

Throwing the Switch

We are born into a “Do as You Are Told” world. Our parents are usually the first to take control of our lives, often with love and a huge sense of responsibility, and this is continued by older brothers and sisters, other adults, teachers, doctors, the police, our employers, politicians, though not necessarily with love or care, but sometimes other less charitable motives.

Being told what to do and think, what to learn, how to dress and behave, how to be acceptable and ‘useful’ to society is like being bought up to be a one-way radio set, always on receive mode and never on ‘transmit’. The words of others, sometimes wise, sometimes kind, sometimes wrong, sometimes cruel, rain down on our heads and seep into our brains in a never-ending storm of noise.

Our class system exaggerates this tendency, assuming that a huge percentage of the population who are ‘manual workers’ are born with an inability to think as if their brains were not involved with building that house, or driving that bus, whilst a smaller section of the population are given more air space so that they can develop their minds enough that they can run the show. An even smaller minority are brought up to believe they are entitled to think for everyone, practicing debating skills at school and university, giving lectures, editing newspapers and television programmes, writing laws and being judges, for example.

We find all kinds of ways of dealing with this. We stop listening, we distract ourselves, we retreat into ourselves. These outside voices have often become our inner voices with which we have to do daily battle, telling us that we have no intelligence, we have nothing to say. Even amongst the middle classes it is very common to be very frightened of being ‘found out’ as the not-very-clever person they feel themselves to be inside, whilst those privileged few at the top of the tree have also had their humanity badly compromised by their extraordinary upbringings, often lacking in love and safety.

The result is that we create an outside 'persona' or mask which pretends to be the real competent us, but in fact the real us is hiding, lonely, afraid to learn, (because to learn means first admitting you don't know something) and most importantly disconnected from others. Isolated. We live in the seething heart of a mass of people yet manage to feel completely alone.

We know with our rational minds that this doesn't make sense, but this doesn't stop us feeling as if it were true. Nor can we 'hear' reason. How many of you have said "I've told him a million times but still he..."? whilst watching someone scream with pain as they stand on their own foot? Clearly the processing of information has not happened and unfortunately your remonstrations are just piling up in his head on top of the mountain of unsorted clutter already there, like another pair of second-hand trainers in the wardrobe.

Part of this difficulty is caused by not understanding how we think. In order to think we need lots of things – information, stimulation, experience, emotional safety, physical safety, nourishment, *and at least one other mind to listen to us work things out for ourselves*. It is this last need which often goes unmet. If we are a 'radio' then we have to have some time on 'transmit' with someone else on 'receive'. This is when we can process all the information and experience we have gathered so it becomes useful to us. We have to compare it to other stuff already in our heads – how is it the same as what we already know? – and then we have to contrast it to everything we already know – how is it different? Only then can we create a new response upon which we are able to act. This process is automatic when given the right conditions.

Can we create those right conditions? The fortunate thing is that it is easy. We just need to ask useful questions and to listen to each other working out the answers. The unfortunate thing is that we live in a culture which hardly ever does this because a lifetime of frustration has led most of us being desperate to be heard and with not much attention for the listening bit, even at home with our loved ones. If we did do this however we would find out

something amazing. We would discover that we can all think for ourselves and are all capable of learning, growing, and changing our lives for the better. We would discover we can solve all kinds of problems and create ideas of our own.

Apart from the cost to individuals of not having access to our own intelligence there is something of more universal significance to this lack of listening in our lives. The whole world is deprived of the thinking of the very people who make everything work. The vast majority of people who make everything, mend everything, clean everything, and provide the services upon which we all depend from transport to care, have no say in how things are run. We are condemned instead to be under the control of people who are denied the opportunity to learn about every day reality because they have had no experience of it.

We cannot leave it to them, but what can we do? How can we throw the switch so we are reconnected with ourselves, each other and the natural world upon which we live?

As habits and cultures are so deeply ingrained, we need to set up little havens where 'normal' rules are set aside and just for a short time we agree to do something different. We can all decide to listen to each other in turn without comment or judgement, just attention. We can divide whatever time we have equally amongst all those present and protect it for each other by using a timer. Sometimes we need to ask a good question to focus people's minds, and to give them a chance to think about something they have not thought about before, or to tell part of their life story, or to try to untangle a confusion. We can welcome any feelings which may rise up with the telling and make a safe space to express them so they can be cleared out of the way.

The value of doing this has to be experienced, not read about. Not only is it valuable to speak to willing 'sounding boards' so you can become aware of your own thinking, but you are able to experience others doing the same, making a little bit of their minds visible. This is where we start to feel the

connection with others because they do not have to hide from us, or we from them. We can start to get real.

At present these conditions need to be facilitated by someone who can help set the guidelines, be responsible for the timing and helping people stick to the agreements which make it safe. They may need to ask the questions. In time however, once the benefit of doing things this way have been felt by more and more people, it could be that we start to shift the whole culture to one in which listening is understood to be a vital part of our human growth, and old futile habits of trying to talk people into change are people are given up and replaced by something which works. People would see themselves more as facilitators rather than authoritarian leaders, and a huge new energy would start to rise up from the minds of 'ordinary' people, informed by all their skills and experience, to genuinely 'democratise' our communities and our world.

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