



# An Identity and Development Story

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## Conditioning

It is essential to have a narrative that can guide our work as leaders, coaches, and educators. Our capacities and achievements as executives, teachers, authors, coaches, and entrepreneurs are enabled, shaped, and limited by a myriad of elements embodied in who we are. To know ourselves is to understand our nature as a biological organism who received certain stories we came to hold as true, as someone who has a unique genetic endowment and history, as the inevitable cumulative product of both our own deep histories and every choice that we have ever made.

Similarly, who we will be in the future is in some way shaped by the choices we make now.

By becoming conscious of how we became who we are, we can wake up to the unfolding story of our own lives and see ourselves in a developmental framework. We can, in fact, become conscious of our own developmental process and can choose and greatly accelerate how we enter into it. By becoming more present, we begin to author our own story rather than living unconsciously in the story that we are only slowly waking up to.

## The Developmental Impulse and Shaping

Each of us is the inevitable product of the miraculous process of unfolding we call development.

Like all of us, my grandson, Miles, came into this world helpless and dependent. Yet he arrived pre-wired with a deep instinctive urge to root for the breast. He didn't have to be taught how to do this; he simply knew. For Miles, the behavior of rooting around was quickly rewarded with warm milk, and nursing quickly became familiar and habitual.

As I write this, Miles is eight weeks old. He is incessantly in motion. His face changes moment-by-moment, and his little arms and legs flail around, seemingly at random, with no conscious control. He is adorable, and we can't help but respond with instant and total love for this little perfect creature.

As the miracle continues to unfold, his neural system develops through these random movements. As he discovers what works and what doesn't, the random movements will develop into crawling, walking, and, who knows? Maybe eventually pole-vaulting! As I watch my grandson, I am in awe that I am witness to the early stages of a primal and powerful development process, driven by the deep impulse that propels us all forward through life.



We are shaped throughout life by the interaction between the primordial impulse for creativity and experimentation and continuous feedback from the world about what works and what doesn't. Our early years are particularly formative. Some behaviors get rewarded: parents are thrilled over our first stumbling word, crying brings a caregiver running to our comfort. We learn to do the things that get us what we want: approval, love, food, a good feeling. Other behaviors don't get rewarded: poking the cat's eye results in a painful scratch, or crying elicits a strong reaction from an already overtaxed parent.

Implied by this is a self-adaptive learning capacity: when something works and is fun, we do it more. We learn to let go of the impulses that first bring pleasure but lead to consequences we don't want. Our bodies come equipped with a natural orienting mechanism that has the function of guiding us toward or away from certain kinds of experiences as we learn and develop.

While the impulse for experimentation and creativity is always available within us, patterns of behavior begin to form that constrict our creativity. Although this is necessary, it also damps our fullest expression as a human being. We can begin to see that we are products of all the experiences that we have had. We can say that we are conditioned by the world around us. As the poet David Whyte says, "We shape our selves/to fit this world/and by the world/are shaped again."

## Habit Formation

Over time, emerging patterns of behavior become embedded as habits; we can think of our particular accumulation of habits as the basis of a unique personality. Habits are part of who we are in the world, and the nature of a habit is that we no longer have to think about them.

Think of driving, and how awkward and tentative we were at first. As driving became more familiar and practiced, our brain internalized the complex coordination of movement and balance required. Now, some of us drive so automatically that we (erroneously) believe we can safely dial a phone or check e-mail as we drive in traffic. This is true for more than mechanical habits like driving. Think of the rote way we ask, "How are you?" when we don't expect or even desire a real answer or, how we eat our food, often without tasting it, while carrying on a conversation.

These habits are just part of who we are. They are defaults, learned over years, that shape how we interact with others and respond to what life offers. Habits are like worn grooves in the parts of our brain that drive behavior. Without a conscious decision to do something else, we nearly always act consistently with these habits. Collectively, our habits determine who we are as a person, how we show up in the world, and how others perceive and respond to us.

After years of practice interacting with the world in ways that make us feel comfortable, we have internalized our habits to the degree we no longer have to think about them. Others may well notice them and remark on them as our unique personality. Yet we remain largely



unconscious of these habits because they're in the background. It is our nature to learn habits well; it is the nature of habits to be invisible and automatic.

## Habit Nature

Habits, which consist of a constellation of related phenomena, are the predominant means by which we experience and respond to our world. Generally a habit consists of practiced behaviors intertwined with emotions, sensations, and a story, or interpretation of reality, that justifies and produces the behaviors.

Our habits are stored in the very shape and hard-wiring of our bodies. They are triggered by events and people around us, which, in our internal story, provide a full justification for our resulting behavior.

Our world is limited because it is determined by our interpretation, which inevitably excludes everything that we're not able to see or understand. Show a member of certain tribes in Africa a photo of an animal with which she is very familiar and she won't recognize it. It's not because the animal is not recognizable to her; she's seen thousands of them. It's that there is no way for her to interpret what a photo represents. It's not part of her interpretive structure and therefore not a part of her world.

In summary, our habits represent our personality and way of being in the world. They include the specific behaviors that we have learned to engage in to get what we want (and avoid what we don't want) and the sensations, emotions, stories, and interpretations that construct meaning in our world and justify our habits. We can say that our stories produce, and are produced by, our habits. By their very nature as defaults, they represent a restriction in our range of ways of seeing, interpreting, and acting.

## Identity

We are driven through this process of development, differentiation, and individuation to form a unique identity in the world. Our identity is our self-conception: what we hold to be true about ourselves. We might have an image of our self as a strong leader, capable of motivating and inspiring others. This identity is linked to a behavior of talking in front of groups. Positive feedback from our audiences affirms and reinforces that identity, making it stronger.

In addition we often, consciously or unconsciously, set up situations where that identity will be reinforced. We construct in our lives the circumstances that support the identity that we are seeking to create. This allows the development of a healthy ego and a sense of self as competent, accepted, and worthy in the world. By relying on what we do well, we get better and better at those things.

Our identity also tends to constrict us. In a very real sense, our identities become their own champions—self-perpetuating, unconsciously working around the clock to ensure their own



survival, and constantly alert for threats. Other behaviors tend to atrophy as they become less practiced. Left unchecked, this tendency leads to an increasingly narrow range of behaviors. At the extreme, our personalities become a caricature of our greatest strengths as we lose the capacity to respond flexibly to what the world throws at us.

Our identity, and specifically the behavioral and interpretive habits that make up that identity, inevitably run up against circumstances in which they no longer match what is required of us. While we came by our habits honestly, through years of hard work, adaptation, and self-preservation, our identity has reached the limits of effectiveness. Our very strengths have become our liabilities and are getting in our way. We are being called to something new, and yet every fiber of our being wants to rest in the familiar home of our tried and true identity.

This is a crux moment in both the personal and professional domains. External circumstances and job requirements change. However, unless a leader is able to reinvent the identity she has built over years, which has been endlessly reinforced by others and has arguably been essential to her success so far, her career may derail. This is a tragic loss for both the leader and the organization.

The central challenge in development is to move beyond an identity that no longer serves us. Development is essentially about engaging intentionally in the business of transcending an existing definition of our identity, in order to literally conceive of ourselves in a different, new sense. We learn to loosen the grip of our conditioned way of being – our habits, stories, ways of interpreting the world, and customary responses – in order to act consistently with new and more generative commitments.

This is a big request given the deep biological roots of our conditioned nature. To do this, we work at the level of the attachments, aversions, and structures of interpretation that drive our behaviors in the first place. We come to recognize and suspend worn habits and aspects of our identity that no longer serve us. We focus on deep change, on shifting the assumptions and narratives from which we make decisions, assess our potential contribution, and orient our self in life and work.

This doesn't mean tearing apart what we have been in order to become something entirely new and unrelated. Rather, we author an ongoing, unfolding story of our own development. We come to see ourselves as engaged in an ongoing process of transcending what we have been, while including the history, skills, and values that are core to who we are. We learn to discover and reorganize around a new identity and to stabilize ourselves in more effective behaviors.

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