The Mystery of the Chicken

By Robert Fritz

The mind has a quirky thing about it. It cannot stand unresolved questions. It can't tolerate gaps in our knowledge. It wants answers – NOW! But we can't always know what's going on. Some answers take time to find out. Some answers are well beyond the reach of our comprehending mind such as the great Universal mysteries.

The mind doesn't like it when we are confronted with unanswered questions. Remember: It wants answers – NOW! So, we give the mind answers even when we don't know what we are talking about. We make up theories or we adopt the speculation of others. What difference does it make if the answer is true or false? The mind likes the feeling of knowing. It likes the sense of resolution it receives from the answers we give it. This is all very natural.

But this dynamic is also limiting. If we think we know the answers to questions, we stop asking. Yet, the gaps in our knowledge can come back to haunt us. We may make decisions based on misconception. We can't build much on a weak foundation.

The mind, left to its own devices, will be glad to accept theory as if it were fact. That is because the mind isn't looking for truth. Rather it is responding to one of the basic principles of structural dynamics: tension seeks resolution. A question functions as a tension. Fact or theory can function as resolution to that tension.

In music and writing, there is a name for a typical tension-resolution system. It is "the antecedent-consequential phrase." The antecedent is a question such as "Why did the chicken cross the road?" This sets up a tension. The consequence of the antecedent will be an answer. The consequence will resolve the tension:

Why did the chicken cross the road?
To get to the other side.

Tension: Question about the chicken. Resolution: Answer about the chicken.

Now, of course, many people attempt to find a better resolution to the chicken/road question. On Google, there are over 5,000 sites answering the chicken/road antecedent. Here are some of the typical answers we find there:

* Walt Whitman: To cluck the song of itself
* Jack Nicholson: 'Cause it (CENSORED) wanted to. That's the (CENSORED) reason.
* Ralph Waldo Emerson: It didn't cross the road; it transcended it.
* Aristotle: To actualize its potential.
* William Shakespeare: I don't know why, but methinks I could rattle off a hundred-line soliloquy without much ado.
* Thomas Paine: Out of common sense.
* Groucho Marx: Chicken? What's all this talk about chicken? Why, I had an uncle who thought he was a chicken. My aunt almost divorced him, but we needed the eggs.
* Karl Marx: To escape the bourgeois middle-class struggle.

* Star Trek’s Mr. Scott: 'Cos ma wee transporter beam wasna functioning properly. Ah canna work miracles, Captain!
* Robert Frost: To cross the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.
* Sigmund Freud: The chicken obviously was female and obviously interpreted the pole on which the crosswalk sign was mounted as a phallic symbol of which she was envious.
* William Wordsworth: To have something to recollect in tranquility.
* Caesar: To come, to see, to conquer.
* Rene Descartes: It had sufficient reason to believe it was dreaming anyway.
* Albert Einstein: Whether the chicken crossed the road or the road moved beneath the chicken depends upon your frame of reference.
* Emily Dickinson: Because it could not stop for death.
* Salvador Dali: The fish.
* Henry David Thoreau: To live deliberately...and suck all the marrow out of life.
* Mae West: I invited it to come up and see me sometime.
* Gottfried von Leibniz: In this best possible world, the road was made for it to cross.
* Dylan Thomas: To not go gentle into that good night.
* David Hume: Out of custom and habit.
* John Milton: To justify the ways of God to men.
* Star Trek’s Captain Kirk: To boldly go where no chicken has gone before.
* Ernest Hemingway: To die. In the rain.

Okay, back to the mind and the human tendency to fill in gaps of our knowledge with speculations, theories, concepts, models, worldviews, beliefs, examples of past experience, or punch lines from famous people. The mind is hungry to end mysteries, discrepancies, unanswered questions and tension. That often leads to a false impression we know more than we know.

Why did the chicken cross the road?

If we don't actually know the true answer, and we wanted to find out the real reason the chicken did cross the road, rather than propose answers, we would tend to ask more questions:

What chicken?
What road?
When?
Why did she cross the road?

These questions presume that we don't know the answer rather than we do.

That's because before we know the answer to anything, we don't know the answer. This may seem obvious but it is counter-instinctive. We orient our lives around the premise of certainty. Some things we do know. Okay, that’s fine. But we go over the line the moment we adopt a stance that suggests we know more than we know. That’s the point where our mental instincts are in sharp contrast to the non-arguable reality: we don't know what we don’t know.

If we didn't pretend to know answers we didn't know, we would be more amenable to exploring the question openly. We wouldn't do the usual things we have learned to do: create a theory, test the theory against reality, look for evidence to support our theory, conclude that our theory was correct, attempt to convert others to our theory, begin a movement, notice that someone else has created a counter movement, fight it out over which theory is right and which theory is wrong, begin to take it all very personally, perhaps even start a war. What a world.

We have learned that the so-called scientific process is to create a hypothesis, test it against reality, collect evidence, and, if the evidence is consistent with the hypothesis, hold the hypothesis to be true. In science there is said to be enormous intellectual rigor built into this process. Perhaps, but the limitation is "start with a hypothesis."

What if we began without a hypothesis, theory, concept, model? That would drive us to a more inventive/creative orientation, one of looking and questioning without the premise of knowing what we might find. We would not pretend to know what we didn't. We would be open to finding whatever there was to find, perhaps answers that do not fit into the common theories that abound in the world we live in.

Why did the chicken cross the road?

That's a good question. How are we to find the answer? What else do we need to know besides the event of the chicken crossing the road? Our focus widens, becomes more relevant, and we can entertain possibilities we may never have thought of.

Now all this talk about the chicken has a point. It is about thinking and creating. We have been taught to learn to adopt theories, speculations, models, and concepts as if they were fact. We can become blind to what we believe, presume, and then we trust our assumptions as if they were fact. When something goes without question, it is not questioned. It become "out of bounds." We censor ourselves from thinking anything that contradicts our built-in ideas. The mind feels it knows. We can experience a large degree of comfort and certainty, but these feelings are not well based. They are a product of the mind's ability to be a sucker for anything that fills in the gaps and resolves the mental tension questions bring.

Step one in our approach to structural thinking is "start with nothing." That is to say, start to observe reality without a premise of what we might find. This is the opposite of what we have learned in school, which is to collect knowledge to use as a database, and then compare reality against it. This process is a variation of the so-called scientific process. But, if we look to the history of the most creative scientists, they didn't use this process. Instead, they were able to start their exploration without a theory. The great creative scientists have had the ability to generate new insights, often over the dogmatic convictions of true believers in unexamined ideas from the past. We need only think of Galileo, Newton, and Einstein to see how the history of science was dramatically changed when old assumptions were challenged and rethought. Thomas Kuhn, in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, put it this way: "When the (scientific) profession can no longer evade anomalies that subvert the existing tradition of scientific practice – then begins the extraordinary investigations that lead the profession at last to a new set of commitments, a new basis for the practice of science. The extraordinary episodes in which that shift of professional commitments occurs are the ones known in this essay as scientific revolutions. They are the tradition-shattering complements to the tradition-bound activity of normal science."

Kuhn is describing a situation when old assumptions no longer work to explain what we see. However, if we never use assumptions, we are always in a position to see something new.

Yet we are not addressing just chickens or science. We are addressing how our minds work, and therefore the discipline we need to go beyond our usual limitations based on belief or past experience. When we adopt any model of how we are to live our lives, and then attempt to apply that model to our actual lives, we begin to lose touch with reality directly. Imposing a theory on experience will always do that.

When we don't fill in the gaps with filler, when we leave them open, we become more inventive, resourceful, creative. We will find that we are no longer a sucker for a quick theory. Nor do we fill our time with useless speculations. Instead, we position ourselves to become more open and generative as we are more able to grasp new insights that we may not have considered before.

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