The Book Shelf: Matt Ridley, *The Rational Optimist* (2010)

William Bergquist

The Rational Optimist by Matt Ridley is one of the books that both of us greater admire and from which we have extracted many insights as professional coaches. We are not alone in expressing enthusiasm for this book -- it has received many rave reviews. In this brief review of The Rational Optimist we want to highlight several key points, indicate where other authors we admire have offered a similar perspective--and most importantly suggest several ways in which Ridley's analysis can offer guidance and motivation to those of us who do coaching and work in particular with men and women in the professions (thereby honoring the theme of this *Future of Coaching* issue).

The first point and one that resides at the core of Ridley's analysis is the important role played by collective learning in the evolution of human beings. We will next turn to the theme of specialization (which Ridley suggests is fundamental in the creation of human societies). We conclude with the importance that Ridley places on the processes of appreciation (a perspective that we think is critical in the field of professional coaching). Each of these key points offers us the opportunity to be rationallly optimistic when facing a postmodern world of turbulence, inconsistency and unpredictability.

The Collective Brain

Ridley proposes right off the bat that successful human evolution is a story of collaboration (not competition):

> It is my contention that in looking inside our heads, we would be looking in the wrong place to explain this extraordinary capactiy for chang ein teh species. It was not something that happened within a brain. It was something that happened between brains. It was a collective phenomenon.

Throughout the book, Ridley refers to the “collective brain.” (pg. 38) He suggests that human beings would never have evolved so quickly if this evolution was dependent only on the physical properties of the human brain. A similar case is being made by David Christian in his extraordinary effort to produce "big history>" (Christian, 2011). He proposes that the accelerated process of human evolution centers on the ability (and desire) of human beings to collaboratively learn and to accumulate and pass on this learning to the next generation. While our nearest evolutionary relatives (the primates) tend to replicate the same basic routines from generation to generation, humans learn, accumulate and invent.

This accelerated evolution occurs not through genetic modifications, but instead through modifications in human cultures. This "new" form of evolution is often refered to as "micro-evolutionary theory." Cultural integration and collective learning and education produce inventions. As Ridley suggests, diverse ideas need to be brought together: “If culture consisted simply of learning h abits from others [as occurs with primates], it would soon stagnate. For culture to turn cumulative, ideas needed to meet and mate.” (pg. 6) Meeting and mating needs to occur in a specific community context (and increasingly in multiple, cross-cultural communities). In this regard, Ridley is echoing the perspective on innovation that is offered by Johansson ( ) in *The Medici Effect*. Communities such as Venice during the Renaissance and Paris in the 1920s become the crucibles of profound and diverse innovations--there is abundant "meeting and mating" among a highly diverse community of interacting men and women.

Ridley's focus on collaborative learning and interactive diversity provides us, as coaches, with a rationale for serving as ideational provocaters and networkers – as coaches we can bring together different perspectives and disciplines when working with our clients. It is particularly important for the coaches of professionals to help their clients become “interdisciplinary professionals” and to assist them in getting out of or (better yet) avoiding the disciplinary silos and rigid mind-sets that are all to common in the socialization and stabilizations of professional practices.

Specialization

Ridley proposes that these high-exchange communities will spring up when no one person had all the answers and when each member of a community depended on others for wisdom,

technological expertise. Cumulative learning and active exhange, in other words, requires specialization:

> The cumulative accretion of knowledge by specialists that allows us each to consume more and more different things by each producing fewer and fewer is, I submit, the central story of humanity. Innovation changes the world but only because it aids the elaboration of the division of labour and encourages the division of time." (Ridley, p. 46)

Cumulative learning, exchange and specialization not only generates innovation -- these forces also lead to improvement in the human condition: "The more human beings diversified as consumers and specialised as producers, and the more they then exchanged, the better off they have been, are and will be." (Ridley, p. 7)

We are reminded of the fundamental analyis done many years ago by the pioneering sociologist, Emil Durkheim, who wrote extensively about "the division of labor" noting that specialization and the reliance on other people for specific goods and services, as well as wisdom (collective learning) creates solidarity in a community. We are dependent on others (Ridley, p. 29). It is interesting to note that human being have more oxytocin running through their body then any other organization--and oxytocin is a chemical that is specifically aligned with the desire to bond and affiliate with other members of one's species. As Ridley has noted, human beings should acknowledge that they are guided by a "declaration of Interdependence." (p. 32) As George Lodge ( ) (the senate candidate and son of Henry Cabot Lodge) noted more than a decade ago, human societies are most likely to thrive if there is a balance between individual rights (declaration of independence) and collective responsibility (declaration of interdependence).

What then are the implications of these ideas for those of us who engage in the coaching process? We would suggest that interdependence becomes a fundamental theme in most (if not all) coaching: our clients can not operate alone in our complex postmodern world. No one can be an island in Friedman's flat world. The very act of reaching out for a coach to provide assistance is acknowledgement of interdependence. It is as if our clients are standing on the sidewalk facing the challenge of crossing the street at an intersection where traffic is coming from all four directions and there are no stop lights or stop signs. Under such postmodern conditions, it is nice to have a colleague (coach) who can help look in several directions for oncoming traffic (or help us decide to walk to another intersection that is not so dangerous). As

coaches, we don't have the answers, but we can help our clients look around and generate various options. We can become specialists in asking questions and in offering diverse perspectives. We certainly do not have to become specialists in our client's own area.

We suggest that this emphasis on interdependence and seeking assistance in navigating the busy and complex intersections of life is particularly important for men and women working in all professions -- given the traditional emphasis on personal autonomy in most professions and the assumption made by most contemporary societies that a "professional" has all the answers. It would seem that the professional who asks for assistance from a coach is often treading into new territory and defying the norms and traditions inherent in their own socialization as a "professonal." As coaches we must appreciate and acknowledge the courage of our professional clients in "swimming against the stream." We must also help them recognize that assistance is abundant and available all around them -- and not just from us as their coach. They simply have to discover (perhaps with our guidance) the best way to ask for this assistance.

Appreciation

Ridley observes that: “people are programmed to desire, not to appreciate.” (p. 27) In this observation, Ridley is aligning with the critical observations made by many contemporary occupants of a new interdisciplinary field called "behavioral economics." Leaders of this field (such as Kahneman and Ariely) note that we are often caught up in the desire to possess, rather than in appreciation of what we already have and in the potential of engaging rich life experiences. One of the fundamental insights offered by the behavioral economists is that experiences are of greater long-lasting value than possessions. People will prize (and relive) an experience long after they grow tired of a specific possession.

The challenge of coaches is to help clients realize this and move from desire for possessions to appreciation for experience. Money is much better spent for most people on a weekend in the mountains than on a new set of dishes. Not only is the experience in the mountains to be savored during the weekend, it is also to be savored in reflection many more times (often in an even more gratifying manner). As coaches we are often in the business of helping our clients identify priorities--whether we are life coaches or executive coaches. This emphasis on the appreciation of experiences can be of great value to many of our clients. And the hard-working professional is often particularly in need of priority-setting. And we (as coaches) might also find

that our own priorities become clearer as we work closely with our clients. Both we as coaches and our clients might even find that the immediate coaching experience is itself of great value -- and to be savored long after the coaching session (and coaching relationship) has drawn to a close. It is all too easy to let these remarkable moments slip by . . . Thank you Matt Ridley for your insights.