



# Purposeful Wanderings

A Monthly Newsletter for Clients and Friends of **The Road Not Taken**

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Vol. 20, No. 8 -- August 2021

## Thinking: It's Not WHAT; It's HOW

*"If one person tells you it's raining, then another tells you it's not, your job isn't to quote them both, but to go look out the window and figure it out for yourself."*

A friend told me recently that I represented a threat to her health and safety because I've been vaccinated. In that moment, I noted three thoughts quietly running through my mind: (1) *evidence* points to the *opposite* conclusion; (2) the *energy* with which she spoke was disproportionately stronger than her message; (3) to *engage* with her (on either point) would be futile, given we both believed we were right. We've all experienced situations like this; and they're not just about vaccines. The divisiveness they create – with friends, family, on social media, even with the “news” – has become a significant and pervasive narrative these past few years.

For the record, it's easy to know what she thinks. It's just as easy to know what *I* think. But in cases of “difference,” I've learned that what matters is not so much **what** we think, but **how** we came to think it – the inner process that leads to our (often disparate) conclusions. Understanding the *how* opens a path *beyond* divisiveness.

We're usually pretty convinced about **what** we think, but we often don't know much about **how** we think. To do that, we need to stop long enough to look *underneath what* we think – at the *environment* in which thinking occurs. Like the air we breathe, our thinking environment is everywhere, though we're rarely aware of either its existence or its impact, lost as we are in the “what.” This exploration moves us beyond sides, opinions and politics. (These are *results* of divisiveness, not its cause.) Thinking environment is a product of both human consciousness and society. Here's my view on ten forces (human and societal) that **CREATE** our thinking environment. Ponder each on its own; then follow the invisible *fabric* they weave in our (and *your*) world:

- Our world is growingly **uncertain** ... everywhere (climate, public health, economy, politics, privacy, business)
- As a species, we **fear** uncertainty; so, we're unconsciously drawn to seek the “perceived safety of the known”
- To the **unconscious** mind, a **compelling falsehood** feels safer than a **complex** or **incomplete truth** (odd, but true)
- But despite their appeal, falsehoods, misinformation and deception weaken and threaten us; and we **miss** this
- The **conscious** mind can reason *beyond* all of this, but as *uncertainty grows*, it's the **unconscious** that's in charge
- This leaves us easily trapped, so we're even **less** likely to adopt the rigorous thinking upon which truth depends
- Enter social media (“news” too, it seems) – one-way streams of just about anything, with little accountability
- Enter advertising (social media **and** news) – where gaining viewers (dollars) now takes precedence over truth
- Unable to separate fact from fiction, we're at risk of being drawn by what goes **viral** over what's true
- Whether we become hooked on all this or not depends only on our level of **conscious** awareness

Unaware, we **don't know** we've been manipulated. If we *remain* unaware, we live the **illusion** it creates – the *illusion* of safety, the *illusion* of certainty, the *illusion* of truth. Unknowingly we simply **become** what we're exposed to ... a soup of **unconsciousness** driven by our own internal fears and society's external pressures. Here's my view on seven “tools” commonly used to **SUSTAIN** this illusion, all serving to hold us back from constructive response:

- **deny** conversation on **how** we might find resolution ... by keeping focus only on **what** (deflection)
- **evade** clarity, objectivity or critical thinking ... by pushing “certainty” instead (one-way communication helps)
- **appeal** to herd mentality (everyone believes this; no other choices exist) to reinforce the claim of certainty
- **stoke** fear (the unconscious mind loves this; it holds on tighter (out of fear), so it avoids [scary] conversation)
- **push** the message with force, as a way to get us addicted to hearing it (repetition works, so does “power”)
- **pretend** that opinion, screamed loud enough, equals truth (anger is an especially effective tool here)
- **shame** or **intimidate people**, instead of working with their *differences* (abdication of personal responsibility)

And for the record, my friend chose “all of the above” as her response. Turns out she's not alone.

There's only one piece of this entire framework we have the power to change all on our own – and that's our conscious awareness. Not easy to do when the **unconscious** is working full-time to keep us safe; but, as we purposefully learn to **see** how we think, we're better able to **choose** how we think. (If we don't see our thoughts, we become our thoughts.) My premise, played out powerfully everywhere – in my own life *and* with so many of my clients, is this: gaining keen perception, objective clarity and conscious awareness of your thinking is the most powerful path there is beyond the divisiveness that ensues in its absence. (Read that again.)

**Exercise:** The “work” here: (1) Regular practice of *getting to know* your thinking. (It helps you shift from unconscious to conscious thought.) Add a commitment to seeing without judgment or opinion (it's ok to have judgment, but if you become your judgment, illusion persists.) (2) With growing personal awareness, you will know how to choose connections to social media and “news” that serve you. (3) Embrace uncertainty; you may never know enough to leave you completely *certain*, but you **can** know enough to keep you from being manipulated.

The Zen card I drew today: Right Thought. “*You are what you think; think it today, become it tomorrow. Nothing can help you or hurt you as much as thoughts you carry in your head.*” To that I'd add, “*And what you think is a result of what you're exposed to (air you breathe). And ... what you're exposed to is a choice – **your** choice!*”

If you're impacted by this societal trend (almost all of us are to one degree or another), and if you're unsure as to a path beyond the divisiveness, here are some questions you might ponder:

- **Framework:** *Get to know* the “picture” presented in this article. What's *your* experience of it? How do you tend to handle issues in the moment? Do you regularly *notice*? Where might you have been drawn to *believe* something with almost no evidence yet at the same time *deny* something with solid evidence?
- **Process:** What “thought process” do you use to “know” what makes sense to you, what you know as truth? As in this month's quote, do you stop and go look out your window?
- **Awareness:** How does the “world you choose to look at” (social media, news, friends) compare with the “world you *experience*?” What do you notice about how your days go when you're more aware of divisiveness than when you're unconsciously trapped by it? How do your days go when you choose to disconnect? Why?
- **Choice:** What new behaviors do you believe might help “move beyond the divisiveness of our times?”

**Life lessons from nature:** The entire universe is a *process* of continual unfolding. **How** this happens is both beautifully elegant and (best we know) remarkably consistent, everywhere. **What** is created is both varied and magical. Some results are better adapted to their environment than others. Those that aren't don't last long, perhaps evidence that the “**what**” is of less consequence than the sustainable process (“**how**”) that creates it.

### Openings to New Possibility -- *The Shop at The Road Not Taken:*

- *The Road Not Taken Community*, a no-cost subscription that offers you connection, interaction, challenge, and learning. Articles, newsletters, blogs. I welcome dialogue; it's an example of how we may all learn together.
- My books: available here.
  - “***A Field Guide to Life: Navigating the Challenges of Our Lives and Times.***” Explore common struggles that hold you back from a life you love. When you discover their true causes, you can create true solutions.
  - “***Living Authentically ... in a World That Would Rather You Didn't.***” Its *premise* is simple: in the midst of a world that has lost its way, you need never lose your own. Get to know, then honor, your unique truth.
  - ***Purposeful Wanderings***, 19 years of ***The Road Not Taken*** newsletters available here as a single pdf file.
- ***Personalized Life Coaching:*** If you're one of the few with the courage to leave conventional thinking behind so you can live instead with authenticity and freedom, I'll help you gain clarity and perspective – about yourself, others, life, work and the world – that allow you to do just that, every day. Trade the *way it is* for the *way it could be*. Contact me for a conversation that *will* change your perspective and may just change your life.

**Book of the month:** ***The Constitution of Knowledge***, by Jonathan Rauch. A rather in-depth view of how we've historically processed disagreements, and how today's “thinking environment” is threatening that process by obfuscating the search for truth as a way to gain personal power. “Differences” are crucial to sound decisions and policies, but to threaten the difference instead of allowing it to be grist for the conversation, is damaging. And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.