but more boring yes? Certainty would take away the gift of serendipity - events that occur in a strangely synchronous way.

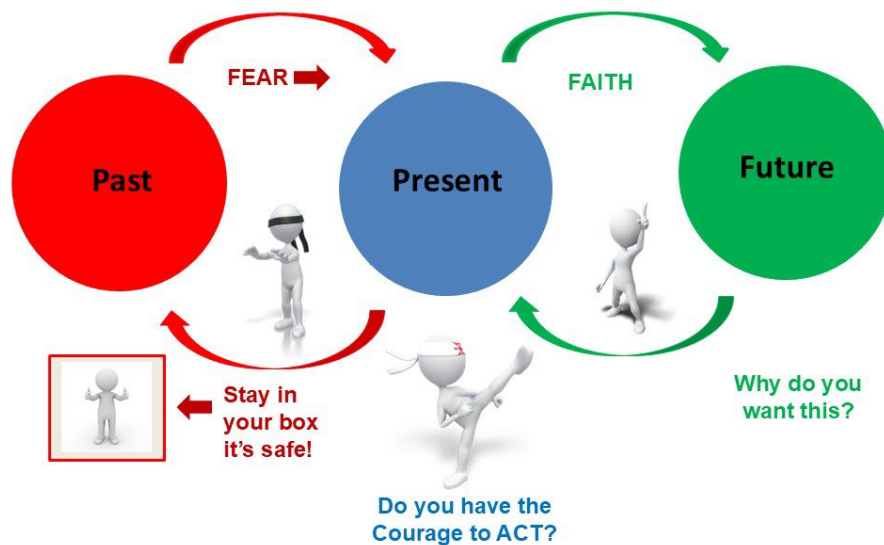
“But sufficeth to say that the day will end, And then the end is known.”

The day will end – we know this with certainty that time will not stand still and then of course we will know the answer to our wonderings – but of course by then if we have not acted it will be too late. A la the quote from Carlos Castaneda in the last post about seizing the cubic centimetre of opportunity as it pops out in front of you and before it passes by.

So, what then of this idea of using Death as an Adviser??

A little morbid one might say and potentially depressing – but that is not the intent here – rather it is about the notion of being able to connect with the notion of your death so that you will not be timid in the present. Brutus and Cassius carry on a tradition that has long been practiced by warriors going into battle – surrendering the certainty of the future so that they can be fully present and make their last stand.

See the Existential model



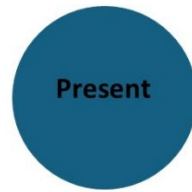
Power is in the present moment – it is the only place where spirit and matter connect – the only opportunity that you have to influence the material world. You can sit in the past and talk a lot about all the things that have happened and now significant they are and all the things that you have learnt – but it will change nothing except for your inner ability to interpret the present. We covered this in the post on Releasing the Past.

You can see from the diagram that FEAR – false energy appearing real - lives in the Past as a learned reaction to Past events that have caused you pain. Finding ways to release the Past allows you to be in the Present and to engage with what happens now in an intentional rather than a reactive way.

But wait we have aspirations – they live in the Future – we desire for things in our lives and these desires lure us out of the Present and into the Future. We covered this idea of Mastery of Intent in the last part and how important it is to be able to be intentional.

However – and here is the rub – our intentions and desires can diminish our capacity to be present so just as we needed to release the Past we also need to be able to release the Future – hence embracing Death as an adviser.

Be here now



The point of
POWER

Yes – Be Here Now – Eckhart Tolle has written a lot about this – The Power of Now and the benefit of being here now – but it is not new stuff. From a Buddhist perspective our unhappiness is caused by cravings and aversions – cravings for the future to be different to the present and aversion to past events – ‘I wish that had been different’.

So, what does mysticism teach us? Bizarrely it goes something like this – there is no such thing as linear time, the past the present and the future intermingle together and influence reach other – think the Matrix – Neo dies but he doesn’t – think Star Wars – Yoda dies but he doesn’t – even Darth Vader dies but he doesn’t – he is redeemed by his dying sacrifice to save his son. But releasing the fear of death provides the gift of power to act with authenticity in the present – it eliminates timidity.

Note here too the importance of FAITH – so faith as in the belief in something where there is no direct evidence for it. If we are to be able to release the future then we need to have some faith that by acting with pure intent in the present then good will prevail. See how this goes back to the mysticism epistemology that there is more to the world than you can actually see feel hear and touch – there is something else going on – something deeper. Having faith means we release our fear that things will not work out if we do not try and control the outcome... Only by releasing this fear can we be free.

So – how to apply?

Remember that the context is how to apply lessons from mysticism to be able to live a happy and fulfilling life.

There is benefit in the dance – the ability to walk between the worlds – to release the baggage from the past and also to explore the possibility of the future. There is also benefit in releasing self importance and getting beyond the ego. The last delusion is that we have time – it is a sad truth than many people do not begin to live until they realize they are going to die. There is also research into the regrets of the dying done by Australian palliative care

nurse Bronnie Ware – compiled over several years she found common themes which included:-

- I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
- I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
- I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
- I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
- I wish that I had let myself be happier.

Mostly, I'd suggest to you that these regrets relate to courage – or more specifically lack of courage. If we go back to the existential model above you can see that we need courage to act in the present.

To embrace death as an adviser requires practice. Our brains want to set and forget – that is make a decision about what it thinks is going to happen in the future and then forget about it. We can also get caught in the constant attention craving of social media and smart phones that addiction expert, Dr Anna Lembke – author of 'Dopamine Nation' – calls the “modern-day hypodermic needle”.

To short circuit this process and the slippery slope down into reactive abyss requires ritual – if time is not linear then linear thinking is not the answer. Ancient and mystical teaching teach circles and spirals. Death and rebirth is part of this cycle.

There are many rebirth and renewal ceremonies in both ancient teachings and more modern ones however it is worthwhile to share some of the teachings of the Medicine Wheel and the four sacred directions. Remember too that this is the attempt to short circuit the frog in the boiling pot conundrum – that is if you put a frog in a pot of boiling water it will jump out and save itself but if you put the frog in a pot of cold water and then slowly turn up the heat the frog will not save itself but instead will boil to death. Humans are the same – the slowly changing nature of context means that we are delusional as to what is actually happening – we adjust to things instead.

A regular ceremony creates a circular feedback loop which highlights the change in context. To go around the medicine wheel one begins in the East and gives thanks for the gifts of spirit in one's life – see how one begins in gratitude for what is? – then one moves to the South and acknowledges the childlike energy of innocence. The West is the place of the adult where we have collected fears but also where we find courage – we take the time to face and release our fears and doubts – finally we go to the North and give thanks for the ones who have walked this earth before us and also for the wisdom in our lives. Having completed a circle we step out of the medicine wheel with the opportunity to see the world anew and begin again.

By creating renewal rituals in our life you have the opportunity to embrace death and the cycle of life as your advisor – remembering that what you are seeking is the courage to not be timid.

Historian, Charles A. Beard, when asked what he had learned from history, answered,

“First, whom the Gods would destroy they must first make mad with power. Second, the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceedingly small. Third, the bee fertilises the flower it robs. Fourth, when it is dark enough you can see the stars.”

Part 3

How to intentionally live an authentic life

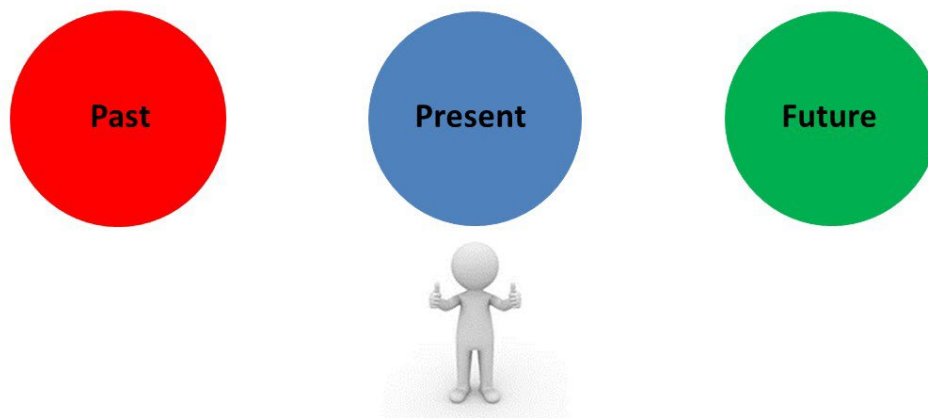
#1 – From reactivity to intentionality



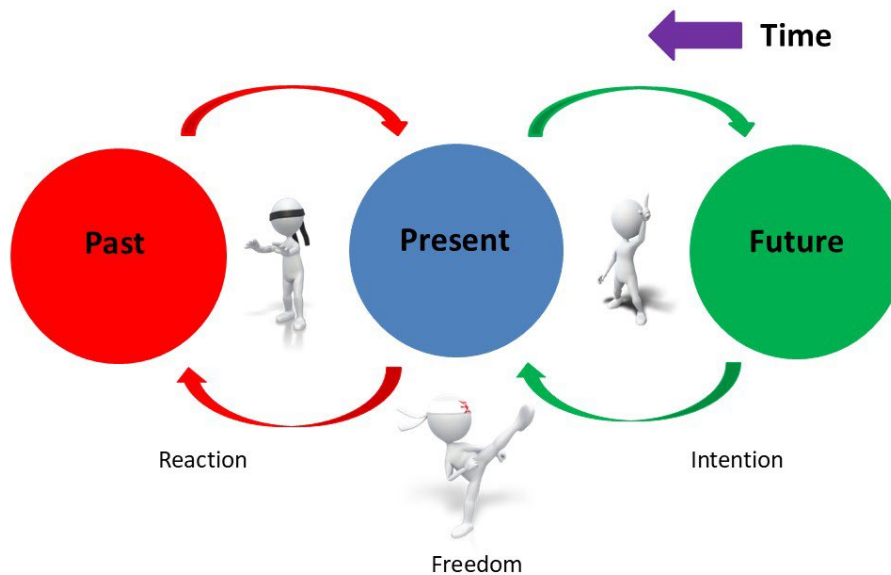
The first step in addressing the question of ‘How to Intentionally live an Authentic life’ is a key shift – that is to move from reactivity to intentionality.

First, let’s recap an existential framework – remembering that existentialism is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of existence. When studying philosophy one is seeking deeper meaning in life and it has been argued that the first question is to consider if it is real or is what we are experiencing an illusion – something like the Matrix. If you come to the conclusion that this is in fact real the next question you can ask is what is the nature of being – this is a branch of metaphysics called ontology. Does Being have an essential nature or is it created?

In existentialism the key relationship is between Being and Time and we can separate time into three domains – Past, Present and Future



Over time our state of Being changes – and it is easy to understand this simply by reflecting on your Past. But existentialism teaches us that time flows towards us which is in contrast to essentialism which teaches that we have an essential nature or state which projects forwards.



Through our experiences in the Past we construct our personality and stories about who we are and about what works for us in our lives. When faced with an issue in the Present we refer to our Past experiences to inform us about what to do in the Present moment. In this way we react to events as they occur based on what we know from the Past.

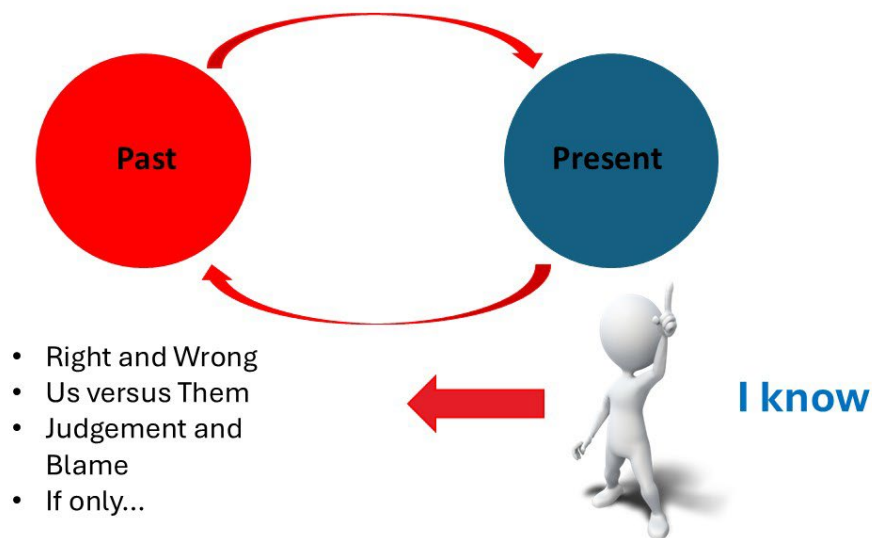
What's wrong with this?

Well nothing as long as you are happy with the way things are going and you feel you are living in a stable linear environment where you can accurately predict what will happen in the Future.

See the issue here?

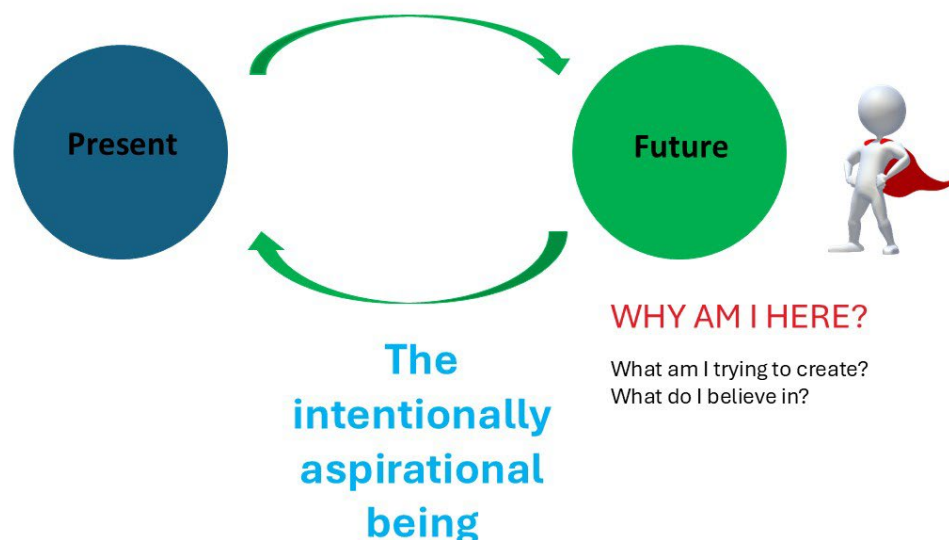
In recent times you may have noticed that things have been changing fairly rapidly and in unpredictable ways. This is an environment characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity – what the US military calls a VUCA environment.

In a VUCA environment reaction to events and trying to fit an interpretation of them into what you already know will be met with increasingly levels of frustration and distress.



Reactiveness drives us into four downward spirals of thinking – right wrong, us versus them, judgement and blame and 'If only...' – all of these modes of thinking will trap you in the Past Present loop and stop you from being able to create what you want in the World.

In contrast the Intentionally aspirational being is focused on the Future and what it is they are trying to create in the world.



So, I would suggest to you that the one big idea is that we need to find ways of shifting from reactivity to intentionality – and of course the next question is How?

Let's consider what we are working with in terms of our brain. You may recall that your brain is a self organising patterning system. It's trying to make life as easy as possible for you by constantly looking for patterns in the world. When it finds a pattern it recognises it shifts into automatic mode. In this way the brain has two distinct decision making modes – first is a subconscious pattern matching mode – the second is higher order conscious reasoning. Because higher order conscious reasoning uses a lot more energy and needs time to consider all of the possibilities the brain defaults into pattern matching mode.

What this means is that the whole time your brain is trying to be as lazy as possible and look for matches to Past experiences – in other words your brain defaults into reactivity. You can probably see now why this is an issue – in trying to help you and make life as easy as possible your brain actually works against the desire to be intentional.

The hard part is that this mostly happens on a subconscious level so you are not even aware of what is happening. An example of this is how we respond to conflict or emotionally charged situations (if you've ever done The Leadership Circle 360 this will resonate with you as your Reactive tendency) research indicates the early in life we learn a response to conflict or trauma that allows us to cope best. The three key responses are Compliance, Protection and Control – underpinning these are three basic fears – 'I'm not worthy', 'I've been hurt before and it's not going to happen again', and 'I can't trust anyone so I'm taking control'. Think of this as – lie down, run away, and run towards.

In any case the key to these reactive tendencies are that they are subconscious and we do them BEFORE we are consciously aware that we are doing them – get it? The brain has

recognised an old pattern and has gone straight into action mode without bothering to consult the conscious higher order reasoning part of the brain. Estimates are – and these vary – that we are doing this somewhere around 70-80% of the time but if you are stressed out and your self regulatory function is diminished – around 90% of the time – so yes you are on auto pilot – and no driving home and only becoming conscious of it as you drive in the driveway is NOT safe!

So – back to the challenge – how do we shift from being reactive to being intentional given that our brain wants to default into reactive mode the whole time and given that our brains are inherently LAZY!

Well what does the brain WANT to do?

Find and follow patterns

So how do we become intentional – train our brains to subconsciously follow different patterns – patterns that allow us to become intentional – neat eh?

How to?

The brain finds comfort in routines – when it recognises a known routine it basically goes to sleep and just follows the pathway – so define the pathway – think of this as standard thinking procedures STPs – like Standard operating procedures SOPs except for the brain.

Before any new situation or segment in our life – and here let's define a new segment as one that requires a new intention – we need to follow a standard procedure.

STOP – do some conscious breathing

MAKE PEACE – with whatever has just happened, anything that is on our minds – let it go

BECOME PRESENT – choose to be here now because power is in making a choice

SET INTENTION – how do you want to BE in the coming situation?

So – Peace, Presence, Intention – then go into the new situation.

Note that this requires you to embed STOPS or PAUSES in your day – you can't do back to back meetings – but the more you train yourself into this process the easier it will get as the brain will start to subconsciously pattern match against it.

Last bit – make it a game not a task – 'I wonder what would happen if I ...' and make sure you take reflective time to gather evidence for what the benefits of doing this are – this will reinforce the learning.

Next we will look at how Context changes meaning.

#2 – Context changes Meaning



If we were walking together across this frozen lake pictured above and upon coming across this hole in the ice I took it upon myself to push you into the hole and the freezing cold water you would rightly be pretty pissed with me – you may even say a few harsh words, and cuss a bit... but if we sat down and had a discussion about the benefits of ice baths and cold water therapy, how they stimulate your immune system, help you process bad fats and more – then – I suggested to you that you strip off and jump in – you may even do it of your free will – intentionally...

So, now we get the second part of this series – how Context changes meaning. If you are watching a play the words of the play are the content and the background provides the context – by changing the background you can change the meaning of the content. In the example above, by changing the bigger picture context the meaning of the act of jumping into the ice cold changes.

The interesting part is how much control you can have on your physiological responses to things if you intentionally set context. Let's go back to the VUCA stuff first – remember a VUCA environment is one which is characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. This is the environment which we are in now and this is why I propose to you that it is useful to shift from reactivity to intentionality.

Ambiguous situations are those in which the meaning of stimuli changes depending on context. Our ability to understand that the meaning of certain stimuli is context dependent allow us to have flexibility in our actions and to respond to a situation in an appropriate manner. A simple example is how we answer our mobile phones – this will depend on whether you are in a private or a public place, what you're doing and who the caller is – see how your response will vary depending on the context?

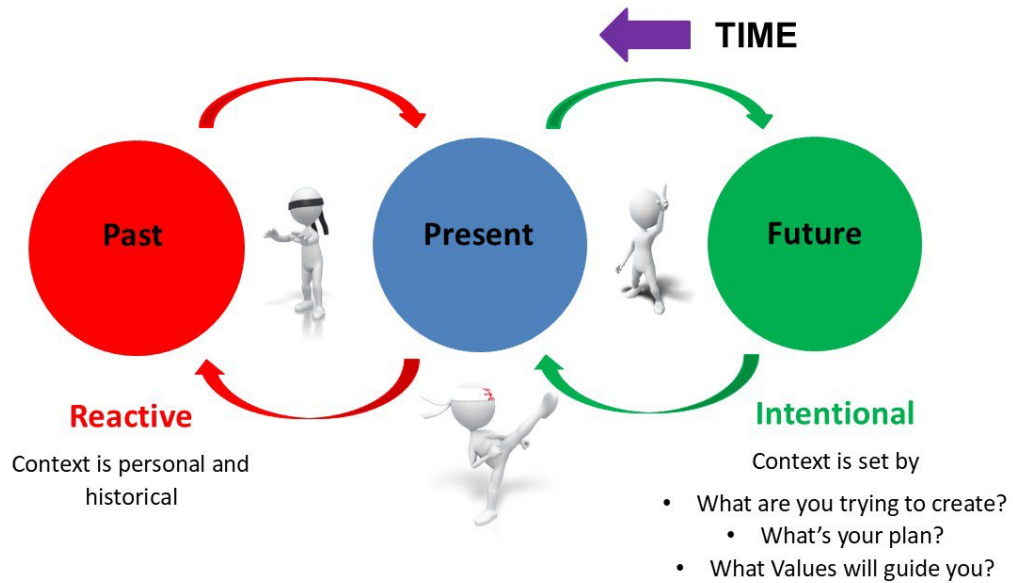
The two parts of your brain that work this out are your orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) located just above your eyes and your dorsal hippocampus (DH) located farther back in your brain. Researchers ('Partially dissociable roles of the orbitofrontal cortex and dorsal hippocampus in context-dependent hierarchical associations', Keiflin, R. et al, Current Biology, vol. 34, issue 23, Dec 2024) conclude that the OFC enables context based decision making by regulating behaviour based on learned associations – and the DH enables rapid learning of new context dependent relationships by using prior knowledge.

So – here's how it played out in the research experiment – rats were exposed to brief auditory cues, presented within a light or dark context. Sometimes the auditory cues would lead to a reward, sometimes not – making them ambiguous predictors of rewards. After a while the rats learned that one auditory cue was rewarded only in the light but not in the dark – while the opposite was true of the other cue. So, they learned that the meaning of the cues was context dependent. As noted above, the researchers learned that the OFC created a cognitive map to enable this understanding – which facilitated the use of contextual knowledge to regulate behaviour – whilst the DH enabled storage and recall of past learning which facilitated future contextual learning.

But wait – there's more – other research ('The self in context: brain systems linking mental and physical health', Koban, L. et al, Nat Rev Neurosci. 2021 Mar 31) indicates *“that mental health and physical health are linked by neural systems that jointly regulate somatic physiology and high-level cognition...These systems help to construct models of the ‘self-in-context’, compressing information across time and sensory modalities into conceptions of the underlying causes of experience. Self-in-context models endow events with personal meaning and allow predictive control over behaviour and peripheral physiology, including autonomic, neuroendocrine and immune function. They guide learning from experience and the formation of narratives about the self and one’s world.”*

What does all this mean? Context changes meaning and Context based decision making models can be learned.

So, now rewind to the last post on shifting from reactivity to intentionality - and recall the Existential framework.



If Context is reactive – and remember here that this is the mode into which the brain would like to default – Context is historical and personal – What happened last time? Do I like this person?

If Context is Intentional you can establish it by asking 3 key questions – What am I trying to create? What's the plan? and What Values will guide my behaviour?

So – now see the benefit of stopping BEFORE an event and considering what your Intention is – Stop – Peace – Presence – Intention. Next see how if we do this and embed feedback loops the brain learns the contextual patterns and creates a cognitive map. The other part of the brain – the DH – then stores the map so next time things are easier – in other words so next time our brain pattern matches against this map.

Hopefully you now see how this process works and how Context changes meaning AND the bodies physiological response to events.

To do this practice the following:-

Remember this process from the last part?

STOP – do some conscious breathing

MAKE PEACE – with whatever has just happened, anything that is on our minds – let it go

BECOME PRESENT – choose to be here now because power is in making a choice

SET INTENTION – how do you want to BE in the coming situation?

Now add to this:-

What's the intentional Context?

- What am I/we trying to create here?
- What's our plan/strategy?
- What Values will guide my/our behaviour?

Next we will look at how to create an Aspirational Context.

"The horizon of many people is a circle with a radius of zero. They call this their point of view."

Albert Einstein

#3 – Establishing an Aspirational Context



“Imagine there's no heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us, only sky

Imagine all the people

Livin' for today

Ah

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion, too

Imagine all the people

Livin' life in peace

You

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will be as one”

‘Imagine’ John Lennon 1971

'Yeah but...' you might say 'nice sentiment but what about war in Ukraine, the Middle East, terrorism, poverty, climate change, bad people...'

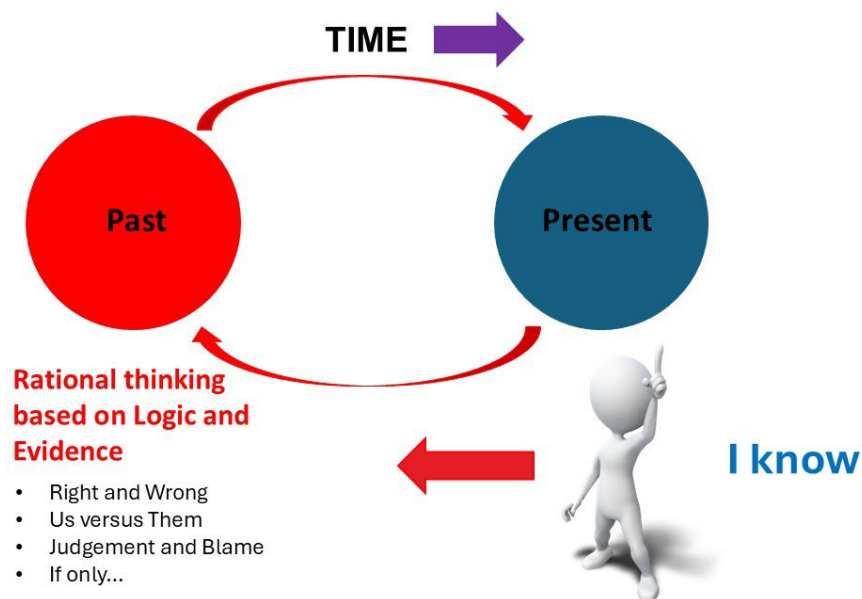
So now is your Context Reactive or Intentional?

And what does that mean for how you see the World and how you now act?

How does that Context change your meaning?

So – let me mess with your head a bit....

If we construct the World from the Past then we use rational logical thinking based on evidence from Past events to create meaning and context.

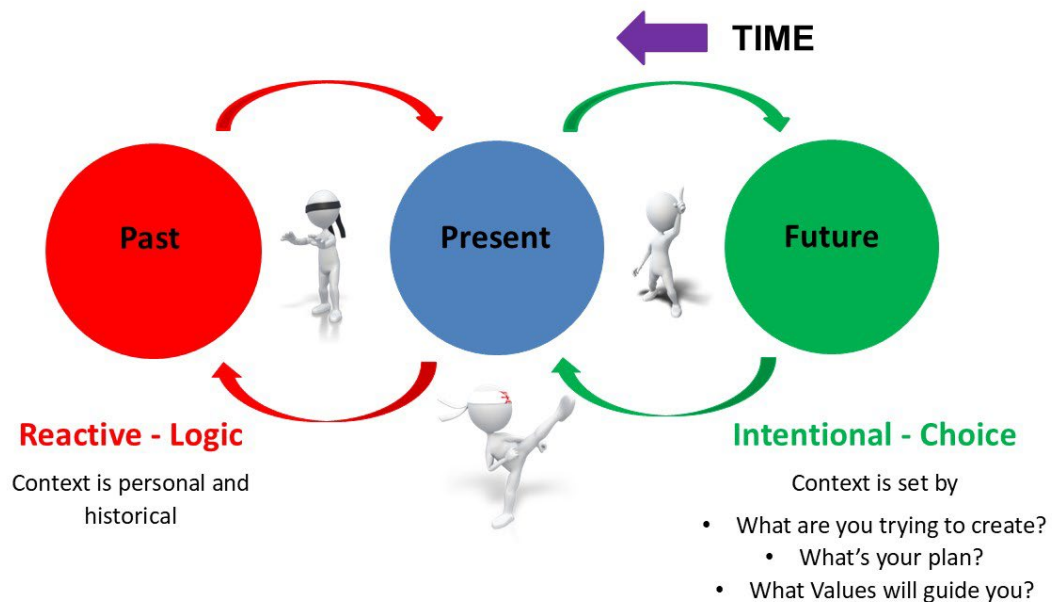


This is all very logical and steps us neatly into binary positions like right and wrong, us and them, judgement and blame – it also allows us an ‘out’ from having to take any action because we can say *'If only... then I could do... but it isn't so I can't'*.

This type of thinking can give us comfort but it does not allow us to change as we become in a way resigned to our current situation and therefore reactive to life's events as they occur.

The very thinking that gives us comfort traps us in the Past – Present loop and perpetuates what we are already getting – because – as noted above – it is all very logical and rational and based on evidence.

But from an Existential perspective Choice comes before Logic



Remember the distinction in Existentialism is that Time is flowing towards us – the Future becomes the Present which then becomes the Past – so from this perspective we make a choice FIRST – and this is where intentionally establishing Context becomes important – because remember from the last part ‘How Context changes Meaning’.

So, the act of choosing Context – of asking those three key questions – What are you trying to create? What’s your plan? and what values will guide you? – then CHANGES how you interpret events in the Present moment and what meaning you give them.

See?

‘Imagine all the people living life in peace’

If you can't imagine it first then you can't create it – logic will deny you that possibility.

So, where should we start with all this?

Remember Richard Boyatzis – eminent professor and student of change? He says we are living in this dynamic system of systems that lurch in and out of equilibrium – and just because a system is in equilibrium doesn't mean that is good – you can be in a state of equilibrium and be perpetually doing bad habits and behaviours – you are stuck.

A volatile, uncertain and ambiguous environment can cause us to be very fearful and to retreat from the World and just look after ourselves. Nightly news feeds of bad things happening in the World can send us into reactive mode and kill our ability to imagine a better World – logic then perpetuates this understanding of the World – and yep – we are stuck.

So Boyatzis says – change starts with Self – and what draws us out of equilibrium is an aspirational Context – which he proposes has five key elements.

#1 Purpose – what do you think you are actually doing here?

#2 Values – what is most important to you in life?

#3 Philosophy – how do you think the World works?

#4 Self Identity – what's the story you tell about yourself and who you are?

#5 Social Identity – who are you in a social setting?

Sounds easy eh?

But remember that the brain wants to default into reactive pattern matching, that fear and negativity denies us the ability to dream and imagine a better world, and that evidence from the Past mixed with rational logical thinking limits our ability to see something different.

Now maybe you see that challenge here?

This is why ancient societies have done Vision Quests in weird and wonderful ways. Why people are attracted to psychedelics and mind altering activities – we want to find ways of escaping the logical rational mind.

But you can work on this in a structured way if you understand that logical rational thinking holds you in the past and emotive heart based feeling draws you forwards into the Future.

“You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will be as one”

So – let's make this practical – remember what we want to create is an aspirational context – and hopefully you can see now that an aspirational context has to be something that we feel deeply and stirs our emotions. With the five questions then your task is to ask – not what is the answer now – but what would you wish it to be? What would the answer be that stirs your emotions and draws you towards it? What strength of emotion will pull you out of fear based reactive thinking and stir you into action?

Emotive answers to the questions will in turn allow you to answer these questions:-

#1 Am I fulfilling my destiny?

#2 Am I being a good person?

#3 Am I leading a good life?

#4 Am I choosing to love myself?

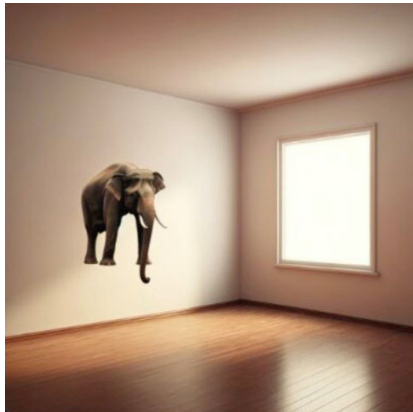
#5 Am I choosing to love others?

Boyatzis says hope is the mediating factor.

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without words
And never stops – at all’*

Emily Dickinson No. 254 (c.1861)

#4 – It begins with You



"I am already given to the power that rules my fate. And I cling to nothing, so I will have nothing to defend. I have no thoughts, so I will see. I fear nothing, so I will remember myself. Detached and at ease, I will dart past the Eagle to be free."

Carlos Castaneda

Your lazy brain likes patterns

Your patterns of behaviour create habits and routines

Habits and routines create systemic equilibrium

Imagine driving an old horse and cart down a muddy track – the first time you go down the track the cart slips all over the place on its skinny wooden wheels. The next time you go down the track there are ruts in the track so the wheels don't slip so much. The more times you go down the track the deeper the ruts get until eventually they are so deep that as soon as you start going down the track you will go right to the end because the effort required to get the wheels out of the now deep ruts is great.

This is your lazy brain in systemic equilibrium. From a neuroscience perspective the neurons that fire together wire together – in other words all the individual bits of action that made up the cart going down the track have now mashed together into one action.

Imagine now as you come to the start of the track you see a very faint junction and another track you'd never noticed before heading off in a new direction. A 'fast' reactive, pattern matching decision is – go down the old track and because now the 'bits' of the track have all linked together – even if you start going down the track your momentum will carry you forwards. A 'slow' intentional decision may be to explore the new track – and let's say this new track is your aspirational ideal self as defined in the last post.

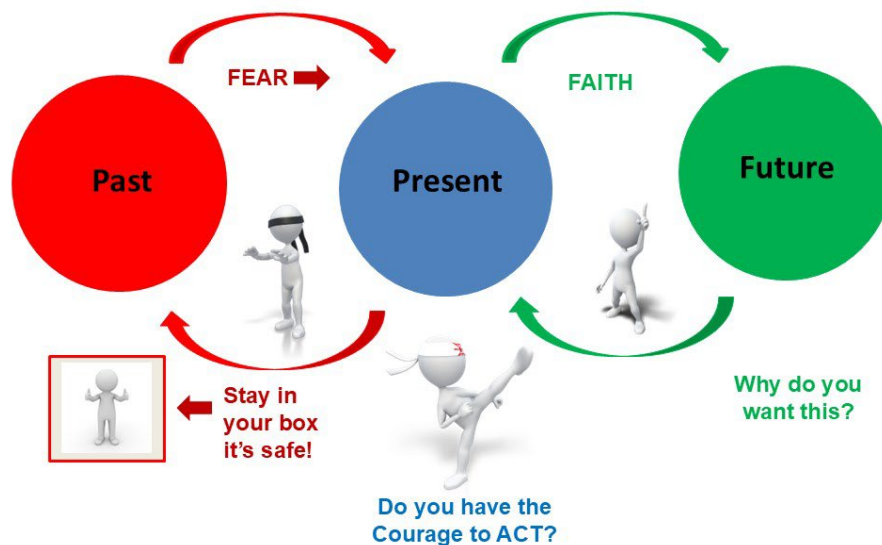
Sounds easy to say – change direction – but remember that the brain is lazy and will default into reactive pattern matching – before you have even thought to make a decision – a decision has already been made...

And there's more – in the brain there is a self regulatory function that mediates between fast and slow decision making – this function has limited capacity and the more depleted you are physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually – the less ability you have to self regulate and the more likely you are to mindlessly pattern match...

Ho hum...

So – your beautiful aspirational context may remain just that – an aspiration.

Your task then is to gather power - if you have no power you will react – negative emotions based on fear will drive you back to where it's safe – rational and logical thoughts will justify why this is so and why it should continue to be so – equilibrium will continue – the aspirational voice of dreams may be silenced with coping activities.



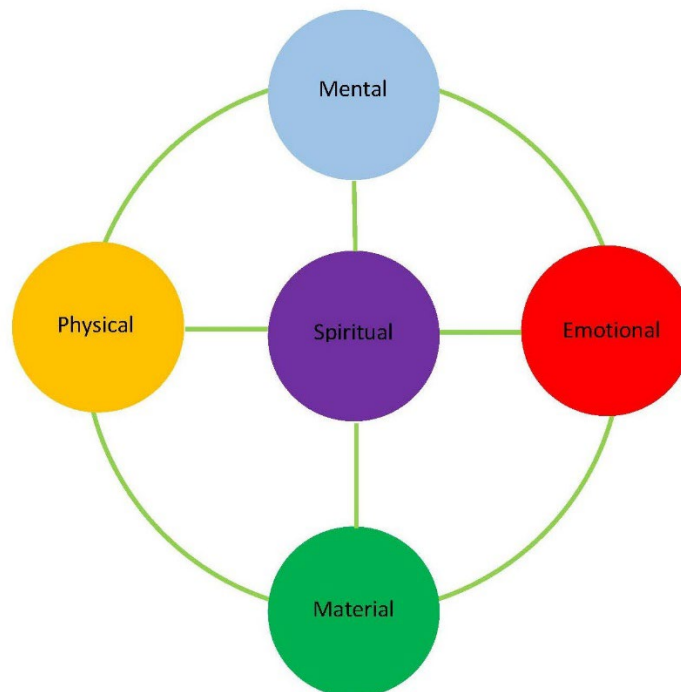
To believe that something else is possible – your aspirational intention – requires faith – not in a religious sense but in the strict definition of faith as – belief in something where there is no evidence.

Fear can be revealed as False Energy Appearing Real – and named as the inhibitor that it is

"I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain."

Frank Herbert, Dune

Finding power is all about finding the strength and courage to resist the urge to react and allows the self to pause instead. There are five foundational elements to consider here – Physical, Mental, Emotional, Material and Spiritual.



5 Areas of Vision © A.C.Ping 2010

The process here is the same.

#1 For each element – where are you now out of ten?

#2 If it was 10/10 – What would it look like? Feel like? Why do you want it?

Then again we need to translate from the Future into the reality of the Present – so

What would you need to habitually DO to BE like that??

And now if you do the work you will have an ideal (aspirational) weekly routine. Something to play with so you have the power to make a choice BEFORE logic intervenes.

“...no way to your future now but the way your shadow could take walking before you across the water going where shadows go,

No way to make sense of a world that wouldn't let you pass except to call an end to the way you had come...

To empty your bags, to sort this and to leave that, to promise what you needed to promise all along... not because you had given up but because now, you would find a different way to tread...”

Extract from *'Finisterre'* by David Whyte

#5 – Consciousness changes everything



'Here we are' Oliver Jeffers

*"Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.*

*The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.*

If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.

No two trees are the same to Raven.

No two branches are the same to Wren.

If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,

You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows

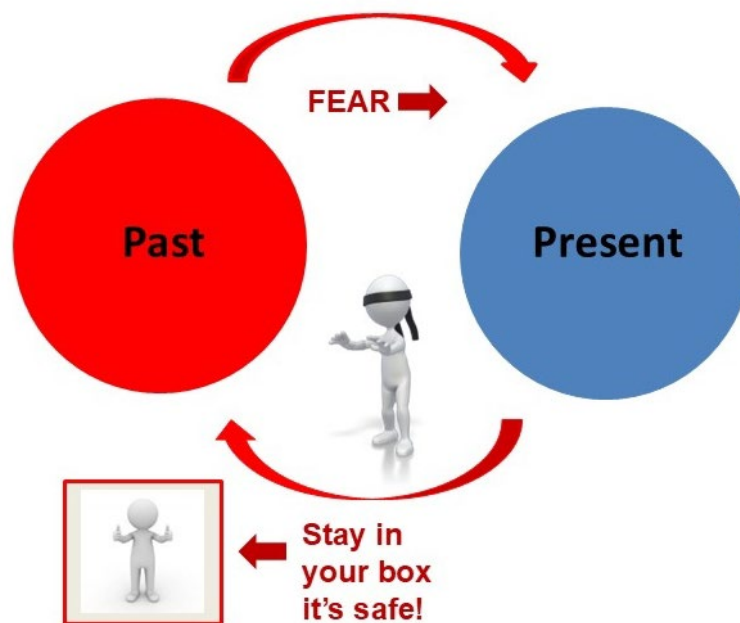
Where you are. You must let it find you."

Lost

by David Wagoner (1999)

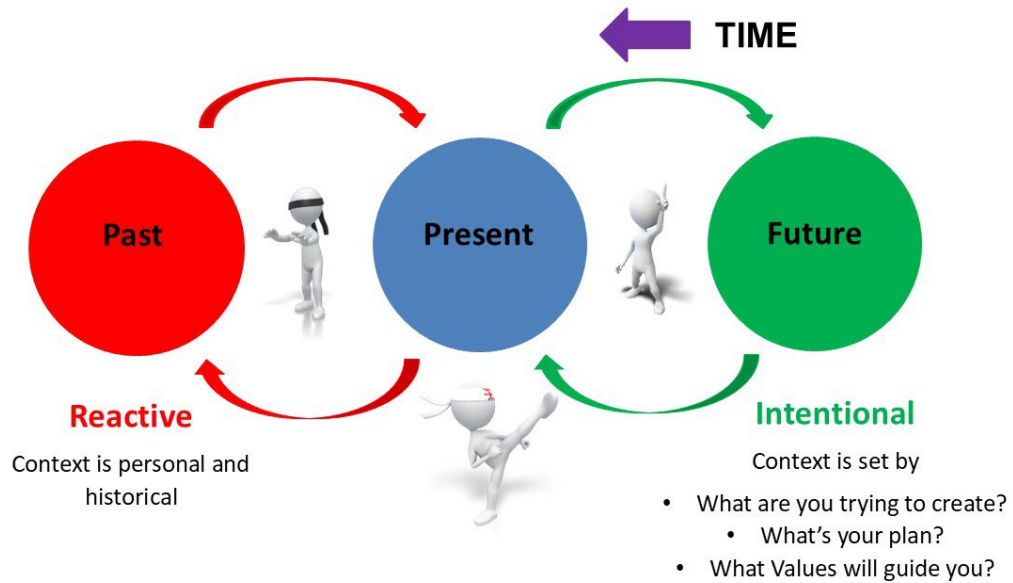
I love this poem – it came to me via a friend who sent me a link to David Whyte discussing it on YouTube (which I recommend) – the poem evolved from an American Indian story in which an Elder is asked by a child what to do if they get lost in the forest.

I love it because it addresses the feeling of being lost – I remember as a child visiting the Zoo in Sydney and at one stage becoming so engrossed in watching the big cats that I lost my family. If you've been to Taronga Zoo, you would know that it is a bit of a maze (great views of Sydney but still a maze) – the more I tried to find my family the more panicked I became and the more lost I became. My panic then morphed into fear and fear then inhibited my ability to think clearly and of course then I was even more lost.



Fear stops you from having any opportunity to be Intentional and future focussed.

Remember we are considering the question of how to intentionally live an authentic life. We've looked at the idea of shifting from reactivity to intentionality, how context changes meaning and how to create an aspirational context. Then we considered how important it is to stand on a solid foundation.



But what if current circumstances cause you to panic?

The RE- action sends you backwards – the breath catches in your throat – your stomach sinks – fear, scarcity and separation arises – protect yourself!

‘Stand still’ says the poem – *‘The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you’*

We must find a way to be conscious of what is, not what could be – you see the essential model above implores us to pay attention to the relationship between being and time. From an essentialist perspective time flows away from us – there is an essential nature to being human – maybe there is a destiny that has brought you here into this life? From an existentialist point of view time flows towards us – there is nothing until we create it – free will is key.

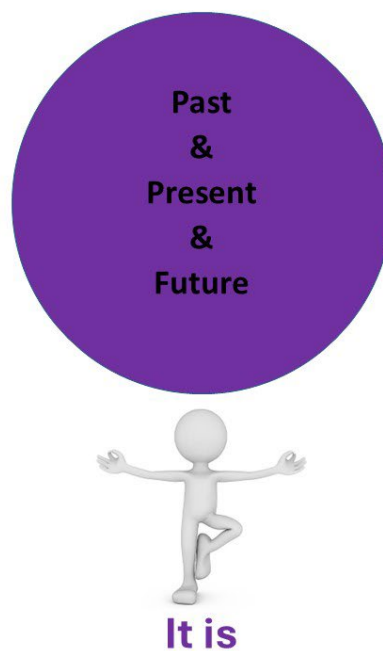
Consciousness asks us to choose what to pay attention to. We can pay attention to the re- action – we can feed the fears that arise from what may have happened in the past and what we have constructed to be the meaning of our world. Then as I said above we retreat away from the future and instead hide in our box and protect what we already have and who we already are.

Stand still the forest knows where you are.

We can pay attention to where we want to go and what we want to create – who we want to be. But then are we really here? Is part of us here and part of us there in the future? Then how do we interpret the present through this future lens? Will we judge it as good or bad? Right or wrong? But then surely this sends us back into the past as we must judge from what we already know.

Stand still the forest knows where you are

Abandon the idea of story – it simply is



In the moment you can choose how to be by being conscious of your orientation towards fear or love.

So, we can add to our process – stop – stand still – pause and become aware of how you are being in the moment – what are you focusing your consciousness on? Is fear or love driving you? Because consciousness changes everything.

“Breathe, breathe in the air

Don't be afraid to care

Leave, but don't leave me

Look around

Choose your own ground

Long you live and high you fly

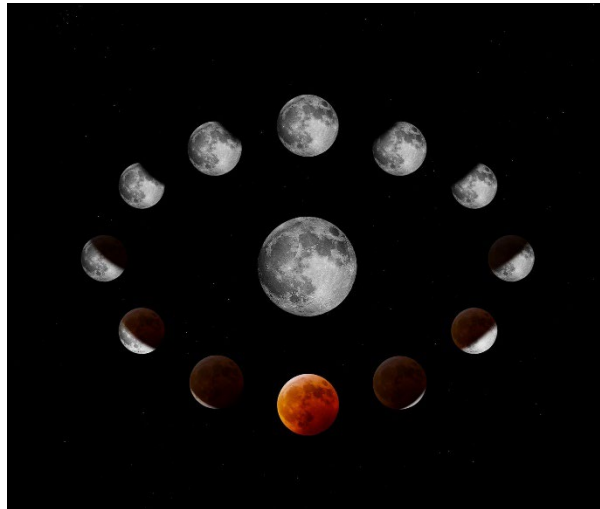
And smiles you'll give and tears you'll cry

And all you touch and all you see

Is all your life will ever be”

Extract from *‘Breathe’* by Pink Floyd

#6 A System that Learns from Itself



“The future will always be better than you expect it to be. It always has been. You would not have been here if your present matched your past fears, would you?”

Mo Gawdat

Six parts into - How to intentionally live an authentic life - it's a good time to pause and recap. See the title of this part – A system that learns from itself – this means circles not straight lines – stopping, pausing in a routine ritualistic way and reflecting on what has just happened then being present and resetting intent for what is to come.

So far we said:-

#1 Shift from Reactiveness to Intentionality

The brain finds comfort in routines – when it recognises a known routine it basically goes to sleep and just follows the pathway – so define the pathway – think of this as standard thinking procedures STPs – like Standard operating procedures SOPs except for the brain.

Before any new situation or segment in our life – and here let's define a new segment as one that requires a new intention – we need to follow a standard procedure.

STOP – do some conscious breathing

MAKE PEACE – with whatever has just happened, anything that is on our minds – let it go

BECOME PRESENT – choose to be here now because power is in making a choice

SET INTENTION – how do you want to BE in the coming situation?

So – Peace, Presence, Intention – then go into the new situation.

#2 Context Changes Meaning

Now add this:-

- What's the intentional Context?
- What am I/we trying to create here?
- What's our plan/strategy?
- What Values will guide my/our behaviour?

#3 Establish an Aspirational Context

Boyatzis says – change starts with Self – and what draws us out of equilibrium is an aspirational Context – which he proposes has five key elements.

1 Purpose – what do you think you are actually doing here?

2 Values – what is most important to you in life?

3 Philosophy – how do you think the World works?

4 Self Identity – what's the story you tell about yourself and who you are?

5 Social Identity – who are you in a social setting?

Emotive answers to the questions will in turn allow you to answer these questions:-

1 Am I fulfilling my destiny?

2 Am I being a good person?

3 Am I leading a good life?

4 Am I choosing to love myself?

5 Am I choosing to love others?

#4 It begins with You

Finding power is all about finding the strength and courage to resist the urge to react and allows the self to pause instead. There are five foundational elements to consider here – Physical, Mental, Emotional, Material and Spiritual.

The process here is.

#1 For each element – where are you now out of ten?

#2 If it was 10/10 – What would it look like? Feel like? Why do you want it?

Then again we need to translate from the Future into the reality of the Present – so

#3 What would you need to habitually DO to BE like that??

And now if you do the work you will have an ideal (aspirational) weekly routine. Something to play with so you have the power to make a choice BEFORE logic intervenes.

#5 Consciousness Changes Everything

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We can pay attention to where we want to go and what we want to create – who we want to be. But then are we really here? Is part of us here and part of us there in the future? Then how do we interpret the present through this future lens? Will we judge it as good or bad? Right or wrong? But then surely this sends us back into the past as we must judge from what we already know.

Stand still the forest knows where you are

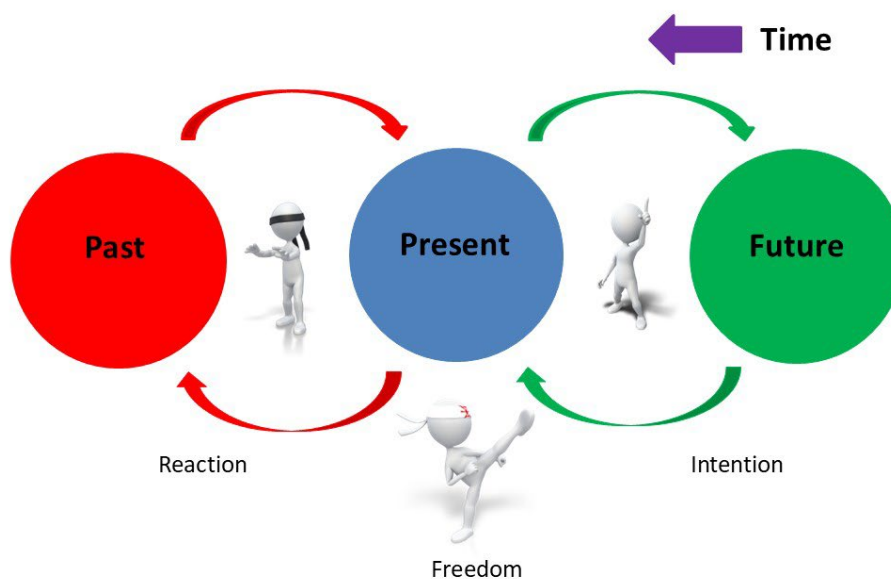
Abandon the idea of story – it simply is

In the moment you can choose how to be by being conscious of your orientation towards fear or love.

So, we can add to our process – stop – stand still – pause and become aware of how you are being in the moment – what are you focusing your consciousness on? Is fear or love driving you? Because consciousness changes everything.

So, now we are at #6 A System that Learns from Itself

If you have come this far then maybe you now have some elements in place and we can start to put together a system. The key here is to recognize that you are not looking for a solution – you are not trying to fix a problem – you do not know what the future holds and you do not know what the answer is. We are living in uncertainty so our task is to become comfortable in uncertainty – let go of fixed thinking and be free. A systems approach will allow you to do this.



Remember that the aim is to live an authentic happy fulfilling life free of anxiety fear doubt worry and self limiting beliefs – so we need to step onto a sacred path of freedom and faith.

If you look at the diagram above you can see where the pieces of the system fit.

The Ideal Self lives in the Future

Fears and doubts live in the Past

Freedom lives in the Present

To be happy and free we must spend as much time as possible in the Present moment – so there is time for connecting with Intentions and Aspirations – this is the Vision Quest Process.

To be happy and free we also need to let go of baggage from the past that can trap us in fear and doubt and hold us back.

Now remember again that what we are looking for is a system not a solution – so see the picture at the start of this post of the 13 moon cycle – see how we go around in a circle? A system that learns from itself circles back around and asks what's working? what's not? What do I need to do differently?

“We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”

Kurt Vonnegut

#7 Is it Safe to Fail?



Ithaka

*As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.*

*Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.*

*Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.*

*Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,*

*you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.*

*Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.*

*Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean."*

C. P. Cavafy

Lots of spiritual teachings tell us the same thing about the value of the journey and the importance of not just focusing on the destination. I love this poem above because it shows us the dance between the destination and the journey – *“Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey – without her you wouldn’t have set out – she has nothing left to give you now”*

The intention begins the journey – without the intention you would not have even started the journey. The aspirational intention arises from a deep yearning for something more and deeper in life – a richer more authentic way of being – maybe a return to a state long forgotten?

But then we do the ‘work’ – we sit in circle and in deep contemplation, we create an aspirational context by connecting with purpose and by defining and refining our Values – we create rituals, routines and ceremonies to allow us to circle back around and find ourselves and see where we are at.

But then what happens when we see that we are not at where we thought we should be at? Where what life has presented to us does not look like what we envisioned it would or should be? A harsh word and self-judgement can arise – maybe even a deep disappointment that may manifest as self-loathing, self-blame and even ‘not good enough’.

Can you accept What is? Not what you think should be?

So here is where consciousness changes everything – as the emotion rises up – as the heart sinks – as despair lingers at the edge of awareness – you are not lost – remember? The forest knows where you are – stand still – breathe...

Is it safe to fail?

My Mother uses to tell us that the only bad mistakes (failures) you make are the ones you don’t learn from.

If we accept that we are living in a changing uncertain environment that is so complex we cannot predict the future then our task is to become comfortable in that uncertainty – not to live in a world filled with anxiety about what is going to happen next.

So – is it safe to fail?

When you sat and worked out your Values and what is most important in life – in terms of how you wish to BE – did one of those Values be ‘Forgiveness’? Did it apply only to other people – maybe even only those that are loved? Or did it apply to all beings? Even the person who cut you off in traffic and then abused you at the next set of traffic lights?

Did it apply to you? Did you grant yourself the same level of compassion empathy and care that you would grant others?

So – we have circled back around and have landed in a place that we are not happy with because of course we think that we are right and that what we think must be created? We feel the emotion of disappointment arise – we feel the emotion of fear that things haven’t worked out and maybe never will?

Is it safe to fail?

First breathe – become conscious of the present moment. In the moment there is only the moment, there is no past, there is no future – only now – and in the now there is no fear, there is no failure.

Next make it safe to fail – give yourself permission to name it – (maybe cuss word) it didn’t work out the way I thought – and that’s ok – it’s safe to fail.

Divide the story from the facts. The story is long and emotive, the facts are short and sweet.

Breathe some more.

Is it safe to fail?

What was it again that you wanted? How did you want to BE? Not HAVE not DO – BE

Did this state of Being involve empathy, compassion, peace, joy, unity, fairness, equality, freedom – maybe even LOVE?

Did it apply to only others or YOU as well??

Are you still committed to this?

Is it safe to fail now??

Breathe

What do you need to do now?

“A moments insight is sometimes worth a life’s experience.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jnr.

#8 Gratitude and Curiosity are Super Powers



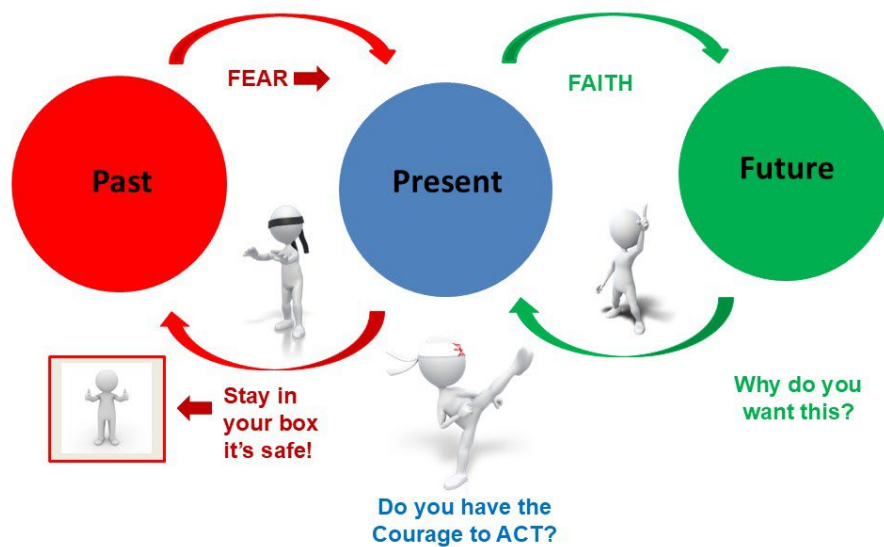
Gratitude statue by Lori Betz

“Be peaceful and carry your peace wherever you go.”

Deepak Chopra

This was Deepak’s answer to the final question in a recent interview about what advice he would give for living a good life. It’s fitting isn’t it that we are back to Peace – without Peace how can we live a good life – but how can we do that when our Peace is constantly challenged by the uncertain changing environment that we now live in?

A reflection on the Existential construct is useful.



Remember what we are trying to do is to live Intentionally – and to do this we need to be future orientated. But the future is unknown and uncertain so we need to find ways of becoming comfortable in this environment of uncertainty.

Fear will drive us back into the Past and encourage us to hide away in our box and defend our territory. In this space we have conversations around who's right and who's wrong, who's to blame, we separate people into us and them, and we lament in 'if only...'

The Past can haunt us and hold us back. Negative experiences from the Past will prime us to have fear in the Present – remembering that FEAR is False Energy Appearing Real. It hasn't happened yet so it's not real – but it might so you'd better get back in your box!

To step into the Future and hold yourself there requires Faith – not religious Faith – but Faith as defined as a belief in something where there is no evidence. One might say here that there is no evidence for example that humanity can live in Peace – that humanity must be saved from itself and that the way to do this is through enforced control – but then you will see there is no Peace if Peace requires Freedom and Equality as it's friends.

The poison for Faith is cynicism – a belief only in what one can see, hear and touch – this manifest as “I will believe it when I see it” – but this paralyses one into inaction and hence prevents one from living intentionally because this view will only allow us to be reactive.

What then is the answer to this conundrum?

A rational logical view of the world based on evidence makes perfect logical rational sense – but – it will trap us in the Past and the recreation of history. This view of the world flows into relational ethics – remembering that ethics is about asking and attempting to answer the question of ‘How to lead a good life?’

Relational ethics is – as the name suggests about relations – you see yourself in relation to others – ‘they did this so they deserve to be treated like that’ – ‘I did this so I deserve to be treated like this’ – ‘everyone else is doing it so I can do it too’.

It makes sense to our rational minds and it’s pervasive and addictive – it builds the future from the trail of history but at the same time traps us into this very same trail.

What do we want remember? To live in a world of Peace, Freedom, Justice, Equality, Empathy, Compassion, Respect, Unity and Love??

‘Yes but’ you may say ‘there are bad people in the world so we must be afraid and we must fight against them’.

To escape this we must find ways to make peace with the past so we can release its hold over us.

“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”

Nelson Mandela

How much do you want to create your intentional aspirational future? Can you step out of your rational mind and into your heart? Can you make a choice BEFORE logic intervenes?

Gratitude is the super power that allows us to free ourselves from the Past. In every challenge there is a gift. If we focus on our place in the world from a relational perspective we can see ourselves as hard done by or even as the victim. This stirs up emotions and causes us to feel discomfort which in turn makes us reactive and again drives us back to the Past and into our box where we know everything and all is safe and logical – but of course from here we cannot be intentional.

Make a choice to focus on gratitude. Studies into happiness show us that if all you do is write down three things you are grateful for over the next 3-6 months you will be up to 15% happier.

Now if we are becoming released from the Past then we need to seed the Future. Curiosity allows us to do this – “I wonder what would happen if...” – become experimental, release yourself from cynicism, embrace a growth mindset. Stop thinking and start playing – life is a dance.

Yes but...

Yes but – conquer the fear – why do you want to create a better future? What in your heart will drive you into action even when your head is saying no?

“Without courage we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can’t be kind, merciful, generous or honest.”

Maya Angelou

And remember at the end of all of this thinking there is DOING

“It is necessary to aid time, that without this kind of aid, time itself will become an ally of the insurgent and primitive forces of social stagnation.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

Habitual practice, ritual and routine will allow you to live an intentional life – this is not a quick fix this is a shift in thinking, Being and Doing.

The Last Bit

So we are at the end of this book and it is worth stopping for a moment to review the journey. This is the second book in the Intention Trilogy – it follows on from the three books in the Foundation Trilogy – BE, DO and Faith, and the three books in the Experiential Trilogy – A Place Where You May Find Peace, FEAR, and The Self Mastery Toolbox.

Whilst you can read all of these books individually it should be understood that the teachings flow on from the earlier books. The Foundation Trilogy is about creating the foundations for a good life. BE is about finding yourself, DO about putting that knowledge into action, and FAITH about having faith to believe in something where there is no direct evidence. The second trilogy – the Experiential Trilogy – takes the earlier teachings and applies them in the world. A Place Where You May Find Peace is a journey into the depths of Africa and into the challenges faced in the shadow. FEAR then delves into how to face and release these fears. Finally, The Self Mastery Toolbox provides a set of tools that needs to work towards self mastery.

The final trilogy – the Intention Trilogy – steps beyond the known and explores the essence of being in ‘The Art of Remembering Who You Really Are’. This book has explored how to do it – the first part takes all the learnings from the previous books and provides a framework for how to create a system for self mastery. The second part – Walk a Sacred Path – is the philosophy behind this. The third part then combines all of this into an intentional process for being authentic in your life.

I hope you have enjoyed this book and you are applying the teachings to your life and into the World. You may also have worked out by now that there is a final book in this trilogy or trilogies? The last challenge is FREEDOM – how do we become free so that we can bring love to ourselves and our world?

In peace and love always.