

Dissonance

By
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Learning to identify, understand and honor dissonance leads to new levels of living and wellness. Dissonance means without sonic alignment or to "beat against". Our first reactions to dissonances, whether in music or life, are to label them undesirable and something to be avoided. When Igor Stravinsky premiered The Rite of Spring many listeners rioted. They cited the horrible dissonances in the music as the cause. A group of doctors tried to sue Stravinsky for damaging peoples ears. Today many find the dissonances in The Rite of Spring to be harmonies.

During the Middle Ages the Catholic church determined what musical tones and intervals were spiritual. New musical sounds were usually introduced through heresy and thought to be the work of the devil. As hard as it is to believe, many people were executed and tortured for playing the "wrong note".

Go to the piano keyboard and play C and G than play the octave of C and C. If you lived in the Dark Ages you may be on your way to being a music star. Now play C and C followed by C and F#. Uh-oh! You made a fatal mistake. You are now on your way to being burned at the stake or worse. C and F# were considered to be the interval of the devil.

Our life experiences of dissonance vary greatly. A commonly used word for dissonance is stress. Dr. Hans Selye defines stress as adaptation to change. Those that resist change will perceive stress as distress. Those that accept change may experience the same stress as euphoria or U-stress. In other words what is distress for one person may be euphoria for another. This may explain from a scientific perspective why the dissonances of a music composition like Stravinskys Rite of Spring may be terrible for one person and beautiful for another.

The process of a child learning to swing illustrates the principle of dissonance as a necessary component of acquiring a new skill. The child learns to pull on the swing at just the right time through hundreds of misses. Because missed pulls are out of alignment with the desired feeling of swinging they are perceived by the child as frustrating. "How can I learn to swing if I keep pulling and nothing happens!"

Eventually through watching other children, getting hands on help from parents, and achieving many mini successes the child begins to internalize a "right feeling" of swinging. The misses contrasted to the "right feeling" may ironically lead to increasing states of dissonance. When we have no idea of the right way the wrong way is acceptable. When we experience the right way the wrong way seems even more dissonant.

One day something happens, a right movement, an "accident", or somebody says something that "makes sense" and suddenly the child knows how to swing. They can pull on the swing again and again at just the right moment. From this moment on the child knows how to swing for the rest of their life.

The Nobel Prize winning physics, Dr. Ilya Prigogine discovered the importance of dissonance while investigating chemical systems. He termed his discoveries "order from chaos". Prigogine proved that for a system to change and go into a higher state of functioning it must first pass through a state of disruption or chaos. The sonic term for chaos is dissonance.

Prigogine points out the crucial role dissonance plays in living systems evolving into higher levels of order or resonance. He discovered that all living systems dissipate more and more energy over time caused by fluctuations or dissonances inherent within the system. As time passes these dissonances increase in intensity causing the system to move further and further from equilibrium. Soon everything begins to wobble. The wobbling increases until all preexisting order within the system shatters causing the system to leap into chaos.

Prigogine terms the precise moment a system goes from order to chaos a bifurcation point. As a system approaches bifurcation it only takes a very small and seemingly inconsequential event to create chaos. From chaos the system reorganizes itself into a new system functioning at a higher-level resonance.

Whether the resonance is a higher or lower level than the original system is determined by what mathematicians call "strange attractors". Strange attractors can be visualized as seeds of the new order sown during the old order. For example, a child learning to swing builds attractors through mini successes, modeling other children, and positive encouragement. When the old order disintegrates the new order reforms around the vibration of these experiences.

We must learn to listen to and appreciate dissonance in our life. For example, an alarm clock is dissonant for our sleeping self. However for our waking self the alarm clock is a sound we created to remind us to wake up. Oftentimes we forget that our waking self set the alarm. The alarm annoys us. We get angry. Maybe we throw our alarm clock across the room. When we surrender to the message we awake and remember. "Today I got up early to begin my vacation." Thank goodness for that alarm or I would have missed my plane.

From a BioSonic perspective the experiences of dissonance are our inner alarm system. When an alarm goes off something is going to change whether we think we are going to like it or not. The more we resist alarms the more the intensity of dissonance increases in our life.

We must learn to appreciate dissonance and actively listen to our inner alarms. The following "dissonance ear training", is to help us tune into our alarms and wake up. Each volume level is like an alarm clock getting louder and louder. We are free to wake up at any volume.

Dissonance Level 1: "Not Quite Right Feeling"

We recognize a vague feeling of discomfort or inner voice whispers a warning. Often times our body slightly tightens. Sometimes we may perceive a subtle feeling of pulling away. The intensity of the alarm is low enough to easily overlook or dismiss. It is the kind of message that we recognize in hindsight and say "I should have listened," or "I had a feeling".

Dissonance Level 2: Minor Problem

We have progressed beyond the not quiet right feeling and can consciously, if only for a moment, identify the source of irritation. A friend or relative doesn't clean up after themselves in the house and we don't say anything. It is even uncomfortable for us to do their cleaning, however it is a small problem and the discomfort soon leaves. Often times we will tell ourselves a story: "It is OK, they will be leaving in a few days. He is such a good person it is worth it to do these things for him just to have him here. "Although we may even come to believe our stories, which in psychological terms is the beginning of denial, our bodies always tighten when faced with a minor problem.

Dissonance Level 3: Major Problem

The source of irritation is clear and in our consciousness for long periods of time. It is increasingly difficult to tell ourselves stories. We know something is wrong and that there is a problem. The person went from occasionally throwing something on the floor to everyday leaving papers, tracking in dirt, overstaying their welcome, and playing the stereo late at night. Even our neighbors are complaining.

However it is still possible to somehow put off our problem. We tell ourselves more stories: "If I am nicer, maybe the person will go away. It's not his or her fault, they had a hard childhood. Maybe their behavior has something to do with me." At this level of dissonance everyone knows we have a problem except us. When we finally do something about it everyone is relieved. When we keep denying, then the problem goes to a higher level of dissonance.

Dissonance Level 4: Crisis

The dissonance is loud and screeching. We can't get away from it. Everywhere we go it is with us. Our whole universe seems to be shaking and falling apart. In psychotherapeutic language we are "bottoming out" and there is no place left to go but up. We have to face the dissonance. Many people tell stories of reaching the bottom and finding a new life.

I learned a long time ago not to judge people at the bottom. While working at Bellevue psychiatric hospital I was called as a therapist to a flop house on the Bowery. We were trying to extend our services into the community and help people before they reached hospitalization stage. On this occasion, I walked into a small dirty room that smelled of human waste with cockroaches running from wall to wall. In the room there was a man covered with spit laying on a dirty bed. A priest sitting next to him preparing to give last rites. I was discussed that I should be called to such a place and angry with this man for letting his life depreciate to such a low level.

For some reason I stayed. As the priest gave the last rites, the man on the bed opened his eyes and said "I see Jesus." Suddenly he began to glow. I actually felt the vibration in the room increase. As I looked at this dying man he suddenly became soft and radiant. I could feel his energy enveloping the room. I felt as though I was blessed and showered with grace.

All of this lasted just a few minutes by the clock and an eternity from my inner time perspective. When he exhaled his last breath, this filthy disgusting drunk had transformed into one of the most important spiritual teachers of my life. He taught

me that a crisis can be an opportunity for extraordinary growth and that I should be very humble in my judgments of other people's life dissonance.

Jacobs Ladder

The ancient story of Jacob's Ladder illustrates the mythological relationship between dissonance and order. Jacob's Ladder is an archetypal ladder between heaven and earth. We begin as spiritual beings at the top of the ladder and descend until we become earthly beings at the bottom of the ladder. Our spiritual journey begins when we choose to climb back up the ladder. Each rung upwards represents increasing states of energy and consciousness.

The transitions from one rung to another on Jacob's ladder are different than a regular ladder. The rungs are in discontinuous steps. This means distance between each rung becomes greater and greater the further we go up the ladder.

Climbing Jacob's Ladder requires a special climbing skill which is sometimes referred to as quantum leaping. We are at one level of vibration or rung on the ladder then suddenly we are at another. We literally leap from one rung something like excited electrons jumping from one orbit to another and changing the nature of an atom.

The myth of Jacob's Ladder is very real in our everyday life. The process of moving into different states of energy begins with dissonance. During dissonance our life becomes challenged. The more we deny our challenge the greater our dissonance becomes. There are no solutions on our current rung of the ladder. We must seek change and seek resolutions from a higher perspective.

I have come to believe the man I worked with on the Bowery was on very high rung of the ladder. He resisted the jump to the next rung until the last moment. During his last rights he surrendered to whatever internal dissonance he had been avoiding. He made what appeared to be an inconceivable leap. His gift was to show me that at any moment dissonance may transform into a new and higher state of resonance.