

# 11

PLAYING TO  
ONE'S STRENGTHS

Psychologists for long pondered the question, "Which is more important — Nature or Nurture?" It has always been an emotionally charged debate. Political demagogues in the twentieth century incited their peoples to extremes of racialism having convinced themselves that certain cultural features 'were there in the blood'. This led to eugenics. Research now shows conclusively that it is nurture that provides the stimulus which unlocks our innate natures; it is nature via — not versus — nurture<sup>1</sup>.

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Confucius was right all those years ago; "Man's natures are alike; it is their habits that carry them far apart".

Humans behave flexibly, argued Stephen Pinker, "because they are programmed; their minds are packed with combinational software that can generate an unlimited sets of thoughts and behaviours"<sup>2</sup>. It is indeed our habits that carry us far apart. The development of the genetic instructions which shape brain processes and behavioural patterns has been a very long process. Some scientists have speculated that it would be theoretically possible, given a time machine, to snatch a late Palaeolithic baby from beside a campfire of thirty thousand years ago and raise it in a twenty-first century English home so that it could eventually earn a degree in astrophysics or computer science. That is not necessarily the stuff of science fiction for there are still a few tribes in remote and inaccessible terrains living in just such Stone Age conditions who exhibit just such behaviours.

Consider the early English set-

tlers seeking to build better relations with the indigenous peoples of Virginia who offered to sponsor some Indian young men to attend the College of William and Mary. The offer was considered carefully but eventually declined; "We are convinced you mean to do us good by your kind offer but you, who are wise, must know that different nations have different conceptions of things"<sup>3</sup>. This offer had been made once before noted the Indians, "but when our young men returned to their people they were no longer good runners. They were ignorant of every means of living in the woods, fit neither for hunters nor for councillors; they were totally good for nothing". Politely the native American Indians reciprocated with an offer to educate the sons of the settlers in the ways of the Indian tribes, which in their turn the English declined. Different forms of nurture on a universal human 'blue print' inevitably produced totally different cultures.

The behaviours that have been fashioned through evolution to acti-

vate our natural predispositions were shaped long, long ago within the collaborative, intergenerational, co-operative behaviour of our distant ancestors. Without similar cultural stimulants to those that have fashioned our own predispositions, future generations of young people may never learn those techniques which unlock so many of our preferred ways of doing things. As a small-group species we expect love, pity, generosity, remorse, friendly affection, reciprocity and enduring trust to be part of our genetic heritage.

All too often such attitudes and behaviours are being squeezed out of the experience of today's young people. Is it possible that, in the ever-faster moving de-socialised, de-spiritualized and essentially depersonalized life of modern man we are losing so many of the cultural factors necessary to unlock our real potential? If so, the human race is in trouble; we have to enter a world where our genes are not puppet masters pulling the strings of our behaviour, but rather our genes are puppets at the mercy of our behaviours. That is not meant to be a circuitous argument for it is through the experience of such emotions that the human brain develops. It is Nature via Nurture; and it is why problems of education are as much about matters of culture as they are about a misunderstanding of how brains function.

*Playing to One's  
Strengths*

# 12

## THE NEED TO KNOW

Children's search for meaning starts young. Children who are already anxious to make sense of issues that matter to them in their own private lives, who come to formal schooling keen and enthusiastic to use whatever it can offer them to help meet their personal objectives. It is not the other way round. The greatest incentive to learn is intrinsic. That is why a caring, thoughtful, challenging, stimulating life - a life of manageable child-like proportions - in the greater community is so vitally important.<sup>1</sup>

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It has been on the restless, creative energy of each new generation that society has been dependent for its progress, and for the solution to problems that earlier generations had thought intractable. Individuals have for generations been growing their intelligence by being able to see others acting in intelligent ways. Like tends to breed like. Until very recently, most people lived in environments in which 'cause and effect' were reasonably local and obvious; youngsters could see and understand what was happening to their more experienced, and presumably wiser, elders. More and more now, those local experiences are being lost in a sea of daily commutes to jobs and schools in neighbouring towns, villages, or counties<sup>2</sup>. Extended families are so often spread out across different countries, even continents that intergenerational learning is becoming ever less obvious and relatives are in positions far less conducive to modelling intelligent behaviours for their children<sup>3</sup>. It is impossible to bring up young people to be intelligent in a

world that is just not intelligible to them.

Since the earliest times learning was best accomplished through apprenticeship, sometimes now called 'discovery' learning<sup>4</sup>. Parents and elders acted as role models for progressive problem solving. As craftsmen worked so they taught their apprentices to understand that part of the project that was within their capability. As the apprentice became more skilled so he took more control of his own further learning. They learnt as they worked, and the greater the overlap the better. Learning was practical, useful and relevant; if youngsters couldn't plough properly then years later as a farmer they would starve.

Consider the importance to youngsters of a stern games coach, be it of football, cricket or lacrosse. Not only do such coaches describe the skills the youngsters need, but they actively get out on the field and demonstrate their own prowess. How many academic subject teachers are able to show how good they are at actual essay writ-

ing or solving mathematical problems for the first time in front of their students<sup>5</sup>? What a good teacher, or coach, does is to make their own thinking visible to the learner. It's that process of thinking through an issue, and putting it to the test, that children need help in understanding.

Schools, however, need to take students beyond apprentice-like learning, to master skills which often seem intensely boring and of little interest in themselves. Such skills as mathematical formulae, foreign language grammar and the routine procedures of the sciences frequently leave students feeling that this is less about getting smarter, and more about getting 'stupid'. Routine skills serve as a means to an end for, without these young children can't move on to more complex work; it's these skills that enable them to move up into a whole new world of meaning<sup>6</sup>. These days, discovery learning is not enough to secure a good job or a place at University. What children have to achieve is the right balance of discovery and routinised learning and that inevitably involves experience both inside and outside the classroom.

It has often been said that those individuals who thrive best in business and personal relationships are those who possess a great deal of self-confidence in themselves<sup>7</sup>. Work and play have personal value and are of personal relevance. Young children who feel valued and respected in their worlds in-school and out, are more likely to be the ones who see their learning at school as relevant to their own personal needs and build up the confidence to tackle whatever spins or turns they may encounter. That is why streets that are unsafe for children to play around are as much a condemnation of failed policy as are burned-out teachers or inadequate classrooms<sup>8</sup>.

# 13

## WHAT IS LIFE?

With the advent of consciousness humans started to ask the apparently unanswerable questions, questions that take us to the supreme heights of human achievement, and into the depths of despair. Not for us the unreflective life of a dog, or even possibly a chimpanzee; we humans try to solve the riddle of existence by posing the ultimate question, 'What is life?'. We have bitten so deeply into the apple of the tree of knowledge that we drive ourselves crazy in trying to find the 'correct' answers – and then attempt to force them onto other people.

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The French painter, Paul Gauguin, seeking to recover from deep depression, poured out all his artistic tension into a massive, enigmatic mural of creation over which he scrawled three questions, "Where do we come from?", "What are we?" and "Where are we going?"<sup>1</sup>. Like Gauguin we each in our own idiosyncratic ways try to make sense of ourselves and our surroundings. Searching for meaning is what our early cave-dwelling ancestors did thirty thousand years ago – they revealed themselves through their paintings, "the symbolic expression of yearnings and values of a culture... that reflected the doubtless rich body of myth, belief and tradition which they represented". In every generation people have found themselves going away to a mountain top, or sitting watching rain drops run down a window pane, and pondering the ever-present question, 'just what are we all about?'. The 'Hows and Whys of life' questions. How is it that we are

as we are, and why are we here in the first place? However 'rational' we may think ourselves to be, such questions just don't go away.

Until very recently most people didn't try to separate out the hows from the whys. There still remains in Tanzania a tiny tribe of less than a thousand people living in Stone Age conditions – they own no land, no animals and plant no crops. They are the Hadza. They have their own 'click' language and a rich body of oral tradition, that is all about such questions. "In the beginning", the elders tell their children, "God (described as female which would suggest this story goes back even further than that of the male God in the Book of Genesis) created the Hadza"<sup>2</sup>. She was pleased and one day, being thirsty, she went and asked the Hadza to fetch her some water. The young people rushed off to the river with their calabashes, but instead of taking the water back to God they had great fun throwing water at

each other. Sometime later God, being ever thirstier and by this time bad tempered, went down to see what was going on. Furious at the disobedience of the young people God cursed the whole Hadza people saying that from henceforth half of them would be the baboons and the others would remain Hadza... and the baboons would cause chaos to the Hadza forever. A simple joined-up story that linked an explanation of creation, and life itself, with the concept of ethical behaviour. An explanation that could well have been passed down, parent to child, through more than five hundred generations, and gave them a sense of who they are.

Questioning the way in which life was shaped by inheritance George Eliot recorded a fictitious conversation in the England of the 1860s between two farmers about the unpredictable characteristics of their children. "It seems a bit of a pity, though", said Mr. Tulliver, the miller, "as the lad should take after the mother's side instead of o' the little wench. That's the worst on't. Wi' the crossing of breeds, you can never justly calkilate what'll come on't. The little'un takes after my side, now, she's twice as cute as Tom. Too cute for a woman I'm afraid".

"But you see, when a man's got brains himself", concluded Mr. Tulliver, proudly, "there's no knowing where they'll run to; an' pleasant sort o' soft women go on breeding you stupid lads and cute wenches, until it's like as if the world was turned to topsy-turvy. It's an uncommon puzzling thing!"<sup>3</sup>

The meaning of existence, and the nature of humankind are the beliefs that societies have gradually formed in order to make sense of who they are, why they're here, and how such thoughts should influence the way they, and other people, should treat

each other. These are the oldest of mankind's questions.

The extent of our technical knowledge compels our generation to go many a step further than our forebears and, with all the wisdom and knowledge available to us, develop a philosophy that honours both our scientific as well as our spiritual natures. Old stories were reassuring, but we want to argue with them. It's simple really. The better we use our brains, the more we want to challenge the boundaries of an earlier generation's knowledge. The very sciences that are helping us to understand ourselves better are becoming a source of inspiration for the re-configuration of narratives that combine with the sense of our commonality and mutual purpose.

*What is Life?*

# 14

## SIGNIFICANCE OF NARRATIVE

Humans are a story-telling species. Faced with a multiplicity of facts and ideas which we may only imperfectly understand, we use stories to create frameworks that help us to transmit the sense of what we understand to other people. Our culture is contained within the stories we tell. The thing which humans need more than comfort, more than possessions, more than sex or a settled home, is a good supply of stories, for it's through stories we make sense of the world<sup>1</sup>.

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To learn is to explore, to go beyond what you thought you understood. It's to 'freshen you up'. It's to make better sense of things which previously were muddled. The more we learn the more confident we become in looking after ourselves. King Alfred (he who burnt the cakes) once said, "The saddest thing about any man is that he be ignorant, and the most exciting is that he knows."

To young children play is their most important form of learning. As they play so they learn to experiment, to develop their imaginations, to act out parts and pretend, and when they make mistakes they learn to do things differently in the future. They learn that life is full of ambiguities, paradoxes and conflicts, and that truth is often stranger than fiction. They are excited by novelty. So, too, are some older people; "To be successful I have to be innovative", said a highly successful young entrepreneur, "I look for discontinuities, and the unusual. That's where there's confusion, and confused people are desperate for new ideas. People call this the boundary between order and chaos. That is where

real learning takes place, the point at which the old systems are breaking up and new opportunities are starting to form. That is where the action is; that's where I need to be."

Between the sparkling, inquisitive eyes of children and the purposeful step of people in their prime, is Shakespeare's "whining schoolboy... creeping like a snail, unwillingly to school". School often fails to excite youngsters who see little connection between their zest for life, and the routines and rigours of the classroom which, while they might make sense to a teacher, leave many a child convinced that learning is not for them. It's an old, old, problem, "How I suffered! Because I was a mere boy I had to obey my teacher in everything. I did not understand what I was taught, and was beaten for my ignorance. I never found out what use my education was supposed to be"<sup>2</sup>. That was a pupil in Rome early in the third century... long, long ago, but an observation that seems timeless. Excitement is the very essence of learning, but schooling – when it misses the mark – can be insufferably meaningless. That

Roman schoolboy later became St. Augustine who wrote in his "Confessions", "I learnt most not from those who taught me, but those who talked with me".

*Significance of  
Narrative*

# 15

WISDOM  
BEYOND  
KNOWLEDGE

Our lives are drenched with information. With so much that we could think about it's inevitable that we shut most of it out of our consciousness for fear that our brains will crash through overload. So selective can be our focus that we can easily miss the blindingly obvious. Give ourselves time to think and we have to question where the wisdom has gone that is lost in so much knowledge, and where is the knowledge that we have lost to a relentless flood of information?

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Our brains are primed to analyse what's going on around us. We are gluttons for any information which either reinforces, or contradicts, something which is already important to us. Information sorted through and related to other ideas makes us knowledgeable and we became the kind of people who do well in a Quiz Night. Knowledge is to such people organized information. Wisdom, however, is something different. Wisdom is the capacity to know what knowledge you need to bring to bear on a particular kind of problem. Wisdom implies the knowledge is being used within some clearly understood structure. Wisdom is knowledge thoughtfully applied.

What we do with the knowledge we accumulate depends very much on our motives. We can be excessively competitive, as well as disarmingly altruistic. We refine weapons of mass destruction with as much ease as we develop the technologies of modern medicine. We can be surprisingly energetic – yet disconcertingly lazy. We can be extraordinarily thoughtful, yet we have an almost infinite appetite for distraction as is well known to the pro-

ducers of TV advertisements. Deferred gratification is not a skill that is easily acquired. It was perhaps easier four hundred or so years ago when there was not so much information to handle and when our minds were less like the butterflies that they tend to be today.

In the late 1500s a surprisingly large number of people read a lot, for an average of two books a year were sold to each of the four and a quarter million people living in England. Across the Atlantic a hundred years later ninety-four percent of the population in Massachusetts were literate and most read a weekly newspaper<sup>1</sup>. Reading was an essential means of keeping in touch. Unhurried, meandering people have time “to chew over an idea”, to go down possible alternative routes, and share conclusions with their neighbours. Only with the invention of the locomotive in the 1820s was it possible for man to travel faster than a racehorse.

Our ancestors did not trouble themselves much with long-term thinking (the future was, they thought quite literally, in God's hands), and what was

out of sight was certainly out of mind. So inured have we become by the artificial world of television that, during the early days of the Iraq War in 2003, some American viewers were said to have mistaken the nightly news bulletins from Baghdad for another episode of the epic film "Saving Private Ryan". It is all too easy for reality and fiction to become dangerously mixed up.

When George Orwell looked into the future more than fifty years ago he feared the possibility of society being dominated by a Big Brother who would deprive individuals of their autonomy, maturity and history. "Nineteen eighty-four"<sup>2</sup> portrayed a chilling prospect. Somewhat earlier Aldus Huxley in "Brave New World"<sup>3</sup> proposed something even more sinister. Whereas Orwell saw whole populations controlled through censorship, Huxley feared that people could be lulled into losing their critical faculties, and that the truth would simply be drowned out in a sea of irrelevant information. Huxley saw future societies so preoccupied with triviality that it had no idea where they were going. Neil Postman's "Amusing Ourselves to Death"<sup>4</sup> was a frighteningly perceptive analysis of how contemporary society actually, in the mid 1980s, seemed to be rushing headlong into just such a brave new world where people were so addicted to the technologies that they had lost the capacity to think for themselves, and had forgotten their history.

Neither Orwell nor Huxley could have imagined the scale of information that early twenty-first century citizens are now dealing with, nor could either of them have anticipated the array of fascinating distractions now available 24/7, constantly competing for our time. Neither of these writers, nor our Stone Age ancestors, had to consider the implications of life-extend-

ing drugs and therapies which would compete for the resources needed for the education of the next generation. Have we become too clever for our own individual good, but not yet wise enough to ensure our collective survival?

*Wisdom Beyond  
Knowledge*