



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

when is choice an illusion?

Most of us treasure our ability to make choices. We like to feel in control! However, unless we are living an “examined life” our ability to choose freely is an illusion. Unexamined beliefs, unconscious biases or fears will influence our choices. We may not even be able to see all the options available. We will find ourselves making the same mistakes, repeating old patterns, and feeling frustrated and unable to get out of our ruts.

When we are born, we are wide open to experience with little ability to make sense of what is going on around us. We gradually learn about the world and understand how things work through our interactions with our caregivers. If our caregivers are relatively healthy, reliable, and nurturing we learn that the world is a safe and caring place.

Like breathing air, as children we take in our experience and use it to understand the world in which we live. We absorb our family’s beliefs, rules and attitudes toward us whether spoken or not.

Our view of our “self” may be distorted. We may feel fat, skinny, unattractive, nerdy, or unintelligent, despite evidence to the contrary. These distorted views can be difficult to change. It is as if they have been “hardwired” into our brain. We learned: “the grass is green, the sky is blue and I am unlovable.”

The broader our range of experience, the more tolerant our families, the more we are encouraged to ask questions and to think for ourselves, the clearer we will see ourselves and the world. The more shut down, isolated and closed our families are, the smaller and more frightening the world will seem. The more dysfunctional our family, the more our view of ourselves and the world will be distorted.

Formal education introduces new information. Reading, traveling, relationships, and experiences away from home add to our knowledge and help us revise and expand what we have absorbed as children. By reflecting on our experience and questioning what we have learned, we can begin to separate what we think, believe and feel from what we have been told. Therapy can be especially useful in this process. Gradually we can examine all of our beliefs, keep what we believe is true and throw out the rest.

Only if we have examined our lives and are continuing to seek and absorb new knowledge and experiences, can we begin to see the world and ourselves with as few distortions as possible. Only when we can see clearly can we make free and informed choices. Otherwise we are constrained by factors that we don’t even know exist. We hold ourselves back because of old fears, assumptions and beliefs.

Health is making our own path in the world, making fully informed choices and learning from the consequences. When we do this we feel alive, whole, vibrant and empowered. I close with Martha Beck’s description of this path:

“We believe without question almost everything we learn as children, stumble into the many potholes and pitfalls that mar any human endeavor, stagger around blindly in pain and outrage, then slowly remember to pay attention, to listen for the Silence, look for the Light, feel the tenderness that brings both vulnerability to wounds and communion with the force that heals them. Don’t worry about losing your way... If you do, pain will remind you to find your path again. Joy will let you know when you are back on it.” (from *Leaving the Saints*, page 296) **hkh**

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