With the Help of Others:

Getting Out of Your Own Way Thoroughly

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We live in an age of bewildering complexity, looking toward a future that feels both technologically dazzling and terrifyingly uncertain. We worry about AI, the "Singularity," and a world that seems to be spinning out of our control. But what if the key to navigating this future, and indeed our own lives, isn't a new technology, but a fundamental capacity we've had all along? What if the answer is far more intimate and straightforward?

What I'm proposing is what our relationships afford us. We are, as the saying goes, "social creatures," and this is not to be understated. Leading theories now propose that our brains are fundamentally designed for connection (Cozolino, 2014). Social Baseline Theory, for instance, suggests the human brain evolved to assume social proximity as its default, most metabolically efficient state; being alone is registered by the brain as a more costly and stressful state (Cozolino, 2014; Sterling, 2012). This deep need for connection starts from our first moments. An infant's immature nervous system cannot regulate itself; it relies on a caregiver's mature nervous system to manage its emotional and physiological states (Schore, 1994). This process of "co-regulation," often occurring through an implicit right-brain-to-right-brain attunement, literally shapes the neural pathways that build our lifelong capacity for self-regulation (Schore, 1994; Siegel, 2009).

We can get incredibly good at this. Think of a skilled psychotherapist. Their professional service is, in essence, to attune to another person so deeply that they can help modulate that person's nervous system toward well-being. By creating a space of what Dr.

Stephen Porges calls "neuroceptive safety," they use their own calm presence to provide social signals that engage the client's "ventral vagal complex"—the part of our nervous system that allows us to move out of a defensive state and into a physiological state of social engagement and openness (Porges, 2011). Within this container of safety, a client's own natural drive toward self-fulfilment, what the humanist Carl Rogers termed the "actualizing tendency," can finally emerge (Rogers, 1961).

It can feel like a skilled therapist is reading our mind. They aren't, of course. They are using a highly trained version of a skill we all possess: the ability to sense the inner world of another. Dr. Daniel Siegel calls this capacity "Mindsight": the ability to see and understand the mind, both our own and others' (Siegel, 2009). This skill likely evolved out of a primal need to predict the behavior of other agents. To survive a complex social world, an organism must model the intentions of others, which necessitates a corresponding model of itself as a distinct agent (Kahl & Kopp, 2018). *(This capacity is also explored under the adjacent psychological concepts of Theory of Mind (ToM), mentalizing, social cognition, and perspective-taking (Gallagher, 2000)).*

Herein lies the connection to a problem that has been the aspiration of spiritual practices for millennia: how do you get out of your own way, thoroughly? This solitary quest for spiritual transcendence faces a "bootstrap problem"—one must use the very self-model one is trying to see beyond in order to be "free" (Metzinger, 2003). How do you look outside of your very own first-person-perspective?

The answer may be best understood by understanding what that perspective is. According to frameworks like the Free Energy Principle, our brain is fundamentally a prediction machine, constantly building models to anticipate sensory input and keep us stable

(Friston, 2010). When reality doesn't match the model, a "prediction error" occurs—a burst of surprise the brain must resolve (Hohwy, 2013). Much of our "suffering" can be understood as the experience of chronic prediction error arising from a rigid and inflexible self-model (Villiger, 2024).

Building on this, philosopher Thomas Metzinger describes a process of "contraction," where the property of phenomenality is misrepresented by being attributed to the model of a distinct, limited "I". Phenomenality, in this context, is the property of being conscious, which Metzinger argues is an objective feature of certain integrated brain states. This chronic contraction results in the felt sense of being a separate, often defensive, self. According to Metzinger, the transparent conscious self-model that is formed then becomes the origin of a first-person perspective (Metzinger, 2024). While this model serves a purpose, maintaining it is an exhausting and metabolically costly pattern for a brain that is always seeking to minimize error (Friston, 2010; Friston, 2009).

So how do we see this contraction in others? Our capacity for Mindsight is not purely abstract; it is deeply embodied. We come to know others through what enactive cognitive scientists call "participatory sense-making" (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007; De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2008). This isn't a one-way process of observation, but a mutual, interactive dance where two people's actions and experiences become coupled, creating a shared understanding that wouldn't exist for either person alone (Di Paolo & Thompson, 2014). When we engage with someone, our own nervous system subtly resonates with and simulates their own. This "felt sense" is how another person is represented within our own consciousness. Psychodynamic therapists have long used this principle; they are trained to use their own internal emotional responses—their countertransference—as a crucial source of information

about a client's unconscious patterns (Yalom, 2002). The more you do your own work to relax your own phenomenal contraction, the more sensitive and reliable this internal instrument becomes. You can better distinguish your own emotional patterns from the ones you are picking up from the other person, and you recognize the signatures of their contraction because you have become intimately familiar with your own. This self-knowledge, in turn, allows your system to more accurately model and anticipate these familiar signals in other systems with your species-shared foundational biology.

This reveals how the relational path can resolve the contemplative's problem. The safe, attuned presence of another person provides powerful sensory evidence that contradicts our rigid, defensive predictions. This allows the brain to lower its confidence in these old, costly beliefs, reducing chronic prediction error and, consequently, the relevance and felt-sense of being a distinct and separated "I" (Villiger, 2024). It may sound counterintuitive but this process is intrinsically rewarding; the very feeling of our predictive model getting better at modeling itself in the world is experienced as positive emotion and well-being (Miller et al., 2021). As we let go of our defensive posture, a natural sense of ease and self-compassion comes to the fore, a practice shown to be positively correlated with contemplative outcomes (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012; Schutte & Malouff, 2025).

This compassion then naturally extends to others. By reducing our reliance on defensive patterns, we free up the cognitive and emotional resources that were previously consumed by self-protection. From this less conditional and secure stance, when we perceive a similar pattern of suffering in another person, our system's natural pro-social drive to minimize error and promote regulation extends outwards. It is not a moral calculation but a

natural consequence of recognizing the shared nature of the struggle to regulate and thrive in our fellow biological human companions.

This process doesn't just heal pathology; it can open the door to profound shifts in being. As the contracted rigid self-model is relaxed, the system minimizes its overall prediction error, or "free energy," and naturally settles into an optimized, low-energy state (Friston, 2010). This systemic optimization is believed to be the computational precondition for Minimal Phenomenal Experiences (MPEs)—states characterized by qualities like epistemic openness, equanimity, and effortlessness (Metzinger, 2024; Sandved-Smith, 2024). It is the phenomenological expression of a liberated mind, which is often considered the contemplative goal.

Crucially, the person facilitating this—be it a therapist or a compassionate other—may require a sophisticated sense for this territory themselves. Their own self-knowledge is what predicates their ability to be a profoundly transformative niche for another, in the first place (Villiger, 2024). A facilitator who is themselves operating from a contracted model may lack the Mindsight necessary to recognise these subtle model contractions in another, and may correspondingly be less skillful or reliable in facilitating another to let go as deeply.

This is not about becoming an amateur therapist. It is about recognizing that we all truly do possess the capacity to be stewards of compassion by honoring the depths to which we can help each other. It is a shared responsibility. The next time you connect with someone, can you try? Can you notice the agential contraction? Can you see where they are holding on? Can you reach out, not to fix, but to create a moment of genuine connection? Because the world I see is one where we don't need to wait for a guru or retreat. It's one where we can

offer this profound gift to one another, right here and now, turning our everyday interactions into the very ground of collective freedom.

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