

Finding Peace Even in Times of Terror

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One of the great marvels of our physical existence is the capacity of the brain to sort and prioritize information from our senses, and to allow to enter our conscious thought only those signals which are most important for our survival. All nerves in the body are constantly reporting condition or change to the brain.

Besides reports from specialized stimulation receptors reporting sight, sound, taste, smell and equilibrium, there are countless sensory receptors throughout the body. From the skin come reports of touch, temperature, pressure and pain.

Each and every hair on the body has a nerve near the follicle which reports movement of the individual hair. Every joint has nerves which report to the brain the angle and position of the appendage. Blood and other fluids are sampled for condition.

Every organ and muscle has nerves which sense and report its condition. This reporting of condition is done waking or sleeping every moment we live, and yet most reporting and responding are done in areas of the brain and at levels of activity far below conscious thought. And thank goodness for that. What would happen if the movement of a single hair on the back of the hand were given the same conscious importance as the sights and sounds of an approaching locomotive?

Even in the absence of impending danger, we probably could not survive the sensory overload of all nerves reporting at the same level of consciousness. One type of insecticide is thought to kill in this very way. It interferes with the insect's ability to process sensory input and shuts down vital functions with an overload from everything all at once.

Talk about burnout!

Our ability to filter and prioritize sensory input allows us to both live at rest and to survive under threat. But this is just the first of several levels in a mechanism I call the perceptual matrix, a filter of many levels which, without our conscious thinking, sorts and prioritizes new information.

I think of the matrix as a woven fabric, each strand of which traps passing information and according to its relevance or survival value lets it pass upward or diverts it. This filtering continues on several levels of progressively increasing consciousness until the new information is made part of our conscious decision-making.

Each matrix level acts as a gatekeeper who says, "That is important," and passes it on to a higher level of awareness or it says, "That is not important," and holds it back to be ignored and filed away. Just which information makes it through the filters varies from individual to individual. Certain psychiatric conditions may be evidence of an either organic or acquired inability to prioritize sensory input ? a faulty perceptual matrix not allowing pertinent data through to conscious thought. Abnormal behavior results from choices based on irrelevant data improperly sorted through the perceptual matrix.

In addition to the organic brain functions of sorting and prioritizing all sensory data, prior experience creates additional layers of one's perceptual matrix. We learned from the day of our birth that some things bring comfort and some things hurt. Through each level of childhood development we learned to distinguish what is helpful and what is hurtful or irrelevant to our well-being. Once learned, those distinctions become part of a person's perceptual matrix, requiring no further conscious deliberation. If I have seen a circumstance or an object before, when it appears again it will mean more to me than to someone who is seeing or experiencing it for the first time. Some demonstrations have suggested that things which we do not recognize, we take no notice of. We see only what we know. If it has no significance we look past it; we will not recognize it as relevant and our perceptual matrix will divert it without leaving an impression.

So it is no wonder that two eyewitnesses to an event will describe that event differently. Two differing accounts do not mean two different events or two different “realities” – it just means two different perceptual matrices processing the same information each in its unique way, with its unique result.



Years ago I had been separated from my fiancée all summer. She told me that she would be coming back to town driving her new yellow Volkswagen Beetle. All of a sudden it seemed that the town was full of yellow VW bugs. Every street I drove I passed one, at every intersection they seemed to parade in front of me. Where did they all come from? I was certain they weren't there the day before. Of course they were there – I just had no reason to notice them. I did not “see” them because they had no meaning to me until their new importance altered my perceptual matrix to allow their image and color to stand out. Yellow VW's were given meaning and I began to see them.

There is a difference between looking at something and looking for something. Looking at a page jammed full of cartoon people has the effect of immediately making me impatient and irritable, but when challenged by “Where's Waldo?” I begin to look for something and each character's appearance begins to have relevance. I still get impatient and irritable, but it takes me maybe two minutes longer.

Okay, maybe there are better examples.



A detective will notice details of a crime scene that I would never notice because he has training and a purpose to look for them. I may look at, but he looks for.

This difference in approaches may have a limiting effect on perception. I, in looking at, might not see the details as I take in the overall scene – I might not see the trees for the forest. The detective, however, in looking for, might miss something in the overall picture as he focuses on details, he might not see the forest for the trees.



Either way, this factor adds a new element to the composition of a perceptual matrix. In addition to physiology and meaning, now we understand that purpose and training help determine what we see and what we do not see.

Some have become so convinced of the effects of the perceptual matrix that they've been so bold as to say, "We don't see what we don't recognize," or, "We don't see it if we don't know it is there." These statements may seem a little extreme, but it cannot be refuted that incoming sensory data are actively, yet subconsciously screened for relevance according to physiological importance, emotional or intellectual meaning, past experience, purpose for gathering data, and skills of observation.

In addition to individual perceptual matrix, there are several levels of consciousness operating at the same time in each of us. It could be said that we "know" things at different levels. How many times have you had ideas which you cannot express in words, or have you ever sensed that something is not right, yet you cannot put your finger on just why? You might learn later that these impressions were correct, but how could you have known at the time? Often information resides on some deeper level in our brain and we may only rarely, with considerable effort be able to bring it to the top level of awareness.

The discovery of pheromones has made it clear that we sometimes make behavioral choices in response to very real and powerful stimuli we cannot see, smell, taste, touch or hear; stimuli received on a level far below conscious thought.

If you are not acquainted with pheromones, you surely are acquainted with sleep, which offers fairly obvious examples of levels of consciousness.

A dream certainly looks and feels real, but sometimes even during the dream, while fast asleep, we are aware that it is only a dream. It is a second level of consciousness that allows you to say as the monster is chasing you, "This is a dream and all I have to do is open my eyes and I will wake up." Here are two levels of consciousness going at the same time, but there is more. A third level simultaneously at work is evidenced by the fact that you were still in the bed when you forced yourself awake.

When is the last time you fell out of bed? Why so long ago, and why not since then? As you toss and turn and roll about fleeing the monster in your dream, at some level your brain is saying, "That, right there, is the edge of the bed. This is as far as I can roll without falling off."

Staying in the bed [1] while you decide to wake up [2] before the monster catches you [3] demonstrates three concurrent levels of awareness -- all while fast asleep. How many more levels may there be when we are fully awake?

Oh, one more thing before we leave sleep. Perhaps you remember the last time you were fully awake when you should have been sleeping. You fidgeted and fussed, pounded your pillow and counted spots on the ceiling. Something was bothering you but you could not figure out what.

Information was percolating up through the lower levels of consciousness and struggling to arrive at awareness. Finally it occurred to you that you were too warm, so you kicked off the covers and turned on the fan and you were fine -- until the dream monster started chasing you.

In a similar case I heard a speaker describe how he could tell how important an idea was by how early in the morning it awoke him from sleep. Once awake he would sit quietly and wait until the idea finally rose

to the surface of his consciousness. It may have taken some time, but eventually an important idea or solution to a problem came bubbling up from deep subconscious levels where his brain had been processing information all night long.

Just as our subconscious awareness can percolate upward and become conscious thoughts, our conscious thoughts can bleed down and color our subconscious awareness levels. If repeated over time, conscious thoughts and actions can become habitual and so automatic that no conscious thought is required to indulge in them. Every behavioral choice we make has an impact on us through several levels of consciousness. Even if one never repeats the behavior, the action resides in one's memory, burned into the neural circuitry in the brain making it easier for that same neural pathway to be followed to the same behavior the next time similar circumstances arise. This is on the one hand a warning and on the other hand an invitation. If the behavior was disruptive of peace, it will be far easier to slip into that disruptive behavior again. Disruptive choices will lead to pain and conflict which can be relieved when better choices replace them, but it will be harder and harder to replace the disruptive actions or thoughts the more they are repeated.

Have you noticed that those persons who have the habit of using profanities are not even aware that they are swearing? What once was a conscious choice has become unconscious behavior.

On the other hand, when their neural pathways are burned into the brain through repetition, thoughts and actions which are constructive and edifying can lead to general happiness and even enhanced performance.

Some years ago a TIME magazine article caught my eye. It featured US Olympic athletes training intensely. They were lying comfortably on their backs in a darkened room with their eyes closed. I immediately thought, "Wow! Finally an Olympic event I can do! I've been training like that all my life!" It turns out it was the US ski team and what the skiers were doing was visualizing every bump and gate in the downhill course, seeing themselves carving every turn, planting every pole, shifting weight, cutting each edge. It seems, they say, that the brain cannot distinguish between thinking an action through in detail, and actually doing it. The same neural circuits are excited and reinforced.

Thinking it is the same as doing it. The phenomenon is recognized as a legitimate tool for performance enhancement.

A conscious commitment to live by peaceable principles may require deliberation and decisive choice at first, but it can soon with repetition become habitual, second nature and automatic. Consequently peace comes and it remains, requiring less and less effort as time goes on.

At this point it is fair to ask why we have focused on perceptual matrix and levels of consciousness. What do these have to do with developing personal peace? These ideas are the basis for an important conclusion – that unfiltered experience with reality is not possible; that we are in possession of far fewer absolute truths than we think. If this is so, how can we function in the real world?

Models.

We must, and unavoidably do use models to help us function in a world which is constantly filtered and interpreted by each individual.

Once beyond our perceptual matrix, everything we have observed about the world we live in has become part of a more or less accurate model of reality. Our models of what life is, constitute a second line of filters to awareness – perhaps the first filters we can consciously influence.

We naturally tend to acknowledge those facts which support our current model of the way things are, but we tend to discount or entirely disregard any contradictory evidence. We are afraid that new evidence might force us to do the work of reconfiguring our model. We may be inclined consciously or not, to filter out, to “not see” contrary evidence, so we tend to be blind to facts which are inconsistent with the operative model.

This unwillingness to see may be subconscious and lead us to unconscious avoidance behaviors to hide ourselves from any sources of contradictory information. Some persons refuse to go to a doctor, some move to a commune.

They have a working model of the way things are and underneath their stated reasons for acting this way they really do not want new information to challenge their models, even if it might save their lives. Occasionally mounting evidence forces a person to concede that there are contradictions in his model, but until then he may choose to ignore, deny or refute the evidence. This is willful ignorance and is not compatible with peace.

Familiarity is a powerful narcotic. Some persons will never relinquish the old familiar, faulty model even when irrefutable evidence suggesting something new is forced upon them. In extreme cases the fear of one's models being proven wrong is so powerful that a person will die, will literally give up his life rather than give up his familiar model to accommodate new data. This may account for the tragedies of Jonestown, Guiana and Waco, Texas.

How can anyone be so intractable as to kill or die to avoid truth? Don't be too shocked; it happens all the time. How many careers are sabotaged by insisting on acting according to a model which is inconsistent with the job? How many families are willfully destroyed through divorce as a spouse repeatedly acts out a model of behavior which is incompatible with peaceable marriage, rather than admit the error and correct the behavior?

As we have grown up, gathering data throughout our lives, we have many times changed or replaced our models of how things work. Every model existed because it worked; it answered our questions; it explained what we had observed about our world, and allowed us to function for the time being.

But successive models became necessary as something new or puzzling occurred in our lives that the old model could not explain.

Even the most primitive model works in the absence of awareness of inconsistent facts. The flat-as-a-table model of the earth explained just fine the fact that after a ship was observed to disappear over the horizon's "edge" it never came back. The fact, however, that a model works to explain all known relevant facts at a given time does not mean that the model is a true depiction of reality. It only means that no inconsistent data are known at the present time.

Back in the flat-earth days, the minute a ship had the effrontery to actually return safely after “falling over the edge”, it was clear that something had to give. There surely were some, who, rather than question the flat-earth model, initially denied the evidence.

They’d say, “The ship is a devil ship full of the ghosts of the dead sailors!” In what should have been a triumphal return, can you imagine the confusion of the poor sailors at the initial hostility of the men and the terror of the women and children? One can only wonder how long that notion lasted. Eventually, when the living, breathing evidence could no longer be challenged, the flat-table model of the earth had to be challenged.

Now as then, when our model works without contradiction, we cannot assume that we’ve arrived at the end sum of reality; we have only arrived at the limits of our current perception of reality. We have gathered up all data that have arrived at our conscious awareness through our current perceptual matrix, and we have not yet found an inconsistency. Will one of our personal “ships” return after falling over some “edge” of our personal world? Sure. It happens everyday. How do we respond? Don’t kid yourself, in favor of an old model we sometimes do denounce our returning ships as devil-ships.

The history of science is rich with models, which have worked very well for a time to explain and even predict physical events. But as observation and measurement instruments improved over the years, new data repeatedly forced scientists to rethink their conclusions and recalculate theories to incorporate the new information. Ever-evolving, good science does not claim to prove anything, it only attempts to describe and correlate what to the current date has been observed and measured. Scientists call their models “theories”. Einstein, himself, refused to refer to his $E=mc^2$ and other findings as a law or a proof. Indeed, during his life observations were made which challenged even that immensely useful calculation-model. At the risk of venturing too far afield, for the purpose of illustrating an important attribute of models in general, it is useful to examine one particular transition from one scientific theory to another.

Isaac Newton, responsible for giant strides in the progress of physical science, formulated in the early 1700’s mathematical descriptions of much of what we see happening around us every day. So accurate and useful

are his equations that three hundred years later we still use them to predict, among many other common physical events, how fast and in what direction a billiard ball will roll when struck by another and, yes, why and how fast an apple falls from a tree. It is hard to do him justice in describing his contributions to our understanding of gravity, motion, transfer of energy, and the wave properties of light. His findings are generally referred to as Newtonian Physics.

More than two hundred years later, when researchers began observing cosmic events with their huge measurements, and sub-atomic events with their tiny measurements, they discovered that Newton's calculations do not fully describe what they were seeing. A new model was necessary and Albert Einstein and others formulated what is generally known as Quantum Physics, featuring subatomic and galactic forces applied to unbelievably small and unbelievably huge masses at inconceivable velocities.

Here is the puzzle: why is Newtonian Physics still taught when it can be demonstrated to be inaccurate as it applies to so much of the known universe, and when Quantum Physics is a more accurate model? Is science deliberately electing to use an untruth? Well, no and yes. No, Newton's laws are not untrue. Relative to Quantum mechanics they are merely simplified, rounded-off expressions of the same calculations. They are accurate as far as they go. Newton's formulas are still useful in systems at rest or in uniform motion at far less than the speed of light, that is, in anything you or I might encounter in our lifetime. Not everyone needs to deal with numbers whose decimal point is somewhere near San Francisco. But, yes, Newtonian Physics is untrue if not accompanied with a disclaimer such as, "...except in very huge or very tiny matters," or, "...as far as it goes." People who work with such formulas understand this and do not need to repeat it every time, but they will always be prepared to say so if you ask them.

Newton tells me truthfully that the train will hit me in exactly 4.2 seconds if I do not jump out of the way. Physicists might be happy, using Quantum mechanics to calculate for you how much mass is added to the locomotive through the energy of its velocity, but this information is of little use to the startled pedestrian. Usefulness, or need to know is an important factor in considering our selection of suitable models. If they both incorporate all known data, a simpler model is more useful than a more complex model.

This among scientists is called the Principle of Parsimony, and justifies using Newton's formulas in every case they can before resorting to Quantum models.

Our models dictate our actions, and we generally act in ways which are consistent with the way we think things are in the world. Sometimes the feedback is instantaneous as we see the results of those actions confirming or refuting the model. One day I decided to expand my stereo by putting additional speakers in other rooms of the house. There were only two speaker outlets on the back of the amplifier, but I overcame that little inconvenience by attaching a "splitter" which gave me a total of six speaker plugs.

As I ran wire for the six speakers I reviewed my model of how this sort of thing works. The amplifier is like a pump, I told myself, which pushes power out to the speakers. If the amplifier cannot pump enough power out to drive the speakers, one or more of the speakers will be undersupplied and will just not work. So to determine the limits of the amplifier, I would attach all six speakers at once, then if the speakers did not work, I would detach the speakers one-by-one until they started working again.

That's how I would know how many speakers the amplifier would sustain.

The test was consistent with my model and I was sure it would work.

After attaching six speakers, sure enough none of them worked. So far so good. As I detached speakers one-by-one, however, I was surprised to find that my amplifier-pump could not drive even one speaker alone. When I discovered smoke coming out of my amplifier, I began to think that maybe my model needed work.

After a week at the shop and \$173 of repairs I arrived at a model of electronic things which better accommodates the experimental data. Speakers are the pumps! They draw power from the amplifier which works to supply the demand. If too many speakers are drawing power, the overworked amplifier cannot keep up; it overheats and burns out. Note to self: It is not a bad thing to pay attention to Ohms and amps and such things.

You electronics wizards out there need not snicker at the level of understanding which led me to so confidently burn up my amplifier. Post-graduate scholars with a high and refined need to know cannot justly snicker at grade schoolers and their simple explanations of things. As the complexity of the grade schoolers' studies increases, their need to know will make them uncomfortable with their simplistic ideas and will drive them to adopt more complex models. Until the very day I tried to add speakers, my model was sufficient for my needs. I did not need to know anything different. This is what is meant when it is said, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear."

If the student is not ready, no information can be transferred, no teacher will be effective. If someone is bumping along, content operating under assumptions you know are flawed, you won't help him by criticizing his model and dumping a truckload of information on him. He is likely to be startled and start defending his misguided ways, further burrowing into the faulty model. Better to ask, "Would you be interested in a different approach to this?" and go from there. If someone is not a student, and does not feel the need to learn, it is no favor to him to blast apart his operative model, however simplistic it might be. Just leave him alone, trusting that one day he will feel the need to know better. Resisting the urge to destroy someone else's flawed model may prove a challenge to any well-meaning person.

During my adventures in stereoland I acted confidently and sincerely and in strict accordance with how I believed things work; never-the-less the outcome was painful.

Self-confidence was not the problem; more of it would not have altered the outcome.

Passion for my work? Oh, I had plenty of passion.

More passion might have induced me to offer to expand my neighbor's stereo for him, too.

Commitment? Didn't I use my very own property to test my model?

Does any of this – confidence, passion, commitment—have anything to do with personal peace?

Unless the operative model is consistent with peace, adding intensity just makes the eventual outcome more painful for everyone. Honest, faithful people can still suffer if the model upon which their actions are based is faulty. Honest believers cannot be criticized – the model is the problem. Faith contributes to personal peace if it is faith in something consistent with reality.

More faith in a falsehood does not make the falsehood true.

Once I had paid the \$173 repair bill, if I had tried again to hook up six speakers, you could justly wonder what was wrong with me. Didn't I learn from my unhappy experience? If I were to do it a third, fourth, or fifth time, you might want to organize an intervention. Start organizing, folks; there are forces at work in you and in me which drive us to keep hooking up our speakers and paying the repair bills, time and time again. We all suffer from it, but this kind of intransigence is the special burden of hard-liners or fanatics.

Those who cling to inflexible models have the toughest job because they must constantly defend their views as the only true understanding. They won't permit themselves to characterize their doctrines as "models", which would suggest the possibility of incompleteness or fallibility. They cannot compromise, since to concede on any point is to admit to the possibility of some other valid perspective which would topple their "house of cards" – their exclusive "rightness".

Extremism and fanaticism are not evidence of the correctness of an understanding, or validity of a contention. Such highly charged emotional dispositions are not even evidence of security or confidence in one's models. They are evidence of quite the opposite, an unwillingness to allow one's models to be scrutinized, to be held up to the light and compared with reality. Emotional volume goes up when the support of evidence falters.

Those who scream the loudest have the least confidence in their cause.

We repeatedly bring pain upon ourselves and others because we do not know or we do not care that there are better, more peaceable alternative models out there. Looking at things just a little differently makes all the difference between a life of chaotic misery and a life of peace and happiness. The circumstances of the world do not have to change for us to be happy – our vision, our understanding, our models can change to allow us a peaceable, happy life regardless of our life circumstances. This is why our quest to find peace is focused inwardly. It is fruitless to launch a crusade, to attack, fight, and break down outside obstacles to our peace. If we allow ourselves to look, we find the obstacles where they truly are, within ourselves, and we dissolve them with understanding.

There are two ways to lift into the air something heavier than air. A rocket burns explosive fuels in enormous quantities, struggling against inertia and gravity to heave itself aloft. The sounds, the smoke, the fury are stunning as force is applied against force in a mammoth battle. This is blasting-off. The second way to lift something into the sky is to open a hole in the air, release your grip on the earth and float into the hole. A gas or hot-air balloon does precisely that. The work left to the flier is only to release. But this is not always an easy job; the ropes that are tying the balloon down must be cut, ballast must be ejected – the flier must relinquish all things which keep the gondola down. This is casting-off.

With peaceable things we cast-off, not blast-off.

Our struggle is not with the world around us. We do not learn techniques to “win” confrontations or amass power. We do not find peace by applying force or finesse to make the world accommodate us. We do not use force against force, rather we recognize that our trials are with ourselves and the work we must do is to relinquish those things which hold us, which tie us down away from the free flight we seek. Cast-off, not blast-off. We give up the struggle of propulsion for the freedom of release.

One of mankind's most fundamental models, one having far-reaching effects on how we relate with others is the basic nature of man. This, through the centuries has been a huge debate among theologians and philosophers, yet the debate plays itself out in our homes and workplaces even now.

We deal with others differently depending on whether we believe man is inherently good or inherently bad. If man from birth is inherently good we approach our neighbors and co-workers with patience and understanding, believing that their good nature will eventually overcome any temporary experimentation with misbehavior. To coax better performance we appeal to that basic good nature through encouragement, reassurance and praise, anxious to help others avoid mistakes and mollify the consequences of painful choices. The incentives we offer will appeal to their higher values, their sense of personal worth, community, and contribution to the team, etc.

Years ago I worked in a psychiatric hospital where I was assigned to the maximum security ward, whose residents had perpetrated violent crimes and were likely to spend the rest of their lives there. I was surprised to see them organized into a self-governing body with elected officers. Through group meetings the residents participated in counseling each other, planning activities and agreeing on standards of behavior, which they enforced themselves with group sanctions revoking or awarding privileges. Called the "Therapeutic Community", this approach was based on the "basically good" model of man, emphasizing that by exercising the healthy portions of their personality the unhealthy portions would eventually be overgrown and squeezed out. As inherently good, even these men and women, it was presumed, would want to behave better if given a sheltered environment to learn how.

The inherently bad model of mankind leads to more confrontational interaction. With no reason to be patient with disappointment, one uses criticism and complaint, punishes with threats, guilt, and humiliation. One tends to manipulate his fellow beings rather than motivate, and incentives tend to appeal to baser values, such as money, possessions and other consumables. I have been puzzled in recent years by a friend with a truly unpleasant bearing. He remains embittered by disappointments that happened years and years ago.

Even though he says those far away events are the reason he is unhappy, I suspect the disappointments may be a symptom of his unhappiness, not the root cause. There is something sour about his attitude which I could not illustrate with specifics until one day I noticed that he consistently refused to allow other people to feel good about themselves.

When someone would mention a happy circumstance, he'd be quick to say 'Yeah, but...' If someone indicated that he was pleased with himself for a task well done, my friend would not let it rest without mentioning how it may not have been a complete success. And asked for positive feedback, he is conspicuously silent. He simply cannot allow anyone in his presence to feel good about himself. This may be symptomatic of his having adopted the "inherently bad" model of man's basic nature. He says he has no friends.

That may be another result of his choice of models.

You, as well as I, can think of other persons, who seem to be at peace or even joyous in the worst of difficulties; who are capable of giving comfort even when they themselves are grieving; who seem to be capable of loving those who are most antagonistic to them. Some seem to forgive even as an offense is being perpetrated. Are these persons supernatural, gifted at birth with this capacity for peace, or can we choose to cultivate it in ourselves? Where do we start cultivating? Start with your assessment of the basic nature of man. What does evidence tell you?

Where some believe with ample evidence that man must overcome his basic bad nature to create goodness in the world, others believe with equal weight of evidence that man is diverting from his basic good nature in order to create chaos and pain. This suggests an important aspect of model selection. All evidence being equal, it is simply a matter of choice which model we adopt. Remember what we have learned from our discussion of perceptual matrix and models? We sometimes see what we choose to see. In this way, regarding the inherent nature of man, how we feel about other people tells more about us than it does about them. If we find ourselves honestly uncertain of what to conclude from the evidence of our experience, we may select a model based on other criteria. If the question, "Which of the two models is more consistent with reality?" cannot resolve the issue, I suggest asking, "Which of the two models allows me to feel

good about my fellow beings?” If consistency with reality is equal, choose the happier, more loving, more peaceable alternative. Like the man who has no friends, or the man who has no enemies, the model will create its own rewards.

“Wait a minute,” some might say, “Isn’t that the Pollyanna Principle?”

We must re-emphasize that ignoring distressing or disruptive things is not the way to find peace. Whatever the issue, whichever model we select must acknowledge all known facts about the issue. Whether the glass is half full or half empty is not about denying that there are both air and water in the glass. If little Johnny is proud of having all by himself fetched you a drink, even though he spilled some of it on the way in, the half-full model would allow everyone to rejoice about the facts as they are.

My sour friend, in preferring the half-empty model, strictly speaking may be justified by the facts, but he will not feel happy about the event, and worse yet, he will not let little Johnny feel happy about it either. On the condition that it is consistent with truth, we may peaceably choose a happier model when one is available.

This is not the Pollyanna Principle, and I like to call it the Dulcinea Principle. We’ll address Don Quixote’s adventures from time to time, but as his exploits illustrate, with fewer exceptions than you might expect, we are free to choose to imbue peaceable meanings and motives into any life event. You may rot where you are buried or you may grow where you are planted. Either model accounts for the fact that you are up to your neck in it. Not your circumstances, but your choice of model makes all the difference.

I used to be vaguely uncomfortable with art, politics and entertainment.

In the case of music, I found myself resisting a song, not allowing myself to like it because it was recorded by a band whose lifestyle is despicable.

As for politics, at the same time I was picketing for his impeachment, I could not bring myself to regard favorably Nixon’s diplomatic accomplishments in China. And movies? I would not allow myself to enjoy a certain actress’ on-screen performance because she had abandoned her

husband to flaunt a worldwide sexual affair with a married actor. In each case I felt deep inside that if I admitted to liking one part of a person's life, I would be endorsing all parts of it. I realized one day that, just like my sour friend I was saying, "Yes, but..." to a large portion of what could have brought enjoyment into my life.

I finally discovered that this condition was forced upon me by my model of people as they relate to their accomplishments. I had been thinking of a person's character as a glass of pure water. For each of that person's misdoings I was adding a drop of ink to that person's water. Of course the whole glass became increasingly gray. It didn't take long to want to have nothing to do with that water. Couldn't drink it; couldn't wash with it; I wasn't sure I would water my plants with it – nothing good could come of it. With this ink-in-water model I had to condone the badness in a person in order to accept his goodness. I was led directly into critically judging people on a scale of white to black – and no one was all white.

No one could possibly fully live up to whatever standard I kept in my head, so I was forced to withhold some measure of affection from all -- even from my best friends. My model forced me to even anticipate offenses, to greet strangers with suspicion and watch them carefully until their weaknesses revealed themselves to me and I could be justified in saying, "Aha! Just as I thought."

As for public figures, eventually I decided that my disgust for an artist's behavior would never change his behavior, nor would my judgments about public disgraces ever sway anyone away from his own choice to disgrace himself in public. In fact, the only person my sensitivities could impact was myself, and I discovered that I was missing out on a lot of color and enrichment in my life. There had to be a better model.

I found it in the mosaic-tiled floors in Pompeii. There it was, clear as day, black tiles laid in a background of white tiles. The black tiles were not bleeding into and spoiling the white tiles. Even from a distance the floor did not merge into gray. Not only could I appreciate the clean look of the white, while at the same time acknowledging the presence of the black tiles, but beyond that I realized that the contrasts between black and white gave pattern and meaning to the depiction.

Bingo! I had my more peaceable model. It may yet be an imperfect metaphor or model, but now I can value O. J. Simpson's great athletic performances without fear of appearing to endorse his movie-acting, or other facets of his life.

Great and useful qualities of character can coexist with flaws and baser qualities within a single person. A man is not summed up and averaged to decide his net value to humanity. In the presence of the very same facts, the mosaic model provides a mechanism to savor any person's contributions where the ink-in-water model did not. A person's gift can be celebrated without absolution from, or endorsement of the other aspects of that person's life.

It is said that a fool cannot learn from the wisest man, but the wise man can and does learn from the fool.

The mosaic model allows me to receive light from any source. Better yet, it takes critical judgment of the whole person out of my hands. I no longer force myself to bear the burden of condemnation. What a peace-promoting relief!

In consciously selecting a model in instances where that is possible, a person might be accused of picking and choosing what he sees. Remember from our discussion of perceptual matrix that we all do unavoidably filter incoming data, and that filtering is largely determined by our needs and values. Yet, while acknowledging the existence of things inconsistent with peace, it is entirely consistent with reality to choose to focus on positive, uplifting, peaceable things.

We divide life experiences and circumstances into "bad" and "good", but this is an artifice, a completely invented contrivance not existing in Nature. Nature just is. There is no bad or good until we each for ourselves judge an event's impact on our personal agenda. The concept of good and bad exists only within each of us, and each judges differently. The same rain that is good for your garden is bad for my picnic. We assign "good" and "bad" yet, with our shallow awareness and our narrow field of vision of the world around us, we are often the poorest judges of what truly is good for us. Taoists understand this well.

“An old man was living with his son at the top of a hill. One day, he lost a horse. The neighbors all came to express their sympathy at his bad luck, but the old man said, ‘How do you know this isn’t good luck?’ A little later the horse came back and with it were some superior wild horses. The neighbors all congratulated the old man on his good fortune, but he said, ‘How do you know this isn’t bad luck?’ With so many horses, the son began riding, and one day he fell off and broke his leg. The injury left him with a bad limp. Again the neighbors came to sympathize, but the old man said, ‘You never know – this may be good luck.’ Another year passed, and a war came. All the able-bodied young men had to go to war, and many died. The son, because of his bad leg, was saved. In this way, what seems to be good luck may really be bad, and what seems to be bad luck, good.”
(from Li Zi, adapted by Lin Yutang)

All events are neutral. Nature has no “good” or “bad”. Shakespeare had Hamlet say it succinctly, “...there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so...” (Hamlet, act ii, scene ii, emphasis added) If thinking is all there is to it, can we adjust our thinking to characterize all things as good? Is this consistent with reality? Pain is often associated with our insistence on labeling events as “good” or “bad”, when in Nature they just are. We must relinquish the notion of identifying anything as either good or bad. More emphatically, we must avoid even using the words “bad” and “good”. Drop them from our vocabulary. Why such a radical affectation?

Because there are more accurate ways to convey things as they are. We could say that rain is “compatible” with our agenda for the garden, or “not compatible” with our picnic plans. Ideas are not good or bad, only “consistent” or “inconsistent” with reality; a plan is either “suitable to our needs” or not. A person is not good or bad, only making choices which will or will not contribute to peace. Remember, our choice of descriptive word-models may have no impact on the circumstances, but will definitely affect how we feel about what is.

Just as the wise man can learn from the fool, successful people will tell you they learned most from their mistakes – from “bad” things. Yet if something useful is derived from it, how can an event be a total loss? If a person remains teachable and open to truth, he can take value or growth from any event. In this way all things can be “good” to those who love peace.

“But,” you say, “some events are just too painful to see any good in.” Perhaps, but even the worst event could create good by acting as a catalyst. Often substances of different chemical properties are mixed with no intention that they bond together, but rather to act as catalysts to each other, each to sling the other into another phase or state of existence. Similarly, all life events – no matter how they are viewed – can serve to sling us forward toward a final un-compromised state of being. How can we call this bad? It is Nature unfolding before us. It just is.

It may not be inconsistent with peace to deliberately interpret an event.

Through our models we will interpret every event anyway. So is deliberate interpretation always mis-interpretation? “Mis-“ according to whom? Who gets to choose? Every negative event may be interpreted as only a part of a greater positive whole, as a dark tile in a beautiful mosaic lending contrast, shape, and identity to the whole picture. Whereas we each may choose for ourselves how we characterize the world outside ourselves, but we may not choose for another how he looks at things. Each person is accountable for his models, and will reap peace or distress, the rewards or penalties of those models.

Deliberately choosing to see value in difficult natural events and happenstance is one thing, but can we deliberately re-characterize as a gift an action intended to be hurtful? If something is sent as a curse, must it be received that way? The answer is also a question: who chooses? I was mowing my overgrown back yard one day and happened to spot a large potato just in front of the mower. A peculiar thing to find in tall grass. I spent the next ten minutes walking the yard looking carefully for more. Sure enough I found more than a dozen. I concluded someone had purposefully scattered them, and knowing how a mower is ruined when its blade shaft snaps, I also concluded that damaging my mower was the prankster’s intention. At first I was angry, but then I realized that until I could find the culprit I would have to suspect every one of my neighbors -- and their kids --and their kids’ friends. I would have to remain indignant until then, and that upon reflection seemed a wasteful use of my emotional energy.

So I rethought the situation, re-characterizing the facts as they were. The fact was that I had a sack full of fresh, washed, dinner-size Idaho baking potatoes.

I chose to characterize this fact as a courtesy of some thoughtful person. And why not? I came away at peace with my neighbors and chuckling at my good fortune. We enjoyed the potatoes for weeks.

Without denying any known facts I had an opportunity to choose a model which left me at peace. It may not always be that simple. For instance, could I have been so cavalier if I had actually damaged my mower before I discovered the prank? Yes, of course I could have -- why not? Who gets to choose how I feel? The details of the event may have changed somewhat, but the alternative responses would have been exactly the same. The prospect of catching and confronting the perpetrator would have been just as impossible. Do I accept for myself and extend to others a lingering emotional burden, or do I elect a peaceable path? More times than you realize you can choose a peaceable way to see things without violating your devotion to truth.

If we can learn and grow from all things, even an assault is an invitation to learn, to grow, to see things differently. We can thank even those who want to be our enemies for helping us to learn peaceable things. It is merely a function of the choices which accompany every event in our lives.

An incident even more touching than my run-in with potatoes is portrayed in *Les Miserables*. The thief, after having attacked the priest and escaped with his silverware, was arrested and returned in handcuffs to face the priest, who chose to respond with words like, "Oh, I am glad you have returned. You forgot to take with you the matching candlesticks." The police released their prisoner. If there was no crime, there was no criminal. By the priest's deliberate re-characterization a theft became a gift, a thief became a free man, and the priest, by relinquishing the desire for revenge, transformed himself from a victim to a benefactor. The facts did not change. How they were characterized did.

Re-characterization can go the other way too. Those who desire to injure another person can turn something intended to be happy and loving into something nasty. For instance, you can drain any gift of any positive value whatsoever by characterizing it as a response to compulsion. "Who told you to do that? Why do you think you have to do this? You wouldn't do this if you didn't have to." When the response to a gift is a counter punch, the gift can look like a punch, and any further interaction becomes a duel.

Sometimes this happens quite innocently when you try to receive a gift pleasantly. “Oh. You didn’t have to do this,” might very easily sound like, “You must have felt obligated to do this,” and “You wouldn’t have done this if you didn’t have to.” To preserve the pleasantry of the moment the giver in this case is required to justify the gift with a response of his own. This interchange usually seems innocent enough, but the moment is lessened a bit. Maybe there is a more peaceable way to express gratitude.

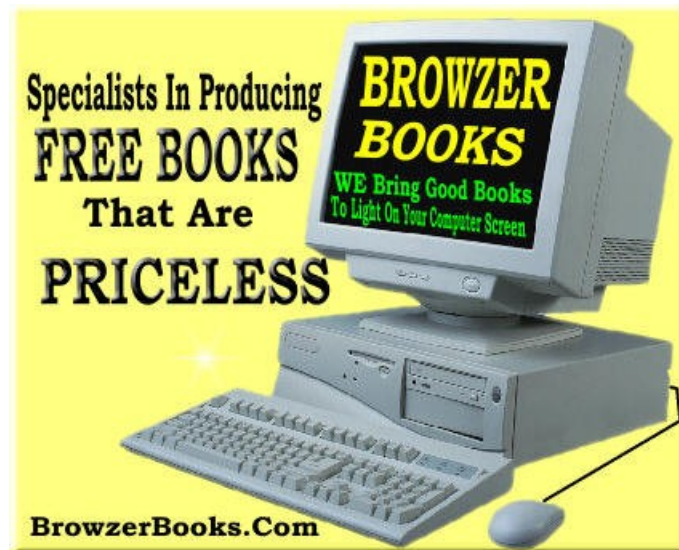
In any case, the receiver’s response to a gift, whether thoughtless or contrived, goes a long way toward redefining the event. With a quick turn of phrase a circumstance can be created in which neither receiver nor giver can rejoice, and both are diminished by the gift. Even subconsciously, the way a phrase turns is also the result of a choice of models. The conscious choice of a peaceable model, even a deliberate interpretation or re-characterization of a circumstance avoids the possibility of misunderstanding and defuses what may have been an attempted assault.

Words are models of ideas. Word-models have a powerful impact both outwardly on other people, and inwardly on our own thoughts and feelings. Those who love truth will be very deliberate in their choice of words. As we learn that a certain model is inconsistent with reality or does not contribute to peace, we must abandon the model and all the words, which promote that faulty model. As we’ve discussed “good” and “bad” must go. As we discover in the chapters dealing with illusions, no one “deserves” anything.

The word “deserve” no longer belongs in our vocabulary. “Right” and “wrong” at best are inadequate descriptions, and at worst they are ammunition used in battle, and resulting in injury. The arrogance of being “right” has its own rewards, but being “wrong” also has its rewards related to being a victim. Peace must come in acknowledging truth without being either right or wrong. It is much more accurate to describe something as “consistent” or “inconsistent” with the evidence, “compatible” or “incompatible” with peace, or “useful” or “not useful” for our present needs. One final, yet vital understanding about models in general -- whereas we must use models to relate to and function in reality, models are not reality. They are limited descriptions of reality as one perceives it.

At some level all models must fail. That axiom has a corollary: For any given model of reality there will at some time and place be a different and more accurate model. We must not marry ourselves to how we understand things today. This is the first step in discovering and applying peaceable things.

Profile: Tracy Sandberg has been through: an acrimonious divorce, contrived estrangement from children, various business failures, fraud and embezzlement by life-long friends, foreclosure, bankruptcy, threat of false lawsuits, calumniated reputation among friends, unfounded firing from employment, physical injury and chronic pain, unfounded persecution and confiscation by taxing authorities, financial losses, employee theft, investment fraud, and death in the family. Tracy Sandberg is still at peace.



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