

Exiting the Matrix

Transcript of Charles Eisenstein's Talk

<https://charleseisenstein.org/video/exiting-the-matrix/>

I'm not one of those people who was, you know--totally in the matrix, and then had some life-changing experience and dropped out of the matrix and--I was always a very unwilling participant, even going back to grade school. On the one hand, what did I know? All the authority figures telling me, "Here's what a good boy does. Here's what's important." I mean, I kind of bought into that to some extent and inconsistently got good grades and did what I was told because I was afraid not to. But I never really believed in the whole thing.

I always had this vague feeling of, "You've got to be kidding me. This can't be right." And even when the "bad kids" in class--the ones who bullied me even--when they got in trouble and they did something really bad, like when they threw spitballs at the blackboard or set off a smoke bomb in the bathroom--like, I felt this kind of glee, this kind of--I felt like I was on their side, even though I was sometimes the target of their abuse. So I had this revolutionary leaning very early on.

I mean, some people--and I was one of these people who had an experience of wrongness, of systemic wrongness visited upon my person that was so acute that I never really could believe in the whole thing after that, which was getting bullied by other kids in seventh and eighth grade in very cruel ways. And it was kind of just tolerated by the authorities, and in fact I saw that the conditions were set up for it. There was no escaping it. It was baked into the cake. And that was one of the things that really alienated me, although I suppose another response could have been to want revenge, to seek to become a dominant person in our society and eventually, like in the *Back to the Future* movie where the bully ends up being the servant of the "good kid"--maybe I could've gone that direction.

But also I had other input into my consciousness that confirmed my suspicion that there was something totally wrong, an all-encompassing malady. And that input came in the form of books, like *1984*, *Silent Spring*, *A People's History of the United States*--books that demolished the shell of the narrative that school constructs, the historical narrative, the social narrative, the political narrative that says: yeah, we've got some problems, but this is democracy, this is an incredible achievement, the founding fathers, the Emancipation Proclamation, this whole mythology. Manifest destiny. All that stuff. And then I read *Trail of Tears*. I read *People's History of the United States*. I couldn't help but dissociate from the program. Knowing that, how could I really participate wholeheartedly?

And maybe I thought for a while there's some part of society that has escaped infection by this illness. Maybe it's the worlds of academia, the worlds of philosophy. But when I went to college and studied philosophy and mathematics, it seemed like it was there too, the same--I couldn't put a name on what was wrong. All I knew was that I felt repelled by it. I felt the desire to sabotage it. I couldn't--it wasn't even a moral position. It wasn't that I had some well thought-out moral position that "I will not participate in this." It was a kind of an instinct that in part did take the form of rebellion, of procrastination, of not building a resume, not preparing for grad school. I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

Now, maybe I'm just making excuses for myself and I'm just a lazy person, and can't hack it in the conventional world, so I've carved out a little niche for myself in the alternative realms. You could see me through that story if you want to preserve the integrity of the conventional realm. You've got to explain me somehow. So, yeah, you know, "This guy's a second-rate, third-rate philosopher who's compensating for his failures by blaming the system." Yeah, it's not that I did something wrong, it's that the system's *bad*, so I'm staying out of it!

People like me are easily explainable in the language of the matrix. And I can't disprove that story by offering any evidence. I mean, any evidence that would satisfy you, if that's the way you see me, would be: well, here are some conventional achievements that I've accomplished. But by doing that, I'm validating the conventional achievements. I'm actually saying that, "Yeah, I actually agree with you that success as we've come to see it *is* actually real success, that it *is* really a good thing, that you can trust somebody who has fancy degrees, or who has business success, or something like that. That is the mark of a trustworthy person." So if I cite the meager mainstream accomplishments that I have, I am undermining my own position. So there's really nothing that I could say to you. Or at least there's nothing that I could do, no evidence that I can use to prove that I'm not just some second-rate discontent.

Ultimately, the choice of the story that we believe is not based on evidence. It's rather that we recruit the evidence to fit the story that resonates with the state of being that attracts the belief. And then when the belief is ready to change, which happens when perhaps your state of being has changed because things have happened to you in your life that have changed you, and that old belief doesn't fit the changed being that you're becoming through maybe a crisis and a collapse, or through an amazing mysterious experience. Now those beliefs don't work anymore. So new evidence comes. Isn't that funny? You start to notice new things. You start to accept phenomena that you had rejected as fanciful before. And the evidence comes to flesh out the belief, to serve the belief. I think that's how it works.

So maybe if you're watching someone like me, listening to someone like me, if you are at that point where the old belief that is in collusion with the status quo of society is ready to change--if you're at that point where you've been going through some kind of breakdown where the old story doesn't work for you anymore, where you don't really know who you are anymore, where you don't know what's real anymore, where you feel maybe almost a little bit dizzy--you don't know how to do this thing called life anymore--that is a really tender spot.

It often becomes a very receptive place, a very vulnerable place, where people--like, you can get recruited for a cult. Cults specialize in finding people like that, who have just gone through some kind of big crisis, who are open to receive a new story, and the cult comes and says, "Here's a new story, here's who you are, here's how to live life, here's the way the world is." They have a totalizing discourse that answers all of these questions and that receives people coming from a dissolving story. Which means that, because our society now is in a process of degeneration, more and more people--I mean, all of our institutions that held our identity, that answered those questions--the institution of marriage, the economic institutions, the educational institutions, the medical institutions that could fix you if you were broken, and can't anymore, and say your disease doesn't even exist and we can't cure it anyway--all of these different dimensions of the breakdown are invading personal life and causing people's own stories to break down, which means

that more and more people are susceptible to being recruited by a cult, and now I'm talking about politics, aren't I?

Mentioning no names, but in many countries, including my own, these kind of almost cartoonish political philosophies are being offered people. And because the old stories have kind of disintegrated, they're willing to believe anything. So it is a very special, vulnerable time. And I am not here to offer my own version of "Here's the new story, here's who you are, here's the way the world works." Really, what I'm saying is that, if you are in this process of breakdown and not knowing who you are and the way the world is and watching the old certainties dissolve into mystery, and what you thought you knew dissolve into, "Wow, that was just a story," if that's happening to you, that's okay. It goes counter to our training to be in a state of not knowing. You get in trouble in school if you don't know the answer. You're supposed to know the answer. You're supposed to have things under control. You're supposed to have a plan. You're supposed to have measurable outcomes. Objectives.

But if you attempt to construct those when you're in this space between stories, when you're in this time of breakdown, then you're going to end up erecting some version of what you already had before and you won't be even that excited about it and you won't be able to achieve it anyway. It'll seem phony. So I'd like to encourage you to abide in that space of unknowing for a while until a new story comes to you that really resonates with who you want to become, that isn't preying on your fear, but that is inviting you into service to something that's really beautiful to you. And I'm not even saying you'll recognize it right away. Probably you'll have to have a few false starts.

Now, even though I'm not offering "Here's the new story," I can say a little bit, maybe, about some of the general qualities of the new story, or maybe the meta-story, which is what I use Thich Nhat Hanh's word for, "interbeing", that says that self and world are not separate, that what I do to the world comes back to me, that my purpose here is to give to something greater than myself. That I'm part of a larger whole. That this is my basic nature.