What's So Great About Now?

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"Stop, hey, what's that sound? Everybody look what's goin' down."

When the band, Buffalo Springfield, released this song in early 1967, my generation took it up as a clarion call to cast aside our illusions and misconceptions and see the world clearly for what it was. And although we mostly traded old illusions for new ones, it was an exciting time as we believed we were seeing the truths behind the propaganda and manipulations of a sick society.

The years since then have made it quite clear that it's not really easy to really open our eyes and see things as they are. But we still want to be able to pay attention to what's goin' down and see things first-hand, as they really are.

But it turns out that this can be a lot harder to do than we expect. Take my potatoes, for example.

I love potatoes. Ever since I was a little boy a potato on the plate meant a happy dinner. I especially liked mashed potatoes, and I still do.

So I make mashed potatoes when I cook for myself. But I've learned that mashed potatoes aren't as good for you as they taste, so I don't make them as often as I might otherwise prefer. I've found ways to make them healthier, too. Sometimes I boil a turnip with the potatoes, sometimes a carrot, and mash them all together and scoop them onto my plate. The turnip disappears into the mix but the carrot adds swirls of orange, brightening things up.

Last week when I was making this dish, things didn't go quite as usual. I boiled and drained the vegetables, added salt and pepper, got out my mashing tool and poured in the milk. Now I know how this goes so I wasn't paying attention too closely. But something felt odd about what I was feeling in my right hand holding the milk carton. It was wiggling. That's odd, I thought. Milk doesn't wiggle. I looked down into the pan. The milk was pouring out in a mixture of lumpy chunks and liquid. That's odd, I thought again, and then realized that the milk was way past sour! My lovely potatoes were ruined! What would I do?

Well, I moved into my quick-thinking problem-solving mode, dumped it all into a colander and rinsed and rinsed away all the sour milk and started over. I had mashed potatoes with turnip and carrot that night, but it had been a close call.

The thing about this was that I didn't see what was happening until afterward because I already knew what was happening. I was watching my memory of making potatoes more than I was watching what was happening right in front of me.

Like they say, "You see what you want to see." This was demonstrated quite clearly in a 1999 Harvard University study entitled, "Gorillas in Our Midst," where researchers asked participants to watch a basketball game and count the number of times the ball was passed during each possession. At some point in the game a person dressed in a gorilla suit would walk out onto the court, stop, thump his chest, and then continue off court. When asked about it, nearly half the participants said, essentially, "What gorilla?" They were so focused on their task that they didn't even notice the gorilla on the court.

You don't just see what you want to see; you see what you're paying attention to and not the rest. This is a basic fact about perception. We are overwhelmed with such a tremendous amount of sensory data every moment that we have to ignore most of it in order to see any of it. We tend to perceive in a figure to ground manner where we focus on one element while everything else recedes into the background. Like the participants at the basketball game, we see the passes we're looking for and miss the gorillas in our midst.

This is so pervasive that even eyewitness testimony, once thought to be the most accurate, has been found to be one of the least reliable sources of information. According to the American Bar Association, "Decades of research show that memory is neither precise nor fixed. For instance, we would expect a moment of high stress to focus the mind and sharpen recall, but the opposite is true. Violence, stress, and the presence of a weapon during an incident actually weaken memory. Racial differences between the witness and the suspect can impair identifications. Unconscious transference, or confusing someone seen in one place with someone seen in another place, is common. Identification can also be impaired by how long the witness is exposed to the suspect, the delay between

the incident and the identification, and post-event information, such as feedback from the police or other witnesses."

It's amazing that we think we know anything at all.

As you might expect, these discoveries have produced a branch of psychology. This new branch is call "schema therapy." Schemas are cognitive frameworks that help us to organize and interpret information. First named by the child psychologist, Jean Piaget, schemas are a normal part of learning. For example, a child may learn what a horse looks like – a large, hairy animal with four legs and a tail. This information could form a simple schema for identifying horses in the future. But the first time the child sees a cow, she might think it's a horse because it fulfills the expectations of her horse schema. In this way, schemas need to be continually revised in light of new information.

But we're not always on top of our schemas. They tend to become expectations and beliefs about the nature of the world and shape our perceptions and understandings without our awareness. There's a Zen saying that goes, "To her lover a beautiful woman is a delight; to a monk she's a distraction; to a mosquito, a good meal." It all depends on how we look at things, and schemas serve as filters to our perceptions. They create our sense of reality.

So far, I've been referring to schemas as cognitive elements that affect our thoughts and perceptions. But they're much more complicated than that. They always contain emotional elements as well, so we can also describe them as emotional habits, many of which may well be maladaptive, destructive patterns that make our lives more difficult rather than less.

For these emotional schemas, I'll be drawing heavily on the work of Tara Bennett-Goleman, whose book, *Emotional Alchemy,* subtitled, "How the mind can heal the heart," explores these themes in depth.

She describes how they often arise. Each begins with a wish or a need; a typical response to that person that that person anticipates; and a person's typical reaction to that response. "Among the common wishes . . . are these three: I want to be understood, empathized with, and seen accurately; I want to be respected, valued, and treated fairly; and I want to feel good about myself, to feel self-confident." As we grow these needs are often thwarted, giving rise to negative beliefs about life, such as ". . . the certainty that the other person will be

insensitive and inconsiderate of my feelings, that the other person will take advantage of me, or that the other person will belittle me."

Bennett-Goleman describes such a maladaptive schema. She says that a woman's "core schema made her long for emotional contact, yet fear she would never receive it; as a result she was acutely sensitive to any hint of being ignored. 'I came home from work eager to connect with my husband,' she said, 'just wanting to spend some time with him, feeling close. But when I got home, there he was in the living room glued to a football game on TV, with his papers from work spread all around him. He barely noticed me. I always anticipate that he's going to ignore me, that he just doesn't care about me or our relationship, and there it had come true again.' Her well-rehearsed reaction was to get angry and withdraw. 'So I stormed out and went shopping. I stayed away for four hours, knowing it would irritate him. And sure enough, when I got home we had a huge argument. That keeps happening over and over again.' "

The good news is that we can change our schemas if we can see them. But first we need to spot them. It's a little like trying to find Waldo in the "Where's Waldo" books, but in our emotions instead of a book. These schemas have emotional power. We sort of experience them like Dorothy experienced Oz, the great and terrible. She was overwhelmed with terror as long as she believed what she'd been told. But when her little dog pulled back the curtain to reveal the little man pretending to be Oz, she laughed and was freed from his power. Schemas are like that. They have power over us because we can't see them in action. It just feels like reality's happened.

She gives us an overview of some of the most common maladaptive schemas. There are fears of abandonment and deprivation, subjugation and mistrust. Some feel unlovable and excluded, others feel overwhelmingly vulnerable. Some are dominated by schemas of failure, others by perfectionism. Some of us feel entitled to special treatment. Most of us have more than one. And when they're activated, they produce what's called a schema attack.

Bennett-Goleman says that a schema attack comes by way of a "neural back alley, a one-neuron-long link between the thalamus, where all we see and hear first enters the brain, and the amygdala, where our emotional memories scan all we experience. But there's a problem with this arrangement: The circuit to the amygdala gets only a small portion of the information coming into the

brain – what amounts to a fuzzy picture of an out-of-focus movie. Only about 5 percent or less of the signal coming in from the senses goes through this shortcut from the thalamus to the amygdala; all the rest goes up to the neocortex, the thinking brain, where a more systematic analysis goes on.

"The amygdala makes its snap judgments on the basis of a dim and foggy picture of things, while a much clearer image goes up to the centers of the neocortex. Because the neocortex is more thorough in coming to its conclusions, it yields a more measured and accurate response.

"The amygdala comes to its conclusions much, much faster in brain time than do the more rational circuits in the thinking brain. In fact, this emotional snap judgment can be made before the thinking brain has time to figure out what's going on.

"That's where the problem begins. The amygdala bases its reactions on a fuzzier picture than the thinking brain gets, and does so with lightning speed. This must have worked well enough during most of evolution, when there were so many real, physical threats. But in modern life we still respond to symbolic threats . . . with the same intensity as though they were actual physical dangers.

"This design flaw in our neural architecture means a snap decision based on a blurry picture can readily lead to a schema attack. A brain response that worked so well in ancient times can today lead to disaster.

"When the amygdala gets triggered, it floods the body with the stress hormones that prepare it for an emergency. . . These biological responses mean that the small crises of a stressful day build up progressively higher levels of stress hormones. . . Schemas can stay primed for hours, while those stress hormones surge inside us. And because a primed schema can make us more susceptible to more schema reactivity, the process can be self-sustaining, going on over days or weeks," or even becoming the dominant feeling-tone of our whole lives.

The good news, again, is that we can reduce their power over us. As we begin to notice that there are certain emotional themes in our lives, we can start to identify their elements.

One critical element of the neuroscience of schema attacks is that we only have about one-quarter of a second, sometimes called the magic quarter second, during which we can reject a self-defeating emotional impulse. And we usually

don't even notice the impulse until after it's well underway and it's too late to intervene.

This is where "now" comes in. We're usually so caught up in our thoughts and emotions that we can't really see anything first-hand in the present. I know there's been a lot of hype over the years about how great it is to live in the present moment, hype that's so full of flowers, butterflies and moonbeams that it can be hard to take seriously as being of any real, practical value.

But it's clear that we must be able to see clearly in the present moment if we're going to be able to respond within that quarter-second window of opportunity.

Believe it or not, this is where religion comes in. The real usefulness of religion is that it can help us find peace and joy and love by giving us the tools and resources to deal with our cognitive distortions and reactive patterns of negativity – our schema attacks.

Bennett-Goleman gives some suggestions to help us explore our schemas while they're active, when we are emotionally upset, preoccupied by persistent emotions, or behaving inappropriately and impulsively. They provide the basis for applying our critical thinking skills to ourselves – a kind of subjective scientific method. She suggests that:

1. First, we acknowledge what's going on.
2. Be open to your feelings
3. Notice your thoughts
4. Ask yourself, "What does this remind you of?"
5. Look for a pattern

And, maybe the most important of all: Be Here Now.
May it be so.

Now, something strange happened to me when I wrote this sermon. I got to the end and realized, I've only raised the question really. I haven't answered it. I talked about why, but not about how. So, I've decided to change the topic for next week from the Transcendentalist controversy—it will be with us—and to talk about "What's So Great About Now?" Part 2. Stay tuned.