

Extraordinary Solutions to Everyday Problems

Inside and Outside Thinking

I like the story of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson going on a camping trip. They spent a pleasant day walking in the foothills of the Austrian Alps, and when it got dark, they pitched their tent in a sheltered spot. Dining well on rabbit stew and a bottle of red wine, they both fell asleep before midnight.

Holmes woke a few hours later in the small hours of the morning, grunted and nudged his sleeping companion.

'Watson,' he said, 'quickly, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.'

Watson struggled awake.

'I see stars, Holmes,' he replied. 'Untold numbers of stars.'

'And what does that tell you, Watson?' asked Holmes.

Watson thought for a moment.

'Well, Holmes, I deduce from the pink dawn light on those clouds that we are in for some good weather this morning. It tells me that there are uncounted stars and galaxies and perhaps thousands of planets. I would guess that the odds are very much against the theory that we are alone in the galaxy. And I look up and feel humble, for I see God's work in the night sky. What does it tell you?'

'Watson, you fool!' shouted Holmes, 'Somebody has stolen our tent!'

Sometimes life is as simple as it looks. What you see is what you get. However, a lot of the time, life seems complicated. People don't do what we want them to do. We can't do what we want, or when we do, we don't get the result we want. We miss opportunities and we are misunderstood. There is often a gap between what we intend and what actually happens. The voice of reason whispers in one ear and our feelings pull us by the other. We want to make the most of life and avoid the pitfalls. There is a simple way of making the most of the good experiences. And, what is more, we can learn from the bad experiences so that they don't happen again in quite the same way. It is depressing to find yourself making the same mistake again. Once was enough.

The secret lies in how we think about them.

Try this thought experiment.

Think of a pleasant experience.

Put yourself back in that experience.

See again what you saw then. Hear what you heard then.

Enjoy the experience again as fully as you can.

When you are back in an experience, seeing what you saw, hearing what you heard, you will also feel what you felt then, only not as intensely. You cannot create feelings out of nothing, that is like trying to burn snow, but you can recapture the feelings in your body if you vividly recreate the experience again between your ears.

Now think of that same experiences again, only this time imagine looking at the experience from the outside. See yourself in that situation from the outside, like watching a film or your own private video.

Where are the feelings now?

You may have feelings about the experience, but little will be left of the original feelings of the experience. When you step out of the picture the feelings stay inside the memory. Our feelings respond to what we think about and how we think about it. You can be inside the experience, 'caught up' in it, feeling it again; this is often called being associated into the experience. Or you can be outside it, taking a more 'objective' view, having feelings about it. This is called being dissociated from the experience.

You do not need to see crystal clear mental images for this or any other NLP exercise to work. However well you see your mental images is good enough. Even if you think you think you see nothing, it will be different sort of nothing. We all make mental images otherwise we would not remember where we left the car, or what our front door looked like. To recognise something by sight, you have to have a mental picture of what it looks like, so you can match it when you see it. If you can recognise your family each morning, then you can make mental pictures. We all have a photographic memory, only some of us have better quality film in the camera.

These two ways of thinking are not an interesting mental trick, they are fundamentally different ways of experiencing. Sometimes you are fully engaged in what you are doing, like watching a good film, having a good meal or enjoying good sex. You really get into them. And when you do, time passes quickly. Too quickly. Looking back, hours may have passed without you noticing.

On the other hand, there will be times when you are more reflective, thoughtful in a detached way. Have you ever had times where you were not really 'with it'? When you felt somehow 'not yourself' as if you were a little distant from what was happening, feeling like you were watching the world go by? Sometimes it seems like you are 'going through the motions' without any real involvement. You may also feel detached when you are working at something you do not enjoy, so you don't put all of yourself into it.

In this state time may crawl. This is one of life's ironies. When you are really enjoying something you go into enter fast time. Time races. When you are bored, you go into slow time, time crawls and the more try to speed it up the more slowly it seems to go. When I

was young our family occasionally visited some distant relatives. I had to go as well so they could tell me how much I had grown. I am sure these relatives were interesting people, but to an eight-year-old, this visit was the most supremely boring day of the year. I would have jumped at the chance of watching paint dry. Instead, I would have to sit in the upholstered chair on the lumpy cushion, while the conversation washed around me, and stare at the large brown clock on the wall opposite, willing it to accelerate. But it just seemed to go slower. It looked the sort of clock that belonged in a rural railway station waiting room. Our hosts had such a weird taste in furniture, that this strange, sluggish clock that inhabited a parallel universe where the normal laws of motion did not apply, seemed to be perfectly at home. Afterwards, I named my trip, 'the day the earth stood still'.

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