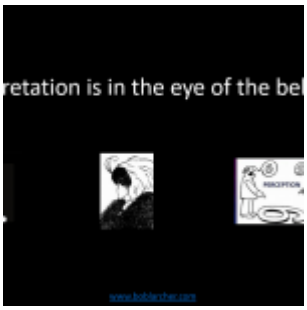
Interpretation



"*There is no truth. There is only perception*"

Gustave Flaubert

I often hear people say that "we have different perceptions of the same event" or "we clearly don't see things the same way", etc.

The word Perception comes from Latin "perception" meaning gathering or receiving and is described as the organization, identification, and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the information coming from our environment.

There are two distinct but interrelated, and nonlinear steps, in this process. Step 1 is perceiving what is going on around us and step 2 is interpreting what is going on around us to create meaning and coming to some kind of conclusion.

I wonder if the difference is more in "our interpretation of an event" and less in "our perception of an event"

We perceive what goes on around us through what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch; we capture signals from our "external world" – light striking the retina of the eye, pressure waves impacting the tympan in the ear, odours entering the nose interacting with olfactory neurons, etc.

Two people standing side by side by a river, looking at a

mountain will have “access” to everything that is going on around them; we can’t stop (under normal conditions) light striking the retina of our eye, we can’t stop pressure waves impacting the tympan in our ear and we can’t stop odours being picked up by olfactory neurons in our nose.

However, the two people will undoubtedly “capture” different signals from their same external world. Some people are (or have become) more sensitive to sounds, others to odours, etc.

One of the two people may have heard the fish jumping and the blackbird singing but may not have smelt the odour of the mushrooms, the other may have felt the wind picking up but didn’t see the storm clouds on the horizon.

Clearly, if the other mentions the blackbird singing, the odour of the mushrooms or the storm clouds, the other will probably also be able to hear, smell and see them.

Having perceived the world around us we then interpret, consciously or unconsciously, what we see, hear, smell, taste and feel – we do this instinctively, intuitively and intellectually.

This is where it becomes more complicated, even if our external worlds are, essentially, the same; our internal worlds are completely different – our values, our beliefs, our drivers, our desires, our injunctions, our pulsions …….. are different and it is with these, that we interpret what we have perceived – and this interpretation is often more a judgement of what we have perceived rather than an objective analysis of what we have seen.

The person who has had really bad experiences with dogs in the past, when seeing a dog running towards them will not perceive and interpret it in the same way as someone for who, even dangerous dogs wag their tails and want to be caressed – one person will interpret, or judge, the situation to be dangerous and the other will interpret, or judge, the

situation to be safe.

Likewise, one less assertive person interacting with someone waving their arms around, speaking loudly and pointing their finger may interpret this as an aggression and feel aggressed; whereas, a more assertive person may interpret the same behaviour as someone simply speaking their point of view and not feel aggressed.

So, what can we do to be more effective in our exchanges with others?

Firstly, we need to develop our capacity to see more of (or be more attentive to) our external world; before we start coming to conclusions, we need to ask ourselves, “is there something I haven’t seen, heard, smelt …… “, “am I missing part of the picture”. We need to take the time to perceive, “holistically”, what is going on around us.

Secondly, we need to be aware that we are interpreting what we have perceived based on our “frame of reference”; our values, our beliefs, our experiences …… and that our interpretation is our interpretation and can be, legitimately, different to someone else’s interpretation.

Thirdly, we need to be humble enough to accept that, “maybe I have missed something” and that “every situation can have multiple interpretations”

“It all depends on how we look at things, and not how they are in themselves”

Carl Jung