

2. DOWN CLAIM OF NORMAL

Several years ago I heard a statement that has struck me as being extremely profound. When I heard it, it was as if time stopped and the words echoed around inside of my head leaving an indelible impression that would be stamped on my awareness forever. Here's what I heard:

For every thousand people cutting away at the leaves of evil, only one is chopping away at the root.

The idea of evil being a tree, or a weed, was moving. It gave evil a shape and a form which made it more manageable to deal with. The idea that people were actually attacking the manifestation of evil was also compelling as it seemed real. I knew many people that were tired of bad things happening to them and to others and they seemed very motivated to 'do something about it.' But the idea of a thousand people plucking away at the leaves of evil was somehow haunting. I envisioned a frenzy of bodies moving to do a work and expending their energy to do something meaningful and valid; yet, despite their vital movement, they seemed to be wasting their time. It was like the tree was a cancer and they were merely pulling out individual cancer cells which would seem to satisfy a desire to do something and look busy, but ultimately not have any real or lasting power against the thing called evil.

Then there was the image of the one individual working in apparent solitude. One among the thousands of people was chopping away at the very root of evil. How different that must be. Did not the thousand people know they were merely plucking away at the leaves? Why were they hoarding around the leaves and not the root? What was wrong with the one at the root and why were there not any others chopping away at it too? Did the ones plucking the leaves of evil think they were getting the roots? Whatever the answers, do we not want to be the 'one' cutting away at the root?

UNDERSTANDING ‘THE PROBLEM’

Perhaps we can look at this intuitive statement differently in order to understand it better and somehow avail ourselves of the potential benefit of directly affecting the root of evil. To do this how about we just call the roots of evil the root of the problem. By labeling ‘evil’ as the ‘problem,’ whatever it is, we have taken the object of our endeavor out of the nebulous ethereal world of good and bad and brought it somehow closer to home. Each of you has a problem for which you seek an answer. Your particular problem could be an unhappy marriage, a cheating partner, a depression, an anger problem, an addiction, and the list could go on and on. You have been doing many things to address the problem, and you may have spent quite a while cutting away at it. Do you feel like you are making progress? If you are like most people who I have met and worked with over the years you may not feel that your efforts are showing much result. You may even feel that your efforts may make the problem worse, but you do not know any other way to address the problem.

To understand your problem better, we need to understand a relationship between ‘cause and effect.’ The ‘cause’ is the man with a finger who pokes a domino. The ‘effect’ is the domino, standing on end, next to other dominos also standing on end, falling and then hitting the next domino. Then a chain reaction seems to occur where the domino once called the ‘effect’ now transitions and becomes a new ‘cause’ as it then hits the next domino. This chain reaction then continues until all the dominos have been toppled. We could then ask the question, “What caused all this?” We would not be wrong if we focused on the last two dominos in the long snaking line of five hundred dominos and pointed out that the one prior to the last was the ‘cause’ and that, in turn, by falling it then toppled the last domino which is the ‘effect.’ We could move further up the chain and point out anywhere else in the domino train the same process, but unless we

ultimately stopped at the man who set off the chain reaction with his finger, we would not be entirely accurate. We could say that we had not accurately identified the ‘cause’ of the ‘effect.’ We would not be entirely wrong, but we would also not have really found the principal cause.

In the domino analogy we would consider labeling all prior dominos before the final domino as the ‘cause’ much like chopping away at the leaves of evil. We would be accurate in trying to address the problem by looking at the various causes but unless we addressed the principal cause, despite our best efforts we would only be plucking away at the leaves of evil and never chopping away at the root.

CAUSE AND EFFECT/ PROBLEM AND SOLUTION

Let us go a little bit further and closer to home. Instead of using the words ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ let’s use a more commonly accepted relationship of ‘problem’ and ‘symptom,’ keeping in mind that the same type of chain reaction shown in the domino analogy can and does still exist in the ‘problem /symptom’ relationship. You go to the doctor because you have a ‘problem’: your head hurts. The problem motivates your action to go to the doctor. What you really want is the pain to go away. If the pain were to go away then you would feel better. The problem would be solved. The doctor sees you and asks what the ‘problem’ seems to be. You state that your head aches. The doctor begins to ask additional questions but you just want him to prescribe some medication to solve the problem, and in the end he does. You take the medication and the headache goes away. But over time the headaches keep coming back. You continue to take the headache medication and the pain goes away. You may believe that the problem is being addressed every time you take the pain medication, but really you are only addressing the ‘symptom’ of pain and not the real problem. The symptom of the real problem may be addressed and even appear to be better for a while, but ultimately until the real problem is addressed all you

are doing is starting at the end of the domino line and looking for the next to the last domino to stop falling. You are merely addressing the ‘symptom’ and not the problem.

What do I mean by this?

CAUSE AND EFFECT CONFUSION

Much of what people consider to be the problem in their lives is in essence only a symptom, and really what most people seem to want is for the symptom to go away: if only my daughter would obey me then there would be peace between us; if only my mother would respect me then I would listen to her more; if only my husband would quit being abusive then I would not have to scream at him so much; if only my wife would fix dinner right, then I would not have to raise my voice so much; if only the pain in my body would go away, then I could work; if only I had more money, then I would be happier; if only the people in my relationships gave me everything I wanted, then I would not have to be upset; if only my partner were a better person, then we would not be so miserable; if only I were not so horrible, then my parents would not fight so much; and, I could say more, oh so much more. Somewhere in this process we may even come across your particular symptom, which is the immediate ailment that caused you to seek relief in the first place.

‘QUICK FIX’ FOCUS

Most often people come to counseling because they want the pain of their symptom to vanish and disappear. If that could happen then things would return to normal and life would go on. But, here is the catch: because the symptoms are the only thing most people want addressed the problem never gets dealt with and the symptoms keep reappearing. Rather than address the problem we typically just want the symptom to go away. So, as a culture and a society, we have become dependent on ‘quick fixes.’ If the headaches keep coming back then let us just take

stronger medication, we might reason. And we do, and then over time we become 'addicted' to the pain medication as the real problem is not being addressed and we seek the eradication of the symptoms only.

In the 'roots of evil' analogy this would look something like this: each headache would be a leaf, and the people cutting at the leaves would be the 'pain medication,' but also all those prescribing pain relief pills. Because immediate results are seen in being able to quickly remove the leaves or symptoms of the problem, and because the problem apparently quickly disappears, we become satisfied and think the problem has been solved. Because the desired result appears to have been accomplished we no longer seek an answer as we are sure we have found it. But then the problem returns and despite the cycle being repeated the problem keeps recurring. We might conclude then that the real problem was not addressed and we might also look for additional causes.

In the counseling world the situation is not entirely different. Many people go to medical doctors for relief of depression symptoms. The doctor literally prescribes medications which then have the capacity to silence the symptom of the depression. It seems to work. Bingo! The problem then appears to have been solved. Nothing else happens and pills are taken on a regular basis to address the symptoms of the problem. The client is happy. The professional is happy. The pharmacy is happy. The pharmaceutical company is very happy.

The same type of intervention is often done with children and their behavioral problems. Certain behavioral problems are manifest and they are taken to various professionals who then prescribe the accepted routine of medication. The symptoms seem to disappear and the problem then is supposed to have been addressed and identified. We, as a culture and society, even give names to these conditions which declare to the universe that the problem has accurately been

identified by our societies wisest and highest paid medical and health care professionals. Now numerous names are given to the various leaves on the tree of evil and medication then is prescribe to cut away at these societal problems.

In the end the problem is never really addressed and we become a society dependent upon our 'leaf pruners' to control us, assure us that the real problems are being dealt with, and be there for us when our symptoms return, which invariably they must . It may be a challenge inherent in the system that the problem never really gets resolved; rather a dependence on what are labeled as 'short term solutions' becomes the standard of practice. The danger here is that dollar signs now come in the picture: is it more profitable to solve a problem or to just reduce its effects temporarily, so the person comes back for more necessary treatment? We must always be wary of any answer that leaves us dependent upon a short term solution, as it may tempt us to wrongly diagnose and label.

The difficulty with only addressing the symptoms is that additional complications are created on top of and in addition to the original problem that was already in existence. Instead of one problem, now there are two or more problems. And, believe it or not, sometimes the apparent 'cure' is worse than the original problem. Who has not heard of the possible side effects of medication designed to solve a problem? There is one page of a magazine advertisement for a particular medication, and then two additional pages of warning label and side effect description. Do not those side effects, sometimes including death, often sound worse than what the original problem was that they are meant to address? Or, you may be aware of loved ones or others who are taking medications to offset the side effects of other medications that they are also taking. Does the cycle never end? This reminds me of a client I worked with who was prone to stress. Stress was a constant companion for him and not surprisingly he developed what appeared to be

ulcers. Years prior to our meeting, he went to the doctors to address his suffering and it was determined that he had ‘Ulcerative Colitis.’ The solution to the problem was deemed to be to remove a portion of his intestines. The procedure took place, and his body part was removed. It seems appropriate right? In a model of ‘cause and effect’ and ‘problem and solution’ it makes perfect mathematical sense: the pain comes from the intestine, so remove the intestine. Well, the leaf of evil was cut from him, but as you probably already guessed it, the pain did not subside. He continued to have his same pain but now he was minus a needed body part. His original problem, which was never really addressed, then became two, which was then further complicated by all the necessary medications and treatments to deal with him having a missing portion of his intestine. His quality of life was greatly reduced for the rest of his life, and he still endured the pains of the original problem.

What makes it so difficult to see the real problem?

THE PROBLEM OF SEEING THE ‘REAL PROBLEM’

Surely there must be some difficulties and it behooves us to try to understand them so that we can learn from them and even overcome them in order for us to be able to address the real problem. We have already talked about our tendency to want a quick fix, but perhaps this part of our nature needs to be explored a bit more in depth .

Why would we want the quick fix? Is it some inherent laziness inside of us? Why does the quickest answer seem to be the best? I have concluded that there is a better and perhaps truer label to address our fascination with the quick fix. I would rather label us as ‘efficient’ instead of ‘lazy.’ Efficient suggests that we are not afraid of work if it has a meaningful purpose; whereas, ‘lazy’ infers we just do not want to work at all, and that we are somehow ‘unmotivated.’ Our ‘efficiency’ drives us to look for an answer but to not expend more effort than is needed.

Resultantly, the first answer that seems to solve the problem is also often the last answer we seek. However, the 'efficiency theory' does not fully explain why we would go back again and again to an answer that at some point we conclude 'just does not work.' Again, whether or not you caught it, we just identified 'addiction.' Addiction is to use some object to satisfy a need, which seems to work for a time, but in the end really does not work but we go back to it again and again. Each time we go back the object does not work as well as it did the first time so we have to use more of it and more of it for the same effect, until it has no effect and we are worse off than when we started.

Perhaps there is another explanation as to why it is so difficult to see the real problem. In addition to being 'efficient' in our efforts, and only doing what we deem necessary to get the job done, or to solve the problem (which if you remember we have identified as really a 'symptom'), there may be something else that causes us to not really want to see. Rather than seeing the real problem there may be a greater desire to just be ... "normal." The desire to be normal is a type of abandonment of the quest to find the real problem, which may occur because of a deep seated fear that perhaps there really is no answer. Since there is no real answer, the best we can do is huddle in the darkness together... and make our own answers.

All throughout human history we have always been afraid of the dark, of the unknown. We cling to the known shores and fear to venture out into the uncharted seas for there are sea monsters there, or perhaps we will find the edge of the world and fall off into oblivion. So we stay near the shores of 'normal.' If everyone believes the answers that are being passed around, or at least believe that others believe them, a type of order is established. This apparent order then creates a type of calmness as for a while the absence of real answers can be delayed. The quest for real answers, then, can be delayed even for years, and by the time the person gets old

enough and recognizes they still have no solid answer they will just die. The desire to prematurely 'sell out' and just be considered normal explains why there would be a thousand people cutting away at the leaves of evil and only one at the root: the thousand gave up but the one continues the quest.

THE DESIRE TO BE 'NORMAL'

The desire to be normal is what haunts modern psychology. What is 'normal' is how sickness, disorder, and mental illness are all labeled and identified. If you are not 'normal' then there is something wrong with you, you have a disorder, and you are 'abnormal.' The focus then is to cause you to become like the theoretical 'everyone' else. This focus then causes a natural desire to get in line and to conform to what everyone else is doing, resulting in perpetuating the same activity that is being done by other people, or at least what is perceived to be done by other people. The desire to be, or feel, normal then becomes the focus and the aim of the individual, of the group and of the society. Systems are then put in place to help maintain and advance what is normal, and to punish what is not normal. Conformity to normal becomes the proposed solution, and becoming like the typical normal person becomes the end-all-good. This quest to 'keep up with the Jones' becomes the focus with everyone striving to be just a bit better than the Jones,' and a bit higher than average. But, of course, the problem is this: is if everybody is the same, and normal is the objective, what is it to be above normal?

This quest for normal pervades all facets of the problem solving process. All helping professionals, all medical professionals, all politicians, all school systems, and many others we could name are caught up in the quest to be normal and standardized (actually they all want to be just a bit higher than average because everyone wants to be better than everyone else). The quest for normal perpetuates a type of blindness and a 'group think' mentality whose purpose and aim

is to perpetuate itself and its current level of being. This may be in part because the quest for normal seems to ease the burden of choosing what to do, what to think, how to dress, what to question, what to answer, and how to see the world. We do all these things so that ‘they’ approve of us.

The quest to be normal then also shapes what we allow ourselves to see even in the professional world, including what we allow ourselves to accept as an answer. Answers must be written up and presented for peer review, or review by the selected experts, who are charged with preserving the integrity of what is determined to be ‘normal and acceptable standards of practice.’ The answers that receive the highest number of positive reviews, or the utmost approval from the selected experts, then are recognized as the accepted treatment standard, which then becomes the norm. In this way, the experts who are given charge of maintaining ‘normalcy’ strive to continue ‘normalcy’ within their own ranks.

An image of the old fable of ‘the Emperor’s New Clothes’ comes to mind, where two thieves approach the emperor as master tailors. They present to his highness the finest cloth the world has ever seen, but state that the cloth can only be seen by people who deserve their station. Fearing that he is inept, the supreme ruler forbids to state that he sees no cloth whatsoever, and remarks how exquisite and wonderful the material is. His attendants and aides, seeing nothing themselves, deem that the king knows what he is talking about, and so they also coo and caw over the wondrous cloth which of course they cannot see either. Each fearing they are inept, they look to each other for direction and counsel. They then take their behavioral cues from what is going on around them and then conform to what appears to be the accepted answer. Here the thousand are chopping away at the leaves of evil, working and toiling hard to earn their pay, and yet evil persists with little or no change or progression. The madness spreads to the entire

kingdom and finally his majesty is convinced to parade his new outfit to all in the kingdom. He considers his own awareness of having no clothes whatsoever with the accepted 'norm' that the cloth is the finest that has ever been seen, and deems his own awareness as faulty. He parades naked in confidence of what everyone else has stated. The illusion is continued until a small boy yells, "He ain't got notin' on!" At which point the spell of normalcy is broken and everybody laughs in agreement at the king's nakedness. Ironically, the simple and unrefined things of the kingdom, as symbolized by the uncouth child, overcome the strong and the wise of the kingdom, as symbolized by the king, the counselors, and the whole adult world.

LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACE

There is perhaps yet another reason why the roots of evil are not addressed by the masses, why the problem remains unattended, and why the multitudes only tend to address the symptoms of the problem; and that is because the multitudes simply do not see the problem. We, as a whole, can see the symptoms of the problem, and we can see that the symptoms are affected but we cannot identify the problem. Remember the idea of the dominos? When there are only one or two factors to consider, the chain of events becomes 'seeable', but when the chain of events includes something like five hundred factors, then the complexity of the events overwhelms our capacity to comprehend, and so we do not see. This is somewhat of a frightening answer, that despite our great abilities and our wizened culture we still do not know where to look for the answer

As grim as this may seem all is not lost.

There may be reasons why we cannot see the problem, and these reasons become extremely worthwhile to consider. Let us return again the statement: For every thousand chopping away at the leaves of evil only one is chopping away at the root. What if we take the

statement more literal? The leaves of the tree and its trunk are visible, as often times are the symptoms of the problem; the headache, the behavioral problem child, the man arrested for domestic violence, and any other symptom that is addressed. But the root of the tree is buried in the ground and cannot be seen, as often times the causal problems are. The leaves and the root of the problem exist in two separate worlds: one world is above ground and seen, and the other is underground and unseen.

So let us go a little bit further. Let us continue with the idea that the symptoms and the problem exist in two separate worlds, one here and one there, but this time let us add that the ‘symptoms’ of the problem lay in our conscious awareness and that the actual ‘causal problem,’ the roots of the tree, remains beyond our conscious control and in what might be called the unconscious or subconscious realm. This is the idea that there are two totally different realms, almost even dimensions, which are not the same but which still co-exist. Each realm, conscious and unconscious, processes life and experience in completely different ways. The tree would then be a fitting analogy as the leaves and branches remain in the visible world but the roots, almost as large as the tree itself, lay hidden underneath: the first is an image of the things accessible to the conscious mind and the latter is an image of the things accessible to the ‘other’ conscious part which is mostly unknown to the conscious mind; unknown, but perhaps not entirely inaccessible.

DIFFERENT WORLDS OF THE HEART AND THE MIND

The visible realm and the things of it I will call the ‘mind.’ The invisible and hidden realm and the things of it I will call the ‘heart.’ These terms are not uniquely mine nor do they need to be. I use them because they are generally known and make intuitive sense. The mind is located in the brain (or so it seems) and the heart is located in the chest. What is interesting to

note is the mind is perhaps literally located in the brain, whereas the heart is not located factually in the chest. The heart, the abode of all things emotional and of the intuitive world, is only 'metaphorically' and perhaps 'symbolically' located in the chest. To the conscious mind, and all those who are pundits and educated specialists of the brain, the location of the heart, or emotional side, is not deemed to be in the chest, but elsewhere also in the brain. This awareness, while being perhaps true to the conscious mind, is irrelevant to the emotional and feeling self. Metaphorically the emotional self and all that it entails, is located precisely where the heart says it is, in the chest within the life giving organ called the heart.

What if the reason that so many people are chopping away at the leaves of evil is because the symptoms are manifest in the visible world, but the actual problem is located in the invisible world? Put another way, the mind can comprehend certain things and see them, and therefore deal with them in the way the mind does, but if the problem does not exist in the realm of the mind and the visible perhaps it is because the problem may have its genesis in the realm of the heart. The conscious mind, wanting and demanding control, does all that it can to address the symptoms, but because the things of the heart cannot be measured, weighed, and diagramed with measurable precision, the problem forever evades the conscious mind. It has been my experience in dealing with many facets of the human experience over the last few decades that the problem lies within the realm of the unseen and the heart, and as such can only be addressed by focusing on the matters of the heart.

Here's what this means: all the pills prescribed by medical doctors, psychologists, or psychiatrists, all the developed therapeutic techniques assigned by counselors, and all the self-prescribe addictions of all kinds designed to deal with the problem on a purely conscious level will never have the capacity to solve the real problem. There is a massive amount of effort and

energy behind fixing a large variety of societal problems which in the long run will be in vain because the interventions, regardless of the amount of money put behind them or the intelligence of the studies behind them, are not able to reach the real problem. For you, this means we need to be able to penetrate beneath the surface and get down to the roots of your problem. This may look like we totally jump over your symptoms and ignore them, but be assured that as the problem is addressed the symptoms begin to take care of themselves. This also means that we will not focus on getting you to be like everyone else, nor focus on helping you feel ‘normal.’ By addressing the problem the symptom of feeling lost and unaccepted will also vanish, but not because you have become ‘normal,’ rather it will be because what was once lost has been found. Being found has a purposeful feeling, which gives a sense of connection and direction. Now, would not that be better than just being normal?

EXISTENCE OF AN ‘INNER WORLD’

By accepting the existence of an inner world and the idea that the problem dwells in such a world, we can now venture into that world and take a peek. By taking a peek, we see not only the dominos arrayed in order but we now see also the hand that pokes the dominos and makes them tumble. The problem has been identified, but now a solution to the problem must also be presented.

We took a majorly significant step, however, in identifying the existence of the inner realm, or the world of the heart. If we cannot accept the world of the heart and its realities we cannot find the healing that is sought. The answer that you seek to the problem that brings you to counseling is only to be found in that hidden-beneath-the-ground realm that dwells inside you. That part of you, you may remember from sometime in your past. But you may also be a stranger to it now. In fact, you may have taken that part of you and locked it in a closet somewhere,

hoping that it would just die. The reason for you doing this is because you may have found it to be inconvenient, disobedient to your commands, a source of pain and suffering, and possibly even embarrassing.

Such a world, the world of the heart, may even possibly scare you. But do not worry; you have another set of eyes which you will begin to develop to help you see clearly in such a new world. These new set of eyes will be as amazing to you as they are important. They will greatly aid you in solving the problem for which you seek an answer.

DOWN CLAIM OF NORMAL

Down claim of normal
Idea to follow others
And be just like them

Walk the paths they do
Because all others walk them
These are of the blind

These are the thousand
Who pluck away at evil
Like leaves on a tree

Walk the path of light
Idea to follow the heart
And remain in light

Opens other eyes
Showing new paths of journey
These are those who see

This is as the one
Who chopped away at evil
Like the root of tree

Fear not to be one
In harmony with the light
You see and are free