The Evolutionary Activist

A Series

Looking Under the Hood: Assumptions and Images

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About the Series

The opportunity for inclusive, conscious participation in the evolution of our culture and society is still fairly new to humanity. Beginning about a century and a half ago, a growing wave has been visible, taking the form of individuals thinking in new ways, people challenging status quos, and progressive movements of many kinds. However, few people have recognized the deeper wave: a new stage of evolution on our planet. Still fewer have considered how we can learn to get ahead of the wave, to ride it, and even to help steer it in a direction more supportive of human development and a sustainable relationship with the environment.

The Evolutionary Activist is a series of booklets intended to help open a bit more widely the door to this opportunity for conscious evolution at the personal and community level. Each booklet in the series focuses on something we need to know, or be able to do, in order to actively and constructively participate in this process.

We don't know whether it is inevitable that we will make the shift from unconscious to conscious evolution, or whether it is something that depends entirely on some combination of effort and "luck." In either case, we do appear to have a choice.

Introduction

Assumptions are accepted ideas about things, ideas that usually go unexamined. Why unexamined? Sometimes they come packaged with other ideas from people we trust, like "Crossing the street without looking isn't safe!" Maybe they are so reliable, based on our experience, that they never need to be recognized, like "The sun will rise tomorrow." Assumptions can be found beneath more conscious things like beliefs, opinions, values, and philosophies. They seem to be essential. After all, we can't go around questioning everything all the time.

In spite of the necessity of relying on them, assumptions have a bad reputation, one earned from time to time as certain assumptions get called out as harmful or are disproven. Sometimes our assumptions don't really serve us well. In that case, it might seem obvious that they would become visible because they will be challenged. But this is not always the case, because first we have to recognize that something isn't working. Not only that, we also have to know how to look to the assumptions for the reason why. And by that time, it can be too late.

We should thus learn to pay attention to assumptions—to shine a light on them now and then—so that we can know better when they are causing a problem. We might even decide they could use an overhaul or replacement. This is true at the personal level, but another big reason to cast a light on assumptions is to help make sure that the assumptions within institutions like our schools, our political systems, our health care systems, etc. actually fit with the best of our knowledge and with our values.

Even if we haven't really thought about what we value, believe, and "know" about things like education and the economy and justice systems, it is valuable at least to see what's "under the hood." Examining the assumptions of a system, or simply those held by ourselves and other people, can help to prompt thinking about what we actually value and believe. And even if we haven't considered them much, there is always a chance that someone else has thought deeply about these institutions or systems, has researched them, knows about different ideas and approaches, or simply has a view on whether they work well or not. Those people could present an alternative set of assumptions to consider.

Assumptions: Where Do They Come From?

Holding assumptions comes with being human. But where do they come from? How do we learn them without knowing we've learned them? Sources will include the following:

- **Direct experience.** Our experiences give us impressions that are likely to influence our beliefs and perceptions until those are expanded or challenged or otherwise better informed. If we consistently get only candy when we go trick-or-treating, we will come to assume that only candy will be in our bag at the end of our Halloween evening. Until someone gives us an apple.
- **Cultural influences**. Cultural influences that convey assumptions include language, religion, books, stories, mass media, education, and ideology (a philosophy about how things should be). Among these, language may be the most surprisingly powerful. Consider how the presence or absence of certain words in a language could reflect deeper assumptions, or how certain phrases or expressions carry assumptions around (from the timeless "it takes one to know one" to the trendy "Ok, Boomer"). Cultural influences can be hard to challenge even if we are aware that an assumption has become a stereotype (e.g., you are an exception in America if you'd dress your baby boy in pink).
- **Influential people.** People who we trust—not necessarily personally, but as authorities on something—convey assumptions to us, consciously and unconsciously. This includes parents, other relatives, teachers, mentors, peers, political and media figures, and anyone else we admire and whose books or articles or tweets we read.
- **Systems we use or work for.** Most of you have gone through a school system. In doing so, you learned (mostly unconsciously) a bunch of assumptions about what school is, what it's for, what it's supposed to be like, how we learn, etc. When you have gotten used to a particular kind of health care, you adopt assumptions about what health care is supposed to be like, what doctors do, etc. If you work for a business, especially a large one, or for the government, you learn the assumptions about how things get done, your role, how communication is done, what's not okay, etc.

Images: Families of Assumptions

Assumptions don't exist by themselves, unrelated to other assumptions and to slightly more visible things like beliefs and values. In his book *The Image*, Kenneth Boulding—an economist with broad interest and insight into society—introduced use of the term *image* to describe the subjective knowledge about the world that a person carries around. I interpret Boulding's notion of "image" to include a family of assumptions, values, beliefs, and impressions. We all hold images of "family," "work," "the government," images about places, about groups of people, and, of course, ourselves (the well-known "self-image").

The idea of "image" is worth mentioning because it can be useful, perhaps even essential, when we are looking at things as a whole. Using the issue of immigration as an example, surfacing individual assumptions about immigration would be a starting point. But if we really want to understand the issue and how people interpret and react to it, we may need to think about the whole "image of immigration" or the "image of nationality" that defines it.

How We Can Shine a Light on Assumptions

I *assume* that we can't always be examining all of our assumptions, because—it seems to me—we'd never be able to get on with our lives. But if we practice being aware of assumptions, it may become easier to sense when they're not working for you or for your community, society, or world. If we can build that *reflectiveness* into our shared systems—so that we don't individually have to do it all the time—we can help to ensure that those systems and institutions stay healthy and functional in the broadest sense. By "broadest sense," I mean that they really work for everyone (because sometimes a system works really well for a purpose that is totally out of harmony with the needs of most people).

Here are just two approaches we might take to shine a light on assumptions and help develop reflective habits about them:

- Have regular conversations with other people about things of common interest or concern in which you apply a conscious intention and effort to surface assumptions—our own, those of others, and those in our culture and systems. We would ideally dedicate special talk time, talk places, and

talk groups to this practice. (See Booklet 3 of *The Evolutionary Activist* series, which focuses on the practice of dialogue).

- Look at "artifacts" from various settings and institutions and systems and try to *infer* what assumptions are at play. By "artifacts" I mean anything from the way a space is organized to roles and relationships (formal or informal), how time is used, how money is spent, rules, regulations, policies—in short, any aspect of the thing being considered. Behind all of these systems and institutions are assumptions that support their structure, function, or behavior (or at least *allow* them to exist).

Here are some examples of assumptions we might glean to be active in some of our most important social systems:

System	Assumption	Evidence
Education	"Education is something that all children should have access to regardless of income."	Educational services are freely available to children in the US.
	"Children can be compelled to learn."	Compulsory education (the law says that children must go to school).
Health Care	"Preventing illness is better than needing to treat illness."	Vaccination and child nutrition programs.
	"Health care is a commodity, not a right."	There is no universal, free health program for everyone in the US.
Government/ Politics	"All people above a certain age of maturity should have the right to vote."	Laws guaranteeing the right to vote regardless of race, gender, or other traits.
	"Our government could not work without a two-party system."	Almost every candidate is either a Republican or a Democrat. Independents are rare.
The Economy	"Money is an essential tool for exchanging goods and services in a large society."	The very common use of money to pay for things, versus direct trade or barter.

	"Our society depends on a continuous growth in consumption."	We measure economic health in terms of how many goods and services are produced and purchased, not by quality of life, happiness, or environmental health.
Justice	"People should be considered innocent until proven guilty."	This is enshrined in the US Constitution.
	"Putting people in prison makes them better people."	Prison sentences are the major consequence for criminal behavior if the perpetrator is caught.

You might agree with some of these assumptions and disagree with others. That act of reflection is important in either case.

Becoming personally more aware of the assumptions we hold and when they are at work is one thing. Building reflectiveness about assumptions into our shared systems and institutions, and into our culture as a whole, is another question. That step may involve projects that work inside, but more likely outside, of systems to publicly surface assumptions for wider examination and discussion.

If we find, collectively, that many of the assumptions underlying certain systems are not ones that we embrace, that could open the door to long overdue *re-design* of those systems from the assumptions level upwards (see the booklet addressing *participatory design* in *The Evolutionary Activist* series).

Why Learning to Surface Assumptions is Particularly Important Now

The semi-invisibility of assumptions and images wouldn't be such a problem in a simpler world. Today, however, there are two realities that make it a problem. First, the world is "smaller" and more interconnected than ever before. We encounter diversity, and we have the opportunity and the need to learn how to thrive with and through that diversity. The old prejudices that were allowed by distance and cultural bias can't stand anymore. They are the root of violence at many levels, and a waste of our potential to grow together. To get past them, we need to surface and explore assumptions about other cultures, other colors, other genders—differences of any kind.

A second reality driving the need to learn to surface assumptions is that most of us rely on large systems that seem to dwarf us, and seem to take on a life of their own. Most of them are built partially on assumptions that are already obsolete, or wouldn't match with our core values and ideas if we took the time to reflect on them. This is because society has changed significantly since the formation of the original images that these systems were built around. Turning this around—ensuring that these systems respond to the needs of today and our aspirations for tomorrow—requires that we learn to *see* and to talk about their assumptions.

Summary

- Assumptions are generally unexamined ideas about anything, serving as a foundation on which conscious beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of living are built.
- Everyone holds assumptions.
- Images are families of assumptions, beliefs, and impressions that we have about any particular thing, from ourselves to the whole world.
- Dialogue is one way to help us surface assumptions and to help build a habit of reflectiveness (or reflex) about the assumptions we hold and use.
- Another way to bring assumptions to light, while planting the seed of change at the same time, is to try to unearth the assumptions that explain how our public institutions and systems are set up the way they are.
- Paying more attention to our assumptions, and to those in our society and its institutions, will empower us to more consciously and actively participate in the design and evolution of the systems that serve us and affect us.

We close with a quote from the physicist David Bohm, who in addition to his pioneering work in quantum physics became well known for advocating the widespread practice of dialogue as a means for surfacing assumptions:

"Dialogue is a space where we may see the assumptions which lay beneath the surface of our thoughts, assumptions which drive us, assumptions around which we build organizations, create economies, form nations and religions. These assumptions become habitual, mental habits that drive us, confuse us and prevent our responding intelligently to the challenges we face every day."

– from *Science, Order, and Creativity* (1987)

Reflection Questions

1. Think of an assumption that you think you might hold, about anything—something that you can capture in a single, simple sentence. Then try to figure out if there is another assumption *underneath* that assumption, and then repeat ("peeling away the layers of the onion").

2. Think about a social institution that you see, use, or are a part of. It could be family, a school, a company you work for, or any other kind of ongoing organization. Based on something you notice about how it works, looks, or feels, identify an assumption that you think might be operating inside of that institution. Ask yourself whether you believe in that assumption.

Connection to Other Booklets in the Series

- Dialogue
- Participatory Design