

OUR INDIVIDUALITY

THE “LIKE ME” TRAP

I was away last weekend visiting with one of the great family systems I have ever known. Over two decades I have witnessed a family of love and warmth amidst a chaos of house expansion and a hard core catch-as-catch-can “lone-wolf” entrepreneurial lifestyle. Two kids at home, three flown the coup as a 2000 sq. ft. home morphed into a still mostly unfinished 5500 square feet and a sequence of new businesses come and gone. A real monument to the triumph of pursuing one’s dreams, falling short by conventional standards, but rising up once again amidst as warm and loving a family group as I have ever seen.

At breakfast, my friend’s wife and I were talking about a mutual friend, let’s call her Mary, and she made a comment about not understanding how someone could live a life like Mary’s and that eventually Mary would come to a painful realization of what a hollow waste the past umpteen years had been. I knew Mary quite well and my friend’s wife knew her only casually. My reply began with a comment about how some people like chocolate ice cream and others like strawberry. I asked my friend’s wife, “what if Mary’s lifestyle compared with yours is just like two people liking two different flavors of ice cream, would you make the same comments about her?”

Perhaps flavors of ice cream is not the greatest example but in fact there is every good reason to accept that flavor preferences represent real biological differences in the taste buds of people’s tongues. It would be unfair for me a chocolate lover to disparage people who prefer strawberry and feel sorry for them because they will never know the joys of chocolate; just as a strawberry lover would be wrong to think ill of me for never

having known the joys of strawberry and believe that eventually I would regret my life of chocoholism.

I told my friend that Mary may have a fundamentally different brain/psyche than she does. For Mary to try to lead my friend's lifestyle, Mary would be a psychological mess whereas my friend is a very happy camper. How much of our judgment of other people reflects our own psychological make-up judging these other people's way of life as if they had our brain/psyche. For us, yes it would be the wrong way to live, but for them with a different brain/psyche as ours they may not experience life in the same way as we do.

Another example of very different ways of living are the personality types that have been labeled types "A" and "B." The "A" is the hard charging, get it done now and get out of my way life of competition, pressures, go go go, "winning isn't everything it the only thing" approach to life. The "B" is a far more introspective, casual, smell the roses, and group consensus, type of person. Without a doubt these are two types of fundamentally different brain chemistries producing very different lifestyles.

If one is sitting around chatting with a group of "Bs," they might very likely speak disparagingly of "As" along the lines of: "wow, what a way to live, pressure, tension, he will be dead by 50 of a heart attack, how can he live with so much stress, is success really worth it." Wrong!!!! The "A" does not experience life in the same way as a "B," they know no other way of living. "As" are of the "warrior class," they do not experience it as stress, to them it is just allowing themselves to be who they are. They actively seek out the high pressure, tension filled way of life since to them it allows them to act in the way that comes naturally to them.

If building a fortune and gaining power are one's goals, being an "A" is a lucky break. The "A" way of living tends to win the fame and fortune battle. The really tough part of this story is the natural "B" who for one reason or another finds themselves in an "A" job. If wanting more money, or just the vagaries of fate cause a "B" to have to act like an "A," then that is the heart attack or other stress induced illness waiting to happen. The lucky ones are not "As" or "Bs", nor is one right or wrong, that is not the issue. What is important is that each person understands who they are and takes whatever steps are necessary to make sure they are not being forced like a round peg into a square hole to act in a way that is not their natural style. It is the mashing of the peg to fit that causes the psychological and physical damage.

On occasion when a young person asks career advice from me I counsel in the following way: "Spend some time trying to understand who you are, what you like to do naturally and perhaps most importantly at what types of activities you excel just being who you are. Then decide what type of life style you would like to live over the next many decades. Take the list of work activities that you would enjoy and that you can succeed at naturally and hopefully you can find one that will provide you with at least close to the wealth you need to live a lifestyle that would make you content."

A natural "numbers person" selling real estate, no matter how many courses they take and how hard they work, will have a limit to their success. However, for a natural "people person," who takes the same courses and works just as hard, the sky is the limit. The same could be said for a people person working in an accounting department, how far they can go is limited. In both cases, the dangers of a mismatch between your natural propensities and the demands of your job are only in part about setting yourself up for

failure, but also about the intensity of the psychological trauma one will suffer from having the demands of a job or a relationship forcing you to act as if you are someone you are not.

The opening paragraph of this essay could be read between the lines to reflect a certain wistfulness from me about being surrounded daily with warm and loving people. Without a doubt my career as first a scientist and then a venture capitalist played well into several of my natural traits that I seem to perform in a high fashion. Yet, perhaps it reflects my age (see tool: “The Wisdom of the Aged”) that I found myself spending the weekend with such a caring family group and experiencing a sense of longing for such in my own life. The tool for all to have in their toolkit is an awareness of the importance of matching one’s own natural talents and needs to one’s career and relationships and realize that as the years pass, these attributes may change and thus require an adjustment to one’s own life.

The concepts about individuality in this tool are also directly relevant to our being effective in our daily social and business interactions with others. Do not assume that the person with whom you are interacting shares your psyche with personality traits identical to your own. Instead, get as good a reading as possible about the other person’s psyche and shape your interactions with them to who they really are instead of relating to them as if they respond, think, and feel the same way you would.

One last insight this tool provides us into our own behavior is our tendency to say things such as: “this guy is a real a__hole.” We think and our comment states that this person acts like an “a__hole” on purpose and even perceives himself in that way. When that person wakes up, does he says to himself: “well, another day to be a real a__hole.”

The answer is of course “No!” In their own mind they see themselves as a fine upstanding human being. People behave in the way that they are, and for most, they are darn proud of it. Remember we are all different people, and as described in the tool, “Heroes of Our Own Stories,” we fabricate stories that we tell ourselves which make us proud to be who we are.