

Reflections on life and love in the world of Trump, Brexit, the NHS and the Church of England

We live in different but connected contexts including those of system interdependencies, psychological processes, personal characteristics (e.g. my 'tapes', triggers and shadows), an authority context and so on.

We suffer a collective anxiety as a human family. Anxiety is a given. That's life. It gets caught up in our societal institutions and processes. We tend to displace our family and personal anxieties into these institutions and each other. We dream of a safe haven but human dynamics make this impossible: rage and frustration are basic and have to go somewhere; one obvious focus is leaders.

Anxiety magnifies differences which foster discord. Anxiety free floats, then settles, either on the most vulnerable or the most responsible. Common triggers are change and loss, provoking shocked and exaggerated reactions either lashing out or retreating.¹ In anxiety we regress: impulse, instinct, reflexes, defences and reactions replace intention, imagination, reflective thought and chosen behaviour. Anxiety removes the capacity to be responsible or loving.²

In a relationship system emotional processes are always present. Notice how anxiety distracts (from an agreed purpose), sets people at odds and builds walls between them. Note, the relationship system does not grow out of individual personalities. Rather, the system contains forces within which people with particular valencies express themselves.³

At its simplest, systems thinking in human relations shifts us from the linear idea that B is caused by A to understanding that there is a mutual influence and interaction between A and B. It's important to understand the vicious circle: Feeling insecure, I react. You pick up and are made anxious by my reacting, so you react. Reinforced this becomes rigid. It polarises, More anxiety is produced. Now we are locked in to a self-perpetuating chain reaction. The only liberation is through exposure.

Moreover, anxiety not dealt with in one relationship will focus on another relationship. Look out for scapegoating, a too narrow perspective, filtering data, blame, vague complaining, exaggeration (think of your own examples.) Or else

¹ The tripartite structure of the brain means that when our reptilian brainstem is fired its job is to be automatic to aid survival. Its densely connected neurons can only be reactive, never creative. At the limbic level the balance of opposites can be lost. A split off prejudice can take hold that distorts new data to fit the prejudice (cf. the 'ladder of inference').

² Important to distinguish between acute (triggered by a crisis) and chronic anxiety which is habitual and built-in to your life: you are your anxiety, likely to be touchy, with a focus on blaming others, easily hurt, a 'victim', prone to persecuting, willful and with a range of dysfunctional behaviours needed to lessen your pain.

³ In healthy relationships there is a constructive tension between separation (my 'self' is defined) and closeness to others. Anxiety undermines this leading either to exaggerated emotional distance (cut-off) that evades or opposes or to exaggerated fusion and overfocus expressed in coercion, seduction or submission. This commonly plays out in communities and organisations.

look out for a too tight and blind binding. In a delirious boundaryless circle of bogus connection, 'love', excitement, ecstasy even hostility masquerade as authentic connection. Self has got lost. Or look out for anxiety displaced onto a third party. All these symptoms reveal relationships stuck in a cycle of reactivity. Dependency and co-dependency, manipulation, blame, false cures and ersatz comfort, fighting, avoidance, sentimentality and intense emotional binding are all such symptoms. Fusion and splitting off are anxiety's ways of luring us to blur my awareness of myself with my awareness of another's self. My compassion depends on my clarity here. Compassion is the key to everything but it rules out taking inappropriate responsibility for others.

The antidote is to see these relationships from a systems perspective, rediscover the mutuality and see how anxiety has played out.

A feature of systems thinking (Lewin) is the assumption that behaviour is a transaction between personality and the environment such that if you change yourself, your environment will change. And when environments change, people change.

So in the face of anxiety, hostility, immaturity or dependency we need to sharpen our objectivity, our imagination and our self-definition over against those who would define us.

What do agency and self-differentiation look like?

When we are self-differentiated we are defining our self from within our self. We are self-managing, resourceful, environment-shaping, responsive, intentional, thoughtful, open, light-shedding, aware, resilient, proportionate, big picture, time-allowing, taking responsibility, learning as we go, relaxed, at ease, sensible, collaborative, staying connected and in touch, clear, poised, objective, purposeful, space-creating, options-generating, common goals-seeking. We don't give up 'self' for a group. We see what might be. We don't give inappropriate power to others. We respond with a large part of ourselves to a large part of our world.⁴

A leader is able to catalyse a system because of their position in the system They are a 'head' who keeps the organisation 'headed' towards a value-based, co-created vision. Leaders lead by affecting people with encouragement, by calmly offering focus and possibilities.⁵

They largely do it by who and how they are in every conversation they have throughout the day. They focus on appreciation and pay keen attention to relational process. They know that self-management is vital for health. They

⁴ Under fire we: have a plan; see issues in terms of relationships; examine the anxieties consciously; identify strengths and resources; create options; stay separate, ask questions.

⁵ Just as white cells enable our immune system protecting us from toxins so good leaders need, when the system is under threat, to make a syntonic reaction (passive tolerance of a foreign substance) rather than a catatonic reaction (excessive attack) which overwhelms (and can destroy) the immune system.

know that where pain and anxiety are denied or not worked through, symptoms of alcohol abuse, sexual trauma, mental illness, physical violence, self-harm and acting out of every kind will appear. So they focus on the system, not the symptom.

The leader's task is to stay empowered and to empower. Good leadership stems from compassion to self which enables compassion for others. Good leadership is just love in action; love for the purpose of human flourishing in a given context.

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