



## The New Sciences and the Learning Organization Part 7: Making Conscious Choices at the Edge of Chaos

by Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“Reason works best in closed systems where there are expected rules, and outcomes can be predicted in advance. ... The future, however, is not constrained by rules and predictable outcomes. We need to cultivate more than logic if we are to thrive in it. We must foster intuition to anticipate changes before they occur; empathy to understand that which cannot be clearly expressed; wisdom to see the connection between apparently unrelated events; and creativity to discover new ways of defining problems, new rules that will make it possible to adapt to the unexpected.” — Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, **The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium** (1993)

Living at the edge of chaos is an extreme sport. It is frightening and exhilarating at the same time. Just like rock climbing, it is full of risk — and the gift of risk is the sense of

achievement once you have reached your goal. It requires people to learn in real time, to learn well, and to learn quickly. More than anything else, the edge of chaos requires us to have the courage to change. But the price of this courage is not an easy one to pay. Learning at the edge of chaos requires us to be honest and patient with ourselves at the same time as we discover what this honesty really means.

In his book **The Evolving Self**, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explores what it means to be honest with ourselves so that we can thrive at the edge of chaos. “To know ourselves is the greatest achievement of our species. And to understand ourselves — what we are made of, what motives drive us, and what goals we dream of — involves, first of all, an understanding of our evolutionary past.” The intention of the previous newsletters in this series was to give you a sense of what drives you at an evolutionary level. In this newsletter, the final in the series, we explore what this knowledge means, and what you can do to use this knowledge to create choices for yourself and others.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, what you perceive as your reality is distorted by three major sources: your genes, the culture in which you live, and your sense of self. At the level of your genes, “Genetic instructions are rather generic — they apply to average situations, and prompt us to act in ways that generally tended to be useful in the

past.” (See **InfoMine**, Vol. 6, No. 6 and Vol. 7, No. 1.) At the level of culture, people of the same culture share a number of assumptions about their reality. These assumptions act as filters through which the people see the world, and these filters define their thinking and resulting actions. “It is dangerous to take too seriously the picture of the world as painted by one’s culture. First, to do so limits the scope of any individual’s potential. ... Second, excessive identification with a particular worldview inevitably leads to blindness to other cultures, and eventually to hostility toward the *other*. ... Finally, to accept the cultural worldview unquestioningly is dangerous simply because it blinds us to larger realities.”

For the rest of this newsletter, we examine how your sense of self distorts your reality, and how you can use this knowledge to make better choices about the future you want to create. Genetics and culture weave filters of illusion. These illusions are especially strong because they are genetically hardwired into human brain functions. (See **InfoMine**, Vol. 2, No. 2.) The result is that humans willingly believe these illusions. However, these illusions are only that: *illusions*. They are not real, and they are not based in reality; however, they create an impression of a reality which you would call your life, your work, your society, and your family.

Nobody is sure when consciousness emerged as a part of human evolution. However, when it did emerge, it changed humanity completely. Consciousness allowed humans to control their mental processes for the

first time, and it brought the *gift of personal freedom*. It is with the advent of consciousness that our sense of self was born, and with it our sense of choice. But every gift that evolution gives us has a dark side. In this case, the dark side is the *illusion of ego*, and “once the ego is present, its foremost goal becomes protecting itself at all costs.”

As soon as humans became self-conscious, they began to be identified by aspects that protect and elevate the ego: reputation, material goods, positions of power, wealth, status, beauty, and so on. “The problem is that the more the ego becomes identified with symbols outside the self, the more vulnerable it becomes.” It is precisely this ego that gives rise to your sense of self. There are three ways in which you can choose to work with your ego:

- Let the ego do whatever it wants to get what it wants. When you do this, your ego will overindulge in all the things that it thinks are important. This is what happens when you overindulge in such things as human pleasures (e.g., shopping sprees, overeating, drinking and partying to excess). If we paraphrase the quote about culture above, “It is dangerous to take too seriously the picture of the world as painted by one’s *self*. First, to do so limits the scope of any individual’s potential. ... Second, excessive identification with a particular *view of self* inevitably leads to blindness to *other people and their needs*, and eventually to hostility or *resentment* toward the *other*. ... Finally, to accept *your view of self* unquestioningly is dangerous simply because it blinds you to larger realities.”

- Give up desires, as some Eastern religions suggest. When you do this, you give up all pleasures of the body. “By our nature, we want certain things to happen; when our desires are frustrated, we suffer. By giving up expectation and desire — in effect, by giving up the self — one can no longer be frustrated.”
- Refocus your desires on what is unique about yourself and your experience. Identify yourself with goals that are connected to something larger than yourself, such as the greater common good.

Csikszentmihalyi believes that, in order for your sense of self to evolve, you need to choose the second and third choices above. However, he also believes that the second choice — giving up your desires — is extremely difficult for most people, and is not the answer for the majority of our population. In fact, it is desire that can achieve the most amazing things, such as helping others less fortunate than yourself. Thus, the third choice is the best choice for most of humanity. But what does it mean to make this choice?

It means that you need to take control of your life, so that you are making your own choices, instead of allowing your ego to make choices for you. To do this, we believe that you need to do the following:

1. Understand how your thinking and acting is being controlled by your genes, culture, and ego. (See this entire **InfoMine** series called *The New Sciences and the Learning Organization*.)
2. Develop a personal vision of the future you want to create, and, if you can, find someone with whom to share this vision. (See **InfoMine** Vol. 1, No. 1; Vol. 1,

No. 2; Vol. 2, No. 3; Vol. 2, No. 4.)

3. Be able to use thinking and acting tools that enhance the quality of your thinking and acting: tools such as critical thinking, systems thinking, appreciative inquiry, scenario planning, action science, and action learning. (See **InfoMine** Vol. 2, No. 1; Vol. 2, No. 8; Vol. 4, No. 1; Vol. 4, No. 4; Vol. 4, No. 5.)
4. Be able to learn in real time by evaluating your learning as you take the journey towards a more evolved self. (See **InfoMine** Vol. 1, No. 2; Vol. 2, No. 1, Vol. 3, No. 3; Vol. No. 4.)

“People who lead a satisfying life, who are in tune with their past and with their future — in short, people whom we would call *happy* — are generally individuals who have lived their lives according to rules they themselves created. ... They understand their motives and their limitations. They have carved out a small freedom of choice. Typically they are not people who want much for themselves. ... They do what they do because they enjoy meeting the challenges of life, because they enjoy life itself.”

— Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, **The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium** (1993)

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