

From the Kitchen

30 September 2009

The world is crazy until we make sense of it. We spend our lives making sense of it, giving it meaning. The problem for each of us is that, once meaning had been ascribed, the world seems to conform to that meaning and we relate to it as if that *is* the way it is.



What is difficult for us to grasp, is that the person standing next to us probably lives in a different world, shaped by whatever meaning they have placed on it. I'm not suggesting that this is wrong or bad (we can't do otherwise), or that we should remove all meaning from our experience (we can't).

Few people would survive in an undifferentiated world. They would, for instance, not know what is edible and what is poisonous; what can be cuddled and what will eat them. My dog lying at my feet is harmless to me; a snake in the same position may not be.

Some of the differentiation comes from our growing experience and much of it comes from what others tell us is so. It is with the latter that we run into trouble. How we ourselves experience the world teaches us things directly, while what others tell us is anything but direct; it may not even be the result of their own direct experience, or even anyone else's. We soon start to relate to the world on the basis of others' beliefs of how it is.

There are many results of this. One can surmise that most conflicts, whether interpersonal, local or global, are probably based on a failure to recognise that the argument is the result of different meanings placed on the world. It is likely that many people's growing apprehension of street violence may be the result of perceptions from increasing media coverage and graphic images in news bulletins and newspapers, rather than any personal experience.

There are many people whose view of the world is based almost purely on belief, usually from religious teachings – hence the unresolvable arguments between evolutionists and creationists. I wonder to what extent the arguments between those who agree with climate change predictions and those who don't, are based on belief only. Recently a professor of medicine extolled the wisdom of being vaccinated against swine flu on the basis that this is the belief of the majority of Australian doctors.

As parents, we often find our beliefs about the world, which we want to pass on to our offspring, clashing with the beliefs of the young people's peers and those promulgated by their choice of media. Those gaps in world views often continue as we and *our* parents grow into advanced adulthood.

An interesting perceptual experiment is to sit in a train carriage and watch how the next carriage swings back and forth while yours stays still. To the people in the other carriage it's the other way around.

How can we educate youngsters to realise that their world may be different from everyone else's and to accept this and negotiate their way through the consequences? Part of doing this is to help them develop a strong sense of themselves together with a willingness to keep learning from others and to have the humility to allow another's truths. What we need in our world are leaders and teachers who have shakeable beliefs, and who are willing to discover from time to time that one or more of those beliefs is not tenable; and then have the wisdom and courage to change.

It's not simply a case of being right or wrong. Any view I may have of the world may become untenable because the world is constantly changing. If I cannot change my beliefs about that world, I'm in trouble. If too many people exhibit such inflexibility, we are all in trouble. This manifests in our current predicament relating to a rapidly changing environment, which has global consequences. It also manifests in the many medical professionals who for decades refused to believe that stomach ulcers are more likely to be the result of a bacterial infection than of stress, despite 'good' evidence. After all, it *was* the opinion of the majority of doctors ...

Of course, there are times when it pays to accept someone else's statement that the world has changed. I would be crazy to reject my wife's timely phoned advice that Nepean Highway traffic is at a standstill; I would be wise to take an alternative route rather than say, "I have always had a good run on the highway, so why should today be any different?" It is a shame that too many people relate to the world in just such an inflexible way. If this only affected them, it would be a shame for them. However, it affects all of us, because the world *is* changing – you'd better believe it.