

5

We Have Met the Enemy, And He Is Us

The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

—Marcel Proust

I (Steve) live in Minnesota. Early every fall, I have fine intentions of getting a huge supply of firewood ready for the long winter. One chilly Sunday afternoon in November, after many weeks of procrastination, I decided that enough was enough. It was definitely time to get the job done, especially since a big snowstorm was on the way. I also wanted to watch the Minnesota Vikings football game on television, but I decided that the firewood must come first.

As I sat on the couch looking out the window at the place in the yard where a winter's worth of cut and neatly stacked firewood should have been, I noticed a squirrel gathering acorns. I thought, "That squirrel is doing the same thing I'm about to do. He's getting ready for winter." Then I lingered a while longer to think about how lucky I am to be a human. "After all," I thought, "I have intelligence and foresight. I can use my mind to figure out exactly what I should do. All that little squirrel can do is run on instinct. He probably doesn't even have a clue about why he's picking up acorns and storing them away. He just does it." Then I watched the football game.

Including the entire half-time show.
And the entire postgame show.

And then I decided that since it would soon be dark and it was already snowing, I might as well watch the next game, too.

It hit me: The human mind is magnificently designed, but only to help us do half the job.

The whole job is doing whatever it takes to get what we need and want out of life. The first half of the job is figuring out what to do. The second half of the job is *doing it*.

When it comes to the first half of the job, the human mind really shines. We humans are experts at figuring out what we should do. For example, there were lots of reasons why putting up firewood for the winter was the right thing for me to do on that Sunday afternoon in November. I wanted to save money on heating, I was convinced it would be good for me to spend some time swinging an axe and working up a sweat, I looked forward to a sense of accomplishment, and I knew that it would be a whole lot easier to do the work before the snow fell than after it arrived.

My mind did a great job of helping me do the first half of the job. It enabled me to figure out the best course of action—to make one tidy decision that took into account a host of needs, wants and realities: Put up the firewood this afternoon.

But when it came to the second half of the job—going ahead and actually doing what I'd figured out I should do—my mind took a nosedive.

Just ask my wife. Or ask the electric company that sold us lots of electricity for heating that winter. Or ask the squirrel, who did the whole job, while I did only half.

The Ultimate Irony

If we humans are so intelligent, sophisticated and advanced, how come a squirrel can do a better job of following through?

The answer, we figured, must lie in the way our guidance system works.

Every living thing has a guidance system. At its simplest, a guidance system consists of the functions and processes that cause an organism to do whatever it must do to survive and reproduce. Even a single-celled microorganism has a guidance

system. It's made up of a few chemically triggered reflexes or switches that steer and propel the little bugger away from danger and toward food.

Most guidance systems, like the squirrel's, operate largely on the basis of pre-programming or instincts. Mr. Squirrel collects acorns for the winter because he's pre-programmed to react automatically to certain environmental conditions by gathering and storing nuts. The mere presence of these conditions triggers the right behavior.

An instinct-based guidance system is simple and reliable. Expose Mr. Squirrel to the right conditions, and he'll start gathering nuts. It will happen every time because he was programmed at the factory to function this way. The knowledge that gathering nuts for the winter is the right thing to do is hard-wired into his guidance system.

Having hard-wired knowledge means there's no need for Mr. Squirrel to watch a video on how to prepare for the winter. No need for him to check with the Squirrel FDA before planning his menu. No need for him to send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Pueblo, Colorado, to request a pamphlet on the best way to store acorns. Mr. Squirrel doesn't have to figure out what to do. The knowledge he needs was installed at the factory.

Automatically knowing what to do is not the only feature of an instinct-based guidance system that distinguishes it from ours. Besides automatically knowing what to do, Mr. Squirrel is automatically motivated to do it. If he *should* collect nuts for the winter, he *will* collect nuts for the winter.

Being hard-wired to act means that there's no need for Mr. Squirrel to listen to a motivational speaker or a lecture from his mother-in-law about being a good provider. He doesn't need any inspiring. He's always psyched up to do the right thing.

Mr. Squirrel's guidance system automatically does the whole job. Yes, having an instinct-based guidance system means always automatically knowing what to do and always automatically having the drive to do it. It means always following through.

There's only one drawback to having a guidance system that

operates largely on the basis of built-in knowledge and preprogrammed responses: It's not very flexible. It doesn't allow its owners to tailor their behavior precisely to the circumstances they face. And this can sometimes be a real problem.

For example, I once watched Mr. Squirrel's cousin make the mistake of storing nuts in a tree that the power company was about to cut down. I watched the power company survey the area and then paint a yellow stripe on each of the trees in a long row. As soon as workers started to cut down the first of the marked trees, I knew exactly what was up. The squirrel didn't have a clue. Operating on automatic pilot, he continued to fill a pantry that would be gone long before winter.

Living things that are guided primarily by instinct pay a price for the convenience of always knowing what to do and always being motivated to do it. They follow through even when they shouldn't! Yes, the price of hard-wired absolute confidence is sometimes automatically doing the wrong thing.

What Makes the Human Guidance System So Special?

Enter the unique and advanced human guidance system. In many respects, it's evolution's crowning achievement. Ironically, we discovered, it's also the source of our follow-through woes.

Instead of automatically tripped switches, the human guidance system relies on the richness of thought to analyze conditions, draw from experience, and use logic to figure out exactly what we should do to get what we need and want out of life. It's designed to enable us to do the very best job of any species of matching our actions to the specific conditions we face and the specific objectives we set.

Because we can figure things out, we can survive—even thrive—under an extraordinarily wide range of conditions. We've figured out how to live in extremely hot climates, extremely cold ones, extremely wet, and extremely dry ones. We've figured out how to breathe under water and to explore outer space; to make

deserts bloom; to generate electricity to make life easier; to treat and prevent serious illnesses and dramatically prolong life; and to sacrifice now so that later on we can enjoy retirement, send our kids to college, or have enough firewood to stay inexpensively warm during a long and cold Minnesota winter.

But wait, it gets even better! Not only does each of us figure things out individually, our guidance systems are, in a sense, connected to one another. Our societies generate and disseminate tons of guidance for us all to use. Members of our species dedicate themselves to figuring out what we all should and shouldn't eat, what drugs we should and shouldn't take, what we should do to stay healthy and happy, to get rich, to be attractive to members of the opposite sex, to play better tennis or bridge, and to find the most environmentally friendly laundry detergent.

Individually and collectively, we humans generate a never-ending supply of intelligent guidance. We get smarter all the time about how to live. No other species can come close to our ability to use intelligence to decide on the best course of action.

If the human guidance system sounds impressive, it is. There's only one problem: *It wastes much of the intelligent guidance it produces.*

That's right, it wastes it.

The Trouble with the Human Guidance System

You'd assume that a guidance system that's beautifully designed to produce intelligent guidance would also be beautifully designed to use it. That would make sense.

What we discovered, however, is that the human guidance system doesn't make sense. It isn't designed logically.

It draws on the most incredibly advanced capabilities to give us first-rate guidance in the form of good intentions. Then it lets the guidance go to waste by allowing us to ignore it.

Think of a highly skilled physician who draws on a wealth of expertise to give his patient precisely the right advice. Then think of a patient who lets the advice go to waste by failing to

follow it. Thanks to the illogical way the human guidance system is designed, we are at once the good physician and the bad patient!

Life would be very different if the human guidance system were designed logically—if we were as good at following intelligent guidance as we are at producing it.

We'd always automatically behave in accord with our intentions. If we decided we *should* do it, we *would* do it.

All you'd have to do, for example, is decide that it's best for you to eat low-calorie, low-fat foods. The case would be closed. You'd automatically love alfalfa sprouts and hate potato chips. If you decided that you should exercise regularly, you'd just do it. You'd not only think, "I really should exercise," you'd automatically feel like exercising. If you decided to spend three hours a day working on a book, playing with your kids, painting the den, or putting up firewood, you'd just do it. Nothing would stop you.

What Was Mother Nature Thinking?

Having a guidance system that does only half the job qualifies us for a rather dubious distinction: *We humans are arguably the only living things that don't consistently do what we know is best.* Accompanying our extraordinary capacity to figure out what we should do is a rather perplexing inclination to often do something else instead.

Why in the world, we wondered, would evolution take our species so far down the path of relying on intelligent guidance without going all the way?

6

No Wonder We Don't Follow Through!

*No matter how loud reason shouts her rules
of good conduct, the passions shout much
louder.*

—Erasmus

During a visit to China in the early 1980s, I (Steve) went to a bank to exchange some currency. I watched the teller use a modern electronic calculator to do the math. After writing down the answer on a slip of paper, the teller dashed into the back room to check her answer with an abacus! Although a modern system for performing calculations was up and running, the teller wasn't quite ready to stop relying on the old system.

Could something similar, we wondered, be going on with the human mind?

A New Theory Begins to Emerge

Here's how our thinking went: Evolution has obviously

been experimenting with intelligent guidance as a means of making humans uniquely adaptable. Perhaps Mother Nature has hedged her bet. Rather than fully retiring the primitive survival-oriented guidance system that enabled our distant ancestors to detect and react decisively to danger and opportunity, could she have left the primitive system in place “just in case”? And if so, might this Primitive Guidance System be working at cross-purposes with the modern Intelligence-Based Guidance System?

The more we thought about it, the more sense it made. And the closer we looked, the more evidence we found that not only is the primitive, survival-oriented guidance system still alive and well, it's the source of our follow-through problems.

It's no wonder that it feels as if we're working against ourselves whenever we intend to do something and then don't. We *are* working against ourselves!

We realized that we humans are at a most awkward stage in our evolutionary development. We are, shall we say, "between guidance systems." Along with a spanking new, state-of-the-art Intelligence-Based Guidance System, we have an ancient, outmoded survival-oriented guidance system that evolution hasn't gotten around to unplugging. Both systems are working to control our behavior at the same time. Unfortunately, the two systems have very different ideas about how we should behave. And, like Democrats and Republicans working simultaneously to advance the country's interests, they're not necessarily working together.

The Squeak-Seeking Primitive Guidance System

The Primitive Guidance System—we'll call it the PGS—has a personality that was well suited to the way we lived

long, long ago when surviving was all that life was about. Vigilant, reactive, and present-oriented, the system was designed to make sure that you detect and respond to the need, want, threat, or opportunity that's most in your face right now.

The PGS has both feet firmly planted in the present moment. It's in the business of detecting and responding, not to well-thought-out intentions, but to what's happening right now. When the PGS notices an itch, for example, it urges you to scratch it. When it notices that you're hungry, the PGS urges you to find something to eat. When it notices that you're feeling lonely, the PGS urges you to search for companionship. When it notices that you're bored and restless doing what you're doing, it urges you to stop and do something else instead. When it notices that you're already late for an important meeting, it urges you to hustle.

When it notices that you're feeling compassion for someone else, it urges you to help.

The PGS's simple rule of thumb is this:

Listen for squeaks, and grease the squeakiest wheel.

You can feel the Primitive Guidance System do its thing every time you smell cookies baking in the oven and feel like you just can't wait to eat one; or when you hear your baby screaming and drop everything to find out what's wrong; or when you suddenly realize that the bathroom is a mess and your dinner guests are due in just a few minutes.

Of course, being vigilant, reactive, and present-oriented usually takes you in an entirely different direction than intelligent guidance does. The Primitive Guidance System couldn't care less about intelligent guidance. What it does care about—and all it cares about—is squeak. It notices and urges you to respond to your most intense feelings and sensations—the squeakiest wheels.

A physician told us a wonderful story that illustrates what it means to have these two very different guidance systems working at cross-purposes.

Dr. James had a mole on his left hand. It had been there for months. Although he would often say to himself, “I really should remove this mole,” he kept putting it off. One day at the clinic, he found himself with an unexpected block of free time—a perfect opportunity to remove the pesky mole.

As he gathered the instruments and supplies he needed to do the deed, Dr. James gave himself a little speech. “The mole has to go. I’m a doctor. I know what I’m doing. I’ve removed lots of moles before. This is no big deal.”

With his left hand planted firmly on the examining table, Dr. James approached the mole with a scalpel in his right hand. Suddenly, as if it had a mind of its own, his left hand retreated from the scalpel.

Dr. James reports that he spent the next ten or fifteen minutes chasing his left hand around the examining room. Frustrated and embarrassed, he gave up.

Dr. James used his intelligence to decide that it was in his best interest to remove the mole. He assumed he could do it because it was the right thing to do. So why couldn’t he do it?

Dr. James’s good intention failed because his Primitive Guidance System gave the grease to the squeakiest wheel, not the smartest wheel. In the contest for control of Dr. James’s behavior, the fear of pain—the intense, immediate feeling—overruled the well thought-out intention to get rid of a potentially troublesome mole. In short, Dr. James’s good intention was out-squeaked.

Calling a Spade a Spade

The answer to the question “Why couldn’t Dr. James do it?” points us in the direction of a new theory of follow-

through, which we call the *Design Flaw* theory. Unlike the *It Must Be Me* theory, which is based on how we think the mind *should* work, the *Design Flaw* theory is based on how the mind really *does* work.

The *Design Flaw* theory goes like this:

We have two guidance systems operating at the same time. Although both systems are designed to steer us in the right direction, the two systems often have very different ideas of what the right direction is. One functions like a learned professor, the other like a shark. The modern system, the Intelligence-Based Guidance System, uses intelligence to figure out the best course of action. It's designed to make sure we behave in accord with our well thought-out conclusions about what's best for us. In contrast, the Primitive Guidance System is vigilant, reactive, and now-oriented. It's designed to make sure we respond to immediate threat or opportunity.

Each guidance system does its own thing. There's absolutely no cooperation between the two systems—no mechanism in place to make sure they work together for our benefit.

In the contest to control our behavior, the Primitive Guidance System has a distinct advantage: It's more powerful. Whenever the professor and the shark have different ideas of how we should behave (which is often), the shark is more likely to get its way.

The *Design Flaw* theory's bottom line is this: The real reason we fail to follow through is not because we as individuals lack willpower, self-discipline, or character. It's because we as a species have a design flaw that prevents our good intentions—despite their obvious qualifications—from having enough influence to consistently get the job done.

So if you're reading this, Dr. James, perhaps you can take comfort in knowing that there's a simple explanation

for why you left the examining room that day with your mole still intact and your pride injured. You made the same mistake that most of us make every day. You assumed that the mind would work the way it *should* instead of the way it *does*. You assumed that, just because it was most qualified, your intelligent guidance would run the show.