

Session One: Unlearning Our Programming
Unlearning for Change Agents
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Session 1.1 - My News Fast

I went on a news fast. By which I mean I didn't look at the news, or read the news or anything, for about half a year. Partly because I wanted to write my book, but also because I felt like it was kind of poisoning my mind, because all of the news was inviting me into hating somebody, into outrage and indignation and kind of one adrenaline jolt after another, one fix after another.

And so I wanted to, kind of, yeah, kind of go on a fast or quit cold turkey for a while and see what happened. So, everything that's happened in the last year I've only heard about it second hand. Whatever Donald Trump said and did, or the "me too" thing, or anything like that, I just kind of got wind of it when people read me something, or said "hey so and so said this." And having stepped back a little bit from the fray of the media, from the cyclone of news, I got a little bit of, yeah, I got a bit more perspective on it, and it's kind of disturbing. And now I'm kind of stepping back in, but just seeing the level of hate, and the level of war thinking, and the level of polarization, and the dehumanization of the enemy, of the other side.

So I've written this book, it's on, I'm not going to tell you what it's on, because, and I'll tell you why I won't tell you right now what it's on, not because it's any big secret, but because it is one of those issues that triggers the "us versus them" mentality, and I find that, it doesn't matter what issue I'm speaking about, if I say something that's a little bit unorthodox, that makes it hard to peg. "Ok, hold on, what are you saying here? I haven't heard that before." So the first impulse that comes up is "well, what side are you on?"

In a war, the most important question is, what side are you on? That's what you have to figure out first. Are you a friend, or an enemy? Are you on team good, i.e., my team? Or are you on team evil, the other team? And if you don't easily fit into one of the two sides, then you're the object of suspicion and hostility and in fact, I find that in a war situation, the enemy is not as detested as the pacifist. Because the enemy at least validates your own identity. Like, who am I?

We build identities from the stories that surround us. And the story of "us versus them" tells us who we are. "I'm an American. I'm on the side of freedom." And they are the Russians, or they are the terrorists, or they are somebody else, so I know who I am, through having an enemy. At least that's how it works in a war mentality, which is pervasive in our culture. So, if you question that categorization, of self and other, if you say yeah, you know, maybe the whole premises of the war are faulty, and we should question the things that are driving us to fight somebody, then you are questioning someone's identity.

And yeah, so anyway, I'm seeing, this is something that's really been up for me as I've kind of started re-engaging with the news, and just seeing, and it's this weird, it's like there's like this disconnect between what I'm seeing on the media, and what I'm seeing on social media too, not just the news media, this, more and more suspicion, and hostility, and hatred, and us versus them, and polarization.

But on the other hand, like, in actual daily life, maybe it's just my imagination, but I think people are getting friendlier. I think people are getting more polite. I think people are getting more human, more empathic. I notice it at TSA. The TSA officials are friendlier than they used to be. It's like, everybody kind of knows, this is, this is all bullshit. We don't really believe in these rituals that we're doing. But you've got to do your job, and I've got to play my part, and submit to this humiliation ritual that you have to go through in order to board an airplane, so that everybody feels "safe." But we don't really believe in it, it seems, it's like, it's like this kind of camaraderie of "yeah yeah yeah we're all stuck in this game, but we don't really believe in it anymore, and what do we believe in?"

These notions of, I mean I use the word "interbeing", but the understanding that you're a reflection of me, that I'm not really separate from you, that any judgement I have on you, is actually something about myself, and maybe I gotta take ownership of it. Like, this, I can't say that this is the new ethos. But these ideas are infiltrating, and leading people, I think, to just, pause for a moment sometimes, before letting loose with condemnation.

Session 1.2 - Which Side Are You On?

There's a danger though, in saying, "Oh I'm just an observer, I'm gonna sit back, and not take sides," because that can also be a recipe for inaction. And I'm not talking

about that. I'm talking about rejecting the prescriptions for action that both sides might offer. When they say, "the issue is about this, which side are you on?" No matter which side you pick, you're still agreeing that the issue is about this. And letting, if there's a deeper cause that both sides are ignoring, and deeper agreements that both sides share, that actually generate the problem to begin with, then no matter which side you pick, you're still part of the problem.

So for example, in this country, in fact a lot of countries, there's a big immigration debate. Which side are you on? Are you on the side that would like to let these people in, and welcome them into this country, to escape the hardships and dangers of where they came from, or are you on the side that wants to keep them out, because they're a different skin color or something like that? Which side are you on? Well, neither side is asking the important questions, such as, why are all these people wanting to immigrate in the first place? What makes life in their home country so unlivable, that they would risk everything, leave their families behind, leave their traditions behind, leave their language behind, for a completely uncertain future, sometimes at the hands of human smugglers, like, what would it take for you to do that? Why, what has made their home unlivable?

And when you start asking those questions, you reach uncomfortable territory for a couple reasons. One being, that there is no longer an easy solution. The easy solution is, you know, build a wall, keep them out. The easy solution depends on identifying one cause, a single cause, that is outside yourself, something you can fight, like a germ that you can kill, or a weed that you can pull up. But when you ask these deeper questions, you come to answers like the global economic system, neoliberal capitalism, military imperialism, that are not, they're so all encompassing, that there's no easy solution, there's no, there's nothing to fight because you're part of it too, and that's the second uncomfortable thing, is that you're part of it too, I'm part of it too, our daily lives, our routines, our way of life is deeply implicated in all of these, you know, imperialism, capitalism etc. etc. So, we don't know what to do, and it involves ourselves. Like, you can't push it out onto an "other."

So, that's just one example of how the invitation to engage in "the issue" is a trap, trapping you into perpetuating the issue because all of that contention, all that froth, and push, you know, that whole war, is a distraction from the deeper issues and no matter which side wins the issue won't go away, the problem won't go away. So I want to say that, I'm not saying, "oh I'm just going to sit back and be the cynical observer and let them play out because I'm above it all." I want to be useful to the evolution of this world. But I'm very wary of the existing solution sets, the existing actions that are offered to us, because that are so often part of the problem in ways that we are unconscious of.

Session 1.3 - A New Personal Motto

I have kind of of new motto that's helped me clear the fog in the political realm these days. Which is that in any polarized debate, the most important thing is in what neither side is saying, and what both sides unconsciously agree on.

So, one of these polarized debates comes up in the area of climate and sustainability and stuff, and it's like, is it possible to transition to a carbon neutral energy source? Can we have what they call a sustainable economy, a sustainable, society. Can we have enough solar panels, and wind turbines, and biofuels, etc etc, to continue running our civilization. I think that is the wrong question. Or it is one of these debates that obscures the real question.

So, the question essentially of, can we sustain, like what does sustainability mean? What are we sustaining? Can we sustain, essentially what they're asking is, can we sustain the world as we know it? The assumption there being, that it's worth sustaining. But do we really want to sustain this? Do we want to sustain, like in this country, a world where the, of spreading subdivisions, and McMansions, and traffic, and automobile culture and the homogenization of what had been local cultures, and the, the whole setup of modern society, do we want to sustain that? If we say maybe not, then we can look at the energy crisis and the climate crisis through a different lens. And we can say, hmm. This is an opportunity to stop sustaining it. This is an initiation, a potential initiation into a different kind of society where we question those things that we've taken for granted as progress, and we, we receive alternatives, we create alternatives, we, we, undo some of what we have already had. We look at the values underneath it. And we ask questions like, well what do we really want? What does a beautiful life look like? That's the invitation that crisis in general can offer.

Whereas the refusal of the invitation would be to say, let's do everything we can to prevent that crisis from affecting anything else. So that would be the world in the climate conversation, that would be to install giant carbon sucking machines in every city, to enable the continued combustion of fossil fuels, etc etc etc, the continued development of unspoiled places on earth. I've written a book on climate change which I hesitate to say because as soon as I say its on climate change, people, they may not, they may be too polite to say this to me face to face, but they're thinking, I'm not going to read that. I already know what it's going to say, its hopeless, its urgent, I've got to do this, I feel paralyzed anyway, I don't know what to do, like, I don't want to read another book on that. So that's why I'm a little bit shy about saying that I've written a book on climate change. It's called Climate: A New Story. And one of the things that it questions is sustainability. Do we want to sustain this? And what would an alternative look like?

Session 1 Invitation: Unlearning Our Programming / News Fast

So when I was growing up, I was told that it's important to read the news so that one can stay informed and be an informed citizen. But I think that many people, if you think about it, you recognize, that that's not the real reason that you read the news or watch the news. Because if you miss the news, if you don't read it for a few days or a few weeks, it's not like you become unable to function in society.

I mentioned in the material for this session that I went on a news fast. I've done this a few times in my life, sometimes for a few days or weeks, sometimes for months at a time. And you know, I never actually suffered from lack of information in any appreciable way, nor did I become less effective as a participant in civil society. So there's some other reason why we are drawn to watch the news or read the news. It can feel kind of like an addiction. And if you take my invitation here which I'll extend right now, the invitation is to go on a news fast for the duration of this course, however long you spend on this course, so it could be a few weeks, to go on a news fast and just stop looking at the sites that you normally use to read about the news, as it is presented to us.

This is a profound deprogramming, because, for one thing, the very choice of what gets into the news and what isn't; what is newsworthy and what is not, that reinforces a certain worldview. It says here's what is important and here is what isn't important, and by implication, here's how the world works, here's what you should care about, here is what is going to change things. That choice, of what to put in the news, and it's, it's not a conspiracy, it's more of an unconscious conspiracy if you will, a collective unconscious choice, that reflects society's values, and the metaphysics, or the causality that society takes for granted. So by pulling back from the news you pull back from a constant reinforcement of that belief in causality. In that belief of "here's what's important." So, it, pulling back from the news will help you in unlearning some of these deeper programs.

You also might find, when you're honest with yourself, that one reason that you read or watch the news, is for reassurance. Reassurance that "I'm right. I'm doing this right. I think the right thing. I believe the right thing. I know things." Most people, and this is the echo chamber effect, most people read news from a source that they pretty much agree with. That shares their outrage and their indignation about some things, shares their celebration about other things. So, it helps maintain a social identity in a time of a loss of identity that comes from a breakdown in our overarching stories and ways of making meaning of the world and of our own lives.

So there's an addictive quality then, and you may have noticed this, an addictive quality to watching the news. Because it pretends to meet a need that ultimately it fails to meet. The need for identity, the need to belong. It doesn't actually make you belong. It's no substitute for deep intimate connections to place and community and nature. But

it at least takes the edge off the hunger that comes from that unmet need. So, you might find, if you are like a serious news addict, you might find yourself going through withdrawal symptoms. And those withdrawal symptoms they come up most strongly in the empty times, the empty spaces that you would otherwise be devoting to watching the news.

So the invitation then is to hold through those episodes of withdrawal and just to take note of what it's like to be free of the news, free of the reinforcement of certain patterns of perception and behavior and thought that the news induces in you. And then also with that distance you might get a glimpse of what else, the other thing that I talked about in this session, the, what's hidden beneath the polarized discourse. What's hidden beneath the "this side" and "that side." And so here's a spectrum of opinion, here's one pole, here's another pole, and you might agree with this, you might agree with that, you might be somewhere in between, but what about being off that spectrum completely? What's being hidden underneath the surface of the debate?

As you pull back, you might gain more and more awareness, and it might seem wow, it's a tempest in a teapot. It's magnifying some little piece of the Matrix, into this all important, all consuming "issue", "the issues." And everyone is intoxicated by "the issues", leaving the real issues untouched. And so you might get more clarity into what the real issues are as you withdraw from the hypnosis of the news.

So that's the invitation. A news fast. I hope that...Maybe some of you don't even watch the news to begin with. If so, congratulations. And I hope that nonetheless, even the consciousness of your permanent news fast carries some benefit to you. So yeah, thank you.