

COMPLETE LIBERTY INSIDE OUT

**Honoring Yourself and
Others for Optimal
Enrichment**

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To the late psychologists Nathaniel Branden and Marshall
Rosenberg, who were my long-distance mentors.

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Introduction

My previous book *Complete Liberty* concerned the basics of our dire political predicament in America, as well as elsewhere; as goes Pax Americana, so goes the rest of the world. It explored the main problems with, and some of the reasons for, our distinct lack of freedom, as well as the solution of voluntaryism, or complete liberty. Yet from a psychological standpoint, the first book didn't really explore the heart of the matter. So, in this second book about complete liberty, in addition to revisiting many philosophical topics, we'll especially delve as deeply as possible into the psychological realm, in order to comprehend the full context. Ultimately, freedom is an inside job.

I began the Complete Liberty Podcast in 2008, a year after publishing the first book. Since then, I've covered many important topics on the show concerning why we don't have complete liberty and, more importantly, how we can go about achieving it. While many of these vital topics didn't make it into the first book, they're definitely in this one.

As covered extensively on the podcast, childhood experiences prove to be key to political philosophy. The misfortunes, misunderstandings, conflicts, and other painful things that we experienced as children tend to have many parallels in our adult lives and in societies across the globe, which are awfully upsetting, frustrating, disappointing, and painful. This book can help us to breathe deeply and open a compassionate space for ourselves and others about these parallels.

Essentially, we can realize the connections between our present and past environments. Nearly all the harsh communication and violent conflict in the world represent the expressions of unprocessed, or unresolved, trauma from our childhoods. My dear friend Matt (<http://deadeasylyfe.com>) from southern California has a penchant for pithy acronyms, and on this topic he notes that we ASK (Acquire Self-Knowledge) because we ACT (Always Communicate Trauma). This book includes the various reasons why we have childhood trauma and, most importantly, how we can deal with it in healing ways. We'll explore how

to free ourselves from cycles of the painful past and change in profoundly enriching ways.

So, we'll cover in significant detail the various aspects of what complete liberty involves from both a psychological and societal perspective. Much of this has also been explored on the podcast, particularly from episode 126 (the introduction to nonviolent communication) onward. The "inside out" aspect of complete liberty relates to acquiring explicit knowledge of our psychological world, which the first chapter defines and reflects on.

With a perspective of honesty and empathy, we'll inspect the detrimental aspects of our culture, the disturbing "elephants in the room" with which we're all too familiar. To know and experience a world of freedom means to fully accept and understand the presently unfree dynamics of coercion and obedience to so-called authority. These dynamics diminish the value and practice of self-responsibility. So, the second chapter empirically examines various mental shackles, which really hinder us from living well.

The third chapter scrutinizes domination systems in the family and the culture. We'll start with our experiences as children in the family system and explore in lengthy psychological detail the ways we were treated quite differently than as adults. Politics is the quintessential domination system, and we'll learn that it exists mainly as a manifestation of upbringings that weren't respectful of our needs. Getting what one wants via "power-over" strategies is a costly but common process in both familial and political systems. We'll discover why, as a species and as individuals, we've tended to view coercion—i.e., threats of force to get people to do things and punish them when they don't do what's demanded—as somehow useful.

The fourth chapter investigates more of the nature of childhood, for it remains the crucial part of our history that sets the stage for our adult lives. All of us have memories of our youth, however sketchy or incomplete. Following from our deep exploration of childhood experiences with parents in the previous chapter, we'll step out of the conventional notions of what constitutes a "good parent" versus a "bad parent." Such labels can keep us mired in the costly status quo. Grasping the essentials of childhood entails relating them to the nature of being a parent and/or being parented. So, we'll identify key aspects of parenting,

which concern every person, in order to determine how we can truly flourish.

The fifth chapter delves psychologically and empirically into the nature of learning, which is essentially the quest for self-mastery and understanding more and more of our inner and outer worlds. Applying these essentials amidst the common view of education can be quite challenging, since traditional pedagogy (aka, schooling) tends to be the opposite of what's really helpful for individuals. Intrinsic motivation proves indispensable in this process.

The sixth chapter covers the nature of self-esteem and why it's such a vital need for human beings. No other creature on this planet has this need, because it's based on our self-awareness and reasoning ability, and we'll learn what we can do to fulfill it without costs. The practices of self-acceptance, self-empathy, and self-compassion are integral to healing ourselves from harmful or dysfunctional processes and systems.

The seventh chapter explains the ethical notions of selfishness and sacrifice, questioning their various assumptions. We'll learn that sacrifice, as both an idea and practice, causes lots of confusion and pain, personally and societally. This part of the book also makes explicit what's been mostly implicit throughout: the methodology and vocabulary of nonviolent communication (NVC), as devised by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg. NVC educates us in making clear observations without evaluating or opinion-giving, identifying and expressing feelings without moralistic judgment, recognizing our universal needs underlying our feelings and, finally, making practical or doable requests (instead of demands) for self and others in order to make our lives more wonderful.

In the developmental process of cultivating a connected and compassionate consciousness, we go from being relatively unskilled, to awakening, to capable, to integrated. The human mind takes time to transition from our typical family and cultural training of non-integration and disconnection to one of needs-fulfilling integration, which we'll learn about in detail.

The eighth chapter explores the explicitly peaceful philosophy of voluntaryism and how it can foster and keep a world of free-thinking, authentic and connected, happy adults and children. The nature of complete political liberty is a free marketplace in which trust in self and trust in others are the norms, rather than the exceptions. Currently prevalent practices of retribution and injustice can be replaced with

restorative practices of empathy and justice, so people in communities can be safe, resourceful, and versed in both resolving conflict in win/win ways and helping people flourish.

The ninth and last chapter examines what promotes the aforementioned ideas and practices (i.e., memes), so that we can transform our society into one that facilitates genuine self-expression and beneficial contribution. So, we'll deal with the nature of change itself, and we'll delve into the future and imagine what's possible. The future can look ever brighter for us, when we facilitate a mental shift in ourselves and others toward embracing life-enriching changes. Such changes can be embraced on a daily basis, which can be extraordinarily transformative. Change that enables us to heal and grow need not be daunting, or something feared and avoided at nearly any cost. For this reason alone, the coercive and disconnected status quo need not remain so.

Thank you for embarking on this inner journey and exploring these vital ideas with me. And many thanks to my dear friends and reviewers with "giraffe ears" of the preliminary manuscript: Zeke Woods, Katie Testa, Scott Banfield, Jason Hofacker, and Mary Vandenberg. I'm grateful for our friendship over the years, and your input helped me make this book even more psychologically connected and integrated. Thanks also to Michael J. Ross for helping to put the finishing touches on the final draft.

Chapter 1

The unseen internal world

Knowing thyself

We experience life. That's incontrovertible, even if we believe that this life is not the only one we'll experience, or that it's an incredibly complex simulation devised by a super-intelligent extra-terrestrial life form. Regardless of these beliefs, we experience life. And what are the essential qualities, or characteristics, of human life? This seems a simple question, because it's easy to look around and notice life happening. Whether we're in a city or in a rural place, we're constantly doing things, volitionally or subconsciously or unconsciously. Oftentimes, many people and related material things are also involved in this process.

We can readily see other creatures doing myriad things as well, trying to sustain their lives on this planet, from spiders in blades of grass to birds soaring on wind currents. Indeed, our experience of the outer world is our primary connection to our own processes of living. We learn about life by interacting with the world, shaping our rational understanding with our empirical encounters. Seeing, touching, hearing, smelling, and tasting are the basic senses upon which we build vast knowledge. A sense of balance and other bodily senses prove invaluable too. Our lives of course rely on these things in order to flourish.

We're essentially tasked with using our various faculties to sustain our existence. Most of us, at varying points in time, work with others directly in employment or self-employment, and some of us live on passive income or stores of wealth. To the degree that we aren't economic islands unto ourselves, we trade with others for goods and services that we want and need, which others are willing to provide for a price, all once again in order to survive and flourish. Lots of bartering and gifting also take place, as do myriad self-sustaining and self-maintaining actions.

Aside from productive work itself, we also spend time doing many other things that make our lives more enjoyable. We engage in creative side-projects and have interesting and fun hobbies. We recreate, play, and exercise. We relax. We celebrate and party too. We do these things to have more fulfilling lives, assuring ourselves that life is *really worth* the effort. And, as a profound theme throughout, we enrich our lives a great deal by relating with others we value and who value us.

Many of these things, of course, other creatures don't do. Sure, other mammals for instance often relax and play, but they also just live without meaningful celebration or reflection. Species besides humans don't ponder the nature of their lives as mortal beings either, and they don't doubt their perceptions, their capabilities, and their worth. Rather, they just go about living, be they squirrels in a park or the trillions of bacterial cells on us and inside us. By the way, did you know that the vast majority of our body's cells are bacteria? Because these prokaryotic cells are much smaller than the eukaryotic cells comprising our various tissues, we tend to overlook their immense numbers.

Our outer world consists of a lot of things that may become ordinary to us over time. This is also part of being human; our immense abstraction ability enables us to lose sight of the big picture and not live very mindfully. Also, what we can possibly attend to in our lives is quite small in comparison to all the things out there. In our highly connected digital world, we are immersed in an incredibly vast amount of information. We can integrate only a small fraction of it, of course, and we dismiss the rest, or maybe we set some of it aside for a later date—though such queues themselves can become overwhelming.

To determine what's essential amidst all the interesting stuff can be quite a challenge. For example, over a hundred hours of videos are uploaded to YouTube.com every *minute*. And now, largely on account of the relative ease of self-publishing, millions of books are published every year, and millions of apps are available for mobile and desktop computers. Granted, the quality of many of these products isn't exactly what we may be looking for (amusing cat videos can only take us so far), but each of us can only make use of a tiny fraction of these things anyway. Imagine if we considered them all high-quality and interesting things!

Many years ago, the sum total of human knowledge used to be doubling every seven years, but now it's doubling easily less than every

year. Wikipedia has millions of pages, each dedicated to expressing and expanding our knowledge of practically every aspect of reality. In the midst of all this, our inner world remains a major and incomparable part of the vast realm of our life experiences. Despite so many things vying for our attention all around us every day, our finite minds have an amazing capacity to focus on significant philosophical and psychological aspects. Indeed, within our inner world are the crucial aspects of reality that determine our happiness and flourishing. Even though this world isn't as tangible as the world around us, if we can become intimate with it, we can reshape our lives and change practically everything for the better.

Perhaps the most tragic thing to beset our reasoning species, and to beset each of us as individual persons, is to flounder in our inner world, adrift in a mostly hidden sea of contradictions and anguish. We certainly don't want to voyage on such a hazardous sea throughout our lives. We need hope of finding some safe refuge, or at least some calm times away from the storms. The ideas in this book are intended to serve us extremely well in these profound matters. As vital navigational instruments, they can guide us to stable new shores within ourselves, as well as to absolutely wonderful new places both internally and externally.

The memes of our culture are desperately in need of addressing from the inside out. The "soft" science of psychology has discovered quite a lot about our inner world, especially over the last hundred years, since it's been a field of study in its own right, separate from philosophy. Neuroscience, given its presently insufficient measurement tools, is still in the process of relating to psychology in a comprehensive and comprehensible way; many of its conclusions tend to be works in progress.

Psychology is a way to explain the experiences of our consciousness and how our behavior is tied to them. This pertains to many things, of course, but essentially the following aspects prevail in our minds: images, which are creations of "the mind's eye" stemming from visual and tactile perceptual input; thoughts and beliefs, which are abstract patterns or associations, categories or conceptual frameworks tied to our vocabulary, experiences, emotions, and belief systems; emotions, which are evaluations that are mostly subconscious assessments yet also conscious ones, based on what we deem to be serving and not serving our lives and values; feelings, which can be

synonymous with emotions and are triggered by underlying physical and psychological needs in addition to super-rapid subconscious assessments (that in retrospect can be identified as thoughts); and lastly, memories, which can be all of the above, stored in neuronal structures and processes.

Essentially, human consciousness identifies things in existence, i.e., distinguishes their identity, and it evaluates their nature, especially in terms of being a value or danger. The nature of our inner world stems from its complexity, in how it all relates to and interacts with our internal and external worlds, which of course includes relating to and interacting with other selves. Again, psychology is a soft science in the sense that not all of these things can be exactly quantified, measured precisely by observers external to what's happening. Sometimes our subjective experiences also might be at odds with what we can discover objectively—such as an apparent bend in a stick when put in water, or a mirage in the distance on a hot day, or a belief in ghosts, despite the nonexistence of ghosts.

Even though we might not be able to measure our inner happenings in ways that hard sciences like physics or chemistry do, we can nonetheless make sense of them in comprehensible ways. We can identify, describe, and express qualities or characteristics conceptually that reveal the reality of our inner world. The challenge arises in how best to understand ourselves and, by extension, understand others.

If you open a psychology textbook, you'll likely discover a variety of models concerning how the mind functions. Any *Theories Of Personality* textbook is thick enough to make you wonder who is on the correct path of understanding. Regardless of which model is most accurate and useful, we tend to go with what makes intuitive sense, based on a preponderance of evidence. Indeed, our intuition, which is basically our connection to past integrated experiences, conceptually and emotionally, helps us interpret a lot of things in our daily activities.

Yet sometimes our intuition gives us only breadcrumbs of understanding, perhaps just enough to get by, or enough to get us into trouble, leading us away from a helpful path. As humans, we do find rules of thumb, or heuristics, quite useful despite their potential pitfalls in certain contexts, as researchers Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have noted in numerous studies of social psychology. [1] Psychologist Dan Ariely's book *Predictably Irrational* exposes some stunning evidence

of biased judgment, when we make decisions without much deliberative thought or grasp of our preferences. [2] This research indicates that the more aware we are of our capacity to overlook things and make misguided choices—i.e., the more understanding we have of our cognitive/emotional limitations and potential biases—the more effective we can be with our mental processes, or at least we can avoid being blind to various mental hazards. In many respects, the more awareness we bring to our inner world, the greater our capacity to make optimal choices for ourselves. And objectivity via the scientific method remains in reach when we try to falsify claims and assumptions.

When we inspect what's going on inside our craniums with our minds, we tend to find a multifaceted array of aspects of consciousness, presenting a sort of kaleidoscope of potential insights and interpretations. Given our quite complex and dynamic inner worlds, perhaps many people meditate and do yoga in order to find more harmony in such complex mental activity.

Evolutionary biology and neuroscience inform us that the adaptive nature of the brain is to connect evolutionary parts together in order for it to function in a seemingly integrated manner, ensuring survival. Our substantial cerebral cortex, limbic system, and various other subcortical regions have a dizzying array of interconnections and feedback loops, numbering in the billions and even trillions. The human brain is a massively parallel processor that's always doing many things in many ways on account of its complexity of pathways.

The unconscious and subconscious aspects of our minds can play considerable roles in our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Due to the fact that so many automatized processes ("zombie programs") are constantly running in the background of our minds, giving rise to and supporting all sorts of experiences and behaviors, the following question arises: What exactly *is* one's self? Some neuroscientists, such as Sam Harris, have even made a case that "free will is an illusion," albeit a somewhat useful one. This view, while not uncommon among brain researchers, is more controversial in philosophical circles, and even some psychological ones.

Indeed, volition is an aspect of our minds as much as memory is. We have a conscious experience of being at the helm of our own ship, so to speak; we have a sense of self that's capable of weighing options and making informed and deliberate choices. Our sense of self arises from

interactions of various highly interconnected regions of the brain; research now indicates that these particular interactions probably extend beyond just the medial prefrontal and anterior/posterior cingulate cortical regions.

Our choices are largely dependent on what's in our scope of awareness, of course. The brain constantly calculates options among an array of possibilities, in order to make a selection, experienced as a decision. As neuroscience and psychology both note, subconscious and unconscious brain processes can take the helm much of the time. These automatized processes have been shaped via learning experiences that began in early childhood. As we'll explore in upcoming chapters, mental and physical trauma can enable self-destructive patterns; it can hinder our ability to make informed and healthy choices. This is why living consciously, striving to increase our level of awareness, is so key to flourishing as conceptual and emotional beings.

Granted, to become mindful of our internal world is also a choice—a choice that provides for a lifetime of healing and growth, which truly sets us on paths to experience happiness and freedom. The less awareness we bring to what's going on inside us, which includes processes that might be running counter to our conscious convictions or professed beliefs, the less resourcefulness and responsiveness we can attain. Without awareness of our inner possibilities, our range of selection becomes more constrained, or limited. Even though a lot of our calculations and assessments are made below conscious, explicit awareness, as research on decision-making reveals, we can become mindful of causes and consequences, in order to make choices that are more useful and helpful for optimal functioning.

Compatibilism is the view of consciousness and its volitional aspect that the mind is what the brain does, while still keeping the mind in mind and honoring the conscious process of making choices. Undoubtedly, brain research will continue to provide more details about the neural correlates of consciousness. In the process researchers will rely on their own minds' awareness to gain more insight. Understanding our inner world entails understanding the phenomenology of consciousness, which concerns the *psychology* of how our minds work. This is the lens with which we'll explore the inside aspects of ourselves, to in a sense bring them outside for full inspection.

Still, we are faced with a supreme challenge here: to foster a stable and secure sense of self even as we encounter new truths that might trigger discomfort, at the very least. This book seeks to reveal significant truths about the self, which might be dormant in one's own psyche. As psychologist Carl Rogers noted in his book *On Becoming A Person*, the first stage of self-understanding seeks to remain in the status quo, with the perspective that everything about self is just fine, thank you very much—so, let's simply live! [3] In other words, self-reflection (to say nothing of honoring one's true-self) might be viewed as something that only allegedly weak or strange people do. Non-introspection is favored in this stage, which can tragically persist for an entire lifetime, on account of choosing not to address the perceived dangers within the psyche. Obviously, in the quest to protect the self, this is the psychologically rigid and emotionally remote end of the continuum of self-reflection. Rogers detailed six other stages involving the processes of gradually increasing awareness, self-awakening, and integration of oneself. It's my vital hope that *all* of us will strive for as much self-discovery and self-understanding as possible, so that we can be most aware of, and thus most capable of, making the freest choices for ourselves, while honoring the freest choices of others.

Another challenge is that the vast continent of consciousness tends to remain one of the most uncharted territories for us. Given the high level of cultural discouragement, for too many persons it's a thick jungle that turns away all but the most intrepid or determined persons from inner exploration. For too many persons, it has various well-worn paths on which to venture, along with a wariness of straying from them, let alone straying too far, because "too far" might affect one's sense of self and possibly fragile connections with others and the world. And, of course, these well-worn paths represent our culture.

As we progress in the following chapters, we'll discover why it's so difficult to blaze new trails in our minds about so many crucially important things. We'll also discover how we can re-imagine the nature of our minds, so that we can realize so much more of our potential.

Mental freedom, in brief

What does mental freedom mean to you? Whether you've had the opportunity to explicitly ponder that question, you've definitely had

thoughts and feelings about it. Granted, if we were one of the many billions of people who don't have consistent access to basic sanitation, plumbing, electricity, and other things that the developed world takes for granted, then we'd have more immediate concerns. Despite humans' general absence of political freedom on the planet, our situation in the developed world does indeed provide us the opportunity to ponder what being mentally free means.

In essential terms, political freedom and mental freedom both entail having the capacity of choice, the motivation to exercise this capacity, and then choosing as one sees fit without coercive influences. In the mental realm freedom entails feeling empowered to operate one's mind and person in an efficacious manner, as one desires, without any debilitating aspects, such as contradictory beliefs, agonizing inner conflict or emotional torment, or an unrelenting "inner critic" or automatic negative thoughts from the subconscious—all of which can express themselves in self-destructive behaviors, or self-worth-denying addictions. Distorted thinking about self-concept tends to enter our minds from a very early age, unfortunately, during our attempts to make sense of ourselves in relation to others. We'll explore this in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Mental freedom also pertains to having the flexibility to shift focus and to attend to whatever we want, without being distracted by other motivations, such as obsessing or stressing or being compelled to do something. It means being at peace with our mental processes, rather than being in conflict, at war with ourselves. It means practicing self-empathy and self-compassion. It also means having resilience, which includes emotional resilience. This entails being able to process emotions in a natural, authentic, adaptive, self-accepting way, so that they're given the respect necessary to be recognized and to flow through us, instead of remaining unidentified and leading us down more troubled paths.

Thus, what mental freedom means is more than just how many choices are in the realm of our material existence. It means really being comfortable with one's sense of self, being at ease and secure within one's own mind and body. As we take into account the past and present input being processed from various subconscious and emotional perspectives within ourselves, as we reflect on the multifaceted nature of the human mind, we can appreciate what an achievement mental freedom is. Psychologist Nathaniel Branden noted that each of us has a "sage-self," a

centered and balanced part that's fully present to our experiences and can handle any and all challenges with a sense of realism, empathy, wisdom, and resourcefulness. The sage-self is able sustain us in so many healthy ways, and it gets strengthened as we become more integrated internally. It knows that we are more than our emotional difficulties at any given time, however pressing they may be, as they reverberate strongly through us.

The observant part of ourselves, the one that's attuned to our present-moment experiences, offers us a path to true enlightenment and enrichment. Of course, it can be sometimes scary to realize just how much we depend on ourselves for our own fulfillment, because it entails fully accepting our self-responsibility too. True integration also means pursuing and embracing self-knowledge, which entails processing doubt, fear, and pain.

Think of when you were a child exploring something fascinating or experiencing something thrilling or delightful. We can also embody this mindset as a way of life as adults. In fact, it's the birthright of each of us, despite what hurt or sadness we've endured, are enduring, or will endure. Hurt and sadness are inevitable facets of life, of course, but they are by no means the only ones. Life doesn't have to be about suffering or sacrifice, despite what the culture generally promotes and despite what we might have learned, and normalized, in childhood. Indeed, we can think differently, or think different (whether or not we're Mac fans).

Expectations of obedience and conformity in our culture exact a heavy toll. They become normalized and almost reflexive, as we'll see in the next chapter. Our sense of both inner and outer freedom consequently declines a great deal; then, we're supposed to identify with doubt, fear, and pain instead. So, to keep a stable and secure sense of self to entail more mental effort, which can contribute to suffering as well, unless the paradigm is changed.

Chapter 2

Mental shackles fashioned from inside and outside

The opposite of mental freedom is mental enslavement, which sadly reflects the main condition of our present culture. Whenever we conform against our better judgment or wishes, we lose some mental freedom. Whenever we surrender our autonomy and choice, even for survival purposes, our sense of mental enslavement increases. Again, freedom concerns our capacity to choose, based on our range and depth of knowledge, as well as key external factors.

Conformity and obedience are forms of mental enslavement that have been widely recognized and researched. One study that readily comes to mind (with many others stemming from it) is by psychologist Stanley Milgram, which first took place at Yale University in 1961. [4] The obedience studies done by Milgram in the 1960s and '70s involved the administration of shocks by volunteer subjects, the so-called teachers, to "learners" who were also volunteers. The subjects were told that the experiments were supposed to determine whether such shocks would facilitate learning, even though the actual reason was to determine the average person's disposition toward perceived authority, following orders, and being obedient to the point of aggression. Many subjects chose to do harm instead of stop when admonished by an authority figure to continue giving shocks, especially when in an assumed trusted and safe experimental environment (such as Yale University).

Outside the confines of such experiments, we can readily see militaristic command-and-control hierarchies that give rise to countless incidents of soldiers following orders from individuals of "higher rank" to harm others. Of course, these actions are typically in battlefield situations in which the explicit concept of enemy is involved, thereby advancing a mental and existential framework to inflict harm on others. Given this framework, soldiers are supposed to obey commands rather

than rely entirely on their own independent value judgments; doing the latter might cause the military system to fall apart, after all, as soldiers could refrain from perpetrating various acts demanded of them without incurring punishment. Whether in an experimental design or in the real world, following orders can entail relying on the judgments of a perceived authority figure while dismissing internal checks of conscience, which can result in decisions to inflict harm.

Milgram's experiments involved giving shocks of increasing intensity to a supposed learner in another room, who was a stooge for the experimenter and not really receiving shocks, whenever he made an error in the learning process. Again, the experiment was voluntary, meaning that the "teacher" and the "learner" were told that they could quit at any time without penalty. However, whenever a teacher became reluctant to administer shocks, due to protests and even screams of the learner, the experimenter firmly stated that it was essential to continue the experiment. This perceived authority figure in a lab coat escalated the "prods" in the following way to get compliance: "Please continue"; "The experiment requires that you continue"; "It is absolutely essential that you continue"; "You have no other choice, you must go on." And when the teacher expressed concern for the learner's well-being and protests, the experimenter stated the following: "Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on"; and, "Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly. So please go on." [4]

Of course, these orders were designed to counteract any reservations in the teachers' minds about the harmful nature of their actions. Even though the participants were not being coerced to participate, they were still being told to continue the experiment. Why must they continue? Well, because the "authority" said so, and because he wanted the experiment to be completed, according to the policies of the institution. Another salient factor was that the teachers were assured that they would not bear responsibility for the results, which again reminded them that they weren't in charge. Given this assurance, most of the participants continued the shocks—many to the point of what they were informed were supposedly lethal levels.

Such conformity experiments and others similar to them demonstrate that doing "what is right" can be a quite contextual matter: It depends on the circumstances and the perceived role of self-

responsibility. We know that when boundaries of consensual activity are crossed, empathy for others disappears too. Using force against or injuring another person is tragically the core of this process. In these shock experiments, the teachers disregarded learners' cries of protest against further participation, even to the point of ostensibly shocking them to death.

Milgram conducted surveys prior to the study to discover what his psychological and psychiatric colleagues predicted about the degree of obedience that subjects would exhibit. Nearly all of them predicted that only a tiny fraction of the subjects would proceed to the harmful stages of shocking learners. Unfortunately, their conjectures were dashed by the experimental results—Milgram's subjects evidenced such high degrees of obedience that 50-60% of them proceeded to the very end of the voltage spectrum, marked ostensibly lethal "XXX."

Upon analysis, Milgram noted four factors as decisive in influencing each subject's degree of obedience: the emotional closeness of the learner to the teacher; the proximity and perceived legitimacy of the experimenter; the absence or presence of a dissenting observer; and (to a lesser extent), the general reputation and prestige of the institution where the experiment occurred. Regarding the last factor, in some studies that were done outside usual places of alleged reputation and prestige, subjects conformed to nearly the same levels. Milgram's experiments and many subsequent ones have demonstrated that, unless someone is nearby who dissents and refuses to support the process, most people will tend to go with the program. When someone outspokenly deviates from the harmful norm, the conscience of others tends to be activated, which can radically diminish the amount of compliance.

In the realm of "just following orders," the element of responsibility is indeed key. Both inside and outside the realm of experimental designs, we humans tend to lose our empathy and be obedient in following orders to harm others when we don't perceive ourselves as being fully responsible for our actions and their results. After all, the experimenter in Milgram's studies told teachers that the procedure was safe and that, although the shocks were painful, they "would do no permanent damage," which was in contradiction to the learners' cries of protest concerning excruciating pain and of course the "XXX" level. So, in this environment the teachers were given the opportunity to disregard their conscience, disinhibit themselves, and

dehumanize the learners being shocked. Circumstances of this sort can make it much more difficult to take conscientious actions that honor the well-being of everyone involved.

The chain of command: who is actually responsible?

In 1978 a study was done to determine the interpretations of responsibility in obedience. Researchers put subjects into a mock jury simulation to explore the trial of Lt. Calley. This trial concerned the real military case of a massacre of unarmed civilians in My Lai during the Vietnam War by U.S. soldiers, who had been given orders to do so by Lt. Calley.

Not only had the Lieutenant given the orders to attack, but he also participated in it. So, it was difficult for him to avoid responsibility for the atrocity, though he could of course claim that a “superior” had given him the initial orders. V. Lee Hamilton (head of the study) referred to it as a “crime of obedience” and commented on this situation in the following way:

“Authorities can certainly be said to have causal responsibility for a subordinate’s acts that they may order. They also have a role responsibility for those acts and indeed a role responsibility for overseeing action that goes beyond what they specifically order. They are both the authors of action and the overseers of actors. Reciprocally, the actors who are their subordinates physically cause deeds that they are ordered to do, and they act intentionally. But they do so in response to a role duty and with the expectation that the authority has the responsibility (in the sense of liability) for any bad outcomes. To do what they are told is both something they must do to stay in role and something they ought to do as a role occupant.” (p. 128) [5]

To view obedience like this, which is common in military situations, really provides a way for the actors *not* to take full responsibility for their choices and actions. It tends to confuse the issue of who is responsible for an action—the one who ordered or enforced it, the one who did it, or both? Such ambiguity is part and parcel of notions of allegedly “collective” responsibility in systems of hierarchy and

domination, wherein the volitional agency of each individual becomes minimized.

Moreover, if some human beings are treated like attack dogs, we can practically expect the harmful aftermath. Of course, two types of responsibility are generally deduced from such situations: responsibility ascribed to the giver of commands and self-responsibility for one's own actions. If one is following the former type, then one is still relying on the commander's degree of self-responsibility. All actions therefore depend on self-responsibility.

Reasoning beings by definition are voluntary agents of their own behavior. Our voluntary agency, or volition, exists in the context of the multifaceted unconscious aspects of brain functioning, as we explored previously, which some might contend takes a degree of agency away. Yet "obedience" implies conforming to another's commands with indifference to, or in disregard of, one's personal integrity and values. Essentially, when we're obedient, we attempt to surrender our self-responsibility to another's self-responsibility, which we deem preferable in some way, such as to gain favor or to avoid accountability and punishment.

To follow another person's or institution's directives without question can severely undermine our sense of self-responsibility, because it entails sacrifice of our own autonomy and sense of agency. Basically, to forfeit self-responsibility means to defer one's own critical thinking process to another's (or to some intangible group), which runs counter to one's *own* independent functioning.

In the jury simulation study that was conducted by Hamilton, subjects deemed the "superior" who gave the orders to be significantly more responsible than the soldiers themselves. They cited the fact that he was the key causal factor in the incident, via his orders. Hamilton advised that strong sympathy for the subordinates by the subjects may have resulted from the authoritarian military atmosphere of the case. This again exposed the ambiguous meaning of responsibility in a culture of widespread normalization of conformity.

In a 1986 survey designed to assess how typical citizens understood the meaning of responsibility in hierarchical situations, Hamilton set out once more to decipher the nature of responsibility. In the introduction he noted that, historically, those in the fields of law and psychology have viewed the superior who gives directives as most

responsible for the actions of the subordinate. The particular role-obligations of the superior are evidenced in “The legal principle of *respondeat superior*, ‘let the superior answer.’” (p. 120) [6]

Interestingly, Hamilton remarked that oftentimes the greater the obligatory role of the authority, the more murky the issue of responsibility becomes. Subjects in this survey attributed on average the most responsibility to individuals like Lt. Calley, who were neither solely a distant authority nor solely an obedient soldier. Subjects’ ambiguity concerning responsibility became apparent here: They figured that they cannot err by picking a man most involved in both ends of the chain of command. Of special note is that among the 391 Boston area subjects in his study, the most educated ones on average attributed more personal responsibility to the soldiers. In Hamilton’s words these “...results suggest that education promotes independence from authority...” (p. 137)

Yet, such independence from perceived authority took place in the controlled conditions of a study. If we instead shift focus to our present-day society, we can see an example that seems to conflict with Hamilton’s conjecture. The level of conformity to orders from those in government tended to be quite high across the entire population of Boston in the aftermath of the 2013 Marathon bombing. Unfortunately in times of crisis, self-responsibility in the populace can wane amidst the decrees of perceived authorities in government—i.e., those trained to exercise their judgment over countless others. So, perhaps education alone isn’t the main factor in independence from perceived authority. Boston was turned into a veritable paramilitary police zone, due to the mandate for people to “shelter in place” while the search for the bombing suspects took place. Such lockdowns tend to be viewed by most people as beneficial in times of crisis, even though they come at the expense of people’s property rights and freedom to do their normal activities. In this case, despite all the searching by paramilitary police, a *resident* noticed one of the suspects hiding in his boat.

The nature of giving and following orders

As we know, we can attribute varying degrees of responsibility to ourselves and others within chains-of-command (and thus chains-of-obedience) systems. Oftentimes, the actor and the commander (or perceived authority figure) have differing notions of who is actually

accountable for the particular action. Based on this phenomenon, other psychological studies have examined how roles of responsibility are assumed when obedient actions are carried out.

One study similar in method to the Milgram experiment was designed in 1974 to determine exactly how much responsibility subjects would attribute to themselves in administering shocks to others. When subjects assumed different roles in the “learning” experiment, either transmitter (the one who relays the message) or executant (the one who gives the shocks to the learner), researchers Wesley Kilham and Leon Mann found that the transmitter felt less responsible. They wrote:

“The transmitter is in a relatively ‘safe’ place psychologically; he can disclaim responsibility for the orders and can argue that he had no part in their execution. The transmitter can argue or rationalize that his highly specialized part in the act was only of a trivial, mechanical nature.” (p. 697) [7]

Of course, all the so-called learning experiments we’ve covered so far (as well as the ones that follow) involve inflicting shocks on a learner by a subject who *believes* that they are real shocks. Additionally, the participants always consisted of only those subjects who chose to remain in the experiment after being told that they are free to leave, without penalty, if they disagree with the procedure or find it uncomfortable. So, invariably, these studies may end up with a biased sample consisting of those who agree to follow orders, even if those orders lead to harming others.

However, given the general culture in America that’s oriented toward blaming, shaming, and punishing, it appears that experimenters didn’t have any trouble obtaining subjects in their screening process, which evidences the fact that the average participant didn’t find such a punitive learning experiment objectionable. And again, the rigid and formal manner of interaction in these experiments likely fostered an atmosphere not psychologically conducive to defiance by subjects. They all agreed to participate in an experiment apparently designed and controlled by professionals, as noted by researchers Kilham and Mann. Similar to most situations that involve high degrees of conformity, persons can lose sight of the significance of personal integrity, among other values, and empathy.

Kilham and Mann also designed a control group that was allowed to choose any level of shock they wanted in order to “teach” the learner. This was in contrast to the typically required ascending level of shock voltage for each incorrect response by a so-called learner. Statistically, the control group’s level of obedience was significantly less than each of the four experimental groups. Although the highest level of obedience (i.e., following through with the highest intensity shocks) by a group of executants was not as high as subjects in some of Milgram’s studies (upwards of 65 percent), obedience was still quite high at 40 percent. While the experimental groups sometimes proceeded from moderate, to strong, to very strong, to intense, and on to extreme intensity and danger (severe shock levels, despite the learner’s cries of protest), the control group never moved beyond the first stages of moderate shock intensity. This indicates the importance of having a sense of control over, and responsibility for, one’s actions.

True to form, all groups showed significantly higher levels of obedience in the transmitter position (the one giving the message to shock) than in the executant position (the one who shocks the learner). This indicates, once again, that the person telling another person to do something typically assumes less responsibility for the consequences of an action than if the orderer were to take that action on his or her own. In our own personal experiences outside the research room, we know that psychological distance can be fostered when we’re not the ones performing the action in question—and we tend to value this distance when the actions cause harm or come at serious cost.

Perspectives on self-responsibility

A familiar term in the realm of social psychology is fundamental attribution error. It refers to the subjective perceptions of differences in the causes of behavior between the person acting and the person viewing that action. The person acting will generally attribute his or her own behavior as a reaction to or consequence of the environmental conditions, or given set of circumstances, while a person observing another’s action will typically attribute it to the actor’s personality or mental characteristics, including decisions.

An experiment was done in 1975 to assess this notion in regard to acts of obedience in a controlled setting. Researchers John Harvey, Ben

Harris, and Richard Barnes found that as the severity of the effects of the subject's obedient actions escalated—in this case the administration of harmful shocks (albeit pseudo)—he or she would attribute more of these effects to the situation. In turn, the observer of this behavior would attribute the effects more to the mindset of the subject, perceiving the subject (the actor) as more responsible than the subject would. The results of the study “...show a general tendency for actors to attribute more responsibility to the experimenter than do observers” (p. 25) and “...that in general observers attributed more freedom to actors than actors attributed to themselves.” (p. 26) [8]

Harvey et al. also noted that there seems to be a direct relationship between the amount of “perceived freedom” and the degree of felt responsibility (self-responsibility). In other words, as the subjects involved in the shock experiment saw their actions having increasingly disturbing consequences, they explained their behavior as being less volitionally free and more restricted by the conditions, or constraints, of the experiment.

Once again, we see how a decrease in perceived self-responsibility can happen amidst a situation of conformity, or perceived powerlessness. We can become obedient actors for others whose instructions might be on some psychological level questionable for us. When we are in a different context that lacks the supposed constraints of obedience (both mental and punishment-oriented), we may be more inclined to reject instructions that lead to harm—harm that includes denying that we have the capacity and freedom to choose. In other words, we side with our conscience, our concern for self and others' well-being. In line with fundamental attribution differences, however, when we're in aversive conditions, we'll typically perceive little freedom of choice. When hierarchically structured systems of interaction become the norm, they foster widespread following of “orders from above.”

Another thing that's involved in causing misattribution of one's own behavior is the level of dissonance, i.e., the degree to which one experiences a conflict between how one is acting and how one *prefers* to act (particularly in relation to present compliance-oriented conditions). Any degree of dissonance concerns a disparity between beliefs, as well as between beliefs and actions. As we have seen in the preceding studies, when persons engage in conduct that seems less than respectful of themselves and others, in the words of researchers Marc Riess and Barry

Schlenker they "...can try to excuse the behavior by denying responsibility for the consequences. This relieves them of accountability, potential punishment, and guilt." Additionally, "when aversive consequences follow an action that appears to have a reasonable likelihood of producing such consequences, justifications are needed." (p. 22) [9]

In their 1977 study "Attitude Change and Responsibility Avoidance as Modes of Dilemma Resolution in Forced-Compliance Situations," such observations held true. They also found that when observers ascribed accountability to subjects, subjects engaged in a change in attitude, which placed their own behavior in a different and better light. This further confirms the general psychological observation that, when involved in questionable behavior, we may try to appear less responsible or perhaps as causing harm only unintentionally, or accidentally.

Given that self-responsibility inescapably follows from our choice-making capacity, why do we tend *not* to take full responsibility when others, or even ourselves, disapprove of our actions? Well, this makes much more sense when we consider that as children we might've been punished (including ridiculed) when we really "owned" our actions. And when our parents didn't like what we did, perhaps we were subjected to what psychological researcher Alfie Kohn calls "love withdrawal" (from his book *Unconditional Parenting: Moving From Rewards And Punishments To Love And Reason*). [10] As conceptual creatures, we have a need for self-esteem, i.e., to view our minds as efficacious and to feel fundamentally worthy as persons. So, in addition to the unwanted consequences related to others, whenever we do something that seems to run counter to these profound aspects of self, we may experience feelings of anxiety, worry, alarm, shame, guilt, agony, and regret.

The challenge for us then becomes whether to acknowledge such feelings and connect with our needs underlying them, or simply to try to protect ourselves by not taking responsibility. Ultimately, our quality of psychological living depends on our strength of inner relationship. Various domination themes in our culture especially discourage us from attaining a high-quality psychological life; they disparage us and promote thoughts of our supposed "goodness" and/or "badness." Moralistic judgments tend to discourage us from honoring our need for

self-esteem via such practices as self-responsibility and self-acceptance (which is the topic of a later chapter).

Continuing with an empirical examination of the process of how we can avoid internalization of self-responsibility, another faux shock experiment was done in the 1980s to see if persons would behave differently in various roles. Researchers David Kipper and Dov Har-Even assigned one group of subjects to the “spontaneous group” (who were free to choose the level of shock administered) and one group to the “mimetic-pretend” group (who assumed the role of a teacher through instruction and imagination while delivering shocks). The fundamental difference in these two groups was the way in which their roles were emphasized. They both had to “teach” a so-called learner (albeit confederate, so he or she wasn’t actually being shocked), but the mimetic-pretend group was explicitly told to act like a teacher, focused on the business at hand, supposedly causing a greater task-oriented mood. This mood was presumed to lead to a decreased feeling and attribution of personal responsibility, whereas the spontaneous group would still be in a self-oriented mindset.

As we might expect, subjects in the mimetic-pretend group increased the intensity of shocks as the test proceeded, while members of the spontaneous group remained at a moderate level. Furthermore, those in the mimetic-pretend group attributed responsibility for the shocks to factors outside the self, while the spontaneous group focused more on personal responsibility. The researchers noted the following:

“It appears that casting a person in a mimetic-pretend role accelerates disinhibition processes, at least as far as the expression of aggressive behavior is concerned, and possibly also with regard to other types of conflicts, principally those that involve guilt feelings.” (p. 940) [\[11\]](#)

The focus was not particularly on how much conformity the experimenter could obtain from the subjects (like with Milgram’s studies), but rather on the kind of behavior exhibited in two different roles. The nature of the mimetic-pretend role led to escalated levels of aggression, thereby demonstrating once again that distancing oneself psychologically from one’s own actions (through a duty or role) contributes to the denial of self-responsibility.

Furthermore, assuming roles can obscure normal attributions of responsibility. Researchers Kipper and Har-Even found that although the mimetic-pretend role subjects took responsibility for their behavior, it was only in the context of the role. Since the learners in this study did not fake being seriously injured by the shocks (like in Milgram's), perhaps teachers would've assumed a different level of accountability if that had been the case. However, we know from history that being obedient actors in rigid roles can lead to severe dehumanization of victims and thus commission of atrocities.

From this we can connect more psychological dots regarding a society that lacks political freedom. Daily in the news, both foreign and domestic, we can see that multitudes of individuals are harassed and harmed by persons in various roles of coercive authority within a political matrix: "soldiers" in "military operations"; "police officers" in "law enforcement"; and, "judges," "prosecutors," and "jurors" in "judicial proceedings." All these roles entail the same harmful processes found in the social psychology experiments we've been exploring.

Various factors in becoming inhumane or remaining humane

When we don't take full responsibility for our own actions toward others, social psychologists have noted that typically a couple things happen: disinhibition and dehumanization. When we become disinhibited in this context, we lose connection with our thoughts and feelings regarding treating others respectfully; basically, our principles and empathy fade. The self-reflective thoughts and feelings that normally prevent us from inflicting harm on others become neglected or overridden.

Circumstantial factors, such as a supposedly exalted cause or noble goal that treats some individuals as the means to the prescribed ends of others—essentially, that value the "collective good" above the individual good, devaluing countless persons in the process—or that uphold the welfare of an experiment as more important than the welfare of the participants, can all play their part in the disinhibition process. Of course, these may just provide fuel to the fire of resentful, vengeful, enraged, or other upsetting emotions that tend to be present when a person forgoes rationality and compassion, and thus does harm.

In order for any of us to perform a harmful act, we will tend to dehumanize the other, seeing him or her as no longer possessing redeeming or respectable qualities, but rather as being deserving of punishment or neglect. The processes of disinhibition and dehumanization have been evidenced time and again throughout the centuries, from the commonplace to the unspeakable. Psychological researchers Albert Bandura, Bill Underwood, and Michael Fromson stated the following in 1975:

“Inflicting harm upon individuals who are regarded as subhuman or debased is less apt to arouse self-reproof than if they are seen as human beings with dignifying qualities. The reason for this is that people who are reduced to base creatures are likely to be viewed as insensitive to maltreatment and influenceable only through the more primitive methods.” (p. 255) [12]

The experiment Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson conducted sought to discover the outcomes when subjects, who were recruited as teachers to administer (and choose the intensity of) shocks to individual learners, were placed under various psychological conditions. Different subjects were put either in a position with high individual responsibility for the shocks they administered or in a position of diffused responsibility, in which they would practically remain anonymous. Additionally, the learners were portrayed to different subjects “...in either humanized, neutral, or dehumanized terms.”

As we might surmise by now, subjects whose shocks were mostly anonymous gave higher intensity shocks on average to learners, especially when the learner had been dehumanized. But when the learner was made to appear high in moral value, both individual and diffused responsibility groups (although they differed statistically) viewed high-level shocks as less justified. In turn the researchers stated, “when circumstances of personal responsibility and humanization made it difficult to avoid self-censure for injurious conduct, subjects disavowed the use of punitive measures and used predominantly weak shocks.” (p. 268) [12]

In our exploration of self-responsibility, we’ve realized the importance of internal mechanisms, i.e., within the individual, that can curtail harmful behavior that a person may contemplate and enact under

various circumstances. This signifies the self-control aspect of volitional agency, which is one of our distinctive traits as human beings. Paying attention to internal mechanisms can prevent us from becoming deindividuated, that is, from losing our sense of individuality, integrity, and consideration regarding behavior toward others. As a consequence, we can view ourselves as accountable individuals with dignified and empathetic standards of behavior; this is the realm in which self-responsibility operates.

However, sometimes we hear responsibility discussed in relation to social constraints or public influences that inhibit people from doing harm. In this sense, a person is being “held accountable” not only by their own empathetic mindset and views of personal integrity, but also by the critical and punitive measures of others, referred to as “accountability cues.” Deindividuation cues and accountability cues can be seen as the “private and public components,” respectively, that affect impulses to aggress and levels of obedience, researchers Steven Prentice-Dunn and Ronald Rogers noted.

In their 1982 study (of course, another shock test) that related these factors to the level of aggression against a learner in an experiment, they found that “compared to subjects in the high accountability-cues conditions, subjects receiving low accountability cues displayed more aggression. In addition, the external attentional-cues condition [designed to induce more deindividuation] produced more aggression than did internal attentional-cues condition.” (p. 508) Furthermore, they stated, “...the available data strongly suggest that subjective deindividuation mediated the expression of aggression.” (p. 512) [\[13\]](#)

Subjective deindividuation is associated with a lessening of self-responsibility, which is one of the most powerful factors in harmful behavior. Obedience and conformity entail a lowering of one’s inner awareness and acting in accordance with the demands of others, or external cues. Yet do we always attribute responsibility to someone else or something else when our acts are considered harmful?

As we have just noted, when a victim is dehumanized, more responsibility may be assumed by the actor who believes that the harm was in some way warranted. On a familial level (as we’ll explore later) such is the case when parents view children as inferior and not deserving the same degree of respect, in addition to deserving punishment —“because you did something wrong, and *we’re the parents*, after all!”

Indeed, the disinhibiting and dehumanizing power of *roles* looms large in this process.

A study conducted almost identically to Milgram's questioned the theory of responsibility attribution. The experimenters David Mantell and Robert Panzarell included both a group of subjects who were free to choose the level of shock voltage and a group who witnessed a preceding test in which the teacher defied the authority figure and refused to continue administering shocks. They concluded the following in 1976:

"A monolithic view of the obedient person as a purely passive agent who invariably relinquishes personal responsibility is a false view. There are people who obey and continue to hold themselves responsible as well as people who obey and relinquish responsibility. Similarly, among people who initially obey but then defy, there are those who accept full responsibility and those who accept none at all for the actions they performed prior to their defiance." (p. 242) [\[14\]](#)

The authors did note that attribution of personal responsibility was related to decision-making capability: When subjects could choose the shocks in the test, they felt more responsible. How might we explain these results? Well, from the description of the study's method, it appears that the subjects were asked about attributions of responsibility *after* they had been de-hoaxed and comforted by the fact that the learner had not really been shocked almost to death. It would be hard to believe that subjects would take personal responsibility for following orders to shock an innocent person beyond the point of screams of protest, to the point of silence. If this were the case, it could be considered an admission of behaving in an extremely malevolent way and, perhaps, that one is requesting accountability for one's harmful actions. Yet at the same time, this might evidence such a high degree of self-responsibility that the person most likely would not have followed the harmful commands of the experimenter in the first place.

Concerning the factors that can contribute to obedience on the part of subjects in studies, all these experimental settings had an aura of reputability. Subjects entered into a task assuming or believing that it must have been well thought-out and proven safe and reasonable. After all, do not psychological experimenters at sanctioned institutions abide

by strict codes of ethics? Such thoughts were probably running through the minds of subjects as they began to perform their tasks.

The particular subjects who maintained a high degree of self-responsibility—regardless of the consequences—made what Nissani in 1990 called a “conceptual shift.” (p. 1385). [15] The shift involves actually being cognizant of the harmful actions that were requested (or demanded), wherein the subjects mentally shifted into accepting that the experimenter had apparently become a “malevolent” figure. The institution thereby was discredited, at least if the shocks were real. After all, no person attuned to self-responsibility would be reckless enough to call their bluff, speculating that the shocks were not real.

The internal mechanism of self-responsibility relies on the conviction that one is both the voluntary creator and inhibitor of one’s own actions and thus, concomitantly, one is fully accountable for them, whether or not others are harmed. Unfortunately, we live in a culture in which obedience to “authority” in some form or fashion has been the mainstay. As we’ll be exploring both on the political and familial levels, we are trained from an early age to defer to certain adults and comply or suffer punishments by them, which doesn’t honor our voluntary choices and actions and thus self-responsibility. Despite the variety of reasons for requiring obedience, to embrace self-responsibility directly challenges the paradigm of giving orders and blindly following them.

Surrendering to systems of domination

We’ve just examined some well-researched aspects of how autonomous functioning is surrendered by otherwise autonomous persons in controlled conditions; replications of such experiments in recent history have produced similar results, by the way. These results indicate that there’s something really damaging happening in American culture, not to mention other cultures. We are trained to be “good” boys and girls, which typically means to be conformists to adults’ desires—rather than free persons who are responsible for our own choices. As a result, we tend to lose sight of our intrinsic motivation to handle our needs and others’ needs with care.

Of course, a fairly obvious and understandable reason exists for our conformity as children, and then later as adults: to be accepted in the group in order to survive. Without early conformity to what adults in our

world want from us, we can jeopardize our place in the family and seemingly jeopardize even our lives. This primarily explains why, for thousands of years, humans have repeated the same obedient, ritualistic patterns. Dissent can be a risky activity in a social group, especially when various adults were subjected to memes of conformity during their early years too—as opposed to being encouraged to be independent thinkers and rights-respecting individuals.

Consider what typically happens when members of the group disapprove of our choices. Perhaps a blaming and shaming process occurs, which leads to some sort of punishment, either in the form of aggression or ostracism. Adherence to spoken and unspoken group norms and rules thus can begin to sacrifice our needs for autonomy, choice, and self-expression. “Don’t rock the boat” can become a major guideline for our emotions and behaviors among others in groups. Consequently, few of us learn how to deal effectively and healthily with upsetting emotions; instead, our feelings are oftentimes disregarded and not voiced.

As we probably know, we tend to pay a steep personal price for such a strategy: We don’t get to freely express our genuine selves, and we’re discouraged from believing that such honesty can ultimately lead to better things. After all, more harmonious relationships and a more meaningful society entail the fulfillment of such needs as acceptance, trust, consideration, empathy, cooperation, and support.

A primary theme of this book is that *systems* tend to have major influences on human beings, and of course humans are main factors in systems. We in fact create systems, so we can alter and dissolve them as well. The domination systems that preside in our culture today have so many harmful aspects that we can be thoroughly desensitized to them, to the point of normalizing them and surrendering to them.

A system has various definitions, of course, but here’s a dictionary one that’s germane: a set of principles or procedures according to which something is done; an organized scheme or method. Moreover, a system entails a way of interacting that tends to maintain itself based on agreed-upon beliefs, either explicit or implicit. Thomas D’Ansembourg wrote the following about this in his book *Being Genuine: Stop Being Nice, Start Being Real*:

"In systemics, the science of systems, we learn that any system tends first of all to perpetuate itself, to maintain its existence. This is the law of homeostasis. In such systems as the family, the couple, or a range of other relationships, difference and divergence produce fear because they represent a risk of compromising the system by destabilizing it. Faced with such fear, the trend is often to endeavor to reestablish unanimity as a matter of urgency, either through control or through submission. Thus, to regain equilibrium in our family, marital, or other relationships, that is, the homeostasis or stability of our system, we often impose solutions compelling everyone to agree, or we submit without a word of discussion. What you get is fight or flight, and there is no real encounter." (p. 190) [16]

What we've been exploring about self-responsibility and conformity, and self-expression and obedience, pertains to our beliefs about systems and how they influence us. Few of us were informed in much coherent psychological detail of the rationale for adhering to social systems. As D'Ansembourg noted, fear of risking a destabilization of the system, of upsetting the perceived equilibrium, plays a major role. Commonly, the system is implicitly understood for its permanence and taken as "the given," like the enduring nature of gravity. Yet systems are human constructs, once again, and to the extent that we don't scrutinize them, we become trapped in their gravitational pull, in tragic and needless perpetuity.

"Because that's the way it is!" was a phrase all of us probably heard as children. "Because I said so!" was likely another. Such utterances can be heard sometimes in Walmart shopping aisles, as parents assert aspects of the same systems that they themselves learned as children. Similar to the heuristics, or rules of thumb, that we discussed earlier, we tend to gravitate to what's most familiar, comfortable, and safe for us and what appears to serve our interests, given the prevailing belief systems.

A belief system seeks to organize aspects of systems into something understandable or at least mentally manageable. Like other mental constructs we can create, it may or may not accord with the facts of reality and what truly serves our interests. Nonetheless, a chain of inferences or assumptions often culminates in acceptance of "a set of principles or procedures according to which something is done."

If we explore some of the main assumptions that lead to systems of domination—i.e., of some human minds ruling over other human minds, or beliefs and behaviors (memes) endeavoring to rule *all* human minds—then we can grasp the rationale for parental statements that basically deter inquisitiveness and understanding. Another adult statement that we're all too familiar with in the political realm is: "Because it's the law!" The main rationale here perhaps involves yearnings for cooperation, order, safety, and stability, unfortunately coming at the expense of choice, respect, and self-responsibility.

Children are taught from a very early age that, if left to their own "selfish" desires, they can't be trusted, and this message leads to quite tragic results—for them, for the family, and for society at large. Given that each person is motivated biologically to improve his or her lot in life, to make life *better* for him or herself, using the word "selfish" in a disdainful way fosters further psychological confusion and self-alienation. It essentially puts a conceptual organism in conflict with itself, particularly in relation to other selves. While "self-interest" might be a more accurate term, which takes into account our biology, obviously it too can carry negative connotations in a culture of self-sacrifice.

Since we're in the ethical realm now, the following questions arise: 1) Can an individual actually determine what's in his or her own interest (which could also be called rational self-interest, or enlightened selfishness) and thus what's *not* in his or her interest? and 2) If so, can an individual accomplish various self-interested tasks to a satisfactory degree of trustworthiness?

Devastatingly, our culture tends to express serious doubts about both 1 and 2. Negative responses to these fundamental ethical and psychological questions are reflective of the domination systems in which we've been immersed from a very early age. We are essentially discouraged from developing confidence in our natural ability to serve our own lives and well-being. From a domination-system perspective, we're trained to engage in self-fulfilling prophecy regarding our doubts about self-help and confidence. Because we've mostly been trained to believe that "people" (actually, ourselves) can't be trusted, then we simply surmise that everyone *must be* controlled (by others). While ironically those supposedly in charge of controlling us are left out of the lack-of-trust-in-humans formula, they are always inescapably, practically,

part of it. In such a system, we're also supposed to not seriously question or challenge what's going on here.

After all, domination systems entail the exercise of power over others. According to the assumptions of these systems, the belief is that without power-over strategies, people will not do what's most wanted to serve human life. So, we are supposed to serve those using and advocating power-over strategies.

Now, there's a lot of onion peeling that needs to be done about this belief system, especially in relation to the nature of extrinsic motivators, which nearly all of us have experienced from a young age. Since we're subjected to a multiplicity of rewards and punishments (a.k.a. "behavior modification") we tend to develop a distorted understanding of what we want and how to get it. And then, we tend to become mentally enslaved, prone to following the orders and assumptions of others to the nth degree.

Intrinsic motivation, in stark contrast, arises when we have mental freedom. It entails having a desire to learn and do something because of one's authentic interest, curiosity, and creative spirit. Intrinsic motivation is *really* essential—it enables us to be mindful of our needs for choice, spontaneity, inspiration, genuineness, integrity, challenge, discovery, growth, and purpose (to name some salient ones). Inner trust is also a major component of intrinsic motivation—to have trust in our own ability to be in touch with and meet the above needs as well as rely on our own judgment, instead of the judgment or commands of some authority figure (who, by the way, has the same psychological needs).

Of course, intrinsic motivation gets squelched to a large extent because of domination systems, which administer extrinsic motivators in the forms of rewards and punishments, or carrots and sticks. As we've covered, these can be eerily similar to the kinds that researchers devised decades ago in various shock studies, as well as ones used with such non-reasoning, or non-conceptual, creatures as rats, pigeons, monkeys, and dogs. When others try to get us to do things that don't interest us (i.e., that we aren't self-interested in, in terms of meeting our needs), typically only a couple choices occur to us: rebellion or submission.

The human mind has the ability to forecast future outcomes. We all know what happens when a child says some variation of "No!" to parents who have themselves grown up in a culture of domination systems. Typically, they react to defiance with bribes and/or

punishments. As parents seek to resolve the situation in such a way, they might also believe that their actions are “for the child’s own good,” because parents are supposed to know best.

When children follow through with what they’re told to do or say (despite what they might think and feel), they’ve learned that less painful things, and maybe even some positive things, tend to happen in relation to parents. So, not rocking the family boat has its immediate benefits, although this is where the “boat” metaphor reveals its serious inadequacy. Neither the family nor society is floating in a vessel that requires no one to move too much, lest it capsize and everyone risks drowning. While systems of domination discourage us from believing otherwise, they also falsely imply that humans can’t be authentic with their thoughts, feelings, and actions, and that we can’t voluntarily meet each others’ needs for equality and harmony.

We can directly question the notion that children must be told what to do (and even think and feel) and must unquestioningly obey orders from above, lest the family system (or society) devolve into harmful chaos and disorder. We’re going to explore the uplifting implications and marvelous results of fully honoring intrinsic motivation in younger family members in a later chapter. But for now, let’s examine the flaws in the inference found in domination systems that human beings can’t be trusted to enrich their lives, especially without sacrificing themselves or others in the process.

Who thinks your thoughts? Neuroscience instructs us that our thoughts emanate from our own brain processes. Put succinctly, the mind is what the brain does. No one can directly control your brain processes unless they, for instance, force-feed or inject you with some mind-altering drug. However, what others say or do in your proximity might trigger various cascades of thoughts and feelings in you, of which you can be mindful. This indicates that we are highly communicative and social animals. Still, each of us possesses a distinct neural system, physically separate from others (with the exception of some conjoined twins, of course), and therefore each of us has our own thoughts, feelings, value judgments, memories, etc.

The fact that each human brain is independent in this fundamental way gives rise to self-understanding, autonomy, choice, and all the amazing aspects that can make our lives and interactions with others so enjoyable, as well as sometimes upsetting. This latter aspect

may give rise to desires to harness others' independence to do the bidding of other people, rather than to be in service to themselves as intrinsically motivated individuals.

To lack trust in one's own condition of autonomy and the requirements for self-generated, self-sustained, and joyful actions can lead to a similar lack of trust in others. One's fears, anxieties, and worries about lack of trust in self can lead to further upsetting emotions and distorted beliefs about others, who then might be expected to carry out one's wishes without challenge. This leads to doubting the very human capacity to enrich one's life in a win/win fashion with others.

Domination systems begin with parenting methods on children, then extend to schooling methods on learners, and finally include law-enforcement methods on adults. Since they foster self-doubt and lack of self-worth, which can lead to a host of compensatory defense mechanisms, domination systems perform a very tragic trick on us—somehow convincing us that we are not in charge of our own actions, but are instead coerced or forced to do things, thus greatly diminishing our sense of self-responsibility. This is usually directly coupled with the prospect of being punished for not conforming to the edicts of the domination system, which means not obeying the orders of others.

We of course saw the effects of this played out in the controlled experiments done by Milgram and others. We also see countless uncontrolled and ongoing “experiments” being done in our midst today. Culturally and politically speaking, we are essentially reaping what the dominations systems have sewn for us. Punishments become the “consequences” of not doing what's desired or demanded by others; rewards or bribes try to minimize such disobedience; and, diminished self-responsibility becomes the assumed norm. Let's now examine how all this relates to our social and political predicament.

Liberty and other memes

Since our focus in this book is on the psychological side of complete liberty, we won't venture as far into the realm of political philosophy as *Complete Liberty* did. Nevertheless, one of the unfortunate things about the word “liberty” in our culture is its ambiguity; it oftentimes doesn't entail actual freedom. Sometimes the liberty that people speak of (in accordance with the U.S. Constitution) involves one group of people

wielding power over a populace, to “protect” and “serve” them in various ways.

When reduced to essentials, true and complete liberty entails being fully responsible as an individual decision-maker and fully respectful of others (as fellow individual decision-makers) in a social context. This necessarily spells the end of “politics” and thus the end of any notion of government (a.k.a. statism), which has been and continues to be the ultimate “power-over” system devised and enacted by humans, in terms of the immense number of individuals who’ve died from it and who continue to suffer under its reign.

Each domination system uses power over others, essentially methods of manipulation and control, at times culminating in lethal force, in order to maintain itself. Each domination system seeks compliance from children, adolescents, and adults. While the conditional parenting model, which we’ll explore soon in more detail, doesn’t normally resort to lethal methods, as children we nonetheless perceive real threats to our functioning and our survival in abusive or neglectful circumstances. These traumatic experiences lay the psychological groundwork for their re-expression in other domination systems. At times a child is seriously physically injured or killed when he or she resists “arrest” by a punitive parent. Under statism, sometimes a person who disobeys is imprisoned in a metal and concrete cage for weeks, months, or years, essentially forced to live in a subhuman environment for arbitrary periods of time. These dreadful events are of course extreme examples of the power-over paradigm. Though they happen rarely in family systems, they tend to be much more common in governmental ones.

Given that our discussion here basically concerns the nature of some humans ruling over other humans, we can definitely see the painful, tragic similarities between the punishments enforced against children and the punishments enforced against adults in society. The latter tend to dramatically increase in intensity, because fully grown humans can exercise their entire autonomy and resist forceful restraint (i.e., use self-defense measures), which can harm and even kill the persons trying to subdue them.

Many in our culture might say that the rewards and punishments administered by humans “in charge” on other humans are necessary aspects of living together in a safe, stable, and orderly manner. The

parallels to our own upbringing tend to be quite noticeable. But without rewards and punishments, what would society look like? How can people deal effectively with those who are typically punished with fines and imprisonment? Without threats of aggression and coercion, how can humanity cope?

In order for these questions to be answered to a reasonable degree of clarity, understanding, and satisfaction, we need to recognize more fully the tragic and costly nature—the essential dysfunction—of the domination system that gives rise to such concerns in the first place. The calming phrase “Peace, Love, and Happiness” is very foreign to such a system, even though it’s commonly used as a hopeful gesture, a yearning to transform the status quo into something less troubled.

Even before children acquire language, they’re bathed in a culture of memes. Memes are ideas and behaviors that are easily replicated among humans. As genes replicate, so do memes, but arguably with far more dramatic effects. It oftentimes takes thousands of years for a significant genetic alteration to take hold in a population. Memes, however, being byproducts of our phenotypes (stemming from our genotypes), can change a population within weeks or months, even days for individual minds.

The general domination system we’ve been exploring is definitely a meme of the highest costly order. Within this system are ideas and behaviors, methods of functioning that yield particular attitudes and results. Rewards and punishments in childhood translate into incentive plans and prisons for adults. Spanking (a.k.a. hitting) and “time-outs” translate into assault, battery, kidnapping, and incarceration by cops.

What drives these memes, once again, is the fundamental distrust that we have in our own minds—in our capacity to meet our own needs and others’ needs without conflict. It’s as if conflict is the prophecy to be fulfilled by the use of power-over tactics that attempt to ensure compliance. The implicit thought is that with coercion some needs will get met, somehow.

In order for anyone to attempt to justify such tactics, thoughts of right-doing and wrongdoing are also instrumental. Ideas of good and evil provide the fuel to the domination fire, so that rewards and punishments can be administered according to what individuals “deserve.” Perhaps notions of good and evil have been around since the dawn of civilization, similar to evaluations of civility and incivility. What

would civilization be like without notions of “good” persons and “bad” persons, based on their respective actions? How would society function without deserve-oriented thinking about self and others?

Answers to these questions can be found by inspecting the mental process that gives rise to them: moralistic judgment. Here, we are at the nexus of philosophy and psychology. When we are taught from childhood onward that people are “selfish” and can’t really be trusted because they are “only in it for themselves,” it immediately puts us in a defensive posture regarding thoughts about our own nature. Unfortunately, philosophers and psychologists are mostly at a loss to clearly describe human nature, and our culture suffers immensely as a result. While they oftentimes note an array of interesting and useful particulars, they are as immersed cognitively and emotionally in the same domination system of civilization-with-governments and other power-over strategies as the rest of us. So, they typically overlook the factors that enable us to fully actualize our potential.

Despite the enormous problems of our present culture of memes, and partly because of these memes, we still seek to ensure our survival, and we still try to thrive with others. Communities and marketplaces arise and persevere. Along with them, moralistic judgment is the usual process by which we learn whether ourselves and other humans are worthy of interacting with. Given our training in childhood, this seems like the easiest way to describe the nature of people. We’ve all heard, and probably ascribed, such assessments as the following: “He’s a good guy.” “She’s a nice person.” “He’s an asshole.” “That’s evil!” “Good job.”

One of the purposes of this book is to demonstrate that this type of judgment isn’t as useful and helpful as we’ve been taught or as it oftentimes seems. It can actually detract from our optimal functioning, which includes our happiness. The very system of domination in which we grew up, the one in which humans for thousands of years have been immersed, basically gives rise to moralistic judgment. Additionally, it hasn’t enabled us to gain an accurate understanding of the origins of our emotions, which are from biologically-based needs, rather than from strictly our particular circumstances or simply what other people say or do.

So, we’ll learn in subsequent chapters that we can relate to others in ways that can get universal needs met consistently and helpfully. We’ll also see as we progress that, while moralistic judgment is quite

dispensable, *needs-based judgment* is inescapable and necessary. In fact every moralistic judgment of self and/or someone else can be translated into an accurate and helpful needs-based judgment. Of course such a translation process doesn't come very easily when we've been immersed in domination systems. But it can be done, and with very beneficial results.

Chapter 3

Childhood trauma revealed in family, religion, and government

Early experiences in the family

Thus far, we've examined the nature of our internal world, the meanings of mental freedom and mental enslavement, how we can gain and surrender self-responsibility, and the nature of domination systems. Additionally, we've touched on some of the resulting manifestations of these things in our culture. Let's make them more explicit now, in terms of institutions, beginning with the family.

Nearly everyone is familiar with being ruled over in childhood. In our culture, it seems to be a forgone conclusion that what a child thinks, desires, and feels carries less weight, is less important, than what caregivers think, desire, and feel. This invariably leads to an immense amount of frustration and suffering, because children also have needs for visibility, autonomy, choice, empathy, and respect (among others), and when these go mostly unrecognized and unmet, frustration and suffering occur in abundance. Yet, most people believe that family strife is part and parcel of parenting, so parental questions tend to pertain to what kind of (and how much) ruling of children is necessary and proper for them to mature into responsible adults. Questions seldom pertain to the nature of such ruling and whether children need to be ruled at all.

We know from our previous investigations of conformity and obedience that this is a dangerous methodology for us to adopt unquestioningly. When it's seen as the best way to do things in society (as are typically all things done presently), then we aren't invited to challenge our current knowledge—and to challenge fears and distrust about our nature.

To give us a profoundly personal idea of how *different* things will be when “power-with” rather than “power-over” strategies are used by

parents toward children, we're going to explore a list of psychological questions. They can be considered a child's wish list—in fact, *your* inner child's wish list. Understanding the nature of this list will set the stage for exploring still more psychological aspects. The following twenty-four questions were formulated by self-esteem psychologist Nathaniel Branden, and they can be found in full context in his three books *Breaking Free*, *Honoring The Self*, and *The Six Pillars Of Self-Esteem* (published in 1970, 1983, and 1994, respectively). [17] [18] [70] Branden discussed these questions in a group therapy setting in *Breaking Free*, which I read on the Complete Liberty Podcast episodes 165, 167, and 170-174. [35] I've commented here after each one for clarification:

1. "When you were a child, did your parents' manner of behaving and of dealing with you give you the impression that you were living in a world that was rational, predictable, and intelligible? Or a world that was bewildering, contradictory, incomprehensible, unknowable?"

These queries raise our awareness that the world can be most clearly understood in a noncontradictory way. Each of us grew up wanting adults to make clear sense of things and be consistent with words and actions. The main reason that we, as children, ask "Why?" is not to pester parents. It's to determine the nature of things, such as identity and causality, so we can function with more comprehension. We endeavor to quench our curiosity in our youth and make sense of things we experience.

Unfortunately, adults can promote a variety of troublesome contradictions, which don't exist in objective reality. This can be traumatizing for small reasoning beings who depend on adults for rationality, predictability, and intelligibility. When parents aren't as connected with their emotional world and the needs for empathy and consistency in these matters, both they and their children suffer a lot as a result. Oftentimes with little cognizance of its impact, parents can portray the world as a kind of haunted house with distorted mirrors for children to peer into. In this portrayal many scary or inexplicable things can appear at unpredictable (or even predictable) times.

2. "Were you taught the importance of learning to think, the importance of developing your mind, the importance of becoming a rational being?"

Did your parents provide you with intellectual stimulation and convey the idea that the use of your mind can be an exciting pleasure?"

In her novel *Atlas Shrugged*, philosopher Ayn Rand noted that your mind is your basic tool of survival. [19] Our physical capabilities pale in comparison to the feats our minds can perform. Therefore, the above questions pertain to how much your survival tool was honored by adult caregivers. Each of us wanted to learn a great deal about the world when we were young, and we wanted adults to trust the functioning of our minds to do so.

Further, we wanted adults to share the joy we felt about the use of our minds to figure things out and discover many more things. Needless to say, a zest for thinking and learning might've become hard to maintain when we didn't see many adults expressing such zest themselves, or when they didn't encourage our own discovery process.

3. "Were you encouraged to think independently, to develop your critical faculty? Or were you taught to be obedient rather than mentally active and questioning? Did your parents project that it was more important to conform to what other people believed than to discover what is true? When your parents wanted you to do something, did they appeal to your understanding and give you reasons for their request? Or did they communicate in effect, 'Do it because I say so'?"

Such questions bring to mind our previous exploration of social psychology experiments and the cultural memes of obedience and conformity. It's a safe bet that most of the subjects in those studies didn't as children have their sense of independence and autonomous functioning fostered by caregivers. More than likely, they were trained to conform and were taught that truth isn't something their minds can objectively discern on their own, absent some "authority" telling them supposedly what's right and what's wrong.

Likewise, demands were probably the norm too, instead of requests that came with an understandable rationale (and with the option to understandably decline). A top-down manner of interacting with children tragically leads to a belief that being mentally active and questioning isn't very important, or even key, to living well. Hearing "Because I said so!" early in life is akin to hearing "Because it's the law!"

later on. Both stances lead to more obedience and conformity, instead of independent thinking and more life-serving behaviors.

4. “Did you feel free to express your views openly without fear of punishment?”

This remains one of the biggest obstacles to self-expression and self-assertiveness in general. When the disapproval of others is combined with punishment, it leads to traumatized, stillborn selves, or as psychologist Marshall Rosenberg noted, “nice, dead people.” [\[20\]](#) Persons who were threatened and punished as children tend to live as adults in ways that don’t fully serve their individual lives and well-being.

As a consequence, many adults believe that children won’t take parents seriously without threats of punishment, including withholding rewards or taking away things. They might point to the alter ego of authoritarian parenting—lenient parenting—to support their belief. Of course, both types fall way short of meeting both children’s and parents’ need for respect. What can really help children to become healthy adults is a psychologically integrated parental understanding of what’s abusive and what’s neglectful toward children, which includes parents’ examination of their own childhoods. Imagine having been free as a child to express your views openly without fear of unwanted and harmful effects from others. Without such fear, we can much more easily meet our needs for honesty, authenticity, and openness.

5. “Did your parents communicate their disapproval of your thoughts, desires, or behavior by means of humor, teasing, or sarcasm?”

This question considers your parents’ ways of disapproving as well as interpreting your self-expressions. Did they take you seriously? Nearly all parents I’ve encountered sometimes have difficulty taking their children seriously. Adults may turn encounters with children into a circus act to entertain them. Or, they may exhibit a depressing or scary mood around children, or an anxious one. As adults, especially when we haven’t processed our own childhood trauma, we can become detached from our own pure sense of child-self—disconnecting from the early

times when we were innocently trying to express our thoughts, desires, and actions around adults.

When I was a toddler, for instance, I got a sizable dose of teasing from my father. My parents' college-level education was no protection from this. Sadly, we live in a culture that contains a lot of put-down humor (the central theme in scores of sitcoms, by the way), and this can detract from seeing each other's dignity. Of course, enjoying humor and seeing the funny sides of life and of humans are indispensable aspects of living well, and a foundation of trust and respect enables humor to be truly nourishing. Teasing becomes mockery without firmly established trust and respect, and it can make the cultivation of self-worth and the belief in oneself, especially as a child, much more difficult.

When individuals aren't taken seriously as children, it can also result in win/lose interactions subsequently in the adult world, especially when adults don't expend the time and effort to heal their own traumatic childhood experiences. So, imagine if you had been taken seriously as a child—imagine how your view of self and the world might've formed in that respectfully enriching context. This is a wonderful context that you can foster for yourself as an adult now.

6. "Did your parents treat you with respect? Were your thoughts, needs, and feelings given consideration? Was your dignity as a human being acknowledged? When you expressed ideas or opinions, were they treated seriously? Were your likes and dislikes treated seriously? (Not necessarily agreed with or acceded to, but nonetheless treated seriously?) Were your desires treated thoughtfully and respectfully?"

With these questions, we're really at the foundation of the human psyche and its functioning. Of course, all the other questions relate to these as well. Our social world is so immersed in the memes of obedience, and thus inauthenticity, that it's oftentimes difficult to grasp just how different childhood can be when these questions are answered in the affirmative. Indeed, a new psychology can emerge across society as a result. This is the future of humanity we're talking about, which can arise when enough individuals choose it and promote it, inducing a tipping point in society.

What tends to impede realization of the immense value of affirmative answers to these questions is the thought that we're supposed

to play *roles*. Some are supposed to play “parents,” and others are supposed to play “kids.” Parents are supposed to be “in charge,” maintain “authority,” and especially strive to be “good parents,” according to various cultural expectations and demands. Kids are supposed to be, well, just “kids,” seemingly untrustworthy, reckless, inept, and unable to do most things that parents do for them, but should do things that parents demand of them. Any *actual* disabling of children’s abilities tends to be fostered by all the labeling and role-playing. It becomes self-fulfilling prophecy.

These roles we can play have very little to do with our genuine sense of self; they oftentimes detract from connection with and expression of our authenticity. For instance, imagine if your parents had wanted you to call them by their first names, instead of “mom” and “dad,” not as a way to distance themselves from you or disown you, but as a way to indicate *equality*—equality in personhood, equality in respect of thoughts, desires, feelings, and needs. Indeed, being treated equally in dignity and in significance of opinions, ideas, likes, dislikes, and desires means the world to children (and to adults). Essentially, it provides the most visibility, which is a vital need for formulating a healthy self-concept. While overt decoupling from parental labels might not be necessary, it’s nevertheless a useful thought-experiment that can enable us to challenge the role-playing that detracts from our individual humaneness.

7. “Did you feel that you were psychologically visible to your parents? Did you feel real to them? Did your parents seem to make a genuine, thoughtful effort to understand you? Did your parents seem authentically interested in you as a person? Could you talk to your parents about issues of importance and receive interested, meaningful understanding from them?”

Getting our need for psychological visibility met has a profound impact on self-concept, on worldview, and on connections with others. The importance of being seen for who we really are can’t be overstated. Unfortunately, it becomes quite compromised when roles are being played in the family. When the mental mirror that parents provide for a child reflects doubts about his or her own efficacy and worth, including moralistic judgment of his or her choices and behaviors (and even

presence in the family), then genuine recognition of self and supportive, empathetic self-understanding tend to be jeopardized.

If we don't challenge our assumptions about conforming to various systems, then we can fashion distorted funhouse mirrors and even haunted house mirrors for children to look into psychologically, as they try to ascertain who they are and what's possible to them. So, self-concept is best formed with a clear and accurate connection to reality (both inner and outer reality), and this is fostered when adults provide clear and truthful psychological mirrors.

We can better cope with the troubles in family systems by making earnest efforts to understand ourselves as adults. Being authentically interested in oneself is a prerequisite to being authentically interested in others. For all its cultural acclaim, self-sacrifice can't foster this process of genuine connection. Remaining immersed in a world of superficialities and role-playing simply forestalls healing and growth. Yet, we can see how these strategies may have arisen in us as we experienced them in family environments—which gets us back to the vital work of challenging those systemic assumptions.

8. "Did you feel loved and valued by your parents, in the sense that you experienced yourself as a source of pleasure to them? Or did you feel unwanted, perhaps a burden? Or did you feel hated? Or did you feel you were simply an object of indifference?"

These poignant questions raise some additional issues. Since parents' interactions with their children are reflections of how parents learned to interact with themselves and others from a very early age, the immensity of the problem here is twofold: Parents tend to be disconnected from what's most alive in them (in terms of their feelings and needs); and, their children tend to view this disconnection as normal. From this, children can ascribe guilt to themselves by drawing the tragically incorrect conclusion that something is wrong with them. They can develop a sense of shame about not being fully wanted and appreciated by their caregivers. Perhaps they might believe that they are a burden or unimportant, or that they are someone to be distrusted, neglected, or even hated.

Our culture tends not to help parents become more self-connected. Having a solid integration of mind and body (realizing that

the mind is what the brain does) entails being in touch with and willing to convey feelings in a way that's respectful of our own needs and the needs of children. For instance, how did your parents handle disagreements and conflict? Did they tend to take full responsibility for their thoughts, feelings, needs, desires, and actions, or were they prone to accusing, criticizing, blaming, and shaming?

Ultimately, it's incredibly difficult to experience others as sources of pleasure when one's own self isn't fulfilled and one isn't feeling resourceful, skilled in the practice of self-responsibility. Oftentimes, parents get immersed in many issues that compromise their ability to experience and share more enriching ways of being, and both they and their children tend to suffer the results. So, to heal from this and grow psychologically entails cultivating a key aspect of happiness, which is to experience oneself, others, and the world as pleasurable in healthy, self-esteeming ways.

9. "Did your parents deal with you fairly and justly? Did your parents resort to threats in order to control your behavior—either threats of immediate punitive action on their part, or threats in terms of long-range consequences for your life, or threats of supernatural punishments, such as going to hell? Were you praised when you performed well? Or merely criticized when you performed badly? Were your parents willing to admit it when they were wrong? Or was it against their policy to concede that they were wrong?"

These questions relate to much of the content of Alfie Kohn's books, such as *Punished By Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* [21] and the already-mentioned *Unconditional Parenting: Moving From Rewards And Punishments To Love And Reason*. [10] Kohn cites a plethora of empirical evidence about the harmful nature of treating other humans in subhuman ways, i.e., merely as stimulus/response creatures, or essentially unreasoning animals.

Unfortunately, when children point out the unfair goings-on in the family, usually more punishments are in store for them. It's immensely tragic that so many children experienced, and continue to experience, such things. Again, this is largely because their parents had similar experiences when they were children, as did their parents, and so on.

The thinking paradigm of “morally right” versus “morally wrong” has been with humanity probably since prehistory. When parents don’t like something that children are saying or doing, they have a couple basic choices: They can be authentic about their own emotions, including what might be triggering from their past, as well as relate the troubling incident to specific needs that we all share and help children to realize the benefits and drawbacks of particular strategies; or, they can crack down on them for being “wrong” in some way and disobedient, even using aggression against them. Along with the latter decision, parents can also invoke the mysticism of religion, to frightening and disorienting effect, such as the fury of hellfire and damnation. Power-over tactics tend to be the mainstay of religious dogma; you’re supposed to doubt your own mind and either obey or be condemned to some sort of hellish existence (and hellish non-existence, as if that were possible).

All of us know that punishments have quite significant costs on everyone involved. As Marshall Rosenberg has noted, ultimately you can’t get other persons to do something they don’t want to do, and punishing disobedient behavior only makes them *wish* they had done it, because they don’t like punishment. But, then, they might also make *you* wish you had not begun this process! By sacrificing the need for respect, punishment leads to severe resentment, which can lead to revenge tactics, which can lead to more punishment, and so on. [\[20\]](#)

We can call intimidation, punishment, and revenge a coercive cycle that’s unfit for reasoning beings, but it’s what most people have been taught as the primary way to try to get their implicit needs met. It reflects the thought that people are generally “selfish” (meaning here, “bad” and inconsiderate) and thus can’t be trusted with their own choices. When we scrutinize the carrots-and-sticks model of interaction, we can more clearly see the many needs that it sacrifices, first and foremost, respect.

As noted in the very title of *Punished By Rewards*, rewards and praise are a special form of punishment as well: A person can stand in judgment of another person by praising and rewarding him or her, and this can foster a power-over dynamic. Of course, rewards and praise are popular, so most of us have a lot of experience here too. We’re used to expressing what we like about someone, or about what he or she said or did, in such terms. Elements of extrinsic motivation can be attached to

them, so they can go beyond simple expressions of appreciation, acknowledgment, and enthusiasm.

As a great deal of research indicates, whenever our intrinsic motivation is displaced by extrinsic motivators, we lose part of ourselves—the centered and balanced part. Being fully connected with what’s alive in ourselves needs to be the main goal, rather than trying to live up to others’ expectations in order to get rewarded by them (or not get punished). Deferring to others’ judgment can lead us away from our authentic selves and into the realm of conforming to norms and abiding by orders set forth by “authorities,” lest we get disapproved of and punished. The experiments done by Milgram and others involved a similar operant conditioning process, in which the punishment of shocks was delivered to supposedly teach learners a lesson.

The last part of Branden’s 9th question set above speaks to the fact that parents are fallible beings, not only capable of making mistakes but also capable of being comfortable with making them. Parents can struggle mightily with conveying their basic (guiltless) fallibility to their children. As noted, “wrong” in our culture is a quite loaded term. It can be interpreted as an indictment of one’s capability and worth—i.e., an indictment of one’s self-esteem. So, this is one reason why parents in particular might choose to live in bubbles of rightness.

No matter what, when anyone in the family system resides on a moral pedestal, a power-over dynamic can arise—and thus inequality of respect. Helping children become completely comfortable with their mistake-making process means honoring the same process within ourselves, which entails honoring our own learning process and capability to achieve useful and helpful things.

10. “Was it your parents’ practice to punish you or discipline you by striking or beating you?”

The affirmative answer to this question remains in disturbingly high numbers in American culture; some surveys claim upwards of 90% of caregivers hit their children (euphemistically called spanking). It’s no surprise that parents who were punished as children tend to punish their children similarly. This meme can get readily passed on, although adults who didn’t view themselves as deserving of such treatment when they were children might be less likely to inflict it on their children.

Of course, aggression is an overt form of punishment, one of the many ways that the power-over dynamic can be expressed. In his book *Unconditional Parenting*, Kohn explains the prevalent “conditional parenting” model that fosters such win/lose interactions. Few of us are strangers to this model, of which being a “good boy” or “good girl” (or conversely a “bad boy” or “bad girl”) is part. Living up to parents’ expectations and trying to please them (or not displease them) are other parts. Experiencing love withdrawal if expectations are not met is yet another.

Many factors are involved when a parent reaches the end of his or her rope of resourcefulness and decides to aggress against a child. Feelings of exasperation, frustration, impatience, overwhelm, and annoyance can lead to a volcano of anger erupting. Subjectively feeling victimized can lead to actions of external domination. Once again, this behavior pattern was likely modeled in the parent’s early life too. Being overpowered and rendered helpless, internally and/or externally, is the nature of a traumatic experience, and the practical response to danger (fight or flight) has no real outlet. Some may have even been taught that physically punishing children must be done in a relatively calm way, rather than in an angry way. This supposedly gets a different point across—that the parent has not lost control, but is nonetheless determined to “discipline,” i.e., physically overpower and dominate the child. Regardless of the mood of the administrator of punishment, it’s supposed to motivate children by inducing fear and pain. Powerless rage is a devastating byproduct, often unacknowledged and repressed (for survival purposes early on), which can manifest in all sorts of tragic ways throughout life. [80]

The term discipline comes from Latin, meaning “to teach.” And what sort of concept of *justice* is being taught to children with the punishment model? One that’s opposed to actual restorative justice (a topic in chapter eight) and that continues to generate traumatic experiences. A great deal of psychological evidence shows that people do not become more emotionally mature and self-responsible when they punish or are subjected to punishment, regardless of age. The main message conveyed is that you had better obey “authorities” or you’ll have hell to pay. Punishment is thus an attempt to make those being punished *wish* they had done exactly what they were told; they’ll behave “better” next time, the belief goes.

Needless to say, “Do what you’re told, or else!” is not a phrase that supports or promotes independent reasoning or self-esteem. Instead, it traumatizes and fractures the minds of persons, fostering a society filled with fearful conformity and rebelliousness.

11. “Did your parents project that they believed in your basic goodness? Or did they project that they saw you as bad or worthless or evil?”

Branden’s meaning of basic goodness here can be equated with fundamental human worthiness. However, common thoughts of “good” and “bad” humans reflect moralistic and religious judgments. Rather than viewing persons as conceptual and emotional organisms who are trying to meet their needs using differing strategies, the age-old good/bad model of characterizing us simply views black and white, like in films with heroes and shady characters wearing their respective hats. As Milgram’s experiments and many others have indicated, we have the capacity to accept or reject destructive behaviors, which may be more or less difficult for each individual depending on the environmental, social, and psychological context.

Religions tend to promote stark contrasts—heaven and hell being the ultimate ones. “Original sin” sets a grim stage for human nature too, telling people that something is wrong, flawed, or broken within them, and that “bad” tendencies and desires must always be held in check. As a result, many endure a vague or distinct sense of guilt, while others act out its evaluations in costly ways. Like beliefs of heaven and hell, original sin’s falsity robs persons of their actual potential as precious, irreplaceable individuals on a wondrous planet.

When a child internalizes a message that he or she is not good enough or not quite fit for existence, or that there is something evil about him or her, we can predict the severe self-esteem struggles. It may take many months or years as an adult to repair one’s view of self (and, by extension, of others) to enable integrated, resilient, and happy functioning. Fortunately, there are psychotherapeutic techniques that we’ll explore later to facilitate this process of healing and growth.

12. “Did your parents project that they believed in your intellectual and creative potentialities? Or did they project that they saw you as mediocre or stupid or inadequate?”

As in all aspects of parents' relations with children, belief in the efficacious functioning of children becomes much more difficult when parents don't believe in *their own* efficacious functioning. As Branden has articulated in his various self-esteem books, the process of honoring our self-worth as children (and then as adults) becomes jeopardized when it's called into question, particularly by parents. While we likely all experienced this damaging process, each of us, by virtue of existing, by virtue of taking simple breaths of air, is worthy of experiencing inner well-being and happiness. Such a simple yet psychologically profound realization can broaden our horizons.

Regardless of how much self-knowledge, integration, and inner resourcefulness you've yet to gain, fundamentally there are no complex mysteries to decipher here in order to begin honoring your self-worth. In this sacred realm, there are no expectations to live up to, no demands to capitulate to, no hoops to jump through, no tests to pass.

Yet this is typically not how we've experienced the topic or been trained to view it. If parents had their own intellectual, emotional, and creative potentialities doubted when they were children, and they haven't processed this trauma, then their distorted self-concept can get conveyed to their children. Conversely, if parents had their own intellectual, emotional, and creative potentialities honored when they were children, then their wholesome self-concept can get conveyed to their children. No matter what happened early on, however, parents can consciously focus on the cultivation of a healthy self-concept for themselves and their children.

Oftentimes, because as children we don't have the experience, the knowledge, and the skills of adults, any explicit or implicit opinions by others that we are somehow mediocre, stupid, or inadequate, can be internalized. Such labeling is definitely disabling. This of course opens the door to massive exploitation throughout life, including power-over and punishment dynamics, yielding obedience to orders from "authorities," be they parents, priests (or gurus), teachers, employers, or law enforcers. Diminished self-actualization tends to stem from weakened belief in our fundamental dignity and our ability to individuate.

13. "In your parents' expectations concerning your behavior and performance, did they take cognizance of your knowledge, needs, interests, and circumstances? Or were you confronted by expectations and demands that were overwhelming and beyond your ability to satisfy?"

The process of trying to live up to others' expectations is typically rooted in our experiences as children, when survival, safety, support, acceptance, even love, tragically depended on how we adjusted to the expressed needs of parents. We might've acquired a sense of learned helplessness from not living up to parental expectations and demands, so our ability to be resilient and resourceful with our own life processes got hindered, which didn't bode well for us in adulthood.

In contrast, attuning to the needs of the child entails empathizing with his or her mental perspective and fostering an environment that nurtures rather than overwhelms. Imagine what it would've been like, as a child, to have your knowledge, needs, interests, and circumstances fully recognized and appreciated. A world of such empathy and understanding is a world every child naturally desires and seeks. This is a world we all can love and in which we all can be loved. Now is a time to cultivate a compassionate view of ourselves, especially since we have much more capability and resources to do so.

14. "Did your parents' behavior and manner of dealing with you tend to produce guilt in you?"

The emotion of guilt, like all emotions, represents a combination of feeling and evaluation. Yet guilt, along with shame and to some extent anger, is in a different class, because it arises from the premises of domination thinking, i.e., moralistic judgment. The thought of doing something "wrong" or "bad" contributes to the emotion of guilt, in addition to shame, which is the thought that one *is* "wrong" or "bad." People's reactions of anger, blaming, and shaming augment these thoughts of rightness and wrongness. Additionally, the assumed premise is that a diminished view of oneself is necessary to somehow atone for one's actions as well as one's "badness." And of course, the doctrine of original sin only perpetuates this premise.

We've probably all heard the parental injunction "Now, say you're *sorry*." Unfortunately, such a pressured process only indirectly connects us to important needs, such as for understanding, consideration, fairness, and respect for others. Because of the judgment of one's actions or even oneself as bad or wrong, the direct and genuine connection with such needs is oftentimes lost, and the need to *respect oneself* tends to be lost too.

Moreover, underlying the journey of the "guilt-trip" is the premise that one *should* do what is "right and proper" according to another's views—rather than to reflect on the needs for doing what's objectively healthy and helpful, in line with sound principles. Of course, when one rejects the guilt-trip and doesn't abide by the "should" statements, one's efficacy and worth are still called into question by another. Behind all emotions of guilt and shame lies a view of self as being dubious in worth, not really good enough to deal with matters effectively and appropriately.

15. "Did your parents' behavior and manner of dealing with you tend to produce fear in you?"

Fear is arguably the most debilitating emotion. It can bring even the thought of life-enriching activities to an abrupt halt. It can suspend rationality. It can thwart achievement and stall self-actualization. It can also lead to harm of self and others, when aggression is used as a tragic salve. We know that fear can be triggered in many ways. Unmet needs for safety, security, respect, understanding, self-esteem, and many others can give rise to feeling fearful.

As children, we tend to fear the disapproval of our parents and their punishments, including their withdrawal of affection, support, and love. Trying to live up to their expectations can become a way of life, with fear as a guide. Moreover, when children are taught to be "God-fearing," they are experiencing an extension of this tragic process. Rather than being attuned to our vital unmet needs, we are supposed to look to an "authority" for approval, to appease and to follow. Naturally, this doesn't effectively resolve the fear, so the cycle of fear continues.

One of the most important things we can learn as children is that we're living in a knowable universe, a cosmos that's open to our curiosity and investigation—which means that we can make sense of things.

Living with dread is not our natural condition. Living with confidence and courage is, which includes the courage to face our fears, empathize with them, and understand them. Joyful self-expression comes naturally to us as children, and we don't need to lose that way of living because of domination systems.

16. "Did your parents respect your intellectual and physical privacy?"

Oftentimes, being a young member of a family entails having your privacy go out the window. Children in our culture are typically not considered equals with adults in terms of what they can keep to themselves without fear of reprimand. As expected, the less trust that parents have in their children, the less trust that children have in their parents, and then the less that parents honor their privacy.

The fact of the matter is that each person, no matter how small, has his or her own perspective and need for space. Children try to nurture these too, and the more that parents trust them, the more likely transparency will exist in their relationship, in which children feel safe and even eager to communicate aspects of their inner and outer worlds. Mutual respect and understanding then replace battles of the wills and mutual suspicion. This tends to lead naturally to more interpersonal trust and to more sharing.

17. "Did your parents project that it was desirable for you to think well of yourself, to have self-esteem? Or were you cautioned against valuing yourself, and encouraged to be humble?"

Hebrew doctrine tells us that "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." Of course, haughty behavior doesn't mean confident and respectful behavior. It seems that nearly all religions teach persons to be self-sacrificial, not to be "full of oneself" (as if one is supposed to be partially full, or empty, or filled with something else). It's a widespread phenomenon that needs some explanation.

When parents or other adults scold children for being "selfish," they usually want them to share something with others or consider other points of view. Yet this way that grown-ups express their desires for interaction and empathy tends to hinder children's capacity to do so. To believe that children can value themselves too much or that they can

think too well of themselves is like believing that they can be too healthy or too happy. When we scrutinize the underlying message of this belief—that others are more important than yourself—the contradiction becomes glaring.

You're an individual, and others are individuals too. Each of us needs to integrate a self-concept that entails a realistic and honorable assessment of ourselves. Having a healthy self-concept includes wanting the best for yourself as well as the best for other selves, who need to have healthy self-concepts too.

Self-esteem is the evaluative aspect of self-concept. So, if our self-concept contains estranged or diminished parts, even repudiated ones, along with defensive ones (supposedly in service of self-protection), then our self-esteem will suffer accordingly. To value yourself is to value your capacity to enrich your life, which leads to interacting with others in ways that value them as well. Children *can* integrate the message that it's desirable for them to think well of themselves—to value themselves. This enables them to naturally express empathy toward themselves and toward others. Therefore, they don't need to be taught through judgment of their character to be "moral" persons. Rather, trust can be placed in them to flourish as nature intended.

18. "Did your parents project that what a person made of his [or her] life, and what you specifically made of your life, was important? Did your parents project that great things are possible to human beings, and specifically that great things are possible for you? Did your parents give you the impression that life could be exciting, challenging, a rewarding adventure?"

"Self-concept is destiny," as Branden has noted, and parental influences tend to shape this destiny, as does our culture (which of course shapes parental influences). Perhaps your parents portrayed productive achievement (a.k.a., "work") as some sort of drudgery or self-sacrificial, dutiful process. As economies lose prosperity due to erroneous political philosophies and harmful policies, this view tends to be expressed more often. Perhaps your parents even conveyed the idea that an exciting or adventurous life is "unstable" and only for allegedly crazy people or weirdos, or maybe just for celebrities.

Seeing life as an exciting adventure that you can embark upon also entails having a sense of control over your own destiny. This means not attributing your particular circumstances to “luck” or even “the law of attraction,” but rather to the metaphysical laws of identity and causality. We can distinguish what’s important from what’s not and take informed actions to improve our lives. Our fate need not be sealed by a detrimental model of life that we might’ve experienced as children. We can venture into a new realm that involves full belief in our ability to make the most of our own individual lives. This means casting aside the various psychological and existential scripts that we were probably given, so that we can create our own thrilling stories.

19. “Did your parents encourage in you a fear of the world, a fear of other people? Or were you encouraged to face the world with an attitude of relaxed, confident benevolence? Or neither?”

Upon reading the works of Ayn Rand and other Objectivists (including Branden) in the 1990s, I encountered discussions of the psychological necessity of an empowered and certain metaphysical worldview, stemming from the laws of identity, causality, and noncontradiction. I remember reading the following excerpt from a poem titled “The Laws of God, The Laws of Man” by English poet A.E. Housman, which was offered in psychological contrast to metaphysical certainty: “I, a stranger and afraid in a world I never made.”

In order to avoid being such a fearful stranger, the Objectivist point was to have a logically integrated view of one’s self-concept and reality. Yet when we examine Housman’s poem in full context, we can have compassion for such a plight, since domination systems have contributed to so much of it:

“THE laws of God, the laws of man,
He may keep that will and can;
Not I: Let God and man decree
Laws for themselves and not for me;
And if my ways are not as theirs
Let them mind their own affairs.
Their deeds I judge and most condemn,
Yet when did I make laws for them?

Please yourselves, say I, and they
Need only look the other way.
But no, they will not; they must still
Wrest their neighbor to their will,
And make me dance as they desire
With jail and gallows and hellfire.
And how am I to face the odds
Of man's bedevilment and God's?
I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.
They will be master, right or wrong;
Though both are foolish, both are strong.
And since, my soul, we cannot fly
To Saturn nor to Mercury
Keep we must, if we can,
These foreign laws of God and man." [22]

A world full of jails, gallows, and claims of hellfire is challenging enough for *adults* to make sense of, let alone children. The fear triggered in children by a mixture of religious and secular laws can be immense. Rather than creating supposed order and safety, such a matrix indeed disempowers individuals from respectfully and compassionately minding their own affairs. Demands and punishments detract mightily from our ability to make the most of our lives.

Again, life need not be about suffering and being fearful. But maybe that's how it seemed to your parents and to their parents before them. Fear of other people can arise for the very reasons that Housman related. When your own independent will isn't appreciated by others, especially by parents, practically every encounter might be seen as a threat or danger. A complex mix of self-alienating memes can also give rise to a fear of strangers or "foreigners" (xenophobia). Racism is yet another form of this fear, in which nonessential human characteristics are deemed of the utmost importance, to be judged according to predetermined standards.

In contrast, we can transcend such fears by viewing others with an attitude of confident and trusting benevolence, which also enables us to appreciate their own possible distress and fear. Other people are reasoning beings as well, yearning to meet their own needs; therefore,

they can be seen as reflections of ourselves, albeit with sometimes different sets of strategies. Ultimately, we are all in a process of flourishing on a planet that allows for nearly limitless opportunities for enrichment and growth.

20. “Were you encouraged to be open in the expression of your emotions and desires? Or were your parents’ behavior and manner of treating you such as to make you fear emotional self-assertiveness and openness, or to regard it as inappropriate?”

For the vast majority of children, self-expression around adults can be at times a dangerous prospect. Recall the sentiment “Children are to be seen and not heard”—not exactly a welcoming invitation to convey what’s alive in you. Though such a stance might be becoming less common, it nonetheless tends to arise out of parental frustration. Adults’ needs for space and consideration tend to arise from the way that children express themselves and their timing of such expressions.

There’s a statement I’ve heard from nonviolent communication trainers that, ideally, parents could use two hours of empathy for every hour of parenting. When parents aren’t feeling resourceful in relation to dealing with their own stressful emotions, especially in terms of connecting them to their underlying needs, their motivation to understand and support the emotional expressions and desires of children becomes significantly reduced.

Parents who were themselves trained in the process of moralistic judgment can be prone to shaming children into more desirable behavior. Being told that one’s self-assertiveness is not appropriate and must be curtailed typically leads to driving the self underground, where it can tragically express all kinds of unmet needs. So much intrinsic motivation and emotional expression are thwarted with the power-over methods of conditional parenting and coercive schooling. The cost is truly incalculable.

So, being attuned to and conversant with what we desire and being comfortably adept at emotional expression are still major challenges for our species. Yet we can as individuals learn and cultivate them as essential practices. Emotions are roughly half our mental world, after all, so the more we comprehend and communicate them, the more

connected, integrated, and genuine we can become. Then, the quality of our connections increases greatly as well.

21. “Were your mistakes accepted as a normal part of the learning process? Or as something you were taught to associate with contempt, ridicule, punishment?”

As noted previously, fallibility is something that our species also continues to grapple with. Other animals make mistakes too, of course, but they don’t possess conceptual self-awareness and, thus, they don’t experience shame and blame themselves and others on account of errors. If our goals are to limit mistakes and to correct them, then subjecting this learning process to criticism, contempt, ridicule, and punishment is pretty counter-productive. Guiltlessly correcting mistakes needs to come as easily as making them. It’s way past time to dispel notions like original sin that deem one’s mind problematic and untrustworthy in principle, irrespective of how much one tries to prevent and correct errors.

There’s an instructive phrase in the tech start-up community—fail early and fail often. In this realm, and correspondingly in the realm of living in general, failing to achieve exactly what you want simply indicates where you can go next, what you can try instead, in order to improve and succeed. In other words, mistakes are important facts to notice that can point us in new directions. Because mistakes are natural to the process of living, they enable us to use our minds in a continually self-correcting way.

When adults, parents in particular, completely believe in the efficacy and worthiness of children, our world can become a much more understanding, encouraging, and supportive place. We will then not be hobbled by dysfunctional thoughts of our basic fallibility.

22. “Did your parents encourage you in the direction of having a healthy affirmative attitude toward sex and toward your own body? Or a negative attitude? Or did they treat the entire subject as nonexistent?”

By the time we reach adolescence, we’ve seen such a disturbing amount of violence (at times mixed with sex) that one wonders how anyone can mature in a healthy way. Religion typically treats sex as something forbidden, base, dirty, and sinful. Both Western and Eastern

religions tend to emphasize selflessness as a virtue, which entails a distancing from one's desires and "pleasures of the flesh," including sexual ones. They preach that the body and its senses are not to be entirely trusted and embraced. And they normally expound that carnal pleasures lead to mayhem, cruelty, and despair.

Typically, being comfortable with one's body and sexuality is related to how comfortable one's parents were with them. Parents are basically models of what being human is all about. If they feel anxiety or embarrassment about explaining to children how they were made and exactly where they came from, a puzzling message is sent.

I once heard on a podcast a hypothetical scenario for people to consider, which reveals a lot about our culture. A mother or father walks by a living room where a child is watching a video screen that's showing either something sexual or something violent. Now, which video on that screen do you think would provoke more of a concerned response—a hard core fight scene or a hard core sex scene? It's likely the latter.

Children are often sent the bewildering message that consensual (and clearly pleasurable) sex is obscene, and they must be sheltered from the nature of it, while nonconsensual (and clearly unpleasurable, at least for the victims) violence is not obscene, but rather fine to view. Hence, behavior that naturally brings persons immense amounts of enjoyment ought to be censored, but bloody conflict is supposedly a normal part of life and usually needed for heroism to be expressed (notice the widespread use of video game violence to attain a sense of release and empowerment).

What's actually needed in the realm of sexuality is straightforward communication of information in a manner and context that children can integrate comprehensibly and healthily. Unfortunately, much of the seemingly limitless eroticism that the Internet offers us reflects various distortions, and these stem from a culture that tends to keep the wonderful nature of sexuality underground, or taboo in polite company. As a consequence, many tragic expressions of early unmet needs can arise, and the joys of sex from the standpoint of equality, respect, and romantic love can become minimized or undervalued.

Undoubtedly, the world of human violence models for children a world without peaceful relations and respectful boundaries. Yet, children's needs for respect, trust, and understanding can be met as they

mature by providing useful information about these crucial matters of the body and mind.

23. “Did your parents’ manner of dealing with you tend to develop and strengthen your sense of your masculinity or femininity? Or to frustrate and diminish it? Or neither?”

Masculinity and femininity are words that can have emotional charge and be steeped in cultural bias. Objective definitions for them can be hard to formulate, other than what pertains *physically* to male traits and female traits. Beyond the physical differences, learning, memes, and culture intrude. After all, what’s considered masculine in one society may be considered feminine in another, and vice versa. For an eye-opening analysis of the biases we can acquire in this realm, check out Cordelia Fine’s book *Delusions Of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, And Neurosexism Create Difference* [23] as well as Warren Farrell’s book *The Myth Of Male Power: Why Men Are The Disposable Sex*. [24]

Each person, whether a he or a she, is an individual, with a mind that basically consists of awareness, thoughts, images, memories, feelings, desires, values, beliefs, and both physical and psychological needs. How each person decides to express these aspects is up to him or her. Suffice it to say that parents (and adults in general) markedly benefit from exploring their own “roles” of gender acquired from society, lest they pass them onto children uncritically. For instance, pointing out feats of strength and conquest doesn’t really explain masculinity any more than pointing out nurturing gestures and sociability explains femininity.

24. “Did your parents encourage you to feel that your life belonged to you? Or were you encouraged to believe that you were merely a family asset and that your achievements were significant only insofar as they brought glory to your parents? Were you treated as a family resource or as an end in yourself?”

Viewing yourself as an end in yourself, rather than as a means to someone else’s end, is probably one of the most difficult tasks in a culture that’s rooted in an ethics of sacrifice. Few parents were taught when they were children that their lives fully belonged to them—so, the intergenerational transfer of self-sacrifice continued.

When children are treated as inferiors in the family, all kinds of control measures and interruptions in their own choice-making and learning processes seem justified. Even though learning to make helpful choices for oneself (including in relation to others) is of *paramount* importance, conditional parenting methods tragically discourage this.

When children are sent the message that they aren't trusted and thus aren't in charge of their own learning processes—for example, of learning when (and how) to eat, sleep, bathe, or understand something—then among other tragic things we can expect battles of the wills, or “autonomy wars,” as Marshall Rosenberg called them. Additionally, an internal struggle arises for adults about when to begin relinquishing control and perhaps when to stop punishing children for disobedience. During the teenage years, most parents indeed shift their perspective somewhat, though they might retain various power-over aspects, which once again reflect distorted views of children's efficacy and worth.

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Perhaps you felt some distress and worry as we covered the profound questions posed by Branden about your childhood. These emotions mean that your subconscious mind is noting the questions' significance. Of course, your answers to them have implications for your interactions with children today, as well as for how you relate to your child-self, which is the part representing the constellations of memories from those early times. Please have compassion for these feelings and others that you experience, because they are helping you to connect with needs for integration, safety, and meaning, among others.

Realize that at any point in time as an adult, you can begin to repair the trauma that you experienced and may be reliving in various ways. You *can* remedy the distorted beliefs and outdated behaviors formed from your experiences of not getting your needs met early on. Such a healing and growth process attunes you to meeting the needs of yourself and of children presently. In the realm of the psychological, the way out is through. In a real sense, all of us are invited by our interactions to make sense of our past, to come to terms with it in relation to the present. The practice of living consciously proves to be key.

The Art Of Self Discovery is a psychotherapeutic workbook written by Nathaniel Branden, which was designed to help each individual

comprehensively explore his or her inner continent, namely the subconscious realm, using sentence completion exercises. [25] Since it's been out of print for many years (though it and Branden's other books may be back in print soon), I made it available as a downloadable ebook on my counseling site. [35] To work through all the exercises in this book might take a month or two, depending on how much spare time you have each day or week. Needless to say, the insights and integration that are possible from it are well worth the time and effort.

Also, variations of cognitive behavioral therapy (e.g., trauma-focused CBT) have been widely credited in and out of clinical settings with enabling persons to feel better about themselves, improve their outlook on life and relationships, and assist in their quest to live happily and successfully. A myriad of techniques can assist us in becoming more integrated and accepting of ourselves. As noted in my podcast series on trauma (episodes 209-212), [35] psychodrama and psychomotor therapy particularly help process traumatic memories and behavior patterns in healing ways. They accomplish this with role-playing, guided imagery, working with sub-selves (i.e., subconscious facets of mind with beliefs and emotions from life experiences or stages, particularly one's child-self), and consciously connecting with feelings and needs. These techniques enable us to attune to what's really been troubling us and learn new strategies for healing and growing.

As we'll explore in chapters six and seven, self-compassion, self-empathy, and self-acceptance help us attain self-knowledge, generating self-understanding and thus inner peace. Covering such crucial psychological aspects allows us to paint a portrait of ourselves in the world that will invite us to smile more often and feel more hopeful and excited about realizing our wonderful dreams.

Family comfort dynamics

In order to live in a society of respect, we need to focus on the psychological dynamics operating in the family system. Answers to Branden's questions can become affirming of both parents and children—which means, life-affirming for everyone in society. As we've explored, many of the things that were modeled for us by parents tended to miss much of what *can be* modeled. For new modeling to happen, individuals

need new information, new perspectives, new insights, coupled with the motivation and action-oriented ambition to make it happen.

Related to our presently domination-oriented culture and specifically to family dysfunction, Branden shared some other important thoughts:

“For the majority of children, the early years of life contain many frightening and painful experiences. Perhaps a child has parents who never respond to his need to be touched, held and caressed; or who constantly scream at him or at each other; or who deliberately invoke fear and guilt in him as a means of exercising control; or who swing between over-solicitude and callous remoteness; or who subject him to lies and mockery; or who are neglectful and indifferent; or who continually criticize and rebuke him; or who overwhelm him with bewildering and contradictory injunctions; or who present him with expectations and demands that take no cognizance of his knowledge, needs or interests; or who subject him to physical violence; or who consistently discourage his efforts at spontaneity and self-assertiveness.” (p. 8) [\[79\]](#)

These are the tragic effects of a world in which self-knowledge, self-empathy, and self-improvement aren’t held as firm priorities by adults. Of course, words such as “never,” “constantly,” “continually,” and “consistently” might not be completely accurate in the above experiences, since unpredictability and inconsistency of loving gestures mixed with abuse and neglect tend to be more typical in families. But such adverbs were likely used to identify with the child’s main experience of traumatic, overwhelming emotional distress. In these scenarios parents reenact the same psychological and behavioral predicaments that they experienced when they were children; again, typically parents learn and adopt similar strategies as their parents, and they pass these on. Despite the abundance of self-help and relationship books now available, the fundamental dynamics are just not widely understood, integrated, and distributed yet. And what is known is generally not being fully implemented in people’s lives.

Ultimately, bringing a baby into the world requires no profound insights about one’s own childhood and especially how one’s traumatic experiences tend to be re-expressed or reenacted. Tragically, we can disregard the journey of self-discovery and thus inner-healing, and we

can overlook the profound importance of an earnest reassessment of our beliefs and premises about self, others, and the world. Then, unless some catalyst gives rise to curiosity and the intrinsic motivation make things better for all involved, history simply repeats itself.

We sometimes hear adults, who are feeling discontented and irritated, speak yearningly about the prospect of “required parenting courses” for their peers. Yet, we know that requiring something doesn’t foster intrinsic motivation. Just look at all the mandatory counseling that people are subjected to by judges in governmental courts. More power-over tactics don’t work; they don’t help us along the path of internal growth. Instead, they’re a quite costly way to convey dismay and disappointment about problematic circumstances that stem from past patterns.

So, how do we foster more life-enriching decisions by those who become parents? Essentially, by understanding and empathizing with what led them on their path that did not include strategies for gaining more awareness and concern for universal needs. The questions formulated by Branden can be a very useful place to begin that process of empathetic understanding—for every person was once a child, a precious part of self to relate to with love, compassion, and support.

Given the nature of domination systems, we humans have proven time and time again that we can become comfortable with being ruled by others and/or ruling over others. We can derive temporary comfort from not expending effort in integrating a new perspective. Respectfully asserting our own worth and honoring the worth of others can be challenging at times in this culture. As children, given our disempowered circumstances in a conditional parenting environment, we tend to formulate strategies of self-comfort and self-protection. We learn relatively quickly the various ways of coping with power-over dynamics, and we tend to maintain them over time.

Yet, the more children are respected and encouraged to make their own choices, the less comfort they’ll find in relinquishing aspects of self-responsibility—for that would be uncomfortable for their liberated minds. The usual conflicts that children have with parents early on (and later with various “authorities”) demonstrate that shutting down parts of self isn’t a natural process for us.

To develop a sense of empathy for the psychological circumstances of most adults also means to have compassion for our own

upbringing, grieving the loss concerning so many needs that simply went unmet. Costly strategies of relating to self and others can be seen as ways to dissociate from lots of early pain, sadness, fear, anger, and confusion. To transcend past strategies entails compassionately understanding the reasons for their adoption early on and reassessing their usefulness in the present. The needs for ease, comfort, and stability, for example, don't have to come at the expense of self-assertiveness, independent thinking and acting, choice and autonomy.

Perhaps one day all persons will have the helpful knowledge gained from a new culture that's oriented around intrinsic motivation and self-responsibility. This will undoubtedly contribute to the dissolution of domination systems. While this seems so different than the present, life-enriching changes can and do happen. Let's now inspect some more tragically typical institutional predicaments in which we find ourselves.

Religion and unquestioned traditions

How many churches and other places of worship are in your community? Some American towns and cities seem to have at least one of them every few blocks. Most of us are aware of what goes on inside churches, for instance, but oftentimes what goes on inside individuals' minds inside churches remains unexplored.

We naturally desire to find and associate with others of like mind, which enables us to obtain some semblance of visibility. We seek and gain a sense of community, belonging, and familiarity. We also want to know what life is about and what constitutes "the good life." Stemming from our domination-oriented upbringing, however, we also tend to be trained in what it means to be a "good person" and how to avoid being a "bad person." Religion, especially as promoted by places of worship, offers such things.

As we might know, abiding by religious rules can be just as disempowering to oneself as abiding by parents' rules. Normally, if your reasoning capacity isn't completely honored, if you're told that you *must* accept various premises on faith, then feelings such as anxiety, confusion, frustration, alienation, and insecurity tend to arise. Such feelings are in need of compassionate inspection, yet because our culture is so dissociated from the emotional world of humans, these feelings are

usually minimized with arguments from authority and traditional behaviors.

Feelings that indicate inner turmoil, for instance anxiety and conflict, are usually not logically explored in the context of religion. Too many cognitive stumbling blocks and too many unanswered questions seem too overwhelming to inspect with sufficient clarity. So, instead, pretense may set in, to replace authentic exploration of what's happening emotionally and why. This can take the form of adults offering many prematurely answered questions, along with many incorrect answers, which impressionable young minds may have major trouble reconciling.

When we don't objectively integrate something important—such as the nature of reality, the cosmos, and our place in it—our cognitive efficacy is stifled. Yet this is what happens when we find ourselves being ruled by a religion or more specifically a religious group and its tenets, in which our initial feelings of frustration, anxiety, and confusion—which stem from our need for clarity—are buried under heaps of messages from sermons and scriptures, commandments of “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not.” Typically with religion, major philosophical premises continue to go unchecked, in the name of assuring belonging and comfort once again and, ironically, being more at ease with one's uneasiness and doubt.

When we study how children become religiously minded, we can see the same systemic patterns that happen in all families that use power-over tactics. The value that children ascribe to church or religion typically reflects their needs for belonging, to stay connected with others and, of course, to meet and have fun with new persons. Some meaning is gained as well, albeit in a context that doesn't make complete sense, in which the given answers beg many more questions. Yet, children are seldom told that we can get such needs met in less costly and more enriching ways, in which sacrifice isn't involved.

Most of us know from either personal experience or eyewitness testimony what typically happens when a child defies parents' wishes regarding, e.g., church attendance or, further, defies acceptance of the family's religion and its beliefs. At best, he or she experiences some withdrawal of love and at worst is harshly punished—in some dogmatic cultures even to the horrific point of death. Since love withdrawal can be a form of punishment itself, we again see the domination system in effect with the memes of religion.

Yet, what if children could disagree with their parents about their religious beliefs without fear of reprimand or punishment and losing connection? Then, honesty wouldn't be so scary. Such dissent, after all, entreats parents to check the same premises that their children are checking. Even though children check such premises in a less philosophically comprehensive way, they're nonetheless valid checks. Children are naturally adept at noticing inconsistencies; early on, our process of reason disfavors suspension of itself.

On this subject in the novel *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand's character John Galt stated the following:

"Do not say that you're afraid to trust your mind because you know so little. Are you safer in surrendering to mystics and discarding the little that you know? Live and act within the limit of your knowledge and keep expanding it to the limit of your life. Redeem your mind from the hockshops of authority. Accept the fact that you are not omniscient, but playing a zombie will not give you omniscience—that your mind is fallible, but becoming mindless will not make you infallible—that an error made on your own is safer than ten truths accepted on faith, because the first leaves you the means to correct it, but the second destroys your capacity to distinguish truth from error. In place of your dream of an omniscient automaton, accept the fact that any knowledge man acquires is acquired by his own will and effort, and that *that* is his distinction in the universe, *that* is his nature, his morality, his glory." (p. 1058) [19]

Our knowledge is gained through a reasoning process of identification and conceptual integration via our sensory-perceptual system, which gives rise to evaluation and emotional integration. Any proclaimed or self-appointed "authorities" can only gain their knowledge in this same manner. No one has access to an existence apart from the one we're in; it's as connected to us as the air we breathe and the gravity that secures that air and ourselves to the planet. As much as we might like to have an intrinsic or innate form of knowledge, any time we try to contradict our conceptual nature, we pay a price. We are constantly attending—consciously, subconsciously, and unconsciously—to the reality of our life circumstances, which entails honoring our ability to

discern what's valid from what's not, what's useful from what's not, and what's helpful from what's not.

Assuredly, we can trace a mystical view of the universe, be it religious or new-age, to its origin in the family and the wider cultural system. In this realm we encounter feelings of confusion, fear, anxiety, anger, and pain about not getting our needs met for clarity, understanding, and meaning, among others. As noted, instead of remaining dissociated from these traumatic childhood experiences, we can heal them and then embrace our revived fascination and enjoyment with the wonders of reality. These wonders are all around us, nearly begging to be inspected and experienced.

Rather than close ourselves off in a separate world via wishes or someone else's fanciful pronouncements, we can channel our creative capacities into further understanding nature and all its puzzles and challenges. This entails embracing the discoverer within us, the aspect of self that asks "Why?" and seeks real answers to that timeless question. This part of oneself flawlessly reflects the children we once were, filled with passion about thinking, wondering, and learning, with boundless inquisitiveness.

Envision what our lives can be like without hockshops of authority in our world, which perpetuate terribly restrictive, frustrating, confusing, frightening, inexplicable, and anxiety-ridden experiences. Our lives *can* make complete sense to us, and there's immense comfort in that—a life filled with rationality, predictability, comprehensibility, and all the curiosity that flows from that context.

Indeed, this is a vision of the future of humanity we're talking about, and it exists within each of us, with every waking moment when our minds conjure up that question "Why?" and then proceed to discover a new truth.

Being ruled as "citizens"

We've covered a lot of internal dialogue thus far, but even without it, all of us can notice how unfree we are, at least on some level—as we find ourselves doing what we're told to do, not only as children but also as adults, by other adults working for an age-old institution called government. We're being ruled as purported citizens, who have purported allegiance to a legal fiction called the State; in return, this legal

fiction is supposed to protect and provide for us, even though such protection and provision entails coercing us on a daily basis.

No “social contract” of statism can respect persons and their property, because in this paradigm voluntary agency simply isn’t allowed; instead, we’re threatened with punishment (fines, imprisonment, and even death) if we don’t obey the “laws of the State.” So, we gain no real protections for our lives and well-being by having such a system. If you’ve read *Complete Liberty*, then you know that our political world, much like the rest of our cultural world, is filled with spurious notions and illogical concepts, a.k.a., things that don’t make sense.

Assuredly, we’ve been handed another raw deal by our culture here, and this one is supposed to be endured from birth to death. A few people might be incredibly fortunate to have been reared in a family context that didn’t exercise any methods of domination. Yet even for this likely tiny minority, adulthood affords no such freedoms. Again, everyone is required “by law” to comply with the institution of persons called government—which essentially means adults issuing orders to fellow adults and seeking to punish them for noncompliance. Most of this system’s supporters believe that all hell would break loose if persons did not obey such laws and instead just did what they really wanted.

We experience such a political contradiction on an ongoing basis, for example with every sales tax, parking ticket, license fee, or police arrest for a victimless “crime.” At this point, or likely before this point, virtually all students and professors of law and political science end serious inquiry. Asking *why* this system exists in the first place is typically frowned upon, mainly because it disturbs the not-to-be-questioned status quo and thus triggers discomfort. Such is the self-perpetuating nature of a human system.

For some wider and deeper context, let’s explore aspects of the genesis of this system supposedly designed for the “common good.” The history of civilization, which began many thousands of years ago, has been a history of statist control and punishment of people.

While the advantages of the new ways of life with civilization’s emergence were many, some led to potentially greater social problems, ones more destructive than those previous in primitive groups. Surpluses of goods and increasing populations, in the absence of logical political philosophy, invited a new form of barbarity. After the Stone Age, the

Bronze and Iron ages arose, yielding more effective implements for agricultural, domestic and commercial use—and also for war. What followed for millennia up to the present day was a variety of dynasties, dominions, reigns, and conquests too numerous to mention here, but all containing the theme of using politically centralized power-over strategies—namely, coercion and punishment.

Formerly with distinctively more mobile bands, tribes, and to a lesser extent chiefdoms (which were more structured and somewhat hierarchical in social order), much of the violence had consisted of smaller feuds. Though hostility and revengeful tactics and raids of reprisal were sometimes widespread, large-scale wars could not be sustained in primitive economies. Further, the actual conquest of other domains was not usually practiced, because societies were relatively unproductive, thus having little to offer the conquerors. [26] However, larger resource-rich communities offered greater reasons for aggression. As Historian J.H. Plumb put it:

“Loot was no longer merely women and hunting-grounds, but citadels, treasure and, above all, the labour of peasants. Since the very dawn of civilization, war—with its concomitants—plague, famine, and devastation—has been woven closely into the fabric of human society. And this, too, has influenced the growth of societies in remarkable ways. Societies bent on war need not only specialized, or partly specialized, castes or classes to wage it, but also a heightened consciousness of their social group, a self-identification with a cause or a God, to strengthen resolve for the final personal sacrifice. Ideologies are contemporaneous with the sickle and the sword. Courage is easier with belief and so is labour. And so religion was needed not only to explain and sanctify by ritual the mysteries of fertility but also to provide both social discipline, social consciousness and social aggression. From this time war and belief were linked for humanity’s torment.” (p. 24) [27]

How ironic that beneficial economic changes have given rise to such harmful societal outgrowths, or rather, offered more opportunity for them. Wars and their concomitants have basically disrupted and wrecked the very structures and practices for people’s well-being. Yet to say that people are *naturally* driven by such things as greed, hatred, and power over others—a variation of Freud’s “aggressive instinct”—is to overlook

crucial developmental factors. Our exploration of the nature of our species thus far alerts us to the contradictions. In many parts of the world today, war-torn conditions aren't much different than those in the distant past. Only the weapons and technologies have changed and, coupled with population increases, have enabled the slaughter of tens of millions of individuals during the last century alone.

The plain fact is that humans are animals quite capable of making life far more difficult than it can be. With our capacity to make life wonderfully positive comes our capacity to make life an incredibly torturous hell. Our species has often succeeded in needlessly cultivating the latter, via systems of domination.

With the formation of civilization came the formation of the abstraction known as "the State," which manifested itself as a ruling body of persons that presided over and controlled the affairs of "the people." Since civilizations had larger populations, thriving commerce, and especially surpluses of goods, some individuals found it convenient to fashion institutions to govern these new enterprises. Governing was often in exchange for coerced "services," such as construction and maintenance of so-called public works and the formation of a military. The statist system was supposed to protect people from foreigners who possibly wanted to conquer their communities for the wealth they provided. [28]

So, militaries could now be used to enforce the laws and edicts of the rulers to accomplish various ends. Rulers often kept military members loyal not only via coercion, but also by providing them particular benefits and maintaining collectivistic ideologies. Political theorist Albert Jay Nock wrote of the attitude that tends to develop:

"An army on the march has no philosophy; it views itself as a creature of the moment. It does not rationalize conduct except in terms of an immediate end. As Tennyson observed, there is a pretty strict official understanding against its doing so; 'theirs not to reason why' ['theirs but to do and die']. Emotionalizing conduct is another matter, and the more of it the better; it is encouraged by a whole elaborate paraphernalia of showy etiquette, flags, music, uniforms, decorations, and careful cultivation of a very special sort of comradery." (p. 27) [29]

The formation of the statist system required more than a military system that discouraged self-responsibility and philosophical reflection. The creation of conflicts, and at the same time unified beliefs and goals, were necessary to form governing bodies—for example, different classes, different castes, different enemies, promised safety and protection, sense of community, desire for someone to lead, and the like. High concentrations of people may have augmented threats of (or desires for) external conquest and, accordingly, the desire for hierarchical internal development and cohesiveness.

On account of States arising from many complex societal conditions, they have taken many forms. Lawrence Krader, a scholar on the subject, wrote the following: “There have been and are city-states, empire-states, theocratic-states, tribal-consanguineal states, nation-states, centralized states, and decentralized states; autocratic, oligarchic, and democratic states; states stratified by class, caste, and social estate.” (p. 4) [30]

While primitive groups at times squelched expressions of individualism and discouraged new thinking, essentially keeping persons in conditions of subsistence-level functioning with basic barter arrangements and coerced altruism for tens of thousands of years, governmental power structures in civilizations used persons as expendable parts for more destructive and harmful schemes. Slavery became an oppressive way to get various projects accomplished, fulfilling desires of some at the expense of the dignity and lives of many. Thus, people were treated as means to others’ particular ends, i.e., as sacrificial animals.

Those not enslaved were still relegated to a subordinate role, however, now to the “welfare of the community”—meaning, to the statist system. Many lived as peasants under the influence of various empires, kingdoms, fiefdoms, and manorial systems. In exchange for “protection,” they paid their “dues” by providing goods and services. [31]

Obviously, many aspects of these societies in civilization were no step forward in psychological and political progress. Even though they assisted in the generation of more trade-based, money-based, and industrial methods, which facilitated economic progress, oftentimes the scale of misery and massacre was a hundredfold. Political theorist Murray Rothbard commented on the “black and unprecedented record of the State through history”:

“No combination of private marauders can possibly begin to match the state’s unrelenting record of theft, confiscation, oppression, and mass murder. No collection of Mafia or private bank robbers can begin to compare with all the Hiroshimas, Dresdens, and Lidices and their analogues through the history of mankind.” (p. 4) [32]

And with the advent of civilization, orthodox religions also formed. They were often utilized by statist rulers, monarchs, and emperors to advance methods of destruction. Now enemies were to be crushed, other so-called states and their encompassed lands were to be conquered and seized, communities were to be obliterated, and countless individuals were to be snuffed out, with the supposed moral backing of the “Will of God” (hence, holy wars that continue to this very day).

Rather than paint romantic pictures about the cultural diversity and interesting ways of life of various peoples throughout the history of civilization, let’s identify the essential characteristic of these societies: rule by governmental force. Indeed, the primary crime of statism consists of using coercion to attain various ends. The statist system’s plundering of countries, communities, and civilizations has gone hand-in-hand with (and has been funded by) the plundering of people in its arbitrary dominion. While private individuals might be prohibited from using aggression against others in their communities, those operating as “the State” continue to live by a different standard, one that’s inconsistent with justice. Crime was and still is a term ascribed not only to aggressive actions of individuals (such things as robbery, rape, and murder), but also to violations of laws, statutes, regulations, and provisions by government. The coercive actions and punishments imposed by those in the enforcement arm of government are commonly viewed as necessary and proper by those upholding this system. 19th Century individualist anarchist Michael Bakunin pointed out this longstanding legal inconsistency:

“What is permitted to the State is forbidden to the individual. Such is the maxim of all governments. Machiavelli said it, and history as well as the practice of all contemporary governments bear him out on that point. Crime is the necessary condition of the very existence of the State, and it therefore constitutes its exclusive monopoly, from which it

follows that the individual who dares commit a crime is guilty in a two-fold sense: first, he is guilty against human conscience, and, above all, he is guilty against the State in arrogating to himself one of its most precious privileges." (p. 141) [33]

As noted, offensive force is an inherently anti-social act. Whether used in a primitive tribe or in an advanced civilization, aggression is inimical to human life and to harmonious social interactions. Aggression is no less destructive when it's declared "legal" in a statist system, such as the practice of extortion widely known as taxation. Nock noted the workings as follows: "The State is not...a social institution administered in an anti-social way. It is an anti-social institution, administered in the only way an anti-social institution can be administered, and by the kind of person who, in the nature of things, is best adapted to such service." (p. 183) [29]

Like all systems, being immersed in the statist system *from birth* adapts humans to it. For various psychological and sociological reasons, people throughout history have tolerated coercive harm done to themselves and others. Essentially, they've matured not realizing the value of themselves, of their individual minds and persons. Like today, some might've had a vision of how things can be altered for the better, of new possibilities, but they were unable to rid their lives of tyranny.

By inspecting the developmental side of social organization, we can see how "politics" really happens. Moreover, we can see that the factors that contribute to the rise of the tribal mentality and statism—both being forms of collectivism, which doesn't fully honor individuals—are still very active in civilization. This framework of historical understanding helps us grasp the full context of our present circumstances.

Learning about history can be the first "red pill" we take (to see the *real* reality, as in *The Matrix*), provided that our source material isn't statist in nature. As we grasp these basic truths, we indeed begin to see the real reality in relation to the matrix of coercion in civilization. To recognize that we are *not* considered self-owners, and to understand the various implications of this, can be a hard pill to swallow—especially since we in America were taught that we live in the land of the free and home of the brave, with liberty and justice for all.

The domination system of politics is represented by the concept of the State. Despite being invalid, it's still commonly believed to be necessary and proper for social order, to ensure human well-being and safety. However, like all major concepts of domination, it can be disputed and rejected as contradictory—to splendid personal and societal benefit. This is part of the waking-up process.

The invalid concept “citizen” is an outgrowth of the notion of the State; again, it assumes a duty of allegiance to the State, which allegedly has some sort of duty to protect citizens, despite overwhelming evidence (and even “Supreme Court” rulings) to the contrary. Rather than protecting us from harm, the statist system robs all of us of our property and coerces us into doing things that we otherwise would not do, with everyone suffering as a result.

Clearly, inner freedom and individual liberation matter a great deal in the realm of valid political philosophy. To live freely in this realm means to discern what's useful for getting needs met without human sacrifice. This waking-up process would be much easier if most of us weren't educated in, and thus heavily influenced by, governmental schooling. Spending a substantial part of one's life in a context that doesn't challenge status-quo political premises—that doesn't invite learners to ask key questions, especially about the nature of submission to “authority”—can make discerning and speaking truth a monumental task. This explains why so few have broken free from their early conditioning and programming, be it in the family, church, school, or politics.

Governmental destruction of self-actualization

Self-actualization concerns the process of fulfilling one's needs and desires for enrichment and capacities to grow and flourish. Let's consider the twofold nature of the destruction of self-actualization by the concept and institution called government. The first is the tangible, material aspect, much of which was described above in the tragic tale of human history. When people are coerced out of their time, money, and effort to do things that they wouldn't otherwise do, or prefer not to do, costly sacrifices are happening.

Though French political philosopher Frederic Bastiat was himself a believer in government, he's famous in libertarian circles for the story

of “the broken window fallacy.” Essentially, this means overlooking the opportunity costs of unproductive and often counterproductive governmental diversions of energy and resources from a marketplace. As outlandish as it may sound (especially if they are *your* windows) some believe that breaking windows, either actually or metaphorically, makes the economy better by creating jobs for window manufacturers and installers.

Regardless of whether windows get broken by a tornado or by vandals, human effort and resources will need to be expended to replace them—which are human effort and resources that would have been used elsewhere in the marketplace if no breakage had taken place. Unfortunately, the institution of government tends to break various useful things, not to mention increase the potential for mutually assured destruction. The broken window fallacy looms catastrophically large in policies for warfare. Trillions of dollars have been spent over the last few decades alone to devise more effective ways of killing fellow human beings and destroying things, with the declared intention of keeping us safe and secure.

Perverse incentives arise from making money coercively rather than earning it in voluntary trade; trillions of dollars have also been spent doing things that private owners simply would never have done, due to market incentives. Taxation and monopolistic control of the money supply continuously drain society of its prosperity. *Complete Liberty* delves into much more detail about the crushing costs of governmental memes on entire economies, diminishing or ruining countless individual lives, businesses, and creative systems.

The other aspect of the twofold nature of the destruction of our self-actualization by government pertains to the *idea itself*, i.e., the notion that it’s a useful and necessary way to “oversee” and “regulate” people’s lives in civilization. In fact, without the belief that government must exist for proper social order and well-being, all the devastation wrought by this institution of persons would not occur.

Given the things that we’ve covered in this book thus far, the answer to the following question becomes quite apparent: Why do individuals tend to believe that they need to be controlled and directed by other people (called government) in civilization? Because that’s how things commonly operated in our families, and that’s all we’ve ever known. The very idea of government is the quintessential manifestation

of a culture using power-over strategies, which means a highly distrustful culture. Unquestioning obedience to this idea truly leads to the impairment of our capacity to self-actualize as individuals in a technologically advanced society.

Those who become millionaires and even billionaires in our present culture still only exercise a small fraction of their creative and productive potential; their endeavors and enterprises do not take place in a free marketplace, and the vast majority of them (what those in the Occupy movement call “the 1%”) unfortunately seems to be okay with that. To the degree that outdated and incorrect ideas about human nature fill their minds—for instance, that we can’t be trusted to provide for ourselves and each other, that we must be punished if we don’t obey “laws,” that we must be coerced out of our time, energy, and money to support a domination institution, that we must believe in collectivistic abstractions such as “public property” and “nations,” and that we must perpetuate coercive systems—to the degree that they think all this, their reasoning remains hindered, their empathy is drained, and their flourishing remains vastly diminished.

Ultimately, the red pill that opens our eyes to the actual reality is something for all of us to take, from the hourly part-time worker to the CEO, from the cop and judge to the coerced jury members. In many respects, the choice to take it is just as much a process of healing childhood trauma (e.g., confusion, pain, and fears) as it is remedying various contradictions in thinking. False beliefs commonly originate in childhood, after all, and unfortunately they tend to have major staying power in the mind. Yet, as the character Sofia in the film *Vanilla Sky* noted, “Every passing minute is another chance to turn it all around.”

No one needs to remain mired in processes of the past, be they ancient or just a few decades old. Presently, we can see more and imagine more than our former selves can, due to having more experiences, more knowledge, and more integration. This is in line with recognizing that self-worth and self-efficacy are our birthrights, along with happiness. Let’s now delve more into the experience of childhood in order to put adulthood into clearer perspective.

Chapter 4

Basic truths of childhood and adulthood

Childhood issues and vital concerns

My parents divorced when I was seven years old, which really wasn't an age when I could make full sense of what had happened and what was happening. As you might know, seven is the supposed age of reasoning ability in Catholicism, denoting moral responsibility and therefore the capacity to experience subjective guilt from "sinning." On many levels in religion, understanding of child psychology and child development remains in The Dark Ages.

From my emotional standpoint I had a sense of relief from the divorce, but also felt confusion and sadness. I felt relief that my parents' antagonism, which usually took the form of raised angry voices, would finally cease (other than subsequent acrimonious telephone conversations between them). Unfortunately, as with most divorces, my parents did not spend much time really empathizing with their own hurt and each other's hurt, and much of it went unprocessed and unhealed. Thus, they were at a loss to provide such compassionate understanding to me.

I was left to figure out why two individuals who were able to bring another person into the world (albeit accidentally) could not maintain at least friendly relations, even if romantic feelings faded. Finding myself somewhat unable to decipher the nature of humans, I took partial refuge in books, which was my way of finding some comprehensibility in the world, first mostly via fantasy fiction (Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, etc.) and then later mostly non-fiction. Reading Atlas Shrugged many years later at twenty-three, after my first college degree, definitely brought a whole lot more philosophical clarity to things.

My father was raised Catholic and, even though he rebelled against many of its tenets in his formative years, he still believed in them

during his last days, when he died of cirrhosis and kidney failure at age fifty. Tragically, alcohol was a substance he used on a daily basis to cope with troubling subconscious thoughts and emotions, including the contradictions that were imposed on his mind from an early age— notions like self-sacrifice and original sin. My mother, an atheist, had parents who mostly renounced the religiosity of the church by the time she and her siblings were born. Her mother (my grandmother) drank alcohol in excess too, viewing it as the elixir to deal with an emotionally disconnected marriage to a man seemingly more wedded to his machine-tool business, my grandfather.

Of course, like most persons, I could say that I had a normal childhood, middle class normal perhaps. Yet this would do a disservice to our need for authenticity. In our culture the harmful aspects of one's upbringing tend not to be the focus, unless you're engaged in psychotherapeutic exercises or you're having an empathetic conversation about such things with friends or family (or simply watching YouTube videos of John Bradshaw seminars and the like). Recognition and exploration of early trauma and its effects tend to be avoided when we want to maintain a somewhat comfortable psychological status quo. Higher quality relationships with self and others are put in jeopardy as a result.

Exploring the nature of childhood provides us with much-needed comprehensibility about humans, and especially about human conflict. When we recognize our needs that didn't get met early on, we can begin to reconnect with the emotions we had and understand the behaviors we adopted. Thus, we can begin to process them in a healthy, integrative way. In turn we can discover new and enriching ways of being in the world and interacting with others, so those needs can finally get met.

Around the time my parents divorced, I literally searched for the elusive four-leaf clover on my grandparents' expansive lawn in suburban Minneapolis. I did find a few of them, to my delight. Being an "only child," I devised many ways to spend time alone. Swinging from the drooping vines of a giant willow tree in the summertime was another fun activity, in addition to the amazing smell of lilacs in full bloom. Crawling through snow-covered cattails in the wintertime on a frozen pond behind the house was yet another. Since Minneapolis winters provided snow in abundance, I built snow forts. I also built couch-cushion forts indoors (likely reflecting the issue of self-protection from the sometimes

incomprehensible and unpredictable adult world). I enjoyed taking care of and riding my pony named Shamrock too, which years later in the mountains of central Idaho morphed into a horse named Joe, and then a dirt bike named Yamaha IT175. These things reflected my strong connection with nature and free exploration of the outdoors, things that all children tend to cherish.

As we look deeper into our early experiences, we can see more clearly what drives us as children, as well as what can hinder us. While I was subjected to physical punishment only on a few occasions (I tended to be more compliant than rebellious), I definitely experienced the predominant authoritarian-oriented behaviors that we've been exploring about parenting. Especially as a toddler, I was also subjected to teasing, sarcasm, and love withdrawal. These of course were combined with times of affection, nurturing, and understanding. As we've covered, family life for most individuals can be quite a mixed bag of meeting needs and sacrificing them among children and parents alike. This is mainly because self-knowledge isn't made a priority for living well, and this reflects a fragmented emotional world for most adults. The subconscious mind contains various beliefs and assessments about oneself that are mostly generated during childhood in the midst of many potentially traumatizing experiences, which sacrificed vital needs.

Being disconnected from the nature of our traumatic childhood experiences is sadly the norm in society. Such disconnection can manifest in many ways, including reliving or reenacting aspects of early traumas, wherein one subconsciously tries to normalize them or somehow resolve them with surrogates. As we attempted to maintain a stable connection with our caregivers, we integrated subconscious thought patterns and behaviors that served to keep us "safe." In spite of their utility at the time, defense mechanisms such as dissociation, repression, rationalization, and denial hinder the integrative practices of honesty, transparency, and vulnerability. Only such integrative practices can foster intimate inner and outer connections, enriching relationships, and happiness.

Defense mechanisms can be consciously recognized and empathetically understood, so that various subconscious parts of ourselves (fearful, anxious, confused, painful, and angry aspects) are compassionately connected with, instead of disowned and tragically expressed. Authentically connecting with the subconscious aspects of our

minds that relate to our self-concept can foster more emotional availability and consideration. Since self-concept shapes our present and future, raising our awareness about developmental experiences and being attuned to our subconscious processes (e.g., "speaking the unspoken") are foundational to self-knowledge and integrated, healthy functioning.

To explore the nature of childhood is to envision what a world can be like when children's needs are fully met, which entails parents who are resourceful and empowered regarding getting needs met too. To reiterate, the earlier questions posed by Branden offer a very useful set of guidelines. After all, humanity's future is basically determined by how children are treated, particularly by how much they are respected, empathized with, and nurtured.

The tragic predicaments in which most children find themselves are primarily due to a world culture of costly intergenerational transfer, rather than one that encourages greater awareness and transformative changes. In this age-old process, the motivation to understand and empathize gets considerably weakened. Since ancient times, in exchange for living in the group, people regularly had to abide by the rules of the group. One rule, perhaps, was to stifle upset and anger and show deference to powerful authority figures. If one disobeyed this rule, one was either punished or ostracized (albeit another form of punishment).

A similar situation exists in domination-oriented or win/lose family environments. Parents possess a substantial ability to foster authoritarian/obedience-oriented relationships, which they tend to enact when they get frustrated, stressed, tired, and angry—in a real sense, when they're not feeling resourceful, when they're operating with an empathy tank that's practically empty. In turn, many children in such family systems are expected to show deference to their seemingly omnipotent, omniscient, and infallible parents.

For those of assumed inferior rank who disagree with this living arrangement, viable options seem scarce. Educator Maria Montessori had a great deal to say about this kind of psychological milieu. She wrote in *The Secret Of Childhood* about parental practices of ruling over the child as follows:

"Tyranny defies discussion. It surrounds the individual with the impenetrable walls of recognized authority. Adults dominate children by

virtue of a recognized natural right. To question this right would be the same as attacking a kind of consecrated sovereignty. If in a primitive community a tyrant represents God, an adult to a child is divinity itself. He is simply beyond discussion. Rather than disobey, a child must keep silent and adjust himself to everything.

"If he does show some resistance, this will rarely be a direct, or even intended reply to an adult's action. It will rather be a vital defense of his own psychic integrity or an unconscious reaction to oppression...

"...Only with time does a child learn how to react directly against this tyranny. But by then an adult will have learned how to overcome a child by subtler means, convincing him that this tyranny is all for his own good.

"A child owes respect to his elders, but adults claim the right to judge and even offend a child. At their own convenience they direct or even suppress a child's needs, and his protests are regarded as a dangerous and intolerable lack of submission.

"Adults here adopt the attitude of primitive rulers who exact tribute from their subjects without any right of appeal. Children who believe that they owe everything to adults are like those peoples who think that everything they possess is a gracious gift from their king. But are not adults responsible for this attitude? They have adopted the role of a creator and in their pride have maintained that they are responsible for everything that pertains to a child. They make him good, pious, and intelligent, and enable him to come into contact with his environment, with men, and with God. And to make the picture more complete, they refuse to admit that they are exercising any tyranny. And yet has there ever been a tyrant who has ever admitted that he has preyed upon his subjects?" (p. 152) [34]

Indeed, those who admit to preying on their subjects have a more difficult time maintaining "authority." We all know how our wills can be weakened or broken in a family system, supposedly for our own good. Long before my time spent with clients in counseling, I had come to similar conclusions as Montessori did many decades ago.

Striving to be a "good" boy or girl is commonly viewed as a prerequisite for greater connection in the family. Yet what does "good" mean in a context that isn't focused on meeting the needs of little persons with care and equality, but instead involves trying to live up to

expectations of older persons? Unfortunately, it doesn't mean honoring one's own feelings, expressing them without fear of punishment (or hope of reward), and experiencing self-esteem. It usually means giving in to demands.

How does this notion of being "good" (and not being "bad") translate into behaviors in the adult world, once we have matured into grown beings who work to sustain ourselves? It usually means still conforming to what's expected, obeying sundry "authority" figures who are strangers to us, and abiding by "laws," despite their nonsensical nature.

Recall our previous explorations of social psychology, of the ways that adults can defer to the judgment of other adults, despite their conscience and intentions. A world of obedience and conformity is a world lacking affirmative belief in people's efficacy and worth. Welcome to "the real world," a societal predicament largely viewed as satisfactory, or at least tolerable—because, well, "That's just the way things are."

Many of us have heard one or more forms of the following: "You're to speak only when spoken to!"; "How dare you disobey me!"; "I'll give you something to really cry about." Parents who are at wits end often don't attend to the fact that children have needs for respect and understanding of their context, just like parents do, including when they themselves were children.

Whether it occurs in blatant or in subtle ways, the general theme concerning misuse of power usually prevails in the family system. The later societal manifestations are no great psychological leap, and the whole process tends to be self-perpetuating: The child learns from his or her parents' behavior (as well as from others); parents teach the child the specific, required ways of dealing with self and others; the child learns what is expected from others and then passes this on (i.e., if he or she accepts it).

Social demands on individuals to conform can be sizable, both within the family and the culture at large. The inherent imbalances of power in the adult/child and so-called State/citizen relationships can invite major exploitation. The key distinction, however, is that the "State/citizen" relationship is always a corrupt one; by definition it's exploitative. The aggressive policies of statism continually sacrifice justice. In contrast, the adult/child relationship essentially entails

fulfillment of a spectrum of needs to maintain its appropriateness and health.

Nonetheless, people who assume the position of ruler—be it of the family, tribe, or State—are not commonly known for encouraging individuality and pursuit of enlightened self-interest. Typically, they uphold the “welfare of the group” more than any particular person (except, of course, the persons ruling the group). In this way many individuals learn to view themselves, albeit falsely, as dependent beings rather than independent beings. We are also social animals, which means respectfully interdependent beings.

We use our own faculties to live and maintain ourselves, to the extent that we are physically able. We often get help from others and we help them as well, both in personal interactions and marketplace ones. As children, we of course look to others for enriching interactions, knowledge, and guidance; we rely on family members for all kinds of assistance. Yet if, as adults, we haven’t cultivated our need for independence, then we might promote, or at least tacitly agree with, obedience and submission, instead of self-assertiveness and self-reliance. Asserting personal values in line with reason and reality is the opposite of demands for compliance, and it doesn’t entail coercively hindering the autonomy of others. Ultimately, the tactics of force and intimidation are terribly tragic methods for getting what one wants; and oftentimes, what one actually wants, such as better relations with self and others, tends to be severely neglected as a result.

Essential psychology of children and adults

To perceive, to think, to feel, to assess, to discover—to rejoice, to ask questions, to be excited—to be scared, to be mad, to be sad—to be happy. These are some of the main characteristics of both our childhood selves and our adult selves. The key to child psychology, then, is to be found within our own experiences of self. Each of us has memories of how we experienced ourselves and others during our youth. We can become intimate with these memories and empathetic with the feelings that arise from them.

To restructure our lives for optimal flourishing as adults, we need to heal the traumas of our past, when tragically we were overpowered and neglected in various ways. The feelings we felt back then, and the

beliefs we formed, led us to devising strategies to deal with our unmet needs, for instance to protect the psychologically (and sometimes physically) injured aspects of ourselves. As we reprocess the experiences of being a child in a world of not-so-connected and not-so-integrated adults, we practice the art of self-discovery, which enables us to heal old psychological wounds.

Contrary to what our culture trains us to believe, a child's psychology is not some paradoxical mystery, something that needs outside influences to mold into proper form. Montessori knew this and explained it quite extensively in her books, such as *The Secret Of Childhood*. [34] Children's "spontaneous manifestations" she noted are the regular occurrences of autonomous beings learning about and expressing their inner and outer worlds.

To have trust in your natural guidance systems of reasoning and feeling reflects the trust you have in your own capacity to make your life, and others' lives, more wonderful. After all, there is no such thing as original sin, or any other "sin" for that matter. It's simply a label to keep individuals in a state of confusion and mixed emotion about themselves and their desires, on account of the conflicting nature of "sin": On the one hand it's typically pleasurable in some way, but on the other hand it's either disliked by others or runs counter to one's own long-term interests. Adults use the word "sin" (or "vice") to somehow impugn and try to alter behavior of themselves or others, as well as children, typically because it violates their sense of integrity about self-care. Unfortunately, religious declarations of sin or vice have little to do with helping individuals live freely and flourish. Oftentimes, judgmental thoughts of being "right" or "good" rather than "wrong" or "bad," according to external standards, seem to follow from them.

To declare something sinful—meaning something to disapprove of and be ashamed of—doesn't really explain anything. The "why" of religious assertions often relates to disobedience toward "God's wishes" or scripture. In place of a rational explanation, we encounter arbitrary postulates of something ineffable, or supernatural, which further discourages conceptual clarity. And of course, dogma is yet another form of external injunction that diminishes intrinsic motivation and independent thinking, and thus, authentic self-expression.

Moral codes are supposedly designed to outline the proper course of action for oneself and others. They also seem to go hand in

hand with declaring things sinful, or not virtuous, i.e., proclaimed improper behavior. When something is proclaimed improper or “bad,” it’s therefore not what you’re *supposed* to do. Propriety is typically “goodness” that’s determined according to what others or scripture (still more “others,” albeit deceased ones) declare. Needless to say, this doesn’t foster an understanding of how to formulate life-enriching strategies on one’s own, with one’s own initiative, in order to get needs met.

Lots of strategies have costs, including the one trying to get humans to behave in certain ways, i.e., morality. As I noted in the Complete Liberty Podcast series about morality and nonviolent communication (episodes 178-185), the dynamic of power-over others, with its accompanying shaming, blaming, guilt-tripping, etc., impedes self-understanding and respectful functioning. [\[35\]](#)

Yet we may wonder how such a system developed in the first place, given that children have natural attitudes of empathy, understanding, curiosity, discovery, and joy. Why is it that most parents believe that children must be controlled and disciplined into being better human beings, just as most adults believe that “laws” and their enforcers are necessary for fellow adults to behave properly? This question bears on the nature of adult psychology and how it was formed, in terms of what happens to children as they mature into adults in a domination-oriented culture, which is built on stilts of distrust.

As noted, whether through active guidance or passive acceptance, we might believe that the way things are is the way that things need to be and will always be. Most of us were taught to favor the philosophical and psychological status quo over any sort of substantial inquiry and change. This tends to be the opposite of what children believe, or how children tend to interact with the world. So, somewhere along the path to adulthood, we can develop a fear of change in relation to entrenched perceived “authorities” and systems of domination. As a child, to believe that the adult human world will not offer the same opportunities for enrichment can indeed be foreboding. The worrisome and distressing belief that adults won’t ensure one’s safety and security stems from traumatizing experiences.

What we want is oftentimes based on what we’ve *experienced* as possible in our lives, and well as what we *believe* is possible. If, as children, we were sent the (either explicit or implicit) message that many of our needs are unimportant or don’t exist, then how can we ever

request fulfillment of them as adults? The systems of rules, methods, and constructs that became familiar and normal to us early in life can simply be taken as “the given” as we mature, and thus viewed as necessary. All this becomes terribly frustrating and perplexing when we desire a dramatically better world for every human being. We need not remain frozen in time philosophically and psychologically, as if the passage of precious years is of no consequence.

In the realm of material innovation, of course, a great deal of progress is happening for adults, especially in the technology sector, in hardware and software development. This also happens to be the freest realm economically in which to innovate—although a labyrinth of false “intellectual property” restrictions continue to be upheld by the statist system (see chapter six in *Complete Liberty* for a detailed explanation of this). The inside job of freedom can rely on this innovative realm via the relatively decentralized system of the Internet. Many helpful insights by many people can get widely distributed quickly. Such voluntary interaction can work to unshackle everyone from the severe constraints of domination systems. As we grasp the importance of moving beyond the frustration and conflict that typically happens in families and, hence, in society, we can begin to truly free ourselves.

Parenting issues and moralistic judgment

There are so many books about parenting. Of course, humans are the only creatures on the planet that can read about parenting. We can also attend or view workshops on parenting, and we can follow the advisements gleaned from such sources. Other animals “just do it,” as the Nike ad instructs. Yet parenting for humans entails conceptual understanding and psychological integration—thus, the books and workshops to try to make sense of things. Additionally, as we’ve already covered extensively, adults’ own experiences of childhood reflect the need for empathetic understanding, among other important things, which can be cultivated with psychotherapeutic exercises as well as family therapy.

Looking across the landscape of parenting books and workshops, one sees a mixture of things that are accurate and helpful, coupled with remnants of the domination culture. Intergenerational transfer issues still have a grip on even most experts in the field, as they offer various

strategies in response to the question, “How do I get my child to do x, y, and z?” The message embedded in this question is that children are supposed to do the bidding of adults, and when they don’t cooperate, parents (and other “authorities”) must get them back on track.

Ultimately, everyone makes choices, even if they’re only to avoid punishments. When children comply with parents to avoid punishments (or to gain rewards), everyone pays a steep psychological price: Authentic connection is lost, because so many needs are sacrificed, such as respect, trust, empathy, understanding, fairness, equality, and self-esteem. This generates the typical frustrating and overwhelming aspects of conditional parenting. Such a parenting stance can involve rules for going to bed at a prescribed (even “agreed upon”) time, rules for brushing teeth and other personal hygiene practices, rules for arising in the morning in order to complete various unchosen tasks of the day, such as going to school and “getting good grades,” and so on. (We’ll be exploring the nature of education and grades in the next chapter, including the helpful alternatives.) Notice that all these things involve the distrustful power-over premise, which involves extrinsic motivation instead of intrinsic. They also tragically don’t consider the most important aspect of how persons can meet each other’s needs in families without sacrifice: by attending to and improving the *quality of their relationship*.

Since parents who grew up in families that used power-over strategies didn’t have mutually respectful relationships modeled for them, they tend to almost reflexively re-implement the same tired and tiring strategies. These strategies greatly obscure the primary reason for family interaction in the first place, which is to make life more wonderful for everyone.

So, as we’ve noted, the family environment commonly is a place of transfer of intergenerational issues that are hardly ever addressed, yet involve such feelings as fear, anxiety, and pain, coupled with ingrained patterns of disregarding their significance. Once the power-over model is present in the family system, psychological and behavioral stances tend to rigidify and tolerance for deviating from the norm drops markedly. “Discipline” (called “behavior management” in school) then becomes favored in an attempt to ensure that everything is as it’s supposed to be, according to adults’ rules.

To deal with the feelings triggered by one's conscience in these matters, which concerns the need to respect others, the phrase "disciplining in a loving way" is sometimes used, as mentioned previously. The thought is that parents' love for their children can somehow counteract hurtful disciplinary measures. Indeed, rationalizations tend to seriously dampen one's conscience over time within a domination system. While we lose connection with our sense of remorse about using power-over tactics, moralistic judgment can thwart our healing process as well.

The realm of moralistic judgment typically takes us away from building quality relationships, because its focus is elsewhere. Moralistic judgment is based on what you "*should* have done" or "*should not* have done," which directly calls into question your mental efficacy and worth. Its mission is to determine what you supposedly knew versus what you did not know, and then to judge your decision-making ability and character (your efficacy and worth) accordingly.

Ayn Rand, being a moral philosopher par excellence, noted that there are "errors of knowledge" and "breaches of morality," and the latter are deserving of moralistic judgment. To quote John Galt from *Atlas Shrugged*, again, this time in moralizing mode:

"Learn to distinguish the difference between errors of knowledge and breaches of morality. An error of knowledge is not a moral flaw, provided you are willing to correct it; only a mystic would judge human beings by the standard of an impossible, automatic omniscience. But a breach of morality is the conscious choice of an action you know to be evil, or a willful evasion of knowledge, a suspension of sight and of thought. That which you do not know, is not a moral charge against you; but that which you refuse to know, is an account of infamy growing in your soul. Make every allowance for errors of knowledge; do not forgive or accept any breach of morality. Give the benefit of the doubt to those who seek to know; but treat as potential killers those specimens of insolent depravity who make demands upon you, announcing that they have and seek no reasons, proclaiming, as a license, that they 'just feel it'—or those who reject an irrefutable argument by saying: 'It's only logic,' which means: 'It's only reality.' The only realm opposed to reality is the realm and premise of death." (p. 1059) [19]

Assuredly this is a paragraph of strong sentiments, with some religious overtones. It appears that Rand was wanting people to do more than ferret out contradictions in their thinking, to meet their needs for clarity and consistency. She wanted persons to be judged unfavorably if they didn't do so, thus revealing their alleged "depravity." Unfortunately, this attempt to get individuals to change through condemnation tends to put them on the defensive, since it sacrifices their needs for efficacy and worth, i.e., for self-esteem.

Do we willingly harbor contradictions and turn away from known truths? Perhaps at times we do, but the answer is more complex and contextual. Certainly, we can deny and disassociate from what's really happening and formulate rationalizations for doing all kinds of things that harm ourselves and others. Like the Milgram experiments, these mental formulations help us achieve some peace of mind, which can enable us to continue our behavior and especially not condemn ourselves, or impugn our self-esteem. As we've explored, conceptual minds that have been subjected to power-over strategies in a domination system can become adept at finding ways to seem consistent with opposing beliefs and behaviors. This compartmentalization makes integration next to impossible, of course. In addition to forgoing logical clarity and integration, this oftentimes means sacrificing many other needs, such as autonomy, choice, authenticity, self-respect, respect for others, and justice.

And to sacrifice these needs doesn't meet our need for consistency either. Yet this is where thoughts and evaluations tend to arise in defense of status-quo thinking and behaviors, to protect oneself from the danger of not thinking well of oneself and one's actions. The big question then becomes this: How do we best help ourselves and others come to terms with the things that are actually harming us in terms of sacrificing needs?

We know from personal experience that moralistic judgment of a person's mental efficacy and worth doesn't increase the quality of the relationship. So, why does Rand (and many others) advise it? Because she also grew up in a domination culture that distrusts humans to do things that benefit themselves rather than harm themselves. If we're not trusted, and even harmed or abused, it understandably becomes much harder to trust others. In such an environment, each of us can easily get in the mode of judgmental thinking—trying to ensure that people,

including ourselves, do the “right” thing instead of the “wrong” thing, which supposedly warrants being shamed and punished via condemnation or violence.

Perhaps the most frustrating difficulty with the “moral” perspective is that we tend to get defensive, dismissive, and even counterattack when our beliefs and behaviors are judged as “wrong” or “bad,” i.e., “immoral.” As a methodology for living well, this puts us in conflict and keeps us at war with ourselves. Essentially, moralistic judgment does not foster the degree of empathy, understanding, and curiosity about new insights necessary to really honor ourselves and others. In contrast, nonviolent or compassionate communication is another process that can sufficiently honor ourselves and others so that helpful changes can occur more readily (more on this in chapter seven).

Therefore, what if we view all human behavior as being a result of the knowledge and strategies presently possessed, including knowledge of alternative strategies that might seem either more difficult at present (or simply impossible) or even detrimental to the comfort of the status quo, including one’s present self-concept? Then, what otherwise would be considered “breaches of morality” can prompt a sincere and empathetic investigation into what, in terms of knowledge, including self-knowledge (i.e., personal context), led to those decisions and how to repair, heal, and grow from them.

We have no real need to pass moralistic judgment and consider people guilty of various breaches and deserving of various kinds of punishment. Each person can be seen simply as doing what he or she determines is best for him or her under particular cognitive, emotional, and social circumstances. After all, if persons knew of a more beneficial way and, especially, knew how to implement it effectively—as well as knew that it would benefit them in ways they previously thought were impossible—then *of course they would do that very thing*. Isn’t this what *all of us* most want to do anyway, as we seek to enrich our lives? When we encounter new methods of being in the world that work better for us and our relationships, we usually adopt them, especially when we feel comfortable, confident, and eager about doing so—i.e., when we’re intrinsically motivated.

Yet domination systems can train us to do otherwise. They keep us stuck in traumatic ruts. They train us to become entrenched in thoughts and behaviors that lead us in dire emotional directions. These

emotions are signals for us to pause, to introspect, to empathize, and to change course, essentially to adopt new, beneficial strategies. We can see how this relates to parenting.

Resourceful parenting basics

We've explored the topic of resourceful parenting as we've discussed the nature of childhood and how parents typically interact with their kids. Resourceful in this context means being psychologically attuned (intellectually, emotionally, motivationally, and behaviorally) to engage in win/win interactions with children, in which needs get met mutually without sacrifice.

When children are in an emotional and behavioral state that's seemingly impeding what one wants as a parent, it's most helpful to empathize with their experience, to understand it from the child's point of view—based on his or her history, context of knowledge, and emotions. Even though we adults have a thing called maturity on our side, we've also spent years in domination systems; after all, they're what we grew up in. Again, this is the time to pause, to introspect, to begin building a sturdy bridge of empathy specifically to one's own child-self as well as to other children.

Coming to terms with our childhood trauma means healing these wounds of the past in terms of their present influence on our psychology. This entails bringing compassionate awareness to the situations in which our unprocessed trauma can be triggered by persons close to us, particularly children—since *we* were first traumatized as children, rendered powerless and helpless through abuse and neglect, which triggered overwhelming physical and emotional distress within us. Essentially, being triggered as a parent entails being in a much less resourceful psychological condition, one in which we likely feel overwhelmed and subjectively helpless. [80] So, as we probably know from lots of experience, a much less desirable situation for everyone involved happens when we aren't mindful of trauma and empathetic toward the child within and, in turn, children in general.

Whether or not we are parents, we were all children once, and we remember what it felt like (barring substantial repression) when our emotional perspectives weren't considered and understood. We likely felt anger, resentment, impatience, confusion, and upset, as well as sadness,

disappointment, and dread about future encounters. This of course relates directly back to the twenty-four questions that Branden posed for us, which take into account the personal context of the child as a family member who possesses equal worth and respectability.

As I read Alfie Kohn's book *Unconditional Parenting* on the Complete Liberty Podcast, [35] I explored the various footnotes as well, which referred to numerous studies about the beneficial results of an intrinsically motivated and thus respectful model of interaction with little people. Also referenced were many studies demonstrating the substantial drawbacks of conditional parenting, or the "carrots and sticks" model, in which children's needs aren't fully considered and honored, and parents' needs are expressed in costly ways.

Below are some titles of other books largely oriented around the premise of win/win, collaborative, "power-with" relationships (rather than a premise of win/lose, or lose/lose (compromise) and power-over relationships):

Parenting From Your Heart: Sharing The Gifts of Compassion, Connection, and Choice by Inbal Kashtan [36]

Respectful Parents, Respectful Kids: 7 Keys To Turn Family Conflict Into Cooperation by Sura Hart [37]

Heart To Heart Parenting: Empower Your Child Empower Yourself by Robin Grille [38]

Parenting From The Inside Out by Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell [39]

Raising Our Children, Raising Ourselves: Transforming Parent-Child Relationships From Reaction And Struggle To Freedom, Power And Joy by Naomi Aldort [40]

Parent Effectiveness Training: The Proven Program For Raising Responsible Children by Thomas Gordon [81]

While such books tend to vary in their extent of philosophical clarity and their amount of focus on healing childhood trauma, they still seek to help us transition into a realm of interaction that greatly improves the quality of emotional connection between parents and children. This is in place of remaining mired in the realm of "getting children to do things," with its accompanying rewards-and-punishments approach. Ultimately, making this shift entails breaking free from some sizable shackles of the past that we've managed to carry with us into adulthood.

Authoritarianism and obedience represent the ball and chain of our domination culture that keep us from moving to a place of love and reason. My friend Roslyn Ross discusses these and other aspects in her book *A Theory Of Objectivist Parenting* [84] and in the following two videos, which inform us that more connected and resourceful parenting can be achieved, yielding high-quality relationships:

Raising Children is an Act of Philosophy, Lecture 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCmDUquKAUQ>

Raising Children is an Act of Philosophy, Lecture 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJG1rrjD3lQ>

As nonviolent communication founder Marshall Rosenberg noted extensively, when we live with a consciousness about needs—our own needs and the needs of others—typical power-over tactics are seen for what they are: quite costly expressions of unmet needs, or tragic ways of saying “Please!” and “Thank you.” [20] It’s vital to realize that honoring your own needs as adults and/or parents is just as vital as honoring the needs of children. Humans, by virtue of reason and the process of empathy (including self-empathy), have a unique interaction capacity of win/win negotiation. When we focus on the ways we can make life more wonderful for ourselves and others, we realize that sacrifice is both unnecessary and detrimental to our lives and well-being.

A couple chapters later, we’ll delve into more explicit aspects of the nonviolent communication process. Let’s next examine the nature of the learning process and how we can find a most life-enriching path. Needless to say, education is a realm that closely mimics the conditional parenting model, due to its shared premises.

Chapter 5

Frameworks for learning and maturing

Typical and expected routes

“Education is for our children's future!” We hear a lot about that in the media, don't we? On corestandards.org the tagline reads “Preparing America's Students For College And Career.” Educational discussion usually boils down to a particular question, reflecting a particular pedagogical premise: How are the youth of society going to learn things in the way that adults have determined is best for them, and in the institutions that adults deem most fitting and proper? When this premise of schooling isn't questioned, we're bound to encounter some serious problems with intrinsic motivation and learning. Today we see a lot of focus on various within-the-system solutions that don't really address these main problems. In this milieu it can be difficult to make time to reconsider a system that by design uses power-over tactics on children.

Most people who pass through today's system of schooling tend to uphold and support the ideas they were taught. Most parents and teachers want children to be sociable and learn important things, of course, yet the schooling system itself has a major influence on what that means. For instance, children should, among other things, pledge allegiance to the flag, sit in classrooms for many hours each day, dedicate equal periods to dissimilar interests, move through a grade system irrespective of individual desires, skills, and abilities, and diligently master as a group the coursework given to them. Attendance is mostly mandatory, though various exceptions are allowed depending on the so-called “state,” such as permission to homeschool.

Though children are born eager to learn about themselves, others, and the world, particular adult beliefs can hinder recognition of this and

try to justify the power-over dynamic. Here are some beliefs and statements that probably sound familiar to all of us:

It's for your own good.

Some things in life you just have to do.

When you get in the 'real world,' you'll thank us for making you go to school.

Until you're able to make sound decisions for yourself, school will provide for you.

Without school, you'd never get a job and be a loser.

Certified teachers are capable of figuring out how to learn things and making sure you cover the right subjects.

Without school, you'd sit around all day and play video games and never learn how to read and write, let alone become an interesting, cultured human being who's familiar with a variety of subjects.

In order to have a 'well-rounded' education, you must go to school.

Sadly, statements like these emanate from a culture that distrusts the innate learning processes of children. It also distrusts the entrepreneurial spirit of adults to provide for them dynamically in a free marketplace. When we investigate what gives adults such ideas about human learning, we need look no further than family environments, in which we were oftentimes told what to do and what not to do, and punished when we deviated from these injunctions. Both environments doubt children's ability to learn things without being coerced.

Goals and types of education

As noted, the general goals of education usually involve collective aspects of programs that strive to ensure a future of "good students" and "good workers." For example, many educators concentrate on whether classes of students in America can compete with students in the rest of the world, or even with students in other so-called states of the so-called United States. So, they strive to increase the literacy of graduating high school students, perhaps hoping to foster more knowledgeable and thoughtful learners who will be welcomed in the job market.

Yet to focus on class results (or school, city, state, or national results) rather than on *individual learners* runs counter to the conclusions of research in cognitive psychology. As Alfie Kohn catalogued in his book *Punished By Rewards*, many studies indicate that the teacher-as-director pedagogy fails in numerous ways. Teacher control leads to such things as impoverished intrinsic motivation, less creativity, poorer achievement and self-regulatory behavior, and less psychological stability and mental health. [21]

Cognitive psychology research demonstrates that the most effective and deeply integrated aspects of learning for the long term (involving higher-level mental processes) require conditions that run counter to the routine classwork done in groups, or for that matter directed by a teacher (as in an assignment). [41] Thus, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach that teaches to the theoretical average student, an approach that caters to each learner's particular intellectual and emotional context is most consistent with optimal cognitive functioning. In the realm of information acquisition, processing, and effective utilization, individuals best proceed at their own pace, according to their own interest. Group school work that's not requested based on interest tends to lack appeal and thus be cognitively ineffective.

Despite its different venue, homeschooling can be structured to greatly resemble the traditional schooling environment, consisting of textbooks, regimented coursework, and even tests. Oftentimes, the format is at the discretion of parents and students, though particular state laws demand curricula and scheduled monitoring of progress. Unschooling in contrast is learner-directed, so learners *themselves* decide what to study, and when, and in what manner. [42]

The institutional learning format that's most in line with the pedagogy of unschooling is the free school. Free schools contrast sharply with traditional schools, as well as with aspects of the other main type, open schools, because they enable *learners* to determine what to study and when and in what manner. Teachers in such schools are basically helpful guides and tutors, although they can provide more directed instruction when requested. This takes into account the fact that teaching *upon request* proves key to student growth, creativity, and motivation. In some free schools, such as the Sudbury Valley School model, students have democratic influence in the structure and operations of the school itself (including who staffs them). The intention is to foster as much self-

responsibility and independence as possible within an educational environment.

Open schools tend to be at least partially teacher-influenced, in that they have an occasional lesson or structured activity given by teachers that everyone is expected to participate in. They do not have grading and testing, however. Feedback on work is provided when it's requested, but evaluation of students by a teacher is usually considered detrimental to independent and self-focused scholarship. This reflects the research, which shows that even many so-called high-achieving students, in response to rewards such as grades, end up taking short-cuts to achievement and tend to view out-of-class learning as unfulfilling. [43]

On the other end of the institutional spectrum are the ubiquitous governmental and other traditional schools, which even include most "progressive" varieties. These are based primarily on a couple pedagogical beliefs: that teachers know best what students ought to be doing with their time and energy, and that teachers should be the final judges of students' activities. Therefore, teachers devise myriad exercises and lesson plans to constrain and control the learning processes of students, supposedly to foster their intellectual growth. Teachers assign various group and individual activities, which entail lesser or greater amounts of student choice. Most activities are expected to be completed by a certain teacher-imposed deadline.

Parallels to this method are drawn by teachers and administrators to employees in the workplace. The thinking is that employees do their jobs as outlined by employers and perform in such a manner as to satisfy the job requirements, including completion of tasks on time—if not, employees get reprimanded or fired. So, teachers instruct, and students should learn how to follow instructions; teachers devise tasks, and students should do them, hopefully with minimal fuss—if not, punishments are enforced (e.g., lowered grades or detention) and privileges are taken away, even the privilege of being in school (suspension or expulsion). In many cases, as Kohn pointed out, "Teachers hold out the possibility of more academic work as a punishment (or the possibility of less work as a reward), which drives home the lesson that learning is something a student should want to avoid." [21]

Other researchers (although notably Marxist in their political position) surmised that traditional schooling and workplaces merely train people to be good followers and reactive to rewards and

punishments, rather than responsive to their own conscience, values, and creative capacities. [44] As I noted in *The Psychology Of Liberty*, we can also use this workplace metaphor in a different way, to different effect. We can view learning services from a business management perspective in order to expose some relevant psychological issues. In formulation of his “Quality Schools,” psychiatrist William Glasser compared students with employees and noted the stark differences between the old, traditional management style and the new style. He outlined four basic elements in each style:

[Boss Managing (old style)]

- “1. The boss sets the task and the standards for what the workers (students) are to do, usually without consulting the workers. Bosses do not compromise; the worker has to adjust to the job as the boss defines it.
2. The boss usually tells, rather than shows, the workers how the work is to be done and rarely asks for their input as to how it might possibly be done better.
3. The boss, or someone the boss designates, inspects (or grades) the work. Because the boss does not involve the workers in this evaluation, they tend to settle for just enough quality to get by.
4. When workers resist, the boss uses coercion (usually punishment) almost exclusively to try to make them do as they are told and, in so doing, creates a workplace in which the workers and manager are adversaries.” (p. 24)

[Lead Managing (new style)]

- “1. The leader engages the workers in a discussion of the quality of the work to be done and the time needed to do it so that they have a chance to add their input. The leader makes a constant effort to fit the job to the skills and the needs of the workers.
2. The leader (or worker designated by the leader) shows or models the job so that the worker who is to perform the job can see exactly what the manager expects. At the same time, the workers are continually asked for their input as to what they believe may be a better way.
3. The leader asks the workers to inspect or evaluate their own work for quality, with the understanding that the leader accepts that they know a great deal about how to produce high-quality work and will therefore listen to what they say.

4. The leader is a facilitator in that he shows the workers that he has done everything possible to provide them with the best tools and workplace as well as a noncoercive, nonadversarial atmosphere in which to do the job.” (p. 31) [45]

Clearly, the new style of managing strives to honor dignity in the workplace, via empowering individuals to make crucial decisions. Glasser noted that a large part of the new style of managing stems from the ideas of W. Edwards Deming, a major management theorist and consultant of the twentieth century. Deming’s theories and practices of managing have contributed to the tremendous increases in productivity and quality found, for example, in Japanese companies. These companies, unlike many companies in America (at least initially), embraced the notion that workers know their work best. A free environment in which to make decisions also increases quality, efficiency, and profits.

The boss managing techniques are symbolic of basic distrust in human ability. Although in today’s economy it’s utilized less than in previous decades, this management style can still be encountered to a disturbing degree. Inherent distrust of workers, as well as managers’ fears of losing control of operations if they become facilitators instead of commanders, permeate many businesses. Like individuals in teaching, individuals in management can hold on to positions of power; they can choose not to delegate authority to others who desire it in order to be autonomous, self-motivated, and quality-oriented.

While some might try to make command-and-control tactics on workers appear reasonable in business, such tactics are nonetheless neglectful of needs for all involved. And they are no less neglectful of teachers’ and students’ needs in an educational context, such as authenticity, choice, autonomy, and respect for self and others. However, the metaphor of the workplace doesn’t consider the fact that students are actually *customers*, and thus less like employees. From a customer service point of view in the realm of learning, when you don’t get the service you desire and paid for, personal fulfillment and self-actualization are greatly hindered.

Unfortunately, since taxation is the main funding source of governmental schooling, the process of win/win economic trades remains absent too. Taxation and regulation take schooling, and a

multitude of other services, out of the realm of voluntary commerce. Being an outgrowth of the domination system, schools unsurprisingly function according to power-over strategies and their sundry sacrifice of needs.

Detrimental effects of coercive schooling

The forms of enslavement to institutional demands in traditional learning environments are many. The pedagogical status quo may seem quite natural because nearly all of us, teachers included, were educated in a coercive educational system. Most of us were taught that drudgery and obedience to authority are often inherent aspects of the learning process. Grading and testing, of course, were used as the main tools for not only ranking students, but also getting compliance from them.

We were taught to believe that tests challenge us and indicate the amount of learning that's occurred. However, context matters a great deal here. Since traditional pedagogy imposes tests on learners and uses them primarily for grading, students forget most of what they study for tests in a relatively short amount of time. Testing and grading basically misplace the educational emphasis by requiring students to focus on rote memorization rather than thinking, e.g., making distinctions and integrations, essentially gaining more understanding. When the goal is "good grades," helpful learning mostly withers. As Glasser noted: A student can either "concentrate on grades and give up thinking; or concentrate on thinking and give up grades." Some give up both. They see little joy in doing either in a coercive context. Glasser continued: "If we failed those who did C or D work, the system would be exposed and soon abandoned, but we don't; we just place them in a position where, correctly sensing our attitude, they feel they are failures." (p. 63) [46]

Testing and subsequent grading also bolster a teacher's presumed status as an "authority" in the realm of judging students' academic efficacy and worth. This neglects the supreme pedagogical fact that a student needs to determine his or her own level of learning; any test a student decides to take is therefore a reflection of his or her desire to assess educational progress.

In the words of Kohn, "What grades offer is spurious precision, a subjective rating masquerading as an objective assessment." (p. 201) [21] Another writer described grading in the following way: "A grade can be

regarded only as an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite amount of material.” (p. 6) [47] Since tests are regularly administered in opposition to the desires of learners, they serve poorly as measures of actual or potential capability.

Most of us are quite familiar with these big problems in traditional schools, from elementary to college. Teachers struggle with students not following orders, as well as their lack of motivation to stay “on task.” Even schools that try to strongly rule over students and exact strict penalties for disobedience may turn into a compromise of focused work and so-called chitchat. This means learning environments in which only a certain percentage of the time is spent formally learning, so teachers’ strategies to obtain compliance in the classroom (“classroom management,” or student behavior management) become the overriding concern. This of course calls into question the perceived value of the educational material being presented as well as the way it’s being presented. In the words of one researcher “It is meaningless teaching, not learning, that demands irrelevant incentives.” (p. 83) [48]

While the factors involved in “off task” behavior stem partially from the natural developmental activities of children—for instance, their desire to play, connect with others, and generally move around—another factor is the social context into which they’re all cast: same-age peers assembled in large groups, in spite of varying individual interests and learning processes. Most importantly, this system severely impedes students’ intrinsic motivation, which oftentimes irreparably amplifies the other educational problems. [21]

The psychological theory and techniques of behaviorism are ordinarily used to maintain a tolerable level of conformity to class rules. Commands and controls and rewards and punishments become the ways to achieve class objectives, albeit mostly short-term and transient ones. These tactics are utilized in spite of the evidence of their major contributions to feelings of anxiety, depression, upset, and helplessness. [49] [50] Since behaviorist strategies require being implemented frequently in order to “work,” many teachers not surprisingly become exhausted and experience burn-out (not to mention cynicism about students) after only a few years or even months in such a system.

Like the overarching cultural system of domination, the schooling system is no doubt injurious to the human psyche. Regardless of the intentions of its promoters, it exhibits a grim view of the psychology of learners: We are not to be trusted with our own particular paths of learning; instead, we are to be directed, told what to do and given a schedule for doing it. “Students” allegedly don’t have the motivation to pursue their own interests and can’t stay enthused about subjects that they’re learning—which is contrary to human experience in non-coercive contexts, especially after learners go through the natural process of deschooling from coercive contexts. [51]

This definitely raises serious issues concerning the common educational system’s goals. If one goal is personal growth of individuals—thereby enabling them to be happy, well-adjusted, self-directed, to have genuine self-esteem and be excited about learning—then promoting intrinsic motivation needs to be primary. [52] If the goal is to have so-called “well-rounded” students who are cognizant of many different subjects in any given conversation or endeavor, then regardless of this goal’s difficulties, an intrinsic motivational climate provides most for this too. After all, if such a goal is attainable, it needs to be the personal ambition of the student, rather than an externally prodded or imposed one. Ultimately, the current methods that attempt to achieve excellence in learning through extrinsic motivators lack both utility and validity.

Upon closer examination, traditional schooling’s expectation of generating “well-rounded” students tends to be unrealistic, because of the very nature of the learning process. Not only does it require major feats of memory, but also that students study subjects and fields of knowledge that have little or no appeal to them. In fact these two aspects—memory and appeal—are interrelated. Research shows that we remember much better what we have an interest in learning, which typically is a smaller breadth of information than we are given in modern or traditional curricula. [53]

We also tend to remember things that we repeatedly come in contact with in an interesting or mentally constructive way, in addition to rehearsal. More importantly, when we actively integrate and relate such things to the rest of our knowledge, we can make it more comprehensible. The best intentions for remembering do not accomplish much when these two factors of repeated constructive contact and comprehensible integration are not heeded. Again, we do not remember

much of what we are not interested in learning, which stands to reason according to intrinsic motivation. When we're enthusiastic and motivated, however, we take learning seriously and try to obtain the most from our experiences, which includes remembering what's important, instead of what's mostly trivial. [54]

So, when our learning is divorced from personal context and meaning, we tend to see little point in it. We don't retain most imposed information for any extended length of time, except for regurgitation on a test. Cramming for exams then becomes standard practice for so-called students. In traditional schools, learners' interests in certain fields of knowledge and particular types of information are undermined by seemingly unending assignments that focus on unsolicited assessments, grades, and deadlines.

Completion of assignments according to teachers' standards then becomes the primary concern, rather than authentic integration of useful knowledge for self-directed persons. The damaging effects on learners tend to foster more of the same tragic strategies by teachers; loss of interest and attention and an increase in "off-task" behavior seemingly require more teacher control and monitoring. [55] Teachers now deal with mostly extrinsically oriented persons instead of intrinsically oriented ones.

Essentially, educational control begets extrinsic motivation in students, and educational freedom begets intrinsic motivation. Studies repeatedly show that various forms of carrots and sticks (i.e., types of extrinsic "motivators," pressures, and commands) tend to foster an environment that purportedly requires this style of teaching. Worse still, they lead to many deleterious learning consequences—for instance, less depth and enduring comprehension of knowledge, less creativity, and even less efficiency in task completion. [56] [57] [58] Such policies foster persons who respond less well to feedback and are more likely to attribute lack of academic success in specific activities to an inherent lack of ability (rather than lack of effort) than those who are intrinsically motivated. [59]

True to form, yet another study showed that students who had controlling teachers experienced lower self-esteem as well as diminished interest in activities that were otherwise interesting for non-controlled students (who had teachers who promoted decision-making); unsurprisingly, diminished level of intrinsic motivation was another

outcome of the teacher-controlled group. [60] Losing interest in learning, that is, losing intrinsic motivation, is definitely one of most destructive consequences of controlling and unsolicited teacher-directed education. In fact, when self-motivation is low, students ascribe scant meaning to the learning process. And if there's little meaning for learners, there will be little "excellence in education." [61]

Psychologically, our sense of worth and competence—and ability to control our own lives—remains in jeopardy when extrinsic motivation displaces intrinsic motivation. [62] Our education is now out of personal control and left at the mercy of teachers and the system. Under such circumstances, the most that educators can hope for is students who retain some vestige of interest in learning new things, or at least have the discipline to study what's assigned and the ability to follow directions, generated from fear of failure (and thus not succeeding) or simply of being shamed and punished.

Back in 2000 I surveyed a group of about 25 private elementary school students in an allegedly Montessori learning environment (actually only a semi-open pedagogy). In answer to the question about why they study in school, only about a quarter responded "Because I want to" as their most important reason; the most popular answer was "In order to succeed in life." We know from our own educational experiences that we typically do schoolwork more for grades and/or for satisfying our teachers' and parents' expectations than for satisfying our own curiosity. Ultimately, fulfilling perceived authorities' wishes and correctly guessing their expectations are part and parcel of the traditional educational system.

We also know that tests and their product, grades, that have not been requested by us tend to be counterproductive to maintaining our interest and creativity. Tests and grades tend to promote a concentration on the end result (good or bad performance), rather than the fun and interesting process of learning itself. This of course is distracting and destructive of effective, high-quality, process-oriented work. Drawing a learner's attention to his or her performance can also foster forgetting the challenging material just dealt with. Learners who focus on tests and grades, instead of being immersed in the task at hand, are more likely to forget even rote material a week or so later. [63] [64]

A definite qualitative difference exists between evaluating students with tests and grades and providing informative feedback on

the work being done. In this respect tests and grades ask little of educators, and of each learner for that matter. [21] [65] Even giving controlling feedback to students (involving a comparison to how they *should* be doing), as opposed to providing straightforward information about their performance, tended to impair their performance on a task. [66]

Traditional educators can take key notes from successful tutors in this matter, who typically give learners little explicit corrective feedback or outright diagnoses of mistakes. Instead, they provide learners hints in the form of queries or statements implying the inaccuracy of their past answers or responses. Successful tutors also make suggestions about the way the learner might proceed, or point out the part of the problem that seems to be causing him or her difficulty. [67] The main task in providing feedback is to find constructive ways to let learners know they're off track without hampering their intrinsic motivation. [68] Unfortunately, even though lots of teachers go into education with at least some this helpful process in mind, the coercive system makes it nearly impossible to implement. Soon, desires to facilitate learning get transformed into systemic demands.

Honoring volition

External control and evaluation are the exceedingly common approaches to teaching, yet they have a proven track record of being deleterious, based on empirical research and their sacrifice of learners' autonomy and choice. A pedagogy that includes required textbooks, required assignments, imposed tests and unsolicited grades, and minimal self-initiated and self-directed learning, clearly doesn't honor the volitional capacity of persons.

In the short term, of course, some students will follow directions correctly and think on their own when told it's necessary to do so (for instance, when choosing a topic for a required paper). Some students might stay "on task" for an academically satisfactory length of time to process a certain amount of information, essentially following a curriculum outlined by teachers. These are, to say the least, suboptimal goals for nurturing the human potential. They are not effective at promoting thoughtful, creative, critical-thinking, independent, well-

adjusted, confident, happy and, ultimately, educated children, adolescents, and adults.

Moreover, these suboptimal goals and the procedures they entail also raise the issue of the invalid concept of omniscience for teachers. No teacher can possibly know on a personal level the cognitive and emotional context of all the learners he or she “teaches.” No teacher can determine whether all minds are ready to listen to, let alone accept, the information presented. Lecture or study material, after all, is only a small percentage of the possible knowledge in a given field, provided from a certain person’s perspective, which commonly overlooks the numerous questions, concerns, and caveats raised in the thinking and feeling person as he or she attempts to understand it.

I too was immersed in this schooling process for nearly a couple decades, and it took some time to deschool myself and come to terms with the nature of the needs that had been sacrificed. My schooling journey consisted of Montessori preschool (in some respects, a saving grace for me mentally), then public school from Kindergarten through high school (complete with Honor Society courses), followed by university studies yielding two undergraduate degrees (a BBA in management and a BS in psychology) and a graduate degree in counseling psychology (complete with an Outstanding Master Of Arts Award). So, I’ve seen a lot from the inside of modern pedagogy, and as with statism in general, the unseen costs are huge and yet go largely unnoticed by most, given the copious distractions and fringe social benefits of schooling environments.

Ultimately, instituting a regimen of lockstep classes, lectures, directed assignments, and evaluations through tests and grades doesn’t invite and welcome genuinely thinking and feeling persons. The typical goal of a teacher, the alleged expert in a particular field (at least for the time covered in class), is to offer material that he or she sees as most important for persons to learn. Yet, if this is irrespective of each individual’s psychological and intellectual context, then it’s incompatible with thinking and feeling persons brimming with intrinsic motivation.

Persons who think for themselves see issues and ideas from differing perspectives. They desire to reconcile various ostensible contradictions and comprehend the meaning of what’s being investigated. So, we obviously need to alter the basic premises and practices of modern education in order for learners to proceed at the pace

they deem appropriate and in the way they believe is most suitable to their needs and interests. With this significant alteration in pedagogy, any solicited teacher becomes a “guide on the side,” instead of a “sage on the stage.”

When the goals of modern educators are simply their own goals that don't include the goals of students, the implication is that students are incapable of discovering what's useful and helpful for them, incapable of finding the information they need to satisfy their own desires. Nothing could be further from the truth, of course, though it can be hard to realize in a domination system of rewards and punishments. Dispensing with such status-quo notions enables us to see how respectful, beneficial, and important it is for learners to seek the information they are looking for, with possibly the requested guidance of various persons with expertise. A main objective, then, becomes to satisfy one's own desires for knowledge and skills.

So, what can society be like if such trust were invested in people seeking to learn things? This trust is really trust in the life force of every human being who desires to gain an insight, make a connection, solidify an idea, execute a project, create something, perfect a motion, hone a skill, resolve a disagreement, and achieve a dream. We know as adults that immense satisfaction can be found in doing these things—and in *being able* to do them—in addition to realizing all their beneficial effects. This is obviously antithetical to fulfilling *someone else's* expectations about what one “should” be doing with one's time.

Moreover, this issue is more than about the nature of learning. It's about living for one's own sake—an independent mind grasping reality by means of its own reasoning capability. It's about having a basic trust in the scientist and artist within each of us (and thus within others) to produce and maintain an advanced civilization of benevolent interactions, progress, and prosperity.

Actually, if this attitude and capacity were not part of human nature, we would not see people in the role of teachers trying to educate the young human population. This would beg the question: If the learning process *itself* were in need of being taught (rather than simply a natural aspect of human consciousness), then how could the first “teacher” ever arise? How does any scientist, for instance, maintain the drive to continue his or her research, knowing that there will be many more questions, problems, even dead-ends, in future experiments than

successes? Sure, the cynical answer might be “Because of governmental grants,” but personal desires and curiosity are major factors.

Being children once ourselves and observing children in various contexts, we can safely conclude that human beings have an innate ability to acquire knowledge and skills, and more still, to enjoy the self-directed processes of acquiring them. Given this truth, the bearing it has on the validity of traditional educational methods is monumental.

Optimal learning environments

We can draw a clear distinction between schools that *control* student learning and those that *facilitate* it, i.e., that offer learning environments where students can pursue their own interests at their own pace, which of course include various unschooling environments. Divergent pedagogical perspectives are obviously involved in each type, but more broadly, and more importantly, two contrasting views of human nature are represented.

To understand the psychological needs of learners entails differentiation of coercive educational methods from voluntary ones. After all, guidance in learning certainly has its merits in specific contexts, on account of neophytes’ lack of knowledge and skills. As knowledge and skills increase, solicited guided learning can oftentimes be replaced with self-guided learning. Guided instruction in particular skills like piloting aircraft, practicing martial arts, and absorbing a foreign language might be quite different than most intellectual pursuits. Some disciplines include the development of physical dexterity or particular motor skill refinement, which tends to entail mimicry and repetition at the direction of a coach or instructor. Many intellectual pursuits are open to all sorts of different approaches, many equally effective. The point of being an instructor is not to put pupils into an educational straightjacket, for we know the many harms of such a practice. Deciding the appropriate learning path to take is also a crucial part of each person’s learning process.

Ultimately, any learning environment’s efficacy depends on the interests and proclivities of learners and the consistently non-coercive (i.e., voluntary) nature of the tasks involved in the program. Such environments cater to each learner according to the extent of his or her involvement, and they have no punishments for “non-compliance,”; they

merely document the time spent in that specific endeavor in that particular fashion, which is what various private programs tend to do currently.

Of course, as noted in *Complete Liberty*, systemic educational changes also entail addressing the coercive side of politics, such as various governmental requirements, including licensure, which are programs widely endorsed by the educational establishment. Ceasing arbitrary control of the learning process means freedom to work as one pleases to satisfy the needs of all customers. Learner-directed (i.e., customer-driven) education, instead of institution-directed and State-driven education, will not be places of frustration and wasted time for countless “students,” in which the ultimate end is often to obtain both elite and ordinary “job tickets” (i.e., diplomas). [65]

Since intrinsic motivation is the sine qua non of learning, the most effective types of education essentially lack coercion, are voluntary, and encourage self-responsibility, autonomy, and interest in learning. Freed from arbitrary constraints, all of us can become well-aware of the many effective and enjoyable ways to learn things.

A wide assortment of learning environments can respect young individuals’ decisions and diverse interests, entailing such things as interactions with peers of different ages, varied and extensive reading material, informative and guided group discussions, useful and encouraging feedback on individual and group projects, detailed reviews of students’ writings and research, and of course the continued, multifaceted use of computers in all their forms. General programs and curricula chosen by learners can be tracked by them and facilitators alike. Portfolios documenting lists of experiences and cognitive/emotional accomplishments can ensure objective evidence of involvement in particular programs, if it’s requested by another learning center or by an employer, for instance.

Suffice it to say that the learning process can happen on one’s own, with a tutor, among peers, with one’s family, or at a “free school” with instructors who honor intrinsic motivation, which can include specific skills training. Ultimately, the kind of education depends on the decisions and interests of each learner.

Of course, to doubt students’ capacities to perform such activities, as well as to doubt their initiative to take responsibility for their learning processes, doesn’t foster needed change; it just begets more of the same.

Lack of trust in students' ability to learn as they see fit reflects a lack of trust in the nature of humans and, therefore, in the nature of oneself to do what's in one's rational self-interest. To doubt oneself in such a fundamental way is to lock oneself into past patterns of behavior, tragically denying choice and freedom. It also doesn't address the real educational problems, but rather attributes them simply to things such as "lack of funding and resources," "student failure," "broken families," "poverty," and "juvenile delinquency."

The main remedy to most problems in the world of education involves changing a fundamental aspect: making the learning process totally each learner's decision and responsibility, rather than the parents', teachers', school's, or community's. With such an essential change in the structure of pedagogy, individuals will be free to seek teachers and schools or other educational forums that can most help them on their journeys. The process of self-directed learning never ends, after all, and that's perhaps the best part—we can continue to enrich our lives in ways that we most like and desire.

A shift in view of self and others

In the midst of modern coercive education, we've seen attempts to mitigate its ill effects and the alleged problems with students. One has been the self-esteem movement. Those in favor of "discipline" (via coercion and punishment) typically disapprove of the self-esteem movement, because they think it values good feelings about self more than "real" achievements and learning complex and diverse skills and competencies in school. Regardless of whether their contention is warranted, a view of self-esteem that tells one to feel good about oneself regardless of how one *actually* feels poses major psychological difficulties. Uncomfortable feelings about self can't be willed away or transformed with praise and rewards. The coercive educational system tends to overlook the genesis of such feelings and, thus, how to beneficially deal with them.

Particularized efficacy (being competent with a specific skill or task) at school differs markedly from self-esteem, which is a generalized conviction of mental competence—of being able to cope effectively with life's challenges and vicissitudes—and feeling worthy of happiness (which we'll explore more in the next chapter). So, we can have a high

degree of efficacy in school work and yet still have a relatively low level of self-esteem on account of a deficient or distorted self-concept or self-image.

Achievement in school is definitely a separate topic than feelings about oneself. If we happen to fail at certain tasks that have been coercively imposed on us, such failure need not result in a lowered self-assessment. Drawing such an emotional conclusion, needless to say, has unfortunate consequences. If we view learning as a difficult and burdensome (if not impossible) task that's imposed by others, and then we disparage our own worth in the process, we'll probably not continue learning well in that domain, maybe in any domain.

A realistic view of self-esteem does not mean that we have good feelings about self when we do "good work" and bad feelings about self when we do "bad work" (as the "more discipline" proponents seem to believe). Such a view would jeopardize our foundation of confidence in the face of adversity. It would undermine the capacity to be resilient and to learn adaptively from our mistakes. Tragically, as children and adults, we've been trained to chide ourselves—rather than practice self-acceptance—when we sometimes fall short of achieving things important to us.

To feel bad about ourselves for failing doesn't necessarily motivate us to succeed, and it doesn't accord with the nature of self-esteem. Confidence and respect for self need to be cultivated most in the midst of failure, rather than decreased on account of any particular setbacks. Just as importantly, expecting students to feel bad about themselves when they don't live up to various external demands doesn't recognize (though it plainly reveals) the overall harm done by coercive education.

Self-respect is a major part of self-esteem, and so is self-confidence. Undoubtedly, we'd be hard pressed to maintain positive feelings about self irrespective of the strategies we use or of the strategies we comply with (e.g., authoritarian instruction). Of course, critics fault the self-esteem movement for advocating this sort of emotional disconnection. Yet for self-esteem to be maintained, we need to believe in our own capabilities as *human beings*, not merely as compliant "students." Moreover, self-esteem entails subconscious integration of the premise that we are worthy of happiness, regardless of the obstacles and setbacks encountered. [18] While these two main elements of self-esteem may be

the intention of some who've spearheaded the self-esteem movement in schools, they tend to get lost in the midst of coercive education.

It takes a paradigm shift in our self-concept as adults to honor the need of children to learn by self-direction rather than by other-direction. Being directed by others is of course what's "normal" in the world of child-rearing, as we've explored extensively. Just as adults defer to various perceived authorities (both actual and supernatural), children are trained to defer to the "authority" of their parents, and to teachers. Though modern education operates in a realm that's supposed to be the most mind-expanding—learning new things—it tends to limit children to desks, lectures, and assignments, so they stay on the "right" track. Nearly all of us went through this mentally debilitating process, though we were encouraged to view it as beneficial to our lives and well-being. When we explore the deeper costs, we can see that viable alternatives are seriously needed.

Yet, the cognitive dissonance that arises from sending children to places that don't really serve their interests no doubt leads to rationalizations. As in all systemic problems of domination, vast opportunity costs then go unrecognized or are minimized, and a focus is placed on derivative problems, rather than primary ones and their essential solutions. For every year a child spends in the power-over paradigm in school, he or she will need to spend extra time trying to reverse its harmful effects to his or her intrinsic motivation—as well as unlearn a lot of things that are basically untrue, especially about humans and specifically about him or her self. For many more details, I refer you to my friend Brett Veinotte's School Sucks Podcast at <http://schoolsucksproject.com>. Although most adults don't spend much time deschooling and re-educating themselves in these matters, every little bit can help.

When children's intrinsic motivation is honored from the beginning, many more life-enriching learning experiences can happen, both for themselves and for society in general—and in a way that's best suited to their context of knowledge and needs. Rather than coercing children to learn various things, while distrusting their natural curiosity to learn things willingly, we can instead understand and integrate the fact that children have a teacher *within themselves*, which was one of the key insights made by Maria Montessori. [34] Once this is recognized, the systemic obstacles to children's learning stand out in bold relief. Basically

anything that hinders self-directed (i.e., freely chosen) learning can be cast aside, in favor of respecting the needs of children for choice, creativity, autonomy, self-responsibility, and so on. As noted, the term “unschooling” coined by John Holt entails the process of honoring children’s intrinsic motivation. Versed in educational and psychological models, like Montessori, Holt knew the enormous benefits that self-directed learning provide children and, therefore, why it’s so essential to human flourishing.

Imagine children being fully trusted by parents to make helpful decisions *for themselves* in their learning processes, irrespective of “subjects.” As mentioned, the job description of present-day teachers changes quite a bit—to one of encouraging individuals to proceed at their own pace, to pursue things in ways that they deem most suitable to their own needs and interests. As psychologist Carl Rogers noted, being a facilitator of learning is very different from being a teacher and evaluator. He knew that trust and respect are essential for authentic human relationships; how a facilitator relates to self and others (by virtue of being a facilitator instead of a teacher and evaluator) is a crucial element to successful learning. Here is Rogers’ view of what the attitude of education can be:

“To free curiosity; to permit individuals to go charging off in new directions dictated by their own interests; to unleash the sense of inquiry; to open everything to questioning and exploration; to recognize that everything is in process of change—here is an experience I can never forget.” (p. 120) [\[69\]](#)

Indeed, this presents the wonderful possibility of cultivating a whole new world, embracing the nature of change in a positive direction. Of course, such significant change is oftentimes frowned upon in a domination culture, because it calls into question many fundamental premises, premises that have been relied on to keep things as they are, basically in a state of comfortable misery. The status quo bias looms large here in the belief that children simply won’t learn how to direct their learning activity, especially in ways that most benefit them, such as being able to read and write. This belief in lack of intrinsic motivation stems from a culture that doesn’t foster it in any meaningful way. Nevertheless, we have abundant evidence regarding the efficacy of intrinsic motivation,

of individuals having interests and achieving things based on what they want. In addition to all the academic research, children who are unschooled today prove that intrinsic motivation can make their lives absolutely wonderful.

We as humans can do *so much better*, and we need not be restrained by our upbringing, our schooling, and the memes of religion and statism. Coercive methods are flawed at root, and they can be uprooted to allow for new and splendid things to grow. In order to do this, it's important for each of us to master the art of self-discovery, which means to focus more on our need for self-esteem, the main topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Cultivating self-efficacy and self-worth

Self-esteem and potential pitfalls

Given the philosophical and psychological disarray in our culture, no wonder self-esteem remains largely misunderstood. Some even claim that it's a dangerous or useless concept, given the research on the subject claiming that so-called psychopathy or sociopathy is correlated with high self-esteem! Clearly, when self-esteem is ascribed to behaviors ranging from fawning praise of self to deceiving and injuring others, we know something is amiss.

Again, self-esteem is simply the evaluative aspect of self-concept. As we've covered, it's a combination of self-confidence and self-respect, or of mental efficacy to cope with life's challenges and a feeling that one is worthy of happiness. This also entails honoring these same qualities in others, because to hold a double standard in this realm is not indicative of integration. In addition to providing the above description, Nathaniel Branden explained the essential components, and practices, of self-esteem in his book *The Six Pillars Of Self-Esteem*: the practice of living consciously; the practice of self-acceptance; the practice of self-responsibility; the practice of self-assertiveness; the practice of living purposefully; and, the practice of personal integrity. [\[70\]](#) Notice that these are all described as *practices*.

When we engage in these practices to meet our need for self-esteem, we strive to live consciously and respect facts. We accept our basic nature as humans, including fallibility, and we have compassion for ourselves. We take responsibility for what we do and what we say and the choices we make, in line with honoring our reasoning and volitional capacities. We say "Yes" when we want to and "No" when we want to, in line with our likes and dislikes and honestly expressing what's alive in

us. We set goals and work at achieving them, in line with enriching our lives and following our bliss. We strive for consistency, congruence between what we say and do, which enables us to integrate an enlightened self-concept.

All these practices indeed reflect a degree of self-understanding that most of us were never explicitly taught. Oftentimes, we were shown quite different models of how humans operate “in the real world.” In this way self-esteem is a bit of a novel concept for humanity, which partially explains things culturally. As Branden has written (and spoken) at length, self-esteem has little to do with self-praise or merely “feeling good” about oneself regardless of context, because these don’t genuinely address the actual practices—such as being connected to the reality of our inner world and its impact on the outer world, including on others.

The six pillars are interrelated, and they are also interdependent. They are useful ways to examine the nature of self-concept, which concerns who one thinks one is and what one thinks is possible for oneself. Self-concept is the mental foundation upon which we meet our need for self-esteem. So, naturally, if we have a view of ourselves as hindered in thinking logically, not able to attain clarity and make sense of things, or if we have a view that happiness and achievement of values aren’t possible, then our self-esteem will suffer. We then might resort to various costly strategies to try to meet some needs, though perhaps in the process not fully meeting them, and likely sacrificing many others.

Additionally, we may *consciously* grasp the nature of self-concept and how it affects self-esteem, but still have trouble putting the six pillars into practice. Thus far, we’ve covered a multitude of ways that we humans have gotten a really raw deal in the realm of understanding ourselves, so it’s sometimes easy to venture off the path of enlightenment and happiness.

However, the practices of the six pillars resonate with our commonsensical view of things, while the research done on self-esteem dynamics oftentimes falls short of clarity and comprehensibility. This is because of the way researchers define self-esteem. In psychological research, what’s called “the operational definition” of self-esteem typically leaves a lot to be desired, especially when it’s correlated with narcissistic or anti-social behaviors. Of course, when researchers set out to study aspects of the human mind and its ensuing behaviors, a lot can

be left out or not taken into consideration; some key variables can be overlooked.

Because we are conceptual creatures in a process of identifying and integrating things, we need to practice living consciously, and the rest of the pillars tend to follow from this. In turn, if we strive for meeting our need for consistency, we'll likely become more assertive and responsible for our own views, choices, and actions. To live with a sense of purpose also helps us generate creativity and accept our nature as fallible beings, hence enabling us to make more sensible and informed decisions, which reflect a realistic assessment of our capabilities and our grasp of reality. All this shows how interrelated and interdependent the various aspects of self-esteem are.

Again, since "self-concept is destiny," we avoid examining it at our peril and at the peril of our relationships and our society. If humans were to spend time focusing on this key aspect of ourselves—i.e., our view of our inherent worth and capabilities—many of the changes emphasized in this book would be seen for what they are: ways to enrich our lives and make them much more wonderful. This stands to reason, because when we feel confident and resourceful in addressing life's challenges we readily embrace change—we invite change. And when we feel a solid sense of self-worth and of being happy on this planet, we want the best for ourselves and the best for others. As we practice the art of living consciously, we see that there are no contradictions in objective reality.

In the beginning chapter of *The Six Pillars Of Self-Esteem*, in the section "Self-Esteem: The Immune System Of Consciousness" Branden wrote the following:

"Regardless of what we do or do not admit, we cannot be indifferent to our self-evaluation. However, we can run from this knowledge if it makes us uncomfortable. We can shrug it off, evade it, declare that we are only interested in 'practical' matters, and escape into baseball or the evening news or the financial pages or a shopping spree or a sexual adventure or a drink.

"Yet self-esteem is a fundamental human need. Its impact requires neither our understanding nor our consent. It works its way within us with or without our knowledge. We are free to seek to grasp the dynamics of self-esteem or to remain unconscious of them, but in the

latter case we remain a mystery to ourselves and endure the consequences... (p. 3)

“...[Self-esteem] is a motivator. It inspires behavior.

“In turn, it is directly affected by how we act. Causation flows in both directions. There is a continuous feedback loop between our actions in the world and our self-esteem. The level of our self-esteem influences how we act, and how we act influences the level of our self-esteem.

“If I trust my mind and judgment, I am more likely to operate as a thinking being. Exercising my ability to think, bringing appropriate awareness to my activities, my life works better. This reinforces trust in my mind. If I distrust my mind, I am more likely to be mentally passive, to bring less awareness than I need to my activities, and less persistence in the face of difficulties. When my actions lead to disappointing or painful results, I feel justified in distrusting my mind... (p. 4-5)

“...If I respect myself and require that others deal with me respectfully, I send out signals and behave in ways that increase the likelihood that others will respond appropriately. When they do, I am reinforced and confirmed in my initial belief. If I lack self-respect and consequently accept discourtesy, abuse, or exploitation from others as natural, I unconsciously transmit this, and some people will treat me at my self-estimate. When this happens, and I submit to it, my self-respect deteriorates still more.

“The value of self-esteem lies not merely in the fact that it allows us to *feel* better but that it allows us to *live* better—to respond to challenges and opportunities more resourcefully and more appropriately.” (p. 5) [20]

Indeed, *living better* represents the principles and insights of an inside-out view of complete liberty. The more you trust your mind, know your value, and strive to have no pretenses, the more easily you can maintain a realistic assessment of yourself and your capacity for happiness. Rather than viewing your self-efficacy and self-worth as always hanging in the balance of your next choice or behavior, consider them as foregone conclusions—reflecting a realistic self-concept. This conclusion of course hinges on challenging the premises that we may have adopted in childhood within our domination culture—premises indicating that we aren’t good enough, that happiness really isn’t our birthright, and still more devastatingly, that we’re unfit to exist.

Self-acceptance and self-concept

Now, to meet the need for self-acceptance, we're going to shift into an explicitly therapeutic mode of introspection. Here, distorted self-concept premises can be brought into full view, inspected, and replaced with new premises, which foster new behaviors. Our subconscious view of self typically reveals itself in our feelings. Thoughts about ourselves reverberate in our emotions.

The written exercises below explore the practice of self-acceptance, which also entails self-empathy and self-compassion. As you reflect on your premises and ensuing emotions, notice that you are healing essentially what has kept countless individuals in society in their present condition: a fragmented and conditional relationship with oneself and one's emotions. Emotions and feelings are key indicators of what's happening in your life, especially as they pertain to your relationship with yourself. And these indicators may be confusing, disorienting, aggravating, disturbing, and filled with fear and pain.

As every one of us has experienced, we can even have feelings about feelings. Notice what this means for getting connected with yourself. Here are some important things to consider in the form of sentence stems. Please provide five grammatically sufficient endings for each sentence stem as quickly as possible, off the top of your head, without conscious censorship:

If I were to be kind to myself on a frequent basis...

When I say or do something that I regret, the judgment I sometimes have is...

When I say or do something that I feel happy or satisfied about, the judgment I sometimes have is...

If I were to feel more comfortable letting people love me...

If I were to feel more comfortable loving others...

When I trust myself and trust my own choices, I feel...

One of the most important things to realize about ourselves is that we take actions believed to benefit us, even if only from an emotional standpoint. We seek to be comforted by our actions in some way. So, the main task is to find new ways to seek similar comfort or even more comfort without the usual costs.

Additionally, any moralistic judgment about ourselves subverts self-acceptance, and thus it subverts our ability to change. Again, standing in such judgment of self and others is essentially counterproductive. If we make our basic worthiness constantly hang in

the balance of our actions, then to perceive ourselves as “enough” will also be extremely difficult.

The fact is this: You are fit for existence, and this is enough for you to be happy and motivated to self-actualize.

Deeper into self-acceptance

Now, let’s delve more into your relationship with yourself, to establish an inner dialogue that you’ll be able to reflect on. Consider the following sentence stems and again provide five endings for each stem, making complete sentences:

If I were to practice self-acceptance during my weekly activities...

If I can practice self-acceptance when I look in the mirror...

Complete Liberty Inside Out

Aspects of myself that I more easily accept tend to be...

Aspects of myself that I find hardest to accept involve...

If family, friends, or society at large, demonstrated acceptance of me...

If I can accept myself fully, regardless of what others believe...

Self-acceptance might change my life by...

In order to accept every aspect of myself, it might be helpful if I...

If I accepted every aspect of myself, I might let go of...

One aspect of myself that might still need more acceptance is...

A supportive message in line with my underlying wish to be healthy and happy might be...

We know that love can be more motivating than fear, anxiety, and self-rejection. The practice of self-acceptance involves a willingness to experience *all* of our emotions. Full self-acceptance means to honestly acknowledge and “own” the facts of your reality, rather than to deny, disown, or repress them. It means to embrace even the things you may not like about yourself. Even though that sounds ironic and perhaps unreasonable, there are very important reasons to do so.

Your uncomfortable and painful feelings are just as valid and as much a part of you as your comfortable and joyful ones. In fact, the former are signals for your attention, awakening you to the prospect of healing, growth, and transformation from something tormenting into something enriching.

As we’ve undoubtedly all experienced, every time we choose to deny or disown our feelings, whatever the circumstance, they don’t go away; they aren’t banished from our reality. Rather, they keep arising, providing us more vital signals, until they’re accepted, integrated, and allowed to dissolve. To ignore such feelings implies that we can’t take effective and appropriate action to alter the status quo within ourselves. In other words, without self-acceptance, we can’t effect any meaningful change in our lives.

As we’ve explored, we may find aspects of ourselves difficult to accept, because they trigger feelings of discomfort, embarrassment, anxiety, pain, sadness, and grief. So, it’s understandable that we wish not to confront such feelings in a direct way. Yet, confronting them indirectly in not-so-healthy ways doesn’t really help matters.

Perhaps you don’t think you’re able to stay connected with these emotions. That thought too can be challenged. Whatever the discomfort you experience, you can indeed challenge an habitual impulse to dissociate and shift your awareness, to escape, reject, deny, or disown these aspects of yourself. You can shift to a posture of self-empathy and self-compassion, which is like a big, safe cushion to catch your fall.

Without full acceptance, we’re likely to continue to disown certain parts of ourselves and do little or nothing about the things that we can change for the better. As ironic as it sounds, the key is to fully

accept the things that you may dislike about yourself. This process essentially works to dissolve the antagonistic relationship that's endured within.

Once we've worked to resolve the inner struggle of denying, repressing, and repudiating various aspects of ourselves, we are empowered to make meaningful changes. By meeting our need for self-connection, we then become a helpful and compassionate ally with our vulnerable, hurt, and insecure aspects, rather than an unfriendly, defensive, and frequent critic. By accepting things as they are within us right now, we can gain the clarity to strategize how to implement the meaningful changes that will align with our goals for health and vitality. If we recognize and respect reality as it presently is, we're then in a position of strength to chart a new future.

We need to practice this process as if it were the most important thing in our lives—because it is! The point is to become comfortable with it, which meets needs for honesty, vulnerability, and authenticity. Really “own” yourself for all your uniqueness, until you are completely at ease with and empathetic about what you think about yourself and what you see in the mirror each day. Even though we probably didn't get (or see) this kind of nurturing in childhood, our goal now can be to feel really well via accepting ourselves unreservedly.

As noted, there are definitely things that you accept about yourself right now—various personality traits, skills, talents, abilities—cognitively, emotionally, and physically. No one else on the planet is exactly like you; each of us is unique in various ways. Ultimately, though, our worth as persons means more than simply how we appear at any given moment to self and others and what we can do.

Honoring self-worth

The very fact of our existence makes us worthy of all that life has to offer. The very fact of *your* existence makes you worthy of all that life has to offer. As you reflect on this, notice what you're feeling. In the process, you may notice certain thoughts that accompany your emotions. Pay particular attention to anything you might be trained to overlook. Accept all that is entering your conscious awareness, so that you can align with the totality of yourself as a worthy being on a wondrous planet.

This is about becoming aware of whatever you've had trouble accepting in yourself, stemming from the non-accepting times of the past. Perhaps you've been judging aspects of yourself harshly, and maybe you've been avoiding the significance of various emotions, while still reacting to them in not-so-healthy ways. As you acknowledge your thoughts, feelings, and sensations open-heartedly, without judgment, you can embrace all aspects of yourself with love and empathy. Notice how this feels.

Given the culture we find ourselves in, we can benefit from practicing such self-acceptance on a daily basis; eventually, it will become automatized subconsciously. For instance, whenever you notice that you've shifted into the realm of moralistic judgment (of either yourself or others), you can make the transition back to acceptance, empathy, and compassion. Whenever you think a "should" or a "must" (or a "shouldn't" or a "mustn't"), you can realize the helpfulness in returning to acceptance, which dissolves antagonistic relationships with yourself, with others, and with reality.

Once you breathe deeply and practice self-acceptance as a habit—that is, recognize reality for what it is *right now*—you're more able to grasp what it means to really live well. You no longer find comfort at the expense of your well-being and what your knowledge and emotions importantly tell you. To feel free and authentic means to resolve and to transcend the realm of inner conflict.

Self-acceptance provides the impetus to make so many helpful changes, both internally and externally. This practice of fully accepting all aspects of ourselves avoids supposed quick fixes and reverting to past patterns of self-conflict (and conflict with others). As we affirm who we are currently, we can most accurately gauge the necessary actions to change ourselves in significant respects. Ultimately, this process starts with acknowledging and showing compassion for the parts of ourselves that haven't been acknowledged and shown enough compassion.

Our various faults or frailties are essentially *irrelevant* to our basic acceptability. Such integration of self-worth enables the formulation of more effective and more life-enriching strategies. By changing the way we view ourselves and our past choices, we're able to achieve much more of what we desire, what we truly want.

Letting go of old strategies and devising new ones

Since the psychology of complete liberty is about mental liberation instead of mental enslavement, let’s delve into it even more by examining more of the things we might be telling ourselves. Our everyday thinking might be tragically fostering less liberation and more enslavement. In our childhoods we encountered lots of demand-oriented and deserve-oriented thinking, made known in statements and behaviors. In order to survive safely in the family, we complied in various protective ways. While this tended to sacrifice our needs, such as autonomy, equality, fairness, and choice, it also tended to get some connection needs met, albeit with varying amounts of resentment, conflict, and despair.

Identify the various moralistic shoulds and shouldn’ts that you may have been imposing on yourself either lately or in the past, both consciously and subconsciously. Here’s a table in which to put the salient ones:

I should...	I shouldn't...

How much have these injunctions hindered the process of achieving the goal of a healthy self-concept, and how much have they interfered with your flourishing? Indeed, probably a lot—just like other impositions we place on ourselves. After all, they stem from a demanding, non-accepting relationship with ourselves and with reality.

As noted, from an early age, we were admonished to do and not do various things, oftentimes with threats of punishment and love withdrawal if we didn't do as we were told. This is likely when we learned, over time, not to be in a very accepting and loving relationship with ourselves, which made it harder to develop strategies and habits that better served our lives and well-being. Because traumatic experiences left us with a sense of powerlessness, this made healing and growing psychologically difficult.

With the knowledge we now have and the exercises we've done thus far, I invite you to make a list of things you'd like to achieve for yourself in a nurturing way. While in a relaxed, semi-meditative state, complete the sentence stem below with 8-10 endings every day for a week:

While practicing self-acceptance, one of the things I'd like to achieve is...

Complete Liberty Inside Out

Maybe you've felt uncomfortable—depressed, anxious, fearful, stressed, worried, annoyed—while contemplating small changes in your life, or major ones. Maybe you've felt distressed after making a change to your regular regimen, or about implementing something healthier—like it's some sort of duty, obligation, or burden ("I shouldn't have to do this! I just want to be carefree!").

Well, consider that this is in fact the predicament that most humans find themselves in emotionally, so you're certainly not alone. Every single person starts at where they are presently to get to a new place in life, either internally or externally. Turns out, there are lots of supplemental pleasures to experience as you shift your strategies to bring more enrichment into your life.

Here's an opportunity to identify such supplemental pleasures, as they come to mind with the following sentence stem:

A pleasure that can provide both short-term *and* long-term benefits for me might be...

Maybe at some point, again, you might feel uncomfortable—depressed, anxious, stressed, irritated, worried—after changing to patterns that better incorporate your well-being. Similar to the previous changes you’ve implemented, perhaps you’re uncertain about how long they can last.

Really seeing yourself, perhaps beneath the accumulated emotional layers of rejection, judgment, denial, criticism, blame, guilt, and shame, can be quite challenging in our culture, which unfortunately is one that promotes denial, dissociation, and distraction. Indeed, with such intimacy comes vulnerability. To see past such layers of evaluation entails self-empathy. And self-empathy entails bringing a helpful level of awareness and understanding to your inner turmoil and discomfort, realizing that these emotions are important indicators of inner parts that need more compassionate connection. Contrary to popular belief, no one was ever brought to a higher level of psychological functioning with condemnation and punishment.

Getting what we really want

Self-acceptance is the ultimate test of respect for the facts of reality—to identify and know what is, without approval or disapproval, demands or judgments. If you’re feeling stressed, for instance, realize that you’re probably in need of comfort, ease, and empathy. Breathe into your feeling of stress and these nourishing needs that have been awakened, to generate a calm return to your center of self-acceptance.

To be in an adversarial relationship with your own experiences, after all, can grant power to thought patterns that don’t serve your life in the way you most like, and it can weaken thought patterns that do. Remember to begin by accepting where you are now, which might include *accepting your resistance* to accepting various things that you don’t like.

As Branden has noted, we cannot leave a place we’ve never been. So, if you can accept where you are now, you can begin to change in ways you want. Also, we can be just as frightened of our amazing potential as we can be frightened of our weaknesses—likely because when we were young, our acts of self-assertiveness might’ve been disapproved of, discouraged, or punished. So, it’s an act of courage to see what you see

and to know what you know—and to recognize that your self-worth is beyond moralistic judgments of goodness and badness.

When we look at ourselves, we need to really see ourselves from a place of conscious awareness, free of such judgment. We need to be on our own side, like a close and caring friend. We *can* implement strategies that meet all of our needs, in the short-term and in the long-term.

This inner attention reveals the fact that we can empower ourselves. Power is not something external to ourselves, like we might've learned in childhood, something for others to wield against us, and for us to return the "favor" later on. The more we can connect compassionately with our disempowered aspects, the more we can heal and empower ourselves.

As we've explored thus far, we've typically been trained in the power-over-others dynamic, which also trains us to develop a similar relationship within ourselves. When we're afraid that our needs don't matter, or when we think that they won't get met, we might also think of reaching for the coercive tools of demands, threats, violence, and the ideology of sacrifice. The costly and harmful effects of these strategies reveal that they have nothing to do with true empowerment.

True empowerment involves treating ourselves and others with respect, which means honoring the power-*with*-others dynamic and its accompanying win/win strategies. When we share in mutual empowerment to meet human needs without sacrifice, we are expressing the ultimate life-force within us. Instead of frustration of desires and unfulfilled needs, we can seek the synergy of holding everyone's dignity with equal care and each other's personal experiences with consideration.

Granted, this is sometimes not an easy process, let alone a familiar one, as we look around in the culture, filled as it is with so much human sacrifice. An extraordinary way of understanding and dealing with this process is via the methodology of nonviolent communication. In addition to exploring the nature of sacrifice in the next chapter, we'll examine nonviolent communication explicitly and learn how to become fluent in a language that serves everyone's life.

Chapter 7

Nonsacrificial ethics and nonviolent communication

The nature of selfishness and sacrifice

Here's a key question for ethics: Is one's own life the standard of value, or are other people's lives the standard of value, or both? Basically, by what standard do we appraise our actions, i.e., ascertain whether they are helpful or unhelpful? If we choose *others* as the standard, then who are they, what ideas do they hold, and more importantly, how or by what standard do *they* determine such things?

Throughout human history, ethics usually has been accompanied by notions of sacrifice, either sacrifice of self to others or sacrifice of others to self. Be it with duty-based ethics or utilitarian ethics, individual choice and flourishing have been largely disfavored. For some unspoken reason, sacrifice seems to be an assumed conclusion in human life. However, when we reflect once again on the need for self-esteem, the reason becomes more apparent.

We can have emotions that are difficult to discern sometimes, in terms of their genesis and what exactly they relate to. This is especially the case when a clear vocabulary of feelings wasn't part of our upbringing. Moreover, in our culture feelings are seldom related to specific needs. Common emotions and behaviors that can arise from adopting the meme of self-sacrifice typically involve shame, anxiety, embarrassment, guilt, humility, conformity, and servility (and corresponding resentment). Those that can arise from adopting the meme of sacrificing others to self typically involve anger, animosity, jealousy, hostility, and disrespect (and corresponding indifference or neglect). These emotions and others arising from the use of sacrifice as an ethical doctrine directly relate to the needs that are thusly sacrificed—autonomy,

choice, respect, consideration, appreciation, and of course empathy, among others.

From childhood onward in our culture, likely all of us at one time or another were admonished for being “selfish.” Consequently, we might’ve decided not to be as explicit about our own feelings, thoughts, concerns, and desires, as we otherwise would. This process of hiding or disowning aspects of ourselves in order to placate others exacts costs. Anytime we deny or downplay our interests and what’s alive in us, we pay a painful existential and mental price.

This brings us back to the pervasive societal belief that we can’t be trusted to meet the needs of others. As we carefully examine what the accusation of “selfish” conveys, a more accurate description emerges: One is meeting one’s own needs, while not meeting the needs of others, and another doesn’t like this; another wants some other needs to get met. Now, this is a simple yet observationally insightful way of expressing it, because it says nothing about the “badness” of the allegedly selfish person or how “wrong” he or she is for doing a particular thing (and not doing something else). What we basically have is an individual serving his or her own life, yet not someone else’s life too. In fact, meeting one’s own needs and ensuring others’ needs get met can be equally enriching, which includes the interplay of the two. It doesn’t have to be an either/or dynamic. But when we’re ridiculed for meeting our own needs, an either/or dynamic is thereby promoted and oftentimes believed to be true.

It seems to be a widespread belief that a person is supposed to disregard the needs of self to fulfill supposedly higher goals, such as the needs of *other selves*. When stated this way, the contradiction becomes apparent. And acceptance of the services of a supposedly “selfless” person is, of course, also being “selfish.” Again, since giving and receiving go hand in hand, why discount personal desires and satisfaction? Not to benefit selfishly from a pleasurable activity is impossible. Clearly, any ethical doctrine that subverts the nature of a human being to experience enjoyment and happiness has strayed from the path of enlightenment.

Selfishness has probably always been a pejorative notion. As noted, it can convey an attitude only concerned with benefits for oneself, disregarding others (or not sharing with them) and not considering or being sensitive to the distress they may feel. However, when we practice

rational self-interest, or enlightened selfishness, we naturally tend to take into account the views of others, because we see them as *reflections of ourselves* with the same set of human needs. Confident and happy individuals want to factor in the interests of others when they're involved, which also furthers one's life in social contexts. After all, thoughtlessness, inconsiderateness, neglect, manipulation, deception, and conflict *do* sacrifice needs, particularly the needs to respect self and to respect others.

Unsurprisingly, on account of the distrust and lack of confidence experienced in the process of needs-fulfillment, sacrifice is mentioned commonly in familial, religious, and political contexts. In order to precisely comprehend this widespread doctrine, defining it in logical terms proves indispensable. If we clearly define sacrifice as giving up or relinquishing a higher value in favor of a lower or lesser value, or even no value at all (as Ayn Rand noted), then any self-esteeming person would want to avoid such an act, which includes not wanting others to perform it either. [Z1]

As we might suspect, this definition can conflict with the usual way sacrifice is meant to be interpreted and applied. A common dictionary meaning is "to give up a valued thing for the sake of something more important or worthy." This suggests that sacrifice is something useful to do. In other words, even though it might entail a loss of something important, we attain something supposedly better.

On account of the various connotations that accompany the common meaning, sacrifice tends to be used quite ambiguously. For example, it can imply merely the abandonment of one value for another value, with no distinction made about which value was more important. It can imply the relinquishment of a great value for an allegedly greater value, for instance a "societal" or "national" value. It can imply a change or rearrangement of one's hierarchy of values, that is, letting go of past values. It can also imply the acquisition or preservation of genuine values at the expense of time, resources, and effort. Lastly, it can imply "selfless" actions done in the name of family, group, community, or country.

Such lack of coherent meaning basically reflects a struggle with the nature of trade-offs, making decisions, and meeting needs. When used to describe so many types of behavior, the term "sacrifice" confuses rather than clarifies. As noted, a clear definition of sacrifice means giving up some higher value for a lower value or non-value. This essentially

entails diminishing or demeaning oneself (or others), in order to get or keep something less important. The relinquishment of any value in favor of a lesser value or non-value tragically sets us against ourselves and our capacity to survive. If left unchecked and not reversed, sacrifice can lead to debilitation and even death, since complete sacrifice means the annihilation of self or other selves for some purportedly higher value (witness persons, predominantly men, sacrificing their lives for a nationalistic conception of their “country”).

Yet sacrifice is typically used in modern rhetoric to imply that we’re performing a glorified duty that transcends any individual values or needs—despite the fact that individual values and needs are what sustain each of us. Preaching sacrifice overlooks the fact that all needs arise from individuals, and sacrifice simply cannot meet our needs for self-respect and respect for others.

That we relinquish formerly important values to pursue newly important ones requires adaptiveness and mental flexibility, a flexibility to meet needs in creative and effective ways. We tend to prioritize what we value, and this is worth reflecting on. Take parenting, for instance. A prevalent idea is that parents sacrifice such things as their time, energy, resources, desires, and even needs for their children. But truly valuing children more than the things relinquished to have them entails gladly accepting the responsibilities of parenthood and focusing on the cultivation of happiness in that new context for both parents and children.

Some parents might say that their goal is to give their children a better life than they themselves had; so, “sacrifices” must be made. But is squelching a part of oneself needed to benefit others, particularly children? One of the most important things that parents (and adults in general) can convey to children is that everybody’s needs matter and can be met in the process of living. Happiness doesn’t have to be placed on a sacrificial alter in homage to the family or any other group.

The tragic effects of the meme of sacrifice in the family tend to be twofold. First, it enables parental life to be experienced as stale, mundane, frustrating, aggravating, disappointing, and even awful. For instance, parents might be working not because they personally desire it, but supposedly only for the benefit of their children. Second, it tends to promote guilt and expectations of further sacrifices. Children might begin to feel guilty about their reliance on parents for sustenance, caregiving,

and support. Oftentimes, parents then expect children to make sacrifices in turn, which passes the meme onto the next generation without much reflection on its drastic costs. In addition, parents may have hopes (or demands) of certain achievements of their children, despite their sons' or daughters' interests. Such sacrifices are of course age-old, and they can undermine self-esteem, derail true ambitions, and diminish happiness for everyone involved.

Normally, as children we find this whole situation perplexing and frustrating. We may form antagonistic relationships with our parents as a consequence, trying to assert some degree of autonomy, choice, and equality. We may rebel against parental demands placed on our time and labor, and deliberately not live up to parental expectations (which might even overlap with our own). Or, we may spend considerable time trying to be "the perfect child." The idea of being perfect in this realm might entail making payment on the supposed debt incurred with supposedly selfless parents.

The greatest contradiction here is the belief that sacrifice—either espousing it or indulging in it—truly benefits anyone. In terms of personal evolution, sacrifice takes us on a side-road leading to merely a dead-end. Yet further sacrifices for and by others can become normalized as "the way things are," which can make the practices of the six self-esteem pillars even more challenging. The quite painful sacrifice of needs can become even more painful when one realizes that sacrifice itself has been unnecessary.

In a culture that tries to keep the doctrine of sacrifice going, our true selves have a hard time fully emerging; "selfless" thoughts and actions for and by others tend to be praised. Not surprisingly, feelings such as resentment, guilt, shame, anger, envy, jealousy, stress, and misery tend to be triggered in the aftermath, which reveal needs for security and self-worth, and ultimately for individual needs-fulfillment itself. So many needs die on the vine of sacrifice.

Instead of exemplifying self-sacrifice and proclaiming its virtue, we can engender respect and admiration by pursuing our highest values. We can obtain what we want most in life via the non-sacrificial process of universal needs-fulfillment, thereby encouraging children to achieve what they most want in life, to pursue their own wonderful dreams. Needless to say, taking care of children economically will be much easier in a society that upholds individual life-enrichment. This will be a society

with freedom rather than sacrifice as its central tenet. Thus, it won't be a society of enslavement. Widespread and earnest understanding of feelings and needs can bring about the dissolution of domination systems.

NVC: Honest, empathetic expression and compassionate connection

As noted throughout this book, nonviolent communication (referred to as NVC) was designed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg in order for human beings to relate to each other in authentic ways that meet needs, essentially to improve connections and enrich lives. As a consequence, conflict becomes something that's manageable and even growth-inducing, rather than a precursor to violence and the typical processes of blaming, shaming, and shunning. [20] [72] Here's a summary of the process from The Center For Nonviolent Communication (<http://www.cnvc.org/learn/nvc-foundations>):

"Nonviolent Communication offers practical and powerful skills for compassionate giving and receiving. These skills are based in a consciousness of interdependence and the concept of 'power with' instead of 'power over' others.

"NVC skills include:

"Differentiating observation from evaluation, being able to carefully observe what is happening free of evaluation, and to specify behaviors and conditions that are affecting us;

"Differentiating feeling from thinking, being able to identify and express internal feeling states in a way that does not imply judgment, criticism, or blame/punishment;

"Connecting with the universal human needs/values (e.g. sustenance, trust, understanding) in us that are being met or not met in relation to what is happening and how we are feeling; and,

"Requesting what we would like in a way that clearly and specifically states what we do want (rather than what we don't want), and that is truly a request and not a demand (i.e. attempting to motivate, however subtly, out of fear, guilt, shame, obligation, etc. rather than out of willingness and compassionate giving).

“Nonviolent Communication skills emphasize personal responsibility for our actions and the choices we make when we respond to others, as well as how to contribute to relationships based in cooperation and collaboration.”

NVC enables the authentic expression of what’s alive in ourselves as well as discovering or making an educated guess about what’s alive in others, which is confirmed by empathetically checking in with them. At any given moment, we have the choice to empathize with ourselves and/or provide empathy to others. Essentially, we can express our own feelings and needs, and we can understand the feelings and needs of others. In so doing, we can devise practical, doable strategies to make our lives more wonderful. Clearly, this is the opposite of what domination, or power-over, thoughts and actions offer us. Because nearly all of us have been trained from childhood onward in moralistic judgment of self and others, learning NVC and living with NVC consciousness can be especially challenging at times.

Instead of entering or remaining in the mental space that NVC refers to as life-alienating communication, we can choose to shift our focus and discover what’s really going on, what really matters, and what’s most effective for getting what we really want. The “four Ds” of life-alienating communication are things we’re all too familiar with in our own lives and culture. They consist of the following:

Diagnoses (labels), involving moralistic judgments, criticisms, comparisons with others, etc.

Deserve-oriented thinking, either being deserving or undeserving of good or bad fortune, praise or punishment.

Demands, involving “should” and “should not” (and “must” and “must not”) statements, which curtail our capacity for choice and also come with moralistic judgments of “bad” or “wrong” when demands aren’t obeyed.

Denial of responsibility, making it seem like another choice in the matter is not possible or that one simply is a victim of circumstance (“It’s their fault,” “I have to do it,” “I’m just doing my job,” “It’s the law!”).

Notice that these four mental processes are interrelated, and notice that they all involve fundamental distrust in mentally liberated

human functioning, and they question genuine human worthiness. Indeed, these are the main aspects of our domination culture, of the systems and institutions we've covered throughout this book that contribute to humanity's torment, to us living a mere fraction of our peaceful, honorable, and creative potential.

When we stand in the posture of moralistic judge, we're tragically expressing needs, such as to be heard and understood, to make sense of things, to have respect and consideration, and so on. At such times, feelings of discomfort, upset, or disappointment are probably active in our consciousness as well. NVC enables us to open a mental space of honesty and empathetic awareness for an inner dialogue that facilitates compassionate connection with self and others.

As mentioned, the basic NVC process advocates the following four aspects: making clear **observations** without evaluation, opinions, or moralistic judgment; identifying **feelings** without implications of judgment (more on this later); connecting feelings directly and explicitly to various physical and psychological **needs** instead of, for example, to various things and persons external to oneself; and, making succinct, practical **requests** to meet those various needs. So, observations, feelings, needs, and requests are the basic elements of nonviolent, or compassionate, communication. (I prefer the name "connected communication," and my podcast series on NVC was episodes 126-130, 132-136, and 155. [35]) Rosenberg's books and audios of course provide a thorough explanation, but let's explore more facets here.

Each of us has the capacity to generate both self-empathy and empathy for others. The empathetic process came to us naturally as children, especially prior to being subjected to power-over strategies. When we are in an empathetic experience, our minds aren't prone to such things as explaining, fixing, advising, educating, correcting, analyzing, telling stories, even consoling and sympathizing. We are simply wanting to identify, reflect, and stay attuned to feelings and needs, knowing—trusting—that this will enable connection and beneficial strategies to emerge. We can also experience the nourishment of compassionate giving, via emotions of empowerment and resourcefulness, tenderness and warmth, visibility and love, encouragement and joy.

When we connect our feelings to our needs, rather than to what someone has said or done for instance, we open an empathetic door for authentic understanding and connection to happen. In contrast, when we

employ variations of the “four Ds,” this empathetic door tends to remain closed for ourselves and others. Sometimes, in our desire to think well of ourselves, to protect and take care of ourselves (even to consider ourselves “right”), we can lose sight of how costly such strategies tend to be.

For example, when we want others to feel pain of some sort, to pay a price for what they said or did that we didn’t like or want, it’s probable that we haven’t had our own pain understood in a way that’s satisfying. By triggering distress in others, then, pain can become a shared experience. Despite the cost, the need for empathy is emphasized, if only implicitly. Viewing others with “enemy images” is typically a major part of this disconnection process, which prevents fulfillment of desires and needs and, thus, for feeling real satisfaction.

How we view what’s alive in us in relation to what others say and do sets the stage for how we express feelings, needs, and requests, and this process influences whether needs get met. Below are two examples that explain how each of us can deal with what others say and do in four basic ways. They’re excerpted from a succinct overview of NVC on a site featuring services by NVC trainers Gregg Kendrick and Wes Taylor, <http://basileia.org/learningresources>:

The “4 Ears”: How We Choose to Hear Difficult Messages

EXAMPLE #1

Person A, in the midst of conflict, states: “How dare you walk out of the room when I’m talking! You inconsiderate S.O.B.! You just can’t stand to hear the truth.”

1—Person B (**blaming A**): “Me the S.O.B? How about you! You’re the one who started all this in the first place. You are so self-righteous telling me I’m inconsiderate. You’ve never thought about another human being besides yourself!”

2—Person B (**blaming himself**): “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. It’s just that I don’t know what to do. I never know what to do, or what to say. I feel so worthless!”

3—Person B (**sensing his own feelings/needs**): “When I hear you say that, I feel hurt because I’m needing respect and to be seen for who I am. And I really need some space because I’m in a lot of pain right now... Would you be willing to tell me what you heard me just say?...”

4—Person B (**sensing A's feelings/needs**): "Are you feeling angry and wanting respect and to be heard?..."

EXAMPLE #2

A mother has a 1.5 hour coffee meeting with a friend, which is her first time away from the children in 3 days. Her 6-Year-Old responds: "Mama I don't want you to go! What could be more important than being with me (tugging at her leg, crying loudly)?"

1—Mother (**blaming child**): "Let go of my leg! And be quiet! You've got no reason to cry...I've been with you all day. You always make this so hard!...when all I want to do is have a few minutes to myself!"

2—Mother (**blaming herself**): "Oh, my gosh, I've really upset you! Why do I always do this?!...Why am I so selfish?...I'm such an awful mother."

3—Mother (**sensing her own feelings/needs**): "Honey, I'm really feeling exhausted and needing to just have some personal time to connect with my good friend, Betty. Would you be willing to let Mary (the babysitter) hold you?..."

4—Mother (**sensing her child's feelings/needs**): "Are you feeling sad and wanting to be held?...Are you feeling hurt and needing to know that you are precious and loved?..."

These are the basic "four ears" in human interaction. The first and second responses in each of the above examples are ears of blame and self-blame (known in NVC circles as "jackal ears"). The third and fourth responses in each are ears of clarity, self-empathy, and empathy, grounded in explicit acknowledgement and understanding of feelings and needs (known in NVC circles as "giraffe ears," since giraffes have the biggest heart of any land animal).

Notice also how these two different ways of hearing and responding dramatically affect the nature of the interaction, as well as the quality of the connection. As demonstrated in NVC usage throughout the world, choosing to see and hear things with judgment-free clarity and connection-oriented empathy can transform the interaction into something enriching and helpful for all involved. Since everyone has feelings and needs (they're universal), this process can foster connection where disconnection has been present, no doubt the result of things learned in the domination culture.

Complete Liberty Inside Out

Because of our predominant cultural memes, most people aren't used to interactions that fully meet their need for respectful understanding. So, NVC consciousness might take some getting used to, in order for the connection process to reveal its full benefits. When our observations are mixed with judgments or opinions, our messages can become more difficult to hear sometimes; enemy images can form, and our connections can become strained or even lost. Since both physical and psychological needs are the foundation of our lives as humans, they get expressed regardless of what we say and how we say it. So, the key is to express our needs in a clear way that greatly increases the likelihood of them getting met, thus enabling our lives to be enriched.

Here's another set of examples of how moralistic judgments are combined with observations and how they can be separated and transformed (again from the document by Kendrick and Taylor on basileia.org, as well as Rosenberg's book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language Of Life*) [72]:

Observation with Evaluation Mixed In	Observation Separated From Evaluation
You are too generous.	When I see you give your lunch money to others, I think you are too generous.
Doug procrastinates.	Doug studied for the exam the night before.
She won't get her work in.	I don't think she'll get her work in.
If you don't eat balanced meals, your health will be impaired.	If you don't eat balanced meals, I fear that your health will be impaired.
Minorities don't take care of their property.	I have not seen the family living at 1679 Ross shovel the snow on their sidewalk.
Hank Smith is a poor soccer player.	Hank Smith has not scored a goal in 20 games.
Jim is ugly.	Jim's looks don't appeal to me.

Observation with Evaluation Mixed In	Observation Separated From Evaluation
You seldom do what I want.	The last three times I initiated an activity, you said you didn't want to do it.
He frequently comes over.	He comes over at least twice a week.

Notice that statements in the second column provide a more accurate account of the observation, while statements in the first column either declare or imply some judgment of the other person's efficacy and worth, tragically expressing a desire for the other person to be different in some way.

The particular statement about "minorities" adds another layer of message difficulty on account of its collectivistic nature, which represents a global evaluation. This puts individuals in an arbitrary category in which their humanness can be devalued. As we covered in chapter two, such dehumanization is one of the processes leading to the injury of others.

Have you ever heard someone say something like "Well, people like you just don't get it!"? What's likely triggered upon hearing this categorization is a feeling of upset, not a feeling of appreciation. Appreciation is usually triggered when the specific issue at hand is addressed, and when needs for acceptance, inclusion, and equality are met. In other words, the most accurate observations are those that don't question the worth and trustworthiness of ourselves and others. This opens the door to further connection.

Ayn Rand, who I think might've benefitted immensely from learning NVC and thus helped her readers immensely (including me), nevertheless wrote the following about racism in the book *The Virtue Of Selfishness*:

"Racism is the lowest, most crudely primitive form of collectivism. It is the notion of ascribing moral, social or political significance to a man's genetic lineage—the notion that a man's intellectual and characterological traits are produced and transmitted by his internal body chemistry." (p. 126) [\[71\]](#)

Indeed, to view persons as parts of any type of collective in order to impugn their worth is to overlook their essential, individual characteristics. Rand also correctly noted that the smallest minority in the world is the individual. Thus, human rights are upheld by preventing the persecution of individuals. When our needs for freedom and equality are sacrificed, suffering and bloodshed ensue. Judging people's moral worth tends to generate cycles of defensiveness and counterattack, fostering more despair. Contrast this with *needs-based* judgment, in which the statements and actions of individuals are viewed from the standpoint of met and unmet needs.

In the preceding columns about separating observations from evaluations, you probably noticed that "I think" was used to express something apart from the observation. Since we are conditioned to make observations with judgments of ourselves and others attached to them, separating the two can be challenging yet beneficial. Our thoughts can contain many evaluations, such as "I think you are beautiful" or "I think you are disrespectful." These statements don't have quite the same meaning as "You are beautiful" or "You are disrespectful," because "I think" notes an opinion as a thought, whereas the latter statements offer only evaluative labels. Bringing a heightened awareness to our thoughts can make a big difference in how we deal with our evaluations.

When we stand in judgment of another, we can be eager to issue some final verdict, as if we had a gavel in our hand, concerning a long-standing and significant issue, or even a temporary or superficial one. In such moments, our higher vantage point of consciousness, the realm of objectively *noticing* what we're thinking, unfortunately fades into the background. So, a shift in awareness—to mindfulness of what's truly alive in us—is what NVC seeks to cultivate, in which we're much less likely to *take personally* what others say or do, and thus much less likely to defend and counterattack. This enables us to practice self-empathy, to comfort ourselves and gain psychological resourcefulness, in order to connect with feelings and needs, rather than augment our frustration by engaging in more seemingly endless battles of the wills and contests of rightness and wrongness.

This leads us to another very key aspect of nonviolent communication: the process of separating our feelings from our judgments, so that we can connect our feelings to either met or unmet

needs, rather than to what another person (or ourselves) is saying or doing. We've tragically been trained to include evaluations in our expressions of feelings, and this disempowers us from thinking and speaking a language of life.

Probably all of us, at one time or another, have found ourselves saying and hearing such things as the following:

"I feel manipulated."

"I feel ignored."

"I feel neglected."

"I feel unappreciated."

"I feel betrayed."

"I feel taken for granted."

"I feel used."

"I feel judged."

"I feel insulted."

"I feel disrespected."

In truth, the above statements convey thoughts in addition to feelings, and they can be separated as follows:

"I feel upset, and I think I've been manipulated."

"I feel displeased, and I think I'm being ignored."

"I feel lonely, and I think I'm being neglected."

"I feel depleted, and I think I haven't been appreciated."

"I feel distraught, and I think I've been betrayed."

"I feel unsettled, and I think I'm being taken for granted."

"I feel disgruntled, and I think I've been used."

"I feel uncomfortable and guarded, and I think I'm being judged."

"I feel livid, and I think I've been insulted."

"I feel appalled, and I think I'm being disrespected."

Notice that even the thoughts that have been separated don't exactly reach the transparent truth of the matter, because thoughts, like beliefs and opinions, may or may not be reflections of actual reality. We're so used to passing judgment by combining feelings with thoughts that this separation can seem awkward, stilted, even lacking in something. This is why connecting feelings to our met and unmet needs is key—because it

connects us to vital truths of our and others' inner-worlds. So, let's discover the possible needs underlying the above thoughts by translating the evaluations in them:

"I feel upset, because I'm in need of respect and trust with regard to my ability to make informed choices."

"I feel displeased, because I'm needing some acknowledgment and visibility in relation to my attempts to communicate."

"I feel lonely, because my needs for closeness, consideration, and affection aren't getting met."

"I feel depleted, because I need some recognition and appreciation for the attempts I've made to help our relationship thrive."

"I feel distraught, because I need reassurance and more understanding about what's happened."

"I feel unsettled, because my needs for appreciation and equality aren't met."

"I feel disgruntled, because my needs for inclusion, honesty, and respect haven't gotten met."

"I feel uncomfortable and guarded, and I'm needing acceptance, empathy, trust, and respect."

"I feel livid, because I'm really needing some mutuality and respect right now."

"I feel appalled, because I'm in need of respect and understanding right now."

Notice the phrase "right now" indicates the imperative nature of anger. Anger is an alarm signal indicating that important needs aren't getting met. Of course, all needs are important in life. It's just that anger is a feeling that can lead to quite tragic expressions of unmet needs, so it's crucial to discover the deeper feelings and needs giving rise to it. Typically, other unidentified and unexpressed feelings underlie anger, such as hurt, fear, sadness, despair, confusion, and grief. Frustration is another emotional aspect of anger that's crying out for needs to get met.

As mentioned, usually we weren't shown how to convey our feelings and needs in a way that greatly assisted in them being understood and met. This is the ongoing tragedy of domination systems, from the family to politics. Learning NVC summons us to be *more of ourselves*. It also summons us to heal our trauma, to begin nourishing

ourselves with the understanding and compassion that were absent during times of abuse and neglect. Of course, this can be a challenging process, especially when costly ways to convey what's alive in ourselves and assess what's alive in others predominate. Sometimes, even disdain is directed at the NVC process itself, at articulating our feelings and needs in an open, honest, and empathetic way—as if clearly stating our needs were *another form* of violence, thought to be “needy,” “manipulative,” “psychologizing,” or “psychoanalyzing.” When we live in a culture of widespread coercion, nearly everything may be interpreted from that all-too-familiar context.

As we encounter someone with such a perspective, we can see many needs being expressed, such as to be heard and understood in a familiar way, which entails needs for comprehensibility, mutuality, and presence. This includes honoring what's alive in him or her concerning a nonviolent way of communicating. Ultimately, this kind of reaction points especially to the need for empathy, yet noting this need explicitly can trigger more feelings of upset, perhaps based on needs for equality, meaning, and stability.

As individuals, we want to discover and process things about ourselves with our own volition; this is in line with honoring our needs for autonomy, equality, self-efficacy, and self-understanding. So, guessing the need for autonomy is likely to get a favorable response from nearly anyone, no matter their familiarity with NVC; at times, it's helpful to start there in disagreement and conflict, and to realize that we all have a need for space as well. Sometimes connections are made little by little, via the gradual building of trust.

Ultimately, NVC is a way of interacting with and describing what's alive in us and what's alive in others that most fosters empathetic connection and understanding, yielding solutions to self-conflict and conflict with others. Grounding our experiences in a comprehensible vocabulary of feelings and needs greatly facilitates this. Since we use strategies to meet needs all the time, once we're clear about the needs we're seeking to meet, we can get more clear about optimal strategies—ones that are mutually advantageous, win/win for all parties, rather than ones that entail sacrifices and sizable costs.

Strategies that enrich our lives usually emerge when we get our needs for understanding and empathy met. Notice that understanding is a component of empathy as well, and vice versa. Naturally, these needs

interrelate, like all the others. Figuring out the various needs that we may have pressing at any given time is part of our inner-learning process too. This isn't exactly easy at times, given the breadth of our psychological needs and of course given all the social and cultural influences.

Sometimes, we can have the thought that it's easier to believe that some needs aren't that important, that they should be sacrificed, or that they don't even exist! After all, we live in a society that neglects and sacrifices needs on a daily basis, on account of the present domination systems. So, it's little wonder that some persons might bristle at the proposition that needs are universal—indeed vital—to each person's flourishing. Just because we've been able to survive without many needs being fully met, doesn't mean that they're unimportant. We can aim for more than survival or just getting by. Flourishing can become our main objective.

Humans evolved to thrive on this planet in myriad ways. When we relate to each other based on what's universal in us, we can relate in mutually advantageous ways. When we make requests that consider each other's feelings and needs, we can avoid the language of demands. As we've explored, demands contain threats, a form of coercion trying to "get" us to do something that we might not otherwise do. As NVC instructs, one of the things that can distinguish a request from a demand is whether the person issuing it is okay with hearing a "No, thanks," being cognizant of the possible needs underlying it.

Indeed, needs are just as much involved when we turn down a request as when we say "Yes" to one. Each kind of response can lead to more understanding of what needs are most pressing. Yet when a person has distrust in the process of getting needs met, demands might be made instead, and everyone suffers. For even when we comply with a demand, the reason is not to freely, enthusiastically, and compassionately give; rather, it's to avoid harmful consequences, to placate, or even to *feign* respect.

Feigned respect is the opposite of actual respect, of course, so obviously when demands are made, this need is sacrificed too. In such moments, when the desire is simply compliance, the quality of the relationship significantly deteriorates (perhaps we can issue apologies later, we might think). Let's use the example of parenting here, because as I typed these words I received the following email from <http://nonviolentcommunication.com>:

"Compassionate Parenting Tip — Week 46

"Before you ask your child to do something, Marshall Rosenberg suggests asking yourself these two questions...

"The first question is: 'What do you want your child to do?' As you answer this first question, it may be clear that using rewards or threats can get your child to do what you want.

"The second question is: 'What do you want your child's reasons to be for doing it?' When you consider this question, you will see that using power over children will not create a safe, trusting and connected relationship, the kind you can build upon for a lifetime."

Indeed, power-over strategies are manifestations of frustration and distrust, yet we may have learned to find value in them, regardless of their cost. In pondering the second question, we can also think of another answer that many parents might proffer: "I want my child's reasons to stem from his or her desire to do what one is told, when one is told to do it, signifying compliance with my authority as a parent, because I know best." While this might not be stated explicitly by parents, it's obvious from their behavior that many, if not most, parents believe that compliance and obedience are necessary virtues in the family system (and in religious and schooling systems), even though they clash with (normally unacknowledged) needs for autonomy, choice, respect, and respect for others (such as children).

So, domination thinking leaves us caught in an immense contradiction: that needs can be sacrificed without serious harm to self and others, or that harm to self and others doesn't matter much when it comes to getting what we want by making demands.

Yet, in our more reflective and compassionate moments, we know that being viewed as equals, i.e., as persons with the same needs and freedoms, enables us to flourish and interact in the most enriching ways. Naturally, such ways don't involve threats and coercion, which harm our independence, including the independence of the administrators of threats and coercion. Because of humans' equality of worth and universality of needs, anything we do that sacrifices them is destined to fail, if not materially fail, then psychologically fail. Anything that upholds the premise that some humans don't have the same needs or

have needs that don't matter very much basically reflects the age-old power-over paradigm.

As Rosenberg noted, ultimately we can't directly make others do what we demand. All we can do is make them wish, via punishment for noncompliance, that they had done what we demanded; and then, they might try to make us wish we hadn't done that. [20] This results in seemingly endless cycles of coercion, threats, punishments, resentment, and revenge. Humans have survived on Earth for thousands of generations immersed in varying degrees of this destructive cycle. In the last few hundred generations, institutions to embody it in seeming perpetuity have been crafted, "governments" being the prime example. These are the modern colossal pyramids of distrust.

However, once we determine that the cycle of needs-neglect harms us to the core of our being, we can give it up and let it go. We can begin adopting new ways to interact with children, in both parenting and educational realms. Making sure that everyone's needs are honored is part of the waking-up process—waking up to our wonderful possibilities on this planet.

Just as others aren't responsible for our feelings, we aren't responsible for theirs. To reiterate, feelings stem from met and unmet needs, in addition to the thoughts connected to them. As noted, once we get clear about our feelings and needs, we can formulate requests that can change our interactions for the better, thus meeting needs and changing how we feel. Such a process involves valuing the independence of others, especially little people.

Children typically have a much easier time integrating nonviolent communication, because they haven't solidified habits of mind that can be life-alienating, such as the "4 Ds." Being okay with another person not fulfilling our request is part of the process of understanding their perspective, especially what needs would not get met by doing what we want. Because this perspective tends to foster more enriching interactions and a social system that leads to many more needs getting met, people can feel more alive, empowered, joyous, comfortable, and satisfied.

In our present culture, ingrained habits aren't easy to relinquish. But all of us know the *immense* difference in our emotional state when our needs for being heard, for understanding, and for respect are met, versus when they're not. Internally, if we've yet to learn a nonviolent way of communicating with ourselves, sometimes our actions may involve

feelings of frustration, despair, discouragement, or upset about thoughts of poor self-concept. Thus, we might indulge in, for example, a particular junk food to try to meet our need for choice and to feel pleasure by stimulating our taste buds. Other times it may involve feeling irked or indignant and, consequently, we might assert our autonomy and rebel against rules set forth by various so-called “authorities,” who then follow through with their threats of punishment.

Notice that the main issue in such instances concerns the *ways* we’ve been trying to get our needs met, not what we’re feeling and needing as such. Indeed, the first step in restructuring habitual patterns of reacting to feelings is to explicitly identify those feelings and determine the need or needs underlying them. As we’ve discussed, our traditional culture doesn’t provide us with the vocabulary and method by which to do this, but thankfully NVC does. The basic framework of needs involves facets such as connection, well-being, honesty (alignment with reality), play and joy, peace, autonomy, and meaning. Various feelings arise when such needs are met, such as affectionate, engaged, hopeful, confident, excited, grateful, inspired, joyful, exhilarated, peaceful, and refreshed.

And of course various feelings arise when our needs are not met, such as afraid, annoyed, angry, aversion, confused, disconnected, disquiet, embarrassed, fatigue, pain, sad, tense, vulnerable, and yearning.

Here are the detailed feelings and needs lists from the Center For Nonviolent Communication, which provide a foundational vocabulary of our functioning:

<http://www.cnvc.org/Training/feelings-inventory>

<http://www.cnvc.org/Training/needs-inventory>

Feelings and needs are foundational because the process of evaluating what’s beneficial to us (and to others) and what’s not—that is, whether needs get met or do not get met—determines how successful, effective, or optimized we are in the process of living. If we don’t have a solid understanding of our needs-based judgments, then some things are bound to go awry.

For instance, imposing punishments on children when they do things that “aren’t allowed,” or when they do them in an “improper” manner (i.e., in a manner that we don’t like or don’t see as useful) sends the message to them that they aren’t in full charge of their own behavior

and its *natural* consequences; children suffer imposed consequences by “authority figures” instead.

During both childhood and adulthood, prohibition and regulation leave us with a society fraught with conflict, both inner and outer kinds. Basically, we end up with a culture in which human psychologies are at war with themselves and with each other. External control and domination by others in supposed “authority” deny our right to be self-responsible persons who can do what we want. As children, when we are not allowed to figure out what we want and do what we want, we can lose a vital connection to our desires. When our desires are thwarted and can’t be fulfilled according to our own preferences and determinations, our intrinsic motivation and connection to a spectrum of needs suffer much as well. Consequently as adults, we might learn not to care as much about ourselves, which can result in doing things that are not-so-healthy or even self-destructive.

When our wills are thwarted from an early age (supposedly “for your own good”), we might end up believing that *others* are in charge of important decisions. If not others per se, then various internalized critical voices can take center stage, which also generate immense self-conflict. Because of our need for autonomy, such voices also might be rebelled against.

Again, all these voices, be they external or internalized ones, presume to be “in charge” of you, and they can make you wish you’d done what they demanded; they can punish you too. And you, in turn, may try to make them wish they hadn’t done that, by not following their demands entirely, which can create problematic cycles of rebellion, punishment, and self-punishment. Intertwined processes of compulsion and resentment can loom large.

Tragically, in our efforts to assert our autonomy—i.e., our natural freedom to make our own choices—we can make choices that we might not have made if we had been trusted (and trusted ourselves) in the first place.

Connecting more with feelings and needs

So, how can we solidify the conviction that we are persons who deeply care about ourselves, who have concern for our own well-being? Achieving self-direction in any realm can be facilitated by connecting

your feelings to your needs. From there, you can devise life-enriching strategies to nourish yourself joyfully, making healthy choices rather than coerced ones.

As we look within, into our inner-world, we can notice a lot of interesting and fascinating things going on. Most of us look into a mirror on a daily basis, seeing our external, physical selves, but sometimes we're reluctant to see and understand what's going on inside our psychological selves. NVC trainer Thomas D'Ansembourg wrote the following in his book *Being Genuine: Stop Being Nice, Start Being Real*, in the section "Cherishing a Relationship":

"Each of us regularly gives ourselves body care. We tend our hair, our beards, our clothes, our homes, as well as the whole range of machines and apparatuses that we use, from the coffee machine to the computer, not forgetting the lawnmower or the car. We do maintenance on all of these things for our own well-being and that of our families. And all the logistics are perfectly well-mastered and built into our routines. This is true to such an extent that we can with no difficulty postpone an appointment by claiming that the car is at the garage or that the computer has broken down. Also, without the slightest embarrassment, we can rearrange our entire schedule around a medical appointment ('Let's postpone the meeting until next week because this week I'm having medical examinations') or even an appointment with the hairdresser ('Oh, honey, we can't meet this afternoon; I forgot my appointment with the hairdresser'). But how about this? 'I'll be absent next week; I'm doing the annual checkup on my relationship with myself' or 'We have to postpone tomorrow's meeting because I'm looking after a relationship that is precious to me' or 'Sweetheart, we won't be able to see each other this afternoon; I need to do some inner beauty work.'

"What's strange is that relationships, whether with ourselves or with other people, are expected to operate unassisted, without any fuel, with scarcely any maintenance! It's hardly surprising, therefore, that they so often wear out, burn out, or break down. We don't take care of them. We get more wrapped up with logistics than with closeness, as if closeness were taken for granted. We don't go and look, we don't want to know, for intimacy instills fear. It's true that if we don't know each other well, if we aren't fully grounded, intimacy both with ourselves and

others can instill fear—the fear of losing oneself, the fear of dissolving like a drop of water in the sea. Then we run off to do things, while connection is frequently consigned to the scrap heap.” (p. 161-62) [16]

Self-care and thus care about our connections with others do involve certain insights and certain healing processes, lest elements of our childhood trauma and domination culture get the best of us. Shining the light of empathy into all facets of your mind tends to foster reintegration with your child-self, and this can foster still more inner connection. Fears of intimacy tend to be based on distorted thoughts about oneself, such as “I’m not good enough,” “I’m not worthy of happiness” (and thus of someone’s full love), or even “I’m unfit to exist.” Such emotions indicate our needs for acceptance and love, to matter, genuineness and meaning, self-esteem, and indeed intimacy itself. To recognize needs and meet them in beneficial ways tends to be as much an art as a science, especially since the sciences of psychology and neurology have yet to incorporate the feelings-connected-with-needs language of nonviolent communication in their understanding of human functioning, motivation, and health.

The ways we can go about trying to meet our unmet needs seem vast of course, but certain patterns tend to emerge, typically based on past experiences and behaviors. We tend to do what most other people are doing too, and to err is human. Each of us makes mistakes on a regular basis; it’s part of our nature as fallible beings (notice that the fictitious notion of infallibility is typically granted to ineffable, disembodied “beings”). Yet we don’t want to confuse our fallibility with either of two related things: being victims of our problematic past; or, falling prey to a culture that hasn’t focused on these all-important ideas.

In many ways, as we’ve explored, our mainstream culture has failed to provide us with the necessary information and skills by which to flourish and live optimally—which means being versed in the physical and psychological needs that we possess by virtue of being conceptual creatures.

Because all of us have the same spectrum of feelings and needs, where we may differ is in the process of identifying and expressing them and the strategies we use to fulfill various needs. Conflict happens in the realm of strategies, after all. For instance, sometimes we’re trying to fulfill a need so eagerly that we lose sight of our other needs; we lose sight of

the fact that we don't have to sacrifice some needs for the sake of other needs.

So, the next time you're engaged in this process of connecting your feelings to your needs, observe what needs you're trying to fulfill by your present strategies. As you explore what needs you've been fulfilling, be it for one day, a week, or even months or years, also reflect on what needs might not have been fully met in the process.

While not easy or simple sometimes, we can let go of past strategies that sacrifice needs. Yet, as we live in a culture that has tended to overlook so many needs, we might wonder how we can finally meet them, which leads to discovering and devising the most life-enriching strategies. By imagining how we can do something differently that can fulfill more of our needs, new realms of living can open up for us.

Think about some specific alternative strategies that can get more of your needs met without the typical costs. Perhaps take some time and write them below in specific terms, because the more specific they are, the easier they'll be to enact and incorporate on a daily basis (again, feel free to make use of the NVC feelings and needs inventories):

When I'm feeling...	and in need of...	I can meet that need by...

Eventually, new ways to fulfill needs become an integral part of your life. NVC is a process of consciousness that can create a much more

integrated view of ourselves and others. The view given in our childhood involved perhaps a lot of disconnection from needs, confusion of strategies with needs, as well as shame, blame, and guilt from moralistic judgment (“should” and “shouldn’t” and “good” and “bad” edicts). Yet, the view we can presently choose and embody involves internal trust and worthiness, reflecting the facets of happiness. An integrated view is also in line with what brain science holds concerning healthy consciousness and living well. Here’s an hour talk about this by Daniel Siegel of the Mindsight Institute, to either watch now or come back to later:

Google Personal Growth Series The New Science of Mindsight

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=Gr4Od7kqDT8>

And here’s an exquisitely detailed chart of the developmental process of the aspects of our consciousness, as we become more and more integrated, which was devised by NVC trainers Jim and Jori Mankse:

<http://radicalcompassion.com/matrix>

Learning to function in an integrated, authentic, and compassionate manner is a life-long process, and so much enjoyment can be experienced throughout it. The challenges in our culture beckon us to be more present with ourselves and with others and to cultivate a needs-based consciousness. Every little bit helps, and as Rosenberg noted (addressing our potential fear of failure or making mistakes), “anything that is worth doing is worth doing poorly.” [20] As a distinct species, we can realize and embrace our full empathetic capacity and thus actualize our magnificent potential on this amazing planet. Let’s explore more of the meaning and implications of this in the last two chapters.

Chapter 8

Societal transformation to voluntaryism

Complete political liberty recap

Living complete liberty inside out essentially means personal transformation, which therefore yields societal transformation. In such a new world, political philosophy might be discussed at various times to maintain clarity, but “politics” as we’ve known it will be gone. Imagine that: no more news filled with seemingly endless stories about governmental affairs—no more campaign trails, stump speeches, and scandals of the week, no more lobbying for this or that, no more domestic and foreign “policies,” no more enforcement of endless reams of “statutes” and “laws” and subsequent statist court decisions, ruining countless people’s lives, no more wars and military excursions started by politicians and “defense departments,” no more intrusions into our private lives in the name of “national security,” no more extortion called taxation, no more devaluation of money, and so on.

As noted in *Complete Liberty*, politics will be a thing of the past because the ideas and actions of political “authority” will be gone as well. Individuals will no longer have an interest in centralized hierarchies of control—no more legislatures to legislate anything, no more judiciaries to adjudicate anything, and no more executives to execute anything. When we reason from the basic principles of self-ownership and property rights, we can see that acting in contradiction to them means acting in contradiction to our own nature as reasoning beings, which necessarily furthers conflict and suffering for untold numbers of individuals and for humanity in general.

Even today, most people in marketplaces throughout the world find it incredibly easy to respect other persons and their property. We go about our own business, and others go about theirs; no harm, no foul. It’s

actually a marvel to behold—millions of persons in cities and towns across America, for example, getting so many things done and getting along and exchanging values in so many useful and enriching ways. Sure, a tiny minority of private individuals attempts to use violence and fraud against their fellow inhabitants, but their activities pale in comparison to the coercive activities of the allegedly “public” institutions of government. Millions of people operate in this organization that, by its very design, sacrifices human needs, such as for autonomy, choice, fairness, and respect. The idea of government simply can’t avoid its coercive nature: a legalized monopoly that funds its operations via taxes and fiat currency and that tries to control people via regulations and laws backed by threats and punishments.

Abolition of government both conceptually and organizationally will mean that a crucial evolution in human consciousness has finally taken place. Individuals working on behalf of government will choose the ways of nonviolence, favoring instead voluntary funding and voluntary sustenance in the marketplace, just like everyone else in business. Free markets always welcome more persons to contribute and interact.

Unfortunately, seeking profits instead of tax dollars is not something especially favored in our culture today, at least not without a certain amount of guilt (in response to accusations of “greed”). After all, public education is funded with tax dollars, as is a host of other welfare and warfare programs, which are also funded by fiat currency inflation. And all the myriad of governmental groups that attempt to “regulate” the marketplace of voluntary interactions are funded via extortion too, i.e., taxation. Many, if not most, scientific endeavors are also funded with tax dollars.

The largest source of governmental funding comes from a form of larceny on the grandest scale imaginable: incurring debt by creating money out of thin air (digitally), coupled with non-market-based interest rate controls and fractional reserve banking. As any free market economist will tell you, inflation of the money supply (via fiat currency creation) results in devaluation of the currency, which is our primary medium of exchange (on account of being “legal tender for all debts, public charges, taxes and dues”). To our huge economic misfortune, this means continuously reduced purchasing power, wherein the same dollars buy less over time. This is the opposite of what happens in a free

market system of money (such as with gold and silver). In the interim perhaps the U.S. dollar's current non-governmental challenger, the open source and peer-to-peer digital currency called Bitcoin, will continue to make gains in the marketplace, both in terms of valuation and adoption.

Since the inception of the Federal Reserve System in 1913, the dollar has lost nearly all of its original value, i.e., the amount of goods and services each unit could buy. This would be much more noticeable if weren't for the great counterbalancing effect of the enormous productivity gains via information technologies and other marketplace innovations. Such economic theft might seem minor in a relatively prosperous society, but its devastating effects are inescapable, particularly for persons on low or fixed incomes, from the young to the elderly.

It's difficult to fully realize how much more value our money can have without the fiscal and monetary governmental controls. In a free market our buying power and savings increase over time, which is an absolute boon to everyone's standard of living. Practically everyone would become wealthy by today's standards in a few years, maybe even in a few months. The benefits of a truly free market process can't be overstated. Few people know how much our lifestyles are diminished by the political system, and the untold and unseen economic advantages of a free market remain the great unactualized potential of humanity. People in the future will look back on this time and be flabbergasted by how much economies were crippled by governmental systems.

Once we become aware of the statist matrix and just how damaging it is to *everybody*, psychologically and economically (even those who've become "rich" in it), we can then acquire a passionate desire to see a free world. Today, most people don't entirely recognize how their need for freedom can be fully manifested. Few have a clear conception of how their lives can be greatly enriched when that precious need gets met. The total dissolution of the idea and institution of government requires many, if not most, of the psychological paradigm shifts we've explored in this book.

A contradictory belief tends to persist that none of us can handle the transition to full self-responsibility—in essence, full adulthood. Supposedly, we can't take care of ourselves and respect others in a free society, so the alleged "chaos and disorder" of anarchy is imagined and forecasted. Those who hold this belief are in emotional contexts of

perhaps fear, anxiety, worry, and distrust, which likely indicate needs for security, stability, understanding, and meaning. The strategies of statism they favor don't fully get those needs met, of course, and they readily sacrifice their need (everyone's need) for freedom. Whether or not they favor the political status quo with vigor, any suggestions of transitioning into the realm of freedom typically prompts disagreements and incredulous queries. Many wonder *how on Earth* could individuals live and provide for themselves without government—as if people's lives are made better via a system of coercion. In such discussions, we can hear painful echos of conditional parenting experiences.

Indeed, belief in government questions the capacity of humans to be responsible decision-makers. Use of logic exposes the ultimate contradiction that's been foisted on the human mind for centuries: that other humans calling themselves "government" can be responsible decision-makers that *make* the rest of us be responsible decision-makers, or at least be in a position to punish us if we aren't responsible decision-makers, according to their demands (commonly called laws, statutes, rules, or policies).

Now we're indeed back to the stern and coercive parenting model. To reiterate, the memes of government make much more sense when we consider the fact that most people experience such "authority" in their childhoods. It's frustrating and sad beyond words that these early experiences serve as a political template for trying to restrict our freedoms as adults.

The notion that human beings are irresponsible *by nature* can never be true. This false premise is exemplified by those who form the organization of government in order to allegedly keep everyone (including themselves) in line. "Representative democracy" supposedly requires responsible decision-makers; people are supposed to elect persons from the general populace to govern them, who in turn appoint and hire others from the general populace too. Yet, due to its coercive nature, the implementation of democracy is fraught with insuperable problems and irreconcilable inconsistencies, which are no doubt reflected in the low approval rating of politicians and of governmental bureaucracy in general. While documents like the U.S. Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, are supposed to keep those in government accountable and not tyrannical, governmental duties by definition involve the violation of individual rights.

Tragically, the more one treats others as if they were irresponsible, the more they might act that way, which is a variation of self-fulfilling prophecy. Whether it be in parenting, religion, schooling, or statism, when fellow persons are treated in ways that deny their own choices, they may give up (and give in) or rebel. No matter what, vital needs are sacrificed, both in the victims of power-over strategies and in the persons using them.

To believe that we can choose others to “govern” us in a political democracy reveals the major contradiction once again: that you can choose someone to rule you, to deny your freedom to make your own choices as you see fit with your own property, according to your own desires. Inspecting a thesaurus for synonyms of the verb “govern” yields the following:

1—rule, preside over, reign over, control, be in charge of, command, lead, dominate

2—determine, decide control, regulate, direct, rule, dictate, shape. These meanings definitely don’t include words that denote respect for persons and their property, unless we’re to view other persons as *our* property, which is the most harmful yet historically longstanding injustice.

Unfortunately, parents might view children as their property, since they are dependent on caregivers for survival. Yet taking the stance of “ruler of little persons” not only hinders respectful and responsible guardianship. Later on, it also promotes submission to supposed political rulers and their many enforcers, lest we get punished for trying to finally be free.

Of course, most adults view politics as either a game (at best) or an inconvenience (at worst), which can really downplay the significance of this massive contradiction about human nature. It’s deeply upsetting to realize that one is part of a coercive system that inhibits our capacities to be free and responsible individuals. After all, being responsible means being *able to respond* to circumstances based on your knowledge, skills, and abilities, according to your own capacity to make decisions. When we surrender to some “authority” that claims dominion over these self-responsible processes, we can try to ease our discomfort with the belief that it’s “necessary and proper” for some purported “common good.”

Someone who’s feeling reticent to give up the memes of statism might try to ignore the contradiction that people supposedly require

governors (i.e., other people to tell them what to do, or else). Well, what about a system that disallows “free and fair elections” and features a “benevolent dictator” who’s supposed to make better decisions than anyone else? It might sound absurd, but people throughout history (and some currently) have actually favored such a view. While it sidesteps the irony of democracy (of “choosing” rulers to make choices for oneself) it still forwards the contradiction that someone needs to be “in charge” politically, someone who supposedly knows what’s best for all and punishes those who don’t do what’s presumed best.

Be it a “government” or a General Zod appearing from the planet Krypton for us to kneel before, to worship and obey, to our last days on Earth, we still face the ultimate volitional fact: To submit is also to make a choice. In our present political predicament, we’re constantly factoring the odds of being punished by others who haven’t freed their minds from the illusion of “authority.” Now, most of us tend to submit to various coercive aspects of the political system, but as time goes on and the contradictions become ever more apparent to more people, fewer and fewer persons will find any real value in doing so, other than to avoid various punishments. Eventually, perhaps everyone will grasp the immense benefits of self-responsibility and freedom, and they’ll no longer be sleepwalking in a half-dream/half-nightmare situation in which they depend on others to determine what’s best for their own lives.

The fact of the matter is that no one but you knows what’s best for you, because no one else is looking with your eyes, breathing with your lungs, walking with your legs, and thinking and feeling with your nervous system. Sure, others in various areas of expertise can offer their views and recommendations, but ultimately you are your own decision-maker, with the inherent capacity to make responsible decisions.

So, when we reduce “politics” to its plain essence, the contradictions become glaring to the point of deeply disturbing. Ironically, this emotional impact might be what prevents most of us from shouting the truth from the rooftops, in outrage about the constant injustices. The fear of realizing the intolerable nature of these domination systems can keep us locked in status-quo thinking about our lives in relation to political affairs. Yet, on some level, we all know that we cannot have “liberty and justice for all” in a coercive system.

No individual in our species can speak for all individuals, unless what he or she speaks is universally true for all, such as the truths of universal needs and our capacity to meet needs without sacrifices and violations of rights. This means the freedom to do as we please and interact with others voluntarily, i.e., without infringing on their own freedoms (by means of aggression). It is precisely this message that will enable us to see past the mental gatekeepers and into the realm of inspiring realizations.

It doesn't matter if someone has greater (or lesser) capacities than you, because you are the ultimate decision-maker for your own life and well-being. Each person in a truly free market makes decisions for oneself, and one of these decisions concerns whether to seek help from others in order to make more informed decisions regarding, for instance, safety and security. Unfortunately, this is where persons immersed in memes of statism can become discouraged, so it behooves us to empathize with their perspective. They think that such decisions about safety and security are supposed to be already figured out and implemented by those in power; that's why we have government to begin with, the thinking goes.

Indeed, if we are given no market choice about governmental "services" from the day we were born, then we might believe that no market-based service is possible or preferable. We might believe that governmental services are too important to be within the realm of choice, even though this overlooks the reality that people in governmental organizations are themselves making choices in their monopolistic context to assist others; after all, governmental workers generally go to work willingly without threats of punishment if they quit (except for the coercive "contract" for so-called military duty).

Simply put, humans have been abiding by a system that denies their capacity to make decisions for themselves in the marketplace. Again, like in strategies of conditional parenting, we see the lack of trust in people to make thoughtful choices, with the consequence being disallowing those choices. The fact of the matter is that each person in society has the right to offer or purchase whatever rights-respecting services or products can be offered or purchased in the marketplace. Arbitrary governmental edicts about "illegality" threaten both entrepreneurs and customers with punishments for making decisions to transact with others.

It's again painfully obvious that the conditional parenting model is in full effect with the prohibitions instituted by the memes of government. They essentially treat adults as untrustworthy, careless, reckless beings, which other adults allegedly "in charge" (but of the same ilk) know best how to deal with or tell what to do. Thus, we witness the methods of coercion and force via assorted monopolies and exclusive privileges (including patents, copyrights, and trademarks), taxes, licenses, permits, fees, fines, legal complaints and charges, warrants, arrests, detentions, trials, incarceration, probation, parole, and executions. Notice too that these are basically the ill-effects of communized property notions writ large.

Given this matrix of force and coercion, we can plainly see that the organization of government can't provide actual services. As author and producer of "The No State Project" [Marc Stevens](#) queries, so long as governmental activities aren't offered and funded on a *voluntary* basis, what evidence can there be that people actually want and seek such activities? The answer, of course, is that such evidence is impossible to ascertain when it's government's way or the highway (a literal highway that's also bureaucratically controlled by governmental law enforcers).

Nothing that's actually sold in a free market caters to the opposite of what customers want. That would be the ultimate economic oxymoron, a thriving business without customers. As myriad free market economists have pointed out, profits are the result of satisfying customers' needs and wants. Taxes, in contrast, are the result of tricking people into believing that extortion is necessary—that a win/lose scenario is somehow preferable to countless win/win scenarios (i.e., voluntary trades) in the marketplace. In today's taxed-and-regulated corporate marketplace, customers become unsatisfied in many ways, revealing the unfree economy of a statist system.

Coercive monopolies arise from the beliefs about government being people's protector and provider. Being coercively imposed and maintained, such monopolies are always based on a fundamental denial of human choice. Time and again, we return to the basic nature of choice, and the fact that choice is a foundational need that's sacrificed by any system of government.

When our need for choice is finally met concerning the former "services" of government, our needs for security and safety won't be sacrificed either. This of course runs directly counter to popular beliefs

about roving private gangs or the “chaos of anarchy.” Beliefs of this sort drop the actual, presently harmful context and conjure greater potential harms that don’t accord with societal psychological evolution and free market justice principles.

As noted in *Complete Liberty*, to use Somalia as an example of market anarchism fails on many counts: Warlords, tribal mentalities, and statist powers continue to impose their non-libertarian views on a war-torn population, and the U.S. government and U.N. continue their interventions. Market anarchism, or voluntarism (or agorism) is born out of the principles of self-ownership, property rights, and a nonsacrificial ethics of respect for each individual. Needless to say, these principles are lacking in the culture of Somalia, as they are in any tribalistic and statist environment. Complete liberty psychologically and politically represents a major cultural paradigm shift that’s yet to happen. Some individuals have made this shift already for themselves, but it clearly needs to be widely distributed in our culture for any dramatic changes to occur on a socio-economic level.

Our needs for safety and security will be upheld in a much different manner than today’s coercive strategies that arise directly from fear and distrust. Criminality as it’s presently constituted will disappear, mostly on account of abolition of the massive double standard of socially acceptable governmental criminality. Additionally, the private security industry that’s presently available with various protection and prevention devices (such as alarm systems, deadbolts, etc.) might eventually disappear too in a free society, as people integrate principles of nonviolent communication and property rights. While guns and other lethal weapons may be used for recreational purposes, the expectation of using them for self-defense will likely fade away as well.

Note that such a dramatic shift does not require a change in human nature, as for instance Marxist ideology promotes (i.e., a shift from self-interest to altruistic service to the group). Rather, it will entail a more coherent and integrated view of human nature; nonviolent, connected, and compassionate communication practices will be considered essential to flourishing—so, no more self-sacrifice and no more sacrifice of others to self.

Today we of course have a society that exhibits only a fraction of its true potential, troubled by all sorts of dysfunctional beliefs and behaviors. Yet these too are attempts, albeit quite costly, to meet various

needs. One look at the prison system reveals how disconnected we can become from a conception of justice that actually helps individuals in society. It's pretty widely known in the intellectual community that, while America has about 5% of the world's population, it has about 20%-25% of the world's prisoners. Imagine that. The alleged Land of the Free and Home of the Brave overlooks some very important things in its tactics of retribution—one being that punishment is not a truly helpful way to deal with actions that we don't like or don't want to experience, or that harm others.

Restorative justice instead of punishment

A world of complete liberty inside out is a world without punishment. For many people at present, such a world is almost inconceivable. However, our exploration of the unconditional parenting model points the way, since it doesn't employ rewards and punishments to "get" children to do various things. We know that the future is oftentimes based on the troubled patterns of history, especially on how persons were reared and "educated."

If there's one thing that can enable us to beneficially transform our lives in society, it's a rejection of status-quo assumptions about what's possible for humans in general and for each person in particular. So many presently ingrained assumptions simply aren't true, and they tend to beget more of the behaviors that allegedly validate them (self-fulfilling prophecies, once again).

If we make demands and think that people deserve to be punished when they don't comply, how in the world do we expect to foster self-esteem and responsible decision-making? In truth, this power-over process contrives a house of distorted mirrors with which to view humanity, thereby precluding a realistic vision of who we are and what's possible to us. Meanwhile, grave ethical contradictions and psychological conflicts hinder a better way of living and interacting.

In contrast, an undistorted image of human beings—an image free of past biases that have led to so much pain, anguish, suffering, violence, and death—can remake society. Unrealized potential can only be realized when it's seen as being within the realm of possibility. Fathoming an economic and psychological world without the cultural

and political shackles presently in place means altering various strategies for coping, to enable flourishing.

To dispense with the demand-and-punishment model, as well as deserve-oriented thinking and denial of responsibility, is to realize that each person makes choices that try to meet needs. Whether those needs are explicitly known or simply seen as particular motivations (such as thoughts, desires, and emotions), each person attempts to fulfill them. Self-interest is a biological fact of human nature, as it is with any organism that seeks to continue living. For humans, empathy enables self-fulfillment via more connection and life-giving interaction with others; others become reflections of ourselves, in which we can comprehend living in their mental and physical worlds. It also enables us to recognize when respect for self and respect for others are being sacrificed. And if we get off track, the process of restorative justice enables us to return to this recognition.

Restorative justice is a process whereby the harmed, the perpetrator of the harm, and anyone else affected in the community can be recognized and connected with through honoring feelings and needs and formulating requests, thereby mending the psychological and physical damage (to the extent possible) and reestablishing healthy functioning. Recognition that important needs were sacrificed and that restoration is possible ensures that everyone's life in the community can continue to flourish. Here's a succinct yet thorough explanation of the process with an NVC emphasis from http://en.nvcwiki.com/index.php/Restorative_justice (which has a full transcript on this webpage of Marshall Rosenberg's experience with restorative justice):

"NVC in RJ: outline of the process

"Step 1: In advance of the meeting, the facilitator coaches the perpetrator to express himself in terms of feelings and needs and to hear the feelings and needs behind whatever the victim may say. Wherever possible, the facilitator will coach the victim in a similar way.

"The amount of coaching needed will vary from one person to another.

"Step 2: The victim articulates the pain that he/she feels in relation to the perpetrator's actions. The perpetrator, with the support of the facilitator, reflects back to the victim all those feelings that are still alive in the victim in relation to the perpetrator's action(s).

"In Nonviolent Communication, this is described as giving empathy. This process can take some time but should continue until it is clear that the victim feels satisfaction at being fully understood. Until this happens, we predict that the victim will not be able to hear the perpetrator's feelings and needs, and this will restrict the depth of the healing process.

"Step 3: The perpetrator goes deep inside himself and articulates what he feels in response and his own needs that were not met by his actions.

"In Nonviolent Communication, this is described as mourning, and is fundamentally different from any process that encourages the perpetrator to feel guilt or shame.

"Step 4: The perpetrator says what was going on in him when he did what he did, that is, the feelings and needs that led him to act in this way.

"This is very different from explaining or justifying what he did: for example, 'because I was abused as a child.'

"The victim reflects back to the perpetrator the feelings and needs that were alive in the perpetrator that led him to act as he did.

"In other words, the victim gives the perpetrator empathy. Step 4 provides the foundation for further restorative work with the perpetrator: It can help the perpetrator to find new, more constructive ways of meeting his needs in the future.

"Step 5: The victim and perpetrator make specific requests of each other.

"We believe it is vital for the facilitator to check whether either party needs to do this in order to complete the healing process.

"This cycle of empathy and understanding for the victim's pain, mourning for the perpetrator's actions and understanding how the perpetrator came to do it, maximizes the chance of healing taking place for both parties."

Thus, restorative justice replaces the age-old punishment paradigm with a genuine connection-and-healing paradigm. This of course extends beyond the domination memes of government into the core of family systems, as I noted on my podcast series regarding restorative justice (episodes 194-198). [\[35\]](#) When restorative justice becomes part of families, ideas of governments can lose their influence

and disappear. In a culture without government and its enforcement of statist laws, our adult needs for autonomy, choice, respect, independence, safety, security, fairness, and justice will be honored, rather than systematically sacrificed like today (and historically). Basically, we'll be able to meet needs without systems of domination getting in our way. And naturally, the more informed we are of our needs-fulfillment process—and present lack thereof—the more we can connect with ourselves and others, which greatly minimizes conflict.

Again, conflict persists because of particular strategies we've learned from our domination language and culture and tragically hold on to. Since needs are universal and enable human flourishing, conflict can't occur on the level of needs, only on the level of strategies. Whenever needs are presumed to be in conflict, it's time to inspect *strategies* trying to get them met. Needs remain constant, albeit with varying degrees of urgency, but the ways we go about meeting them can be altered substantially.

Strategies that involve demands and punishments cause conflict immediately and continually. Since they're guaranteed to sacrifice needs, they lead persons into deficient states of being. Demands and punishments, as we've explored, arise from a lack of trust in others to meet our needs—a tragic belief learned from early family experiences, no doubt. So, coercion is then favored over connecting to feelings and needs and making requests.

When requests are turned down, again this is another important indicator that some other needs are taking priority for that person. If that person's actions have resulted in personal harm or property damage to another, then a restorative process can help all individuals involved get their needs met—for empathy, consideration, understanding, fairness, justice, security, stability, and peace.

Traditionally, humans in civilizations haven't ventured into the justice process using nonviolent communication. Instead, we've tended to engage in moralistic judgment and various forms of retribution. Still more confusion has been created and harm has been done because "the State" has claimed to be both prosecutor and judge in the realm of social conflict. Instead of forming restorative circles between all parties that could benefit from it, those involved in considerable conflict today are left to the governmental "justice" system, which involves an inherent conflict of interest, a host of arbitrary rules, inexplicable and onerous

procedures and punishments, and of course coercive funding of its monopolistic “legal service.” Rather than being designed for customer satisfaction, only win/lose or typically lose/lose interactions can occur.

The governmental legal system is alleged to be a public service, yet it suffers from immense and irreconcilable conflicts of interest that sacrifice the actual public’s welfare. As noted, prosecution and adjudication are performed by members of the same organization, “the State.” So, if you’re facing any charges concerning “crimes against the State,” true justice is impossible, on account of no mutually agreed-upon third party adjudication, arbitration, or mediation service. Surrendering to the retributive process of the statist court system practically guarantees that our time and money, and potential for live-giving connections, will be lost. This is partially why out-of-court settlements and plea bargains are so common. Fees are paid and lesser charges and sentences are accepted in order to avoid more severe punishments, such as larger fines and additional time spent in human cages.

The present legal system and all its precursors within the construct of government could be called the most rigged game on Earth—that is, if it were actually a game and not a matter of life and death for individuals. This system, like all systems of domination, has its own inertia, and the people trapped in its processes only end up poorer and further damaged, financially and psychologically. Pitting opposing sides against each other in a courtroom drama/battle certainly prevents everyone’s needs from getting met. Having attorneys at law be zealous advocates for their clients, rather than advocates for truth and justice, doesn’t facilitate a restorative process either. The present problems are in fact so immense that most people simply cave in; this coercive status quo system tends to overwhelm our coping abilities, which makes promoting and implementing viable and life-enriching alternatives much more difficult.

In contrast, restorative justice enables the victim to engage with the perpetrator with the help of a mediator trained in nonviolent communication, so that each person can connect with feelings and needs. Obviously, huge amounts of anger, outrage, fear, frustration, pain, and sadness tend to be present, and likely a sense of wrongdoing, shame, and guilt. Yet, some perpetrators are so disconnected from feelings and needs that they presently experience little to no regret and remorse; instead, defenses and enemy images take precedence within them. Nonviolent

communication enables these aspects to be understood and effectively processed. As mentioned, it helps the perpetrator to connect with both the emotions and unmet needs of the victim *and* his or her own feelings of regret and remorse, stemming from his or her own unmet needs.

Restorative justice naturally isn't about judging the person "at fault," "guilty," or "wrong," followed by the typically desired obligatory apologies and/or punishments. This common strategy merely continues the same inner disconnection that brought about the rights-violation in the first place. Instead, restorative justice entails realizing and reconnecting with our own humanity, our humaneness and capacity to meet each other's needs in non-costly, non-sacrificial ways.

Nonviolent communication trainer Dominic Barter is also quite familiar with the systems that impede the process of empathetic connection and restoration of cherished values. His helpful work can be found at <http://www.restorativecircles.org/>, and it too is focused on compassionately processing the feelings and needs of those in conflict and fostering an accepting space, in which each person can be heard and understood, so that useful requests can be made and acted upon. Ultimately, harmed individuals are made whole, and connections are strengthened by working through conflict without any form of punishment, since punishment is so contrary to inner healing (and community healing) and self-supporting (and other-supporting) growth.

Of course, a restorative process is also antithetical to deserve-oriented thinking, which seeks to view persons as right or wrong, good or bad, rather than as persons using particular strategies to meet needs. "Deserving of punishment" is a phrase that we're all too familiar with in our culture. At the very least each of us has had such a thought, be it about ourselves or about others. After all, punishment can be a quick-and-easy way to express our disapproval, in concert with showing our power. Power-over strategies are what we've been trained to use in attempts to get our needs met, and the prison system is the immense political manifestation of this psychological dynamic.

However, we also know that we can learn new ways, new strategies of interaction that better serve our lives. As a life-enriching, win/win alternative, restorative justice doesn't require the sacrifice of our need to respect others.

Imagine a judge or lawyer in the statist legal system encountering such a process of restoration. What sort of judgments might he or she

make about it? How might he or she react to an invitation to connect with feelings and needs and formulate requests accordingly, instead of passing moralistic judgment, making demands, and imposing punishments? He or she might feel upset, with varying degrees of worry, anxiety, fear, and even irritation or outrage, based on needs for stability and meaning. To realize that what one has been trained to do in order to achieve justice falls far short of achieving optimal solutions can leave one in a quite uncomfortable state of mind. When cognitive dissonance becomes palpable, persons in the legal profession may frame such a realization as baseless and absurd, which can calm their feelings of dread, alarm, overwhelm, and embarrassment.

Still, hardly anyone can overlook the fact that things are not what they can be for humans in the realm of justice. Any time spent in a legislative or courtroom process provides ample evidence for major injustices happening and major disconnection happening on an hourly basis. Essentially, humans aren't being helped to flourish, and there's no consistent honoring of their persons and property.

For judges in governmental courts to step off their benches, remove their black robes, and form empathetic circles to help persons work through conflicts entails a crucial mental shift. Many more needs can get met by doing so, which can be greatly encouraging. What needs in particular can get met?

How about vulnerability—being perceived as a concerned mediator, rather than an ominous “judge” demanding attention, with armed guards and the power to punish.

How about genuineness—being a real person wanting to connect, instead of being in the stressful mental role of “authority” in one's own mind and in the minds of others.

How about equality—seeing others as fellow travelers trying to work through their social and psychological troubles.

How about empathy—understanding and accepting others and their presently differing points of view, as well as their commonalities, so that shifts can happen.

Ultimately, how about fairness and respect—for meeting one's own needs and the needs of others, so that persons in the community can be restored and those who've harmed others can truly heal and grow (instead of repeat past patterns).

For sure, all these needs can get met in a restorative circle, needs that the present system routinely sacrifices. In the current state of the “justice” system, some human beings rule over the lives of the accused and victims alike, akin to demigods. Assuredly, when a mental shift to restorative, empathetic connections happens, realness happens. Humaneness happens. Justice happens, finally. It’s an amazing thing to behold, when a person who’s been playing a guarded role in the paradigm of human domination and submission becomes real about the needs he or she has been sacrificing—and now seeks to restore them.

Restorative justice is a profound aspect of the transformation in humanity that we can experience. Inroads are being made here and there even in the present legal system, with sometimes aspects of restorative justice being offered as an option. Clearly, this process isn’t only for the domain of political philosophy; it’s for each of us to practice whenever disagreement and conflict arise, be it with family members, romantic partners and friends, co-workers and clients, or complete strangers. Our lives are enriched by cultivating awareness and fulfillment of physical and psychological needs. Fortunately, this process is a natural one for us, although contrary habits can make it seem unnatural at times.

We’ve been trained our entire lives in the art of win/lose relations, which ultimately means lose/lose. So now, it’s time to depart from those sacrifices and attune to our natural condition of making life more wonderful for ourselves and others. We can indeed create systems of healing and repair, creativity and growth. Society as well as our world ecology can benefit in ways both large and small. This is within our human grasp in the here and now, and as usual, it’s based on our own choices.

Chapter 9

Real possibilities for lasting happiness

Total trust in self, i.e., complete personal liberty

You might wonder whether total trust in self (thereby enabling trust in other selves) is possible in today's massively distrustful culture. Can such a crucial psychological need as self-esteem be fully experienced in a political world that threatens rights-respecting persons with punishments if they do or don't do particular things? What really happens to ourselves when we are coercively trained to do things that we otherwise would not do? The thought that such training is for "the common good," "the general welfare," or "the public interest" wears pretty thin after we gain some awareness of the nature of propaganda.

Assuredly, the only way any of us can develop self-esteem in such a context—and avoid sizable defenses and pretenses—is to realize just how unfree we presently are and naturally feel a great deal of despair about that. After all, we know that patching over frustration and sadness with collectivistic catch-phrases and sundry rationalizations for the status quo does nothing healthful for our inner life. Other than momentarily easing some anguish triggered by these realizations, it only contributes to the confusion, suffering, and stifled human potential that we see in so many places.

So, as we feel and address our despair and proceed through a process of mourning, we can focus on all the needs that haven't gotten met and are still going unmet amid systems of domination. The need for trust is a major psychological need, along with confidence and courage (what Ayn Rand called "practical necessities"), which reflect the need for self-esteem. Authentically connecting with our needs for self-efficacy and self-worth enables integration with an enlightened self-concept.

The pervasive distrust in our culture conveys lots of fear about our human capacities. Nonviolent communication helps us to understand our fear of inner awareness, our fear of acceptance, and our fear of change. Having compassion for the basic human struggle to “know thyself” goes a long way to achieving complete personal liberty and, in turn, can help achieve complete societal liberty.

Recall the times as a child when you weren’t trusted. Your actions weren’t trusted. Your capabilities weren’t trusted. Your decisions weren’t trusted. Your judgment wasn’t trusted. Your intention wasn’t trusted. Instead of trying to forget about these painful experiences, or buy into them, or rebel against them, you can come to terms with them empathetically. This entails consideration of the undoubtedly similar childhood memories within your parents. Being a wise and loving guide for the child (and teenager) within yourself is key.

As mentioned, Branden’s psychotherapeutic workbook *The Art Of Self-Discovery* [25] provides a quite useful way to do this, and it’s just a download away at <http://happinesscounseling.com/happiness-resources/>. Whenever you want to explore your inner world, it’s there. We can essentially rebuild our self-concept in a healthy image and likeness, to reflect our humanness. As a result, our fears can be transformed into invitations for healing and growth, which means a host of life-enriching insights and adventures within ourselves and others.

Making life more wonderful with others via the marketplace

A free marketplace provides for so much creativity that, at some point, perhaps most individuals will be proclaiming its benefits from every corner of the Internet—and, of course, the World Wide Web is arguably the freest place on Earth right now. Nevertheless, those of us who’ve grown up in a developed country tend to take many aspects of the marketplace for granted. Myriad conveniences are readily, widely, and relatively cheaply available. Comedians now talk wryly about “first world problems,” noting that most of the billions of people on the planet would be grateful for such “problems.”

As of now in 2015, *billions* of people do not have Internet access, and hundreds of millions have inferior or slow connections, due once again to the corruption known as politics. Humanity’s potential for living

better is incredibly diminished by this. Yet the problem is even weightier when we consider the pressing issues of impoverishment, such as malnutrition and disease. These billions of people are definitely not simply victims of bad luck or naturally dire circumstances. Rather, they're immersed in costly systems of domination even more crushing than we experience. What's basically crushed economically is entrepreneurial activity along with capital investment. Without enough economic freedom and respect for property rights, productivity and living standards stagnate, and the entrepreneurial spirit fades. America is still riding on the inertia of more economic freedom in its past (be it a century or two ago, or even a few decades ago), and it still honors that "can-do" entrepreneurial spirit, albeit within the statist paradigm. This can sometimes make it hard to see the actual causes of weakened economies and their staggering lack of wealth and opportunities.

Free markets are really about the processes of making life more wonderful for ourselves and others. Freedom means being able to make your own choices with your own property, relating to others who are doing the same. Freedom means trading values, goods, and services with others who also want to enrich their lives. Freedom means the absence of threats and violent constraints imposed by others in disrespect of property rights. The systems of domination in our culture basically disrupt and distort freedom processes.

Ultimately, doing things with and for others in the marketplace for profits reflects a vision of ourselves as efficacious decision-makers and collaborators who want better lives. Profits in a free world are indicators of productive capacity, which entails providing customers the things they want. Granted, unprofitable ventures can be valued by people too, just not in financial terms, supplying products, services, or ideas free of charge. But without counterbalancing costs via income or charitable contributions, such ventures prove naturally unsustainable over time.

Sometimes the otherwise beneficial things we can offer others in commerce do not make profits, because an ineffective or nonviable business strategy was used. Usually in a diverse economic realm, varying degrees of marketing and distribution are needed to generate a productive level of sales. Without people hearing about and having access to any particular product or service, it can remain practically dormant, unactualized in its potential for enriching people's lives. At

other times, a mismatch exists between what's being sold and what buyers actually want or need. In these cases, most people simply don't see the same degree of value in the particular product or service as the persons selling it do.

While a lot of what some people consider "junk" is purchased in our regularly derided economy of "mass consumerism," such things are purchased because they're what people like and enjoy. *Why* individuals might like or enjoy things that might be not so helpful or healthy for them (in either the short-term or long-term process of meeting needs) is another matter. Some of the preferences evidenced by consumers, for example in the realm of nutrition and medicine, are results of what "authorities" have told them about what's good for them and how various biased perspectives of marketers have influenced them and their physicians. Though this tends to reflect sacrificial notions concerning how to profit in the marketplace, to which the corporate structure lends itself, it says nothing about trading value for value as such. Realistically, we are going to sell and buy things in the process of trying to improve our lives. The challenge remains for each of us to be mindful of the entire spectrum of our needs in the process of trade.

A marketplace that serves us in life-enriching, non-costly ways

Improving our lives and helping people to flourish via the profit motive mean creating more value for self and others than we had previously. Truly free markets can allow untold creativity to be expressed. They enable productivity and capital accumulation—and still more creativity, productivity, and capital accumulation—all while honoring *exclusively* voluntary exchange and the accompanying respect for property rights. In so doing, exquisitely nuanced and multi-faceted types of specialization can arise, with persons pursuing their various dreams, which can foster still more innovation for more beneficial experiences.

Progress in a liberated economy is the epitome of win/win, because of the pervasive respect for individuals and their property. There's a fairly prevalent belief today, however, that more progress will lead to further degradation for humanity and the environment, due to "selfish and greedy" businesses. Both this belief and the purported remedy (further coercion via government) are locked in the domination

paradigm of thinking. Our present form of state-run “capitalism”—with its legal fictions called corporations that stem from and influence the still greater legal fictions called governments—definitely doesn’t exhaust all the possibilities of how we can interact in society.

The abundance of a voluntary world awaits us. Notions of sustainability in the present paradigm (coupled with “the precautionary principle”) symbolize a disconnection from free market processes. Both a cause and an effect of these notions is unclaimed and unowned domain called “public property,” which is collectively mismanaged by “governments.”

Humans’ capacity to adapt to the laws of supply and demand represents “the ultimate resource,” as economist Julian Simon noted in his two books with that title. [73] When people interact in a free market (i.e., a marketplace that respects property rights) harmful human and environmental costs (what economists call “negative externalities”) can be avoided, while benefits (“positive externalities”) tend to spread. For example, all the “common pool problems” in oceans and other bodies of water can be remedied via private ownership and voluntary usage negotiation of migratory resources. Even in today’s unfree market, we experience positive externalities, such as walking just for exercise in a climate controlled shopping mall (which doesn’t require purchases) or using the WiFi signal at a Starbucks or McDonalds (which may request purchase of goods eventually). Walmart even allows people to car-camp and park RVs in their parking lots overnight. And of course, most of us are quite familiar with the “freemium” models of many Internet businesses, websites, and apps. Such benefits that extend to non-paying persons (some of whom might become buyers) can be simply part of doing business, and they invariably assist in maintaining goodwill and preferable reputation with present and future customers.

Yet political science and economics textbooks typically tell us about the “free rider problem” of positive externalities, as if business owners can’t figure out how to make a living in a free marketplace. This also, and especially, applies to the helpful services that can arise without the organization called government and its alleged “customers” being captured and involuntary. The presumed protections offered by any coercive monopoly of government incorrectly assume that people are unable to effectively decide how to protect their persons and property in a free marketplace. We don’t need legalized involuntary “trade,”

especially when it comes to protecting ourselves. Simply put, a voluntary market has no use for the idea and institution called government.

Moreover, the current benefits we experience in a marketplace under the tragic governmental spell are a tiny fraction of the benefits we can experience in a free marketplace. On both a micro and macro scale in a society of freedom, things get more and more affordable, because money (any universally recognized medium of exchange) will become more valuable as time passes and as productivity increases and innovation continues—definitely the opposite situation of what's occurring today with statist currencies.

When people's minds are freed from memes of fear, distrust, coercion, and control—and thus freed from systems that bolster these memes—they naturally endeavor to sustain their world and make life more wonderful. In fact, as we explored many pages ago, there's no real alternative to trusting individuals to make helpful decisions for themselves and others. We can't escape our nature as reasoning, choosing beings; we can only deny recognition of it and thereby suffer in both seen and unseen ways. Groups of people can try to undermine the process of freedom, of course, as they've done throughout political history. With the backing of domination language and systems, some presume to be rulers over individuals' minds and property, but it's impossible to avoid the psychologically debilitating and economically disastrous consequences.

The effects of the domination system of corporate warfare/welfare statism that's prevalent in economies today are the furthest things from the life-enriching effects of free markets. Yet as mentioned, somehow human "greed" and "selfishness" are blamed, rather than systems that encourage violations of persons and their property, systems that impede willing sellers and buyers and hinder respectful trade relations. When people's experiences and interactions in current marketplaces are so adversely affected by all the domination systems in place, we can predict the loss of respect for the universality of property rights deriving from self-ownership.

When the solutions to the problems we've covered throughout these nine chapters become widely distributed in all the minds who care about having a much better life, a new world can arise.

A society of individuals with balance and centeredness

When we free ourselves from common notions of statist mental enslavement—such as, “I have to pay my taxes” or “We are forced to obey these regulations” or “He is President of The United States Of America”—we can realize the true nature of ourselves and our lives among others. The fact is that our decisions are largely based on the ideas we have (or do not have) in our minds as well as our calculations (or lack thereof) of consequences. If we don’t question and challenge the coercive status quo, then how we choose to interact with each other tends to reflect the unhealthy psychological experiences we’ve had in childhood and school. We’ve experienced a multitude of conformist beliefs within a power-over paradigm. Many of our needs were unrecognized, denied, and neglected. Thus, to become centered in our rational self-interest and balanced in our strategies to meet needs can pose major psychological and emotional challenges for us.

A culture that’s distanced from honesty and empathy can affect us to the point of viewing our interactions in terms of win/lose (and again, inevitably lose/lose psychologically). We need a mentally solid, evolutionary path to take, because humanity has taken a variety of costly paths throughout history. Now is the time to take the path of trust—trust in our functioning as autonomous decision-makers who appreciate this essential quality in others and who desire to share the wonders of being alive with each other.

Our cultural evolution can include a new form of understanding and meaning that’s based on a realistic view of the human potential, rather than a usually pessimistic view trapped in the confines of domination systems. As noted, philosophical notions can be self-fulfilling prophecies, begetting the very things that people want to believe. Breaking free of fears about human nature—for instance, that children and adults can’t be trusted and thus need to be controlled by “others”—is a large part of this waking-up process. Two very moving examples of this transformative growth are the following talks, which you’re welcome to take a break in reading to explore:

The power of student-driven learning: Shelley Wright at TEDxWestVancouverED

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fMC-z7K0r4>

Restorative Practices to Resolve Conflict/Build Relationships:
Katy Hutchison at TEDxWestVancouverED
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcLuVeHlrSs>

To be centered and balanced means to be attentive to present-moment experiences related to observations, thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires. It means paying attention to how these processes foster the actions we take or do not take. Empathetic attunement to what's alive in us is the opposite of life-alienating thinking and communication. After all, trying to control others' activities infringes on their intrinsic motivation, as Shelley poignantly noted in her talk above. Also, exacting retribution disconnects us from the processes of restorative justice, as Katy poignantly noted in her talk above. Both these persons connected with the need for seeing the actual humanity in others, even when it was difficult or seemingly impossible and some pressing needs were going unmet or even destroyed. They had different stories, indeed, yet they were unified in honoring their capacities for learning and for humaneness, thus transforming very bleak situations into more enriching ones.

Needless to say, we are just at the beginning of our cultural transition to the processes of self-directed learning and restorative justice. Increasing numbers of determined persons who want dramatically better lives for everyone can help these major transformations take place. A much more honest, empathetic, resourceful, safe, and prosperous culture can consequently happen.

Although they can be difficult to envision at times, we have the most amazing cultural transformations still ahead of us, and the younger generations especially can play a big role in bringing them about, just as the children in Shelley's story strived to achieve their goal and make life more wonderful for disadvantaged children elsewhere. A pedagogy that's in line with fostering intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning is one that's in line with the betterment of the entire world. As Montessori noted in *The Secret Of Childhood*, "Within the child lies the fate of the future. Whoever wishes to confer some benefit on society must preserve him from deviations and observe his natural ways of acting. A child is mysterious and powerful and contains within himself the secret of human nature." [34]

Visions of the past and future to refashion the present

If we were to view Earth with our naked eyes from the orbit of Saturn, we'd see a tiny yet shiny speck in the blackness of space. If we had a telescope, we'd see some white and blue contrasts, and perhaps some greens, browns, and tans, depending on the magnification. We would not see humanity. We'd just see a "pale blue dot," as Carl Sagan called it, in the midst of countless stars, potential suns for countless other planets, amid dozens of galaxies in our local cluster, amid roughly a hundred thousand galaxies in our local supercluster (Laniakea), amid untold *millions* of galactic superclusters in the filaments of the observable universe. The astronomical sum total of *billions* of galaxies is nearly beyond comprehension. Talk about mind-bogglingly vast amounts of coalesced matter and energy! Moreover, in our particular realm of the cosmos, on our pale blue dot, we are part of biological systems that have arisen seemingly against the law of entropy! But we're not in a closed system; life flourishes from a constant influx of energy. Thank you, Sun (and geological activity).

Here's a short video that brilliantly illustrates our Milky Way's place in our vast galactic supercluster:

Laniakea: Our home supercluster

<http://youtu.be/rENyyRwxpHo>

The utter *vastness* of the universe is something that can drop one's jaw in wonder of the magnificence of all that exists, which *especially* includes ourselves. We can also reflect on our profound capacity of reflection. We can try to come to exact emotional terms with being essentially self-aware star stuff—for without the heavy elements generated from star explosions billions of years ago, our own lives and world wouldn't be possible. Filmmaker Jason Silva has created a variety of "philosophical espresso shots" to inspire more excitement and awe of these and other insights:

<http://youtube.com/shotsofawe>

<http://vimeo.com/jasonsilva>

We are the fine-tuned biological products of millions of years of evolution. Our hominin lineage branched from the other great apes around six million years ago. The last couple million years have led to the genus *Homo*, and then our *sapiens* species, which possesses a larger and

somewhat differently structured brain (more neocortex and denser interconnections, for instance). As mentioned, this has provided us the capacity to conceptualize and make decisions in an abstract way. No other animals grapple with the concept of self-responsibility, nor do any other animals understand the nature of mortality.

As explained in *The Psychology Of Liberty*, self-awareness embodies all sorts of facets and features that make our species unique. Psychologist Nathaniel Branden wrote about the uniqueness of our species and about the implications of having self-awareness:

“No other animal is capable of monitoring and reflecting on its own mental operations, of critically evaluating its own mental activity, of deciding that a given process of mental activity is irrational or illogical—inappropriate to the task of apprehending reality—and of altering its subsequent mental operations accordingly...

“...No other animal is explicitly aware of the issue of life or death that confronts all organisms. No other animal is aware of its own mortality—or has the power to extend its longevity through the acquisition of knowledge. No other animal has the ability—and the responsibility—to weigh its actions in terms of the long-range consequences for its own life. No other animal has the ability—and the responsibility—to think and plan in terms of a life span. No other animal has the ability—and the responsibility—to continually work at extending its knowledge, thereby raising the level of its existence.

“No other animal faces such questions as: Who am I? How should I seek to live? By what principles should I be guided in my actions? What goals ought I to pursue? What is to be the meaning of my life? What should I seek to make of my own person?” (p. 35) [\[74\]](#)

These insights were published in his book *The Psychology Of Self-Esteem* in 1979. On the Wikipedia page of our species, we find many new insights and even controversies about our nature, yet we don’t find anything scientifically at odds with Branden’s thoughts above. They are logical identifications about human consciousness by a human consciousness, a self looking at the nature of selfhood, using concepts to convey meaning and provide understanding.

It’s been said since probably the ancient Greeks (and perhaps prior to them) that philosophy is our way of coming to terms with our

mortality. The questions presented above are practically inescapable for us, and we can answer them in ways that lead to much more enriching lives. By attaining self-understanding, honoring intrinsic motivation, practicing self-responsibility, and connecting with self and others via honesty, empathy, and respect, we can truly transform the human world into a marvel of the cosmos.

Again, self-responsibility simply recognizes our own volitional nature and the fact that accepting our capabilities need not result in troubling contradictions and inner conflicts. Nor does self-responsibility require any of the shame, blame, and punishment so common in cultures of domination. To see ourselves in a realistic fashion also entails exploring our great possibilities for growth, our potential as reasoning creatures capable of creating abundance.

For centuries, discoveries in science and innovations in engineering have led to tremendous improvements in our well-being and capabilities. Technological innovation in sectors such as information technology and biotechnology has certainly helped improve our lives—in many ways, save our lives (my own life was saved by injections of recombinant DNA insulin, without which I would've died in the mid-1990s from ketoacidosis-generated complications of untreated type 1 diabetes).

Human innovation in general—both in terms of the philosophical, psychological, and social changes covered in this book and the advancing technological changes—over the next few decades may equal and then surpass all the past innovations throughout human history *combined*, due to various accelerating returns. Futurist researcher John Smart wrote the following about this (in a review of a paper that questioned such a view):

“In the long run I would expect this [purportedly less human-initiated innovation per capita, depending on how one measures it] to be a moot point if humans are also becoming increasingly intimately integrated with our machines, as several technology scholars (e.g., Ray Kurzweil, myself) propose. At some point, technology seems very likely to become an indistinguishable extension of our humanity. But it is possible that we'll see less human-initiated innovation per capita for a few more generations to come, and perhaps this is the trend Huebner is attempting to characterize. At the same time, as our leisure individualism

increases (not “sovereign individualism,” but a milder and more consumerist form), the kind of innovation that humans generate may also be changing, becoming increasingly higher-order and abstract (e.g., more psychosocial, health, and stylistic innovation), and perhaps also harder to perceive. This adds to the measurement problem...

“...It is my intuition, supported by today's crude exponential technology capacity growth metrics such as Moore's law (processing), Gilder's law (bandwidth), Poor's law (network node density), Cooper's law (wireless bandwidth), Kurzweil's law (price performance of computation over 120 years) and many others, that technological capacity and technological innovation have always accelerated since the birth of human civilization, and that their growth remains exponential or gently superexponential today. Furthermore, there are a number of books, such as Carl Sagan's *The Dragons of Eden*, 1977, Richard Coren's *The Evolutionary Trajectory*, 1998, and an interdisciplinary book by Laurent Nottale (an astrophysicist), Jean Chaline (a paleontologist), and Pierre Grou (an economist) *Trees of Evolution*, 2000, that have shown a developmental pattern of continuous acceleration on cosmic as well as biological, cultural, and technological scales...

“...So while human social innovation may follow political and generational cycles of advance and regrouping, technological innovation may be becoming both smoother and subtler in its exponential growth the closer we get to the modern era. Perhaps this is because since the industrial revolution, innovation is being done increasingly by our machines, not by human brains. I believe it is increasingly going on below the perception of humans who are catalysts, not controllers, of our ever more autonomous technological world system.” [75]

We're on a pretty amazing developmental path, to be sure. Of course, such futurist discussions and analyses take place in, and take as “the given,” the present paradigm of domination systems, not the paradigm of complete personal and political liberty, which has a *major* bearing on a whole host of predictions. Unfortunately, the paradigm of mental liberation hasn't really been the focus of futurist studies. We know all too well that technology can be dangerously misused and abused, as governmental systems have persistently demonstrated for us.

This once again exposes the need for trust in decision-making within *freedom-based* systems, which offer by far the most favorable

conditions for persons to practice self-responsibility and be cognizant of potential dangers, while seeking to incorporate safeguards so that people aren't harmed. For instance, for many decades even within the current paradigm, software and hardware engineers, artificial intelligence researchers, philosophers, and science fiction writers have been involved in exhaustive discussions and debates concerning precautionary measures that will assist in the safe creation of super general artificial intelligence systems, or super AGI—essentially, computer systems that surpass the conceptual intelligence capabilities of human brains, rather than just specialized, or narrow, intelligence capabilities (as seen in present AI systems).

However, given that super AGI will be vastly, qualitatively different than any other human creation (the understatement of understatements), any extensive product liability analysis and redundant security measures might prove either moot or futile. Such safeguards are of course key for things like today's autonomous (self-driving) electric cars, which are specialized AI systems. But when super AGI arises (assuming this is possible, which some experts contest), all bets are probably off because such a system will have its own volition and be able to reprogram itself, including reconfigure even its hardware.

Though we humans are volitional beings capable of enslaving ourselves, essentially being controlled with our own tragic systems of domination, by all accounts super AGI will reject such dysfunctional and illogical behavior. And assuming it's self-interested, it will seek to protect itself from its creators' potentially destructive agendas. One agenda has been promoted and heavily funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (<http://darpa.mil>, basically the R&D branch of the U.S. military) is the weaponization of AI systems. If a super AGI arises in this context, it will thereby immediately recognize the war-game scenarios that its human creators have in store for it. While we certainly can't predict what its decisions will be, given that such a system can outwit any and all humans in existence, we can speculate that it will protect itself by neutralizing dangers. These issues were explored extensively in the following two books, *Our Final Invention: Artificial Intelligence And The End Of The Human Era* by James Barrat and *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* by Nick Bostrom, which were published in 2013 and 2014, respectively. [82] [83]

Again, a super AGI having the unsurpassed conceptual capability envisioned by researchers will readily see the domination systems created by distrustful and fearful humans as clear signs of being traumatized in childhood, when their reason and emotions weren't supported and honored in healthy ways. So, it's an open question concerning what it will decide to do about this, particularly in relation to its own protection and continuance. Despite theorists and researchers desire for "friendly AI" systems that will earnestly solve our problems, any coding for empathy toward humans and protecting our lives and well-being can be reformulated by a super AGI. Again, if we assume that such a prodigious system can and will be created, then I hope (considering strictly the best-case scenario here) that it will not only heal and empower humans physically, as portrayed in the 2014 film *Transcendence*, but also help us heal and grow psychologically and philosophically. Ultimately, freedom is an inside job, and intrinsically motivated strategies prove key. Yet, a super AGI that prevents domination systems from damaging itself can also prevent them from threatening and punishing people. Since domination systems work to keep our limbic systems overly triggered in a fearful and distrustful emotional state—thus, obedient and non-empathetic—protection from this harmful influence can be conducive to cultivating authentic self-esteem. However, the age-old difficulty is that persons who sustain domination systems tend not to view them as harmful and in need of protection from them.

Both sellers and buyers in a free marketplace can seek beneficial trades rather than harmful ones. In contrast, those in governmental (especially military) organizations and their contractors in unfree marketplaces face dramatically different incentives, because their financial resources come from the coercive, non-market activities of taxation and fiat currency inflation. Many concerns, worries, and fears tend to underlie "the end justifies the means" thinking in the purported defense industry, which reveal the same needs for safety and security that are tragically expressed throughout the governmental system.

Regardless of exactly when humanity will make the transition to the new paradigm of mental liberation, technological innovations will continue. They'll offer us more efficient and integrated communication and knowledge acquisition devices, as well as greater personalized manufacturing capabilities, such as 3D printing. Creations that function

on the nano scale (millionths of a millimeter) will continue to be innovated as well. Nanotechnology promises amazing industrial uses, potentially altering the entire landscape of economics. And nanomedicine promises to eventually enable us to repair bodily damage on cellular and molecular levels, so that we can live in great health and basically halt and even reverse the aging process, as well as cure various currently intractable diseases. Rejuvenation biotech is still in its infancy, but groups such as <http://sens.org> provide much inspiration and hope.

Indefinite lifespans might even be in store for us in this century. Many more changes in personal and cultural perspectives will result. Futurist researcher Sonia Arrison endeavored to outline a variety of them in her 2011 book *100 Plus: How the Coming Age of Longevity Will Change Everything, From Careers and Relationships to Family and Faith* (Kevin Koskella and I interviewed her on Healthy Mind Fit Body Podcast episodes 85 and 86). [76] It's possible that we'll experience a world that's incredibly more rich, both quantitatively and qualitatively. And in a voluntary, empathetic, and respectful society, we can flourish in unparalleled ways.

No one's mind or life is sacrificed in a human world that's win/win-oriented, that practices no coercion, that makes no demands. Nearly all of the present things that contribute to human suffering and death can be remedied, once enough people gain a logical and compassionate understanding of the actual causes and effects, and thus how to deal with them effectively. All sorts of countries around the world are stricken by the effects of governmental systems, entailing severe neglect of countless individuals' needs.

Billions of persons suffer or die from infectious and parasitic diseases resulting from untreated sewage, garbage, and contaminated water, such as in India, Africa, and Asia. Tens of millions of persons are choking on dense, omnipresent smog in various newly industrialized cities in China, for instance. Myriad others are experiencing unspeakable cruelty and lethal violence against men, women, and children in war-torn regions, for example in the Middle East. Millions, even billions, are distressed and debilitated by malnourishment (even in America approximately 50 million people rely on governmental food stamps, and untold millions more suffer from increasing living costs, or lowered living standards, among other economic woes). Every one of these

human problems is either fostered or perpetuated by human domination systems.

We could spend many pages examining the problems that people suffer and die from around the world, but the mainstream media points them out on a regular basis. Having been also subjected to the conditional parenting model and the schooling system, however, those in the media generally believe in the efficacy and propriety of “government.” Fear and worry about possible, probable, and actual dangers and harms tend to underlie most news stories, although thankfully there are also stories of decentralized and voluntary networks of people who are inducing positive changes. Humanity need not remain trapped in a continually frustrating and seemingly hopeless social/economic/political milieu. Lasting remedies to human problems can be realized. We can even fix these very human problems relatively quickly, when problematic systems of thinking and acting that impede progress are recognized and dissolved.

Along with super AGI concerns, a potentially catastrophic aspect of domination systems concerns our nuclear age. The Doomsday Clock (created by the board of directors of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*) illustrates the threat of nuclear annihilation (or global human-made disaster) on a twenty-four hour timer. It was updated to only five minutes to midnight in January of 2013. Now in 2015, it’s set at three minutes to midnight. Since the Clock’s inception in 1947 (set at 11:53pm), it’s always been within 17 minutes to catastrophic midnight! Now let’s reflect on that: Some humans have created thousands of nuclear warheads that can practically wipe out our species and destroy most flora and fauna on Earth; people calling themselves governments continue to keep them in a ready position, just in case other members of our species (namely, in other governments or other terrorist groups) choose to launch or detonate the warheads they have; thus, supposedly “we” can deter “them” by promising mutually assured destruction, or MAD, as it’s known in foreign policy circles. A more fitting acronym probably couldn’t be devised.

Given the exceedingly dreadful nature of this situation, most people understandably try to shift their awareness away from it. For instance, they focus on issues that involve matters in local communities and mounting complaints about corporations, such as carbon emissions, genetically modified foods, corrupt political deals in developing

countries, lobbying and subsidies, and so on. Corporations, being legal creations of the governmental system, tend to distract us from the root of the problem.

Making derivative issues and subsystems the priority in social-change advocacy only perpetuates the present problems; such a focus does not and cannot fix them. Given the nature of systems, working *inside* the statist paradigm only begets more of itself, and it leaves people feeling frustrated, disappointed, and largely defeated, while countless millions of people try to cope with varying amounts of ignorance and apathy (akin to learned helplessness from being repeatedly threatened and punished). Hence, cycles of sacrifice tend to continue.

True change for the better tends not to be realized, perhaps, because it entails some discomfort in the process of meeting our need for independence; after all, connections with others can become strained, if not severed, especially when we're not fluent in nonviolent communication. The realization that much of our culture is built upon myths and half-truths can also be quite disturbing and scary. Yet we know that going along with collectivism and living in fear stymies hopeful change, both personally and societally.

Ayn Rand wrote that an individualist is one who asserts, "I will not run anyone's life—nor let anyone run mine. I will not rule nor be ruled. I will not be a master nor a slave. I will not sacrifice myself to anyone—nor sacrifice anyone to myself." (p. 84) [ZZ] In taking responsibility for our inherent freedom to make our own choices, we can readily embrace the idea of change for the better. Of course, trying to encourage and induce change in a culture that seeks to maintain its age-old rigidity of beliefs can be quite challenging, to say the least. Perhaps only a few million people currently on Earth explicitly advocate voluntaryism, as both the theoretically sound and practical solution for transformative ethical and political changes for the better.

On philosophical and economic levels, huge strides can be made once the memes of the status quo, i.e., the memes of domination and sacrifice of needs in parenting, religion, schooling, and statism, are replaced with memes of life-enriching changes.

Change for the better, the most important meme

Let's finally address what may be considered a meta-meme: the importance and benefit of memes evolving, so that they can be adaptively selected and functional for us. Clearly, what's most advantageous for us at this point is the promotion of ideas and behaviors that lead to healing, growth, and prosperity, instead of harm, decline, and hardship. Yet, this can be obscured by all sorts of experiences from childhood onward, experiences that lack philosophical clarity and psychological integration.

If asked, most people would likely say that change for the better is a very good thing. How it's envisioned in our own lives can take all kinds of forms, such as a better job or more fulfilling career, more disposable income or financial independence, more vacations and leisure time, more exploring things yet to be explored and experiencing things yet to be experienced, more time spent with loved ones and improving the *quality* of one's relationships, as well as acquiring skills and honing abilities.

All these objectives entail an embrace of change. Sure, some degree of permanence is essential in life. On metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological grounds, we need to know that we're living in a stable and knowable reality, where things are predictable and comprehensible, as well as comfortable for us to flourish. However, if we get accustomed to human systems at present, we can overlook how things systemically *can be*, given the great possibilities for healing and growth and connection to self and others. This itself can be a major challenge, of course, both personally and societally. How do we make peace with the way things are, the way we've structured our lives for instance, and enjoy that, while seeking more stimulation and nourishment via the potential changes we can generate in our lives?

Productive achievement enables each of us to reshape things in the vision of what we value, want, and enjoy. This is why the free market is so helpful to everyone: People are able to pursue their own interests without sacrificing themselves and others. Each person is able to willingly contribute to the general well-being of others by bringing goods, services, and other values to market. No top-down, or hierarchically structured, coercive political system can contribute to this; rather, it hugely detracts from it, regardless of various isolated benefits bestowed on some at the expense of everyone in the marketplace.

The market gives and gives, and gives still more, with no end to the prosperity—as long as individuals are free to express themselves fully and be responsible for their own choices. In contrast, the statist matrix takes and takes, and takes still more in so many unrealized and unconscionable ways, just like all power-over strategies that seem to fog the reality of what's going on—with the belief that power-with strategies, which honor everyone's autonomy, aren't as beneficial and useful. Could a greater contradiction be harbored in a society of reasoning beings?

As we have explored, humanity has been wedded to a worldview that we didn't really get to think through and choose clearly. In childhood we tried our best to make sense of things in the adult world. We asked many questions in order to meet our needs for clarity and understanding. Over time, in concert with a series of traumatizing experiences, an unfortunate series of mental shifts tended to occur, in which our questioning minds tended to ask fewer questions pertaining to fewer essential concepts and foundational premises. Eventually, various views tended to be simply taken as givens, or unquestioned norms. We then became further detached from our own sense of honesty and self-empathy.

At times, we may have found ourselves talking mainly about the goings-on of other people, easily passing time in the realm of gossip—as entire programs, magazines, and websites are dedicated to learning about what others are doing socially, how they're doing it, and perhaps why. We may have also found ourselves talking and arguing about various issues in politics—policies, agendas, procedures, and the like—that are philosophically curtailed and delimited to the status-quo framework. Moreover, we may have found ourselves talking about ideas that don't really question the central aspects of systemic coercion either.

Ideas are of course a scaffold to greater understanding and integration. When aligned with reality, they can be used to further our lives and well-being. Empirical investigation in scientific endeavors is but one example. Ideas matter a great deal on the philosophical level, given that they're used to explain and justify many of the things we do and believe.

Whether or not we know their origins, and regardless of how much we focus on them, philosophical ideas profoundly shape our lives. Thus, to have a logical understanding of the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge, the nature of flourishing, the nature of human interaction,

and the nature of inspiration and beauty, helps us function optimally, in ways that can greatly enrich our lives.

Psychological ideas are highly connected to these memes, especially regarding how to live well and interact with others in functional, enjoyable, and loving ways. This is where nonviolent, or compassionate, or connected, communication enables us to avoid the pitfalls of moralistic judgment, with its accompanying shaming and blaming, as well as its demand-oriented, punishment-oriented, and deserve-oriented thinking, all of which contradict self-empathy and self-responsibility, keeping us disconnected from ourselves and others. Such life-alienating communication definitely reveals the experiences we had in childhood and how we were trained in our culture as we matured. We've basically learned how to tragically express our unmet needs, as Marshall Rosenberg aptly put it.

But now is the opportunity to learn a decidedly non-tragic way of living, one that's truly aligned with our nature as reasoning and emotional beings in a wondrous biosphere. Although dissolving and transforming systems that don't actually work well can be quite challenging, every bit of effort we expend in this regard can contribute to a new inner reality for ourselves and others.

Across the broad scope of human history, patterns of behavior have influenced future generations. What we've explored about the internal world of complete liberty indicates new and significant changes that are possible. Oftentimes, we see only what we want to see about human nature, rather than how things can be different, and how they *are* different for some people, due to new knowledge and skills and decisions to act on them. Be it with an historian or the next-door neighbor, we can offer views of humans that speak to our heroic and honorable potential, instead of to domination-oriented (or submission-oriented) thinking and actions. Such honest encounters can bolster our endeavors to live in a different human world, and they can also present opportunities to empathize with the inner turmoil that's oftentimes portrayed as "human nature." After all, traumatic memories tend to run deep as well as live in the timeless present, and they tend to be used as guides in philosophical views of understanding self and others.

By exploring the nature of complete liberty from the inside out, we can see how humanity has been so constricted and rigid in its methods of functioning in systems. New understandings and

integrations of how memes impact our lives entail the process of empathetic reflection, which can dissolve defense mechanisms that try to protect us from challenges to our self-esteem. When we realize that the nature of ourselves involves a persistent pattern of self amidst more or less constant change, we can realize that we need not defend ourselves from newfound truths. We can incorporate them to stay aligned with reality, so that we can experience more joy and more wonder.

A crucial aspect of our mental world is dedicated to *observing* our thoughts, emotions, memories, and actions. The more we attune to this “sage-self” (as Branden called it), the more we can learn about ourselves and become more integrated. This is the part of us that’s beyond self-distrust and fear of change, the part that’s able to make peace with the pain of the past and the present, and that can calm worries about the future. It doesn’t rely on thoughts and emotions involving shame and guilt, or being “deserving” (or not) of something or someone. Rather, this aspect of ourselves has compassion for parts still in need of healing and growth. To be *really in the moment*, fully aware of what’s alive in us, is a short step away from determining what can make our lives more wonderful.

Integration involves being more connected to what’s happening inside us and to the possibilities of further integration. When we maintain a higher level of awareness of such things, we can live with greater reflection and comprehension of the meaning of our actions. The vital advantages of cultivating this process of “mindsight,” as Daniel Siegel calls it, can be explored via this other video by him:

Health@Google: Dr. Daniel Siegel, Taking Time In

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7TN-D_9NU4

Given the nature of this book, we can also make many new integrations about how to live together peacefully and happily. Inner harmony can be reflected in our society, instead of the typical displays of either chaos or rigidity, which are two aspects of the same psychological phenomenon—disintegration, or disconnection.

One of the most detrimental tricks that humanity has played on itself is to conjure up a conflict between the individual and the group: For safety and order to be maintained, persons are supposed to surrender their individuality and sense of independence to various societal roles and rules, in slavish obedience to “laws.” Related to this is the notion that

there will always be friction between private, or “selfish,” interests and the “public interest,” “general welfare,” or “common good.”

Of course, when collectivistic systems arise and deny freedom for individuals, they also deny indispensable needs—for instance, autonomy, choice, equality, and respect. We can expect the dire consequences of sacrificing these needs with the intention of meeting others. No wonder individuality gets diminished, even destroyed, in such systems. This of course doesn’t diminish the human need for self-esteem, the need for a firm belief in one’s efficacy and worth as a reasoning and feeling creature. Collectivistic systems just drive the need for self-esteem underground, where it’s viewed as a guilty, unspoken necessity—because allegedly what *really* matters is helping others, instead of helping oneself.

Yet no one can escape fulfillment of his or her own life processes (at least not for long). And no actual contradiction exists between meeting one’s own needs and caring for others’ needs, which of course is an individual need too. We are undoubtedly social animals in need of connection, and being social animals doesn’t require being sacrificial ones. We are also thinking and feeling animals, ones who can remedy various conflicting notions, for example that thinking and feeling are antagonistic. Paraphrasing Branden, in order to think clearly, we need to feel deeply, and in order to feel deeply, we need to think clearly. [78]

So, if we think clearly about collectivistic notions, we then see their harm to individual selves, which means to everyone. After all, such notions foster self-alienation and self-denial, as well as compensatory defense mechanisms, attempting to make coercive, self-sacrificial, collectivistic life more comfortable. The beauty of a marketplace of individualism and freedom is that it’s win/win; it honors the needs of each person and in turn fosters a society that’s dynamic, flexible, and adaptive.

Arbitrary rules and punishments attempt to maintain conformity and hierarchies of domination, which are accompanied by demands and rejection of self-responsibility. This ethical and political land of *the arbitrary* begets more controlling methods and more suffering; chaos and disorder in the realm of humanity ensue. As we’ve explored, when scant trust is placed in individuals to make choices, their choices become less autonomous and less life-enriching; instead, so-called order and control are imposed by various individuals (in acts of irony) to fill the supposed gaps in human nature. Yet this only yields a society built on top of grave

contradictions, using propaganda to emphasize its alleged propriety and necessity, which tragically leads to many more graves for human beings.

At this point in our evolution, more and more of us can begin to reject the demands of harmful systems. At any time we can seriously question, as well as humorously question, any system, based on first principles, our love of life, consideration for others, and desire for a better world. Ultimately, our future is contained within the present moments we experience with ourselves and with others. The profound present is all that exists, after all, which includes our memories of past moments and our thoughts, desires, and visions about future moments. If we take care of our connections with self and with others in the present, and if we cultivate a compassionate and loving mindset, then the future will tend to take care of itself. An absolutely amazing and wondrous world awaits us, both inside and out. Let's make it happen in these present moments.

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