

# TRAINING - FREE WILL & CRITICAL THINKING

*By Sue Pivetta*

## WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

**W**alking on the waterfront on a bright and crisp Seattle Sunday, I saw a large Seagull sitting on a railing, unusually close to humans. He had a 4" iridescent pink lure dangling hooked into his lower beak and tongue. As I walked closer I could hear that he made rhythmic soft clucking sounds. When I was very close I tried to get hold of him, hoping to help and of course, he flew away. He dropped down to the water next to the shore and swam in the same direction as me. Still I could hear the little soft clucking noises. I wanted to help. He would surely die, but it wasn't in his nature to let me approach him. His instincts urged him to fly, he did not have the capacity to reason any different. He had to follow his "nature".

I began to think about nature, and instinct. What if this bird had been found as a baby and raised by humans? Would his nature or his instincts be different, would he let me approach him? Maybe, or maybe in a time of pain he would revert to what his nature told him — which could possibly be his first impulse. But then again, maybe not, possibly if he had been cared for — he would have approached because he was hurt and understood through experience that humans could be comforting. The difference would be entirely his experiences that would or could change his behavior.

What is the "nature" of humans? Would you say it is in the nature of a human individual to murder a baby? NO, I would argue human nature is to protect a baby. And societies — as a grouping of humans — surely must follow human nature. Therefore a society of humans who protect babies would protect them together. Yet, how do we account for people not so different from you and I - choosing individual and societal acts of murder against thousands of babies in Germany during the Holocaust?

The bird can not choose to override instinct unless he has had experiences that proved different for him — and only him. One wild bird cannot watch another tame bird sitting on a human's lap and decide he wants to do that too. Yet each human can decide to act in any way they choose too — we have free will. If you consider the strength of free will and our human freedom to perceive, believe and act in any way you feel is necessary, you will begin to understand the power of critical thinking. Many German citizens joined resistance groups — exercising their free will to reason. The Jonestown massacre is an example of groupthink.

Yet, two people chose to run. What causes us to choose anyway? What was the difference between those who drank the poison Kool-Aid and the two who did not? The only difference was their perception of what was painful. To the Kool-Aid gang — going against the group was too painful.

One German citizen turns a blind eye, another joins the resistance. Why do some people follow along — knowing they have choice? Or do they know they have choice or do we mistakenly think we are somehow trapped by others or our own thoughts and lose knowing we do have free will? Or is our free will engaged — just choosing what we consider the least painful of two choices?

*I stood among them, but not of them; in a shroud Of thoughts which were not their thoughts.*

— Lord Byron (1788-1824), English poet

Free will is the foundation for Critical Thinking. To participate in critical thinking you must first believe that you have the capacity and ability to think and decide for yourself (free will). Yet, many of us are stuck in what we feel obliged to believe with little attention to what is logical, ethical, or compassionate. Have you heard:

“*That is how I was raised.*” *“I was taught to believe that.”* *“That isn’t the way it’s done here.”* *“My family is just like that.”* *“That’s just the way I am.”* *“I don’t have to have a reason.”*  
*“I can’t change the way I was raised.”*”

So this type of thinking is simply choosing what was programmed in. Asking some to challenge ‘upbringing’ or cultural values may be viewed as blasphemous and disrespectful. Therefore going outside the traditional is seen as painful. Others purposefully reject their upbringing because they view those beliefs as painful. To change your behavior you must change your beliefs about what is *painful*.

Of course our family values were taught by others who believed them to be right. Take bigotry for example, an example of a family belief system that may be passed down without challenge. This is a belief that perceives people of other races as somehow threatening. Or religion, or thinking about male and female roles. Possibly ideas on honesty or responsibility. We were taught by our families and our surroundings — still it was our choice what to believe. I guess you could call these our beginning instincts.

**Ask yourself:** What beliefs do I hold that my family held? Which are meaningful to me and serve me well? When have I exercised my free will to think differently than the group because it was reasonable to do so? When did I practice groupthink or autopilot thinking? When was the last time I challenged my own beliefs? Do I feel this is OK to do?

When using critical thinking, you may come up against your own set of beliefs that have survived unchallenged but don't 'work' or make sense any more to you. There is that moment or event or thought that comes upon you that changes some old pattern — it's a very private and internal event. Generally when this happens — it has a lot to do with logic and begins with a sense of discomfort. You may recall a time you defended a belief that wasn't defensible then reflecting upon how illogical it was and how painful it was to look stupid.

When teaching others to think like you in the work, it may be valuable to remember that they also have a private set of beliefs, ideas and perceptions that you may not be privy to. You may see some of these surface in the training as 'behaviors'. You may feel them as resistance, or a vague discomfort. How do you find out what someone believes? **You ask.** First you must know that an attitude, or belief is what motivates behavior. If you don't understand someone's behavior it may be that you are assuming their perception or belief is yours. At times you don't need to understand their beliefs, you are there to create new ones for them — you accomplish this by understanding the pain and pleasure theory.

Back to our bird. He didn't have the choice to exercise any belief system that said, "If I could step out of the way I was raised, if I could do this different than my feelings of fear guide me— I may end this pain." He could not think