

EMOTIONS: UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES AND OTHERS

Crisp Winters, Burning Women

THE PHOTOS on the website are inviting. This kind of small-town pastoral splendour is like catnip for city dwellers like me: flowing rivers, lush forests, kids and horses, and even a beautiful white church with tall spires. The site goes on to say that “the surrounding countryside is reminiscent of times past, lazy country summer days, crystal clear streams and lakes with cold crisp winters in an unspoiled environment.”¹

Wow—I’m in. Sign me up.

Clicking through the site, I find something called the town charter, which has been approved by the mayor and six council members. The declaration includes a section entitled “Our Women.”

Hmmm . . . interesting. I scroll down and read:

We consider that men and women are of the same value. Having said this, we consider that a woman can; drive a car, vote, sign checks, dance, decide for herself, speak her peace [*sic*], dress as she sees fit respecting of course the democratic decency, walk alone in public places, study, have a job, have her own belongings and anything else that a man can do. These are our standards and our way of life.

This is starting to sound somewhat unusual. What is it—perhaps the website of a commune or a retreat centre with pseudo-feminist leanings? The last line, though, really throws a wrench in the works:

However, we consider that killing women in public, beatings, or burning them alive are not part of our standards of life.

Wow. What part of the world could promise both cold crisp winters and a strong rebuke against burning women, advertised in the community's code of conduct? Confused yet?

Welcome to Herouville, Canada. Population: 1,200 people.

In 2007, this community in the French-speaking province of Quebec made national and international headlines when it passed the now infamous Herouville Town Charter. (The original charter even forbade the “stoning of women.”) The context? No local or regional cases of such gender-based violence prompted the town's charter. It seemed a not-so-subtle message targeting “immigrant” groups, specifically Muslims. But immigrants (and people of colour, generally) are almost non-existent in this very white region of the country. So where was this coming from?

There were no actual experiences or problems in the region, let alone the village, upon which to base this aspect of the town charter. We are left to speculate why the town council would take such drastic steps. I'll leave that question hanging for a moment, as the actions of this small town were a harbinger of things to come on a larger scale.

Six years later, the provincial government of that same province—the recently elected Parti Québécois, a party whose existence is premised on Quebec separating from Canada and forming its own independent country—drew a page from the Herouville playbook. It proposed a so-called Charter of Quebec Values that promoted an extreme form of secularism in the name of “neutrality.” The centrepiece was to ban the wearing of all overt religious symbols—including Muslim hijabs, Sikh turbans, Jewish kippahs, and large Christian crosses—by public employees including doctors, teachers, government officials, and daycare workers.

Further, it was proposed that publicly funded daycare centres would be forbidden from serving halal or kosher foods, sidelining students from families that practised these religious observations. People would be allowed to wear small, "discreet" items like rings or pendants, although what was defined as discreet was unclear. The only exception would be a number of Catholic symbols, including street names and large crosses or crucifixes that would continue to hang in public places, as a way of acknowledging Quebec's religious-cultural history.

Incidents of minorities being harassed increased dramatically. Observant Muslims, in particular, reported property damage, confrontations, and being spat on publicly.² Canadians, including many Quebecers, were outraged and polarized by these events.

In the cases of both Herouxville and the proposed Quebec secular charter, mainstream analyses focused on anti-immigrant prejudice, Islamophobia, and the urban-rural divide. Some political observers suggested that the Parti Québécois's use of such divisive political tactics was a gamble on the part of a desperate party whose separatist mandate had an aging and shrinking support base. Mobilizing conservative, rural voters—the PQ's foundation—was strategic, as these people had the strongest ties to the traditional French-speaking, Euro-cultural heritage of the province.

But what I find most relevant to the Deep Diversity discussion is that in this conversation, fear was a critical undercurrent. Why is fear so easily triggered? When it comes to dealing with those whom we perceive to be cultural outsiders, why is it so easy to evoke feelings of anxiety, suspicion, or even panic? The emotion of fear—often present in these situations but usually invisible—opens a way to examine the broader unseen role emotions play in our encounters with those who are, or are perceived to be, different than us.

Investigating fear as a trigger allows us to expose and thereby weaken the unconscious power of Us versus Them. This dynamic can manipulate us into being reactive rather than thoughtful, resulting in choices that sometimes hurt our relationships and communities. We'll also discuss how the inner skill of self-awareness can help us identify what's happening internally,

so that when it comes to issues of racial difference, we are better able to act rather than react.

I'll focus on the Herouxville Town Charter to make this point. But similar dynamics play out at all levels of government (and institutions), often obscured by multiple layers of politics.

Developing Emotional Literacy

Emotions do more than colour our sensory world; they are at the root of everything we do, the unquenchable origin of every act more complicated than a reflex.

— Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*³

In the 1990s, psychologist Daniel Goleman helped popularize the principles of emotional intelligence. Since then, a considerable library of materials has developed on the purpose and power of emotions and their controlling yet invisible role in our lives. Developing our emotional quotient (EQ) has become widely recognized as critical to personal and organizational success. EQ is regarded by many to be as important as IQ (intelligence quotient), the traditional measure of intelligence.⁴

In daily life, emotional intelligence can be defined simply as how well we, as individuals, manage ourselves in relationships with others. This sounds deceptively simple. Most of us believe that we handle ourselves pretty well and would likely say that we are good at managing our relationships. Where a relationship is not easy, even while accepting some responsibility, we're likely to point to shortcomings in the other person. *They* are angry, self-centred, and insecure. It's rare that we notice how our own actions, tone, or behaviour may have contributed to or instigated the problem.

Even when we pay lip service to the idea that we're not perfect, we put our energy into finding fault in the other. Through this exercise of fault-finding, it's difficult to see other people clearly. Our unconscious motivations, bias, fear, and history—our emotional baggage—gets in the way.

This is especially true regarding issues of diversity and intergroup differences. Emotions play a crucial role in the Us/Them dynamic. Feelings are at the roots of our actions, whether we are aware of them or not. A significant portion of our decision making lies below the surface of our awareness. That's why developing emotional literacy is critical.

From a mountain of good literature on this topic, here are three ideas that are helpful for understanding the unconscious and automatic nature of emotions as they are relevant to issues of racial difference:

- Tilting towards/away: We are inclined to tilt towards or away from things in our environment; this is also called the *approach-withdrawal system*. Whether we are aware of it or not, we tend to tilt towards those most like ourselves and away from those we perceive to be different.
- Emotional contagion: The contagious nature of emotions and the open-loop structure of our nervous systems means we are designed to regulate each other. When we feel included, we tend to soar. When excluded, we tend to underperform, second-guess ourselves, and in extreme cases, get sick.
- Emotional triggers: The midbrain region, called the limbic system, modulates our emotions; the amygdala specifically alerts us to dangers in our environment. Strong emotional triggers can activate the *fight-flight-freeze* response, reducing our ability to think clearly, especially when dealing with those who are racially different than us.

Comm climate

limbic system
amygdala

Tilting Towards/Away: Our Survival Instincts

The primitive nature of our brain is well established in research: it was designed to survive physical threats and emergencies more than anything else.⁵ (See sidebar: Primitive Brain Served Our Ancestors Well.) Although that function may have suited our ancient cave-dwelling relatives who lived

PRIMITIVE BRAIN SERVED OUR ANCESTORS WELL

From an evolutionary perspective, the brain was designed to survive physical threats and emergencies. It is believed that our brain's primal orientation towards a *fight-flight-freeze* response helped our cave-dwelling ancestors—who lived in tribes of thirty to seventy people with a fraction of our life expectancy—survive through extremely violent times.

Threats in their natural environment included dangerous animals and plants as well as other humans. Daily survival frequently depended on reacting swiftly, without time for careful thinking. Researchers suggest that early humans, similarly to our animal cousins, survived thanks to the reactive, unconscious, adaptive nature of the brain.

Although our prefrontal cortex—the thinking brain—has expanded significantly over the millions of years of evolution, the basic brain orientation towards emergencies can still override rationality and reason. This reactive, defensive part of our neural wiring serves us less well in an interconnected village of seven billion people.

Sources:

Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2002, 2004).

Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

Daniel J. Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation* (New York: Bantam Books Trade Paperbacks, 2011).

in small, violent tribes, it can be problematic for interconnected, globalized societies in which billions of people are attempting to live together.

Like other animals, we have a very simple survival orientation: tilting either towards or away from things. Generally, we are attracted to tasty foods, pleasant smells, friendly people, warm blankets when we feel cool, and cold drinks when we're hot. At the same time, we will jump away if we think we see a snake, express disgust at rotting foods and animals, pull

our hands back from a hot fire, and generally avoid erratic or dangerous people.

Overall, both tilts are part of an elaborate mechanism to help us keep our physical and emotional states in balance.⁶ The approach-withdrawal system develops from genetics as well as social and environmental factors. It also applies to our relation to human groups based on identity: we gravitate to those who are most like ourselves, and are shy or fearful of those who are different.

social identity theory

Negative Tilt Stronger Than Positive

It's important to note, however, that the two tilts are not created equal: the tendency to withdraw is more powerful than the tendency to approach. We have what's known as a negativity bias that primes us for avoidance and remembering the bad even when it's outnumbered by the good.⁷

Frasier episode

From my experience working with people—whether with junior high school students or with senior management teams—people will spend much more time discussing, for example, what went wrong at the end of a project rather than what went right. It's rarely proportional. The negatives are almost always given far more airtime than is deserved. The positives are skimmed over relatively quickly.

Rick Hanson describes this phenomenon as the brain's tendency to be "like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones."⁸ Of course, people don't need to have advanced psychology degrees to figure this out. It's why political smear campaigns are so effective and why news reports seek to attract an audience by focusing on what's going wrong in the world.

Well established in research, this negativity bias is much less overt than a conscious thought. It exists instead at the subtle feeling level. It's also closely related to fear, which is believed to be our oldest emotion.⁹ As a result, we recognize fearful faces more quickly than happy or neutral ones. One brain structure related to emotions, the amygdala, is activated so quickly when fearful faces are flashed that they don't even need to be registered consciously.¹⁰ The impact has also been shown in relationship to diversity. Greater negativity arises when dealing with those we perceive to be different than ourselves, especially racially.¹¹

We can track this tendency back to early humans. It would have been an evolutionary advantage to tune in to danger, fear, aggression, and general negativity expressed by unfamiliar people who may have been a threat to survival.

Much research, which this chapter and the next will expand upon, demonstrates that we generally tilt towards those most like ourselves while tilting away from those who are different. This impacts our choices of where we live, work, and play and whom we choose to be part of our social networks.

questioned
re: those
with whom
we work,
live, etc.

For example, just northwest of Toronto in the suburb of Brampton, where my family lived for many years, a massive influx of South Asians took place over the last two decades. This group now makes up almost 40 per cent of the population. (In fact, people of colour are a majority there, with over 60 per cent of the population).¹² Many people whose roots are from India and Pakistan have made this place their home, drawn to a city that has a lot of people like them (tilt towards). This is far from unusual; such ethnic enclaves—Chinese, Italian, Greek, Polish, Jewish—have always existed, in some variation, in most large cities.

On the other hand, *white flight* describes the phenomenon in which white people have left Brampton—and other North American city cores—in significant numbers. Many felt uncomfortable with their place in the increasing ethnocultural diversity (tilt away), preferring more homogeneous white communities and small towns outside the city (tilt towards).¹³

In the context of Herouxville, negativity bias may help us understand how the fear of difference became so easily activated, even when there was little local experience with immigrants or people of diverse backgrounds. The town charter seems to have emerged from a defensive posture, a wariness of imagined immigrants. In contrast, the mayor of another small town in Quebec—Huntington, population 2,587—made headlines in 2011 through a tilt towards newcomers. He announced his intention to build a mosque, halal slaughterhouse, and Muslim cemetery to entice highly educated immigrants to help counter his community's population decline.¹⁴

Emotional Contagion: Being Controlled by the Moods of Others

The open-loop design of the limbic system means that other people can change our very physiology—and so our emotions.

—Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, *Primal Leadership*¹⁵

Emotions surround all human dynamics, influencing our interactions on conscious and unconscious levels. Many experiments demonstrate that feelings are contagious. They can be transferred between people, like catching a cold.¹⁶ Our heart rate, blood pressure, and mood, for example, are easily synchronized with others in our vicinity. Those who are emotionally dominant can transfer their mood to others without effort, prior history, or words being spoken. (For more details, see sidebar: Emotions Are Invisible and Contagious.)

These effects, referred to generally as *emotional contagion*, occur with family and friends, in boardrooms, on the shop floor, or when dealing with clients and customers.¹⁷ Emotions spread quickly and easily, influencing interactions in our private, public, and professional lives.

The physical form of our bodies can convince us that we are a series of self-contained units—closed loops—that are separate entities from other people. Although there is some truth to this (otherwise we would be leaking blood and fluids everywhere we went), it's also partly an illusion. Neurologically speaking, we are considered *open-loop systems*.¹⁸

Our nervous systems are designed to tune in to and intermingle with each other's physiology to make neural connections. Specifically, our emotions play a significant role in our biochemical regulation. We are designed to regulate, and be regulated by, others. (For more details, see sidebar: The Illusion of Separation.)

By design, we are also exquisitely sensitive to social pain such as exclusion and ostracism. In the words of neuroscientist Matthew D. Lieberman, “When human beings experience threats or damage to their social bonds, the brain responds in much the same way it responds to physical pain.”¹⁹

EMOTIONS ARE INVISIBLE AND CONTAGIOUS

Emotions are a part of all human interactions, whether subtly or strongly, with or without our awareness. The influencing, at times contagious, nature of emotions is illustrated in the following examples:

- At the end of a fifteen-minute conversation between two research participants, their physiological profiles—including heart rate and blood pressure—look quite similar, even though their profiles were different from each other at the beginning of the conversation. This synchronization of physiology, called *emotional mirroring*, occurs in line with the strength of emotions being experienced: hardly at all during emotionally neutral conversations, subtly during pleasant ones, and most powerfully during conflicted, angry, and hurtful exchanges.
- Three strangers are seated in a room such that they are facing and can see each other, but do not talk during the experiment. Pretests determine the emotional state of each of the participants before they begin. Within minutes, all three participants share the same mood, each person in the group unconsciously synchronizing their emotional state with the others. The evidence also shows that the mood is transmitted by the most emotionally dominant/expressive person in the group. It should be stressed that this happens without them speaking or having any prior history with, or knowledge of, each other.
- Similar research examined the interactions of seventy teams across diverse industries ranging from health care to accounting. During meetings, all members of the group shared the same mood within two hours. The emotions of team members tracked together in synchronicity, independent of team hassles, successes, or failures.

Source:

Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, *Primal Leadership*, 5–9.

THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATION: NEURAL WIRING CONNECTS US

When we experience the powerful sensation of being “in sync” with another person, it is an example of *emotional resonance*. This effect not only feels good, but is also a powerful tool that may be used by leaders and groups to drive collective emotions in a positive direction, creating enthusiasm and high performance. Professional teams that are on winning streaks and become seemingly unstoppable demonstrate the quality of emotional resonance.

We can also experience the opposite effect, that of *emotional dissonance*. This is the experience of feeling “out of step” with another person; the relationship seems awkward, clumsy, or always challenging. Leaders and groups with significant dissonance can create toxic environments where low morale, reduced productivity, and increased sick leave are common.

We are designed to regulate one another, on a deep, biochemical level. The conclusion that many researchers have reached is that emotions serve a critical role in human interactions that is necessary not just for our well-being, but for our very survival as a species (Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, 66–99).

Consider the following examples:

- Rene Spitz’s famous research from the 1940s looked at babies in hygienic institutions whose basic needs were met (they were fed, clothed, cleaned, and kept warm) but who had limited physical human contact (were not held, stroked, or played with). These babies had staggeringly high death rates compared to those infants in the less pristine general public who were being held, fondled, and generally loved by caregivers (Lewis, Amini, and Lannon).
- A 2003 study measured the blood pressure of participants five minutes into every social interaction over a three-day period. Interactions with family members and spouses were found to lower blood pressure, while interactions with ambivalent network members were found to

- produce the highest blood pressure (Holt-Lunstad, Uchino, and Smith).
- In 2012, the Amsterdam Study of the Elderly found that elderly people who lived alone were twice as likely (9.3 per cent) to develop dementia after three years compared to those who lived with others (5.6 per cent). Especially important was how people felt. Those who reported feeling lonely (13.4 per cent) developed dementia at twice the rate of those did not feel this way (5.7 per cent) (Holwerda et al.).

Sources:

Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 69–70.

Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Bert N. Uchino, and Timothy W. Smith, "Social Relationships and Ambulatory Blood Pressure: Structural and Qualitative Predictors of Cardiovascular Function during Everyday Social Interactions," *Health Psychology* 22,4 (2003), 388–97.

Tjalling Jan Holwerda et al., "Feelings of Loneliness, but not Social Isolation, Predict Dementia Onset: Results from the Amsterdam Study of the Elderly (AMSTEL)," *Journal of Neurology Neurosurgery and Psychiatry* 85,2 (2014), published online 2012, doi: 10.1136/jnnp-2012-302755.

Lieberman's team was the first to demonstrate that social and physical pain areas overlap in the same region of the brain.²⁰ Kipling D. Williams from Purdue University has shown that even brief experiences of exclusion during the playing of something as insignificant as an online game resulted in strong emotional reactions. Participants demonstrated "unusually low levels of belonging to groups or society, diminished self-esteem, and lack of meaning, and control over, their lives."²¹

The upside to this neural connection is that joy, positivity, calmness, and rationality can also be transferred between people. Emotional intelligence research has clearly shown that when individuals or groups feel positive and upbeat, everything goes better, including creativity, problem solving, productivity, understanding complexity, and predisposition to being helpful.²²

The downside of our ability to regulate each other is that negative emotions like chronic anger, anxiety, or a sense of futility can also be transferred,

damaging relationships and hijacking the work or personal environment. Generally, when we are upset, stress hormones are secreted that take many hours to be reabsorbed by the body and fade. They impact our ability to rest, sleep, and recover.²³ In a toxic workplace, for example, where conflict, distrust, or dysfunctional relations are the norm, not only is productivity reduced but the health impacts on employees can also be significant, resulting in sick leaves and absenteeism. In Canada, it is estimated that stress-related absences cost employers \$3.5 billion annually, while in the United States, that figure is ballparked at \$300 billion.²⁴

Leaders Set the Emotional Tone

According to emotional intelligence research, leaders play a role in how people feel. In a group, they serve as emotional guides.²⁵ Leaders' words and reactions carry more weight than those of other group members; they are watched more carefully and are given more eye contact. We take many of our cues from those in charge.

People in positions of authority generally set the tone for appropriate group behaviour, especially in times of uncertainty. For example, leaders who are able to stay calm during a crisis can settle group members. A manager who demonstrates mild anxiety or hesitancy may communicate to the team that something still needs careful thought or attention. Leaders can inspire us, evoke our empathy, or fuel our patriotism and anger through a call to arms against an enemy. The quality of leadership, therefore, plays an influential role in our lives with both negative and positive impacts, including in the context of cultural differences.

Which brings us back to Herouxville. There's some evidence that one of the town councillors, a strong anti-immigration activist named André Drouin, played a leadership role in drumming up support for the charter—and likely, fear. Drouin, the key spokesperson on behalf of Herouxville regarding this issue, has been known to speak bluntly, referring to multiculturalism as “idiocy” and demanding a moratorium on immigration to Canada.²⁶ He was responsible for drafting the controversial legislation, and has asserted that he brought this issue forward for the other decision makers to consider after eight years of planning. In a 2011 interview, he claimed to

THE POWER BEHIND HEROUXVILLE'S CHARTER?

André Drouin became the spokesperson for Herouxville regarding its charter and during its controversial time in the media. A retired military man, his background on these issues includes self-claimed ties to unnamed European groups, which, he asserted, conducted a multiyear “benchmarking analysis study . . . covering 19 countries,” that concluded multiculturalism and accommodations to immigrants were tools to “transform a democracy into a theocracy.” In a 2011 interview posted on an anti-immigration website, he boasted that the infamous town charter was eight years in the making, and done as a case study for this shadowy network that he claimed to be a part of.

Source:

Canadian Immigrant Report, “CIReport.ca Interviews: André Drouin,” www.cireport.ca, Sept 16, 2011.

belong to a shadowy international “network” for which Herouxville served as a case study of an anti-immigration strategy.²⁷ (For more details, see sidebar: The Power behind Herouxville’s Charter?)

Drouin’s anti-immigrant bias was accompanied by great passion and purpose. Given that he had a significant leadership role—he was an elected town official, after all—it wouldn’t be outrageous to suggest that he may have played a prominent role in creating Herouxville’s fearful and defensive *tilt away* posture that resulted in the unusual code of conduct.

In the absence of Drouin, it’s not unfair to ask whether such a town charter would have been created at all. Did it truly represent the feelings of residents in the first place? Or was it the result of emotional contagion from a highly charged, fearful leader with a few allies and a political agenda, who served as the emotional guide for the community? There is some evidence to suggest that the charter may have been unrepresentative.

In 2013, a reporter from a national newspaper returned to Herouxville to ask residents how they felt about the Quebec’s proposed Charter of Values, which seemed to be inspired by their own town charter from six years

earlier. Given that this town and its residents were considered the Quebec heartland and most likely to support aggressive assimilation laws, the results were surprisingly split.

Although many did approve of the province's proposal, others felt that, in banning public servants like doctors or teachers from wearing headgear such as hijabs or turbans, it went too far. In the words of one of the residents, "We're in the countryside and, it's true, we're not used to head scarves. But if you're a good nurse, that's what counts. It's not a turban or veil that says whether you're competent, it's what's underneath."²⁸

Emotional Triggers:

The Role of the Amygdala and Limbic System

To understand emotions and their origins, we need to back up a bit and revisit the brain. It's believed that our brain evolved in stages, resulting in three distinct sections known as the reptilian, limbic, and neocortex. From an evolutionary perspective, the reptilian brain is the oldest and most primitive part of us. It regulates our automatic functions such as breathing, heart rate, startle function, swallowing, and a host of other tasks that are essential to basic survival.²⁹

The next region in line to develop was the limbic brain, a feature we share developmentally with other mammals. This part of our brain is responsible for the "share and care" parts of our personality. It is critical for nurturing and defending our young, communicating vocally, play, community, empathy, and socialization.

The youngest brain region to develop was our neocortex.³⁰ This is the metaphorical home of our conscious mind. Thinking, attention, abstract reasoning, fine motor skills, and language are rooted here. The prefrontal cortex, the section encased by our forehead and behind the eyes, is particularly important. It is believed to be the brain area that determines our capacities for emotional intelligence.³¹ The prefrontal cortex is responsible for a variety of executive functions including setting goals, planning, directing action, and guiding as well as inhibiting emotions.

The home base for emotions is in the limbic region. This part of the midbrain houses many structures including the amygdala, which constantly scans for threats and is the trigger point for the body's fight-flight-freeze mechanism.³² Rick Hanson describes the amygdala hub succinctly:

Moment to moment, the amygdala spotlights what's relevant and important to you: what's pleasant and unpleasant, what's an opportunity and what's a threat. It also shapes and shades your perceptions, appraisals of situations, attributions of intentions of others, and judgments. It exerts these influences largely outside of your awareness, which increases their power since they operate out of sight.³³

A perceived threat by the amygdala can set off the body's fight-flight-freeze mechanism. The automatic response easily overpowers the thinking part of our brain. In this state, we become very reactive. This can work in our favour and help us, for example, jump out of harm's way (from a snake, say). But it also has drawbacks. For example, the amygdala can misfire when we interact with those who are different than us. It has been shown to be activated when we relate to those of a different race, suggesting that a potential cascade of unconscious feelings and bias are also at play in racial interactions.³⁴

Our built-in negativity bias is accompanied by feelings of anxiety. These feelings, in turn, keep the brain scanning for threats, amplifying other unpleasant feelings such as anger, guilt, shame, depression, or sorrow.³⁵ Because we don't seem to have an equally strong automated response mechanism for positive inputs, we have to work harder to keep track of the good things. The result is a tendency to judge members of other racial groups unfairly.

In short, when dealing with those we perceive as "not us," thinking frequently takes a backseat to feeling. Especially if the situation involves uncertainty, confusion, or anxiety. Overactive amygdala responses, fed by Drouin's fears, likely played a role with the council members of Herouxville.

And why wouldn't they? With the events of 9/11, the so-called war on terror, and related propaganda as a backdrop, media stereotypes of Muslim peoples as dangerous, backwards, democracy-hating, fanatical, and

violent have been prolific. With stories like that about a group of people who are religious, cultural, and ethnic outsiders, how could the emotional cores of Herouxville town councillors—like those of the rest of the Western world—*not* be overactive?

The feeling response makes it easier to put all Muslims (and similar immigrants) into the mental categories of “potential threat,” “terrorist sympathizer,” “female-hating,” and “barbaric.” Developing a town charter to protect your community, therefore, could seem like a rational choice, even when there’s no evidence that the threat is at your town borders.

And this is why emotional literacy skills are so important to issues of diversity and difference. If we do not develop these skills intentionally, we risk living our lives on autopilot, our choices and behaviours governed by unconscious habits.³⁶ And when on autopilot, we may default to using the most readily available stereotypes thereby living in a state of guardedness and suspicion. We tilt away rather than towards those different than ourselves.

It's Hard to Talk about Diversity

Given how emotions impact human interactions and intergroup dynamics, it's not that surprising to find that even talking about our differences is challenging, especially in public. This struggle was well illustrated during a professional development session I co-facilitated. The daylong session, with a group of 150 high-performing young public servants, was not about discrimination or diversity, but rather about the importance of professional networking.

After an activity in which participants individually mapped out their networks and discussed their results with a partner, one of my co-facilitators asked: “How diverse was your network?”

The question was met with an incredible silence.

The facilitator repeated the question—and again, there was silence. This was in stark contrast to other questions asked that day, which had resulted in plenty of responses and participation.

At the end of the session, our facilitator team analyzed what had happened at that moment. It came as a great surprise because, overall, the participants were very talkative, quite diverse, and relatively young. If anyone might have engaged the question of diversity with ease and proficiency, this group was a likely candidate. However, they seemed to collectively freeze up, and our team wondered why. It was especially intriguing, as this public sector institution had been honoured with both diversity and best employer awards, indicators that many things were going well.

One of the facilitators, a twenty-year veteran of the company, responded very matter-of-factly: "Diversity is a very difficult subject in our organization—people feel as though they've done something wrong. This group of young people seemed to have picked up on this. It's like the subject is almost taboo."

Feelings of wrongdoing. Taboo. The words of the organization's veteran employee resonated strongly with my experience. That's how hard it has become to talk about these issues.

The challenges of plainly discussing issues of diversity and difference are not confined to a single organization or region. It is commonly accepted in this field that they are part of a broader social struggle in North America. As a result, the conversations are either avoided or come out in explosive ways.

It's not hard to understand why. After all, diversity and inclusion are about rectifying a problem. And the problem is not small. It goes beyond groups of people being left out. It includes ugly words (connected to strong emotions) like "discrimination" and "racism"—words that may evoke images of the Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan, and stories of helpless victims and brutal perpetrators. The content and context is fundamentally emotional in nature. So the feeling that individuals, groups, or organizations are doing something wrong is understandable. It is also one of the greatest challenges of doing this work.

Body Language: Our Early-Warning System

To state the obvious, emotions exist at both overt and covert levels. When we get angry, sad, or happy, the feeling has to break our particular personal threshold before we become aware of experiencing the emotion.³⁷ Before that threshold is reached, much of our feelings remain unconscious. And that's a problem, because without our full awareness those emotions influence our behaviour, thoughts, and choices. ←

But there is a way to get a jump on what's happening to us internally: to notice body language and tone of voice, both in ourselves and in others. The feelings we don't express overtly may be conveyed through our bodies. For example, researchers have known for some time that people express their bias regarding racial others by sitting further away from them, making less eye contact, and displaying increased facial muscle twitches. These signs indicate high levels of anxiety and nervousness.³⁸

Unconscious body language is difficult to control. It may demonstrate our tendency to tilt away from (rather than towards) out-group members. Even actors—who are trained in the art of body language—are unable to hide their racial bias.

A 2009 study led by Max Weisbuch from Tufts University in Massachusetts used popular TV shows to observe the body language of actors. The study found strong anti-black bias, even though the black and white characters in these dramas were social and economic peers.³⁹ Ten-second video clips were created with audio removed and one character ingeniously cropped out so that their race was not apparent. Viewing the clips, impartial observers found that positive body language—such as smiling, nodding, and leaning in when talking—was far less common when white actors interacted with their black rather than white counterparts. (For more details, see sidebar: Body Language Experts Foiled by Bias.)

Nalini Ambady, one of the co-authors, bluntly stated in an interview that black characters were “less liked non-verbally than white characters.”⁴⁰

Such negative feelings portrayed by the unconscious interaction between actors—which is a form of anti-black, pro-white bias—has a direct impact

BODY LANGUAGE EXPERTS FOILED BY BIAS

A study by Max Weisbuch, Kristin Pauker, and Nalini Ambady showed that even those experienced in the art of relaying emotions may betray their hidden emotional racial bias. The research team used TV clips to observe the body language of actors, and identified strong anti-black bias. Clips of eleven popular TV shows—including *House*, *CSI*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Scrubs*—were specifically selected because black and white characters were portrayed as social and intellectual peers.

University students who had not seen these episodes viewed ten-second clips of interactions between either two white characters or one white and one black character. Two modifications were made to the clips. First, there was no audio. Second, only one actor—always white—could be seen. The second actor was cropped out of the frame. Regarding the white character remaining on screen, the students were asked, “How much does this character like the character they’re interacting with?”

The results were unanimous.

The student viewers (who were all white) were clear in their choices. When considering body language, the hidden black characters—in spite of similar social status—were less liked than the hidden white characters by a significant margin. (The student viewers were unaware that race was a factor in the study.) Smiling, nodding, leaning in when talking—all examples of positive body language—were far less common when white actors interacted with their (hidden) black rather than white counterparts.

Source:

Max Weisbuch, Kristin Pauker, and Nalini Ambady, “The Subtle Transmission of Race Bias via Televised Nonverbal Behavior,” *Science* 326 (Dec. 2009), 1711–14.

on the rest of us. In another phase of the study, the authors found that viewers were negatively affected by what they were viewing. Watching such subtly pro-white clips from TV shows (normally formatted and appropriate characters visible) resulted in higher pro-white scores on tests that

measure unconscious bias. Putting this impact into context, according to the study, the eleven TV shows had an average weekly audience of nine million Americans *each*. This hints at the enormous impact of media alone in reinforcing existing racial bias in all of our lives.

So what's going on? Why all this body language bias?

It's a stretch to believe that, across eleven different TV shows, directors overtly and consistently gave their white actors directions to single out their black peers for subtle negativity. That would be plain weird. But the researchers did indicate that they were uncertain whether the negative body language was scripted by directors, an innate reaction by white actors, or some combination of both.

My creative passion is filmmaking, and I'm aware that the actor's instrument is their body. Accessing unconscious reactions and emotions is the real craft behind the work. It wouldn't be difficult to argue that the study did reflect the unconscious pro-white bias that the actors held. And why shouldn't it?

Actors live in the same society as the rest of us. Their job is to express their unconscious feelings convincingly to create believable and real characters. As the next chapter will explore, we all possess unconscious bias. Anti-black prejudice, to a greater or lesser degree, has been widely absorbed by North Americans. It would make sense, then, that actors who are trained to unleash their unconscious through body language would more readily reveal such bias. These performers, in essence, serve as cultural mirrors. They reflect back something unpretty that exists inside all of us.

To manage rather than be controlled by our feelings, then, we need to develop an early-warning system to the emotions bubbling below the surface of awareness. Self-awareness is the tool required for such advanced detection, the foundation upon which all other inner skills are built.

Inner Skill 1: Self-Awareness

According to Michael Inzlicht, a neuroscientist at the University of Toronto Scarborough: "There is substantial evidence that those with more executive control are able to regulate their prejudiced responses. . . . People

who are better able to focus their attention and manage their emotions tend to be people who are able to regulate their stereotyped associations."⁴¹

Executive control refers to the work of the prefrontal cortex, including planning, evaluating, thinking about ourselves, and impulse control. And executive control is premised on self-awareness, the starting point for inner skill development.⁴²

Self-awareness starts with attentiveness to our own emotions and needs. It includes knowing our strengths and weaknesses, and having a strong sense of our worth and capabilities. It is the ability to self-reflect, follow our instincts and gut reactions, and be aware of the impact we have on others and the world around us (and of their impact on us).⁴³

Even with a good handle on our conscious selves, it's the elusive unconscious parts that behave as personal blind spots. Learning to direct our focused attention to the internal workings of our mind is critical to living a life where our actions and choices are aligned with our values. Especially regarding issues of racial difference and diversity.

Researcher and psychiatrist Dan Siegel argues that developing such inner knowledge—what he calls *mindsight*—helps us “name and tame” our emotions, so that we know how and when to constructively process and express them.⁴⁴ It also helps us counter the sweeping emotional charges that underlie intergroup interactions, especially when there is competition or conflict. Such insights may have been useful to the leadership at Herouxville as they developed an unnecessarily inflammatory town charter in reaction to a perceived—but non-existent—threat of outsiders.

The most extensive process for developing self-awareness that I'm aware of also happens to be the second inner skill, mindfulness meditation. This technique offers simple exercises for the brain that include attention to breathing, body sensations, and relaxation.⁴⁵

Inner Skill 2: Mindfulness Meditation

Prejudice and stereotypes, as we have seen, are simply neural habits. As such, they are subject to neuroplasticity: they are flexible and can be altered

through conscious attention. Mindfulness meditation has been shown to help change negative habits of the mind. It is the tried and true method of over two millennia for improving our focused concentration.⁴⁶ It's a specific form of attention that emphasizes our here-and-now experience. Mindfulness meditation is about being aware of what is happening in both the mind and the body, without reacting or judging.

This Eastern contemplative tradition has spread across the Western world over the last several decades. It has been modified for use in a variety of non-religious settings, including health care, personal growth, general stress relief, and leadership development.⁴⁷

In his book *Mindsight: The Science of Personal Transformation*, Dan Siegel discusses the many benefits of mindfulness meditation. It can enhance resilience—our ability to bounce back from hardships—helping us tilt towards rather than away from challenging situations and people.⁴⁸ Further, from a neuroscience perspective, studies on long-term meditators suggest that we can literally grow and thicken the fibres in our prefrontal cortex through mindfulness practices, thereby enhancing our cognitive and emotional capacities.⁴⁹

There are many ways to learn more about mindfulness meditation. Resources by teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Pema Chodron, and the Dalai Lama are readily available, and there are local practitioners in many small and large urban centres. The most rigorously tested technique I'm familiar with is the Mindfulness Stress Reduction Program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Dr. Kabat-Zinn has written a number of books on the topic and has helped spread mindfulness across the health care sector.⁵⁰

Other Strategies for Developing Self-Awareness

Many strategies besides meditation can also help us develop self-awareness. Although beyond the scope of this book, the following may offer some starting points:

- Notice your own body language and tone of voice at regular intervals during the day. Track especially what happens when you

get anxious, uncertain, or upset (clenched fists, irregular breathing, obsessive behaviours or thoughts).

- Take three to five opportunities daily to notice the shifts in your emotional state. Develop a broader palette of words to describe primary feelings (anger, joy, fear) as well as secondary ones (envy, contentment, nervousness).
- Recognize what issues, people, and situations emotionally trigger you into a state of fight-flight-freeze, especially regarding issues of racial difference. Everyone goes somewhere emotionally off-centre when triggered—where do you go?
- Keep track of daily events in a journal. Review them over time to identify your patterns of choices, reactions, and behaviours.
- Get feedback from trusted others. Ask them specifically to help you consider perspectives that may be in your personal blind spot.

Questions to spark personal reflection regarding racial difference can also help enhance our self-awareness. The following sample questions are adapted from cultural proficiency educator Randall Lindsay and his colleagues:⁵¹

- To what social identity groups (including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability) do I belong?
- How are institutions and organizations in this country influenced by the dominant ethno-racial culture?
- How has my race and identity helped or hindered my progress in society, in small or big ways?
- How does race and social identity help or hinder people in my organization?
- How does my perceived status based on social identity in an organization (or society at large) affect my behaviour and motivation to achieve? In general, how might perceived status affect behaviour and motivation to achieve?

It's not easy to confront parts of ourselves that we are less aware of or that are contradictory to our espoused values. It can fuel painful emotions such as guilt, shame, anger, or defensiveness. This is where Deep Diversity's compassionate approach becomes important. Self-compassion helps us observe ourselves with curiosity rather than judgment. It's the salve to lessen the painful sting of our mistakes so we don't beat ourselves up. Yet it still holds us accountable. Compassion is essential; without it, we may not be able to focus our attention long enough to learn about and unlearn some bad habits about relating to others.

Finally, the key to developing any skill is practice and repetition. Although this may seem obvious, it's still worth mentioning. Persevering is the hardest part of any habit breaking and forming process. If you're like me, it's an imperfect series of forward and backward steps. So, practise noticing your body language and breathing, even if there's a stretch of days in which you don't. Continue to ask yourself about the impact of your social identity on each situation, even if it's an afterthought. Practise. Rinse. Repeat. Do this until it becomes automatic.

Acknowledging this challenge from the onset may help us push through periods of inconsistency without getting demoralized. In this case, "fake it till you make it" is a completely acceptable principle. It may also be the most realistic path of learning for most of us.

Compassion and self-awareness are especially important in helping us uncover hidden prejudices. In the next chapter, we will explore the biases that exist within all of us, regardless of our good intentions or egalitarian leanings.