



Personal Development: The Dysfunction of the Herd

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During a recent radio interview where we were discussing that, in fact, even though stress causes all manner of problems – from the twitch in the show host’s eye (he said he had one but the interview was by ‘phone so I suspect he was joking) to insomnia, digestive problems, heart disease and death – stress does not actually exist, other than in the mind of the sufferer; the host made the point that, with the state of the US economy at present, many people are stressed out, fearing that they’ll lose their jobs whilst, of course, many people are stressed out because they already have. We live in desperate times, he contended.

We do, indeed, live in challenging times. People have seen their life-savings erode, or disappear completely, in the mad greedy rush for unbelievable investment gains that preceded the fall. People have seen their pay packets slashed. People have seen friends and colleagues lose their jobs and, as a result, fear that they will lose theirs. People have lost their jobs. People have lost their homes. People are feeling angry, frustrated, fearful and victimised.

At least, that’s the normal way to look at it. It’s the way the media likes to continually portray it – bad news sells newspapers (granted in every diminishing quantities as the web takes over!) – bad news improves the ratings. Media outlets compete with each other for the latest piece of bad news, parents picking up their children from school compete in the same way at the school gate, colleagues are doing the same thing around the water-cooler. It’s how the herd thinks. And it’s important to be part of the herd. It’s important to be normal and maintain, in as far as possible, the normal standards of living while the economy sorts itself out.

No – it’s not OK to be normal. Normal people are crazy – I’m not saying that, seventy years of psychological research proves that they are. Unable to focus, unable to experience the reality of the here and now, unable to discern what is actually going on because their backward-looking minds are running on automatic, unable or unprepared to stop behaving in a herd-like fashion. It’s this herd-like lunacy that caused these desperate times – the herd of greedy bankers threw the rules of banking out the window, the herd of greedy investors threw reason down the toilet (if an investment return sounds too good to be true, generally it is!), the ordinary man in the street threw caution to the wind when it came to racking up the credit or charge card bills and, as a client said to

me recently, “Even the little old lady had to have her brand new car every three years – even though her old one would have kept going for twenty-three!”. The point is that there is no point in blaming bankers, politicians, hedge-fund managers, property speculators, the vast majority of normal people played their part – simply because the vast majority of people are normal.

And, as we’ve very briefly explored, it’s not OK to be normal. But what about the danger of being abnormal? Doesn’t it take courage and bravery to step out of the crowd? What will your friends and colleagues think of you if you don’t belong to the herd anymore? Well, first off, there are no dangers – only benefits – in being abnormal, only normal people think there’s a downside. Secondly, the life-changing steps that people like myself, my family and many of my clients have taken were described as courageous and brave – yes, you’ve guessed it, by normal people! There’s no courage or bravery involved – just following gut instinct and doing the things that feel right, regardless of what others think. Which brings us to the fear of what our pals will think of us. They won’t, they don’t – they don’t think about you at all, they’re too busy thinking about themselves. A bit of a jaundiced view on life, perhaps, but those of us who can count a couple of true friends in our lives are truly lucky.

So, there’s no downside in being abnormal, there’s no downside in leaving the herd – there’s only upside. But what do I mean by leaving the herd and how can you do it? Well, we’re not talking about being a recluse or a hermit! We’re not even talking about behaving perceptibly differently. We’re talking about using your mind differently so that you don’t get embroiled in the crap that herd-like behaviour triggers – from the belief that everyone could be a millionaire during the (all too illusionary) boom, to the belief that we’re all now doomed during the (all too real) bust. We’re talking about not doing something just because everyone’s doing it. We’re talking about opening our eyes, seeing what’s actually going on and behaving according to our newly-open-minded view of reality, what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s good for me and those dear to me and what’s bad for us. Don’t get me wrong, we’re not talking about being selfish in the normal sense of the word, we’re talking about simply being sensible.

In other words, we’re talking about coming to our senses – an often used and more often misunderstood phrase. Coming to your senses means just that – you have five of them, use them, pay attention to what they’re telling you, not what the herd wants you to hear. If you do pay attention to your senses, you will realize some fundamental truths: most people don’t care about you – and by their herd-like behaviour they don’t even care about themselves; the behaviour of the herd is, ultimately, self-destructive; there is only a small number of important people in your life (you, yourself, are one of them) and, most important of all, the current fear, panic, depression and obsession with bad news is only group-think – in actual fact, the current economic environment presents major opportunities for those with eyes to see and ears to hear – for abnormal people.