



→ The Way Ahead Group

why do birds fly in flocks and snails crawl alone?

a meditation on relationship, balance and impermanence

dr al thompson

Introduction

Dr Al Thompson was an early client of The Way Ahead Group. He has built his practice up to 12,000 people and from a turnover of £350,000 to £2 million in 18 months and from 1 to 5 sites.

Last year his wife faced a diagnosis of a brain tumour and he was forced to be on the other side of the clinician's table where he experienced good science and atrocious respect and dignity.

This article is a reflection on relationship and what it means for Al, informed as it is by his recent experiences.

He argues that we all have a terminal illness but that we do not live our lives with that in mind. There was a good deal of thinking in the therapeutic community that this existential crisis came into the collective consciousness when the nuclear threat became real. I would argue that as experts tell us that we have recently passed the tipping point on global warming that we will all be much more aware of our lives, their purpose and their end.

Perhaps I am wiser than I used to be, but I also don't believe wisdom brings health, wealth or happiness. The ability to build strong relationships has probably led me to those things more than wisdom. Strong relationships are not necessarily effective relationships. Effective suggests that we know what we want from a relationship. It could be considered arrogant to know what one might want from a relationship, it seems to have no thought for the other's input. So why do I work on my relationships? Why do birds fly in flocks and snails crawl alone? I like to fly to give me the freedom and the vision to the horizon but only when that flight is in the company of like minded friends. Much of what I have learned is built on stories, metaphors, wise words and the like. Once the Bishop of Blackburn told me that education is about disturbing the settled and settling the disturbed. I liken this to building a relationship. Wisdom to some people is about making the same mistakes with ever increasing confidence which is not good for building relationships. Where does empathy and sympathy fit in this. Sympathy can mean joining together in illness. Not a sensible way of supporting a friend or colleague. Empathy is about awareness of emotion without taking on the emotion. At times empathy sounds cruel because it can place a fence centre stage in the relationship. But then I think of helping my wife when she is about to erupt with anger. If I join her in that anger then the relationship begins to split. If I am aware of her anger without becoming angry myself then we can work it out together. It feels to me more like a successful relationship where there is awareness of the other's emotions without taking them on. The fence makes good friends as well as good neighbours. Meaningful relationships are also dynamic. Just like a business; if it is not growing then it is shrinking.

Balance too, is crucial in relationships. Have you ever tried to balance a bicycle that is not in a dynamic state? Making small changes in direction is much easier when already moving. Try this with a stationary or moving car. Movement facilitates movement both in the physical and the emotional world as long as you are not so quick you lose awareness. And just like a business a relationship needs to be near its customer; near in geography and in being. This comes back to the Bishop of Blackburn. Wisdom can make you too settled and also too confident. Sympathy can make you too disturbed as both your own emotions and your partner's emotions will prove too much for one head.

In business, confidence you know your customers' needs sounds too presumptive. But leaving the whole decision to your customer is too disturbing. Too much choice can cause paralysis. An interesting piece of research on patient choice showed the patient's insistent desire to have choice but also a need for the doctor to tell them what to do. How similar is this to a business to customer relationship or a personal relationship? Back to why I value relationships and why birds fly in flocks and snails crawl alone. Flying gives freedom and vision but only with a good team around you. Where does this put my work/life balance? When I can fly at work and at home the balance is always in the middle. It is only when work and/or life weighs me down do I have to consider 'does it balance?'

My wife has just completed 35 daily sessions of radiotherapy for her brain tumour. Is it possible to find a balance in life with this? There were some weeks when I spent so much time with her but we became morbid. We did things like visit places for the last time in her life and walking up St Bee's Head to find a place to scatter her ashes. This morbidity settled. So I went back to work until she became too disturbed and demanded my return home. I now nip out of work to spend some time with my wife, to go to a film or for a walk in the park to watch the ducks. My wife has found new friendships in old friends and I have too.

Thinking of settled and disturbed has been an amazing discovery of self and my wife. How else can we live our lives? We don't have a handbook of how to live with a terminal illness. We have to find our own way of being. It could be said we all have a terminal illness but many of us have not realised yet so we live our lives by the book. Why do I need relationships? Why do birds fly in flocks and snails crawl alone. I need to fly to give us the freedom and the vision for all but only when that story is in the company of like minded friends.

Meditation

- 1 sit quietly somewhere where you can see nature
- 2 bring your attention to your breathing and the rhythm of its rise and fall
- 3 Listen to the rhythm of your heart
- 4 allow loving kindness and gratitude for the breath and blood which keeps you alive
- 5 connect to the nature which surrounds you. Be aware of the rhythm of nature and the seasons - the birth, growth and death
- 6 notice and celebrate your aliveness in every cell of your body
- 7 use that idea of life to in your relationship

Other possibilities / ideas to meditate on:

- flying like a bird in a flock
- balance in motion
- disturbing what is settled
- settling what is disturbed