

Control and Influence

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A number of years ago I had surgery for which I agreed to a spinal, rather than a general, anesthetic. In the recovery room I lay on a bed looking at my legs. I had the strange feeling that I was alive, warm, supple from my waist up. Below that there was a sense of something like stone. The lower half of my body was dead weight, There was no sensation other than a sense of extreme density and immovability.

A nurse now stood at the end of the bed and asked me to wiggle my toes. I looked at her. Then I looked at my toes. Then I looked back at her. “How do I do that?”, I asked. I had no idea how to move my toes! I *could not move* my toes! But if I had no idea how to move them now, how had they ever moved before? “Don’t worry”, she said. “When you can move them, call me.” Then she left.

I continued to stare at my feet. I could feel a first stirring of anxiety carrying the potential to grow into panic. This must be what it is like to be paralyzed! No! It isn’t *like being* paralyzed. I *am* paralyzed! Now I truly understood the term “dead weight”. How could something so incredibly heavy be moved at all, much less by a thought or a wish? Or does it move itself and I only imagine I am doing it directly? I can’t make the chair move by itself by asking it to, but I can move my body by intending to do so. But right now, I *could not move* my body regardless of wish or intention. What would life feel like, immobilized in a wheelchair, unable to lift myself, totally dependent on others to move and care for my body? It would feel just like I was feeling now! I knew the paralysis was supposed to wear off, but this taste of a different, potential reality was truly heart-stopping and mind-freezing. I was, for a short while, sharing the world of others much less fortunate than myself in this way.

I intentionally relaxed ... at least the top half of my body ... and directed my attention away from the fear, back to this interesting question. “If I don’t know how I move my body, then how has my body been moving? I knew enough anatomy to understand how the brain, spinal cord and the rest of the body were wired with nerve pathways ferrying electrical currents throughout the machinery. I knew the anesthetic had interfered with the signal between my lower and upper half. Was the electricity no longer flowing? That did not seem likely. Were the signals not being received at their appropriate locations? Was the wiring, and current, operating correctly, but “I” was blocked from interacting with them? If “I” were blocked from sending and receiving signals from my lower body, then what was “I” in relation to my body? I thought in this way as I waited for sensation to return.

In time, my legs began to feel warm and I sensed a stirring in my toes. They moved! I now tried to direct my intention for them to move ... and they moved again. Had I *made* that happen? Had I only *encouraged* them to move? I could not see a connection between the intent in my and the movement down at the far end of my body. Had I made a non-verbal *suggestion* to my toes?

How would a suggestion work? Are my toes separate entities that can listen to and choose, or not, to obey my wish? Are other parts of me, like my hands, separate entities? They clearly seem to have a life of their own, moving all day without my attention or direction ... even talking for me through gesticulations that I am usually oblivious to ... although they do perform most of the movements I wish for them to perform when I want them to.

My body obviously has a life of its own for which it does not require my participation or even awareness. My organs function, my blood components stay within required limits, food is digested and eliminated, lungs breath, heart pumps ... and perhaps tens of thousands of other metabolic and maintenance activities down to the cellular, the molecular, the atomic, and perhaps, the quantum level, carry on their responsibilities in a near infinitely complex, interactive, multi-dimensional programmed system. Where am *I* in all this?

As I lay in the recovery room, experiencing life returning to the missing half of my body, my meditation continued.

Feeling out of control Realizing I had no influence I have no personal control over what will occur ... I will just have to wait and see what fate brings to my doorstep. All this applied to my mental-emotional state during this event. Realizing I had no control over my body at the time, I relaxed and watched the drama unfold, with interest.

Up until this moment, I could “control”, or influence, the movement of my large muscles, if the signal from my brain was not interrupted. I could walk and talk and perform activity within the parameters of my body’s capacities. But for all the internal mechanisms ... I could indirectly influence them for good or ill with diet, exercise, relaxation, meditation, positive thinking, good maintenance ... but much more was beyond my influence, much less, control. I could only act responsibly towards my body and hope for a long run of good luck.

Writing about this memory today, I am now, by association, recalling an event that happened many years later. I awoke early one morning and went to the bathroom sink. Suddenly, I felt really, really awful in a way I have never experienced. I have no words to describe it. I stumbled out to the hallway and began to tell my companion that I did not feel well. I was aware my body was stooped and at an odd angle. My next awareness was of lying on my back on the floor. I had no memory of falling. I realized that if I had fallen to my right instead of my left, I would have gone down the stairs. An ambulance was being called. I did not, or could not, move. I clearly recall my inner state at this time. I was relaxed, unafraid, curious, amazed and philosophical. I understood I had no control over what was happening in my body. Nor did I have any intention at this point in trying to influence what was about to happen to me. I surrendered to the experience.

At the emergency room I was tested, hydrated and a few hours later sent home. Apparently, my kidneys had been “damaged”. This was my first warning of a medical condition that, so far, has been well managed. What was most interesting to me was how effortless it was for me to collapse and need medical care. It had happened on its own, on its timetable, indifferent to the needs or schedule of my personality. I realized, with interest, rather than fear, how easy death could be in the end. It is its own process and occurs in its own time frame. Previously I had

known, with my intellect, that this was so. Now I understood it with all of me. The emotional taste was sobriety and interest. In a strange way, there also appeared a sense of freedom. Death was something I need not worry about. It was not my responsibility. My responsibility was to help my body stay as healthy as possible as long as possible. Nevertheless, it would decline, either through time, illness or accident. Over the process of life's trajectory, I had some influence but no ultimate control.

This memory now reminds me of another. I was talking to a dear friend, and the great spiritual mentor of my life, who had recently returned from hospital after a coronary incident. He said to me, "There is nothing to dying. I've died a couple of times already and they brought me back. It just happens. Nothing to be concerned about. I didn't even know I was dead." He maintained this impartial attitude until his last breath. The day before that final moment, which I was privileged to share, he had said to a small group of us, with some difficulty as breathing was now exhausting for him, "Pay attention! Remember ... all of you will someday be where I am at this very moment!".

As I am exploring this subject, I see in my mind flashes of interactions with people over many years. There are situations I wanted to unfold in specific directions but that met resistance or outright denial from others. The love interests that were not reciprocated. The business plans that did not receive support from those who had indicated willingness to help me or the potential customers who did not show up. When I was a young man, I had to accept that my body was not talented in the ways that would allow me to perform as an athlete at a competitive level. I was naturally gifted academically in some ways and disinterested or unskilled in others. No amount of tutoring in French could help me learn that language in school.

When I look back over my "achievements" in life, I recognize that much effort, considerable luck and the help of others, combined with some natural, inherent talents in communication and reasoning, were necessary for me to gain a professional degree which matched my skills and temperament. As I look around, I realize that I found a niche where I could grow and thrive. I realize that I am unequipped, by inclination and natural ability, for most societal roles so much better filled by others.

What can I take credit for? I did not create my body or a healthy nervous system or the type of brain I carry around inside my skull. I had no choice over my genes. I did not (as far as I am aware) choose the place, time or family of my birth. Each of these factors came with advantages and disadvantages. For most of my developmental years I followed the suggestions of adults and flowed along the life structure I found myself occupying. As I grew, choices began opening for me, but all within the basic framework accompanying my place in the life around me. I suppose, I could give myself credit for listening to some advice, occasionally making reasonable choices and being a fairly responsible, diligent student. But those qualities may also reflect my basic character. Could I have really done otherwise?

We have all heard some people say, and perhaps we have thought so ourselves, that, "If I can do it anyone could do it". But is that true? How many variables of innate skill, or lack thereof, chance encounters, the luck of the draw, timing have combined into the shape of my character and life?

I can give myself credit for developing some interests and skills that I seem to have been born with. I also have to take responsibility for not developing others, allowing them to lie fallow due to demands of life, insecurity, lack of support from others, laziness or timing. I think now of life as being like a game of cards. We are each dealt a hand. We can make a few exchanges within the rules of the game, but we have to play with the basic hand with which we began. We can try to be creative about what we have, we can calculate and play the odds and hope for good luck, but our possibilities are not limitless. What can I do with what I have been given? What am I willing to risk? Yet, even risk-taking may be an inherent predisposition, greater for some than others. Can I take credit for a quality that came with me at conception?

This reminds me of the several variations on a parable about three servants, each given one “talent” by their master who is leaving on a trip. When he returns, he asks each to account for what they did with their “talent”. The first reports that the talent was invested and returned tenfold. The second reports an investment that returned a five-fold profit. The third servant hands back the single, original talent, saying that he did not want to risk losing it. The master rewards those who made something from what they were given and punishes the one that did not risk and leaves him with nothing.

The River

At this late point in my existence, the sense of life now feels more like a river, a flow of momentum which carries me, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, sometimes smoothly, sometimes turbulently, always moving... moving ... continually without ceasing. What can I control, what can I influence, in this impartial current that carries not just me, but us all? I have learned to be able, most of the time, to keep my head above water. I’ve learned to be able, at times to float on my back and watch the scenery. If I am aware that some whitewater lies ahead (and I am often taken by surprise), I can try to maneuver around, or through it, without swallowing too much water.

Yet, there has been something else at work. There are interests and inclinations that have been part of my subjective world since childhood. My idiosyncratic attraction to mystery has sensitized me to certain qualities in the water that carry the taste of this interest. When encountering ‘molecules’ of these qualities in the current, I have repeatedly swum towards them and allowed them to carry me into eddies and side-flows in the river. These repeated inclinations, although perhaps also determined by my inherent nature, have altered my path from the main channel, deviating over a lifetime, from other possibilities that would have produced a different life.

This river, in addition to all the idiosyncratic possibilities that lead to so many different types of lives for different people, seems to fork in a fundamental way that diverts those it carries towards different destinations, not just life-styles. The vast majority of people seem carried towards lives of external focus, building achievements or failures in social, financial, political activities. They may mark the places they have been, the adventures they have had, the people they have met, the wonderful meals they have consumed at wonderful restaurants as the milestones of their lives.

Most of us ask, “What have you *done* in your life? Where have you *been*? What have you *seen*? *Who* have you known?” The questions, “What have you *learned*? How have you been *changed*? Have you a sense of *purpose* about your life?” are of a different nature. The former highlight activities. The latter focus on meaning.

The type of questions, the type of milestones one marks on the calendar of one’s life indicate which fork of the river one is carried within. The lesser branch carries its passengers into a life focused more on exploration of the subjective internal world. Interest is more focused on the pursuit of the meaning of existence, both personal and in general. Swimmers in this channel are drawn to exploring the mystery of their inner experiences rather than seeking fame, fortune in the world.

To enter and remain in this branch requires an objective, rational confrontation with imaginary wishes for control and certainty and with illusions about one’s capacity to influence people or events in most situations ... *and* have the outcome be what was wanted ... *and* without unexpected collateral reactions.

Loss of Illusion

Accepting an unwanted reality is a difficult meal to swallow. It is a kind of death ... the death of a belief, a hope, a wish. The pattern of acceptance follows a basic format regardless of the loss being grieved. It begins with a long period of *Denial*, followed by intermittent, shallow, intellectual recognition of the problem, but still with a continuing attempt to cajole and manipulate life into correcting course back towards one’s aim. In grief counseling, this stage is called *Bargaining*. When it becomes apparent that the “plan” is not working, that one is not exerting effective control, the mood will alternate between stages of *Sadness* and *Anger*. People can get trapped in any of these phases or a closed looping back and forth without resolution. The resolution lies in the fifth stage called *Acceptance*.

Acceptance does not mean one likes the outcome. Rather it is an acceptance of reality. This is the hand I have been dealt. I wish it were any other hand but this, but this is the one I must play, as best I can. Many people will take a short cut into *Resignation* and believe they have accepted, but this is a deception. Resignation is tinted with sadness and anger. Acceptance has more the taste of sadder but wiser, or relief that the ordeal is over, or to discover oneself finally with an answer as to why one’s attempts to control outcome failed. They failed because it couldn’t be altered. Or, even if maybe, I could have said or done something to change it, whatever that might have been did not happen. So, this is what I have now whether I like it or not. It cannot be changed. Our choice is to live in acceptance and make the best of it or to live in denial and continue to suffer a Quixotic mission in futility.

Which Branch?

Which Branch of the River is carrying me? Well ... what motivates me? We can talk about people in general, but the location of any real potential efficacy lies within each of us. So, as I do with myself, I ask you, dear reader, to explore along with me this question of external and internal efficacy, its implications, its limitations and what its pursuit may distract us from confronting.

Ask yourself, “*when, in my life, have I had the desire to control people, events, activities?*” All right. That obviously would be far too long a list for most of us to compose. How about two or three (or more if you wish) memories of situations where you tried, or always try, or at least wish, to make certain of the outcome? In reviewing these memories, now hopefully with additional understanding, ask yourself:

What was I trying to control?

How many components, people, timing, unforeseen factors would I have had to have complete mastery over to exert control?

Was control possible?

Perhaps you would say, “No. I wasn’t trying or expecting to control. But I did want to influence the situation so that it would turn out the way I wanted it to.” All right.

What was your plan for influence?

How many variables would have to fall into place for your influence to be accepted and the outcome conform to your vision?

If you were only trying to influence and not control, what would you have rated the likelihood of success ... 80%, 20%, 10%?

How disappointed were you at the time when things didn’t go as you hoped? If your answer is any more than “mildly”, I would suggest you were hoping for control and only pretending to yourself that you would be satisfied with an attempt at influence.

As you look back now on your examples, ask yourself if there was a degree of wishful thinking in your estimation. What role did luck, the always present wild card, play in the outcomes?

If things did work out as you planned, did you give yourself credit for this accomplishment or did you thank your good luck that everything, including how you approached the situation, worked out as you had hoped. Sometimes it does and sometimes it does not. What makes the difference?

The Role of Fear

Take a moment now and recall the experience of feeling out of control ... realizing you have no influence ... recognizing that what will happen depends mostly on luck, that you have no personal control over what will occur ... that you will just have to wait and see what fate brings to your doorstep.

Why do we all seem, innately, to fear what we call “loss of control”? What is so disconcerting to realize that, we may, sometimes, have degrees of influence, but can rarely force an event, or person, or relationship to be what we want it to be if there is any resistance.

The first, and natural, reason is because we are programmed to try to survive. All life is programmed to survive. Survival must be long enough in duration for the creature to produce a copy of itself. It must avoid death until its first re-creation can occur. Then, its primary purpose completed, the organism continues to eat, sleep and procreate until its functions weaken and it stops living ... or it is eaten by something else in need of food so that it can also survive and procreate. The energy transformed through eating, and then redistributed through elimination, is the currency of Life, the continuous feast of exchange that powers the activity of all Living. To survive, the organism has to negotiate its environment, the supports and the dangers. To protect itself it is born with programmed strategies to increase its chances of a favorable outcome, moment to moment, for as long as possible. Does it have control, mastery, absolute power over the dangers in its surroundings? Of course not. It must depend on its built-in strengths and a great deal of luck. In fact, Nature overproduces the amount of new life because of the astronomical attrition rate. Just like the one sperm in millions that fertilizes the egg, only a few of the vast many survive to adulthood and breeding capacity.

As we have bodies, and our bodies are animals, this built-in survival program comes also with our original programming. Our autonomic-nervous-system produces hormones that activate or relax our animal-body so that it has the necessary energy to fight, flee or relax as the situation requires. Of course, we would want to control the degree of threat and maximize pleasurable experiences for our body. “No means no”! “Yes. Scratch a bit to the left, please.”

If our body functions properly, we can make it move where we want to go, to carry us around the landscape and perform tasks, with its hands, arms, legs, that *we, our mind*, wishes to accomplish. We can “control” our movements dependent on our strength, co-ordination and physical training. But then, there are times this is less so, i.e. when tired, distracted, weak, clumsy, ill. For many of us, our body will, at some time, break a bone, have an organ malfunction, have a stroke. Then, where is our “control”? How could I have controlled my body before and now I cannot control it? What has changed? Perhaps, I never actually controlled it, but rather influenced it to follow my wish. Perhaps my relationship with my body is not the master-servant arrangement I believe, but rather a symbiotic partnership between two very different entities intertwined with each other in order to become more through the bending than either can be by itself.

Try this experiment. Look at your arm. Silently, in your mind, say the word, “Rise”. What happens? Now, look at your arm and say aloud, “Rise”. What happens? Now, *allow* your arm to rise. How did that happen? Did *you do* it? If you say, “Yes, I made my arm rise”, then explain to yourself how your intention connected to your arm.

Control

The origin of the word, “control” means to check or verify accounts. This original understanding suggests the quality of attentive, impartial observation, not the implication that the “controller” should tip the scales to force the accounts to be what is wished for. Over time, this word has transformed, as indicated by some of its synonyms: power, authority, command, mastery,

supremacy, domination, regulation. It is this current transformation of the concept that we torment ourselves, and others, with today.

How does one obtain such power over others or over events or natural occurrences? Obviously, in relationships determined by fear, violence and intimidation, most will often choose the path of least resistance and fall into resentful or fearful compliance. This kind of control can be exercised over people ... but, isn't acquiescence still dependent on a surrender, a willing compliance, even if one is giving up in despair? History, both communal and personal, is filled with stories of those few who refused to submit and were either destroyed, escaped or formed a rebellion. So, the person with the capacity to use force only gains control through assent, even begrudged and compelled, whether it is given by an individual, a small group or an entire nation. Realizing that this type of control must be maintained by sufficient fear to sap any active resistance, this power possessor is always afraid of losing control, losing the ability to frighten and coerce others ... pushing them to the point of having nothing else to lose. This produces a spiraling descent into more and more desperate measures to crush the soul and will of others to prevent them from rebellion or escape.

What about wishing to be able to control events which are not dependent on the activity and choices of people? If I have a machine I understand how to operate, I can control its functions ... until it stops working. But it was designed for me to be able to control. It is not "natural". What is left then but Nature and random luck? Can we control, totally "master", random events to force them to obey our will? This was the hope of less technological cultures who prayed and sacrificed to the gods for fair weather, good crops, the destruction of their enemies. Perhaps if one's tribe had a seer who could foretell events, better choices, better bets on the future, could sometimes be made. Many today retain private rituals or prayer or affirmation or good luck charms, so soothe and serve the same purpose. The activity of human-kind can alter climate and landscape, river channels can be dug to redirect the flow of water, but does this give us control over the seasons, storms, earthquakes, volcanos, tidal waves, the coming and going of comets, eclipses, falling meteors ... or the unforeseen consequences of felling the forest or altering the river? Do we have protection from these phenomena or are we hoping to chance that we, personally, are not in the way when they manifest?

Well, what about "self-control", total mastery, complete command of my moods, my thoughts, my reactions and impulses, likes and dislikes, habits? Do I never find thoughts or music in my head that I did not invite and do not welcome but that will not go away when commanded? Do I never fall into moods, get caught up in attitudes, have mixed feelings? Where is my control in the emotional-psychological realm? How easy is it for me to permanently change a habit by

willing it so? I can, if I choose to, focus my attention for a time on something of my choice, but this effort needs to be continually maintained as attention is flighty and easily drifts. If I can't even control my mind and moods, why am I even using this concept, this word, "control."

Influence

Perhaps a more reasonable aim might be to acquire "influence." Where the word "control" is hard, rigid, fixed, the word "influence" is softer, more liquid, more flowing. In fact, its origin from 14th century Medieval Latin is "influentia" meaning emanation of power from the stars and from Latin, "influere" meaning to flow into.

Influence implies a connection, a channel between parties, where at least one of them is open to the emanations of the other. In allowing you to have influence with me, I am opening myself to your suggestions, ideas, motivations, because I respect you and value the emanations towards me from your inner world. I am hoping that by being open to you, you will in return be open to me, or I am afraid of the consequences if I don't accept what you want of me. If I don't value or trust you or want what you are offering, I am not open to your offers of influence and there is nothing you can do to force me without doing violence.

Influence seems much more realistic as an aim. I can try to cultivate influence. Everything and everybody is a part of one larger Whole. To one degree or another, everything and everyone is entangled in the web of existence. Can I flow with, flow through, people and events around me instead of trying to push, shove and steer the currents? Do I have the courage to just attempt to steer myself rather than try to force a resolution, to renounce the fantasy of security stimulated by the illusion that I can control life?

Reflection

I am now reflecting back over my life. Were there any people (circumstances) who had absolute power over me? Of course, when I was a child, my parents, guardians and other adults could, potentially, do with me anything they wished as I was small, weak and without their mental, emotional and physical capacities. We all start out this way. Whether our experience is wonderful, benign or negative, will be a strong factor in our attitude towards the goal of control.

In particular, experiential negative qualities from childhood may increase a need to maximize a sense of influence, if not control, later in life. Or, instead, we may develop a defensive sense of futility to protect us from the pain and humiliation of crushed hope.

A number of years ago, I realized that if I had had a different personality, I would have experienced a different childhood, even with the same parents, siblings and outer structure. Why? Because different personality types tend to make different interpretations of the meaning of events. By nature, an accommodating type of personality, my experience with power, control and influence has been ambivalent. So, I ask you, dear reader, to imagine yourself with a different personality, more or less assertive, more or less risk taking, more or less inquisitive, more or less sensitive, more or less introverted or extroverted how would this change have influenced the way you have experienced life ... and yourself? How might these differences have changed the way you relate to the wish for control or influence?

Conclusion

What, who, do I want to control? What can I control? What can I influence? Why do I feel authorized to make such efforts? For what reasons?

What can I take credit for? What do these “credits” get me? Do I store them in a vault? Do I cash them in? What is this credit currency? Who is the audience for my credit ... others ... myself?

What is the *fear* in my fear of not being in control? Is it fear of loss of prestige, personal or political power (is there a difference)? Is it fear of unwanted changes in my life pattern, in relationships? Do I believe I can ward off illness, aging, dying?

Where are such attempts useful and natural? Where are they invented and not part of nature?

To believe we can control, completely, continuously, correctly, without anything unexpected occurring is a delusion too far. We tend to deny that we have such fanciful, illusionary thinking. However, our reactions of hurt, surprise, disappointment, irritation that well up with the frustration of thwarted plans, reveal the reality of our subconscious hopes and fears and belie our rationalizations. Our reactions when things don't work out as we wished, demonstrates a failure to recognize that nothing and no one happens in a vacuum. Everything is part of other systems larger and smaller, each of which is also entangled in other systems larger and smaller. To believe in ultimate, frictionless control is to fail to recognize that any attempt to control or influence occurs in a field connected with other fields. There are many other things in these fields than my agenda. When I move my attempt to control into a field, I meet everything and

everyone, else there who may be unaware of, indifferent or hostile to my attempts. Every action brings an equal and opposite reaction. Whatever was neutral in the field before my effort began, may become active when touched by my effort. It must be accounted for. To believe in control over life is to deny that resistance is a natural part of the give and take of existence and will appear whenever touched by the pressure of an effort to change something.

The reality is that we did not create ourselves. We find ourselves awakening inside vulnerable biological bodies that will inevitably suffer from illness, injury, death. All the people we love and cherish and want to keep safe and with us forever ... are living inside vulnerable, temporary bodies also. Each moment is on loan to us. There is no certainty other than fluctuations in pleasure and suffering and then eventual death. We all hang by a thread through each passing second. To find an attitude that will allow one to flow with the current of life, enjoying the joy and grieving the grief, without self-pity, self-recrimination, without anger or fear, would be to practice the art of living while allowing the river to carry to carry us to an unknown destination determined by whichever branch we have followed.

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