

Escaping Social Proof

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Exodus 23:2 (NLV) *“You must not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you are called to testify in a dispute, do not be swayed by the crowd to twist justice.”* (The Easy-to-read version): “Don’t do something just because everyone else is doing it. If you see a group of people doing wrong, don’t join them. You must not let them persuade you to do wrong things—you must do what is right and fair.”

That advice was given some 1000 years Before the Common Era, since the days of Moses and ancient Israel, and not much has changed in our demeanors. We are still humans with individual lessons to learn. The lesson we learn from the story of Adam and Eve is that we cannot rely on our own sense of right and wrong – we cannot lean on our own understanding.

It is not easy being theistic human beings: human beings who believe in a power greater than ourselves. It is not easy to remain calm and peaceful within when the science fields so often want to prove that there is nothing other than what is testable, verifiable, measurable, and physical. That is why the quantum science exploration appeals to me so much; it examines the universe from a new perspective, where the rules, as we understand them, are less definitive. Quantum Physics bucks the traditional views of science and we don’t understand the intricacies currently in the research. We don’t understand the specifics and innuendos.

It is like that in our spiritual research and explorations. There are individuals from all arenas of spirituality, from Christianity to Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and many other spiritual platforms outside organized religion who have explored deeply the spiritual realms. They learned to leave behind the physical planes and enter spiritual dimensions that we have few words to describe. Science defies it, the world can’t explain it, and yet these unique individuals share with us experiences that we cannot comprehend.

But these same experiences are available to us if we spend the time, energy, and years of practice to achieve them. Christ was able to do things that we call miracles. Other great ones before him were capable of states of consciousness that placed them beyond the grasp of the physical world. Since Christ, many yogis, priests, and sages have been able to enter into a quantum-like state of mind that took them out of the common and traditional pathways. These souls have been able to see the world, each other, and themselves from a new perspective – unfettered by the laws, constrictions, and expectations of the world.

We call them mystics, enlightened ones, shamans, or just plain weirdos. But in every discipline, there are geniuses who push the limits and derive as much as possible out of their field of endeavors to share with us. We comprehend their contributions to the best of our abilities and willingness, then discard the rest.

So it is, so it has always been and always will be. Many of us simply do not have the time, energy, background, or desire to pursue everything that comes across our paths. Although we like to believe that we are in control of our thoughts and behaviors, we cannot get to the bottom of everything we encounter, so we rely on shortcuts...and one of these shortcuts involves social psychology.

Social psychology is defined as “the scientific study of how we think about, influence, and relate to one another.” We are a highly social species and most of us have interactions with people every day. Spirit requires it of us – to engage others, to serve, help, and in other ways mix it up with other Children of God. Yes, yogis may spend years alone in a cave at the top of a mountain discovering the secrets of the Universe, but as one great soul said, “These individuals can spend so much time with their minds focused on heavenly matters that they are of no earthly good.” For the most part, we are on earth to connect as social creatures, absorbed in life and each other, as challenging as that can be at times. Studies have shown that on average we spend 70 to 80 percent of our waking hours communicating in some form. 30% of our day is spent speaking and 45% is listening.

The research from social psychologists tells us that we do not have as much control over our thoughts and actions as we believe. We take cues from each other on how to behave. We’ve all heard the saying by Saint Ambrose from the 4th Century, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” We tend to apply this philosophy without thinking; it is called social proof.

One way social proof presents itself is through what is called group polarization. This means that a group of likeminded individuals reinforces and strengthens each other’s opinions, viewpoints, and perspectives. A French study showed that even though people held a rather reticent opinion leaning in a direction, by the time they had discussed it within a group who held the same slight leanings their opinions became extreme. From slight to extreme, by just a bit of reinforcement, or social proof.

I think we all prefer being around people who share similar attitudes and opinions as ourselves, and the more we discuss our viewpoints with others who share our perspectives, the more emphatic we become.

Unless keenly aware, most of us use social proof to make decisions on what to do, think, say, and buy. Often, to learn what is the correct way, or the best way, we look at what others are doing. I am aware that when I buy something new from Amazon, I frequently look for the best reviews, the most stars, or Amazon’s Most Popular. I do this for choosing movies to watch. I don’t want to take the time and invest the energy in researching everything myself, so I rely on the experience of others.

It is a shortcut, and it is not always reliable. I have watched movies with 3 stars that I have liked as well or better than movies that have gotten 4 and a half or five stars. But we use this technique a lot: what we do with an empty popcorn box at a theater, for instance. Do we leave it at the chair or toss it as we leave the theater? Many people will look at what others are doing with their trash. Me? This is one instance where, no matter what anyone else is doing, I take it with me and put it in the trash as I leave. But not everyone does that.

How fast do we drive on a particular stretch of road? Well, how fast is everyone else driving? We look for social input to decide. Frequently when driving, I will pull over to let people who want to go faster than me go by. But at other times, like in Los Angeles, I will go 80 just to feel like I am safe in the streaming traffic.

How do we eat chicken at a dinner party? I don't know about you, but I will watch the host and hostess to see if it is with fingers or a knife and fork. My social environment can determine how I behave and the choices I make.

It is true in how we wear our hair, how we dress, what kind of language to use. The amount of slang, colloquialisms, and vulgarity we use is determined by our social environment and what others are doing and saying.

Robert Cialdini wrote a book entitled *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. In it he relates an experiment. At Arizona's Petrified Forest National Park there are signs which read: "Your heritage is being vandalized every day by theft losses of petrified wood of 14 tons a year, mostly a small piece at a time." I'm certain they were put there to raise people's consciousness to the value of the forest.

As an experiment, Cialdini removed the signs from one part and discovered that the theft of petrified wood decreased by a third. Despite their intentions, the signs actually emboldened people to steal because so many other people were already doing it. It was like giving permission, and the visitors thought it was normal to steal.

This tendency of social proof can be used to help people. In one study, children who were frightened of dogs watched a four-year-old play happily with a dog for twenty minutes a day for four days. At the end of that time, 67% of the children were willing to enter a pen with a dog. After a month, that same group of children were willing to play with a dog. Their fears had been reduced by observing the behavior of someone else; a new model of behavior had been formed.

Social proof is difficult to identify and then it is difficult to overcome, largely because it is so entrenched within our belief system. There are times when our behaviors are rooted in what our parents have said, how they behaved, the decisions they made, what they believed. They may not have directly told us anything in particular, but we observed how they treated others, how

they behaved, and subconsciously noted the decisions they made following a particular set of beliefs. Then, without our knowing it, those beliefs and their patterns for living became our patterns.

Clearly, our behavior is affected by others, just as our behavior affects others. And all of this research supports the teachings of the Bible. 1 Corinthians 15:33 teaches: *Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."* Then in Proverbs 5:20-21 - *Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.*

The good news is that we can become aware of who is influencing us. Although we are animals, we are not just animals. We are intelligent creations with a spiritual nature and can tune into our Source for solutions and guidance. We may not be fully enlightened souls capable of reaching Nirvana at will, but we can quiet our minds and hearts and listen to Spirit.

Although difficult, with the help of God we can see what and who influences our thoughts, behaviors, attitudes, perspectives, and decisions. Once that occurs, the choice becomes ours: do I continue living under that influence, or do I allow another influence to affect my being. It becomes a matter of willingness. Generation after generation of poor, negative, and destructive choices are not inevitable. Regardless of the hatred, divisiveness, intolerance, and lack of ethics we see around us, we do not have to perpetuate that behavior.

Despite one's political persuasion, each party accuses the other of hatred and divisiveness. In our attempts to differentiate ourselves as Republican and Democrat, poor, middle-class and wealthy, educated and uneducated, white, black, Hispanic, Asian, or middle-eastern, we create greater divisions and more reasons to hate. As long as we see each other as an opponent within the political spectrum or social spectrum or financial spectrum, we will continue to live from the ego and ignore the love that resides within our hearts. It is only by seeing each other as a family member within the spiritual-quantum spectrum – that spectrum outside of the world, that we can rise above our differences and make healthy, wise, and love-based decisions untainted by previous paradigms and patterns. This is what will ultimately transform our thoughts and attitudes --- and the world.

But what a challenge that is.

The solution may begin partly by each of us, individually, opening our minds and hearts to a new influence, that of Love. In the physical world we are told that we communicate 30% by speaking and 45% by listening. Those are not bad ratios to apply to our prayer lives. But that only adds up to 80%. Perhaps we can spend that remaining 20% of the time in prayer just being; being with Christ, being with Spirit, not listening, not speaking, but just being; resting in the love of God.

It is my prayer that we can know the truth of Romans 12:2 and accept its challenge: *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

We can rise above the pattern of the world and escape from using the social proof of the world 'out there'. Instead, we can use the spiritual proof from Christ within. I pray that we become conscious of God's good, pleasing, and perfect will and be transformed through the renewing of our minds in the Light and Love of Christ.

Let us pray....