

Chapter 5

We Have Met The Enemy, and He Is Us

*The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes,
but in having new eyes.*

Marcel Proust

I (Steve) live in Minnesota. Early every fall, I have fine intentions of getting a huge supply of firewood ready for the long winter. One chilly November Sunday afternoon, after many weeks of procrastination, I decided that enough is enough. It was definitely time to get the job done, especially since a big snow storm was on the way. I also wanted to watch the Minnesota Vikings football game on television, but I decided that the firewood must come first.

As I sat on the couch looking out the window at the place in the yard where a winter's worth of cut and neatly stacked firewood should have been, I noticed a squirrel gathering acorns. I thought, "That squirrel is doing the same thing I'm about to do. He's getting ready for winter." Then I lingered a while longer to think about how lucky I am to be a human. "After all," I thought, "I have intelligence and foresight. I can use my mind to figure out exactly what I should do. All that little squirrel can do is run on instinct. He probably doesn't even have a clue about why he's picking up acorns and storing them away. He just does it."

Then I watched the football game.

Including the entire half-time show.

And the entire post-game show.

And then I decided that since it would soon be dark and it was already snowing, I might as well watch the next game, too.

It hit me: The human mind is magnificently designed, but only to help us do half the job.

The whole job is doing whatever it takes to get what we need and want out of life. The first half of the job is figuring out what to do. The second half of the job is doing it.

When it comes to the first half of the job, the human mind really shines. We humans are experts at figuring out what we should do.

For example, there were lots of reasons why putting up firewood for the winter was the right thing for me to do on that Sunday afternoon in November. I wanted to save money on heating; I was convinced it would be good for me to spend some time swinging an axe and working up a sweat; I looked forward to a sense of accomplishment; and I knew that it would be a whole lot easier to do the work before the snow fell than after it was here.

My mind did a great job of helping me do the first half of the job. It enabled me to figure out the best course of action - to make one tidy decision that took into account a host of needs, wants and realities: Put up the firewood this afternoon.

But when it came to the second half of the job - going ahead and actually doing what I'd figured out I should do - my mind took a nose dive.

Just ask my wife. Or ask the electric company that sold us lots of electricity for heating that winter. Or ask the squirrel, who did the whole job, while I did only half.

The Ultimate Irony

If we humans are so intelligent, so sophisticated, and so advanced, how come a squirrel can do a better job of following through?

The answer, we figured, must lie in the way our guidance system works.

Every living thing has a guidance system. At its simplest, a guidance system consists of the functions and processes that cause an organism to do whatever it must do to survive and reproduce. Even the dumbest single-celled microorganism has a guidance system. It's made up of a few chemically triggered reflexes or switches that steer and propel the little bugger away from danger and toward food.

Most guidance systems, like the squirrel's, operate largely on the basis of pre-programming or instincts. Mr. Squirrel collects acorns for the winter because he's pre-programmed to react automatically to certain environmental conditions by gathering and storing nuts. The mere presence of these conditions triggers the right behavior.

An instinct-based guidance system is simple and reliable. Expose Mr. Squirrel to the right conditions, and he'll start gathering nuts. It will happen every time because he was programmed at the factory to function this way. The knowledge that gathering nuts for the winter is the right thing to do is hard-wired into his guidance system.

Having hard-wired knowledge means there's no need for Mr. Squirrel to watch a video on how to prepare for the winter. No need for him to check with the Squirrel FDA before planning his menu. No need for him to send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Pueblo, Colorado, to request a pamphlet on the best way to store acorns. Mr. Squirrel doesn't have to figure out what to do. The knowledge he needs was installed at the factory.

Automatically knowing what to do is not the only feature of an instinct-based guidance system that distinguishes it from ours. Besides automatically knowing what to do, Mr. Squirrel is automatically motivated to do it. If he should collect nuts for the winter, he will collect nuts for the winter.

Being hard-wired to act means that there's no need for Mr. Squirrel to listen to a motivational speaker or a lecture from his mother-in-law about being a good provider. He doesn't need any inspiring. He's always psyched up to do the right thing.

Mr. Squirrel's guidance system automatically does the whole job. Yes, having an instinct-based guidance system means always automatically knowing what to do and always automatically having the drive to do it. It means always following through.

There's only one drawback to having a guidance system that operates largely on the basis of built-in knowledge and pre-programmed responses: It's not very flexible. It doesn't allow its owners to tailor their behavior precisely to the circumstances they face. And this can sometimes be a real problem.

For example, I once watched Mr. Squirrel's cousin make the mistake of storing nuts in a tree that the power company was about to cut down. I watched the power company survey the area and then paint a yellow stripe on each of the trees in a long row. As soon as workers started to cut down the first of the marked trees, I knew exactly what was up. The squirrel didn't have a clue. Operating on automatic pilot, he continued to fill a pantry that would be gone long before winter.

Living things that are guided primarily by instinct pay a price for the convenience of always knowing what to do and always being motivated to do it. They follow through even when they shouldn't! Yes, the price of hard-wired absolute confidence is sometimes automatically doing the wrong thing.

What Makes The Human Guidance System So Special?

Enter the unique and advanced human guidance system. In many respects, it's evolution's crowning achievement. Ironically, we discovered, it's also the source of our follow through woes.

Instead of automatically-tripped switches, the human guidance system relies on the richness of thought to analyze conditions, draw from experience, and use logic to figure out exactly what we should do to get what we need and want out of life. It's designed to enable us to do the very best job of any species of matching our actions to the specific conditions we face and the specific objectives we set.

Because we can figure things out, we can survive - even thrive - under an extraordinarily wide range of conditions. We've figured out how to live in extremely hot climates, extremely cold ones, extremely wet and extremely dry ones. We've figured out how to breathe under water and to explore outer space; to make deserts bloom; to generate electricity to make life easier; to treat and prevent serious illnesses and dramatically prolong life; and to sacrifice now so that later on we can enjoy retirement, send our kids to college, or have enough firewood to stay inexpensively warm during a long and cold Minnesota winter.

But wait, it gets even better! Not only does each of us figure things out individually, our guidance systems are, in a sense, connected to

one another. Our societies generate and disseminate tons of guidance for us all to use. Members of our species dedicate themselves to figuring out what we all should and shouldn't eat, what drugs we should and shouldn't take, what we should do to stay healthy and happy, to get rich, to be attractive to members of the opposite sex, to play better tennis or bridge, and to find the most environmentally-friendly laundry detergent.

Individually and collectively, we humans generate a never-ending supply of intelligent guidance. We get smarter all the time about how to live. No other species can come close to our ability to use intelligence to decide on the best course of action.

If the human guidance system sounds impressive, it is. There's only one problem: It wastes much of the intelligent guidance it produces.

That's right, it wastes it.

The Trouble With the Human Guidance System

You'd assume that a guidance system that's beautifully designed to produce intelligent guidance would also be beautifully designed to use it. That would make sense.

What we discovered, however, is that the human guidance system doesn't make sense. It isn't designed logically.

It draws on the most incredibly advanced capabilities to give us first-rate guidance in the form of good intentions. Then it lets the guidance go to waste by allowing us to ignore it.

Think of a highly skilled physician who draws on a wealth of expertise to give his patient precisely the right advice. Then think of a patient who lets the advice go to waste by failing to follow it. Thanks to the illogical way the human guidance system is designed, we are at once the good physician and the bad patient!

Life would be very different if the human guidance system were designed logically; if we were as good at following intelligent guidance as we are at producing it.

We'd always automatically behave in accord with our intentions. If we decided we should do it, we would do it.

All you'd have to do, for example, is decide that it's best for you to eat low-calorie/low-fat foods. The case would be closed. You'd automatically love alfalfa sprouts and hate potato chips. If you decided that you should exercise regularly, you'd just do it. You'd not only think,

"I really should exercise," you'd automatically feel like exercising. If you decided to spend three hours a day working on a book, playing with your kids, painting the den, or putting up firewood, you'd just do it. Nothing would stop you.

What Was Mother Nature Thinking?

Having a guidance system that does only half the job, qualifies us for a rather dubious distinction: We humans are arguably the only living things that don't consistently do what we know is best. Accompanying our extraordinary capacity to figure out what we should do, is a rather perplexing inclination to often do something else instead.

Why in the world, we wondered, would evolution take our species so far down the path of relying on intelligent guidance without going all the way?