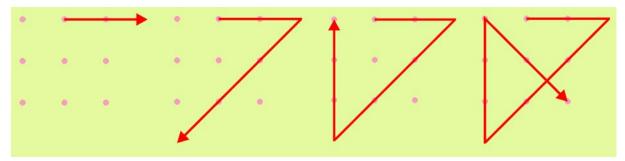
From the Kitchen

29 June 2011



Did you manage to solve the puzzle in the last post? Did you have to change your thinking to solve it? If you did not manage to solve it and you now look at the solution presented above, can you discover something in your thinking that stopped you? Did you find an entirely different solution?

Thinking allows us to make connections where there may appear to be none. Facts are often accepted at face value, separately.

An example of an area where thinking could reap important results is the discovery that proteins emit microwaves¹. Why do they do this? Is it 'deliberate' or a by-product of some process they go through? Are proteins sensitive to microwave transmissions? If so, what effect does this have on their function or their health? Could this be a mechanism for good or bad effects of mobile phones on our health?

Such questions could lead to a raft of possible answers, the truth or relevance of which can then be investigated. The area of mobile phones and the possible effects of their use on our health, is one where concerns are often greeted with easy, pat answers. These answers, unfortunately, usually come from those with vested interests in the communications industry. However, there are also many scientists who fail to ask such questions. Why? Where does the failure come from?

A good example of people failing to ask questions is illustrated by the following. Some years ago it was noticed that workers on upper floors of a university building in Melbourne had a higher than normal rate of certain cancers. There were mobile telephone towers on the roof of the building and the conclusion was quickly drawn that these were the cause of the cancers. A side issue here is that the print and electronic media picked up this story immediately and also that the conclusion about the towers indicated a shift in popular thinking; the concerted campaigns by concerned people for many years to point out the possible adverse health effects of mobile telephone towers appeared to be getting through. Another issue is that as a result of the wide-spread publicity given to the cancer rates and the conclusions drawn about the towers, the trade union representing electrical workers said it would place a ban on any work, anywhere, in which its members would be exposed to (short-term) microwave energy. This was a knee-jerk reaction with no thinking involved.

An expert in investigation of (and thinking about) the effects of electromagnetic frequencies (EMFs) on heath, investigated by doing some sensitive measuring of EMFs in and around the university building. He concluded that there was insufficient energy coming into the building from the transmission towers to have any affect. However, the top two floors of the building were packed with electrical equipment that was putting out a high level of EMFs. Whether this could be the case of the high incidence of cancers in the workers is not known. But this story illustrates a tendency to look for quick answers to badly formulated or even unasked questions. Most people fail to think.

There are many examples of people not thinking or not thinking well. The annual 'Darwin Awards'² are given for people who have removed themselves from the gene pool through engaging in activities that kill them or otherwise remove their ability to procreate. Not thinking things through can have disastrous consequences.

Although not disastrous, there are other examples of not thinking through to a point where action could be taken to improve our lot. There have been a number of instances of doctors going on strike

for a protracted period in a number of countries. One example is a strike in Israël, as a result of which the *British Medical Journal* reported that it may have been good for the population.³ Similar stories exist in relation to doctors' strikes in Canada, the USA, Colombia and other countries. The death rate appears to have dropped during each strike and to have risen again when the doctors went back to work.

There has been some research done that could point to reasons for the drop in deaths. Also, there have been articles in major medical journals pointing out the large number of people in certain countries who die as a result of medical interventions in hospitals; in one study in the USA, deaths from negative effects of prescription drugs amounted to over four deaths per ten thousand of the population in one year.⁴ Per head of population, the figures are similar in Australia and the UK

Is anyone thinking beyond these raw figures? Is anyone wondering why this is happening? Does anyone ask why we accept these deaths? Is anyone thinking about this information – really thinking?

We can immediately see that this death rate is far greater than the death rate associated with the use of motor vehicles (around three per fifty thousand each year in Victoria). Governments and communities are doing a lot of work to reduce the latter, but I am not aware of much being done to reduce the former. What does it take to have people say "enough!"?

With the doctors' strikes, what caused the drop in death rate? There have been some suggestions. An obvious suggestion is that, with doctors on strike, there were no deaths due to iatrogenic (doctor-caused) reasons. Another, very interesting suggestion (in relation to a doctors' strike in California) was that people who were ill or old could not die (in their own minds) if there were no doctors around.

What I find most interesting is that, while suggestions such as those above were made, no-one seems to have asked such questions as: "what does this teach us?" and "can we learn anything from this that will allow people to live healthier, longer lives?"

While there is so much going on in the world that presents such a rich opportunity to ask questions, there is a widespread failure to make use of these opportunities.

There is also a worrying drop in the amount of pure research being done. Pure research is about asking questions such as, "what will happen if I do ...?", and then repeating the question over and over as the researcher follows an unknown path. Increasingly, research is done with a set of preconceptions and to obtain a particular, defined result. We seem to have forgotten that so much of what has been discovered in the past was achieved by people who observed something and asked 'why?' or 'why not?' One example is the discovery of penicillin; another is the discovery that a bacterium can be the cause of stomach ulcers.

Thinking and asking questions allows you to respond to what is going on around you in a way that could make a difference. If you respond to situations without thinking, you do so through your emotions and your prejudices. While emotional responses are valid, they are not productive on their own and will generally not bring about useful action. It is the people who think, and especially those who think outside what is expected, who foment change. For individuals, societies, institutions and businesses to survive and thrive, they need to embrace change, and thinking makes this possible.

Thinking for yourself allows you to be a more active participant in society. It allows you to live creatively and to teach your children a way of surviving the sometimes stultifying environment of school. Thinking allows you to make sense of what goes on around you, locally and in the wider world. It helps you make better choices and should lead you to enjoy a more fulfilling life.

- 1. New Scientist, 2336; 30/3/2002, p.12
- 2. http://www.darwinawards.com
- 3. *British Medical Journal* 2000;320:1561 (10 June) and at http://bmj.bmjjournals.com/cgi/content/full/320/7249/1561?ck=nck
- 4. Starfield, B. (2000, July 26). "Is US health really the best in the world?" *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 284(4), 483-485.