



Making the Invisible Visible: Transforming Functional Patterns for Individual and Collective Liberation

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Teaching, reading, and writing for a post-patriarchal world

I've yet to meet anyone who doesn't want to be free from debilitating patterns that have been instilled in us through socialisation into the world of scarcity, separation and powerlessness that patriarchy has created for all of us. Clearly, the particularities of our patterns vary, based on where we were born, with what body characteristics, or into which class or religion. Clearly, some of those social locations come with certain evident benefits, both on the material plane and in terms of how much others will orient to our own needs. And with all that added complexity, none of us have escaped patriarchal socialisation unless we were born into whatever tiny islands of matri-centric societies are still present.

Changing patterns is an extremely difficult task. There is a burgeoning field of personal growth that has mushroomed in the last few decades, ranging from some version or another of therapy to a plethora of self-help processes. Many of us have benefited from one or more such approaches, and have courageously managed to liberate ourselves from this or that pattern and to find our way to increasing our individual capacity. This means, often, finding more freedom in how we respond to what life brings, as well as finding ways of relating to others that make for more satisfying relationships. As far as

I can tell, it rarely means mobilising to open up new pathways for a visionary future for humanity, beyond enhancing our own individual existence.

This is where the systemic lens can deepen our capacity to make sense of, and begin to transform, the conditions of our existence, both individually and collectively. Instead of looking at the specific familial context into which each of us was born, which is an individual lens, the systemic lens focuses on the larger phenomena within which individual variations occur. The systemic lens points us to historical developments (such as patriarchy and, later, capitalism and related events) that brought us here and, from there, to envisioning and then experimenting with pathways beyond individual liberation.

Humanity is currently facing a range of interrelated global crises. I have come to believe that if there is any possibility still of averting the extinction scenario, it will take more than many individuals shifting their individual lives. I believe that what is needed is re-learning how to live in actual togetherness with each other, shifting back from accumulation and exchange to flow and gifting, and embracing the deepest layers of non-violence.

This means different pathways, depending on where we are situated. For those of us in most of the global North, where we have been torn from land and community for centuries, it means forming communities. For those of us in communal settings within patriarchal societies, as is the case in much of the global South, where communities are often where immense pressure to go along and conform is in place, it means transforming communities that already exist. Both kinds of settings, as they currently exist, are within a profoundly painful either/or that is key to patriarchy continuing: framing choice and togetherness as mutually exclusive. This either/or and related ones are the lens through which we are socialised, and which shapes our deepest survival patterns. Within it, most of us give up our needs within what my sister Arnina calls the ‘Freedom Triangle’ (such as authenticity and choice) in order to be able to care for the needs within what she calls the ‘Security Triangle’ (such as belonging and acceptance).¹ Very few of us recognise that this raw deal can be reversed and, instead, give up on belonging and acceptance in order to maintain our capacity to choose freely. Either way we go, as little beings, leads us to choose patterns of thoughts, communication and action that shape the rest of our lives.

The consequences of this way of looking at human life are profound because it means that reintegrating choice and togetherness is a core task of any liberation work. Nor is this either/or the only one that shapes our lives. Coming together in a global web of interdependent, self-governing communities, living within the means of the planet, is likely to take major shifts such as this one – shifts that happen at individual and collective levels, and involve the material, cultural and political planes at once. This is a project of multiple years, many people, and many forms unfolding in many places, to which I am now giving the rest of my life. The bulk of my writing at present emerges from and articulates learning that is happening in one cluster of such experimentation, slowly over time.²

Understanding functional patterns

Given the complexity and interrelatedness of all that goes into visionary experimentation, it becomes progressively more difficult to document results without a significant introduction such as the one I just gave. Such an introduction provides a wider context for making full sense of any specific insights I am sharing, and reduces the likelihood that they will be understood within individualising frameworks rather than as challenging them.

In this case, understanding human patterns within a systemic lens is what made it possible for me to see that different patterns play different roles within the systems in which we live, and that this influences which ones we are more or less likely to aim to shift, with more or less support, and with different outcomes within a larger whole. Specifically, I saw that although just about any patterns that any of us have are generally costly for us, they are not necessarily costly for others, or for the whole. Some patterns serve a function outside us, even if they are at cost to us. In that sense, they are functional patterns within existing systems. And to complexify matters, given that existing systems are costly for life, moving in visionary directions may well entail disrupting patterns which are, on some level, functional.

Functional patterns are the topic of this article because I think they are less often attended to. They are more challenging than what could be seen as dysfunctional patterns to notice, to name, to be motivated to shift, and to receive support for shifting. In that narrow sense, dysfunctional patterns such as hostility or unreliability can be easier to work with. Because they have impacts on others or on the whole, we are likely to receive ongoing feedback about them from others, which provides intrinsic motivation for change. If we take on shifting our dysfunctional patterns, this is likely to support collective capacity, and we are likely to be supported in doing so.

Just about the opposite is true of functional patterns. When we begin to shift our functional patterns, there is likely to be impact on others, as

the collective field needs to adapt to new information that is, at least initially, disruptive. This means, very practically, that there is likely to be some subtle or sometimes blatant pressure on us to go back to the patterned behaviour that appears to serve the whole. This is an adult version of the process of socialisation. Until we find pathways that integrate choice within togetherness, the threat of loss of togetherness will continue to exert pressure on many of us to submit or rebel.

As a result, we are generally going to need more inner strength to transform our functional patterns. From the perspective of thinking about our global predicament, some of the consequences of this are far-reaching. When we begin to use that systemic lens, we can see how much we end up supporting the status quo when we don't prioritise shifting some of our functional patterns. Through mourning and bringing tenderness to ourselves and everyone else, we may find the vision and courage to make visible what is going on, directly or indirectly, by shifting our own behaviour. We will likely need enormous strength and robust structures of support to be able to this, because we will likely need to absorb and engage with push-back, even when what is motivating us is care for others and the whole.

Niceness and conflict avoidance

Some years ago, I started, playfully, to think of myself as someone engaged in disrupting the conversational infrastructure that sustains the status quo. I have never been a 'nice' person myself, though over the years I have supported many who recovered from niceness. Having been a truth-teller my whole life, I realised, early on in my work with people, that the journey towards integrating truth and care is not symmetrical. For someone like me, bringing in more care into how I speak truth, which has continued to unfold over many years of practising Nonviolent Communication,³ makes it easier for people to be with me, and enhances my relationships. For someone who comes at it from the other direction, walking towards more authenticity can easily lead to being less liked, and even losing relationships. Patterns of

niceness can lubricate interactions, and most of us find it easier to be around people who are 'easy-going'.

Beyond personal interactions, within groups, communities, organisations and even whole societies, patterns of niceness are very linked to conflict avoidance, which regularly leads to serious collective consequences. Before going further, it is important for me to name that what I am about to say isn't a criticism of any individual who is caught in the bind of conflict avoidance. I have endless tenderness for such patterns, given what I know about how we are socialised, and the resulting fear and discomfort that keep people in their grip. I see it as a social phenomenon, not as an individual pathology. That is precisely what the systemic lens makes possible: tenderness towards individuals, combined with massive mourning for collective impacts. In this case, one common set of impacts can look like many people turning away from instances of bullying, participating in prioritising and orienting to the needs of those with more power or privilege, or refraining from providing important feedback.

All of these perpetuate separation and impact on the many. When the very few of us who are willing to take the risk do stand up, provide feedback, or take any number of other 'unpopular' actions, it rarely leads to collective co-holding of the situation. Even as some may thank us privately, publicly we regularly remain exposed. What we do is filtered through an individual lens because the impacts on those who don't speak up remain invisible, and the situation is often seen as an interpersonal conflict instead of an opportunity for collective coming-together to attend to a systemic issue. This is, often, how conflict avoidance and niceness are functional within the status quo, and why it would take many, not just one or two people, to change these deeply ingrained patterns, and to make visible the degree to which our current status quo is not working for many who quietly absorb the impacts on them.

General manager of the universe

I encountered the term ‘general manager of the universe’ in 1995, during a game in which someone in the middle calls out some characteristic, and then everyone to whom it applies needs to find a new seat, including the person in the middle. As there is always one more person than seats, the game continues indefinitely, with lots of laughter and running, both of which are sadly rare for adults. When the person in the middle called out all the general managers of the universe, some people wondered what that meant, while some of us immediately recognised ourselves and began to look for another seat. Those with severe cases of this malady, such as myself, have been known to walk into a store or office and pick up a ringing phone to let whoever called know that there’s no one there to pick up the phone, or to re-arrange books in a library that are out of order.

I am a person who closes loops, responds to email within minutes, integrates divergent perspectives, including when I am within the divergence, and in many other ways steps in to care for needs. I have done this for decades. Since stepping into visionary leadership, building an organisation from scratch, and then another one, and growing my own capacity for integration and facilitation, my level of mobilisation only grew, to the point of being physically too much for a human body to carry. And still I continued, as many like me do.

It is only in the last few years that I began to see this as a pattern, with impacts beyond the weight on me. I have now come to see that since the patriarchal systems in which we live go against life, they cannot reach easy flow, and as a result their operations require permanent mobilisation. Most of us, most of the time, follow along, while some of us end up doing way more than our human organisms were designed for. We keep things going, even though there isn’t enough collective capacity to do so. Eventually, I came to understand that whenever any of us over-mobilises, we prop up the system and plug holes that would otherwise be exposed as capacity voids.

Tragically, the combined pattern of some of us over-mobilising while many live in pervasive disempowerment persists when we try to create visionary systems to realign with life. In my own situation, it persists within a community organisation⁴ designed, from the beginning, with distributed leadership, where all of us have been invited to initiate projects and decisions.

Three years ago, I took on a conscious practice of putting my needs on the table, exposing impacts on me, and making visible the limits of my own capacity. This is still work in progress for a number of reasons.

- De-mobilising is, in itself, going against a habit, and, paradoxically, requires its own version of mobilisation, which means I am inconsistent in doing it.
- Since over-mobilisation interacts with others’ patterns of disempowerment, the push-back is often overwhelming, as both expectations of me and narratives about me, as a leader, continue.
- I have, all too often, swung too far and too quickly in the opposite direction, leaving people flailing without sufficient guidance about how to proceed in ways that won’t repeat patriarchal patterns.
- Given that the principle of functioning within willingness and capacity is strongly held within the organisation and we have no incentives or punitive measures, we haven’t yet found reliable new pathways for people to mobilise when I don’t. This means capacity voids remain, and often enough the result of me not mobilising means things simply don’t happen.

Even within all the limitations of where we are at present, I am already seeing a clear new pathway for me, for the community, and hopefully for many others in multiple other similar situations. Patterns of over-mobilisation often reflect the presence of what I call ‘non-redundant capacity’. What I want us all to do at this difficult time of global crises is to learn or re-learn how to discern together, rather than from within separation, how much mobilisation is actually needed, as we begin to thaw the frozenness that most of us live within, where our gifts are not brought forth in service to the whole.

In closing

I have used two distinct examples to illustrate the phenomenon I refer to as ‘functional patterns’. It is only as I am wrapping up this article that I see the two as related. Specifically, the pervasive pattern of conflict avoidance is one key form that disempowerment takes. What I see as needed is the same from everyone, though the obstacles for getting there are different, depending on where we are in terms of our patterns as well as where we are in terms of social location. When we are able, both individually and collectively, to identify and make visible all the needs, all the impacts, and all the resources and capacity limits that are relevant to any decision or project, we can begin to collaborate with each other – anywhere from the most local to the most global level, to do the complex integrations necessary for solving our most pressing global crises, so that if it’s still possible, we can realign ourselves with life.

Notes and references

- 1 See our joint article ‘Parenting without obedience: a preliminary guide to intergenerational collaboration’, Miki & Arnina Kashtan, *Tikkun*, Winter 2019, for much more about these processes. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/5bfhn7hu> (accessed 29 October 2023).
- 2 All my work, at present, happens from within the Nonviolent Global Liberation community (<http://nglcommunity.org>), whose purpose is ‘to integrate nonviolence into the fabric of human life through ongoing live experiments with truth focused on individual and collective liberation’.
- 3 See Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, 3rd edn, Puddle Dancer Press, Encinitas, Calif., 2015; and the Center for Nonviolent Communication (<http://cnvc.org>).
- 4 See note 2.

About the contributor



Miki Kashtan is a practical visionary pursuing a world that works for all, based on principles and practices rooted in feminist non-violence. Miki is a founding member of the Nonviolent Global Liberation community (www.NGLcommunity.org), and has taught, consulted, and engaged with projects globally. An Israeli native with

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