

A Crisis of Perception

by Ralph Strauch

Approaching the millennium, humanity faces an interlocking array of potential crises. Some affect us as isolated individuals and some as a larger society, while some threaten the whole of humankind.

Overpopulation, environmental pollution, and possible catastrophic climate change seriously threaten our current way of life, and perhaps our very survival. Less devastating, yet still serious, are crises in crime, education, economic inequity, and health care which stress the fabric of our society. Individually, we must each face our personal stresses, insecurities, identity crises, and physical pains and limitations.

Superficially, these different crises seem separate and unconnected. Yet underlying them all, contributing in a fundamental way to each, is a more basic and largely unrecognized crisis — a *crisis of perception*. I'm referring not so much to *what* we perceive as to *how* — to the narrowly focused perceptual style that both shapes and is shaped by contemporary civilization. This narrow perceptual style has contributed significantly to our development of contemporary science and technology, but has served us badly in their applications to human needs, and in our social institutions and our personal lives.

Perceiving is not the simple process of passive observation that it sometimes seems. It is an active, interactive process, in which you filter and select from sensory and memory data to construct the perceptual images that you experience as external reality.

At the visual level, for example, you see what you know how to see. You see meaning when you look at this page because you know how to give meaning to the symbols on it. The same content, expressed in Farsi, Arabic, or Chinese, would convey little. You might have trouble even distinguishing the individual symbols, let alone the larger words.

As an urban American you can easily pick out a street sign from the visual welter of an urban street corner, but you would be blind to the sign left by an animal in the bush. For an Australian aborigine, the situation might be reversed. The sign left by the animal would be obvious, while the urban street sign might be difficult to differentiate from its surroundings.

You filter and assemble your perceptions in other dimensions besides the visual — from your auditory perception of the what you hear, through your proprioceptive experience of your body and your emotional feelings, up to and including your most complex conceptual and intellectual understandings. You always throw away much more raw data than you use, so that you could potentially bring any

situation or event into focus as very different experiences.

I discussed this filtering process at length in my book, *THE REALITY ILLUSION*. My interest here lies not with the filtering process itself, but with the breadth of the lens through which that filtering takes place. That lens can vary from a narrow focus, showing you sharp detail in a small area with little surrounding context, to a broad, open focus which supports an integrated gestalt of the world as a whole. How you experience a situation depends on where in that range your perception is focused. A narrow focus will produce a fragmented and piecemeal experience, while a wider focus will result in a broader and more integrated experience.

To experience this difference visually, curl your fingers into a tube and look through that tube at the room around you. This narrow visual focus allows you to see everything in the room, in the sense that you can see each the pieces. But you can't get a *complete* view of anything bigger than the visual diameter of your tube, and you can't see relationships between different things. You can see other people in the room individually, but you get no sense of the group as a whole.

Now uncurl your hand, relax, and let your focus soften. Take in the room without concentrating on any particular details. As your vision broadens, notice your ability to sense relationships that were absent when you looked through the tube.

Your other perceptual dimensions can be broad or narrow as well — your hearing, your proprioception (awareness of what goes on inside your body), even your conceptual understanding. The perceptual breadth of these various dimensions tends to track in parallel; they broaden or narrow together. It's easier to hear background noises, to be aware of your breathing, and to think more broadly when your vision is broad than when it is narrowly focused.

This perceptual range evolved because it served our biological needs. The hunter needs an open focus to detect his prey, wherever it appears in his visual field. Once he does find it, he needs a narrow focus to aim and throw his spear. We're meant to have and use the whole range, adapting fluidly to the task at hand.

Contemporary society, however, biases us strongly toward a narrow focus, and we tend to get stuck there. An emphasis on early reading teaches concentrated focus, while *sitting still* in school teaches reduced body awareness. No matter what you watch, television is a *tunnel vision trainer* without peer.

We respond to the stresses of contemporary life with excessive muscular tension, which

physiologically reinforces perceptual narrowing. Scientific reductionism leads to increasingly subspecialized experts who know more and more about less and less, while the economic imperatives of “the bottom line” both reflect and reinforce this narrowness, helping make it a cultural norm.

A narrowed perceptual focus diminishes your ability to perceive relationships, because your awareness can't hold all the elements of the relationship at the same time. The world takes on a fragmented “us-them” character in which self-interest has more appeal than altruism and competition feels safer than cooperation. This encourages decisionmaking styles, societal as well as individual, which focus on sharply defined problems and neglect surrounding context — what economists call the “exogenous variables.”

This decisionmaking style yields narrowly focused “solutions” like the use of environmentally polluting chemical pesticides, clearcutting old-growth forests to “save jobs,” and reducing education or drug treatment programs because they're “too expensive.” But the neglected context eventually catches up with us, as the “solution” becomes the source of greater problems.

At a personal level, perceptual narrowness manifests itself in a lack of proprioceptive (body) awareness, contributing to a wide range of physical and psychological ills. You unconsciously hold your back rigid as you get up from a chair, creating unnecessary tension and strain which eventually becomes chronic back pain. You are unaware of, and therefore can't control, the physical tensions you create in response to external stressors, so you try to suppress the resulting discomfort with painkilling drugs. Much of the angst and insecurity rampant today stems from poor self-awareness, and many of the limitations we attribute to “growing older” really come more from the unconscious accumulation of inefficient and dysfunctional movement habits than from the aging process

It doesn't have to be that way! Philosophers, mystics, and teachers from traditional cultures speak of a sense of “oneness” with their surroundings, indeed, with nature as a whole. Most of us, most of the time, have little sense of what they are talking about. But that *sense of oneness* is not some mystical hallucination. It is a perception denied to us when our focus narrows, just as the sense of relationship between objects in the room is denied when you look through the tube.

We are one with each other and with the world around us, in a very real sense. That oneness is hard to describe intellectually, but can be accessed through direct experience — if your perceptual system is open enough to allow that experience.

Cultures in which that openness is encouraged experience a far different world than we do, in which

life is a less fragmented, more integrated experience. Without a narrow focus to separate them from their environment, they retain a greater sense of connection with the natural world around them. They don't develop our sense of the natural world as “property” separate from themselves, nor the science and technologies necessary to exploit that “property” as we do. Because they haven't developed the material standard of living by which we measure progress, we tend to see them as “primitive.” But they did live in a sustainable equilibrium with their environment, at least until their contact with us destroyed that equilibrium.

Our particular perceptual narrowness has contributed to making contemporary western civilization all that it is, both good and bad. It has provided the intensity of focus needed to develop the science and technology that has made us the dominant world culture today.

That same narrowness has also blinded us (at least until recently) to the environmental and social havoc that our science and technology have wreaked. If current trends continue, it will contribute to our downfall, as the peripheral connections that our narrow focus so conveniently exclude catch up with us in the form of the various crises mentioned earlier.

To survive we must broaden our perceptual focus — in our business, economic and public policy institutions as well as in our personal lives. There are some positive trends, as diverse as increased environmental consciousness and growth in awareness-broadening practices such as meditation, T'ai Chi, and the Feldenkrais Method. But it remains an open question, I'm afraid, whether we can broaden our perception enough, quickly enough, to avert the crises that face us.

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