

# Freedom from Strife

*Natalia Lynn*



An essay contribution to  
*Conversation 2015*

## Participant Bio



**Natalia Lynn**

Novelist

Natalia Lynn is a freelance writer living in Seattle, WA. She is currently working on a sci-fi book series highlighting the dangers of climate change and its impact on future generations. She is involved with organizations around Seattle, such as Facing Homelessness and Patients for Safe Access, and spends her free time baking pastries for local food co-ops. She loves to travel and experience a deeper understanding of foreign cultures.



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### **What are our prevailing assumptions about the way the world works?**

An American dollar bill depicts The Great Seal, with the “eye of providence” at the top of the pyramid looking down on a society where all men and women are created equal. Dating back as far as ancient Mesopotamia, pyramid structures prove a powerful study, pointing up when applied to corporate interests and wealth distribution, inverted down when illustrating environmental or generational burden. It is an architecture that requires solid foundation to sustain growth. The pyramid fosters hope, but also relies heavily on self-preservation and a desire for legacy that breeds prejudice towards those who threaten glory at the highest level. Equality within this structure is an abstract concept that varies by timing, social constructs, and contemporary values. Fair worth assigned to each tier allows the model to reach great heights, reinforced from foundation to apex. Stability begins with individual perception.

“Our paradigms have a great deal to do with creating the reality we experience,” Dr. Richard O’Connor addresses in his book, Rewire about literally reshaping the human brain. “It’s just about impossible to explain self-destructive behavior without some sense of the divided self, or motives that we hide from ourselves, a part of the mind that sometimes works against our own interests.”

“There are times when, no matter how much you know, you find yourself doing things and repeating patterns that cause you pain, but for some reason you can’t make a change,” explains psychiatrist, Helene Brenner. “At those times, there is something operating below our conscious awareness, something that still needs to be discovered - that’s where sensing comes in.”

Sensory perception forms our “assumptive world,” which includes our most basic beliefs - race, class, gender, nationality - and how they bias our point of view. Assumptions affect our relationships and sway our morality. They support our greatest achievements and manifest our worst failures. We are constantly balancing belief against value that essentially propels our actions forward. O’Connor writes, “None of us can really view the world objectively. Everyone’s assumptive reality is unique, and some fit reality better than others.”

While struggling to understand each other, it’s important to address the biases we carry but may never recognize. Human instinct often breeds misinformation. For instance,

descendants of the Lakota tribe have noted issues connecting and advancing in the modern workplace for simple reasons. Race aside, Lakota customs include avoiding eye contact with authority figures, nodding up instead of down, and making jokes during tense moments - mannerisms that seem slight, but in many assumptive realities, small differences can trigger prejudice. These Lakota customs are passed from parent to child and originated during a time when Native survival was tense; gestures adopted out of necessity to deflect crisis. The current isolation felt by Lakota people is caused by tribal assumptive worlds and the worlds of those around them – an intricate combination of all emotions.

Human emotions are not inherently positive or negative. Beneath the surface, emotions orchestrate complex changes in motivation, attention, perception, and behavior. Each feeling has a critical job, whether it's preparing us for what we want (anxiety/anger), urging us to improve (envy), or allowing us to undo a social gaffe (embarrassment). Our emotions are carved by human experience that we cannot control - but we can control our focus.

Pope Francis is a current leader who seems to defy assumptions made by both opponents and followers of the Catholic Church. Francis stepped into a role criticized for unfair biases, yet continuously takes bold action by placing high value on compassion and accountability. Like everyone, Francis holds pre-conceived notions, though as Candida Moss of *The Daily Beast* reports, "What sets Francis apart is both his sharp critique of structures of power and his seductively popular style. He leads with a human face of global issues and sharp denouncements of exploitation."

While at the highest tiers, we have an opportunity to experience elevated perspective, vantage point with a broader scope. Powerful institutions may not always exercise the most empathetic assumptions when presiding over their reach, yet leaders continue to emerge in all sectors, individual voices striving for understanding. In today's collective assumptive world, perception climbs to encouraging heights of acceptance and consideration shaped by sharing knowledge, acting together, and embracing the technology that connects us.

### **As we watch the social sector address big, tough social challenges, what seems to be the sector's predominant "theory in use" about concerted action?**

The greater problems facing the social sector are deeply personal - gender and ethnic inequality, lifelong education, environmental sustainability, nutritional and health care needs; issues that seem insurmountable, especially if inter or intrapersonal relationships are suffering. Technology grants us a global connectivity that humans' crave, but are possibly not prepared for. Each day overwhelming challenges face refugees and victims of war; their stories appear in news feeds on par with a neighbor's flu symptoms and local food labeling initiatives; each a real time issue with a different proximity. Mentally prioritizing complications can build a framework to keep expectations "above water," but organizing a

problem's importance does not solve it. Guilt over the inability to implement change is paralyzing at all tiers of a hierarchy.

"Human beings weren't built for the conditions of twenty-first-century life," states O'Connor. "Tens of thousands of years living by cycles of the seasons, with gods to explain what we couldn't understand has shaped our brains and expectations." The stress-response system is not designed for such life-long trials. Fight-or-flight responses impact the whole body - the nervous, endocrine, muscular, circulatory, digestion, sensory, and reproductive systems. "Fear dominates our lives, much more than we're aware of." O'Connor believes that we're constantly in a state of stress because of three fundamental issues: too much stimulation, not enough security, and a personal crisis of meaning. "The truth is that much of contemporary life is bad for us, though we've been so mesmerized by advertising, consumerism, and the media to believe otherwise."

Unhealthy behavior appears to stem from isolation, a desire for stimulation, and the social pressure to fit in. "The things we want in life are the things the evolved mind tells us we want, and it doesn't give a fig about our happiness. All evidence suggests that you would probably be happier not caring about your promotion and building boats or doing volunteer work instead." To control emotions, O'Connor suggests the practice of "mindfulness to build new paradigms instead of muscles." Mindfulness is the deliberate effort to stay in the present moment, to pay attention to detail, and to stop judging and categorizing. Mindfulness helps us gain control and step back to see the patterns at work. Mental workouts can change aspects of our lives from burden to wellness, identifying confines that offer false comfort or bring purpose to unhealthy desires.

"Going with the flow" seems beneficial to keep stress low, but often neglects defensive intentions that inevitably manifest stressful situations down the road. "We must know how to stand up for ourselves, make independent choices, and not depend on authority for guidance." O'Connor writes. In other words, we must learn to consciously fight negativity.

One definition of negativity is resistance to a present moment, resistance to a reality that contradicts our idea of how life *should* be. Life coach, Holiday Mathis instructs, "Pinpoint the belief that is causing resistance to your reality then challenge yourself to let that belief go. Agree to what's really happening. Agree and suddenly negativity will disappear, replaced by a feeling of being connected, an integral part of what's really going on."

So staying true to empathetic teachings, keeping biases to a minimum, practicing mindfulness, and operating within others' assumptive realities while climbing and sliding a pyramid, all without losing our sense of identity seems impossible, but the key is forgiveness. Compassion can push the limits of pride and encourage connection, which opens us up to empathy. We feel better as we treat others better and vice versa. A person

with high levels of self-compassion may not blame themselves for stress beyond their control, or be more willing to move on after an argument, rather than dwell for days.

A five-step “REACH” method of forgiveness was developed by Everett Worthington at Virginia Commonwealth University. His five principals helped the professor address his own guilt and rage after an unthinkable family tragedy. ““Recall” the incident, including all hurt. “Empathize” with the person who wronged you. Then, give them the “Altruistic gift” of forgiveness, maybe by recalling how good it felt to be forgiven yourself. Next, “Commit” to forgive publicly by telling a friend or the forgiven. Finally, “Hold” that feeling of forgiveness. Even when feelings of anger surface, remind yourself that you’ve already forgiven.”

Forgiveness is not always easy. Differences quickly intensify due to constant re-negotiations of opinions and expectations. Feelings of resentment have a tendency to build over time, though this habit has proven to be extremely unhealthy. In 2005, a study published by the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, found participants who considered themselves more forgiving had better health across all categories: physical symptoms, number of medications used, sleep quality, fatigue, and complaints.

Researchers at Brandeis University found a connection between a self-compassionate attitude and lower levels of stress-induced inflammation. To understand the connection, 41 participants ranked their achievements then took a stress test. Researchers measured their levels of interleukin-6 (IL-6), the chemical linked to inflammation, before and after the test. At the end of the first day, participants with higher self-compassion registered significantly lower levels of IL-6.

On the second day, the team found something unexpected. Participants with lower self-compassion had higher base levels of IL-6 before the test, suggesting that they may have been carrying stress from their experience the day before.

Scientists have also learned the more peaceable a "victim" of a fight (ones accused of not doing their fair share or of invading another's privacy), the lower their blood pressure; but remarkably their accusers' blood pressure lowered, too. In other words, granting and receiving forgiveness seems to relieve tension within an entire relationship. Remarkably, it didn't matter whether the instigator tried to apologize. “The power to grant forgiveness rests with the victim,” the authors concluded. Other studies have shown that if someone is unforgiving, they see objects as heavier, and hills, steeper. When asked to jump, forgiving people jumped, on average, seven centimeters higher.

Forgiveness and kindness are important predictors of satisfaction in any relationship. When we practice self-love, we fortify prevailing social stability, while compassion helps to ward off fear that keeps us from achieving our best. Mindfulness is an ancient practice that seems revolutionary in today's information obsessed age. Connections happen faster granting us a constant opportunity for focus on the interactions where we find the most comfort. To solve our biggest problems within a tier-based society, top priority must be granted to the welfare of the lowest, most basic processes within oneself.



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