

# I'm Afraid of Myself

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In last week's commentary, I wrote about my not trusting others. Basically, this boils down to fear of my suffering because of others' unpredictability. My ability to control other people, so as to insure my own safety, is distinctly limited, both ethically and practically. Controlling others simply doesn't work most of the time, but even when it does, it's a lousy way to live. The obvious spiritual challenge of life in bodies with an ego-basis is to work on ourselves to achieve some grace, balance, and consciousness, and attempting to control others too often results in that work not getting done.

Along with that is our participation in the web of life, the fact that we coexist and are interconnected with other beings — human and non-human. We need to find ways to acknowledge that in our interactions with others through cooperation, respect, and (when possible) love and joy. I tend to do better with the non-human connections. Believing that the only values that matter are human and that we're superior to other creatures have been major factors in creating the terrible trouble we're in now. For instance, assuming that animals have no consciousness that matters, meaning that they're "dumb" or don't feel love, joy, and suffering has always seemed to me absurd, ridiculous, and cruel. It's an insane form of elevating ourselves, by diminishing the stature of everything else. The lack of consciousness that terrifies me is in other human beings. Elephants, mice, and gnats don't scare me. People do.

This week I want to talk about the other side of the fear coin — being afraid of myself.

From my perspective, human sentience — call it what we will: consciousness, self-awareness, whatever — is the rough equivalent of a man riding on (i.e., "driving") an elephant. What is the elephant in this metaphor? It's the sum total of all our drives, instincts, desires, needs, habits, and other impulses that originate from regions in us that operate beneath our consciousness.

In many ways, this unconsciousness is a worthwhile and very good thing. For instance, if we had to consciously remember to take a breath every 20 seconds or so, we wouldn't be able to do anything else. All our time and attention would be taken up in the survival urgency of breathing. So, it's evolutionarily to our advantage to have our breathing occur on auto-pilot, without our having to

constantly and continuously monitor it. Many of our bodily survival functions are set up this way — heart rate, blood pressure, digestion, etc. All these tend to occur beneath the level of our awareness, freeing us up for whatever creative tasks we take on. That's a marvelous system for which we can thank Gaia and Mother Nature.

Any yet, our unconsciousness goes far beyond mere survival. It covers an astonishingly broad range of our experience and intrudes into our consciousness at nearly every turn, frequently overriding or even invalidating it to the point of sheer mockery. Hardly anything at all happens solely because of conscious decision and willful implementation. And often, even when we think we're conscious, we're not.

So, back to the man sitting atop the elephant, presuming to drive it where he wants it (and him) to go. I wonder how compliant and obedient the elephant will be to dutifully carry out the man's commands — go this way, go that way, stop, turn, speed up, etc. I use the image of the elephant because domesticated animals — dogs, horses, oxen, even elephants — do seem to be mostly willing to serve us by complying with our commands. The word "mostly" in that sentence is a critical qualifier, however. Mostly does not mean always.

In the metaphor of the man riding the elephant, I wonder what percentage of the man's "driving commands" are dutifully and correctly carried out by the elephant, what percentage of commands are defied or ignored, and what percentage are actively countered with disobedient actions, where the elephant not only doesn't obey the command, but instead does something that the rider/driver doesn't want. This breakdown is difficult to even estimate because of the nearly infinite variety of differing situations where commands are given.

For instance, if we instruct our bodies to cough or swallow, this is almost always followed quickly by the cough or swallowing reflex. However, one of the bodily functions that was damaged in my hemorrhagic stroke in 2007 was swallowing. In the immediate aftermath of the stroke, I discovered that I couldn't swallow at all. My consciousness would instruct my brain to send the "swallow" signal to the muscles of my throat, but nothing would happen. The muscles still worked, but the stroke had damaged my brain, so that message wasn't conveyed. It took me three years to "re-wire" my brain, to teach it to make new neural pathways for transmission of the swallowing reflex. During that three years, I had numerous choking episodes where food was "caught" in my throat, and I could neither swallow nor breathe. Had I not steadfastly remained calm, I could easily have passed out and died.

That's not an example of the elephant defying the man. In the case of my stroke-related swallowing problem, the elephant simply couldn't "hear" and carry out the command. The same would be true of my commanding my body to flap my arms and fly. My body (the elephant) might be completely receptive to the

willful command, but it literally could not do what I asked. Life is full of those kinds of disconnects. If I consciously decide to rob a bank, so as to get enough money to fulfill my cockeyed fantasies of happiness (or whatever motivation makes me want to rob a bank), my body will be perfectly willing to do whatever I ask. It will not “refuse” to rob the bank. But my plan may be foiled if I’m caught, convicted, and sent to prison. Some commands are inherently risky. We might call them foolish or stupid.

In the prime of my life, from age 20 to 45, I met and became involved with numerous women that I was intensely drawn to, but whom I knew would be trouble. The fact that I was drawn to these women was part of my unconscious hard-wiring — the proclivities were plain as day in the astrology of my natal chart. The crazier and more dangerous (to me) certain women were, the more I wanted them. And yet, distilled experience told me that these were seriously bad bets. So, did I make the sane and conscious choice not to get involved with these “wrong” women? Sometimes, but not always. And whenever I didn’t — whenever I went with my habitual and unconscious “instincts,” I paid the price, sooner or later, in pain, suffering, and eventual remorse.

My problem was the “wise” choices didn’t work, either. I’ve met many wonderful, lovely women in my life — smart, attractive, and obviously worthwhile — any of whom I could have pursued to be lovers/partners. The problem for me was that they didn’t turn me on. They didn’t make me hot. I didn’t want them. My heart opened to the ones who were most damaged and crazy.

The major arenas in life for most human beings seem to be work, love, and health. Work is not only job, career, and livelihood (i.e., money), but includes our needs for meaningful activity, respect, and social status. Love includes both family, one-to-one intimacy, and friendship. Health is our existence in bodies, and everything that comes with that. In all these arenas, our consciousness claims some measure of control and direction. Time and again, however, our unconsciousness overrides our consciousness. Very often, our elephants end up calling the shots.

We tend to deny that, of course, insisting that our consciousness is in command. We do this by “performances” for others and “self-talk” to ourselves that involve complex rationalizations of our attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. Mostly, though, that’s bullshit. It’s just our egos trying to convince ourselves and others that it’s in charge.

I’ve learned over my lifetime (the hard way) that eating healthy food and taking good care of my body are very, very complicated and immensely difficult. My consciousness tries to figure out what to eat and how to live, but my elephant often won’t or can’t do what I command. On top of that, our culture is really full of shit about nutrition and diet. Having studied this dilemma for nearly my entire life and very aggressively over the past half-century, I’ve learned that my

conscious commands are often impossible for my particular elephant. They might be reasonable for someone else's elephant, but not mine. Usually, though, it's not that my elephant is disobedient or refuses to comply. No, most often, my consciousness is at fault in not understanding how my body works and the ways to gracefully alter the balance to re-establish harmony and good health.

The upshot here is that while my mistrust and fear of others may sometimes produce difficulty in my life, it's actually much less a problem than my fear of myself. I understand neither my elephant nor my consciousness well enough to relax and be fully OK with either. Sadly, after 72 years, my judgment about myself is that I'm not sufficiently competent in either realm — consciousness or unconsciousness — to make correct decisions about living well. Sometimes my decisions are fine, and my behaviors (whether "chosen" or auto-pilot) work well enough to achieve the desired end, but not always, and not reliably.

My first spiritual mentor, the Russian Sufi Mystic and all-around rascal, G.I. Gurdjieff, admonished his students to refrain from trying to change anything about themselves until they were at least 60 years old (and maybe not even then...). The example Gurdjieff gave was this: Imagine that you're driving down the road in your car, and the engine suddenly stops. Now, you know how to drive acceptably well, but let's assume that you're not a mechanic and know nothing about how cars are built, nor how they work. Nonetheless, having pulled over to the side of the road, where your car now sits, apparently dead, you exit the vehicle, pop open the hood, and begin randomly pulling out wires. What do you think the odds are of your fixing the car? Not just slim, but zero.

So, here I am, still riding atop my elephant at 72 years old, trying to get through the remainder of my life with some semblance of grace, maturity, and as little suffering as possible. I've studied myself and my elephant for a lifetime, and I've learned a lot. Sadly, much of what I once thought I knew and understood has proven false. This has left me very anxious about what I think I know now. Basically, both my elephant and my consciousness are still mysteries to me. Given the amount of crap I've already lived through — suffering, ill health, "trouble and pain" (to use Warren Beatty's repeated line from the movie *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*) — and the terrible crap that's probably coming down the pike for us all, I'm not exactly sanguine about my future.

All in all, I'm not a bad guy. Sure, I have monsters inside me — we all do — but I try not to let them run my life, and I've managed that acceptably well. That's not true of modern civilization, though. Some humans among us — far too many, if you ask me — seem willing or even eager to act out their lives monstrously. They maneuver their way into social positions of power, wealth, and stature.

There's considerable overlap between the "1%" who are the richest among us, the "1%" who run the world and make most of the decisions that affect us all, and the "1%" who are the worst monsters. It's possible to be in one of those

"1%" clubs but not be a member in the other two. There are rich people who aren't in positions of power and aren't monsters. There are powerful decision-makers within social elites who are not wealthy or monstrous. And there are monsters who aren't rich or powerful. However, membership in any one of those clubs does seem to increase the chances of membership in all three. Since most of us (the 99%) are on the outside and not privy to what goes on behind closed doors in all three of the 1% clubs, we have a hard time distinguishing who's a monster and who's not.

I'm not a member in any of those 1% clubs. I'm with most people in the 99%. I hope it's not false flattery for me to consider myself as well-meaning as many people in the 99% and more thoughtful than some. Whether I'm right or wrong about that doesn't matter much. I mean, with well-meaning thoughtfulness and four bucks you can get a cappuccino. Rim shot.

The bottom line here is that I scare myself because I've seen firsthand just how wrong-headed and fucked up I can be. From time to time, I've harmed others. Not fatally, but still... Even worse, I'm aware of how often and how badly I've harmed myself, and I'm worried that I still haven't outgrown that. If I'm going to mature more effectively, it'd better happen pretty damned fast.

Odds are high that I don't have a lot of time left, and I fear that we collectively may not, either.

From where I sit, it appears that we've let the monsters make our collective decisions and dictate most cultural memes, leading us all to a dead end. And by "us" I don't mean only the billions of us who are human. No, I mean all of humanity plus the millions of other species of sentient organisms who reside on this planet. Worst of all, the rest of humanity let the monsters wreak havoc. I don't know if we could have stopped them somewhere along the line. Lord knows, we had enough chances. But we didn't stop them, and now it's too late. The party's over.

The great experiment on this planet conducted over the last two billion years — Biological Life — ultimately produced *homo sapiens*, which was presumably the "Crown of Creation." That was *us*. Human beings. The very top of the food chain, with the greatest possibility for sentient consciousness and relatively significant self-awareness. Sadly, though, that proved to be a bridge too far. Our species went insane and ended up ruining the entire game.

I wonder if the earth will be able to recover and try again.