

Letter from the Island (11/10)

Evolving or Flipping Out?

Lucy the dog and I tread the frozen path into Drottningholm Park as the dim morning light glistens on the frozen ground. In the background I can hear the morning traffic heading from our 18th century idyll into digital Stockholm. There in the city many things happen at the same time and in the blinking of an eye. In the very same minute that people discover they don't know something, they can know it by peering into one screen or another. This exponential expansion of personal knowledge happens at the same time as the same persons are being rushed around underground on modes of transport that always feel too slow for them.

I send a thought to the bare trees and the fallen leaves, and feel a camaraderie with them. In their world things take time – nothing happens in an instant. I begin to wonder whether I and many others of my generation are in an evolutionary middle-phase between the way that people were for a very long time to the way that they will be. I can still feel a certain identity with the need for focus on one thing, and for good things to take time. Moving at a speed that I can walk at still feels natural to me in a way that it may not to the next generation. I can still appreciate the smell and crunching of the daily newspaper in contrast to younger people whose instincts tell them that they will know what is going on because it pops up around them all day. They, unlike me, are secure in the knowledge that they will know what the time is without wearing a watch.

Lucy pricks her ears up at something moving under the frozen grass. Is she too an evolutionary middle-phase, between dogs who are good at hunting and dogs who are good at navigating the pavements and the streets? The alternative to this explanation is that people and their furry friends are starting to flip out. It's a thought path that I have frequently gone down but that I don't particularly like to pursue

because it feels too much like an older generation harping on about how much better things used to be.

My mind goes to the classrooms that have become my place of work of late. Schools are beginning to find that the methods and structures of teaching created to serve the requirements of the Industrial Revolution are not serving our children and the future that they are on the way to face. The reason, it seems to me, is that the next generation has already moved on in various ways. What if ways of being that just look like misbehavior, or even disordered behavior, in a traditional environment are actually a new phase of evolution?

I am sure that a few of you who have worked in the classroom are shaking your heads, and with very good reason. Kids will always be kids in the sense that they would prefer to play and romp around rather than sit and listen. Each of us needs to learn that quiet skill that is so unnatural to most of us. At the same time, I've also noticed that if you change the parameters for functioning well in the classroom, as I've been doing at schools with my colleagues, the response from kids tends to be strong and positive. But what do I really mean by this?

I'm standing at the whiteboard writing things down. Kids try to follow but they are bored. There is only *one* thing going on here – no need to use that simultaneous capacity that startles so many adults.

There's too much time for day-dreaming and science tells us that this doesn't usually lead to good thoughts. One child sends his day-dreaming across the classroom in the form of a paper airplane with a sharp point. It lands with a crash on the floor in front of me. “Wake up, woman!” it screams. “These young folks in front of you are designed for a much more interactive and multi-faceted form of communication...*dummy!*”

Then there is the issue of power structures. What gives me the authority to tell these kids what is right

and wrong? A more developed sense of empathy and a bit more experience, perhaps, but nothing else. Out in their world, on the Internet and elsewhere power structures are falling into great heaps. Why should I be listened to all of the time? Out there everyone has the chance to speak and be heard, not just by a couple of people but by millions of 'surfers'. One can argue that it shouldn't be like this: kids shouldn't be allowed to be out there in an unregulated way. However, the fact is that they are and in overwhelming numbers. Technology has flattened hierarchies, including those that exist in the classroom and if those adults who stand in the classroom don't find a way to meet that challenge, there will be no way for them to engender respect.

When I was a child at school, reading a book and processing that information was a typical means of learning. It was enjoyable and I still relish it today. However, the amount of information that I could amass through that experience is a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of information that most kids in this most digitally advanced part of the world are exposed to on a daily basis. Very young children have a lot more information pushing its way into those gray cells than I did at the very same age. The issue today is not access to information but developing the skills to process it, to knowing whether and how to act upon it to knowing where it belongs as a means of understanding one's world. As a teacher one has increasingly to adopt the perspective that the issue is not that kids don't know, it is more that they don't know how to interpret and handle.

On the way back home from the park on this morning which is beginning to feel like Christmas, I pick up the latest issue of *Scientific American* from the post box. I feel relieved to learn that the rate of evolution may actually be increasing due to the speed of change created by the technological revolution. We're not just all flipping out, we're evolving and, yes, Lucy and I might just be that middle phase to something else. Whatever that may be, I do hope that in the future they don't forget the barren trees.