

Breaking Free From Our Cultural Chains

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Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing there is a field.

I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about.

- Rumi

We're often afraid of what is different. It's easier to stick with what we know, especially when it comes to relationships. We tend to stick to a group of people who think, act and do things like we do. This is where we feel confident that we belong. We can understand and feel understood. Everything is easier when we are around people we know, however this can also be severely limiting. When we know or think we know, we close ourselves off from knowing anything else because we already know - there is no more learning to be experienced. We know and that is enough. We can stay in our comfort zone secure in our knowledge where there is no fear or uncertainty. Beliefs and norms of behavior are pre ordained - no independent thinking required.

However, a danger arises here - we need to ask ourselves if we have been shaped so much by the world around us that we have lost ourselves in the process? Human beings rarely, if ever succeed at accurately perceiving their own culture. It is true to say that this is how most of us live our lives. We are victims of our culture and most of us don't even realize. We are born into a culture and the problem with culture is it's impossible to know it when you're in it. You just can't see it. Although your life is defined and shaped by your culture we are all like the fish who swim in the sea - we are surrounded by the water of our culture, it is literally everywhere and so we take it for granted. We can't see it unless we have an experience where we notice an absence of our cultural norms and we know at a visceral level that something is missing.

So what do we mean by culture? Many people quote the work of Dutch psychologist

Geert Hofstede, whose maxim, “The Software of the Mind” informed many thought leaders on this subject. Culture is the commonly-held traditions, values and ways of behaving in a particular community. We all live within layers of cultures; cultures within cultures. Our mental programs begin to develop within the family in early childhood and are reinforced in our educational processes and in our work lives within organizations. These mental programs contain components of our national and religious cultures, too. Every single human being within the world is a product of numerous cultural influences. Culture has significantly impacted the many different ways we think, feel and behave. We are who we are today because of our cultures, and it is impossible to exist outside of them.

At the same time, culture is a dynamic phenomenon surrounding us at all times. It is a constantly evolving eco system being shaped by our interactions with others and a set of structures, routines, rules, traditions and norms that guide and constrain our behavior. We each play a part in the evolution of our culture, but how aware are we of when culture is shaping our decisions and when we as an individual are making an independent choice? In fact, we must wonder if an independent choice even exists.

As an Executive coach who works internationally, I have guided many relocating executives from many different cultures around the world through what we commonly call, “culture shock”. I have coached many individuals and their families through the emotional upheaval that goes hand in hand with leaving your native country and setting up life in a new location.

Limiting cultural beliefs operate in much the same way as limiting personal beliefs - they hold you back from fulfilling your potential. However, they are harder to spot and more challenging to overcome, as these are shared beliefs that have been reinforced many times during your life and are often regarded as unquestionable “truths” or “fact”. Many people refer to them as “*just the way life is*” or “*just the way I am*” and use these to excuse behavior.

The good news is that cultural beliefs are merely self-imposed limitations which act as self-fulfilling prophecies and can be overcome with a shift in mental attitude. The simple fact is that you can break free from your cultural chains.

Despite all this knowledge, I was stunned at the level of “culture shock” I and my family experienced when we moved continents. I had worked internationally, visited many times, knew the stuff, had read the literature, and was up to date with the current research. Therein lay my biggest problem. I thought I knew. My expectations were that I would breeze through the transition with no problems whatsoever.

How deluded was I? I was completely unaware of what I didn't know (and was acting as though I did). It's hard to describe the visceral and emotional reactions that arise when you are thrust out onto the very edges of your experience and you realize, maybe for the first time, that the world is not the place you thought it was. Not even close. I didn't know what I didn't know, nor did anybody else. Like speaking a different language, I encountered many situations where there was no shared understanding and we struggled to find it.

Through this experience my eyes were opened a little wider to the diversity of the world and I was humbled as my experience was stretched in unimaginable ways. At a point I knew at a deeper level that life would never be the same again. I would never again 'know' with such certainty. I saw myself and my children emerge from the chains of our culture to find ourselves anew. My relationship with life has shifted and a new energy has recharged my curiosity. I am less attached, more agile, and want to learn more about this amazing and diverse world of ours. I'm even excited to find my place as ever-changing within it.

It seems to me that this is a tension we are all living into at this point in our human evolution. We are changing so rapidly into a global community that there is much we don't know. Yet many of us want to be seduced by the security of knowing, even if it is an illusion. We want to know. We need to know. We cling to the familiar when everything around us is calling us to find a new way, to allow a new world order to

emerge. We all need to learn how to live into the unknown; how to manage complexity and keep stepping forward when all around us is uncertain. And we need to break free from the ordinary to allow a new ordinary to emerge.

The Importance of Breaking Free from the Ordinary

When we look back over history we can see that breaking free from our cultural beliefs is how we have evolved over the centuries. The cultural belief that a woman's place was in the home oppressed half the population for many centuries. The cultural belief of the racial superiority of whites has oppressed many cultures for a long time as well. We have broken the shackles of many of these false and limiting beliefs, yet in all cultures still live under many delusions. It's up to us to decide the direction we want our lives to go, individually and collectively.

I have yet to meet anyone who isn't interested in finding and fulfilling their potential. Overcoming self-imposed limitations opens up your individual potential to do and be all that you can be. It increases your quality of life. The same is true of culture. Embracing racial and gender equality has opened up new directions for us as a culture and enriched many lives. When we shed our false impressions we clear a path towards truth and a clear resonance of the soul.

The direction of a culture is driven by the people within it. It is the collective mind that counts. We the people, have the ability to change the direction and become more intentional in our collective cultural consciousness. We no longer need to expatriate to a different country to do this - diversity is all around us. All we need to do is to step out. All we need is an open mind; individually and collectively. We must be willing, to be open to changing our beliefs, to finding out where they might be flawed, and to always seek the truth. It is a journey of evolution for each of us. Seeing ourselves as change agents can become our contribution to the collective evolution of humanity.