

HOW RIGID IS YOUR PARADIGM?

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A month or so ago, the manager at my local branch of Waitrose was promoted.

I was happy for him but sad, in a way, to see him go. He was an interesting man to talk to and took an interest in his customers. Since Waitrose is part of the John Lewis Partnership, it has a policy of distributing its profits among the workforce and for that reason, if no other, I continued to do my grocery shopping there.

Some time afterwards, I went to Waitrose, only to discover that someone had moved the tinned fruit!

Of all the nerve!

Everyone knows that tinned fruit goes with ice cream and that is where the old manager had put the stocks. Now, where were they?

Eventually I found them . . . next to the fresh fruit!

Next to the fresh fruit, I ask you, where's the logic in that? Of course, since this lunatic had moved the tinned fruit, the rest of the store was in chaos (to my eyes at least): and so, where now were the eggs? Not opposite the tinned fruit, and so on.

Events like this shake up the normal pattern of our life and make life unbearable.

At the time of the tinned fruit outrage, another event occurred in my life: it was at about then that the word paradigm was pushed into my conscious again.

Do you ever have thoughts and words which you don't understand and which seem to come back to haunt you at unexpected times in your life? This word paradigm was one for me.

Even though I'd managed to discover how to pronounce it ("para-dime"), I'd long known that I didn't understand what it meant.

The event that pushed the word back into my conscious was a telephone conversation with a friend in Canada. All too often, I guess, we jump to instant conclusions on the basis of limited information and that telephone conversation seemed to explain the word to me.

The word "paradigm" was invented by an American, Thomas Kuhn, to explain how scientists think. He suggested that groups of scientists makes sense of observations from their experiments by, collectively, coming up with a set of theories and models which, to them, explain their findings. For example, Newton's laws of gravity were based on his observations of the real world, perhaps including the famous falling apple story, and then he invented his set of equations. For two or three hundred years, these equations and Newton's Theories were used by physicists and others to predict all sorts of events and to explain the workings of the universe: we could call this collection of theories, equations, models and ideas, the "Newtonian Paradigm". Eventually his set of theories (his paradigm) were found to not fit all of the observations made by other scientists and, in the course of time, we ended up with Einstein's theory of relativity: the paradigm, the working model used by physicists, had moved on.

So what's this got to do with tinned fruit?

It struck me that, as we grow up, we all develop our own "Personal Paradigm". By this I mean the set of models and ideas which we use to make sense of the confusing world around us.

Take red traffic lights as an example.

A new born baby would have no concept of its reaction to a red traffic light but virtually every member of the adult world knows to stop at a red traffic light. In other words, an observation - seeing the red traffic light - elicits in each of us a response: to stop. We do this almost unconsciously. But should we?

Two recent news reports made me smile. In the first, Jacques Chirac, the new President of France, decided as one of his first actions, to instruct his driver to stop at all red lights: apparently previous Presidents' motorcades had driven straight through all red lights. At the same time, there was a report of an American driver in the mid-west who had sat in his car for nearly four hours in the middle of the night waiting for a red traffic light to change: apparently it had jammed on and he just sat and waited, and waited, and waited.

Can you see why I smiled? Sometimes our Personal Paradigm gets stuck: sometimes it isn't appropriate, or true, and sometimes, it gets us to follow, uncritically, conventions which we ought to question.

It is the case that our view of the way in which the world works - our Personal Paradigm - needs to be continually updated. There are certain "truths" that serve us well for the whole of our lifetimes. There are certain scientific truths which serve us well for centuries, but we need to continually to ask ourselves whether or not we need to alter our Personal Paradigms.

Tom Peters tells us that we need to continuously ask ourselves two questions. "Is what I am doing getting me closer to my desired goal?" and "Is my desired goal really where I want to be?".

A wonderfully funny movie "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" starring Michael Caine and Steve Martin drives this point home. If you've already seen the movie, you'll know what I mean. If not, I'll not spoil it for you.

The problem with this stuff is that it is very uncomfortable.

Painful in fact.

Just spend some time, for example, trying to convince some-one that the political or religious part of their paradigm is wrong: it takes time for them to consider that they ought to reflect on their paradigm and then time for them to believe that a change might be appropriate. We often speak of people who are “closed” to new ideas: this is a way of saying that their paradigms are too rigid. It seems almost too painful for them to accept change.

Take a familiar example: the loss of your marital partner.

People who have been either bereaved or divorced suffer a similar sense of loss: their personal paradigms involve worlds which work in conjunction with another person. The loss of that person results in a mental loss that seems to be similar to a physical loss which people often experience after the amputation of a limb. Such amputees often say that they can “feel” impulses from the missing limb: a tickle or an itch for example, and yet they know that that limb is missing. The same seems true for a psychological loss, such as the loss of a partner.

Mental activity is a very energy intensive process and we often speak of “thinking hard”, which results in people claiming, half humorously, that this “makes my head hurt”. It seems that the pain associated with changing our paradigm may often be too great to face, either at all, or at present. The adage “Time is a great healer” seems appropriate: it often takes time for people to rejig their paradigms.

People often remark that the young are more responsive to new ideas: perhaps greater flexibility in their brains’ chemistry gives them this advantage.

That may or may not be so (I’m not sure if I can fit the inevitable consequences of physical ageing and my mortality into my own paradigm yet!), but my thoughts to take away from this essay are the following.

Firstly, how rigid is your paradigm? Can you find the time to cast away those parts of your paradigm that are inappropriate? Can you identify those parts of your paradigm that you must keep at all costs? Can you keep the rest of your Personal Paradigm flexible and fluid enough to enable you to take change on board?

Like physical healing, changing one's paradigm takes time. In an age when we admire those people who can respond in an instant with a perfect answer (top class sportsmen and women for example) we expect everything to be instant and perfect, but most of us are not that capable. Nor do I think we should be.

It is far better, surely, to work towards a better world (both personally and globally) by being active rather than passive: to change our paradigms incrementally and not attempt change in great leaps and bounds.

The despondency about our inability to change the world for the better, which is particularly endemic at present, is a case in point which serves no-one well.

It is a truism that the greatest journies all start with a single step, and I believe that the best way to make a good decision is to make lots of imperfect ones.

To quote Adam Engst: "The best way to predict the future is to invent it"!

And, yes, I have now learnt where the tinned peaches are.

John Courtneidge June 1995.