

Behind the Scenes in the Theatre of our Thoughts

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Just this past week a colleague had shared with me that she was “warned” against the teachings of Rob Bell as we were using his DVD *Everything is Spiritual* to launch discussion with our Tuesday morning Spiritual Discovery Group. The views that I am about to share are not about defending Rob Bell. However being in the public eye, he certainly has been target and topic of many conversations. Although he is a forerunner as a spiritual intelligentsia of his generation he is not the focal point in this article. More so, discussion around him serves to spring-board observations about anxiety, and *priori* beliefs and *exit-criteria*. This warning from my colleagues’ friend was meant to protect her. Yet that warning reveals anxiety. Anxiety comes in many types of thoughts and reactions to those thoughts.

What we do not understand has the ability to provoke anxiety in us. We all possess a *priori*-belief that colors our interpretations whether we are aware of it or not. There is an unspoken anxiety that seems to be at the root of many misperceptions and misunderstanding.



About a year ago, during lunch a lifelong friend and former mentor, plopped a copy of Time Magazine (Meacham, 2011), on the table and declared boldly, “Have you read this article about Rob Bell? Well I am not going to buy anymore of his books or DVD’s! He doesn’t believe in hell.” I felt “somewhat chastised” through the attitude in which it was delivered. Over the past year we both shared many insightful experiences when reading Rob Bell’s works or watching his Nooma Series together. Since I had introduced her to his teachings, I initially felt responsible for her distress.

Inwardly, I cringed, and thought, “Really???!?” Outwardly, I responded by saying, “I won’t defend Rob Bell to you, but I must ask, have you read the article?” She had not. Although she said that she had heard from others that Rob does not believe in hell. My friend and I have not discussed Rob Bell or his teachings since. That saddens me as I love to examine deeply, spiritual thoughts with my inner circle of friends. Now that door seems shut. She and I have different needs. Having a disagreement about Rob Bell or any other controversial doctrinal issue is so far from who I am but having robust and challenging conversations is indeed the core of who I am.

I also recognized something else. At one time I would have steadily stayed on the subject, subtly soliciting her approval and then unintentionally creating discomfort between us trying to verbally converse through and work out this distressful anxiety that was mounting in me. Even worse, I might have tried to extract a feeling in attempt to regain her approval *through my eyes*, inadvertently pushing her away while all the while trying to pull her closer to me. That type of anxiety was strong in me at

one time. As I mentioned earlier, I felt “somewhat criticized” in that transaction as I felt responsible knowing that I had introduced her to someone she now seemingly distains.



This is a juncture to notice in our relationships with others. Where did that anxiety originate? There are multiple dynamics happening in this scenario. Let’s use this to examine what happens behind the scenes in the theatre of our thoughts.

In this case, criticism and shame are close cousins. When a person has been so emotional needy of approval there is an “internalized other” in whose eyes one can feel “shamed” over something so innocuous. Shame is one’s own indirect experience of the others’ seeming scorn. In this case I was not scorned but having experienced childhood of feeling scorn and disapproval, I began to understand how those old feelings were being aroused in me. *The self*-through-the eyes-of-the-other became magnified in that moment. The experience of shame often occurs in the form of imagery, of looking or being looked at. Shame also may be played out as an internal cacophony, in which the whole self is condemned (Herman 2011).

Karen Horney, well known for her work in Psychoanalytic Social Theory, said that neurotic thoughts develop from basic anxiety and feelings of isolation. In my situation, from a child ego state, previously, I might have taken a subordinate role, seeing my friend as more spiritual, intelligent and capable. Low self-image is often only a reflection of how we perceive other people see us. What I did not realize in my scenario was that my friend was also experiencing anxiety and in her inability to express her thoughts comfortably with me, she sounded critical whereas she really was not being critical toward me rather toward what she *perceived* Rob Bell believed.

There could have been an ongoing push/pull in trying to meet my needs through attempting to gain approval in the eyes of my friend as she had been my mentor. What is this human need for approval? Why is it so strong within us? We humans desire the response of mutual delight, the response of eye contact, the response of being heard and deeply understood. When one feels criticized or shamed; one feels the absence of that connection. It is not the other whom we scorn when one feels shamed; it is ourselves that we detest. When that kind of internal shaming is built into the construct of *the self* and is reinforced in relationships we either retreat or become aggressive and most certainly we lose our essence. In this case, it is an example of how anxiety, one’s own anxiety can be the *looping algorithm* until we take what is called *exit criteria*.

For more information on “Anxiety, *Priori* Beliefs and *Exit Criteria*” please contact Crystal@Crystal^{and}Associates.com.

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