



Innovatus

Innovatus – 20th November 2013

‘Driven or Hounded?’ by Dr Elizabeth Reddish

In the intimate setting of The Bleeding Heart’s wine cellar dining room in Farringdon on a filthy November evening, the third meeting of the Innovatus networking group took place. Eminent psychotherapist and Executive Action consultant Elizabeth Reddish talked about our relationship to work, and why it matters – the subject of her newly published book, *The Petrified Ego: A new theory of conscience* (Karnac, 2013).

What inspired Elizabeth to write the book



In her work as a psychotherapist, Elizabeth had repeatedly observed a particular profile: professional women with visibly successful careers (in banking, IT, law, fashion wholesale, senior civil service and party politics), all experiencing severe exhaustion and anxiety, and all of whom had sought help because they feared they might break down.

Intrigued by the fact that they all seemed so capable and successful - particularly with regard to their professional lives - yet were all struggling personally, Elizabeth decided to explore what, if anything, they had in common.

Shared ‘symptoms’

Elizabeth found that three particular characteristics typified them all:

Exhaustion: They were gaining no sense of satisfaction or cumulative sense of achievement, as if they started each day at work from square one. This ‘groundhog day’ experience gave them nothing to look forward to, no sense of forward momentum or sense of building or accumulation. This lack of meaning had persisted all of their lives, and meant that their capacity for decision-making was grinding (or had ground) to a halt.

Anxiety: A fear of being ‘found out’, of being discovered to be fraudulent, with an accompanying sense of precariousness.

Rigidity: An inflexibility in their view of the world; things were either right or wrong, black or white, and they were quick to pronounce judgement.

The view of others

Elizabeth gained the impression that no-one in their workplaces would describe these individuals as lacking self-esteem or sense of self-worth. Typically, colleagues would say that they were intelligent, adaptable, hard-working, lively in discussions, quick to grasp issues, sociable, committed; in other words, their symptoms were entirely hidden.



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Understanding the fear

At first, Elizabeth found that working together was quite difficult, as even a simple acknowledgement of an issue such as a lack of self-esteem was heard as criticism or an implication of failure. This seemed to fuel a sense of hopelessness that nothing would ever change.

One day, one of Elizabeth's patients charged her - with distinct finality to the statement - with being 'immoral' to challenge her in this way. A powerful word, it seemed that her sense of morality was affronted.

Elizabeth considered what kind of morality was so rigid it couldn't even be verbally challenged, concluding that the likely answer was a morality that was holding something in place, like a fortress. Occupation of a kind of 'moral high ground' would offer protection from the unconscious belief that she held about herself, that she was bad, irrevocably and irretrievably bad.

The difficulty that she had was that she was in a terrible impasse, a vicious circle of mental processing.

Believing herself to be a bad person, she dealt with it by doing two things: repressing this feeling and identifying instead, internally, with a morally impeccable persona. This was the front that she presented to the world. In order to sustain this, the bad part of her had to be punished - and if she punished herself, it proved that she must be bad.

Elizabeth came to realise this was the common underlying problem for this whole group of women. Although consciously they very much wanted help, unconsciously it was the last thing they wanted. Or to put it another way: they had an equal fear of being, and not being, discovered.

Reflecting on the successful nature of their professional lives, it became clear to her that the energy and momentum that drove them was generated by fear, anxiety and guilt.



Two distinct types of relationship to work

Rather than being driven forward by curiosity, inspiration or excitement (in Freudian terms, the 'life instinct'), and a creative, productive relationship to work, this group of women were hounded forward by fear and anxiety.

They were driven by what Elizabeth came to think about as the 'survival instinct', and were living in 'survival mode'.

Considering the women deriving no sense of satisfaction from their own hard work, and feeling that they had nothing to look forward to, being in 'survival mode' makes the individual feel hounded and leaves them with a feeling of frustration at the end of each day. This sense of lack of achievement is accompanied by the idea that 'it must be my fault - if only I'd done more' and anxiety ('will I manage tomorrow?').

Alongside this is despair and confusion: how can I be working so hard and feel like I'm still achieving nothing? (A further explanation for this sense of meaninglessness is that the drive to work doesn't originate in the 'true self'; see Elizabeth for further details!).

The second symptom in common, their fear of being found out as fraudulent and constant sense of precariousness, corresponds to the constant fear in 'survival mode' of being found not to be the person they claim to be. This may be because they are inhabiting a secret, self-constructed space and repressing their 'true self'.

The rigidity of their worldview, the sense that everything is either black or white, is symptomatic of a rigid, morally impeccable persona that holds the defensive structure together; it is the bricks and mortar, the support for the fortress that allows them to function.

An unexpected (but interesting) finding

From her conclusions around this work, Elizabeth proposed that instinct, not intellect, is the primary form in the development of morality.

She illustrated the connection between morality and the 'survival instinct' by saying that, in the case of these six women, their particular relationship to work was symptomatic of their whole world view, with conscience/morality sitting at the core of it.

Asking herself on what grounds these women made judgments about the world and decided whether things were right or wrong, good or bad, she concluded that their decisions were made on the grounds of whether they were experienced as safe or threatening to their own survival. And their thinking stopped there – job done.

Their judgments of good and bad, right and wrong are driven by instinct, NOT by thinking.

Primitive or mature?

Characterising judgements made by instinct alone as those of a primitive conscience, Elizabeth defined a mature conscience as one with the mental capacity to question, to challenge one's own 'first responses'.

She went on to talk briefly about three common instinctive responses: revulsion, anxiety and retribution.

Taking revulsion or disgust first, she asked us to think about our first response to the idea of using human body parts for research. People often say that it's disgusting – but are we happy to make a judgment that it is therefore 'wrong' based on instinctive revulsion? and what about the issue of prisoners' right to vote? David Cameron was recently reported as the idea 'making him sick'; do we believe that he has done some proper thinking about this?

Considering anxiety or retribution, she asked us whether these get in the way of us thinking fully about the judicial handling of rioting adolescents, or the right to benefit, or indeed the right for every person to have work?

Elizabeth left us with a big question to consider: if, as she thinks, these primitive instinctive responses get played out in groups as well as individuals, is the 'herd instinct' an example of it? This can be seen in group cultures which become very unhealthy: one thinks of the 'blind eye' turned to abuse of elderly people in care homes, corruption in the banking sector or the phone hacking scandal at the News of the World, to name only a few.

Between courses we discussed this, and whether we recognised ourselves or our colleagues in these behaviours, talked briefly about class and 'Catholic guilt' as factors, and considered men (such as the self-declared Jack Straw) also suffering from 'imposter syndrome'.

