

## **Interview with Adrian Savage, author of *A Spark from Heaven*?**

*Adrian, your book is about potential and how to realize it. What got you interested in potential in the first place?*

Well, it started a long time ago with an observation. At the time I was working in recruitment, particularly young people straight from college and university. We would bring people into the organization, and on paper they were identical. But when I actually saw how they operated, I began to see that there were significant differences between them. The difference was not so much in *what* they did, and certainly there was little or no difference in terms of their qualifications, but in *how* they did what they did. I began to get interested in that and started talking to people. It turns out that this was a common observation – people talked about potential but no one seemed to have any way of quantifying it or putting any structure around what it actually was.

*Tell us what led you to do something about potential then.*

As time went along, and I was more and more involved with people, I understood that many people were hampered, because although they had potential, they were not using it. Many of the restrictions that people complained about in their lives and careers were self-inflicted. We tell ourselves what we can and cannot do, and we believe ourselves. So we don't often check it out.

Then occasionally, just occasionally, something happens to people and they suddenly have to step up to something much greater, much more demanding. And they do it. And they are as surprised as everybody else is. The question has to be, where did that come from? It was always there, but they weren't accessing it.

The most obvious and newsworthy cases are in times of great disasters, when perfectly ordinary people do amazing and sometimes heroic things, and if you'd asked them before hand, "Could you do this?" they would have denied it – "No, I couldn't possibly do that." But when events call it out, it comes.

I was talking to some people who had been through the Blitz in London. I began, in my ignorant way, to sympathize with them about what a dreadful time it was. They stopped me and said, "No, it was wonderful. It was a marvelous time." I said, "Come on, people were dropping bombs on you, people were being killed." And they said, "Yes, all that was terrible, but we saw more good things – people doing things we never would have believed, and we were all really excited and happy." That got me thinking, what is going on? Here was a dreadful situation, people were under immediate threat of their lives being lost, and yet they're saying it was the most exciting and wonderful time.

I began to think that it was pointing to a situation where, under the stress of external circumstances, people had forgotten all the things they told themselves about what they could and couldn't do. So they started doing all kinds of things that otherwise they would have believed they couldn't do, even down to being kind to their neighbors, which they probably hadn't done for years. And lo and behold, their lives were a lot better for it.

So all that got me thinking about it, and I began to play around with the ideas, and said to myself – there is something here that we are not latching on to. (That was a long answer to a short question!)

*What kind of things have people done by realizing their potential through the system that you have developed?*

I don't think it's anything dramatic, in the sense of people suddenly turning their lives around, although that has occasionally happened. I think it's more that people begin to take conscious control of their lives. One of the other things that we're aware of, but don't think about most of the time, is the extent to which we sleepwalk through our lives. We do things, we sometimes make momentous decisions, and we're barely aware of what we are doing. Our habits, our values, the typical way in which we do things just take over. Once people begin to exercise conscious control again, it opens the way for dramatic things to happen, if they want them to.

This is not a "Road to Damascus" experience, where people's eyes are opened and the world is suddenly different – I don't think it works like that, except in very rare cases. I think mostly what happens is that people develop what I call a kind of quiet satisfaction with their lives; they are now in control and can begin to see things happening.

And sometimes they begin to step up. I had a case this week with someone I had been involved with four or five months ago, who was pretty unhappy in his role, and felt that he wasn't really fulfilled – he felt frustrated. We talked about some of the conscious things he might do. He rang me back a little while later, and asked if I would mind if he talked about his experience within his company. Of course I wouldn't mind! Well, I heard the day before yesterday that he's just been appointed President. This is a fairly dramatic change. I understand that he got the post because he went after it, which he wouldn't have done before. I think he would have sat and thought, "I can do that job," but kept his head down. While I don't know this for a fact, it's certainly probable that he wouldn't have been considered. But he took charge of his life, and said, "That is a role I want to have," and he put himself forward for it. I'm sure there were other candidates, but he is the one who was successful.

*You talk a lot about conscious choice in the book. How do you know you're choosing consciously and not from force of habit?*

First of all, you realize that you are awake!

There are a number of pointers that show you that conscious choice is at work. One is the element of *stopping*. When we act according to a habit, there's no perceptible pause between requirement and delivery of results – because we don't have to pause, it's automatic. So first there's the element of stopping and looking at the decision.

The next thing, and I think it's the key indicator, is the careful consideration of options. The thing that our habits do, more than anything else, is to squelch any possibility of other options. When Mrs. Thatcher was Prime Minister of Britain, she became famous for a catch-phrase, which was "There is no alternative," which meant "If you don't do what I say, I'm going to hit you with my handbag." But that's what our habits say to us. We stop and say, "Well, I never really thought about that," and they say, "There is no alternative." So we go blindly down that line. But there is always an alternative – at least one, sometimes many more than one. We might not like them, but they're there. I think that as soon as we start actively considering alternatives, other possibilities, then we are exercising conscious choice.

The third thing is, we know why we did it, or why we're going to do it. When I look back sometimes at decisions I've made, I think, "Oh, crikey, why on earth did I ever do that?" Well, I don't know why I did it – I did it because it felt right at the time, or I can't even remember how I felt. That's an absolute indicator that I was asleep, I was not making a conscious choice, I just did it. And then later I may come to regret it, but at the time, I just really wasn't aware. Our values do that to us particularly – they will say to us kind of loudly, "This is the right thing to do, hurry up." And

we do it. And maybe only 24 hours later, we think, “Wow, I wish I could go back in time, I wouldn’t do that now.” But it’s too late.

*Talk a bit more about values too, because that’s a primary focus of your work.*

I think values are the main driver of our decisions. We like to kid ourselves that we take decisions rationally. I don’t think we do, I think most of our decisions are emotional. Emotional in the sense that we do what we feel is right, even if it’s not logical. What tells us that this is right, what produces that feeling that this is the right thing to do? The answer is our values. Our values say to us, “Hey, this is the right thing to do,” so we tend to do it, pretty much without thinking about it. And because our values have a strong emotional element in them, if somebody gets in our way when we are doing it, or something seems to question what we’re going to do, we tend to get angry. You violate somebody’s values, they’ll get cross with you. That anger further blinds us to what we’re doing. So we don’t take our values out and look at them. It’s like driving along somewhere, and we know that somewhere in the back of the car we’ve got a book of road maps, but we never open it. So we go whichever way we always go. We see a new way and we think, “I’d better not go down there, because I don’t know where it goes.” But we never open the book to take a look. We don’t know why we’re going that way, except that we always have.

Our values are neither right nor wrong. They’re always right for us, of course, and everyone is fully entitled to have their own values and to stick to them. The problem is that we don’t become conscious of them – we don’t look at them, we aren’t aware of them. We don’t even see the huge inconsistencies between different values that arise in us at different times, because we pick them up on different occasions, from different sources, and there’s nothing to say that they fit together in any sensible way.

And sometimes – this can happen – our values become dysfunctional, or one or two of them become dysfunctional. They go over the top. We get so attached to them that they become tyrannical and we become obsessive about them. As regards other people, we become horribly self-righteous about them. If you’ve ever had to deal with someone who lectured you about your sins because you don’t do things as well as they do, at the time they’re doing it they have this weird idea that they’re doing it for your own good.

*I can hear a lot of parents in this!*

Yes, we all do this to our kids. “This is for your own good.” What’s happening is that a value has become dysfunctional. And instead of passing along our experience, what we’ve learned, explaining, saying, “Before you go down that track, think about this, this has been my experience,” instead we become dictatorial about it.

People who’ve got a dysfunctional achievement value end up being the Chief Financial Officer of Enron, because the ends justify the means. Because achievement is all that matters, never mind who gets hurt, or what rules I break, achievement is all that matters. It’s become dysfunctional. Nothing wrong with achievement as a value, but it can so easily get out of control.

We talked to one fellow who had a horribly dysfunctional value around justice and fairness. Almost every other phrase out of his mouth was, “It isn’t fair.” And when we pushed against it, he became very patronizing and self-righteous. “Well, you wouldn’t understand, because you’re not as ethical as I am.”

That’s just a dysfunctional value. The rampant do-gooder doesn’t realize why people run when he or she appears. From their point of view, they’re just helping people. But they are doing it in a dysfunctional way. The only way of coping with that is by making values conscious. You have to look at them, and it’s sometimes a painful experience – sometimes it’s very painful – you look at

your actions and you wince, and ask, “Did I really do that?” Yes, you did!

*It sounds like consciousness, becoming awake and aware, is the first step.*

It is. If you’re not awake, then you cannot exercise any form of choice – you do what you do, and that’s it. There are a great many people who are born, live and die, and never wake up anywhere along the line. They do what they have learned to do from their families, their communities, and the society in which they were born and brought up. They take on those values for good or ill, they take on those habits and simply keep repeating them. They may feel quite frustrated, they may feel that their lives aren’t what they’d like them to be, but they have rendered themselves helpless. All they can do is complain. Most of us do a lot of that.

*Including those of us who are sometime awake!*

That’s right! Large numbers of people, sometimes whole nations, go into synchronized whining – “Oh, this is terrible, it shouldn’t be like this, *them out there* are a wicked lot.” But we take no responsibility for it.

*Do you think there can be national values and habits?*

Oh, sure – of course there are. As someone who is now living in a nation that is different from the one I was born and brought up in, I’m probably more aware of the U.S. national values than most people in the U.S. are, because they grew up with them. Native born people think, “It’s just the way things are done.” A lot of the time when people complain in other parts of the world that Americans are arrogant, what’s happening is that Americans are operating as if their values were the same as everybody else’s. We all do this. If someone doesn’t share those values, they appear to us as kind of weird. But the country, the people on the receiving end will interpret it as us being arrogant.

*What did you hope to accomplish by writing a book about all of this?*

The book is designed to help people to understand, to wake up. It’s not a recipe book – it doesn’t say, “do this and everything will be well.” There are lots of those books about. I don’t feel very comfortable with them, because I think what they are asking for is a kind of blind obedience. “Do what I tell you and everything will be wonderful.” What I was trying to do with my book was tell people, “Here’s what I’ve seen, and here’s what I’ve come to understand. Does it work for you?” If it does, the book suggests that there are ways in which you might take charge of your life – *you* take charge of *your* life, in your own way. If it helps people to re-establish conscious choice over their lives, then I will be very satisfied.

*Is there another book in there?*

Yes, if I ever get time to write it! I’ve been playing around with some interesting ideas – well, I think they’re interesting, maybe nobody else will! Just as I started with individuals, what it is that we do that gets in our own way, and realized that most of the problems that we encounter are self-inflicted; I think most of the wounds that organizations suffer are also self-inflicted. There are lots of ways in which organizations operate as if they were asleep. They don’t make conscious choices. I’ve become convinced that the way in which we organize in business, in industry, is hopelessly out of line with the demands that have been placed on us. We’re using systems that have been around for a very long time, and which were created and designed in a completely different environment, and we haven’t changed. So we’re still using Industrial Revolution tools in the Information Age. A lot of it is arrant rubbish. It may have been sensible in the past, but it isn’t sensible now. We hang on to it largely because there isn’t anything else. And we have a pressing need to organize.

Think of it — just the size of organizations. A big organization in the past might have been several hundred people, and they'd all be in the same locality, and the people running the organization could walk round and talk to them all. That's never the case now. A big organization now may be 100,000 people, spread all round the world, of many different backgrounds, and yet we're still trying to use the same ways of communicating and coordinating that we did when the owner of the factory could walk out of his office and shout at all the people – and they could hear him. We're using exactly the same processes! Some of them have been speeded up by things like e-mail, but essentially it's the same. E-mail is only an electronic memo. We're using all these outmoded ideas because we haven't got anything else, and we're getting in our own way. That's why we are seeing these awful scandals and breakdowns in companies that are apparently successful, which suddenly stumble and fall into a black hole because all the problems, the self-inflicted wounds catch up with them.

*We're looking forward to reading about it!*

Thanks.