

WELLBEING + HAPPINESS THRU' ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN

Crafting Joy and Warmheartedness
Thru' Designed Spaces

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P U B L I S H I N G 

CHAPTER 7

MODERN DAY CAVEMEN

“YOU CAN TAKE THE PERSON OUT OF THE STONE AGE, NOT THE STONE AGE OUT OF THE PERSON.”³⁵

NIGEL NICHOLSON

The caveman is a descriptive word that literally means men who live in caves. The cave of primitive man has evolved to become our homes, ones that are built. And we have today an wide array of interventions and treatments we can apply to our modern caves. Do we still adorn the walls with our markings to record our hunting trips or the unusual flora and fauna we have encountered? Instead of ferns and moss naturally finding a foothold, are there indoor plants?

For me, I strongly believe that we are a modern and slightly more technologically advanced version of cavemen. Almost all of our intuitive mindset and spatial registers are still active, and function in our current environment.

Although we are a lot more advanced and do things in a more sophisticated way, we are hard-wired to still operate like cavemen. I often jokingly

remark that we can indeed be hardwired to refer to the steel and glass constructions of modern cities, but that will be in another hundred thousand years' time. After all, that is how much time has lapsed to lead to our brains being calibrated the way they are today.

When I design and set up my home office space, I like to sit where I can look out to a distant view, and also have my back facing my bookshelves or walls that have no doors or openings. Psychologically, I prefer to have anyone or anything that can approach me within my line of sight. This is akin to the settings of good fortune in some feng shui teachings, like positioning oneself on elevated ground to be able to look out to sea, which means you can have first sightings of any enemies as well as the incoming harvest from the seas. I think this is us thinking as cavemen.

If we cannot go back in time to change how our perception and modus operandi have evolved, the next best thing is to understand it as best as we can and conduct today's tasks with them in mind.

INSTINCTUAL NEEDS

Despite how different we might look, we are no more than iterative versions of the same cave-men. Alongside our evolution, the desire for overall knowledge growth and the acquiring of new

skills is part of the ambition to seek happiness. Our instinct for happiness derives primarily from our cavemen times.

In every species of living creature, including in humans, the brain is primarily driven by the need to prevent the demise of the species, through ensuring survival and procreation. Because of the need to stay alive, we as a tribe also have a deep desire to be connected, to belong to a group, and to be appreciated and liked. The need to become an appreciated member of a larger group allows our continued existence and protection against enemies or predators. Anthropologists believe that other homo-species disappeared because of their inability to cluster adequately to battle against threats and predators. In a way, ganging up was at one point a necessary course of action that eventually became second nature.

This logic is one of the key pillars the designers and creators of social media embedded into the original algorithm. In the documentary “Social Dilemma,”³⁶ a group of early-generation social media platform creators and academic researchers articulated how their work involved an exceptionally complex understanding of the human being’s psychological needs and cravings. The original goal of social media was to be raise the connect-ness of human being through the internet, to bring about a great sense of belonging. Ironically, this algorithm is today causing us much stress and discomfort, due to the resultant business model to

aggressively market in order to expand and prolong every individual's screen time. This awareness of how a positive motivation has been transformed is the basis of my exploration of how the narrative can be changed.

I believe we must first start to understand our instinctual tendencies: that part of ourselves that automatically directs us towards feeling good. This is the same sensation that the original beta versions of social media were aiming to achieve.

Feeling good is the most basic step of our quest for happiness. While some current research suggests that our instinct is aligned with the objective of avoiding unhappiness, my personal belief is that this attitude is too passive. If you understand the stories I have shared in my life's twists and turns, you should be able to recognise me as one who takes action toward what I want and believe in, not to avoid discomfort.

EGM³⁷

Even as cavemen our brains were already intuitively organized to seek happiness. This search for happiness can be understood under the heading of EGM. I use EGM as an acronym to help us remember, just as it represents the words in the business arena, Extraordinary General Meeting. An EGM in business is a meeting we call when we have a

special agenda, a special important issue to deal with which cannot wait for the routine annual general meeting.

E stands for Experiences, **G** for growth and learning, and **M** for meaning and purpose. While there are many ways to understand happiness, I have found that this approach is the easiest to interpret and the easiest to enter into the discourse and the study of happiness.

E STANDS FOR EXPERIENCES

When we say **experiences**, we refer to the moments when we have a positive emotion and a positive reflection on any moment in time. These experiences can be through either the things we do, or the objects that we possess or acquire.

The reason why many queue up, perhaps even overnight, in anticipation of being among the first to own the latest iPhone model, is because of the thrill and exhilaration we experience when we obtain a brand-new product that we believe is going to transform something in our daily lives. I did not queue up for the new iPhone, but I certainly beamed with joy for half a day when I acquired the latest edition. Justifying to myself that I now have more features that I need, I was truly happy. Or, at the very least, I was experiencing a good dose of materialistic bliss.

Experiences can also be positive doses of happiness from a holiday, a shared moment with your loved ones such as a candlelight dinner, a romantic excursion, or a family outing. One of the properties of experiences is that they are time-based. These experiences, regardless of how intensive or how moderated they are or how deliberate, how intentional or how by chance they happen to occur, exist for a limited period of time.

Sometimes a positive response might last as short as 90 seconds. In the case of memories from major holidays, these feelings might last as long as weeks and perhaps even months. Nevertheless, after a certain point in time, the feeling from the experience dwindles and fades.

G STANDS FOR GROWTH AND LEARNING

Growth and Learning are basic instincts of a human being. These instincts attach themselves to the need for survival.

By the end of 2020, after I was able to stabilise my mental imbalance with medication, I realised how much I had robbed myself of Growth and Learning. In the previous ten years, I had read one book; in the following twelve months, I read 23. And even though I might only have absorbed about 10-20 per cent of the potential learnings contained within them, that is far more than the ten

years before. I was happy learning. I might not be becoming wiser, but I was happy because, to me, I felt that I was. It was like magic.

In order for human beings to survive, we have to continuously be creative, innovate and acquire new skills. Think of the cavemen who discovered and realized that sparks caused by heat and friction when combined with air and kindling can create flames.

In my mind, I visualize a particular scene in the movie “Cast Away”³⁸ with Tom Hanks, when his character is stranded on an island. Alone and stripped to basics, he had to survive on the rudimentary instincts of a hunter gatherer, so he was living on coconut water. When he found a way to start a fire, that particular scene, which lasted almost two minutes or so, showed the exhilaration we feel when we have discovered something so crucial and important that is a primary element necessary for survival.

Growth and learning in our modern day can be illustrated by more contemporary examples, such as when one learns another language, or when one takes up dance lessons. Growth and learning may be in the form of knowledge or it might be in the form of physical skills. For the longest time, growth and learning has been one of the intrinsic ways our brains derive and attain pleasure and satisfaction.

But what has happened to growth and learning today? The problem that we have is that we have

created a mindset that growth and learning is for children and not so much for adults. If you are a parent, remember the moment when your infant, probably at the age of between 10 and 15 months and after a prolonged period of trying to stand with support, took their first steps. The pure joy and delight and the satisfaction and sense of accomplishment that you saw on the child's face is the exact visual illustration of happiness through growth and learning.

Sadly, the education systems that we adults have created have gradually and in a very disciplined and organized way instilled into our minds that learning is something that is not a happy thing to do. This has come about by the methodology of learning requiring tests, exams and other triggers of high anxiety. If we can deal with this, we can bring back growth and learning to serve its pure purpose of generating pleasure and happiness.

M STANDS FOR MEANING AND PURPOSE

For us to exist, it is not enough to have positive experiences combined with awareness and the acquisition of new skills and growth. In our minds, we are also perpetually wondering why we exist, that each of us must be here because of a bigger logic that we fit into, like a giant jig-saw puzzle. Here in the category of meaning and purpose, we are dealing with how each individual

exists as part of a group, or a piece of a larger jigsaw puzzle.

When you change your baby's nappy, it should be one of the most unpleasant experiences you will ever have, because of the human waste that your fingers will be touching, and that you will be seeing and smelling. However, I'm sure that most parents will remember this as a time when you had a lot of fun, laughing and playing and making jokes with your young infant who didn't even understand, but who reciprocated with smiles and giggles.

I share this image based on visual recollections of me with my first born, Ella. She was so little and laid out in the shallow Corian washbasin of our Singapore home at the time. I changed her nappy so many times I was adept at the operation, without any need to even be aware of what I was doing. Instead, what I was doing was experiencing the pure joy, and deep happiness of bonding with my most precious one. It is bewildering how an act that is so uncomfortable, if not disgusting, involving our hands handling the human waste of another, can actually be pleasant. But yet those of us who have children can relate to it. Something more sophisticated and unknown to our logical processing must be happening.

At a neurological level, our brain releases tiny chemical messengers called neuropeptides to help fight off stress, alongside other neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin and endorphins. This is because we are at that very moment having a very

special experience of our human existence based on the logic that we exist to serve and to be part of other beings' lives. I believe that the cavemen (mother or father) also felt a sense of pride and comfort that there was a successor to the tribal existence.

Other ways meaning and purpose can be understood is when we serve as a member of our community, as part of a charity group or a religious organization or a sporting or social club. When we exist as a member of a collective that has similar beliefs, does certain activities or shares an opinion on certain subjects, we understand and psychologically have an awareness of our joy and happiness through meaning and purpose.

For us to experience EG and M or to understand and practice EG and M in today's world, we have to perhaps reinterpret how our caveman brain can be adjusted based on today's technology and lifestyle and everyday routines.

FOREST IN OUR MODERN CAVES

Let me draw an image in your mind. Imagine yourself as a caveman. When you as caveman look out towards the horizon and to the space beyond the cave, you would typically see forests and foliage, bushes, trees, perhaps a stream and, basically, natural surroundings.

Imagine that one of the bushes moves suddenly. Your instinctive response will be to immediately shift your attention and focus on that particular spot. Why? This is because there are two likely reasons why the bush suddenly moved. It will be either that at the spot lies the next meal, or that it conceals a sabre-toothed tiger, ready to pounce and enjoy you as its next meal.

This particular way our brains work, and the intuitive response by the limbic section of our brain moving the eyes to pay attention to the possible threat, is spontaneous. This is one example of, and an illustration that there are indeed many aspects of our brain's workings that are hardwired from caveman times.

This illustration is also used to bring attention to the way that we might curate our spaces so that there is no visual distraction, in order for the brain to focus on and be more productive in doing what we need to do. If there is something in the background that doesn't belong, it can cause distraction, even if it is in our peripheral vision.

For this understanding to develop into something useful to you every day, I recommend you put in a little bit of effort in designing your own home to begin to discover your comfort zones. The comfort zone is akin to when you have lived far away from your family home and you come back to your mother's cooking. Regardless of what your mom's cooking is like and whether it is technically of a high

standard, you will appreciate your mom's cooking because your mom's cooking is like coming home.

I recommend everyone get connected with their gut instinct. There is no equipment necessary. Just use your gut instinct, close your eyes, and listen to your body's response to certain details. The awareness of how to hack your mind to motivate yourself to work in your own favour is a very special skill requiring practice.

In a world filled with modern technology, it is important to recognize the basic rules of what affects us to our innermost cores. Our instinct to remain alive and to survive as a species require us to form tribes and gang up to defend territories and protect our young. There is also the core evolutionary nature to reproduce and sustain a species through reproduction.

These are essential aspects to understand and appreciate, and they overlap with our understanding of the functional notions of the spaces that we dwell and operate in today.

TRY THIS OUT

Identify three objects that you instinctively find comfortable to hold in your hands. Your choice can be based on the sense of touch, the items colours or its materiality. This might be your mobile phone,

your watch, a piece of jewellery, furniture or an ornament.

Study and journal about the physical attributes of those objects. Are they sharp? Do they have curved edges? Do they fit into your palm? Do the objects suggest natural shapes or profiles or other aspects that make you comfortable? This exercise will help to hone your eye to decipher and appreciate the likeness between more desirable and pleasurable details, which for you register safety, comfort, and positive memories.