

# **A Road to Consciousness**

**Tony Turnbull**

Reflecting on my life in my 78th year my earliest memories are when I became “conscious” of things around me; my parents, the house I lived in, the garden and streets I played in, the family dog and my favourite toys. My experience of this early “consciousness” in my first three years was encountering things, people and surroundings that were not me - no more than that.

Very soon I started to experience the impact these early encounters had on me. I started to experience a whole range of emotions from happiness, excitement, fear, love, doubt, pride, frustration, anger, embarrassment, fun, safety and danger, which started to shape the way I engaged with my circumstances. I don't recall “consciously” experiencing these emotions. It was more a reaction based response of resistance or engagement; “I like that” or “I don't like that.”

By the time I started school in my fifth year I started to become attentive to what situations I was okay with and could handle, and which ones were uncertain and potentially upsetting or threatening.

This then developed into a much longer “learning” phase, probably into my twenties, during which I became more and more adept at recognising which experiences I could manage and which ones I struggled with. During this phase I also started to recognise and draw conclusions about my capabilities and strengths, and my limitations and weaknesses as a person. This was heavily influenced and often reinforced by those who I considered authority figures (teachers, parents and elders), and by comparing myself with others who were better or worse than me in the various activities and examinations that I went through.

For example, I remember when I won the Diligence prize at school, I was told I would never become top of the class but would win more Diligence prizes. I took this to mean I wasn't as intelligent as others and therefore working hard was what I needed to rely on. Amazing how this eventually evolved into me always putting in a massive amount of effort to new interests and never accepting that I might be naturally gifted in some of these.

By the time I was into my thirties I was pretty much clear on who I was as a person and my character. In summary I believed I was not particularly talented, but able to work really hard. Following the rules, respecting authority and not exposing my weaknesses became my "winning formula" for having a good life and being relatively successful.

Recognising this early life-shaping has allowed me to reflect on the many other early experiences that shaped what I believed about myself as a personality, my capabilities and limitations. However, for most of my working life I lived unconsciously in this approach, often struggling in it but never questioning it, and even reinforcing it. All my successful results and decisions, of which there were many, I attributed unquestioningly to this approach, never acknowledging that it might also be significantly limiting my continued growth and transformation as a human being. I sometimes attempted in times of disappointment, failure and letting myself and others down, to adopt a new attitude and behaviour but these genuine attempts for "character change" were still shaped and anchored in what I believed was the "Real Me".

I built a reputation for being wise, having sound morals, being a great coach, intelligent, and in general an upright citizen who was respected. I relished this reputation and constantly took care to ensure it remained intact and unsullied. In those moments when I risked tarnishing it by losing my temper, being nasty, putting others down and failing, I became accomplished at apologising and criticising myself.

Those who knew and loved me were quick to acknowledge that this was not the real me. I even believed this myself, which in an ambivalent way allowed me to feel genuine and honest, but at a deeper level still believed I was not talented enough but by working hard, everything would improve. “Not good enough” and “Not smart enough” were my internal mantras. In summary I considered myself to be an imperfect being trying to be and look perfect, and not seeing the limiting grip of this approach. The risk of losing my reputation was always the senior consideration over taking the risk of being and behaving differently.

It wasn't until I was in my sixties that I took some time out to reflect on my life and was able to distinguish a new level of consciousness, hitherto obscured by my “busyness” and efforts to keep improving and developing. Simply described, I was able to distinguish the difference between “me” and my “mind”. In everyday vernacular, for the first time I could hear all my thoughts as internal conversations, generated from the thousands of experiences that shaped my engagement and response to the prevailing circumstances and situations. Also, even more impactful, I saw that the mind is a continuous, powerful and unquestioned survival mechanism and its principal function is to maintain who I considered myself to be.

This level of consciousness felt truly liberating, giving me a conscious choice for the first time in my life for what I said and did, and how I engaged with myself and others. Quite startling and energizing, like a new awakening. However I began to also notice that, energising as this was, I started to make this survival trait of the mind wrong, and tried to nullify or suppress its reaction-based interpretations. This frustrated me and had me wonder if I could ever escape the grip of my mind's limiting nature.

For example, I still frequently got angry when I struggled with my piano playing and golf and with others who didn't meet my expectations, including my family and friends. Reflecting on this I eventually chose to embrace my mind and its survival instinct to protect me in all facets. I no longer held it as wrong, but actually

acknowledged it was designed solely for protecting me, not just physically but also my ego, emotional and spiritual well-being. I just had to stay conscious and remain at choice when its limiting responses kicked in.

This “detachment” from my mind’s survival design allowed me to embrace my failings and self-deprecations without them limiting my engagement with others and what I could accomplish. The possibilities for who I could be and how I could engage in any moment were indeed limitless. I soon realised that this level of consciousness is not a permanent state or fix, and that was fine. It requires a moment-to-moment awareness discipline to its survival-based design, and thereby be open to possibility as the initial engagement whatever the circumstances.

This individual level of consciousness seemed to me to be the ultimate level at which I could engage with others and myself, at choice and free from the ever present self-limiting internal conversations. However, with yet further reflection I recall occasions when I was working with teams and groups, first as a senior manager in a well-known, multinational consumer goods company and then as a consultant working with a myriad of business clients across the world. Nine times out of ten they admitted that their fundamental issue was how to attain the quality of collaboration needed to accomplish their very challenging goals and strategies. “Silo management” was a frequent phrase they used to describe their predicament.

Of course, a myriad of team building approaches was available, many of which are of a very high quality and which I could bring to their attention. However, time after time I was puzzled by how a group of really talented, dedicated and forward-thinking individuals so often struggled to reach a transformative level of collaboration that was more than the sum of their capabilities, and indeed often fell below even that. To be honest, as a manager, a consultant and even a coach I often found myself contributing to this lack of full-hearted collaboration!

On reflection, I now consider that there is another level of consciousness that can

occur at a group level as distinct from an individual level. Similar to an individual mind, the collective mind of a group tends to operate in an unconscious survival mode. However, when this is openly recognised by the group, be it two people or more, it can start to engage in a truly conscious mode, thereby freeing itself from its survival-based limitations, and truly enter a collaborative mind set. Of course, as for an individual, a group's consciousness needs to be continuously refreshed, moment-to-moment.

I make no claim to expertise in the fields of psychology. My observations are based on my own experiences and my interpretations of my experiences. For some reason I have always been fascinated by the human condition. Maybe because my father, an intelligent, hard-working and wonderful parent, suffered throughout his life with nervous breakdowns (what is now called The Bi-Polar condition). This experience, although at times distressing, had me become okay and indeed interested in how the human psyche "runs the show" in spite of our best intentions.

The writer whose insights resonated most with my experiences as a child, parent, manager and consultant was David Bohm (December 20, 1917 – October 27, 1992), a distinguished physicist and philosopher who summarised consciousness beautifully. He was an American scientist who has been described as one of the most significant theoretical physicists of the 20th century and who contributed unorthodox ideas to quantum theory, neuropsychology and the philosophy of mind. His main concern was with "understanding the nature of reality in general and of consciousness in particular as a coherent whole". He said: "Consider that our ordinary thought in society is incoherent—it is going in all sorts of directions, with thoughts conflicting and cancelling each other out. But if people were to think together in a coherent way it would have tremendous power".

He continues, "The human race knew this for a million years, but now we have lost it, because our societies got too big. We have to get started again, because it has become urgent that we communicate and share our consciousness. We must be able

to think together, in order to do intelligently whatever is necessary. If we can all suspend carrying out our impulses, suspend our assumptions and look at them, then we are all in a shared state of consciousness. Suddenly the feeling can change to one of fellowship and friendship, participation and sharing. We are then able to collaborate in a shared consciousness.”

The possibility of this kind of Collaborative Freedom and Choice for the transformative resolution of the major issues facing the world today (Climate Change, Geopolitical tensions, Inequality, Poverty, Religious Conflicts, Food & Water Security, Government Accountability & Integrity, Lack of Education), is surely worth the practice of this discipline of group consciousness at all levels in society, particularly at the top levels in Government, Industry, Commerce, Science, Education & Religion.

### **A final reflection**

On a visit to China a few years ago I visited Dr. Sun Yat-Sen’s mausoleum. Born Nov. 12, 1866 in Guangdong Province, he died in Hong Kong March 12, 1925, Dr. Sun is still honoured by both the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan) as the "Father of the Nation". He said his political philosophy, called the "Three Principles" of nationalism, democracy and people's livelihood, was inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. He was a doctor and political, social and religious change was the main goal of his life.

His mausoleum was built by the Republic of China government and in 1929 his body was carried there. To reach of the top of the Mausoleum, you need to climb up 392 stone steps. Once in a while there is a flat platform for rest. However, there is a visual technique design about the steps. From a bottom-up perspective, you can only see steps, no flat platforms. From a top-down perspective however, you can only see flat platforms and no steps. It needs to be seen to be believed (see photos).

As I climbed upwards to the mausoleum it occurred to me that it is a striking

physical metaphor for one's life journey through stages of consciousness, the 392 steps representing our efforts to make progress and achieve our goals. The unseen platforms as we progress upwards represent the opportunities in life (often not seen), to reflect on how we are engaging before rushing up the next flight of steps. As we near the end of our journey and have more time to reflect, we have the opportunity to see the various platforms we reached previously, obscured by all of our busy efforts to make progress in the climb.

As for me I now do my best to engage with consciousness as an individual and in collaboration with others, while remaining conscious of my choice to do so, and climb the next flight of steps to discover the next level of consciousness as an ascent rather than a descent as I grow older.

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## **TONY TURNBULL**

Tony Turnbull is a vastly experienced manager and consultant. He worked for 25 years in the consumer products industry in supply chain, HR and product launch functions and spent the next 25 years consulting to top international companies. His approach focuses on how individuals and organisations can achieve breakthrough improvements through building powerful working relationships. Using his experience and insight at every level of business he brings a balance of compassion, understanding and no-nonsense challenge to those who set their sights on world-class performance. Tony has a passion for innovation and is continually inventing new leadership approaches that keep his clients performing at the edge of their capabilities. Reflecting on his career and life experiences, Tony is now exploring how the energy released from "Conscious Conversations" in which each participant maintains cognizance of how his/her engagement is shaped by a lifetime of "unconscious" shaping of their character. He is exploring how the simultaneous awareness of self, while being totally present to the prevailing circumstances and others can create hitherto unavailable freedom to

create possibility for breakthroughs in the seemingly intractable issues facing individuals and groups at all levels in today's world.