

3 Scheins Roundtable #6

Written by Bernie, Martha & Maggie Schein
Tuesday, 10 April 2012 12:07

The Emperor: With or Without Clothes?



How do we know when “sticking to our guns,” and “holding our ground” is admirable and righteous, versus when it is delusional?

We all know someone who does that and is respected and turns out to be have been right, “against all odds” and against common opinion (think, Galileo) and someone who does that and is—outside of the small circle of friends who support his fantasy—off his rocker delusional about his skill, expertise, knowledge, values or whatever it is he is holding his ground on (think Jim Jones). How do we know when we are Galileo versus Jim Jones?

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– *Liam, From Lyons*

Ah. The fear of being self-delusional versus being the underdog whose truth will one day come to shine on those who doubted. Yikes. This is a toughy. So tough in fact, we will confess at the outset that this might be better suited for a dissertation than for a short monthly column—and even then, the answers could be so varied and personal that no generalized one would do. In our discussion, we sought out examples that might help us identify the scenarios that trigger Liam's type of conundrum. Unfortunately, those can only be identified in retrospect, when we already know who turned out on top and who drowned in their delusions (the Nazi resistance fighter, the false prophet, the poet posthumously recognized for his penetrating insights, the stubborn defensive friend who insists the earth is flat or that she is going to be the next great American Novelist.)

Dr. Martha: It's true, however, that we can identify some of the common features of those who ended up being delusional, versus those who ended up being correct.

Bernie: The delusional are often defensive, over-zealous in their confidence, and belligerent against anyone who disagrees with them.

Dr. Maggie: Those qualities may often coincide with delusion, but certainly one could be delusional without them and have them without being delusional. One could also have them and be correct.

Bernie: You're just saying that because often when you're right, you're even more stubborn and belligerent!

Dr. Maggie: That's my point.

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Dr. Martha: On the other side of the coin, those who ask themselves whether or not they are “Galileo” or “Jim Jones,” are already participating in a dialogue with themselves that at least is aiming for the truth. They are, therefore, more likely to be open, to see more (about themselves and about others), and therefore, less likely to be delusional.

Dr. Maggie: Yes, but this is precisely the person we’re speaking of. We’re speaking of the one who *does* ask himself this question and *still* feels the pang that he could, despite that, be wrong. Clever people can ask themselves such a question in order to enforce their delusion—for instance, we all know the racist-in-denial who believes that because she doesn’t actively pursue discrimination and because she has observed black folks in person, her derogatory stereotypes are justified and correct. Liam doesn’t want to be that person.

So far, we have examined this question from the “outside”—How would we offer insight from a more personal, internal perspective? Dr. Martha, take it away!

Dr. Martha: That’s true. If Liam came to me as a client, I might ask him if this kind of question had occurred more than once in his life, when was the first time it happened, and why he feels he is attracting this kind of conflict. Does it serve him in some way?

Bernie: Good questions. It could be to repeat or work through rejection (or fear of it), to practice setting boundaries.

Dr. Maggie: Or because there is, indeed, something he is refusing to see about himself that his unconscious is repeatedly trying to get him to recognize, or because his sense of his worth is in some way tied to confirming his righteousness, his independence.

When we feel challenged to the point that we think we are standing alone to fight for something we hold dear – and we ourselves become shaken by this – we reveal the boundaries of our minds or hearts completely. It is one of our most naked moments, not just because we are exposing ourselves to others, but also because we are exposing the limits of what we can and can’t see of ourselves to both ourselves *and* others.

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What Liam is revealing, in his experience of this conundrum, is that there is something about himself he can't quite grab hold of. So such a feeling is an invitation, a warning symptom like a sore throat, that there is something in him he needs to attend to and either make right, or be at peace with. It is an opportunity to take stock of all aspects of his perception: of himself, those around him, and the issue in question. Perhaps it is that he is uncomfortable with confronting those around him. In which case, why does he need to? Is that because of them or him and what can he do to hold his ground without confrontation? Perhaps he is seeing clearly, but not holistically. In which case, what completes the picture? Perhaps he IS the emperor with no clothes, and his own nakedness and vulnerability are what he must come to terms with. Taking the invitation for self-examination seriously here is one half of our suggestion; the other, we all agreed, was to fortify yourself with those who you trust to see you clearly, impartially, but compassionately—be they friends, therapists, or acquaintances—mirrors who you trust to reflect you accurately, blind spots, age spots, cellulite, ignorance, truth, beauty, and all. Since this question is a bit over our pay grade we will end with two quotes from the sages, the Taoist Masters of Huainan:

"If you do not hide from yourself, then you do not hide from others either."

And...

"Clear calm is the consummation of virtue; flexible softness is the key of the way; open selflessness and serene joyfulness allow one to make use of all things."

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