

EYES, CONSCIOUSNESS, ANXIETY, AND SURVIVAL

Eyes, Consciousness, Anxiety, and Survival

A lot of adjectives can be used to describe relationships: tricky, wonderful, impossible, necessary, convenient, scary, etc. There is no way to completely exist without them; there is plenty of opportunity to get lost in them.

Vision and perception capacities and their developing neural processes provide the link between the individual and his/her environment (e.g., the relationship environment). Humans begin their lives with their eyes open. The retinal and optic nerves are fully present at birth, with synoptic density continuing to grow, peaking in the visual cortex by eight months. Saying it another way, the eyes are working from the beginning, with the connections to and within the cortex evolving and learning over time. One's visual system is responding adaptively to the world in which the developing organism finds itself. Survival is precarious. The arithmetic of perception and early sensations of anxiety develop "wiring patterns" which extract and interpret meaning from the environment. The brain has the capacity to extract significance via the sensory visual input.*

Given such major survival and evolutionary forces, it takes a major effort to focus anywhere else but on the environment and the people in it. If there is a trace of anxiety in the mix (and there is usually more than a trace), the automatic focus will be external, and if one experiences danger, it will be attributed to the triggers, and not to that which is triggered (e.g., in one's brain).

Dr. Bowen postulated a larger reality, that is being examined in detail by neuroscientists. There is a capacity within the brain (the cortex) that can focus on and think objectively while being connected to the anxiety processes; thus the phrase "both separate and connected."

*For a readable description of the visual and brain developmental processes see: *The Future of The Brain*, by Steven Rose, pages 122-129.

His letter of February 17, 1989 is a response to a patient who was complaining about her daughter “not growing up.” He challenges her to focus on herself, the anxiety that automatically comes from that focus. He also points out a few difficult questions and options to guide her effort. His “P.S.” adds yet another layer to the difficult yet necessary questions – if one can ask them.

Feb 17, 1989

Dear Mrs.

Some thought following your session today. This is for you ALONE, and it is not to be communicated to others.

It probably is inaccurate for you to blame the infantilization of your daughter on your husband. He is doing what appears to be natural to him, he assumes you go along with him – (just like you always have done), and you are too unsure of yourself to really be different. The problem is YOU, and it will continue to exist until YOU can be different.

What do you do about you?????? You have a few options. Most have been failures!!!! Get angry with your husband, and you did not change. Make loud vocal statements to your husband, while your feelings still baby your daughter, and you are the same. Nothing changed. Still focusing on the other person. Divorce your husband and nothing changed. Still focusing on the other person, and YOU did not change. Tell you daughter you love her, and it is a hollow as words, unless your ACTION is different. It is a little peculiar to tell someone you love them, while you still DO the things that make the other into a child.

Your long term goal is a situation in which you can be a mature woman, and your daughter can be a grown up woman, and your husband can be a mature man. One way you can modify that: One can slowly modify one's self. If one can change one's self, the family will slowly change. Your family somehow got triggered into a situation of fussing at everyone else, without modifying self. The more you focus on changing the other, the worse it has become. You are in a "no win" situation. The worse it becomes, the more the family makes it worse by trying to change back the other.

What are your options????? A few years back, you moved toward improving the situation in your life. It must have created waves in others, but it was for you, and the family came out ahead. Then in the face of symptoms, the family reverted to the great togetherness, of the family "love in". Does NASA still hold possibilities for you? Would you give up NASA to make the family more happy with you? These are issues, all strictly within self, far beyond the superficial issues of changing to make others happier. They involve yourself, and the relationship system in which you exist as a person. They involve everyone in the non-family situation. Something to think about. How do you go about changing you, within the non-family, and still have the family approve of you. How do you become YOU with your husband, without making a big deal about who writes the checks? What do you focus on, if the goal is to be YOU, rather than who likes it?

These are merely a few ideas that might be helpful, if the goal is to change you, without trying to change everyone else. There is some kind of magic if one can focus on one's own self, and take the responsibility for success or failure, without blaming the other. Your husband is not going to change himself in relationship with your daughter, unless you change yourself in relationship to everyone back in Kansas, and NASA, etc.

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.

P.S. This is done hurriedly. The overall attitude rather than words, is all important. One cannot pretend a zebra is a mule by painting out the white stripes.