

## The Pursuit of Openness

A few years ago I began reflecting on the concept of openness, asking myself: how open am I to other ways of being, other ways of thinking and looking at the world. Openness is a seemingly simple topic. We say to ourselves, openness is good and I'm a good person so of course I am open to others. But there's more depth to it, in fact I think for many if not most, openness is not the norm. Why? Because being open is hard, it challenges our worldview, our sense of self, our relationship with others. In fact, due to advances in the field of neuroscience—placing participants into fMRI scanners—we can actually see what happens in the brain when an idea or belief is challenged. In short, we process that experience in just the same way and along the same neural pathways (specifically the emotion center of the brain – the amygdala) that we process physical threats. As an example, when someone criticizes the political candidate we support, we react as if a bear had just walked into the room.. at least to a small degree. Now this long-winded prologue is just my way of saying that openness is tough, like flossing your teeth every day. You have to work at it and build a habit. So why do it? What can come of adopting a more open attitude. What does it look like to be “radically open?” I can't relay some textbook answer, but I can share a personal anecdote I experienced on my path of bringing openness into my life.

It was the middle of winter, not half a year ago and I was out having a meal with some close friends. As those who were here in Portland last winter remember, it was a very cold and snowy winter. “Snowpocalypse” some were saying. So there I was, heading home with a full belly and warm jacket when a young man about my age stepped directly into my path. He was wearing ragged clothes, stained jeans with large rips and tears. His hair was unkempt and his eyes nervous and shifting. “Hey you got a minute,” he said. Immediately I felt my body react physiologically. My heart began to beat faster, I became alert and attentive. Part of me wanted to say I didn't have time and walk on but I stopped myself. “Yeah what's going on?” I asked. His gaze slowly rose from his feet, never quite meeting mine but he said: “do you have somewhere I can sleep tonight, it's very cold.” Again my mind began to work through various options and potential outcomes. Should I drive him to one of the shelters in town? Was I putting myself in danger if I brought this stranger to my home? With this thought came a deluge of fears and assumptions. Then it came to me, this was a real-world opportunity to test the lens of openness I was trying to build. So I told the young man I would give him a warm place to sleep for the night.

On the ride home I tried to spark conversation, asking questions about his life. But he told me he didn't feel like talking. Again my mind raced, was I making a mistake? Was I being unsafe? Whose discomfort was I trying to assuage through conversation, his or mine? We rode on in silence, two strangers on a winter night. Eventually he spoke: “I don't mean to be rude. I'm coming down and I don't feel comfortable. But I don't have anything with me and I won't use at your house. I'm trying to quit.” I checked in with myself then, with my intuition, with my sense of this man in the moment. “That's fine I said, I imagine that's a really shitty feeling.” “Yeah it is,” he said and we rode the rest of the way in silence.

When we got to my home I made up a bed on the living room couch and heated up some leftovers for my guest. Then I went to sleep. Now I am not saying that this is something everyone should do, or even that I will do frequently. I am only suggesting that to be open we have to challenge our immediate reactions to people so we can see the real human beings' underneath. I had to confront the fears and stereotypes I had about people that looked the way this man looked, in the situation we found each other. People later criticized me for my decision, their arguments rife with their own fears and

assumptions. He could have stolen from you, he may keep coming back, he could have killed you, they said. Yet not only was nothing taken, he folded and stacked his blankets in the morning. Before he left I sat down with him and we chatted. He asked to play a song, Tupac's *changes*. He told me about the breathing technique he uses at night to stay warm, of his struggle with meth, the way it aches in your bones when you try to quit. He told me that he feels invisible. As he spoke I sat with him, trying to be fully present and offer no judgement whatsoever. We were both of equal value. He gave me his grandmother's phone number before he left, in case I wanted to get touch. He said he could teach me a meditation form he'd picked up recently. Then he thanked me. He said: "I haven't felt like someone was listening without judgement in such a long time." I thanked him for the tips and stories, we shook hands and he was gone.

It was a genuine human interaction, both of us seeing the other without filters and being seen ourselves. The phrase: I feel invisible, continues to echo in my mind. There is real healing in being seen by another. Yet this experience would never would have been possible had I stuck with my initial stereotypes, fears and assumptions. Instead I stopped to listen and we both came away nourished. In a world that seems ever more divided, we must remember this truth: we are all in this together.

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