

Why Thinking for Ourselves is a Strategic Necessity and What to Do about It

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Why Did I Write This?

In early 2020, lockdowns and other restrictions were implemented in the name of ‘Covid mitigation’. Sadly, the mitigation measures ruined livelihoods, fractured societies, damaged supply chains and economies and exacerbated global poverty. There’s been immense suffering. Over the ensuing 15 months, I conducted hundreds of interviews across a wide range of demographics, from which I gained some inspiring insights.

We are extraordinarily resilient. We’ve done our best to keep our spirits up, help others and stay afloat. Some have even transcended the circumstances, with good outcomes for them and real contributions to those around them. The central theme that ran through all of the positive stories was – *thinking for oneself*. It’s the free thinkers who’ve navigated well.

Today as I write (in 2021), we are a shattered global community. Emotionally, physically, mentally, psychologically, socially, financially and fiscally; we’re individually and collectively exhausted, drained and worn down. We need healing and recovery. We need restored economies and societies.

Thinking for ourselves is a strategic necessity for this next phase. In this piece, I offer some of the outputs from my research. We’ll take a look at some of the undercurrents beneath the obvious distresses we’ve felt or witnessed. We’ll explore the role of free thinking as a key strategy for transcending the difficulties. And we’ll remind ourselves how to help others think for themselves in the next phase.

Who Am I, and Why Listen to Me?

I was brought up in an alternative environment. My father was a naturopath and osteopath – which in the 1950s was considered akin to witch-doctory. My mother was an artist, a contemporary of Quentin Crisp, Liz Frink and other expressive types. Natural health, free-thinking and personal responsibility were encouraged from the beginning.

Early exposure to radical thought leaders encouraged my development as a free thinker with a passion for self-determinism, human fulfilment and creativity. This perspective brings with it certain biases – along with a fierce respect for everyone’s right to their own opinion, regardless of whether it agrees with my own position.

The first 15 months of the Covid pandemic were ‘interesting’ for me. In addition to learning about others’ experiences, I was prompted to explore my own responses to this unusual situation, and re-affirm what most matters to me. One thing that matters a great deal to me is learning – especially from situations that fall outside of comfort zones.

Nothing interesting happens inside our comfort zones – Anon

As a Self-Mastery professional I am always looking for ways we can leverage our success and elevate our lives. Hard times provide a unique perspective on this question, especially when the population in general is encountering the same difficult conditions. At times like this, patterns and themes arise and are explored. Notions are tested, taken on board or dismissed. Understanding deepens – for me and for my clients.

I don't think anyone liked what happened in the first 15 months of the pandemic, and nor did I. What I do find fascinating and exciting is the opportunity for creativity that is provided by disruption and chaos. We have an opportunity now to recover and rebuild.

What We Went through in 2020–1

Here I explore some of the undercurrents beneath the distresses we felt or witnessed.

Fear

Our inbuilt survival reactions reared up, flooded our systems with adrenalin, and we rushed to protect ourselves and our loved ones. A lot of us like to forget that we are mortal. We encountered our mortality, our fear of death, and our fear of suffering. We agonised over our elderly, we imagined life without those we love. We began to fear those outside our homes – could they bring death and destruction into our lives?

Grief

Some of us lost loved ones. Most of us lost companionship and many of the activities that make life worth living. Grief arrived in force. We mourned the loss of the lives we had built over the years. We grieved for our lost loved ones, and for our children and the generations to come. Some of us spent too much time by ourselves, and were lost in loneliness and despair.

Guilt

Feeling powerless in the face of a novel virus, we encountered guilt. Had we really done enough for our loved ones, and for our elderly in particular? We met our realisation that we can't protect our children, our seniors, our spouses. A deep-seated sense of helplessness rose up, and filled us with a fierce imperative to lock down any and all avenues of danger to those we care about. Driven by a terror of letting everyone down, we sacrificed our convenience and our lifestyles, in a desperate attempt to be doing something to help. Or to be seen to be helping.

Pervasive distress

Something significant happened that affected everyone. This is unusual. Usually, we all have different things going on. Of course this is still true now – but the situation was significant and affected all of us. This means that some of the emotional reactions are widespread, permeating the collective atmosphere wherever we go. Because this is both subtle and pervasive, it tends to become 'normal' – a sort of background greyness. Seemingly endless.

Energy drain

Our feelings are influenced by the collective emotional atmosphere, so subtly that we may not notice it. This unaware effect can induce a kind of sludginess of perception and thinking, along with an energy drain; or a kind of fractious restlessness and frustration. Add to that our pragmatic personal concerns, and we have a cocktail of exhaustion.

Confusion

On and off throughout – confusion was common. We rely on a certain predictability to give us structure and clarity in a complex world. Many core aspects of life were upended – with no clear roadmap back to normal. This has been a shock. Shock generates confusion. Many of us have drifted in and out of confusion in the first 15 months of the pandemic. This is a weird feeling. It undermines our sense of security. We begin to doubt our handle on reality. We lose our capacity to think clearly, make decisions and get things done.

Loss of identity

We tend to identify with our lifestyles, our jobs and our relationships. We rely on our connections and interactions with others to help us frame who we are, and find meaning in our lives. In the absence of all of that, we begin to lose touch with who we are, and to doubt our place in the world. Our sense of identity is undermined. We begin to feel less substantial, more fragile, and less sure of ourselves.

Apathy

The past year as I write has been simply exhausting and draining. It's been virtually impossible to 'fix things'. Many of us have lost incomes, we've all lost something that made life joyful. We hit a state of pointlessness – we feel helpless, powerless and out of ideas. A general slumping into giving up is almost inevitable. In this place, we are indeed powerless, at the mercy of circumstance.

Negative patterns

As we tackle difficult situations, we utilise our thinking faculties to make sense of what's happening, make choices, and develop plans of action. On a good day we do this consciously. When circumstances become overwhelming – some of the process can become too difficult to manage consciously – the sub-conscious takes over, and trots out whichever coping strategy worked for us in the past. Unfortunately, old strategies may not be appropriate or helpful for the current scenario. Because this is taking place on the sub-conscious level, we don't recognise what's going on. This is when we can find ourselves getting stuck in repeating patterns of unhelpful behaviour.

Inflexibility

In an attempt to reduce the distress and chaos we're experiencing, we try to regain control. We all have techniques for creating order and controlling our reaction to circumstances. These techniques can help us continue to function. However, they tend to become non-responsive to live events as they occur. This means we navigate reasonably well, but we lack flexibility and miss opportunities to switch direction when that might serve.

Obsessing

The Covid-19 virus and the associated events have been a topic of conversation everywhere and at all times. It was rare to have a conversation or listen to a podcast or read an article where it wasn't mentioned. The media was full of it. Everywhere, people were talking about the virus, the restrictions, the meaning of it all, the statistics. Becoming obsessed is almost

inevitable. This fixed emphasis on one topic makes us lose touch with present life in the moment. We miss out on opportunities for joy.

Righteousness

It's not unnatural for us to feel that the best way to secure ourselves is to find the right answer to a problem, and commit to that right answer. We've all experienced that to hold true at times in our own lives. In this case, we're looking at a global event. Many of us have extended our natural individual solution-finding in an attempt to find the solution to the world's ills. Or we've embraced solutions that have been presented by others. And we've become fixated on whichever solution we've chosen. There's been an extreme reduction in curious listening, along with an enhanced intolerance of disagreement. An almost religious fervour has developed, attaching morality to whichever position is favoured.

Defensiveness

Bottom line, we want to survive. We want our families to survive. Once we've run out of things to do to help our survival, and while still feeling powerless, self-protection becomes our refuge. As a vulnerable species physically, we're good at this. It's one of the ways we've survived as long as we have. In the present day it manifests as extreme caution, suspicion, rigidity, a loss of humour and an increasingly limited scope of movement and self-expression. Along with coldness, distance and outright hostility towards others. Danger is imagined around every corner – 'It's not safe'.

Anger

As time went on, anger began to appear. A general groundswell of frustration became a low-grade anger expression – a kind of muttering disquiet, spoken quietly in private, and loudly on politically incorrect videos and podcasts. Neighbours yelled at neighbours. Activists yelled at governments. Governments yelled at non-conformists. The US presidential election of 2020 was a fine lightning-rod for the release of pent-up anger.

Victim syndrome

Most of the experiences I've described here do not support or nourish free thinking. On the contrary – fear, anger, confusion, obsessiveness and the rest tend to interfere with our trust in ourselves, and cause us to look to others for solutions. We don't want to think for ourselves because that leaves us feeling more confused and insecure.

We've had a difficult time of it. And yet – some of us managed to find antidotes to the unpleasantness. These antidotes were rooted in Free Thinking.

Why Thinking for Ourselves is the Best Strategy

Here, we'll explore Free Thinking as a core strategy for transcending the difficulties. When we think for ourselves, we enhance our breadth and clarity of thought, and open ourselves up to a wider range of possibilities and choices. From this position, recognising and engaging effectively with feelings and emotions becomes easier for us. We are better able to navigate difficulties, whether mental or emotional in emphasis.

Humility

Free thinkers tend to be individualists who have developed their free-thinking capacities on their own, often despite their upbringing and environment. It's rare to find someone who says: 'I was taught how to think for myself at school and encouraged to do so at home as well.' On top of that, free thinking isn't finite. The more we do it, the further there is to go. There's always another level of self-inquiry and expansion of perspective available, beckoning. The first 15 months of the pandemic illustrated that in spades. Even the most free-thinking among us probably had moments of getting stuck in some of the unhelpful emotional and thought reactions. Retaining humility has been a saving grace.

Introversion

Introverts tend to look within for answers. This helps insulate them from the arguments going on around them, and assists them in choosing their own path with confidence.

Baggage-awareness

How we feel in any given moment is a combination of in-the-moment experience, and re-lived experience from the past – triggered in some way by what's happening now. We're accustomed to that. Sometimes we feel our reactions are out of proportion, and we take ourselves off to think about that. Other times we feel fully present in the moment, with feelings that relate directly to what's happening now. As we mature and learn to think for ourselves, we become more aware of these distinctions, and we learn to navigate and adjust accordingly.

Present-moment orientation

Life goes on, with many of the joys and opportunities still available to us. Some of us are adept at living 'in the moment' – staying connected to the richness and variety of daily life. Available to love, friendship, creativity, beauty and appreciation of life in general.

Curiosity

Curious people with a 'spirit of inquiry' look below the surface and find greater granularity of understanding. They are less prey to the tides of public opinion, and more secure in their own well-informed knowledge.

Determination

Free thinkers tend to have a wider awareness of the full range of possibilities available in any given situation. They can see advantageous outcomes where some of us might only see the downside. This encouraging perspective helps them to rise above and get through hard times in a good state. The human spirit prevails, with inventiveness, resourcefulness, pragmatism and enthusiasm.

Communication tendency

Isolation was an issue for many over the first 15 months of the pandemic. It was all too easy to

withdraw. Communicators who remain in lively interaction with others help to fill the gap in human connection for themselves – and for their friends as well. They expose themselves to a variety of stories, ideas and experiences. They are reminded that they're part of a highly varied community. Their perspective is broadened. This helps them balance their perception and feel part of the whole. Maintaining this kind of lively connection both requires and enhances free thinking.

Boundary awareness

Something that's a little harder to identify, navigate and adjust to is the effects of other people's feelings and emotions. We all know what it is to walk into an 'atmosphere' of happiness, anger or fear. We notice that because it's strong and distinct, and because it's different from the atmosphere we were in before. We notice quick and powerful shifts in the emotional atmosphere around us. Gradual shifts, and subtle shifts, are harder to pick up on. When we think for ourselves, we're more likely to notice when our thoughts and feelings are being externally influenced. We can set boundaries that help us to retain our own clarity.

Rut awareness

To survive, we set up rituals and structures. These help us feel secure and in control. We can get into a rut. When we think for ourselves, we retain a metaphorical 'witnessing' consciousness. We develop the ability to catch ourselves and pull ourselves out of the rut. We remind ourselves that there are wider possibilities, and that some of them are sensible and life-enhancing.

Wealth

Some of us came into Covid times with ample reserves. We had to think for ourselves to build our positions. Generating wealth requires creativity, even if only that which is needed to maintain an existing position. In our debt-based economy, standing still is tantamount to going backwards. Without clever management, assets dwindle over time. In general, those with wealth

acquired or held on to it by making choices that paid off – and that requires agile thinking.

Access to whatever resources may be required, services accessed privately, the ability to work, comforts, and a choice of locations all provide insulation from externally driven damages.

Health

Those of us with a healthy lifestyle have done well. These days, remaining healthy requires conscious attention, and determination. Commitment to health and wellness generally indicates knowledge about how to remain healthy, and experience of taking care of oneself through sickness and health. Resistance to disease is enhanced. Informed beneficial choices can be made, with confidence.

Rewarding mission or occupation

Being occupied and challenged by something other than the current difficult situation helps distract us from the issues. We have a place to channel our energies, with observable results. Having a mission gives us a full and interesting life. We feel productive and worthwhile. Our sense of meaning is enhanced. This works best when our mission or occupation is a freely chosen expression of passion and individual intent.

Maturity

Ironically – given the profile of the virus – seniors have stood out for me as navigating this well. They have lived through all sorts of dangers, diseases, deaths and losses. They tend to have a well-developed relationship with risk and with their own mortality. This provides them with insulation from pervasive emotional and thought reactions.

Rural lifestyle

Country dwelling and Free Thinking are not synonymous. However, rural residents do tend to think for themselves. And they've benefitted from their situation. Nature remained vibrant and present throughout Covid times, unimpressed by the ups and downs of our human dramas. The possibility of wandering

outside in pleasant solitude, perhaps encountering a few sheep or a relaxed person with a dog, is calming to the soul. Fresh air, exercise, sunlight and organic produce are more readily available.

Equanimity

Equanimity is the rarest response, and perhaps the most advantageous. Somehow, a few of us found a place of conscious peace. This is not a state of denial, rationalisation or self-control. It's a state of aware self-observation, clear attention on what's occurring outside ourselves, and choosing to accept and be responsible for our own experience in the mix. Equanimity is rare because the state requires a high level of conscious exploration and evaluation.

These qualities and manifestations of Free Thinking have served as powerful antidotes to the distresses referred to in the previous section. They will serve just as well in the next phase, as we work to restore ourselves and our world.

How to Help People Think for Themselves

Here, the aim is to remind ourselves how to help others think for themselves, as a core strategy for healing, recovery and rebuilding.

I'm guessing that as a reader of this journal, you may well already know how to lead, coach, encourage and mentor others. You probably already help people think for themselves. The difference now is that we've all been steeped in a situation in Covid times that did the opposite of encouraging free thinking. You and your people are contending with that, in a world full of people also contending with it. Your leadership as a free thinker who fosters free thinking in others is more vital than ever, and more challenging than ever.

How did you learn to think for yourself?

Somehow, through all of the events and experiences of your life, you've arrived in the here and now with the capacity to think for yourself. This didn't happen overnight. It's the

result of a complex combination of many factors. Your path is unique to you. By tracking back and reflecting on how you got here, you deepen your understanding of how you became a free thinker. That understanding then provides you with the beginnings of a handle on how someone else might do the same – in their own unique way. The events and circumstances of their lives, and their personal make-up, are not the same as yours. But some of the steps and experiences they will encounter on this path may have some equivalence to yours.

What are your strengths?

Some of your qualities and capabilities are particularly supportive to you thinking for yourself. Which are those? These are the aspects of yourself that you can rely upon, no matter what. They don't require significant effort. They feel natural to you. Some of us are not keen to investigate our strengths, considering it a waste of time and egotistical. In reality, getting a good handle on your particular assembly of strengths is helpful when it comes to helping others develop their free-thinking capacities.

What are your frailties?

Under which circumstances is it less easy for you to think for yourself? We all have certain vulnerabilities to external factors that can distract us or undermine our free thinking. Some of these vulnerabilities are common to most of us. For example, extreme fear can limit our thinking capacities. Additionally, we each have our own unique 'Achilles heel'. Some of us lose our grip when shouted at. Others can't cope with pressure. Knowing your vulnerabilities enables you to work around them, and find effective ways to assist others to think for themselves.

Humility

We're all prey to 'takeover' – situations where we lose our independence of thinking and succumb to another force or agenda. One can make a point of owning up to yourself as to when and how this happens to you – even if it's extremely rare. You can resist any temptation to berate yourself for not having an iron-clad

resilience to external conditions, accept how you are, and retain the humility of recognising that we are all fallible. Have compassion for others, who are facing their own versions of ‘takeover tendency’. Help them accept themselves as they are, notice when they’ve lost themselves, and find ways to reclaim themselves.

Keep practising

Thinking for ourselves is an ongoing active process. It’s not a task that can be completed once and for all, and ticked off. The world keeps changing. As free thinkers, we continually take in new data, consider it, and make choices. This way we stay current, masters of our own destiny, in the real world. We continue to grow and develop as free thinkers. We are ‘in the game’. We have the right kind of energy and perspective to be relevant when helping others think for themselves.

Why We Don’t Want Others to Think for Themselves

The trickiest barrier is not really wanting people to think for themselves – because:

- it’s quicker to do the thinking ourselves and then direct everyone else
- we don’t trust others to come up with good ideas
- we don’t trust others to be able to think for themselves
- we think it’s irresponsible not to give people the answers
- we don’t want to have to deal with the fall-out of their mistakes
- if they can think for themselves successfully, we may become irrelevant

These are all fair points, not to be overlooked. After all, we’ve all made mistakes that could have been avoided by following someone else’s directions. And we know we had to do that in order to accomplish extraordinary things and become who we are today. Retaining our awareness of our own ‘shadow’ in this area is vital if we’re to encourage Free Thinking in others.

Why They Don’t Want to Think for Themselves

There’s an old Zen story about a worker who takes on a job moving manure from one place to another. Hard, back-breaking, smelly work. He is quite content. After several days of this, the boss, impressed with the worker’s diligence, announces that he is being promoted to sorting the potato harvest into sell/keep/discard categories. The worker quits immediately, muttering ‘Choices, choices, choices – too many choices!’. Our worker would prefer to stick with a dull and tiring task, rather than be faced with making choices all day. The story highlights the fact that making choices is work. It requires attention, consideration and effort. And every choice has a consequence – a risk of failure alongside the potential for success. Our challenge is to help people transcend their natural resistances to thinking for themselves.

‘And’, Not ‘Or’

Free thinkers sometimes disagree with majority opinions. They’re able to do this because they have weighed the options and come to their own conclusions. This doesn’t mean that free thinking equals disagreement. Far from it. In fact, some of those who disagree with majority opinions are simply following the lead of a charismatic fringe actor, without actually thinking for themselves. This distinction is important to keep in mind. Otherwise we’re in danger of encouraging people to rebel and disagree for the sake of it. Whereas the more effective strategy is to take on board all the options, majority opinions, fringe ideas and new ideas we may come up with ourselves – reflect and consider – and come to our own conclusions. Or if not conclusions, the next level of inquiry we’ve identified.

Emphasise Scope/Universality

It’s natural to focus on ourselves and our loved ones. We have a primal motivation – and some say responsibility – to take care of our family and tribe. We also know that everything affects

everything else. Not just locally, but globally. Not just for humanity, but for all living things, and for the planet itself. Advanced free thinking recognises the importance of local focus, whilst bearing in mind universal focus. By attending to both, we open our minds to a rich mix of data, and we develop the kind of creativity and wisdom that serves both locally and globally.

Bring It into the Moment

Global communication has the advantage of delivering us data we would never have had access to even ten years ago. This is useful, and with some research skill and discrimination we can become, and remain, quite well informed. Meanwhile, all the world loves a good story with plenty of drama and human interest. A pandemic is one of the classic best-selling stories – there's something for everyone, and people are riveted. Over the first 15 months of Covid times, everyone was talking, thinking, and even dreaming about the viral pandemic. It is of course important to know what's going on. The downside of the global story is the way it takes us away from present-day reality. We can become divorced from our actual experience of our daily lives, our relationships and our individual passions. We become almost addicted to the story, and forget to live our own lives. By bringing people back to the present moment and reconnecting them with the reality of their own lives, we re-introduce them to the possibility of engaging and participating as autonomous agents with their own mind.

Validate Principle, Not Position

Sometimes we don't know the answers. This can be uncomfortable: we'd prefer to have all the answers, know what to do, and get on with it. Finding deeper wisdom often requires remaining in a state of 'not knowing' for longer than we might like. When we do this we can discover the core principles by which we wish to make our choices and live our lives. Along the way we may hold off on settling our opinions and positions. This emphasis on

principle over position is freeing to the mind: it creates space for deeper inquiry and consideration – and opens us to deeper wisdom. We can encourage people to relax their drive to form opinions and take up positions; help them to investigate the principles by which they choose to live.

Remember Love

Without love, no amount of elevated thinking, discernment or freedom is worth a jot. As herd creatures, we need companionship, mutual regard and community. Keeping this in mind, as we pursue freedom of thought, helps us stay grounded and connected to meaning. Otherwise, we risk becoming overly isolated in our 'castle of truth', in a life barren of a major aspect of what it is to be a human being. We can sprinkle our encouragement of others with authentic reminders that love is a vital ingredient to the fulfilled life, alongside freedom of thought and other liberties.

Nurture

We can look for ways to encourage and support people to think for themselves on a day-by-day basis. Here are some ways to do that:

- Validate their perspective
- Communicate your perspective with respect, open-handed
- Let them know you value them regardless of their opinions
- Ask for their perspective and show you've listened
- Point out ways they have thought for themselves already
- Ask them what they like, and what they like about it. e.g. music, art, sport, film
- Discuss a variety of thought leaders with a range of perspectives
- Celebrate wild ideas and implausible concepts

Let Them See You

Let people witness your process of thinking for yourself – including changes of mind and dead ends. Your live process, while unique to you, is

the most vivid illustration you can offer people. You are not pretending that their process is the same as yours. You are demonstrating that you too are in an ongoing process of seeking truth and autonomy. You are confirming the notion that we are all somewhere on this path, and we all have the possibility to grow and develop. And by disclosing something about yourself in this way, you build trust.

When you apply these measures, you help people think for themselves. This is one of the greatest gifts we can give. You are not only helping your community navigate the next phase; you are helping them live meaningful and fulfilling lives.

Wrapping up

I've explored some of the difficult experiences people have encountered, in ourselves or in others, over the first 15 months of the Covid pandemic. I've reviewed how those who came through it fairly well are, in general, people who think for themselves. I've looked at some of the levers for helping people think for themselves, now and going forward.

Much joy and fulfilment to you and those in your sphere. May your benevolent ripple effect spread far and wide.

About the contributor



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Organisational Transformation Strategist and cat lover. She helps entrepreneurs and business owners launch themselves to the Next Level, having worked on large-scale corporate leadership and transformation programmes. With a lifelong passion for evolution and transformation, over decades she has incorporated the humanistic philosophical approach, along with the arts of physical embodiment, energy healing and strategic creativity. Today she works privately with clients; hosts a weekly podcast, 'Truth & Transcendence'; organises local conscious gatherings for free thinkers; and periodically releases thought-provoking eBooks.

SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“Our whole upbringing and education have made us afraid to think contrary to the established pattern of society, falsely respectful of authority and tradition.”

Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986)