

# It Is My Faith That Every Flower Enjoys the Air It Breathes: *Fundamental Assumptions of Psychotherapy*

*You are perfect.* Nature does not make mistakes. Nature makes corrections, and has been working on us for 3.5 Billion years. The mind of Nature—is written in the Code of Life: in our Genetic code. You were born with a unique physique, intelligence, and disposition *perfectly* evolved to maximize your survival--and the survival of your ancestors. We can each proudly claim that each of our ancestors survived infancy and childhood. They all reached adulthood, and brought at least one child into the world. We are survivors from a long line of *fierce* survivors.

The natural state of man is disorder, poverty, and stagnation—this is how we lived throughout our evolutionary past. This is how we “grew up.” Environments on earth drastically change every 10-thousand years or so (the average ice age) and evolution has selected traits over millions of years that were adaptive within environments of both abundance and deprivation. The majority of people adapt well to most environments and it is this capacity has allowed us to survive within and populate the earth. *We are a hearty species.*

We don't choose the many circumstances of our lives—whether we live in times of deprivation or abundance—rich or poor, war or peace, protected or neglected. We get plopped into this world—our brains half-baked--as human-beings and we have to figure it out as we go. *All of us.* We are figuring it out right now (right here, right now...). We don't have control, but we do have *choice*—and a responsibility (to ourselves, if not our ancestors)—to live our lives to their fullest potential wherever we do find ourselves.

Most people are happy (70% surveyed). There are lots of reasons to be. The world is getting safer all the time; women and children are increasingly protected by law and the enforcement of law; we are richer, with greater equality, liberty, and justice. This is the land of milk and honey. However, pain is also woven into nature. Life requires struggle. Life is bittersweet. We live, on average about 80 years, and as we age, we are more likely to experience illness, accidents, disintegration, and death. About 30% of our population has what is diagnosable as a psychiatric disorder (mostly anxiety and mood disorders). These are my clients, and they suffer—in good times and in bad times.

As a clinical psychologist, I'm asked to address an assortment of unanswered--and often unanswerable--questions related to pain, love, loss, meaning, and purpose. The task of the psychologist is to address the questions not with answers (we never actually *answer* questions), but with a “retelling” of the story—a revision--that allows the healthiest possible understanding, acceptance, and growth. In order to do this effectively, I needed to come up with a way of “connecting-the-dots” myself—of answering --*Who Are We?* This essay is my attempt to share my fundamental assumptions of psychotherapy with you, and how I am applying this understanding to my clinical practice.

## Assumption One: We are Three Animals in One

The Brain is the organ of interest in psychology. *Your* brain evolved over the course of one-half billion years to become—You—the most highly engineered, intricate, and complex creation of Nature. The purpose of the brain is to enhance survival through the prediction and control of future outcomes. The brain evolved to help us make optimal predictions, to protect us from potential danger. Our mind replaces complicated problems with simpler ones that allow quick approximations—not certainties, but best guesses. In milliseconds our brains can do what supercomputers to this day cannot. Our brains protect us and our loved ones instantaneous, without conscious thought.

The first psychotherapist—Sigmund Freud—was a neurologist—a brain scientist. He practiced over 100 years ago, and was interested in understanding the biology of conflicts within the human brain. He established theories—for example, related to conflicts between the Id, Ego, and Super-ego.

It turns out: Freud was right! Modern neuroscience in applying imaging technologies to the living brain is revealing not just the presence of conflict—but *why* the conflict exists. It turns out: We are three brains in one! One is behaving from ancient instincts, one is more recently emotional, and the other is most recently logical. This results in a lot of our human conflict.

## Assumption Two: We Behave Like Reptiles

We have a Behaving Brain. We are part dinosaur.

**Drives.** The reptilian brain, estimated to be over 250 million years old, provides the ongoing, instinctive capacity for our survival. It is motivated by basic drives for survival such as: food, shelter, social status, and sex. These basic drives are also our basic pleasures. The guiding force of all animals (whether dinosaur, mouse, or human) is to approach pleasure and avoid pain. That is our main motivation and is the basis of all learning.

**Behaviors.** We are motivated by these drives to engage in *behaviors* such as approach—avoid, and fight—flight—or freeze. The dinosaur brain approaches and avoids stimuli in all-or-nothing ways: move forward, move away. The brain responds quickly—especially under conditions of perceived threat. When basic needs for survival are not met, the reptilian brain can “hijack” the other brains, and we can become fierce—in states of fight and flight.

**Needs.** We are all motivated by the same needs and will continue to grow toward higher-order needs, as basic needs are increasingly met and sustained. We have a human drive toward growth, and are unable to satisfy that drive if stuck in various lower-level needs (e.g., food, shelter). As lower order needs for security and safety are met, we can set ourselves up for higher-order needs fulfillment—towards our highest potential (e.g., self-actualization).

## Assumption Three: We Feel like Mammals

We have an Emotional Brain. We are part mouse.

Mammals brains originated about 150 million years ago, and introduced a new psychology to the world. Compared with reptiles, mammals provide a significant amount of investment -

protection, care and nurturance - to their offspring. This is possible because mammals have a rich emotional life—including the love of mother to child. It takes a long time to grow a human-being, and we wouldn't survive a day without love. Out of this care-giving to our young emerged compassion and caring for other family members and extended non-kin.

Our brains developed the capacity to feel not just physical pleasure and pain, but *emotional* pleasure and pain. Emotions like love, fear, excitement, sorrow, joy—are our “super-powers”: they protect us and our kin in a moment, without conscious thought, and guide us towards our needs.

For just a moment, I'd like you to pretend--if you can--being suddenly stripped of all emotion. Try to imagine this moment without feeling. Nothing you see, hear, taste, feel would have importance--beyond anything else. Nothing would have individual significance, character, expression, perspective—flavor!

Emotion gives us personality. Just as we have physical differences (tall/short, thin/muscular), we have emotional differences that guide the mind's eye. Whether you're born happy, excited, loving, sad, afraid, or angry--guides the interpretation of all experience--from birth forward.

There is a survival advantage to doing so. Someone low in anxiety or anger might not live long in a dangerous environment, and our human environments have historically been deprived. In that environment, the best personality type for survival would include people who are self-protected by strong negative emotion—like anxiety and anger. But, in a safe environment--like the one we have now--people who are wired with a sensitivity toward strong negative emotional states carry a "lifeboat" of anxiety and anger with them. They just don't need all the protection to survive in today's world, and it can be very self-limiting.

## **Assumption Four: We Think Like Humans**

We have a Logical Brain. We are part human.

We are a composite of dinosaur, mouse, and human. Approximately 2 million years ago, humans began to develop a particular type of intelligence that gave us unique abilities among animals. Through this new brain, consciousness allowed a resolution of the conflicts in the brain; a capacity to *guide* our thinking about our experience and to allow the body to resolve conflicts: behavioral, emotional, and logical.

We all have a tendency to think more about bad experiences than good ones. It's an over-learning from the more primitive survival-based instincts of the lower-brain, as well as the painful situations we encounter through life. The brain provides fast, intense, and negatively biased information, and as such, we have evolved to have a readiness for deprivation. The human mind searches constantly for "what is missing/wrong," rather than "what is present/right." Anxious people have the motto: “Better safe than sorry.” Their brains turns to solving problems—even in the absence of a problem to solve.

## **Conflict within the Behaving, Emotional, and Logical Brains**

Many human struggles are consequences of brain evolution--not character deficits. Adding a neuroscientific perspective allows us to move toward a mindfulness, compassion, and admiration for our brains and their complexity. We can then move *toward* the conflicts within us—and begin to do something to restore order and balance in our life.

Just as we can effectively—or ineffectively--communicate with others, we can communicate with the self. Psychotherapy allows an observation of the multiple needs that our brain expresses, by allowing the conscious observation of the stream of thoughts and feelings that your brain creates, and how you behaviorally respond to them. You are then in a position to make some choices that you couldn't make before. You can evaluate how accurate and useful they are, and whether or not you choose to let them guide you.

Decisions are made by various competing parts of the brain--so conflict is inevitable. We have multiple brains—multiple interpretations. Imagine the conflict in the brain of a young heterosexual male upon seeing an attractive female in a room. The reptilian brain will urge “Approach! Have sex!” The emotional brain might warn “Avoid! You will be humiliated!” The logical brain—if it is called upon at all--might look for the evidence underlying a decision: “She smiled back.” “She’s not wearing a ring.” “She might like me.”

Psychotherapy often involves sorting out these different soundtracks in order to provide a clearer idea of just what is going on in there. The role of the psychologist is to train people to exercise that part of their brain that is under-utilized; if you underutilize the thinking brain (e.g., by ignoring the logic of a situation)—basic drives (e.g., food, sex) and emotions (e.g., anxiety and anger) can become out of control; If you underutilize the behaving and feeling brain (e.g., by ignoring your needs and emotions)--life loses its flavor and meaning.

### **APPLICATION TO PSYCHOTHERAPY: Reptilian Brain**

When we don't feel well, it may be an indication to the self of an unmet Reptilian need (e.g., hunger, sleep). Therapy seeks to identify those needs that are out of balance, and the drives and behaviors that may support or conflict with them. We—as CEOs of our bodies—are then responsible for identifying, and providing for that need. The goal is to achieve a positive balance between the pleasures and necessary pains of life.

### **APPLICATION TO PSYCHOTHERAPY: Emotional Brain**

Emotions are our body's way of signaling a need. People with negative emotional dispositions—especially related to anxiety and sorrow—tend to live their lives through the avoidance of pain and protection, rather than the pursuit of pleasure and growth. As a therapist, one of my primary goals is to shift my client's response to unpleasant emotion, like anxiety, from one of avoidance to a conscious curiosity and exploration. Emotion is used as a compass to allow a “bottom-up” guide to our needs. Becoming aware of emotion is then followed up with an exploration and eventual understanding of what we are feeling and why we are feeling it. When we are able to consciously understand the meaning and purpose of an emotion, we can make sense of it and logically decide *how* we want to respond. In this way, emotion can be woven into a narrative that can be consciously experienced, and interpreted as necessary for growth.

## **APPLICATION TO PSYCHOTHERAPY: Thinking Brain**

The prefrontal neocortex serves as the executive decision-maker—the broker—of the multiple needs represented by these brain factions. Psychotherapy regulates strong, negative emotion by activating the logical brain and inhibiting the behaving and emotional brains. This allows for a “top-down” regulation of brain networks. The power of psychotherapy to change the brain rests in our ability to recognize and alter belief systems that aren’t adaptive. The process for brain change involves deactivation—of old, worn-out understanding, and the creation of a new, more adaptive, understanding.

Just as we control what we take into our bodies—if we’re healthy—we can maximize our emotional health, by choosing what we allow within our minds. By talking about and then editing our own understanding we can change perceptions that stand in the way of our highest potential. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a mechanism for training the logical brain to operate by consciously reflecting on the evidence for beliefs.

Writing about oneself and personal experiences — and then rewriting your story — can also lead to a resolution of conflict and a richer understanding of one’s life. Writing in full sentences is therapeutic because it forces the logical mind to make sense of the emotional experience of the mammalian brain, as well as the basic needs and drives of the reptile. Narratives allow us to combine—in conscious memory—our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in a coherent manner that supports neural integration.

Another strategy for moderating an automatic tendency towards pessimism, is to focus intentionally on what is right via gratitude journaling. Rather than thinking of life’s challenges as problems, try to re-think them as opportunities to make accurate predictions and optimal decisions toward your own evolution. Focus on what good can come from inevitable change.

Ultimately, the goal of therapy is to help clients recognize and improve their relationship with the self. To realize their greatest potential and live lives of meaning and pleasure. To help clients achieve this outcome, I try to sustain our focus on three over-arching themes:

**1. Life is important.** We have limited time to exist and there’s no time to waste. We may not have control, but we have choice. We are living now in a period of great relative abundance. For the first time in human history, we can choose whether to have children, we can choose our profession, we can choose our village. We are free.

**2. Radical acceptance** is not about non-suffering--it's about accepting the necessary & instructive forms of suffering in life, and minimizing the unnecessary forms. Because change is necessary in life, loss is inevitable. Life is full of bittersweet. To be angry, fearful, or sad is to suffer. In the long run--especially as we confront our own death--it may be better to radically accept what you can't possibly change about the world—the self—and others. When we do, we free ourselves from the suffering of the judgement of the Universe. Who are we to judge the Laws of Nature, Human Evolution, Genetics?

**3. Deep freedom** derives from a conscious decision to remain free from unnecessary suffering. To live mindfully in the present--aware of life’s impermanence--and its Glory. Every moment

free from suffering is a moment of deep freedom to discover the highest pleasure of existence. In recognizing the genius of Nature and accepting it on its terms, we can recognize and accept ourselves--and Our genius. We can be in Awe of Life—and aspire to live each moment to its highest potential.