

INTRODUCTION

LEARNING TO THINK FOR OURSELVES

Here in the United States, IQ test scores have been falling for five decades. Apparently, we have been getting stupider and stupider since 1972. At the same time, ideas for addressing critical issues like climate change, racism, economic inequity, and the future of work have been slow in coming, uncreative, and ineffective. Many high-profile sources, including the White House, Pew Research, and major news outlets, are sounding the alarm that there is something profoundly wrong with how we prepare people to deal with pressing issues. They all agree that we have a problem, but the best practices they offer as solutions are based on false premises and are certain to make the situation worse.

A century ago, a group of psychologists known as *behaviorists* began promoting a radical reconceptualization of the human self and human behavior, and it has been sold to us ever since. They introduced a method for reconstructing society based on redefining what constitutes knowledge about human behavior, how this knowledge can be generated, and who is qualified to own it. In the process, they overturned a fundamental and enduring belief that had been handed down for millennia: that we can know ourselves and act as the final arbiters of what is true about us.

Since their inception, behaviorist theory and method have been successfully scaled to such an extent that they have become ubiquitous in all our lives and institutions. As a culture, we have so completely internalized behaviorist ways of

thinking and working that they are now invisible to us, although they are among the primary causes of our inability to respond appropriately to the challenges we face today. We no longer look to ourselves for guidance on even the most personal aspects of our lives. Instead, we turn to experts and the internet for advice, instruction, evaluation, and confirmation.

AN EARLY ENCOUNTER WITH THE MACHINE

My first vivid memory of being subjected to a behaviorist assessment was when I was a high school freshman in the Dallas, Texas, public school system. The department of psychology at Southern Methodist University (SMU) had initiated a research project that was responsible for administering IQ tests statewide. At the time, psychology departments around the country were ramping up to conduct universal psychological testing, having successfully sold the idea to the military and corporations in the early twentieth century. In the 1960s, testing was extended to students in lower and upper grade levels.

SMU, in collaboration with the Texas State Department of Education, chose my school because it had been integrated following the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. They expected to find a broad array of intelligence levels in the racially and socially mixed student population, based on their assumption that race was a primary determinant of intelligence. I was selected to be part of the sample group of students who were tested. The tests were oral, and, to me as a teenager, they seemed to go on forever. The psychologists presented me with questions and graphic materials that they wanted me to respond to. I remember being completely baffled. I could not make sense of what they were asking me or comprehend why it might be important.

About a month later, my mother got a call from the school, asking her to come in for a meeting. A psychologist in the testing program told her that I had not done well on the tests. She explained to my mother that I was, in the program's parlance, "mildly retarded" or "slow" and would need special education, which they would provide. Nevertheless, the woman reassured my mother, they had a plan for me by which I could still be "productive in society."

At the time, my mother was on medication for schizophrenia, and she had a hard time understanding what she was being told. The one thing she was able to gather was that they thought there was something wrong with me. This did not compute

for her. Both she and my sister were mentally ill and on medication, and as a single mother, she relied heavily on me to help her keep our lives together. In her experience, I was flexible, resilient, competent—intelligent. When the university sent her paperwork to reassign me to the special education program, she refused to sign.

Meanwhile, my homeroom teacher, who was also my debate team coach, was also presented with paperwork to place me in the program. Completely independently of my mother, with whom she never spoke about it, she also refused to sign. She knew from experience that although I might be an independent and unconventional thinker, I certainly was not slow. I blithely made my way through high school without ever realizing that I had been labeled “retarded.”

I learned about the incident years later when I graduated from the University of California, Berkeley. My mother, who had flown out for the occasion, told me how glad she was that she had not bent under the considerable pressure that was applied to her by the school and the psychological team. I was dumbfounded and called my former homeroom teacher to find out if she had known anything about it. She told me about her part in the story. All I can say is that I am deeply grateful for the protection these two women afforded me. I had already been saddled with an abusive father who repeatedly told me when I was a young child how stupid I was. It was enough of a struggle to maintain my confidence in my own intelligence and agency without having these messages reinforced by a psychological testing apparatus.

This moment in my academic career represented a profound awakening for me. I knew instinctively that there was something wrong with this approach to psychology, and the conversations with my mother and former teacher confirmed this for me. I had been diagnosed as low IQ by the SMU psychologists because I did not accept their standardized assumptions about what was meaningful and important. The fact that they could not get me to think along prescribed rails laid down by their research protocol meant, obviously, that I either lacked common sense or was mentally deficient. It never occurred to them that I was an independent and self-directed thinker.

As a result of this shocking realization, I dedicated my doctoral work to finding out what was leading modern psychology down such a destructive path. In the process, I became a lifelong researcher into the dehumanizing effects of behaviorist theories and methods and a pioneer in the creation of effective alternatives.

LOST IN THE LABYRINTH

Modern social institutions have walked deep into the labyrinth created by industrial thinking, capitalist accretion, positivist social science, and behaviorist psychology, taking the planet and society with them. The resulting crises have left many of us desperate for a way out. I believe that there is such a way and that it can be found in the fundamental capacity for consciousness, creativity, and wisdom buried deep within human minds. Like Ariadne, whose mythical thread helped Theseus escape the labyrinth of the Cretan Minotaur, we brought this capacity into the dark with us, and we can use it to find our path back to the light.

For centuries, we have reaped material and social benefits from ways of thinking that view the cosmos as a mechanical clockwork. From this perspective, mitochondria, economies, populations, languages, and minds are all machines—decipherable, manageable, and ultimately predictable in terms of the elements and forces at work. Unfortunately, aliveness gets lost in the machine metaphor, and life suffers the consequences.

If we are to thrive and flourish as a species, and if the planet is to thrive and flourish along with us, we will need a life-affirming, life-generating philosophy that works from the infinite and evolving complexity of a vibrant world. We will need a way to dismantle and replace the life-destroying architectures of modern thought, organization, and activity. My intention in *No More Gold Stars* is to offer a seed out of which such a living systems philosophy can be evolved.

MAKING BETTER CHOICES

I particularly want to speak to the wonderful, well-intentioned people who are putting so much energy into addressing the dysfunctions that they see around them. This group, for whom I have great affection and hope, is the one I find myself pitted against in battles over its unexamined assumptions about the nature and role of humans on our planet. Whether they are arguing for protecting ecosystems or dismantling social injustice, they mostly start from a set of premises that I think are not only false but dangerous. They hold to the idea that human nature is fixed and unchanging, and that therefore the purpose of cultural and social institutions is to manage it, keeping its innate destructiveness within bounds. Most well-intentioned people are unaware of the fact that this is essentially a restatement of the doctrine

of original sin. It leads inevitably to the nihilistic notion that we do not belong in this world and should be expunged from what would otherwise be a paradise. In this narrative, we are slowly but steadily killing the world because, ultimately, there is nothing we can do about who we are.

I strongly reject this idea. In my view, there is no upper limit to the potential development of the human capacity for intelligence, understanding, wisdom, and compassion and of the ability to make systemically beneficial choices. The issue is that we keep failing to develop this potential because we refuse to acknowledge that it is there.

Potential is innate in everyone and everything, period. But without conscious development, human potential remains latent or even suppressed. If we want to do something to change the state of the world, we need to stop building professional disciplines and institutions that are organized around a mistaken need to control people. Instead, we urgently need to transform these disciplines and institutions into arenas dedicated to the development of human and living systems capacity. This will begin with a rededication of their focus and efforts to development of the life-affirming work for which humans are ideally suited—enabling evolution in something larger than themselves. I call this *actualizing systems*, and I believe that it is core to who we are as humans. As a species, our role on Earth is connected to our ability to recognize the innate potentials in living systems and to help them become manifested.

The job of well-intentioned people everywhere is not to limit and slow down the destructive impacts of humans. It is to redirect human energies toward amplifying their evolutionary effects. To do this, we must develop the evolution-enabling capacity in people, which involves helping them learn to see how living systems work. We very much belong to this world, and we have serious, life-affirming work to do. The alternative is a death spiral—the extinction of countless ecosystems and species, ultimately including the human species.

This failure to commit ourselves to the necessary development of human potential is unacceptable to me, and it has made me a fierce critic of the self-defeating rhetoric of the well-intentioned. I applaud their agency, their desire to stand up and do something about the world that they have inherited. But I challenge them to look at their foundational premises, which only serve to reinforce the underlying destructive processes they battle against. This has got to stop, but it can only stop when people develop enough reflective self-awareness to recognize and make bet-

ter choices about the sources of their beliefs and actions. My shorthand for this is “getting people to think for themselves,” and I mean it in the deepest, most radical sense. Which brings me to another personal encounter with the machine, this one with drastic effects on my life.

LOSING MY PHD

Looking back over my life, it has only recently dawned on me that I have spent much of my energies tilting against one particular windmill. Again and again, I have found myself in situations where people attempted to exercise their authority over my thinking and decision making. Apparently, they could not imagine that I might be able to exercise authority over myself or have better ideas than they did about how I should educate and manage myself. That I was perceived as unruly and out-of-the-box was obvious. What has taken me longer to figure out is that I was swimming against the stream of twentieth-century culture.

When I was growing up, parents were expected to instill in their children clear beliefs about what was right and good. Parenting and educating were all about keeping kids on the straight and narrow path. This was a process of correction and conditioning because the budding ability to make their own discernments and decisions was often mistakenly perceived as misbehavior and actively discouraged. Authority was always placed outside, in the hands of teachers, doctors, managers, religious and political leaders, and other experts—anywhere but in the conscience and consciousness of the individual.

This was my background, too. I had a strict Southern Baptist upbringing in a household headed by an authoritarian father. My first marriage was to an authoritarian husband who wanted me to set aside my intellectual and career aspirations to become a quietly deferential wife and mother. I tried! We went to a counselor who told me that the problem with my marriage was my inability to submit to the will of my husband. For better or worse, my will was too strong to allow this kind of submission. My character was in some sense shaped by my resistance to having other people tell me who I was and how I should be.

The pressure to submit to external evaluation was both powerful and pervasive. While in graduate school, working on my doctorate, I encountered both subtle and overt attempts to rein in the independence of my thinking. My research was in the field of cognitive and organizational psychology, and my first significant research

had to do with whether the way we educate and discipline children promotes lying. I worked with third-grade boys at a public school in Pennsylvania. Why boys? Because their teachers reported that girls at that age rarely lied, whereas boys did all the time.

We had the boys go through a set of simple, sequential arm movements and afterward asked them how they did. “It was perfect!” they nearly all reported, aware that they were being tested and needed to justify their results. Observing them from the outside, this was self-evidently false—they had trouble following the instructions and were easily distracted. “Would you like to see a film of you doing the exercise?” we asked. They watched themselves and then reiterated that they had done the assigned movements perfectly.

We did the same exercise with a second group of boys but framed the follow-up questions differently. Rather than asking them how they did, we asked them what they might do to improve the way they did the exercise. They began to try out different things: watching themselves in the mirror, watching each other, giving each other suggestions. We had removed the external arbiter of success from the situation and invited them to evaluate themselves with respect to their own idea of success. The improvement was remarkable. The teachers who participated told me that this forever changed the way they thought about teaching.

Like the rest of my doctoral work, this research project used a *hermeneutic* approach (one based on self-interpretation of events). I considered introspection to be as legitimate a source of information and insight as empirically observable phenomena. I was as interested in observing how I and others were interpreting what we were learning as I was in the data itself. I was deeply skeptical of the biases that were built into empiricism and the scientific method and of the claims to objectivity that were, from my perspective, delusional (and very similar in kind to the delusions of my third graders). I was particularly skeptical of behaviorist psychology, which claimed that the inner life of human beings was knowable only by external observation of behaviors, a repudiation of the ancient Socratic tradition that we become human by striving to know ourselves.

I was not alone in this skepticism. My doctoral work was happening at a historic moment when broad exposure to quantum theory, postmodernism, Eastern religions, and other schools of thought was causing thinkers to set aside received wisdom in order to observe and question their own assumptions and methods. My work had been accepted and approved by my doctoral committee, and some of the

investigations I was making into hidden biases within research methodologies were beginning to influence my colleagues and graduate students.

Nevertheless, it all came crashing down at the last moment when my thesis advisor, Elaine Freeman Kepner, discovered that she had cancer and needed to withdraw from my committee. She was replaced by the new president of the institution, who was at the time pushing for accreditation. He summarily rejected as unscientific all research and theses that used hermeneutic, theoretical, or action research—approaches that had been respected and accepted just months before. He shared with the behaviorists (and the accrediting body) a strong desire to make psychology a scientific, rational, utterly professional discipline, and in his mind, this meant that its practice had to be uncompromisingly empirical. This conformist impulse put the final nail in the coffin of what had started as a small and innovative graduate institute with a mission to upgrade the quality of the processes used in higher education to teach people to think for themselves.

You could say that I was shut down by the built-in biases of an accreditation infrastructure based wholly on the positivist idea that truth about ourselves can be verified only in what can be observed by those outside of us. Truth, from this narrowly empirical perspective, cannot be discerned through inner reflection or subjective experience. In other words, *we cannot know ourselves!*

How ironic that the dominant approach to psychology, the study of inner states and of the soul, had by the middle of the twentieth century become completely and intentionally divorced from inner experience. To even question these epistemological assumptions about how it is possible to know ourselves and our world was to place oneself beyond the pale.

Naturally, at this point I was completely overwhelmed by the vagaries of the system, and after exploring all avenues for a reprieve, I abandoned my academic career path. I set aside my dissertation, choosing instead to apply what I had learned to organizational change processes in large companies around the world. Nevertheless, I retained my strong belief that there was something fundamentally degenerative and destructive about ways of thinking that delegitimize inner understanding, especially when they are applied to human beings and living systems. From my point of view, unconscious adherence to an expert-driven, empirical bias is the source of nearly all psychological, social, racial, political, economic, and ecological problems facing the world today.

If there is one thing that ties my personal stories together, it is that I was always

unwilling to accept people's self-evident truths at face value. After all, isn't questioning one's assumptions a basic principle of intellectual honesty? From a very early age, I instinctively questioned authoritative assumptions. My father, for whom it was self-evidently obvious that Hispanic people were ignorant and inferior, called me a disobedient child and punished me brutally when I asked him why he disparaged my friends. The examiners who came to my high school and tested my IQ, for whom it was unimaginable that I would find their questions meaningless or irrelevant, called me "retarded" and wanted to banish me from my classrooms. The young scientist who took over my dissertation committee erased seven years of work because I did not accept his definition of what constituted legitimate knowledge, labeling me unscientific and a bad influence on my research colleagues.

Most of the institutions that you or I interact with have deeply internalized the belief that, to be legitimate, knowledge must be gathered empirically and verified by an expert. We have become collectively dependent on third-party, professional expertise, and in the process, our basic human capacities for self-reflection, creative intuition, and sound judgment and our tolerance for uncertainty have atrophied. We face a crisis of mental dependency, at a historic moment when the need for independent thought and innovation has never been greater.

I am not advocating know-nothingism, fabrications, conspiracy theories, or blind rejection of fact. On the contrary, I am calling for intellectual rigor, open-mindedness, and a willingness to hold our most cherished beliefs and certainties up for thoughtful scrutiny. In my lived experience, this is how we grow and evolve as human beings, and it is how we come into respectful and creative dialogue with one another. The ability to deepen and revise our understanding, in some cases over many generations, is how we build the intelligence needed to serve the ongoing evolution of living systems. But to get there, we have a lot of work to do to dismantle the pervasive—the almost universal—processes and systems that prevent us from developing our own capacity to have direct, unmediated contact with reality.