



Labels Kill

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I have long been of the view that “normal” behaviour is bizarre. After all, the Universities of Chicago and Milan calculate that so-called “normal” people use just 1% of their mental capacity to do what they’re doing in the here and now. The rest of their mental energy is wasted on looking forward, worrying but, most destructively of all, looking backwards – because that is where the subconscious mind lives. And this subconscious, focused in our formative years, automatically creates our daily reactions – and our daily behaviours.

Just by way of example, I recently mentioned to a number of my clients that the behaviour of the “locals”, where I live, offers a perfect example of so-called “normal behaviour”. So, this article starts in the French Alps, with the bizarre behaviour of people whose livelihoods depend on “foreign” tourists – where I live in the Alps.

But what does “foreign” mean? For example, I visited the village doctor recently – a five minute call to get a medical certificate for sport for one of our children, turned into a forty minute, highly entertaining diatribe on “the locals”. Our doctor, who has lived in the village for twenty three years but is not a local, started the conversation by asking me what I thought of the locals. I answered that I didn’t much think of them at all! She told me that one of her patients (a local – and by that I mean his family has been in the valley for hundreds of years!) had almost broken down in tears in her clinic the previous week. He had just got married and the locals in the village wouldn’t talk to his new bride because she was a foreigner. When I asked where the lady was from, I was told “St. Nicolas de Veroco” – the next village down the mountain!!

I know what being a foreigner is. One Sunday afternoon, whilst cutting my grass, an Agent de Police, accompanied by his assistant, shouted at me from the road. “Are you French?” he demanded. Bemused, I asked him to repeat the question – which he duly did, just a little more agitated. I replied that he knew me, that I lived here. He responded by shouting at me “I didn’t ask you if you live here, I asked if you’re French!”. I told him he knew that I was Irish. He then gave me a five minute lecture that, under the laws of the glorious French Republic (any of you who have seen Steve Martin’s *The Pink Panther* should realise that it is by no means an exaggeration) he was obliged to give me an official warning that I was not allowed cut my grass on a Sunday afternoon. I was allowed do it Monday to Saturday (excluding lunchtimes of course) and Sunday morning – but not Sunday afternoon, that was reserved for “le tranquillité”. Having appropriately reprimanded

me, he went into our neighbour, his drinking buddy. Half an hour later, our neighbour's son started cutting wood with a chainsaw!

I'm not recounting these stories (and there are many more of them) to have a pop at the French – after six years in France I will freely admit that some of my friends are French!! On that note, as an aside, I was chatting with one of my French friends last week, who told me that, despite having lived in the area for thirty years, his wife had only two friends – the locals wouldn't talk to her because she is a Parisienne!

The point of all this is that we label people. The stuff I've mentioned is pretty harmless – but a lot of how we label people is not. Our children don't know the difference between a Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or Jew until we tell them. And once we start encouraging our children to label people (as we were encouraged during our formative years) we kill a little bit of them – they no longer see the world with the open-mindedness that is a prerequisite for being happy and effortlessly successful. But, worse than that, our categorisation of people leads to actual hurt. In France, the North African community is ghettoised – the same is still true of African Americans. Sexual harassment is still a burning issue in the workplace – not just in terms of sexually suggestive behaviour but in terms of the sexual imbalance in senior management structures. And, of course, labels that take on a life of their own over hundreds or thousands of years actually kill people. Witness the Middle East where revisionist historians hold out the possibility that Moses was actually the Pharaoh Akenaten who was run out of Egypt for introducing mono-atheism. So, if Moses was an Arab....

Psychology tells us that we start categorizing people from as early as eighteen months. "Categorization" is part of our "automaticity" suite of programs that enable us make sense of what's going on around us without having to over-tax our limited perceptual and attentional resources. Unfortunately, just like with automaticity, categorization enables us make nonsense of our world! But, again like automaticity (which I cover in other articles and in the Gurdy Members' Workshop), categorization is just another one of our bad habits and, as such, is easily broken.

I say easily because each of us has a choice. You choose your thoughts and, as my website regularly explains, we can all start breaking our biggest baddest habits, by breaking little ones first. Your life and the lives of those around you depend upon it.