

## Shift Happens!

By Glenn M. Smith

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What and who can we control? This is the question with which I begin every class I teach. Whether I am facilitating courses on self-development, parenting skills, managing, personal relationships, teaching, coaching, etc., I always come back to this one essential question. The answer, I believe, lies in our power to *shift*. Shift in this context means to create changes in our perceptions. As a life coach, I am much more interested in helping individuals shift their perceptions than in rewarding or consequencing their actions. Whether the shift we experience is considered good shift, bad shift, holy shift, and yes, even bull shift, one thing is evident, the one thing we can totally control is the *shift* that goes on in our minds. The students who begin to fully understand this concept will playfully come to me and say, “Mr. Smith, sometimes I get tired of all of this shift,” “I can’t get enough of this shift,” or “I have to get my shift together.”

The hundreds of incarcerated men I have taught as well as the numerous clients I have counseled and professionals I have coached have limitless perspectives on how the world operates. Some believe the world is a bad and dreadful place where there are “haves” and “have-nots” and that life is a matter of destiny or fate. Some of the men I have mentored believe the world is a safe and just place and believe that we reap what we sow. Some believe their time on this planet is preparing them for the future; a sort of a test where learning from their mistakes will prepare them for their next journey here on earth and even in a hereafter. Others believe that their life is a time to create a sense of purpose - to serve others and thus themselves. Some believe there are moral absolutes (rules of right and wrong) that apply to all people in every culture and some believe in a Supreme Creator that holds us accountable for what we do. It is easy to determine that where we focus our *“shift”* will determine the way we will act in any given situation.

William Powers, author of *Behavior: The Control of Perception*, describes the individual’s brain as being like a large vast darkened room such as a cathedral. When in a cathedral, where we decide to shine a flashlight will determine one’s view of the purpose of the structure. For example, if one decides to shine light on the area with musical instruments, the cathedral appears to be a place for making music. If one shines light on the podium, the cathedral is a place for speaking. Shining light on the pews, one can perceive the overall function as being a place to rest and listen. Thus, one’s limited experiences and the meaning they attach to them determine their unique perspectives and the ensuing course they follow.

A similar analogy can also be demonstrated by the story of the blind men and the elephant. In various versions of the tale, a group of blind men (or men in darkness) touch an elephant for the first time and then share what they think the object is that they are collectively experiencing. Each feel a different part of the body (the abdomen, a leg, an ear, the trunk, the tail or the tusk) and tell the group of their experience. Their description of what an elephant is comparable varies from a wall, a tree trunk, and a large handheld fan to a snake, a rope and a spear. As they share, some of the men adamantly hold steadfast to their conclusions arguing that their description is correct, never accepting the wide difference in perceptions. Others, comparing notes, learn that the entire object, or elephant, was much more than their own limited points of view. To intentionally shift perspectives opens one to more options of experience thereby creating the potential for greater connection with others.

Steven Covey speaks in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* of something he calls a paradigm shift. He explains a paradigm as one's view of what is real. He describes it as a mental image of the way one believes things are and the basis of all of one's decisions. Some examples of paradigms that have been historically significant are world views like the earth being flat or being the center of the universe, and that there is or is not a God or Higher Power. A paradigm shift is when one changes a core belief or world view. So change the way you look at things and things you look at change. Anais Nin writes: "*We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.*".

The paradigm shift I control for in my teaching and life coaching has to do with the paradoxical outlook that focuses on either "how is the world treating me?" or "how am I treating the world?" I believe it is not so much what *is happening to one*, but rather how one interprets *what is happening*. Which one of these can you answer more extensively? Are you more aware of how the world is treating you or how you are treating the world? A self-evaluation question I introduce may sound like "How am I perceiving this situation, this person, or myself and is the way I am perceiving this serving me?" Another way to say this is: "When this particular situation, person, etc. presented itself, what story did I tell myself?"

Here in lies a behavioral paradigm shift. If one can shine their flashlight more on how they are looking at things, they can begin to assess if their perspective is serving them and those around them. They are now on the way to becoming more effective in managing what they can and cannot control and that is some "*mighty good shift!*"

"...*The last of our human freedoms -- the ability to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances...*" Viktor E. Frankl

Glenn

