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What Makes us Tick? The Ten Desires that Drive Us

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I wonder if you have ever asked yourself the question: “Why did I do that?” It seems a very strange question to ask because, after all, *we did it* of our own volition and yet here we are, apparently mystified as to *why* we did it.

When we reflect on human nature, perhaps we shouldn’t be puzzled by the fact that we are so often puzzled by our own behaviour. There is rarely a single explanation for any of the things we do. Virtually everything we do is the result of a dynamic interplay, an interaction – sometimes even a contest – between the desires that drive us.

Tonight I want to identify the ten primary *social* desires that drive us.

A good way of thinking about these desires is to imagine a bunch of enthusiastic kids in a room, all with their hands up, saying “Pick me! Pick me!”. It’s as if each of these ten desires would love to control us. And yet, if we were to let any one of them gain the upper hand, we would become miserable and unbalanced. Much of the art of living lies in learning not only to identify these ten desires and understanding the interplay, the contest, between them, but also to finding a way of bringing them into a manageable, harmonious relationship.

I’ve said there are ten, but I am not assigning an order of importance. There is no hierarchy here: these desires are more like the interlocking, overlapping strands of one vibrating web; they are in continuous, dynamic relationship with each other, so

it is more realistic to think of them as potentially equal players in this blend of desires – though, of course, the pressure they exert on us will wax and wane at different stages in our journey through the life-cycle – or even within different periods of one day. And perhaps it goes without saying that they make themselves most keenly felt when they are frustrated.

Although I have already said several desires will usually be interacting to produce a particular piece of behaviour, there is one desire that is almost always present in the mix. In fact, offhand, I can't think of any behaviour where you would not find this particular desire struggling for expression. This is **the desire to be taken seriously**. That doesn't mean we desire to be regarded as serious people. It is all about the desire to be acknowledged as the unique individual each of us knows ourselves to be – the desire to be noticed, appreciated, valued, accepted ... perhaps even remembered.

Some of you will be aware of the work of Helen Bamber, an English woman who has devoted her very long life to the care of torture victims. She tells the story of finding herself, as a very young woman, at the gates of the Belsen concentration camp in Nazi Germany at the end of World War II when Belsen was being liberated. Bamber watched as the prisoners staggered and stumbled out of the gates, and she noticed one woman in particular, a woman clearly frail, spent, almost crawling out the gates; a woman clearly at the very end of her life.

Helen Bamber rushed forward and cradled this woman in her arms and listened as she rasped out an horrific account of her treatment in the camp. As she listened, Helen Bamber said to the woman, "I am going to tell your story". At that, the woman seemed to become calm. Bamber said it was as if merely knowing her identity would be preserved and her story not just evaporate was enough to give her the reassurance she needed, even at the end of her life.

All of us need that reassurance – and not just at the end of our lives. We all need to know that that someone is taking us seriously; that we aren't being ignored or forgotten.

Young people applying for work often say they send off dozens of applications and don't even receive an acknowledgement of their application. As one of them said to me, "It's as if you don't exist". The same occurs if you are kept waiting for too long in a doctor's surgery, without explanation or apology.

We live in a time of official apologies to various groups in Australia and around the world, such as the Australian Government's apology to members of the stolen generations and the Roman Catholic Church's apology to the Jews for its role in Nazi Germany. Some people are very sceptical about such apologies. What is the point, they ask, if you aren't going to do something about it? What is the value of an apology without compensation? In the early months of 2008 we saw the value, didn't we, in the outpouring of emotion, and not only from indigenous people but from around the country in response to the apology. Suddenly we all realised what it must feel like for a minority group to go from feeling marginalised and ignored to being on the agenda.

It is this desire that explains why all of us hate being the victims of racism or sexism or any other prejudice that simply lumps us in with a category, as if we ourselves have no unique identity. "Oh, she's a single mother ... gay ... Presbyterian ... a Baby Boomer ..." we hate being labelled like that, because we feel we ourselves are not being taken seriously.

So what happens to people when they feel they aren't being taken seriously enough? In some cases it can be a spur to ambition. Ken Moroney, the recently-

retired Police Commissioner tells the story of his first performance review as a probationary constable, when he was told, “Moroney, you will never amount to anything”. His response was to become Commissioner. And you do hear occasional stories of people spurred to great achievement by such early humiliations.

But those are the exceptions. Most people who, at vulnerable period of their lives, feel they are being mocked and belittled, carry it as a wound that sometimes takes a lifetime to heal. And the frustration of the desire to be taken seriously can sometimes be like a weapon in the hands of individuals, or even entire nations – Germany between the two World Wars a classic case in point.

Of course, some people who feel they aren’t being taken seriously enough decide they are going to do the job themselves and end up taking themselves far too seriously. (Perhaps that’s one reason why we should take each other seriously – to avoid the pain of having to put up with the arrogance or hubris of those who are still trying to deal with the feeling that they have been overlooked or, at least, insufficiently recognised and acknowledged.)

It’s the desire to be taken seriously that explains why good listeners are so highly prized. When someone gives you their undivided attention, the clear message is: “I am taking you seriously as a person”. It’s also why counselling is generally so effective: although various schools of psychotherapy are sometimes at war with each other over philosophical and methodological differences, the truth is that they all work, to some extent, because the counselling relationship – the counselling model – says to the client: “This is all about you. I am here to listen. I am taking you seriously.” And we all need to know that someone is – even if it’s only a faithful dog that wags its tail reliably when you walk through the back door after a rough day.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, it is the desire to be taken seriously that explains why ethnic and religious minorities often thrive on persecution. They don't say, "We've obviously got the wrong end of the stick – let's give this up". No: their faith is strengthened – their identity is reinforced – under the influence of persecution, because indifference is the real enemy. Even if you are someone's target, that can, of itself, make you realise you are being taken seriously.

So the way we listen to each other, the way we respect each other's passions (even if we don't share them), the way we respond to each other's needs, the way we make – or don't make – time for each other, even the way we make love to each other ... all these things send clear signals about the extent to which we are taking each other seriously.

One of the most famous experiments in industrial psychology was conducted by an Australian psychologist, Elton Mayo, working in the Hawthorne, Illinois, plant of the US's Western Electric Company. Mayo was trying to establish a connection between conditions in the workplace and productivity. In one of his experiments he found, as predicted, that when he increased illumination levels in the plant, productivity went up. But later, when he restored the illumination to its original level, productivity went up even further. His conclusion was that the workers were responding to someone taking an interest in them – taking them seriously – at least as much as to the illumination levels, *per se*.

So that's the most persistent of the ten desires that drive us. Let me run more quickly through the other nine.

There's **the desire for 'my place'**. At the beginning of this event, Adrian [the chairman] acknowledged the traditional owners of the land on which we're meeting

tonight. We are very willing to acknowledge that indigenous people have a powerful sense of place, but less prepared to recognise that this is the case not only for indigenous people, but for all of us. We all have a powerful sense of place. We all need places in our life that say things about us we're pleased to have said; places that symbolise, perhaps, our rites of passage or other magical moments or phases of our lives. Some people, even well into middle age, never quite forgive their elderly parents for selling the family home! For churchgoers, "my place" could be a favourite pew. For some people, it might be the shed or the bed or a favourite armchair.

A woman in one of my studies of the meaning of home said that, for her, it was a rock in the bush near her home. That was her thinking place; her dreaming place; her secret place. We all have places like that – places that define us; places where we feel comfortable and in control. Migrants speak of the sense of rootlessness that can arise from losing the places that were special to them in their birth country and never being quite able to replace them in their adopted country.

You may not be able to remember the person with whom you shared your first romantic kiss (though I hope you can) but you are very likely to remember where it happened. Where were you when John F Kennedy was shot? We know, because "place" is an integral part of emotionally powerful experiences: we are, quite literally, "rooted to the spot".

We are also driven by our **desire for something to believe in**. Humans are born believers – in terms of cognitive effort, neuroscience tells us, it is easier for us to believe than to remain sceptical. Bertrand Russell wrote that "man is a credulous animal and must believe something. In the absence of good grounds for belief he will be satisfied with bad ones". It is not surprising that we need something to believe in because our beliefs are how we make sense of life's mysteries: Why we

are here, what is the purpose of living, what is going to happen next, what is our place in the world ... the answers to all these questions seem locked up in mystery. So we need some way of making sense of our lives; attaching meaning to our lives; finding a template, a code, that gives us a framework of “meaning”.

In other words, we need a belief system to help us explain to ourselves why we are here and how we should live. Historically, most people found their answers – their beliefs – in religion and that is still true for millions of people today. But in most Western societies, including ours, traditional religious faith and practice have been in sharp decline for 30 years or more. Of course, many people who withdraw from conventional religious practice still say they believe in “god”, but even those who don’t still believe in something.

Some believe in astrology – about a third of Westerners say they believe in astrology and, in Australia, that proportion has been increasing at almost the same rate as religious belief has been declining. Perhaps you don’t want to say you believe in astrology ... but almost everyone seems knows their star sign. Even if you say you’re not interested, you find yourself in the hairdresser’s, flipping through a magazine that’s four months out of date, and you find yourself drawn to “what the stars say”. (If only you could remember what was happening to you four months ago, you could check the accuracy of the predictions.) You hear people say things like this: “It’s all rubbish, of course; on the other hand, my husband is a textbook Aries”.

Some people believe passionately in the free market or a free enterprise economy; some believe in the god of science; some believe in rationality (though I must say the idea that man is a rational animal hardly seems to coincide with the facts. Most of us are ruled more by the heart than the head, so perhaps it makes more sense to

say that man is a fundamentally irrational animal capable of occasional, surprising bursts of rationality.

If you're looking for evidence of our desire to believe – and of the therapeutic power of belief – look no further than the famous “placebo effect” in medical research. Many of you will be familiar with this. When medical researchers are trying to determine the efficacy of a drug, half the people in their test sample receive the drug and the other half receive an inert substance – like a sugar-coated piece of chalk. They all know that they may not be taking the drug at all and yet, in hundreds of published papers reporting clinical trials of this kind, a persistent 30 percent of people who are only swallowing the chalk report the same therapeutic effect as those taking the drug. The most dramatic example of the placebo effect, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, was based on a sample of people waiting for arthroscopy surgery on a knee. Half the patients had the operation while the other half simply had an incision made in the knee which was then stitched up, without any surgery. You guessed it: there was no statistical difference in pain relief or knee function between those who had the surgery and those who had only had the cut.

When we believe there will be some healing effect, we tend to experience it. Belief itself seems potentially therapeutic for many of us, so it wouldn't pay to be too sceptical about faith-healing, would it?

Then there is **the desire to connect**. This is really a threefold desire. We all know that we are social creatures – we need to connect with each other; communication is our lifeblood. But we also need to connect with ourselves; to know ourselves; to feel “in touch” with ourselves. *Know thyself* is an injunction we'd all like to respond to though, for most of us, it seems to be a lifelong project. My personal guru in the field of psychology, the US psychotherapist Carl Rogers, reflecting on 40 years of

clinical practice said: “There is only one problem”. What he meant was that it doesn’t matter what his clients were presenting with – broken marriages, dysfunctional relationships, addictions and phobias of all kinds – it always came down in the end to this: who am I? What kind of person am I, that is now in such a situation?

And we also need to connect with the natural world – for some people, that’s a desire to be “one with the universe” or the cosmos; for others, it’s a desire to set ourselves in the context of an eco-system. This can be a problem for people who live in highly urbanised areas, cut off from “nature”, living in a concrete jungle, a high-rise apartment block or an area so developed it’s links with the natural world are perhaps hidden. Most of us in that kind of situation need to compensate for it: we go swimming in a river or in the sea; we go rock-climbing, or bush-walking; or we maintain a small garden, or have a pet. Even people on the 14th floor of an apartment block tend their pot plants, as if to say: there’s a part of nature up here with us.

Some of you are old enough to recall the pet rock craze of the 1970s. That was a tremendous marketing success – you even got a handbook telling you how to care for your pet rocks. Most people found rocks to be deeply unresponsive pets, and the whole thing was a kind of joke – but it was also a sign of just how badly we need to feel some connection with the natural world, and how restless and anxious we can feel when we are cut off from nature. (No wonder we place such high value on parks and gardens in our cities.)

I don’t think I need to say much about **the desire to be useful** except to invite you to consider how you would feel if the judgment on your life was this: “Oh, he’s been a pretty useless father; she’s a useless person around the office; they’re useless neighbours.” We all need to know we’re useful; that we serve some

purpose; that we are contributing. It is the desire to be useful that propels us to do jobs that we don't like, but know need to be done. It's the desire to be useful that makes us helpful; that fuels our altruism. It sounds like a modest desire but it's the very thing that helps create a civil society.

The desire to belong reminds us that we are social creatures; tribal creatures; herd animals. We need those little groups –herds – that provide an intimate connection with others *and* we need those larger tribes as well – religious, political, sporting, professional. We need both kinds of belonging to give us a satisfying sense of identity and to build up our emotional security. It seems as if we can't easily get on without each other: there are true hermits and isolates, but they are few and far between.

Traditionally, the herd was the immediate, nuclear family; the tribe was the extended family. In modern, more fragmented societies, both herds and tribes tend to be less familial: the herd might be a book club or a workgroup or a small knot of friends and neighbours; the tribe might be a political party or a religion. For many people, religion is as much about belonging as believing. I recently heard an American quote her Jewish grandfather: "A Jew goes to the synagogue to sit next to another Jew," he said, and there's plenty of truth in that – and not only for Jews.

All of our desires have the power to bring out the best or the worst in us, but there are a couple that often seem darker than the rest. **The desire for more**, for instance. We are an insatiable bunch, aren't we? We seem to want more of whatever we have; whatever we enjoy; whatever makes us feel good – even if only fleetingly. It's our desire for more food and drink that is driving the Western epidemic of obesity. Our desire for more possessions – more *stuff* – has got us deeper and deeper into debt. Our desire for more stimulation drives our voracious media consumption habit, and our appetite for more and more IT gizmos.

Some of us have a desire for more violence. If you look at the world's armies and arsenals, it's hard to avoid the feeling that we desire more war – though we deny it, of course.

All of us desire more life. Early in life and into our middle years most of us say: “I'm only interested in the quality of my life; quantity doesn't count. When bits start falling off, or I start doing and saying stupid things, hit me on the head will you?” And then bits *do* start falling off and we *do* start doing and saying stupid things, and then we say: “Is there a pill?” For some people, the greatest appeal of religion is that it offers the promise of yet more life beyond this mortal span – perhaps through eternal life, or a process of constant reincarnation.

But by far our most troublesome desire is **the desire for control**. We started life feeling as if we were in control. We yelled and someone fed us; we lay in a dirty nappy and someone changed it. Then we ran into others, perhaps at school, and discovered that we all thought we were in control of the universe. Gradually, we came to the painful realisation that the only way society is going to function is if we are prepared to co-operate and compromise – in other words, relinquish control.

Most of us stumble through life hoping to be able to control the uncontrollable, such as the weather and the traffic, and, most especially, each other! It takes us a long time to realise – and then accept – that the only life we can control is our own and, when it comes to weather or traffic or the myriad other external events and circumstances that affect our lives, the only thing we can control is our reaction to those external forces.

Many people are destabilised and even distressed by the rate of change – social, cultural, economic, technological. We often experience that as loss of control, and that fuels our anxieties and leads to our increasing reliance on tranquillisers and

antidepressants (though I realise there's more to depression than loss of control). Most of our phobias, our neuroses, are about this desire for control being frustrated. Fear of flying, fear of crowds, fear of travelling in lifts, fear of open spaces .. all such fears are expressions of our desire for control.

One of the ways we try to gain a sense of control is through our beliefs, and our interpretation of events. If you feel you can explain something, you often feel more in control of its effect on you. (So the desire for control overlaps with the desire for something to believe in.)

Virginia Woolf, a keen movie-goer, once wrote an essay about a very early horror film called *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. In the essay, Woolf praised the brilliance of the director in having been able to incorporate into the film a formless shape that served as a visual symbol of the human emotion of fear. This black symbol appeared in the corner of the screen from time to time, swelled and shrank, changed its shape ... Woolf was intrigued and entranced. In fact, the black shape was caused by a malfunctioning movie projector but, if you're a control freak (as Woolf apparently was), you have to find a way of explaining and interpreting *everything*.

Here's another powerful desire that drives us: **the desire for something to happen**; the desire for something to look forward to. Of course, we *say* we crave stability, predictability and certainty, and when we have those things we complain that nothing ever happens. The truth about us is that we thrive on unpredictability and uncertainty and we have since we were children. We are stimulated by having to deal with the unexpected.

Of course, we have a deep and justified craving for stability in our emotional lives. We yearn for emotional stability, most of us. We need the security of knowing we

are accepted and valued in the groups we belong to. But beyond that, it's unpredictability that keeps us alive, alert and interested. Predictability is precisely what we don't need. Rituals are important for our sense of well-being, but they need to be balanced by uncertainty. (If you want to keep your brain active, a crossword won't achieve much, once you're learned to master it; it's the uncertainty and unpredictability of personal encounters that really keeps us going!)

Finally, **the desire for love**. This desire expresses our yearning for the deepest and most emotionally rich and satisfying of all our human experiences. We all need people to love us and we need to love. This is the desire that brings out the very best in us; that encourages us to perform acts of extraordinary kindness; that reassures us and develops our capacity for empathy. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to experience the unconditional love of a parent, the thrill of romantic love, or the deep satisfaction and joy of enduring friendship know that love is our greatest contribution to making the world a better place.

So those are my ten ... but of course there are other kinds of desires that drive us. There are ethereal desires – ideals – that drive our passion for justice, truth and beauty. And there are basic “survival” needs (I'd hardly call them desires) for food, drink, sleep and shelter, and, on behalf of the survival of the species, the desire for sex. But the desires I'm discussing tonight relate to our sense of who we are and our place in society.

Finally, let me mention a couple of examples of how these desires might interact and influence our behaviour.

A young couple announce they are going to get married. Their friends ask: “Why marriage? Why aren't you just going to live together?” So what desires might drive

the decision to marry? Is it that they want to express their *belief* in the institution of marriage? They may want the particular *recognition* that will come from being acknowledged as a married couple. They might want to create *their own space*. One of them, coming from a chaotic or dysfunctional family, might yearn to *belong* to a loving extended family. They might want to experience the particular kind of *connection* with each other that they feel will come from making the formal, legal commitment of marriage. And one of them, at least, may be *looking forward* to the excitement of a wedding day. So that's seven desires, all of which might be part of the decision (and I haven't even mentioned the desire for *control*, which is not unknown in these circumstances: "Once I've got him, I'll fix him.").

What about work? Why do people work when they don't need to earn a living? Why do people persist with a job they don't enjoy? Why do some people resist the idea of retirement? The answer is that work is a classic example of the kind of behaviour that satisfies many desires at once. Work makes us feel *useful*. For many people, it satisfies the desire for *a place of our own* more intensely than any domestic setting. Work gives us a herd to *belong* to (the workgroup) and a larger institutional or organisational tribe as well. For many of us, the desire for *control* is more richly (and more harmlessly) satisfied at work than in any other department of our lives.

Once you begin to recognise and explore these desires, you begin to understand why so much apparently irrational behaviour is nevertheless deeply satisfying to us. Religion, for instance, is under sustained attack from the anti-theists at present, largely because of the perceived irrationality of religious belief. But when you look at the desires that drive us, you realise that for many religious believers, their faith and practice ticks all the boxes at once. Irrationality simply doesn't come into it.

None of the desires I've described is inherently good or bad. Each of them has the potential to bring out the best and the worst in us; each of them has the potential

to cast a dark shadow. Refusing to acknowledge another person, for instance, is usually the shadow cast by our own desire to be taken seriously. Mocking someone else's beliefs is often a shadow cast by our own desire for something to believe in. Wanting less for someone else is the shadow cast by our own desire for more.

Each of these desires can be turned to good account or bad. The art of living is, at least partly, about our ability to recognise that we are all swept along by these desires; torn by them; sometimes riven by the contest between them ... and then working out how to bringing them into a harmonious relationship. These desires are not about survival, but about the choices we make every day – choices that determine the kind of people we will become and the kind of society we will create.

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