

Thoughts on Filters

An interesting thing about filters is we typically do not recognize we are wearing them. When a filter is engaged we confidently believe we are seeing what we think is there. We too readily believe our assessment of a situation. An evangelical Christian knows the only way to God is through Jesus Christ. A Muslim knows that Allah is the supreme deity. Pat Robertson doesn't think there is any problem with calling for the assassination of the president of Venezuela. He knows it is a good idea and others should think the same. And Tony Soprano knows he isn't doing anything wrong, wrong is being done to him. We are taught to stick to our convictions. To speak confidently of our beliefs. To know that we know. Of course when we are honest with ourselves we recognize there is precious little of which we are sure.

A filter, for the purposes of this paper, is an activity or decision that organizes perception. A theory, a belief system, ethics, politics, to name a few, can be seen as filters through which we make sense of our life. But before we organize perception we must perceive something.

We all recognize that our senses are quite limited and act as filters for an all too vast reality. Our mind further filters this information to make sense of what is being sensed. We use filters upon filters to get through life. Our brain can only smoke filtered reality.

Science has clearly demonstrated we are incapable of seeing objectively. For example the table this computer sits on appears solid when it is really composed mostly of space. We all know this yet happily collude in the fantasy that it is solid. And now, if string theory is correct, what we thought were the particles floating through this vast space are actually vibrations and not solid at all. To embrace the fact that our senses are filters which selectively perceive the world and are incapable of accurately, or perhaps better put, incapable of perceiving completely, is a bit anxiety producing, to say the least. We are not very comfortable when we do not know what is going on. We take great comfort in the illusion that we see things the way they are. We like to believe our feet are solidly on terra firma. To think otherwise is frightening. Even though some of us claim we know we are on a rock spinning through space, to really embrace this reality may make us throw up.

It is as if when a filter is engaged it sends a soothing neurotransmitter into the synaptic space. We relax in the comfort that we are no longer swimming in the unknown. We already realize sitting in the unknown is uncomfortable and sitting in the unknown for a sustained period is very uncomfortable. So when a filter sends its soothing message, that we understand a situation, to the brain, everything seems right again. We know what is going on, what is real and what should be done. And that is the seduction of the filter. We want to get out of any unknown field as quickly as possible. We do not know how to comfort ourselves when we don't know what is going on. And we certainly don't know how to find the unknown soothing in and of itself. While counseling someone can you imagine the thought; "mmmmm I don't have any idea what this person is talking about, this is great."

We are programmed to believe we should know. And equally programmed not knowing is a problem. So much so an increasing pressure to know arises the longer the not knowing continues. Because of that pressure we are susceptible to filtering what is coming in so it conforms to that which we already know. "Oh he is insecure", "this is an oedipal dynamic", "oh she feels abandoned, lonely, etc.", "she needs to meditate more". If one pays attention one can feel the comfort such conclusions offer. One can sense anxiety quieting down.

But how do we differentiate a premature filter from a deeper kind of knowing. Is it even possible to make this distinction? Of course we would prefer being in a less anxious state. But are we prematurely reaching for knowing when remaining open would, eventually, produce greater rewards?

For me it is helpful to remember that I probably do not recognize when a filter is in place and I would rather understand something (even if it is half baked) than be parked in the unknown zone. Knowing one of my filters is a preference to know allows me the room to avoid the shame which typically ensues from not knowing. This is the shame which dictates that I should know something when I simply don't. The shame which insists I not sit in the vulnerability of not knowing what to say. The shame which creates so much internal noise it makes listening almost impossible. The shame which reminds me this person is trusting, expecting, paying for me to be insightful or helpful and "just saying something for God's sake".

Shame, it seems, is the mafia of this pressure to know. If one doesn't comply, a little reminder, like a threat to one's self esteem or a broken knee cap, may help. Which, of course, is simply more incentive to rush to a filter. Avoiding anxiety and shame seems quite natural. But what is the cost?

I have found the kind of relationship within which this dynamic plays out is of great importance. If I have established a relationship wherein I am the authority, filters become all the more seductive because there is a shared expectation that I am the one who knows. If the authority for knowing is mutual with the caveat that the speaker is the final authority (meaning that we both recognize we are on an exploratory journey together but decisions of what is true resides with the speaker) there is far less pressure on me to know any more than I do. In fact, with the pressure to know reduced, I have found when I express I do not know it is often helpful to the speaker. Perhaps it reduces the relational pressure to know prematurely; perhaps it reduces their shame for not knowing. I do know when I can confidently state that I do not yet know what to say something changes in the relational field. It becomes more of a collaborative endeavor where the old roles of authority shift and a more mutual container is created.

Perhaps it is because I am communicating more interest in the evolving narrative that is being spoken than my own interest in being the authority. In fact I am more intrigued by what is being spoken (who this person is) than I am in figuring out what it all means. I find people shut down a bit if there is a presumption I have to figure them out. Who wants to be the subject of a scientific observation?

When I am free of the pressure to be the authority and know what is going on at all times my curiosity has more room to play. And this is a key reminder for me. If I am curious I am enjoying the interaction and I am learning moment to moment. Curiosity makes the unknown a playground. A playground is meant to be played in. Listening is play.

Sometimes I think the genuine curiosity I express in listening (the curiosity that is more interested in hearing what is being said than in coming to conclusions) is the single most important gift I have to give. Even though I have said some insightful things over the years

See even before I finish this thought I could feel a creeping anxiety. A worry if I have in fact said insightful things. What value would I have if not. The step from this barely conscious anxiety to the rush to make "insightful" conclusions to avoid anxiety is a slippery slope and very seductive. Seductive because it is natural to avoid discomfort but produces unsatisfying results.

Let's try that again. Even though I have said some insightful things over the years the feedback I receive from those who have worked with me is usually about presence or how they feel cared about or listened

to or that no matter what they spoke about I was with them in a nonjudgmental way or they felt loved where they could not love themselves. And I do know, or at least I think I know, those were offered during times when I wasn't anxious to think, say, or do the clever thing.

Freud tried to address this issue by recommending a position of neutrality. Neutrality was basically being an empty slate so that a patient could project their unconscious needs and drives on to the analyst without the analyst's own personality complicating matters. Today most analysts/therapists/counselors believe that this ideal (some would say cold and patriarchal) position is impossible. We are still trying to figure out the impact the listener's subjectivity (filters) has and how much one can and should disclose. A rule of thumb for me is to tell the speaker (and I do this frequently) that I am biased. I ask them to try on what I am about to say and see if it feels true. I do not pretend to speak as The Authority but I do speak confidently about what I see. I think trying for an ideal of neutrality (or any ideal) is another message that one is not enough. This by its very nature creates a constriction which is then communicated into the relationship. This, of course, produces a non-neutral dynamic because one's internal experience has and will find its way into the relationship in one form or another. It is important to know that one doesn't reach out to a counselor because they want to hear all about the counselor's life. But, my bias is, they do want to know (within reason) what is going with me while they are speaking. We tend to want authentic communication. Karen Maroda suggests that if we are asked a question we can ask if the speaker really wants to know the answer. If we do not answer then it may be a mistake and may actually be injurious because it is withholding from a direct request. This action may be similar to how things were withheld from them in their history. And we all know what it is like when someone withholds from us.

But of course these are simply my thoughts about filters. And like most things in life I find they are best taken lightly. In fact, if one doesn't laugh about one's filters and how limited and biased they are then we are probably taking ourselves too seriously.

Don't get me wrong, I am not devaluing my filters. In fact, if everyone would see the world the way I do it would be a better place. Now, about that dictator in Venezuela.