

Chapter 7

The World as a Continuous Flow of Interpretation

Our interpretation of sensory input occurs as a continuous flow. The voice I distinguished in the est Training, “It,” continuously describes what I have just experienced. Until I was 29 years old, I thought it was my voice, and I believed that its interpretation was the world itself. But during that year, something happened that changed my view of the world, and of myself, forever. I would like to present that story here.

An Extra-Ordinary Experience



One day in 1974, I bought an International Scout in Southern California and began to drive it back home to Colorado. I had several criteria for what car to buy. It had to have room for a bunch of music equipment, and it had to have four-wheel drive. It was ok with me that it was the color of the desert and wasn't very attractive. What I didn't consider at all was fuel economy.

Back then, I was based in Aspen, making a living as a musician. When I say, "making a living," I mean paying rent and buying food, and occasionally having some extra spending money. I didn't have a credit card, and I didn't have a cell phone. And on that particular day I had what I thought was enough cash to make the trip home.

As I drove to the San Francisco Bay area to visit friends, I started thinking about the rather poor gas mileage, the price of gas, the miles to go, and how much money I had in my wallet. I knew it would be a closer call than I had anticipated. But I had to get home!

As I prepared to depart Berkeley for Aspen, I stopped at a filling station to top off the tank. Those were the days when you could look in the pipe and see the surface of the liquid, and I could see it shimmering in the sunlight.

Though I set off on my journey with a light heart, I gradually felt that lightness disappear. I was having a persistent conversation with myself, worrying about how much

gas this car used and about whether I would actually have enough money to get home. This frightened me. I had never experienced being alone on the road and having to hitchhike or whatever else might be required if I ran out of gas. I felt fear in my stomach and in my chest, and as I drove it became more and more oppressive.

Religion of any kind was not part of my childhood experience, and I had never before thought of praying, to whomever or whatever might be listening. But on that morning, I did just that, essentially confessing my “sins,” such as the arrogance of my refusal to quit the music business and get a “real” job, my insistence that I was right and my mother was wrong regarding my attitude about money, and about the way I was living my life in general.

In the next moment I clearly heard a strong, powerful Voice that spoke with complete authority. It said,

“Don’t worry Larry, we’ll get you home.”

Immediately there was no conversation in my head. I knew that something very profound had happened, and in some sense the way I viewed the world had fundamentally shifted, though at the time I had no words to express that shift. My heart was beating a little faster, and I felt a lightness and something I might have called breathless anticipation.

Realizing that I was now fully present in that car, in the Central Valley of California, noticing the scenery, hearing the car's noises, and aware of my breathing, I felt a calmness come over me I had rarely experienced. The usual mental chatter, which I sometimes call the internal dialog, "It," was conspicuous by its absence. I experienced that silence with feelings of great relief. Somehow, I knew I was ok, and that this situation would work itself out one way or another.

As you might expect, the silence didn't last, and I was soon indulging in my usual mental chatter. At some point, I happened to glance at my gas gauge. I saw that it had not moved from its "full" reading, and by my calculations the car by now should have used about a quarter-tank. My first reaction was something like, "Oh great, now the gas gauge isn't working. I'll have to get that fixed... although, since I know how many miles-per-gallon I'm getting, I can still figure out when I need gas."

Shortly thereafter, the gas gauge began to fall. Now my thinking was, "Well ok, it doesn't register the first quarter-tank drop, so I can compensate for whatever it reads. No problem."

As I approached the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, I decided to stop and top off the tank again. The gauge now read three-quarters full, and my mental calculations told me it really was half full. I pumped the gas, and as I stood there, I was still feeling some of the relief I had felt when the mental

chatter had stopped. The pump clicked off, and as I hung up the hose, I looked at the reading. The car had taken a quarter-tank of gas, not the half-tank I was expecting.

I looked in the gas pipe, and there was the surface of the liquid shimmering as before.

A strange mixture of disbelief and complete trust washed over me. On the one hand, I had no way to explain what had just happened, and on the other I was again feeling that everything was fine. In terms of what I see now, the world had stopped for me. By that I mean, the normal flow of events, and most importantly the flow of interpretation of those events, stopped for me, because my rational mind had no answer, no explanation. I had the clear thought that I had just experienced something outside the boundaries I had always assumed were dictated by “reality,” by the laws of physics.

The power of our idea of the world

The books that Carlos Castaneda wrote about Juan Matus tell the story of Castaneda’s interactions with a man who called himself a sorcerer. These days we might call him a shaman. There are “tales of power” in those books that relate incidents that a first-time reader might have a hard time accepting as real. For me, they’re worth reading about even if they aren’t real, because of Castaneda’s skill as a writer. I wouldn’t call those works self-help books. For me, however, the value of his books is that while reading them I feel the

“whispering” of that deeper Self that I actually am. For that feeling alone, I am grateful to him.

However, there is another idea that I take from those stories that is relevant to our fundamental question about what it is to be a human being. And it emerges from the realization that our *idea* of the world is what allows us to experience the world as we do. On that day in 1974, when I had no choice but to conclude that my car had just travelled a considerable distance without using any gas, something about the world stopped. Visually, of course, it was all there. I could see the car and the level of the liquid in the pipe. I could hear sounds around me. I could feel the pump handle in my hand. Yet, in Matus’s terms, my understanding of the way the world works had shifted. I can see now that what we call the world is a continuous, uninterrupted flow of interpretation. And in that moment, all those years ago, that flow simply stopped. Juan Matus called an experience such as that one, “stopping the world.”

Castaneda relates numerous experiences of similar disruptions of the normal flow of events. As he tells it, his first such experience, taking place in the Mexican desert, involved having a two-way conversation with a coyote. The next day, Matus told Castaneda,

“What stopped inside you yesterday was what people have been telling you the world is like. You see, people tell us from the time we are born that the

world is such and such and so and so, and naturally we have no choice but to see the world the way people have been telling us it is.... Yesterday the world became as sorcerers tell you it is. In order to [know who we really are], one must learn to look at the world in some other fashion [than the way we've been taught], and the only other fashion I know is the way of a sorcerer.”

I don't spend time in the Mexican desert, and to my knowledge I have never met a sorcerer. But I have discovered that everyday life gives me opportunities to see the world in terms different from those of the description I was taught. I have never had a sorcerer around to guide me, so I've had to learn to do this by myself. As a result, it has been a long, slow process and required a great deal of patience and persistence.