**Sun., Sep 1, 2019 – Diana Clift at Capital UU Congregation**

**Who controls your mind?**

*A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.*

*William James (1842 – 1910), American philosopher and psychologist*

**Story for all ages**

In the 1970s, Ellen Langer and Judith Rodin at Harvard University embarked on an experiment to see if elderly people in nursing homes would benefit from being given more responsibility. They chose two groups and one was given more choice over their daily routines. What made the experiment famous was the use of house plants. Both groups were given plants in their room. The control group were allocated their plants and told that the staff would look after them. The experimental group got to select their plants and were required to look after them themselves. They were studied over a period of a year and a half and the experimental group were more cheerful and alert, suggesting that the responsibility was beneficial, but also, remarkably, only half as many had died over the 18 months. The experiment attracted a lot criticism because the group sizes were small, but it seeded many further similar experiments. One of my favourites was televised in England. It entailed bringing a group of 4 year olds into a residential home for elderly people to play with the residents for a few hours a week. Over the 3 months of the trial, both the very young and the very old benefited significantly.

Returning to Ellen Langer’s group: They continued their researches into ageing and carried out a ground-breaking experiment in the 1980s which involved taking 8 elderly men, all of whom were being cared for by family or professionals, to a remote monastery which was kitted out as if it were 1959… For a week they were exposed only to the news, the music, the tv, the radio, and photos, from 1959. At the end of the week, they were found to be years younger by every criterion, psychological and physiological. Their sight and hearing were better, they were taller and their fingers were longer!

This remarkable experiment was repeated in 2010 in England, with a group of elderly celebrities and this was televised in a 3 part BBC documentary called The Young Ones. In this case they were put into a 1970s house and exposed only to the news, tv, radio and music of the 70s. They were also given tasks to do, drawing on their interests and experience. At the end of the week, they tested years younger than at the start. One of them had entered in a wheel chair and came out walking.

So is age just a state of mind? Obviously not entirely….but partly!

**Homily**

“Who controls your mind?” is a sinister sounding title, but the alternative ‘the Power of Suggestion’ is almost worse!

I shall make the case that our conscious reality is largely determined by suggestion and habit, and we have the power to change it.

I do not believe that our thoughts, feelings and behaviour at any moment are who we are, but merely our experience…..

**Perception**

From the moment we are born we are taught how to make sense of our perceptions, how to divide our experience up into things and label them and yet we all feel that our perceptions, especially sight, are a window onto an objective world ‘out there’. There is plenty of evidence that perception is shaped by language and culture and has to be taught. Oliver Sachs documented the sad case of a man, blind from birth, who received his sight as an adult. Where someone loses their sight in childhood but receives it back as an adult, this is truly miraculous. But for Sachs’s patient it was terrifying. He couldn’t make any sense of it and eventually asked for the procedure to be reversed so he could return to the reality he understood.

Perception continues to be influenced by suggestion throughout our lives. It is well known that a cheap wine given a fancy label, a high price tag and maybe a description about the floral bouquet and hints of apricot and gooseberry, actually tastes better. It’s not just that we think it must be better. The difference is actually one of perception. The advertising industry has studied this phenomenon in great detail ever since the disaster of the creation of ‘New Coca Cola’ based on blind tastings. They changed their formula….a bad idea for something which sells itself on nostalgia and tradition!

Perception is an active process. We interact with the world through our perceptions. In other words, part of our perception is ‘out there’ where we think it is and can interact with other minds and with the physical world**.** It’s not all in the brain. I’m being deliberately very definite about this. The experimental evidence is vast. Take, for instance, the common experience of sensing when you are being stared at. This has now been tested many thousands of times. There are some sixty staring experiments in the published literature, each involving many volunteers and hundreds of trials. The effect is very small. The starees are correct about 54% of the time rather than the expected 50%, but because of the numbers involved it is hugely statistically significant. With odds against chance of 1059 to one. [*One Deception to Rule Them All*, by Gregory Lessing Garrett, pg 155]

Similarly huge statistical significance has been found in trials of ESP and of psychokinesis, that’s the influence of mind on physical systems. If this were any other area of research it would be totally accepted. The problem is the current scientific belief…and it’s just a belief… that consciousness is generated by brain. In which case these phenomena can’t happen, therefore they don’t happen, therefore I will not look at the evidence that they do. Needless to say that attitude is not scientific!

**Culture**

As we grow up our beliefs about the world and our place in it are determined overwhelmingly by family and culture. A great deal of research, especially in the USA, has been carried out in this area showing the effects of belief and expectation on achievement, especially with regard to race and gender. One interesting study concerned performance in Maths tests which is measurably better in the US in males than in females and in East Asians rather than whites. A group of East Asian women were given maths tests to do, but before each they did an exercise which reminded them, either that they were women, (in which case they did worse than controls) or that they were east Asian (in which cased they did better!

**Placebo**

The effect of cultural expectation also applies to ageing…hence the remarkable experiments carried out by Ellen Langer’s team. What was particularly fascinating about those results were the physiological effects. But perhaps we shouldn’t be so surprised. This is surely a variant of the placebo effect. We tend to think the placebo effect applies to dummy pills which patients believe are potent medicine, but the phenomenon is much larger than that. What in England we call a doctor’s ‘bedside manner’, how kind and attentive they are, is well known to influence outcomes. In other words TLC (tender loving care)… is a huge placebo. We have many medics in the Capital congregation and I know if I consulted any one of them professionally I would feel loads better, regardless of any treatment programme.

Most pharmaceutical companies regard the placebo effect as a nuisance as it’s something they have to out perform, but we should all be trying to maximise the effect if our goal is to help people overcome symptoms and feel better. There is a huge debate in Britain over complementary therapies and whether they have any benefits other than the placebo effect. The implication, of course, is that if their healing effects are only attributable to placebo, then they aren’t really real.

I have a big personal interest in this subject because, as a hypnotherapist, I am clearly ONLY using the placebo effect, and yet I have been able to use hypnosis on a client as the only anaesthetic for a minor surgical procedure and I have been able to relieve physical symptoms of many chronic illnesses. The Mind/body connection is amazing. It’s even been shown that thinking about lifting heavy weights for a few minutes a day for a month puts on muscle mass and strength!

**Body influence on Mind**

But, just as weirdly, the mind/body connection is two way. Your body is feeding suggestions to your mind all the time. Things like posture, facial expression, and movement, all impact on how we feel. American psychologists have done lots of research showing how power postures make you feel strong and confident. Some remarkable research in Germany showed that patients hospitalised with depression when encouraged to walk faster with a spring in their step showed sufficient improvement that their medication could be halved. It is well known that exercise lifts mood, and dancing is especially beneficial. Singing, especially together in groups and in harmony has a huge effect on wellbeing. When we sang and moved to the song *The Tower of Strength*, we were giving ourselves powerful positive suggestions. The work Dick and Cathy do with their community choirs is not just giving people pleasure but it is actually improving the physical health and longevity of the singers.

However, the feeling of wellbeing which comes from singing and moving together can be used for evil ends. Armies throughout history have marched in step while singing jingoistic songs to lift morale, increase stamina and arousal for battle… and the same applies to the mob chanting together ‘lock her up’ or ‘send her home’.

**How to change habits**

So, there are numerous factors which influence our conscious reality and many of these can be changed.

You do not have to put up with old habits of thought, feeling and behaviour. You can take control of your mind. Here are some simple practical tips:

**The easiest things to do:**

1. Improve your posture, put a spring in your step, and smile a lot!
2. Make a playlist of the soundtrack of your life….the most significant moments, especially the high spots…. Listen to it often and dance!
3. Break damaging habits of thought, feeling and behaviour. My habit changing approach is summarised by what I call the **5Bs**:
4. Believe you can change
5. Be aware. Notice every detail of the habit without fighting it
6. Break the habit by interrupting it
7. Build up healthy new habits
8. Big up your successes (they are proof you can change) and belittle your lapses (just the remnants of the old habit).

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy can be very helpful in this context. It helps to point out the beliefs underlying negative habits. ‘Mustabation’ for instance: ‘I must pass this exam’ or ‘He mustn’t leave me’, usually followed by ‘Awfulising’ and ‘Low Frustration Tolerance’. ‘If I fail it will be a disaster and I couldn’t cope’, and ‘If he leaves me it will be the end of the world and I couldn’t bear it’. A much more realistic way of believing/thinking would be: ‘I really want to pass this exam. I will be very disappointed if I don’t, but I’ll adapt and manage’, and ‘If he leaves me I will be terribly hurt, it’ll be tough but I will move on and I will manage’.

**The Half Halt**

And finally, the most useful little exercise of all. I’ve called it the Half Halt after an equestrian term.

Notice what you’ve been thinking, feeling and doing for the last few minutes and say to yourself ‘Stop’. Take a deep breath and on the out-breath straighten your spine, relax your shoulders and jaw, lift your gaze, brighten your face…smile if you can!... and bring your attention in to something in your immediate sensations. Could be what you’re looking at, or perhaps the sensations of the soles of your feet.

This uses mindfulness and physiological cues to divert your attention to your immediate sensations. It’s a skill and is worth practising randomly throughout the day as it’s difficult to remember to use it when you most need it (e.g. when angry or anxious).

Interrupting your thoughts in this way is a reminder that **your thoughts, feelings and behaviour are just your experience and not who you are!**

*The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts. Marcus Aurelius*

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NB: This is not a scientific paper. It is based on a wide range of books, journals, broadcasts, lectures, courses and personal experiences, but mostly not on primary source material, as published in peer reviewed journals. I cannot therefore vouch for the accuracy of the information and I cannot provide comprehensive references. I will, however, list some readily available books which may be of interest.

Some reading and viewing suggestions:

**Experiments on ageing**

Langer, Ellen *Counter-Clockwise*

Channel 4 documentary *Old People’s Home for 4 Year Olds*

BBC documentary *The Young Ones* 2010

**Perception, Culture and Habit**

Vance, Erik *Suggestible You*

Wiseman, Richard *Quirkology; Rip it Up; 59 Seconds*

Sachs, Oliver any of his books, but especially *An Anthropologist on Mars; The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*

Gladwell, Malcolm *Blink; The Tipping Point*

Heath, Chip & Dan *Switch*

Duhigg, Charles *The Power of Habit*

Levitt, Steven D, and Dubner, Stephen J. *Freakonomics; Super Freakonomics*

**Placebo**

Dispenza, Joe *You are the Placebo; Breaking the Habit of being Yourself*

Hamilton, David R *How your Mind can Heal your Body*

Ranking, Lissa *Mind over Medicine*

Lipton, Bruce *The Biology of Belief*

**Psi evidence**

Radin, Dean *The Conscious Universe; Entangled Minds; Real Magic*

Sheldrake, Rupert *The Sense of being Stared at; Dogs that Know when their Owners are coming Home; The Science Delusion*