

Confidence – Not Knowing

I'm writing these blogs at a very difficult time in my life.¹ The effects of my wife's cancer become more obvious every day (to me, at least, because she conceals them from others at times). We are told she does not have very long to live. How long? Weeks? Months? Nobody can tell us. Medicine and Science have assumed great 'authority' in our modern society, but in this case they don't know.

Not knowing is a state of mind we all have to live with, day in and day out, yet our mind **wants** to know – it feels it will have more control if it knows what is going to happen. Every instance of the human mind is trying to predict and plan for the future. Uncertainty is our constant companion so each of us deals with it – sometimes with difficulty.

At the root of the problem is how little we actually know about anything and how little control we actually have over anything that happens. This is why I explain the mind, for our everyday purposes, in terms of basic biology. It is no more or no less than the process that connects us effectively while preserving our individual autonomy. It enables both **being** and **belonging**, though I also think it requires some **love** to do this. I source that love, in the first place, from the unknown. This way of thinking is elaborated in my book *Dancing with the Unknown - Feelings and Everyday Mind and Soul*. We can choose to use our minds to **be and belong** rather than to **judge and control** and love is the catalyst we need to do this.

In my own life I found great solace from becoming aware of the unknown and gradually learning to love it and trust it as my friend. It may sound like a paradox, but I think that what we call **self-confidence** involves welcoming the unknown. One's life (and one's mind) is a dynamic process, an ever-changing present moment, and we **feel** our way forward with confidence because what we know **now** will be sufficient for the **moment** that follows. We know this from what has happened before.

Which brings us back to **memory**, the subject of the previous blog. For years in my lectures on the mind I hardly mentioned memory (even when people asked about it) because I felt that the science of memory was trapped in an outdated theory of mind and therefore its relevance was questionable. I still feel this. European scientists like Ylva Østby (from last week's blog) are less dogmatic about it than their American counterparts (and I did enjoy reading last week's featured book). The part I liked best is the final chapter where it says that the process we use to remember is the same as the process we use to envision our future.

This sounds less like mainstream neuroscience in which the memory itself could be found 'sitting' in a certain part of the brain and more like what I said above about **feeling your way** in the world. Memories are not things – they arise as part of the **process** of mind. Let me try to explain how it is that different scientists will say completely different things about memory (and mind) and how it happens that I belong to the school that explains mind as a dynamic and holistic happening in which the brain is just one of the most useful parts.

The term 'autopoiesis,' coined by biologists, Maturana and Varela, in 1972, means **self-producing** and by the end of the century it had introduced a new paradigm (the one that I use) for understanding the mind. At that time – and even today in large measure – the science

¹ Because she sleeps a lot I have time to write and it's important for my own health to be doing something that is purposeful and meaningful – hence the blogs.

was all about the mind as a computer taking in information through our senses and processing it cleverly to produce representations of the changing world outside, some of these images so stable they are recorded as memories in certain parts of our brain. In this scenario the mind is nothing more than whatever the brain does. Yet a self-producing mind also occurs in all the living things that have no brain. The life process does not require a brain. Our revered grey matter is a wonderful enhancement for our very special mind magic, but it is just one of the components, not the mind itself. It does not tell us what to do or, for that matter, what we did. The flow of our entire mind-body does that.

The three main ‘models’ of **the mind** can be roughly put like this: (1) it is internal, in the brain, (2) it is the connections we make with the world and (3) it is external, consciousness existing in the world itself. The middle one that I mostly use is often called ‘enactivism’ because we bring forth our world by the way we connect with it. We ‘enact’ our existence by what we **do** and the way we do things.

Everything you do will contain memories to guide your actions. Walk into any shop and you’ll notice what is familiar about it and also some as yet unfulfilled possibilities! (You could wear that to the wedding.) Even if it’s a café you’ve never been to before something like the coffee machine will be quite like the one you know from your previous experience. Everything we do has memory within it. We are constantly remembering as we engage with the future in the dynamic flow that is aliveness. Our wanting to know what comes next is the same process as remembering what happened before. There are gaps and inconsistencies and also unexpected insights.

We have instincts that drive this process and a useful way of describing them is as **primary emotions**. We are born with these (as are other mammals). There are only a few (perhaps seven) and all our other more subtle emotions are learned as we go along. For example the primary emotion is FEAR, which is a reaction to danger, but we learn to embellish it with worry and anxiety because we don’t know what’s going to happen. The fundamental primary emotion is called SEEKING, which is exploring, searching, attempting . . . **the will to do something**. This one wanes if we are depressed. This explanation comes, of course, from Jaak Panksepp who wrote *The Archaeology of Mind*.

In an earlier blog I mentioned the **sense of agency** that stems from an inner feeling of movement (or music). Confidence has a lot to do with **enthusiasm**, a word derived from énthéos (‘God within’) that captures **aliveness** very nicely if you respect the unknown and have quit ‘playing God’ yourself. Many a debilitating illness has been eased somewhat by its bearer hearing the maxim: ‘we quit playing God.’

So if I’m not in charge, how am I going to live? Instinctive confidence in the unknown is a good start. I also need to use my mind, as far as possible, in the way it’s designed, that is, to be and belong. We make it too complicated sometimes. When people are dying the priorities seem much simpler.

My wife is truly inspirational in that, in between deep rests, she has a great enthusiasm for living – for doing things – mostly social interaction. Choosing not to have treatments, she is unhindered by their side-effects, and her natural zest for life shines through.

A famous quote that I like is this one:²

‘Until one is committed, there is always hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising to one’s favour all manner of unforeseen accidents and meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would come his way. **Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.**’

² This quote is very commonly attributed to the great German poet and scientist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, but the Internet tells me there is some confusion about that. In any event I am copying it from my own book *Mind and Love - The Human Experience* where it appears in a section called *Commitment and Joy*. The meaning it has for me fits with my own experience.