

The great protector

Or *Why we don't always get what we want, or want what we get*

A Lifescape work in progress, July 2006

One of the dilemmas of life, it seems to me, is the way in which our conscious, intentions, values and beliefs about ourselves and the world, can be undermined and challenged, not always by others, but most often by ourselves and our seemingly automatic or unconscious reactions and behaviours:

- A man carries with him, for all his remembered adult life, a set of values and behaviours that emphasises fairness to others and goodness and moderation in behaviour. Yet he yearns to be passionate, abandoned, excessive and even 'bad', and cannot seem to sustain a long-term relationship. In short, he feels caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, and then loses his temper and takes it out on his grown-up daughter, shouting at her and accusing her of abandoning him and not loving him... but he knows she does love him...
- A woman feels ugly and dissatisfied with her body and looks. She feels fat and develops a bingeing eating pattern. Trying to get some control she starts a diet, writes down her targets in a little book, keeps these goals realistic, but finds herself rebelling against the plan, and being angry with the bit of her that wants to get better. She becomes more and more angry with herself and the world, and wonders whether it's worth carrying on. And yet something keeps telling her to keep going...and so she does...
- A woman works with a counsellor. She asks him to help her to get rid of the anxiety and suspicion with which she views the world. The counsellor engages with the woman, and they make progress: she is less anxious, feels more positive about other people and then, in the sessions, begins to experience something else, and to start asking herself about what she is like inside – what actually makes her tick? She starts resenting the counsellor and suddenly ends the sessions. She continues in her life, feels very guilty about letting people down, and carries around a constant low-level awareness of a kind of emptiness inside...and yet she also carries hope...
- A man loves a woman. He wants to be with her and thinks about her a lot. One night they get together and he is happy, but something inside him tells him that she can't love him, that she is just doing this to make him feel better, that she'd be better off without him; that he'd be better off without her, that he's not really good enough for her. He stops returning her phone calls and texts, and avoids her when he sees her in the street. He loves her still, but resigns himself to never being with her, and goes off travelling for a while...maybe, he wonders, she will love him when he returns...

For each of these individuals there is a moment when something - a thought, an inner voice, a familiar interaction, an evoked emotion – seems to trigger something inside that makes it impossible (it seems to them) for the logical, believed in, wished for outcome to happen. Something takes over in that split second and the emotional power of it forces their thinking and behaviour one way - towards a kind of self sabotage - rather than the other wished-for direction. It is thoughtless, in the true sense of the word, and yet it leads them into those little habits and patterns of behaviour that are actually about the **avoidance** and **denial** of what they fervently wish for and desire. How paradoxical! How awful to feel, time-and-again, the frustrations of love spurned and unrequited; of unmet dreams and unfulfilled destinies and the shame and regret that inevitably follows! And yet how reassuring it can be to know that nothing much has changed, and the world is still a predictable place of familiar habit!

These habits, instilled into us by our experience and responses to our families and culture, and by our genetic inheritance, become so ingrained that they emerge and are acted out almost automatically. One version of this occurs through what some psychologists are calling the **adaptive unconscious**¹. This is revealed in our facial expressions, our prejudices and our habitual emotions and behaviours, especially when we're under extreme pressure or when faced with life situations which confront us with familiar problems, paradoxes and patterns. So in time, in order maybe to avoid the disappointment, frustrations, shame and regret, these habits can become rational in themselves, and attract to them a whole set of justifications and stories - which we sometimes call our values, beliefs and life-histories - but might just be cleverly constructed cultural excuses.

And so we act, against our better judgement, in the blink of an eyelid. We write an angry email that we don't want to be read, then press the send button. We go into a discussion with our partner determined not to have the same old argument THIS time, and then something she says triggers off the usual strong emotions and blaming behaviours. On the edge of something important, we decide to go back to our therapist or life coach and say nothing can change really: "it's just me and my personality, thank you for all the work you've done, goodbye!". We lash out, eat up, drink up, give up and 'carry on-carrying on' with the very habits that we yearn to change.

Taking a more archetypal view of this, I think that there must be a part of us who **wanted** to send the email, leave our therapist, have the argument. Otherwise why choose, in that brief, **almost** automatic, **almost** unconscious moment² to continue with the familiar destructive patterns, sabotaging what we really want to have? Well perhaps because it **is** familiar (the 'devil we know') and perhaps because it also seems safer that way. The psychological challenges of personal change, developing deep awareness and becoming ourselves might seem just too big to the tricky, amoral, protector inside us.

Protector, you might say? Why would a protector want us to continue with these destructive, shameful habits and illogical, irrational outbursts? Well, think about the protector as a guard keeping the prisoners shackled inside the prison walls. The guard is not very subtle, maybe not very clever (in the adult sense of the word!) but is strong, tricky and streetwise and has one purpose only - which he's been trained for throughout and beyond our childhood - to keep us safe from the demons both inside us and in the world. Once-upon-a-time the demons were pretty real and frightening for us as children, and so maybe our protector feels pretty justified in keeping us safe from them.

As adults we might believe that logically the demons are really not that dangerous at all. How dangerous can it be to for an adult to take a risk, to love someone, to eat healthily, to forgive past wrongs and live-and-let-live? "Very dangerous", says the guard, and remains intransigent about this. And therein lies the conflict that we feel each time anxiety touches us and change threatens us. The guard thinks he is keeping us safe, yet as we become aware of ourselves and our destiny, we become aware that he is actually keeping us a prisoner.

All the time, on some level or other, we know - our intuition knows - that there is something deeper going on. There is, if you like, the most important prisoner of all trying to get out of the prison - our soul, our destiny, our self (whatever we call it) - and so we start to fight with our internal protector, attempting to change our thinking and behaviour, or to deconstruct the way our habits have been put together by this internal part of our psyche. Through change and understanding, says the adult ego, will come salvation and growth!

This ongoing relationship with our inner protector is probably the most important one we can have throughout our life. And it often seems like a struggle. The

protector is wily and will often hide in the shadows. Sometimes we'll be convinced that there's nothing to worry about, and at other times that the task is just too big. That's just the protector at work, whispering his (or her) justifications for keeping us behind bars. So maybe we stay there and get depressed, or mistake the prison for the world, or become ill, or eat and drink too much or too little, and fight with the other prisoners. And the adult ego may even 'realises' that resistance is useless, and resign itself to a safer, quieter existence mustering all its logic and rationality to justify such a choice. But the tug of intuition never goes away.

It's only when we realise that the protector has our interests at heart and IS trying to keep us safe, albeit in a misguided, limited and rather unimaginative way, that we can perhaps begin to experience what is really going on; and to realise that the task is not to fight or even understand the protector, but to recognise and embrace him or her as an integral part of our self. This way we get to see things through the eyes of another part of us, to notice what is going on minute by minute, second by second, blink by blink in another slice of our own little world.

And then, do you know, we might find that all this time the door has been unlocked, and we can just walk through - if only we can find the courage ...

Endnotes

¹ The profound implications of the adaptive unconscious for our behaviour, intuition and emotions is brilliantly discussed in "**Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking**" by Malcolm Gladwell, Penguin, 2005.

² When I write about the **almost** automatic, **almost** unconscious moments – I am referring to my belief that there's always a slice of awareness, however thin, that knows what is going on. In my poem **The promise** I sum this up with these words:

*"It is always there, laid out for
Us all to see,
in a hint, or a promise,
Or the subtle turn of the head;
Eyes avoiding momentarily.*

*I wish to write today,
assert that
There is nothing, nothing
Truly out of awareness.*

*The unconscious
(here's a revelation
For a poet)
Does not exist.*

*This knowledge can liberate us
For though we
Might name it such, it
Is only ever the
Greatest excuse."*

(From the **Stones Triptych**, <http://www.lifescape.org.uk/pages02/details.asp?id=96805197>)

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