

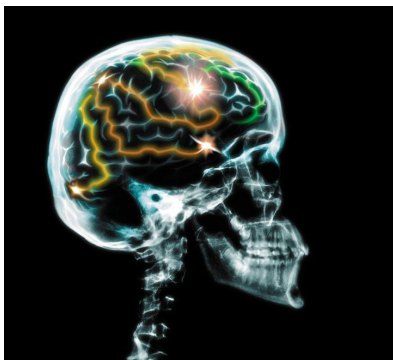
## Vision: Can Human Beings Drop Their Divisive, Reactionary Thinking and Move to a Higher Level?

*A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels. The good news is that the human brain is more flexible than we assume.*

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12/26/2010 07:21pm ET | Updated November 17, 2011



Why does so much of our political and social discourse devolve into extreme positions with little or no ability for each side to hear the other? Why are we continually reacting to conflict in the same unproductive or destructive ways? Given the multitude of challenges facing us and our planet, it's time to break this reactive and futile cycle. As Albert Einstein so eloquently observed, "A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels." The urgency of finding that "new type of thinking" cannot be overstated.

As a psychotherapist and a human rights activist working for over twenty-five years with thousands of people on four continents, I witness these patterns of reactive behavior everywhere; and I have become intimately aware of their underlying causes. Gratefully, I have also seen our great capacity to break through these destructive patterns when provided with the necessary knowledge and tools. We can move past divisive obstructions when we become mindful of what is blocking us, and step up to the next level of our evolution -- awareness.

Recently, neuroscientists have shed more light on our physiological mechanisms and have helped to explain why our conflicts can become so intractable. Advancements in brain scanning technology have revealed that many of our adult emotions, thoughts and actions arise from neural pathways that were created and deeply ingrained in us when we were young children.

Ninety percent of human-brain growth occurs in the first five years of life. During this critical developmental period, life experiences determine how the millions of neurons in the human brain connect. These connections form the structure of our brains, which in

turn create our minds. Hence, our early life experiences shape our minds and define our individual beliefs and values -- who we are. While genetics plays a significant role, our experiences are responsible for how the genes are expressed, because our experiences actually shape our brain structure.

As we continue to grow, our tendency is to filter new information and experiences through our initial sets of beliefs and values. We develop patterns in our brains that determine how we perceive and respond to our world. These patterns are relatively fixed and will tend to stay that way unless and until repeated new experiences restructure the brain, and thereby change the mind. For example, if a child is raised by racist parents, his brain structure becomes wired to think and feel racism. The child's view can change, however, if he is actively exposed to tolerance.

By adulthood, our worldview is so fixed that most people don't even know that there is another way to be. We become emotionally attached to our points of view, since they represent and order our reality. Our egos may perceive any challenge as life threatening. When in conflict, our defense mechanisms trigger, and negate or deflect opposing points of view in order to maintain our own reality. For example, many dismiss those who hold creationist beliefs as uneducated or irrational, while Creationists, in turn, label Evolutionists as heretics. Few among either group engage in objective inquiry to understand the other. In fact, our differences are due to the fixed nature of our brains. This set pattern is the primary source of our divisive conflicts.

To further complicate matters, these unconscious tendencies to feel threatened leave many people open to manipulation by the demagogues of the day. The results of the recent elections are a perfect example. Driven by irrational fear, millions of citizens were led to vote against their own interests, prompting confused, frustrated and angry reactions from the other side.

Since rational arguments do not assuage fear (because fear trumps our higher reasoning) continuing to get angry and frustrated at people and dismissing them as irrational or stupid does not change the landscape or serve us as a whole. It only leads to a perpetual reactive pattern, one that does not allow for new creative solutions. So how do we move forward?

The answer lies in the brain's ability to restructure itself when consistently stimulated by new experiences. This relatively new finding has revitalized neuroscience medicine. Through implementing certain rigorous and intense physical rehabilitation practices, for example, stroke victims and those with traumatic brain injuries have been able to successfully repattern the neurons in their brains. Many patients return to optimum physical health. On the mental health side, studies on long-term meditation practices have shown that mindfulness also changes the brain's structure, shifting people to become more clear, peaceful and compassionate.

These new findings can now be useful for all of us. By becoming more mindful, we are able to intercept our habitual thought patterns, disconnect from our emotional attachments to our points of view, objectively examine and test our views' validities in

larger contexts, and override these patterns with other perspectives if necessary. The more aware we become in our daily lives, the better able we are to catch our early preprogrammed patterns and replace them with more constructive approaches to our conflicts.

How can we apply this ability to help us on a collective level? How can our greater awareness reduce the divisiveness and reactivity of others? There is no quick fix here! However, continuing to meet others on their levels of reactivity only serves to fuel the cycles and gets us nowhere. Einstein's definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results. The only solution is for more and more of us to try and understand the role we play in perpetuating the cycle, and become aware of how we can respond differently to conflict.

Too often, one side pulls and the other side pulls harder, hence, we devolve to extremes, and conflict becomes unhealthy. Awareness of reactivity gives us the ability to stop pulling blindly, and pause long enough to evaluate the bigger picture so that we may address our conflicts from broader perspectives. The great conflict-resolution expert, Bill Ury, calls this The Third Side. With awareness of how this system operates in ourselves, we can create more balanced, constructive responses that do not drive the other side further into their entrenched beliefs and away from our common goals.

In my practice, I have experienced great success with these awareness techniques, particularly when working with warring couples. I help them to become aware, and to rewire their early childhood patterns. Breakthroughs in neuroscience have given me a deeper understanding of why my practices work, and have inspired me to create a tool that can affect these changes and reach many more people.

This tool is an iPhone application called AWARENESS, which randomly intercepts users several times a day and asks them what they are feeling in the moment; and then follows up by also asking them to document what they are doing while they are present to their emotions. Based on their answers, the app treats users to a brief video meditation exercise. This momentary interruption, repeated over time, begins to recondition the users' minds to become more aware of their emotional states and helps them release those emotions more constructively. Over time and with dedicated use, this tool can free us from our reactive patterns and helps us become more objective so that we are better able to generate new creative responses.

AWARENESS is the first tool in what I hope will be a new frontier for forwarding humanity's consciousness. We need neuroscientists, biologists, social scientists and technology experts to collaborate on developing new tools and practices that can be applied in various ways to free us from our reactive patterns.

At this juncture of human evolution, it is incumbent on us to step out of our habitual counter-productive patterns and create new, out of the box solutions. This will require a willingness to challenge our preexisting perceptions and open our minds to the higher level of thinking that Albert Einstein called for so many years ago. When we know what we are up against, we humans have demonstrated an indomitable and awe-inspiring

ability to step up and triumph over the most difficult of challenges. For the sake of future generations, we now need to find constructive ways to transcend our differences.

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