

THE PARADOX OF THE CYNIC

This is a true story.

At the front of a meeting room, a speaker presented a series of slides with research showing that even highly stressed people can and do change for the better when they learn more about their own resiliency and find their own wisdom and common sense. The speaker offered an opportunity for others to participate in a whole new way of drawing stressed people into their own strength, and assisting them to understand the source and remedy for stress so that they know how to refresh their own spirits and enthusiasm. The evidence that this indeed had happened among a wide sample of people was quite clear.

*From the back of the room, an audience member called out, “I personally don’t care what your evidence is, this will **never, ever** work. I **know** it will never work. I’ve tried everything that has come down the pike to improve the morale of people in my organization and they just won’t change. They’re not willing to change. Nothing you can do for them is going to help them. Our profession attracts people who aren’t interested in self-improvement. People in my group are hopeless.”*

This person’s view is cynical. (Webster’s dictionary defines cynical as “contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives.”) And here is the paradox of the cynic: The cynic’s view of life is vivid and real to the cynic and it poisons the relationship of the cynic to those around him or her. No one knows how to break through the cynic’s wall of scorn. Through the eyes of the cynic, the sweetest and kindest gestures appear to be manipulative or self-serving. Through the ears of the cynic, the noblest and most hopeful statements appear to sound phony or silly. In the immediate circle of the cynic, people learn to keep their heads down and do as little as possible. Those who cannot tolerate discouragement and distrust move out of that circle. The cynic creates a self-contained and self-defining world that continually reinforces cynicism.

But the cynic, increasingly certain of the rightness of the cynical outlook based on the evidence of that immediate circle of downhearted people, loses interest in looking beyond the perimeter of the circle. The cynic makes the judgment that high-spirited, optimistic people just don’t get it about life, are deluded, and have nothing worthwhile to offer. The cynic feels more and more burdened by the heaviness of negativity and the strain of having to bear it through even the simplest of daily routines. At the same time, the cynic feels ever more sure that the burden is a grim inevitability of “real” life that is plain as day to anyone who sees things as they are.

Back to the story.

The speaker responded to the audience member, “Well, as long as you are quite sure in your own mind of what you just said, then you’re right. That is true – for you. There is no

doubt that what is on our minds is exactly what we see in our lives. But people can and do change their minds and see life differently. That's what we're talking about here."

The audience member snorted. "Give me a break! People enjoy their misery. They're not going to change, period. And you don't know the people who work in our group. They're all X!)#@&."*

Faced with this kind of argument, it's easy to be dismayed and back away from the discussion. It's easy, too, to turn away from the cynic and avoid that person thereafter as mean-spirited and unpleasant. This understandable response actually feeds the cynic's misanthropy and contributes to the certainty that the outside world is a hostile, unfriendly environment in which people are not to be trusted.

Going back to the dictionary definition, though, there's something more to learn. A cynic is "contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives." This would suggest that the cynic has arrived at a conclusion about life – not that the cynic came into life with that attitude. Contempt is learned. Distrust is acquired. What we make of human nature and motives are concepts, ideas that must be formulated by our own way of thinking.

Where do people get their ideas about human nature and motives? How do people arrive at a view of life that becomes the background color for the whole tapestry, regardless of the scene being painted? What information might open a cynic's – or anyone's -- mind to other possibilities? Is there a way we haven't clearly understood to break the cycle of cynicism and draw these people back into ordinary, warm human connections?

Most of us don't realize how much thinking we do routinely that colors our daily life and our immediate responses. To start to realize what we're doing, it is easier to see this in others, or in life examples that do not involve emotionally charged ideas. For example, I had a friend in college who grew up in a household in which everyone was consumed with ideas about time and they talked constantly about it – how much time before dinner, how little time there was to get something done, what time they had to eat in order to make it to the movies, whether the children were spending enough time on their homework ... I was fascinated with her way of going about college life because she was the first person I ever met who used her alarm clock for anything more than waking up when she wanted to. She set the alarm clock for each period of time she had designated to do something, including phone calls. Her alarm went off intermittently all day long. She was always precisely on time, and always said she had to rush, and she was the one person we could count on to know exactly how long it took to get from one place to another, what time the buses ran, when the last mail service went out, when the grades would be posted, what schedule changes had been announced ...

When I was growing up, my family never paid much overt attention to time. I knew when I had to leave home to catch the school bus, and I knew when I had to go to bed. I

glanced at the clock on and off all day long. But we hardly ever talked about it. We just seemed to go about life, getting ready to leave when we needed to, and heading for the door when someone said, "Let's go." My friend was amazed at my indifference to time; I was amazed at her absorption in it. Both of us were living the life brought to us by our customary ways of thinking. She had learned to bring the exact time to mind all the time. I had learned to check the clock on and off, assuming I'd stay on time.

All of us have hundreds of subtle but frequent ideas that we continually include in our everyday thinking. Because what we think immediately becomes the reality we see, those ideas provide the tone and color of our lives. They are so much on our minds that it doesn't seem to us that we're constantly bringing them to mind. It seems to us that they represent how life actually is or should be.

That is another paradox. None of the thinking we do that becomes a constant "theme" within our own minds looks like our own thinking. It is so prevalent that it looks like it has to represent the way things are, period. The only way to change that thinking, though, is to become aware of the way thought works, and the connection between bringing thoughts to mind and what looks real to us. That awareness leads us to a deeper kind of reality, a spiritual or abstract reality, the reality of a person who knows that we are constantly creating a changing or readily changeable view of our world. We are not the prisoners of our habitual thoughts, nor are we doomed to continue to think them. We are free to think them more and more, or less and less. The realization, "I'm thinking these thoughts, they're not thinking *me!*" is the pathway to freedom from the *status quo* within our own minds.

From that deeper spiritual reality, it doesn't matter how often certain thoughts come to mind because we are always aware that the external reality we are seeing represents the internal reality of the thoughts we are thinking. We can't be duped. We are always aware that we are the thinkers creating those thoughts. When our thoughts bring forth a familiar and redundant notion, we know it is not information about the way the world consistently is; it is information about the way we consistently hold and use our own thoughts.

A cynical worldview is truly nothing more than an accident of thought. Most people who have the patience to work with cynics to help them to see a brighter life tend to try to examine the details of the cynic's history to dredge up the events or circumstances that cause that dark view of life and other people. But the more the cynic brings that history to mind, the stronger and more frequent those thoughts are, and the more absolute the reality appears. What is on our minds is in our life.

From a deeper perspective, the hope for cynics lies in understanding *how* their thinking works to continually deliver their experience of life and in understanding that everyone is creating a totally unique and separate reality of experience in exactly the same way. The underlying process of thinking is the same for all; the products are different for all because each person is using that process to bring to mind their particular ideas.

Universal truth – what is true for all people – is *that* we are constantly making up our lives within our own minds. My truth, your truth, everyone’s personal truth, is *what* we have made up at any given moment. Universal truth never changes. Personal truth always changes, and is the variable we can come to understand. Once we see that the variable of personal truth is the gift of creating our own life, we can create any life.

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