

I see you are all here. Or at least that's what my eyes tell me. Which is nothing to go by for I can barely see now. I have a lot to complain about this degenerating body but that is a story for another day. I am sure young people like you are not interested in an old woman's woes.

I gathered you all here today because a few weeks ago I had a troublesome morning, which is old people code for "I had problems remembering things". Now I have been getting increasingly forgetful but what stood out that particular morning is I actually forgot who I was. The doctor said I have senile dementia, which I suppose is a fancy way of telling me that I am losing my marbles. I am sure I have lost a couple so far, but I figured it would be prudent we have this discussion before I utterly lose them all.

Firstly I will share briefly about how the world came to be called the After. I am sure you know all about it but I am an old woman who loves to blabber.

### **The Day the Cough Came**

The infection started inconspicuously, with not so much as a ruffle to foretell of the damage it would cause. Besides, its symptoms sounded like something even a medical student could treat. And that is how it outwitted us all. For who in their right mind would have believed that the world with its technological advancements in health and pharmaceuticals would be brought to a standstill by a mere cough? That with all the far more debilitating diseases we had already found cures for, it would be this, a flu-like illness whose disruption on all spheres of our being would be compared to when we had the World Wars. It would have sounded incredulous and perhaps earned one a few bewildered looks followed by bellows of laughter.

We followed its spread rather half-heartedly, hoping they would contain the spread for their own sakes. It was not until we got cases of our own that we all began to grasp the gravity of the situation we were in. By then we had already lost a priceless head start and we paid dearly for the cost with the human lives it claimed. As the infection raged on we finally came to terms with the fact that to win we had to come together. Our squabbles, international conflict, civil disputes and prejudiced stereotypes looked rather petty in the face of the looming threat. If anything the infection brought us together through a stark reminder that we were all, after all, human. The world came together and that turned out to be the Deus Ex Machina that saved the day.

### **The After**

The After. That is what we unanimously agreed to call it, for we could not ignore the glaring fact that the world had changed. Just like after every major threat to our existence, everything was up in the air. Although we had emerged victorious, the infection had questioned all we knew to be solid in our economic, political, governmental and social structures. Nothing was left unscathed. Societal and organizational modus operandi we had known to be surefire were no longer applicable in the face of the uncertainty that loomed over our heads.

### **The Young People of the After**

Initially there was some belief that younger people got a milder form of disease<sup>1</sup>. When I saw that on the news I was relieved for a few seconds (because I was twenty three then, if you can believe I was ever that young), but that was followed by a rushing feeling of despair. I wondered what would happen if the young people survived and immediately be faced with the responsibility of leading the world. Were we equipped with the critical thinking skills such a situation would require of us? And how would we even begin attaining, developing and applying these critical thinking skills for ourselves? With the waves of untruths flooding us daily, how would we discern truths from falsehood enough to make good decisions for ourselves and our organizations?

Those aren't easy questions and I pondered upon them many a night. I do not think there is one right set of answers. But I have my own opinion on the matter and that is what I intend to share today with you before this brain completely goes to mush. Throughout this session I ask that you think about what I am saying. Afterwards I expect nothing less than to be ruthlessly bombarded with your opinions.

### **Why we were not thinking**

#### *The Problem of Solved Problems*

Were we equipped to be critical thinkers? The short answer is No. The long answer starts at the turn of the Twentieth Century, after centuries of discoveries in all spheres of life, from business to health. There wasn't much to think about really. Most answers had already been found. The incentive of discovery dwindled and was far lesser compared to during the eras of Aristotle, Plato and Maimonides. Unlike Archimedes there wasn't much we could shout, "Eureka!" for. As such we lacked the intrinsic motivation to question everything. Although this is an oversimplification, for the world truly did have issues of its own, most of the fundamental questions had been answered already. Thus creating the problem of solved problems.

#### *The Problem of a working system*

Peter Drucker rightfully thought that the education system was wrong for assuming that there is one way of learning<sup>2</sup>. Despite his protests and that of many others it remained unchanged because it worked for the system. To understand how let us take the example of a young child entering the education system at four years of age. Inquisitiveness is a natural feature during this critical period of brain development. But they soon realize from the reddening faces and the look of annoyance in their teachers that listening instead of questioning is rewarded more. Before you hastily rush to blame the teacher you must understand that they too were trained up in the same way, and that teachers are grossly underpaid globally, impacting negatively on their motivation. All these factors intermingled to subconsciously place the value of original thought on the back burner to parrot-like repetition in our young learner's mind. As such students spent hours cramming whole books which they would regurgitate word for word in

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<sup>1</sup> [www.who.int](http://www.who.int) Myth Busters about Covid-19

<sup>2</sup> *Managing Oneself* – Peter Drucker

examinations. Whoever did it best was Magna Cum Laude. But our glorified graduate would seriously lack critical thinking skills. This is not an immediate problem because for as long as the world or organization stayed as described they can manage and even thrive without having to think much for themselves. However if the economic arena shifted or the world's predictability was questioned, then our college graduate will be left undone, unable to figure out how to navigate the world in uncharted seas. I have more than a hunch that our inadequate preparation for the critical thinking the world required of us grossly contributed to the global deterioration in mental health<sup>3</sup>.

### *The Problem of Good Parenting*

Compared to other animals, human parents are the most involved in the rearing of their offspring and they do it for the longest (some even rear their children until they are forty years of age). And compared to previous generations our parents were incomparably better. That is not to say they did not have their fair share of shortcomings, but the world had begun to realize the impact of how one was raised went on into their adult lives. Seminars, vlogs, podcasts and YouTube channels on parenting skills were quite popular.

But too much of a good thing can be quite detrimental and that is how 'snow plow parenting' emerged<sup>4</sup>. It was a phrase used to describe parents who went out of their way to make sure their child would never have to struggle. This ranged from solving their child's every problem to paying their way into Ivy League institutions despite their offspring's dismal academic performance. Although the latter set were on the rather extreme spectrum, most parents did shield their children from the world and its problems.

I once watched on National Geographic as a baby giraffe was born. After it came out it could not stand on its feet, they were too wobbly. But the mother stood there and waited for it to learn how to stand. Eventually it got the hang of it and stood on its own four feet. Most young people lack the opportunity to solve their own problems and thus develop the courage to stand their own feet.

This extended into government and the international arena. We were shielded from active participation in solving the world's current problems. What young thinkers suggested was applauded but rarely implemented. Invitations to global meetings were merely an appearance instead of a sincere effort to include young leaders in the decisions that would affect them for more years of their lives than those making them on our behalf.

### **Why we all need to think like Doctors**

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<sup>3</sup> *How Education is failing Mental Health* – Raya Bidshahri

<sup>4</sup> *How Parents are robbing Children of their Adulthood* – The New York Times, March 16 2019

How then is a young person supposed to think critically? To put it simply, we all need to think like doctors. Peter Drucker said that management is like medicine. That is also how one should think critically I suppose, like a doctor would about a patient.

### *Take a holistic history of your patient*

Doctors start by taking a detailed history of the symptoms, what they have been treated for before, how they grew up, lifestyle habits and beliefs structures.

Take time to know your thoughts and how they came to be. Your thought processes are not as straightforward as you'd like to think. Acknowledge the contribution your temperament, upbringing, culture and beliefs have on your thinking. That is the first crucial step in knowing yourself. Find out how you think and listen to the things you think about.

Take time to know how and when you think best. Peter Drucker found that most people are either writers or readers. I personally am a writer, I need to put my thoughts on paper for me to process them. Neither of the two is superior but it is essential you know which you are so you can function optimally<sup>5</sup>.

### *Examine the patient*

As all good doctors know, examining your patient is crucial. Sift through your thoughts as if they were another person's own. Find any subconsciously held stereotypes in your world view and get rid of them. A good way to do this is to make friends with people from cultures and belief systems that differ from yours.

Examine yourself and find out your strengths and weaknesses. Overall productivity of any organization is best when one does what they are suited for. Set yourself free from the motivational clichés on how we could be anything. Truth of the matter is I cannot successfully be anything I put my mind to. There are things that are naturally easier for me to do than others. Find your strengths and perfect them that you may be excellent, find your weaknesses and work on them as well lest they become a blind spot. As Peter Drucker said, *Mathematicians are born, but we can all learn trigonometry*<sup>6</sup>.

Examine yourself to figure out the responsibilities you can handle instead of being led by blind ambition. I spent years as second in command because I realized that I work best as advisor rather than decision maker. Some people work best in teams and others alone. Find out which you are so you can put yourself in conditions where you are most productive.

### *There is always a Differential Diagnosis*

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<sup>5</sup> *Managing Oneself* – Peter Drucker

<sup>6</sup> *Managing Oneself* – Peter Drucker

No matter how obvious the diagnosis is, a good doctor always has differential diagnoses. This is to say, *Even when you are right, you could be wrong*. Realizing that makes it easier for you to question yourself ruthlessly and make room for change. Listen to differing opinions without intent to correct or reprimand. Accept criticism when it comes, and be ready to critique even your best ideas yourself.

The same goes for your career. You are not a one-trick pony. Be well-rounded in your knowledge. Specialization is great, but you may lose sight of the bigger picture. You are a being vested with much talent, find two or three areas outside of your current employment to invest your time in. This will give you a well-balanced outlook on life. You should start now when you are still young so you can prepare for what Peter Drucker called the second half of your life, when doing the same job is no longer satisfactory.

*Manage as best as you can with the information you have.*

As most doctors will tell you, waiting for comprehensive information before managing a patient can cost them their life. You have to make the best decision you can based on the information you currently have and adjust your plan as new information comes in. That is the same for everyone leading an organization. Waiting for the full picture is far more costly. Nothing is ever truly certain. Conquering the infection did not totally demolish all uncertainties from the world. Climate change, which had long been written off as myth had begun showing its ugly head. Cyclones and earthquakes had begun affecting regions where they were historically known to have spared<sup>7</sup>. The weather patterns were no longer as predictable. That is the world we returned to after the pandemic. And that is true for you as well. There are factors outside of your control which will affect the outcome of your decisions. There will always be uncertainty, a good leader knows this and readies themselves for its tyranny.

The second part to how you manage your thoughts involves taking stock of your achievements against your expectations. This is gruesome exercise that requires unparalleled honesty. Find out where you went wrong and how you can work on becoming better. Peter Drucker put it more eloquently as literally becoming the CEO. Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist noted that when it comes to managing ourselves we are simultaneously the boss and the employee, and that we are often worse bosses than we are employees. As such as you manage yourself you need to take time to bargain with yourself and put in incentives that will motivate you to meet your set targets. And once they are met reward yourself with the incentive as your salary; like any good Boss would<sup>8</sup>.

## **Discerning truth from untruth**

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<sup>7</sup> 2019 Cyclone Idai in Southern Africa – World Vision

<sup>8</sup> 12 Rules of Life: An Antidote to Chaos – Jordan Peterson

What was the third thing? Or have I said it already? Ah! There goes my marbles again, tumbling up and down. It's a good thing I had jotted it down on a piece of paper. Let me see, the third question was; "How do you discern truth from untruth?"

Well, that's a biggie.

*Why do we lie?*

We have seen blatant untruths going viral on social media, reaching millions of people globally and affecting personal and organizational reputations. We even had inquiries that provided unsettling light into the use of social media in distortion of elections<sup>9</sup>. Fake news threaten the continued health of true democracies. What's worse, false news drives misallocation of resources during terror attacks, natural disasters and pandemics. Although some aspect of spread of false news can be attributed to automated bots, humans are still responsible for the huge chunk of false news<sup>10</sup>. The question then is if the lie is so obvious why do millions of people share it?

*Continuous Partial Attention*

The internet is an information super highway bombarding our eyes with literal millions of new information for our brains to process. Our minds have had to find ways to cope by deciding what's important and concentrating on that. Hence they operate under *continuous partial inattention*<sup>11</sup>, a phrase which means an unwillingness to think your thoughts all through the end. Which means you only take a few seconds to create an opinion on the matter before proceeding to the next batch of information, and thus are more likely to share obvious lies because your brain has not had adequate time to process the implication of the information presented to it.

*Falsehood sells*

Studies show that falsehood diffuses faster, deeper, and more broadly than truth in all categories of information. And it's not because those who share it aren't the smartest nor that they are malicious. Studies show most people sharing fake news do consider it important to share only what's true and are capable of detecting fabricated ones<sup>12</sup>. It's just that they get distracted by the strong urge to share what they read before reflecting on its veracity.

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<sup>9</sup> The Robert Muller Report on the 2016 USA Election

<sup>10</sup> MIT Twitter Study: Fake News – March 2018

<sup>11</sup> Continuous Partial Attention – Linda Stone

<sup>12</sup> MIT Twitter Study: Fake News – March 2018

### *How to tell the truth*

During the infection we all saw the detrimental effect that fake news has. The fight against fake news escalated as governments put in heavier fines and even jail time to curb the spread of fake news. A perhaps more effective way I would suggest is asking major social media sites to put in algorithms for a Prompt that simply asking users whether what they are sharing is true, thus giving them a few more moments to actually see their thought processes through. When prompted to reflect on the accuracy of a fake headline, people are less likely to share it. Or perhaps you could create phones that physically restrain their users from sharing news on social media before validating its truth. I am sure you are smart enough.