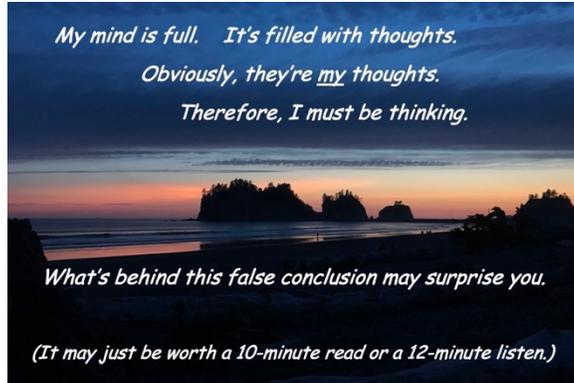


Tricked into Believing We're Thinking

by Bradford Glass, brad@roadnottaken.com

My mind is full. It's filled with thoughts. Obviously, they're my thoughts. Therefore, I must be thinking.

Oh, how often I hear this story line. Yet (and as a way to set the stage here) research shows that while our minds are in fact full – we have about 70,000 thoughts each day – *only 5% of them are conscious*. The obvious concern now becomes, “what’s up with the other 95%?” What’s going on in our minds? Well, a lot more than you “think.”



Human consciousness is a marvel of evolutionary adaptation. The mind is an amazing combination of creative genius (which holds the question: what’s possible?) and protective mechanism (which holds the question: what’s wrong?). Without the creative (conscious) mind, we’d not be able to wonder, invent, comprehend. Without the protective (unconscious) mind, we’d not feel safe on the earth or be capable of trusting connection with others.

The unconscious mind runs 24/7. It has to; it’s there to protect us from danger; (tigers can show up at any time). The conscious mind runs when we **invoke** it – to create, to solve a problem, to figure stuff out, to make choices. In simpler (i.e., perhaps ancient)

times, the ‘two minds’ may have found balance: check for tigers, then go find food.

But there’s a problem here, one which evolution perhaps didn’t count on. Over time, the unconscious mind has become “acculturated” into interpreting life’s growing complexity, uncertainty and chaos as a “safety threat,” so it kicks into gear to defend us (it’s just doing its job.) But the unconscious isn’t “rational;” with no way to evaluate truth, it processes repetition as validity. What this means is that our continued exposure to uncertainty is “heard” by the unconscious as having the same danger value as a tiger. This has put the unconscious on **overload**.

Now, with safety more crucial to survival than creative genius, the unconscious could keep us busy 24/7. And it could care less if the dangers are just thoughts (stay busy, avoid mistakes, look good, life shouldn’t be like this, I hate uncertainty, etc.) The point is that **if we’re reacting, we’re not thinking**. (Example: panicking under stress.) The more we react, the less we think. So it’s not so easy to use the conscious (thinking/rational) mind anymore. And as if to get us into more trouble, we **miss** the fact this is happening ... so we’re led to believe we **are** thinking! Why wouldn’t we? Mind full; must be thoughts. We even believe none of this could apply to us! It does.

In a world where the perceived threat of uncertainty shows up everywhere, this explains ... why we like to listen to people who agree with us ... and why we often deny information that doesn’t fit what we already believe ... and why we believe what makes us feel better over what’s [unsatisfyingly] true ... and why we’re hooked more easily by drama than by facts ... and why we like to think that we’ve thought everything through to the point of certainty ... and why we judge, blame, distance ourselves and separate ourselves from anything that **isn’t** ourselves. It all feels “safer.” But it’s not. It’s just the unconscious mind, reacting to “thoughts.” And we miss *that*, too.

So, we’ve got this evolutionary adaptation that allows us to do phenomenal things – invent, wonder, create, even change the course of our lives. (I never met a polar bear who got tired of catching seals and decided to go to school so it could get a better job.) But by misidentifying thoughts as fears, we keep the unconscious on overload, leaving us easy prey for **any** danger signal to get in. Feed it a new danger; it goes to work, trying to protect us.

Now, I don’t know if some people are really good at spotting this “loophole,” or if they’re lost in their own fears, too, but either way, a great way to garner the support of others (there’s perceived safety in numbers) is to cast doubt on something already “known.” I mean, life is so complex there’s always room for at least a *little* shred of doubt, right? It doesn’t matter a hoot if the doubt is valid/true, as it’s *not going to be processed by the conscious mind* (which isn’t working), but by the unconscious mind (already on high alert with its other dangers). Because the unconscious can’t evaluate “truth,” it simply reacts to what it hears: “*hey, you’re already afraid of uncertainty, how about this one?*” Door open. Then, while we believe we’re “thinking our way to solving the problem,” what we’re really doing is adding one more false danger to the “to-do list” of the unconscious mind. And we allow it. Because we don’t notice. In so doing, we lose even *more* of our grasp on reality.

This combustible combination – unconsciously reacting from fear while *believing* we’re consciously thinking – opens us to the world’s conspiracy theorists and opinion mongers. Thusly deluded, we become (1) blind to how we’ve been tricked into misidentifying danger, (2) blind to our false “conclusions,” (3) convinced neither is so. The first step beyond this limitation is to come to see that we have two choices when confronted with doubt:

Unconscious reaction ... following where voices in the head may lead. Being unaware, we engage in “pretend” thinking, grasping at what “feels good” as certainty (which we see as safety) ... even with no evidence. To the unconscious, comforting falsehoods feel far safer than inconvenient or incomplete truths. And ... it needs the answer “now,” not “someday.” Somehow, being “wrong” feels unsafe. Hmmm.

Conscious response ... critical thinking. Being aware, doubt triggers the conscious to be curious, to explore, to inquire, to learn ... detaching from opinions and fixed beliefs, holding judgment in abeyance (maybe a long time, until evidence is clear). Skepticism, key to critical thinking, isn’t about denying or judging, but about inquiry and learning. Here, doubt is an opening to learning, to new knowing ... not a way to “pull in the edges” out of fear.

The key, and often missing, ingredient here is **awareness**. Yet if we believe we are responding consciously, we’d see no reason whatsoever to care about this, or to make this choice. This is why adopting a *personal commitment* to awareness of our thinking is so crucial. If we “don’t know what we don’t know” (which is more often than we think), we need to “catch the unconscious mind in the act” of deceiving us. By [consciously] choosing to set aside a bit of time each day to be an observer of your thoughts, not just a participant in them, you do just this. When you become consciously aware (*as observer*) of your need for safety and of how your mind hijacks conscious thought in order to comply ... you can then use that awareness to make new choices. Even though you may already think you’re thinking, this practice exposes how your “certainty” lacks firm foundation. Listening **for** your thoughts (consciously) is a powerful alternative to listening **to** them (unconsciously).

As we use the conscious mind on purpose, we “rebuild its muscles,” so we grow awareness of when we’re at risk of processing nonsense as truth. And the more we *do that*, we regain a power we didn’t realize we [always] had – conscious choice. Know, however, it’s an “uphill battle” to reclaim your truth ... in a world that would rather you didn’t. (1) Your unconscious loves safety, and to it, *minimizing risk* feels far safer than *creating into the unknown*. (2) Society loves sameness, not uniqueness, and *compliance* is a great tool to achieve it. But what about the role of critical thinking in our lives? Critical thinking has gotten a bum rap in our society. Despite it being the path beyond this problem, we’ve pretty much lost our skill at critical thinking. It’s no longer taught in schools. To use it leaves us feeling like an outcast ... in a world where the comfort of community feels safer than standing alone in truth. I even read recently that one state legislature *denied* a proposal to restore critical thinking to the public-school curriculum because it “undermined parental authority and undermined fixed beliefs.” Give me a break!!!

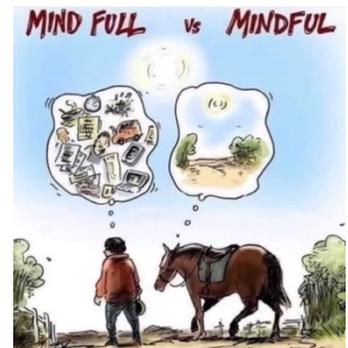
In no way here am I trying to claim what’s true and what’s false, **or** what you should believe. What I **am** claiming is that there’s a rational process to *get us to truth*, and we’ve somehow lost, ignored or denied it along the way ... replacing it with unconscious judgment, lack of critical thought, and lots of inconsistency. And we don’t know we did. Worse, we’d swear we didn’t. It’s time to reclaim the power of conscious thought. Evolution will thank us. As of now, we’re a good way down the evolutionary dead-end street of denying our potential through the atrophy of conscious thought. Examples: (1) we favor competition over cooperation (no other creature does that); (2) we undermine/destroy the ecosystem that supports our existence (not even a chipmunk shits in its kitchen); (3) we believe we’re here to dominate nature, not nurture it. We may be the top of the food chain, but we’re the only species on earth with the power to bring that chain to a grinding (failing) halt.

Three attributes seem to separate those who are less susceptible to deception:

Mindfulness: If you’re more “mindful” than “mind **ful**,” you’re less reactive, giving drama fewer places to root. Open minds are less attracted to nonsense.

Courage: If you tend, in general, to have “one ounce more of courage” in life’s trials than “ounces of fear,” you’re less susceptible to fear-based thoughts.

Worldview: If you believe life is benevolent, you’re less likely to find comfort in negative/drama/fear than if you view life as unfair or out to get you.



The life you claim eludes you is already inside you. If you’re not living that life now, the reason is also inside you. Perhaps it’s time to honor (consciously, of course) the gift that evolution has bestowed upon you.