Your Help Needed, Please! And it won't cost you a penny …

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Following *The Master and his Emissary*, I am writing a book about the curious phenomenon whereby our theory about how the world works is completely at odds with how it actually works in practice. Nothing too odd in that, you may say. But the really fascinating aspect is that when theory and experience clash, theory always seems to win the day. Rather than revise the theory, we carry on regardless, with more of what failed first time round, because clearly we just didn't push it far enough … I am looking urgently for examples, and this is where you come in.

My thesis is that the world in which we live in the West is shaped by a set of beliefs about reality – those of the left hemisphere – which we know from experience, and feel intuitively, to be almost certainly false. Though the consequences of this are widely deplored, we seem strangely powerless to resist it. We are as if in a trance, whistling a happy tune as we sleepwalk towards the abyss.

Usually the problem involves some or all of the following:

- Heedlessly applying something from one context to a quite different context

- Conceiving a system as linear, when it is complex and recursive

- Treating the intrinsically unpredictable as if it were predictable

- Adopting a head-on approach to something that can only be approached obliquely

- Falling for bogus precision, where imprecision would be more accurate

- Believing that if something is good more must be better

- Failing to see the downside to an idealised goal

- Looking too narrowly

- Neglecting all but the short term

- Ignoring all that cannot easily be measured

- Believing that faster means better

- Mistaking people for machines

- Mistaking machines for people

- Mistaking the whole for the sum of the parts

Let me give a few examples of the 'paradoxes' that surround us:

- pursuing happiness and becoming measurably less happy over time

- pursuing leisure through technology, and discovering that the average working day is longer than ever

- allowing machines to take the drudgery out of work, while work becomes ever less fulfilling

- for more than half a century pursuing measures designed to promote equality, leading to greater inequality than obtained 50 years ago
- increasing our ability to manipulate the world, while finding less and less meaning in it

More specifically:

- going into Iraq and Afghanistan to achieve global security and stability
- carefully predicting and monitoring the stock market in order to avoid a crash
- destroying the landscape with wind-farms in order to protect the environment, while creating a carbon footprint that the wind-farm can never neutralise
- embracing 'paperless' technology that leads to ever greater consumption of paper
- making nurses fill in forms so that 'there will never be another disaster', with the result that nurses stop focussing on their patients and disasters recur
- managers in education, the health service and the police aiming to incentivise professionals by introducing a business ethic which saps the morale and goodwill on which public services have so long depended for high quality and good value for money
- being so eager that all scientific research results in 'positive findings' that it has become progressively less adventurous and more predictable
- grossly misconceiving the nature of teaching and research in the humanities as utilitarian, in order to get value for money, and thus rendering it pointless and, in this form, certainly a waste of resource
- 'improving' education by dictating curricula and focussing on exam results to the point where free-thinking is discouraged
- over-sanitisation leading to vulnerability to infection
- over-use of antibiotics leading to super-bacteria that no antibiotic can kill

- making drugs illegal to protect society, and while failing comprehensively to control drugs, creating a fertile field for crime
- so protecting children that they can't cope with uncertainty or risk
- as part of the process, so stigmatising contact, particularly physical contact, across generations, that children and the elderly alike are deprived of what every human being craves, to belong and to be loved
- promoting social 'networking', thereby keeping people glued to their screens and reducing face to face contact with friends, if they still have any *real* friends …

I am particularly interested in learning **specific** examples from people working in the following areas: schools, universities, teaching, research, medicine, nursing, police, finance, and the law. If you know people in those areas who might be sympathetic to the project and want to do something about the way in which their lives and professions are being shaped by this sort of thing, please ask them to be in touch with examples. But really **any and every area of life at all is valuable and worthwhile** to include.

I cannot promise to reply to everyone who writes, and the briefer and more succinct your contribution the more helpful it will be (not more than one side of A4, please!) But I would be very grateful, and any contributions that get used will be acknowledged.

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