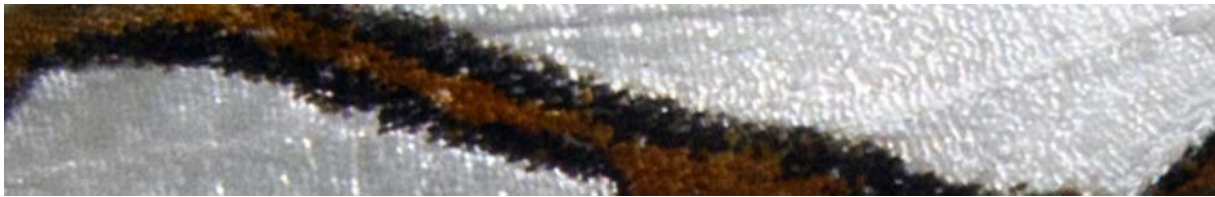


From the Kitchen

4 July 2012



No matter how much a person believes s/he lacks prejudice, there are very few people who would not, from time to time, find themselves surprised that a person they see or hear is able to do something unexpected. Expecting that someone will or will not do something is a form of prejudice – a prejudging of a situation. It may be the most benign form of prejudice, yet prejudice it is.

We expect people to be able to do certain things, or not be able to do things, based on what we see and hear. We may expect someone who speaks with a slow drawl not to be able to hold a conversation about complex ideas and we may well be surprised if that person holds forth on the shortcomings of string theory. Think about it – what if you had not heard of Stephen Hawking and you met him at a party and then heard him expound his theory of black holes and what they teach us about the origins of the universe? If you saw Francesca Martinez stumbling her way onto a stage, you may well be surprised to hear her English accent as she exercises her rapier-sharp wit and deep understanding of social and political issues. Disabled? Who's disabled?

There are many stereotypes that inform our beliefs and, therefore, our responses to people and situations. Stereotypes once helped us survive: wolf = danger, possum = food, black berries = poison, red berries = food. And there are exceptions – a wolf cub may grow up to be your companion, a possum may scratch and bite you, some black berries are fine and some red ones are not. Large, hairy man wearing black leather festooned with a skull and angry slogans = danger; or he may be one of the many men, thus attired, who distribute toys to hospitalised children every year. A frail-looking old lady may pull a gun on you and demand your valuables.

Stereotypes lead to prejudice. They become destructive of self and others when they are adhered to slavishly. Slavish adherence leads to fundamentalism. Fundamentalism dispenses with the need to think and becomes the only reason ever needed by the fundamentalist for any action or argument. Fundamentalism is one extreme end of a spectrum on which all our behaviour and thought exists. We all measure every experience, every encounter and every situation against what we already know. How we then relate to whatever or whomever we are faced with lies on a continuum which at one end has us behave almost like automatons and at the other end has us behave as if this is a novel situation in which we feel free to choose that behaviour.

Benign prejudices come from our experience – the learning we do as we live life. They are benign because they can be easily overcome through new experiences and through the application of logic.

More dangerous are the prejudices that comes from family, peer-group, social or religious indoctrination or pressure; and similarly from other institutions. Because these are not developed from 'normal' experiences of life, they are harder to overcome with the application of logic or through new experiences. As with benign prejudice, other people can point out to us that we are subject to them. However, unlike with the benign sort, most fundamentalists would not see their prejudices as such, because 'that's the way things/people are'.

Extremism, when expressed as fundamentalism, is the hardest to shift, because it is based on a deeply-held belief that the world *is* that way ‘and nothing you can say or do or show me can have me stop believing that’. Fundamentalists will interpret everything they experience to fit in with their fundamentalist beliefs. Such people cannot have a meaningful discussion with anyone, because nothing exists outside the confines of their narrow beliefs. Other ways of seeing or describing the world are frequently dismissed as coming from conspiracies designed to undermine ‘the truth’.

In many countries the education system is used to indoctrinate young people into fundamentalist beliefs. In other countries authorities are trying to be so careful not to indoctrinate students in any way, that they shrink from even teaching them to think logically and for themselves – to do so would have to expose them to concepts that may be regarded as too far to the left politically.

It almost seems that there is an attitude amongst many people that to think at all is a subversive activity. It probably is if you are beholden to beliefs and attitudes that could be threatened by people who are able to think.