

## It's Hard to Build Bridges While Looking Down Your Nose

I want to tell you about some recent experiences I have had that have strengthened my own personal bridge between mainstream science and holistic spiritual beliefs.

I am a scientist by training, and for the past 40 or so years I have been a fairly traditional experimental psychologist, working in the area of human perception. For even longer than that, though, I have had an intense interest in what can be called “holistic spiritual” issues.

My graduate psychology degree is from Brandeis University. I was there when Abe Maslow was head of my department, and he seems to have had a strong influence on me. I was, for a while, a member of the Transpersonal Psychological Association and for more than 25 years I have been teaching a personal growth course. Also, I consider myself to be a Buddhist. More recently, I have become a Ken Wilber fan.

So, in a sense I have been an embodiment of a bridge between the areas of mainstream science (secularism?) and holistic spirituality. I know that many of you on our panel, and probably many of you in the audience, also are embodiments of bridges between belief systems. I don't know about you, but I can say the bridge I have embodied has been filled with potholes and all manner of structural defects, and has been in serious need of refurbishing.

Even though I consider myself as having a holistic spiritual worldview I have a strong sensitivity to any **suggested violation of the known laws of nature**. Using Stan Klein's metaphor I can say that, for me, claiming that the known laws of nature have been violated is like waving a red flag in front of an angry bull. Since I moved to California some 35 years ago the red flags have been flying wildly and I often find myself in somewhat heated discussions with my fellow holistic spirituals about the existence of paranormal phenomena and the like.

I have found these encounters fun, but frustrating, and if I have persuaded any of my opponents to see things my way they are too stubborn to admit it.

A few years ago I came across Rupert Sheldrake's book "Seven Experiments that Could Change the World". I was particularly intrigued by his experiments investigating the **feeling of being stared at**. Sheldrake's experiments purport to demonstrate that people really can tell when someone out of their field of vision is staring at them. This is a giant red flag for me.

I'm curious as to how many of you believe you can tell whether someone out of your field of vision is staring at you. Well, that's impossible according to what we presently know about laws of nature.

I didn't take Sheldrake's experiments seriously, and I would guess that the overwhelming majority of mainstream science people would share my attitude. On the other hand, holistic spirituality people seem to take him **very** seriously. This difference has disrupted traffic flow on my particular bridge.

Very recently I have come to the realization that there was a particular emotional component to my attitude toward Sheldrake that was contributing to that bridge problem.

The name I would now give to the attitude I had then is "**covert condescension**".

I considered Sheldrake's beliefs to be based on an inferior view of the Universe to mine. I thought if only he understood science as well as I do, he would have no choice but to see the error of his beliefs.

In other words, I was taking a condescending attitude toward Sheldrake, I was “looking down my nose” at him. Once my condescension kicks in I have a strong tendency to write the other person off, to stop listening and stop trying to understand his beliefs. That’s what I did with Sheldrake. And to some extent that’s what I did with the people who support him.

And that isn’t very good for bridge building.

But I don’t think of myself as a condescending person. I almost always manage to hide my condescension from those who are objects of it. That’s why I call it **covert** condescension. A good way of hiding it from others is hiding it from myself. That’s what I did, so I was not particularly aware of my condescension.

The event that **forced** me to become aware of it was my being forced to drop it.

One of the items on Sheldrake’s website was a video of a one hour presentation that he made to employees of Microsoft. **Watching him in person blew my condescending attitude away.** Sheldrake struck me as a man of great erudition, and clearly surpassing intelligence (clearly surpassing **my** intelligence, anyway). He is a past fellow of the Royal Society of London, and there is no way I can claim I have a better understanding of science than he does.

**It’s pretty hard for me to be condescending to someone like that.**

He convinced me that he has been unfairly treated by the scientific establishment. When he executes and publishes carefully controlled experiments showing that, for example, people **can** tell when someone is staring at them, the establishment response is, well, that’s impossible, so we don’t believe it.

So Sheldrake’s video produced a kind of epiphany for me. Please understand, I still don’t agree with him, but I have a new respect for his beliefs.

Since then I have been much more aware of an element of condescension in my attitude toward others who disagree with me,

particularly in areas of religion and politics. It pops up with disturbing frequency.

### **Well, what to do about it?**

As I said, I consider myself a Buddhist, and it is my belief that simply becoming **mindful** of one's condescension will go a long way toward preventing it from influencing one's reaction to others. One goal I have is to just notice it when it is happening.

A question posed by this conference is, "What can we do to strengthen bridges between belief systems?" I believe that one concrete step we can each take, personally, is just to notice what triggers our "covert condescension." Are there "red flag" beliefs that cause you to assume the holder of the belief is a little bit damaged, a little bit inferior? (One way to detect the presence of condescension is by noticing a tendency to roll your eyes)

I believe that one remedy for condescension might be **empathy**. When you notice your condescension triggered you might ask yourself, "If I had that person's predilections and experiences would I believe the same things that he or she does? Maybe I should find out more about why that person holds his beliefs."

For me, Sheldrake is easy.

I am working on my attitude toward someone who believes in the physical resurrection of Christ. For me, that's much harder.

After that, someone who believes that the world was literally created in 6 days.

So, I invite you to see if you have "red flags" that trigger your condescension and if it seems right, to work on them, maybe replacing the condescension with empathy.

The discussions at this conference might be a good place to start.

I bet that I triggered the condescension of some of you when I declared my own red flag around paranormal phenomena. "Narrow minded scientific beliefs" might be a red flag of yours. If that is true I welcome you to work on that one first