



Adaptation & Potentials

By Boris Matthews, PhD

Have you ever noticed that you seem to be keeping up with the demands of life but feeling worse and worse? That something important is missing? Have you ever wondered if there is something wrong with this picture? If your answer to both questions is “Yes,” then read on. (If your answer is “No,” please write me a note and tell me how you do it.)

In this article, I will address adaptation, our “essential nature,” and the (often unconscious) story or narrative that informs our life.

What do I mean by “adaptation?” When I use the word “adaptation” I mean something like “the best possible fit” between you and whatever you need to deal with. The best possible fit may be something of a compromise between your ideal and reality, not resigned compliance or rough-shod insistence on having your own way. Optimal fit is a balancing act. It’s that critical point between what the situation demands, what you can deal with, and what you need to attend to “in yourself and for yourself.” So one aspect of adaptation is to the world into which you were born and now live. The other aspect of adaptation is to your essential nature. Frequently the demands of our world and the demands of our essential nature come into conflict.

It’s no news that our lives are often very fast paced. By keeping up with the demands of life, you are finding ways to adapt to the world around you. If you have children at home, their educational, social, and recreational needs can keep you hopping. Care for other family members—whether your spouse or aging parents—adds to the load. Working outside the home takes a chunk of time and energy, especially if you put in overtime hours.

Those are some of the demands of outer adaptation.

“Inner” adaptation is a less-familiar concept. Just as there is a “world” outside us, so too is there a “world” within us. It’s innate, not acquired in the course of life, but shaped—facilitated or hindered—by our life experiences. This “inner” world may not even be bounded by our skin, but extend far beyond our physical body.

What constitutes an inner world? What’s “in there?” For starters, each person is born with a range of potential interests and talents. I say “potential” because when we are born, not much is active except the ability to cry and to eat; those innate, instinctual capacities. Innate potentials become evident as we are attracted to or repelled by what we encounter. As we develop in the early months and years of life, our preferences—likes and dislikes—become more distinct. By school age, we can see clear and meaningful differences. Our “inner world” has shaped our way of being in the “outer” world. (Part of a parent’s challenge in child rearing, by the way, is to help the child balance the demands of the outer world and inner world, as expressed in desires and fears.)

Jump a few decades ahead. Now you’re an adult. You’re on your own, maybe with a partner, maybe with children. You’ve had years and years of dealing with the demands of the outer world. How are you feeling? Where are you on the scale between complete satisfaction and burn-out?

Is your adaptation to the world optimal? Or are you coping? No longer sure who you are? Losing your grip? Chances are the balance between your outer and your inner adaptation is lop-sided in favor of the outer world. (Of course, the balance can go the other way: wonderful inner adaptation with nearly complete inability to function in the outer world. That calls for a different approach.)

There come times in life when the inner-outer imbalance has to change. Actually, these periods of sensing the imbalance and needing to readjust come in multiples of about seven years. (The “seven year itch” is no joke.) Recognizing the need for periodic reassessment and adjustment is normal and healthy: Take stock of your outer life, your obligations, and accomplishments. Take stock of your inner life, your aspirations, needs, what draws your attention, and what has lost its appeal.

I have already suggested some of the clues that your inner-outer balance may be off. Loss of interest in or energy for something you've passionately pursued is a pretty good indicator that you have given all the energy and attention that's naturally in you to give. Loss of energy in general suggests that you may not be cultivating and expressing the talents and potentials in you. Looking "outside" for the answer is not the best place to start - the new car, the different house, another child, a new affair. All those are possible, but unless they are the authentic expressions of an un-lived and neglected part of your potential, they won't be the long-term answer.

So if you're keeping up with the demands of life, but feeling worse and worse, or starting to lose your grip, and fantasizing about the new car, the new lover, etc., it's time to look within and get a clearer picture of what in you is calling for attention. This is the point at which we need to find out what unconscious story or narrative is informing our life.

There are many narratives people tell themselves, sometimes even consciously, without realizing how significant that narrative actually is. For example, one person may feel compelled always to be the "fix-it" person, the one to whom people turn when they need some sort of "repair" in their lives. Another person's narrative is "the good child," the one who pleases the parents by getting good grades in school, always sends thank-you cards, and lands the "right" job. Chronic fault-finding and pessimism is another narrative: you hear the person always talking about the half-full glass, the missed opportunity, the stupidity of other people and their actions. You get the idea. Usually these stories are almost as old as the person is; attitudes learned in childhood. Often the narrative was not so much explicit as it was an emotional atmosphere in which the person grew up. Even though an individual may look around and see others doing things he or she would like to do, "It's impossible." The individual's "story" essentially says, "Not you. You can't do that." Even if the individual has a lot of innate potential, the internalized story blocks it. Hence that person is not well adapted to his or her "internal" world and consequently suffers in a variety of ways.

So how do you change the crippling narrative? Somehow you have to become aware of the inner story that sets limits on what you can aspire to and attempt to do. This sort of awareness is more than knowing in your head that you feel limited, restrained, blocked. There is a kind of emotional knowing that breaks through the barrier. That's the kind of knowing that wakes you up in the middle of the night, or causes you to break out in a sweat. That's a kind of knowing you experience in your whole body, not just in your head. It's somatic, visceral.

Recently a client had this sort of realization. "There's joy in me," he said. "But it comes out in little bits and pieces. It's like a huge rubber tire of hopeless disappointment rolls along, and now and then little bits of joy squirt out the sides. Those bits don't set the tone or shape my attitude."

Your inner story, your narrative, can affect not only what you do and how you think, but your physical health as well. Consider an integrative medical approach which surpasses traditional treatment modalities. The old Latin saying, *mens sana in corpore sano*, is still a golden maxim: healthy mind in healthy body. Step one may be an assessment of your physical condition and recommendations for improving identified conditions. The next step could be nutritional consultation, acupuncture, body work, or yoga. A third level of work might be homeopathy and psychotherapy or psychoanalysis.

The organism is not separated "mind and body." The organism is a unit of interrelated and interdependent organs, each having a role to play, and each affecting all other organs.

Isn't it time to pay more attention to *your* story and create a better balance between adaptations to your inner world and your outer world???

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