Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Can a Leopard Change its Spots: Change and its Discontents

Larry Brooks · Wednesday, July 20th, 2016

Dr. Larry Brooks was killed after being struck by a car on May 5, 2020, while walking near his home in Los Angeles's Arts District. Larry contributed several articles to Cultural Weekly describing his signature work in Social Dreaming. We are returning these articles to our home page each week to celebrate Larry and his vision. This article was first published on July 20, 2016.

Changing personal belief systems, narratives of how one sees the world, is the last thing that most people would think could be beneficial. Individuals have an implicit set of beliefs that organize their perceptions of the world and ground their reality, particularly how they see themselves and others. These beliefs are woven into the fabric of their identity. Like a map, it delineates the psycho-emotional geography of interpersonal space. To give up these beliefs is equivalent to asking a person to surrender their identity or a leopard to change its spots. Yet these beliefs are often what cause and perpetuate interpersonal conflict, and ironically stand in the way of realizing one's deeper self.

Personal beliefs are a product of unconscious and conscious factors strongly influenced by interactions with parents and significant others across development. However flattering it is to assume that we are the architects of our beliefs, they are not simply ideas one picks off a shelf. They are cognitive-emotional complexes embedded so deeply in our being that they seem hard-wired into our brains.

Our personal belief systems mediate our understanding of the world. Projection is instrumental in constructing and fortifying personal beliefs. It is not exclusively the tool of the paranoid, but a "normal" phenomenon. Projection operates unconsciously and seamlessly. It is a psychological mode of representation-perception that incorporates the world into a fantasy or belief and then perceives the world it has constructed as reality. We project our fears, hopes, idealizations and devaluations onto others and fail to recognize these projections as representations not of reality but of our internal world.

When the going gets tough, beliefs tend to harden. Significant Stress tends to activate rigid emotional reactions, the default of our being-in-the-world or as researchers have described the flight or fight response. To this I would add a third response that is characterized by submission. When faced with perceived psychological hurt, individuals tend to withdraw, fight back or submit. These hard-wired responses are particularly present in the conflicts between individuals, groups, and nations and seem so prevalent in our world.

After listening to many couples describe their difficulties in couples therapy, I am no longer surprised by how differently each individual in the couple sees the relationship. Usually couples therapy begins as a tale of two relationships. These tales are often organized around unrecognized psychological pain and trauma, the baggage that individuals bring into relationships. Many

individuals unwittingly see their world through a wound-broken lens that is dissociated from its painful origins. Each new insult or disappointment is experienced as a distinct provocation that occurs in the present. The hard work of therapy when successful leads to a narrative that transforms the two stories into a shared third that recognizes the pain at the heart of the difficulty.

Jessica Benjamin, a contemporary psychoanalytic theorist, describes in her book *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* how most relationships struggle with mutual recognition. Mutual recognition depends on the ability of two individuals to recognize, accept, and appreciate each other's subjectivity, i.e. their differences. The crux of the conflict is simple: the person who we need recognition from is also the person who needs recognition from us. Achieving mutual recognition challenges each individual to manage the conflict between assertion of self and recognition of the other.

In other words to get a little, we need to give a little. Or to quote Lennon and McCartney, "And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make." The principle of sharing and giving that is taught in preschools seems so difficult for adults to practice in their intimate relationships.

What makes this lesson so difficult for adults to incorporate into their close relationships? So much of our psychological energy is devoted to the development of our individuality, giving voice to our uniqueness, worrying about and protecting our self-worth. To this end, we sacrifice relational goals. From the narrow perspective of the self, relationships are challenging and potentially threatening. We want to be liked, validated, and respected for our ideas and opinions, especially by the people closest to us. Our need for love is intertwined with our need for recognition. When we feel misunderstood, not heard or valued, strong feelings of rejection and anger are activated that often lead to conflict.

Many relationships go through repeated cycles of breakdown and repair without change. Benjamin describes the breakdown of mutuality in terms of complimentary or "doer-done to" relationships. In "doer-done to" relationships, each person feels unable to gain the other's recognition, and feels misunderstood, devalued, and judged, in other words, "done to" by the other. Ironically, both individuals occupy the same position without recognizing how they are "doing-to" their partner what they feel their partner is doing to them.

The resolution of this impasse challenges the self to change perspective: its narrative of self and other. Making such changes often feels like surrendering power and giving in and giving up. A complaint I have heard from clients who are frustrated with their spouse criticisms is "This is the way I am. She/he wants me to change who I am!"

Intimate relationships present an opportunity for self-transformation. Psychological development hinges on the individual's ability to balance autonomy with dependence, assertion of self with recognition of the other, and assimilation of the new with accommodation of the old. The idea of the autonomous individual is a cultural construct that doesn't recognize the value of inter-dependence nor provide guidance in the pursuit of mutual recognition.

In the sequel to this essay, *Rupture, Empathy, and The Mechanics of Repair,* I will explore the process of change.

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