

Unintended consequences!
June 4, 2023 Rev. Dr. David Thompson

Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other," (Psalms 85:10).

More powerful than all the world governments, corporate boardrooms or militaries, there is a giant, which is able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. It is Unintended Consequences.

In fact, right now, two Super Giants stride the world. One is the Giant of **false narratives** and the other is the Giant of **unintended consequences** and they are in league. Together they explain most of what is going wrong with our world...

Galatians 6 says: Be not deceived. Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." Jesus said:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Sociologist Robert K. Merton popularized the concept of unintended consequences. He said that unintended consequences can be grouped into three types:

- 1) A positive unexpected benefit such as luck, serendipity or a windfall.

When Jesus told the parable of the peasant farmer plowing a rented field, he was talking about a positive unintended consequence that came out of it. The farmer's intent was to plow the field when the plow hit what he thought was a rock. It was not. It was a chest of treasure hidden in the field!

He covered it up again and bought the field in order to be able to claim the treasure hidden there. According to Jesus, God's rule on earth is discovered just like that. Often when we are intending something else, God touches our lives with unconditional love. We become filled with joy and give up everything in order to follow this sudden meaning in our lives. Has that been your experience of God?

- 2) A second type of unintended consequence can be something negative in addition to the desired effect.

A woman when asked whether she wanted to travel to Mars said "No." She didn't like the idea of being confined in a small spaceship for so long a time. There was also an unintended consequence to deal with: radiation. In space it is more intense. So you might have the glamour of being the first person to step foot on Mars but later develop cancer...

- 3) An unintended consequence can be a perverse effect to what was originally intended- when a solution actually makes the problem worse.

For instance, the war on drugs was intended to suppress the illegal drug trade. Instead, it consolidated the profitability of the drug cartels.

Or a drug taken to cure cancer actually kills us...

According to Merton what are the common causes of unintended consequences?

- Ignorance. It is simply not possible to take everything into account. We don't know enough to avoid unintended consequences
- Error. Incorrect analysis of the problem, or following habits that worked in the past, but that no longer apply
- Immediate interest, which may override long term interest. Invade the Ukraine now and worry about the long term later.
- Basic values that require or prohibit actions, even if the long term results might be unfavorable. China's one child policy meant to control an out-of-control population growth, ends up with abortion of female babies and a selection of boy children who when grown up have difficulty finding a woman to marry.
- Self-defeating prophecies: fear of some consequences drives people to find solutions before the problems occur. What you don't know is that you have anticipated a problem that is not going to happen...so you are all expensively geared up for no reason.

Unintended consequences can be both positive and negative.

When the army developed the Internet, they had no idea how it would affect the world both positively and negatively. The Internet puts knowledge at our fingertips as well as creating addictions to overuse and wasting a great deal of time. It was a tool for Osama Bin Laden as well as The January 6th Capitol Hill riot.

Did you know that legalized abortion in the United States accounted for a drop in crime rates? States where abortion is common see greater drops in crime rates than States where abortion is rare. Unwanted children are more likely to become criminals.

Unintended consequences are everywhere. Good/ bad/indifferent they are always unanticipated. That makes them very hard to deal with. One thing becomes very clear: ***If there is any law more powerful than the ones constructed in the halls of power, it is the law of unintended consequences.***

So what do we do about it?

Naturally when we discover a benefit, like a mold on an orange that creates penicillin, **we want to preserve the benefit**. We discover that aspirin not only relieves headaches but can also prevent strokes, so we are happy about that unintended consequence.

What we don't want is the unintended drawbacks. Our solution to that problem is control, control, control, but sometimes that is just not possible. Like opening Pandora's box, we cannot get the evil spirits back inside. But the Pandora's box story does have one gift in it. The last thing to escape Pandora's box was hope- a bright glittering creature that came out to give us hope amidst the swirl of the negative unintended consequences of our actions.

However hard we wish and strive we simply cannot control all outcomes. We cannot stop all actions either! So, we are trapped into whatever problems we create. As Jesus said; whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap.

As long as there are human beings we will have unintended consequences and the law of cause and effect will roll on as 'the chickens come home to roost'. So where is the hope?

We human beings live in two worlds- one is the one we share with all living things, the natural world with its physical laws and consequences.

The other is our 'story world' where we create narratives to try to find meaning, where we think and plan, and then suffer consequences, or try to avoid them. In this story world we have the naïve idea that someone or something knows what is going on, either some very smart people somewhere, or even the Supernatural. But let's note this: ***The 'story world' is the only place we can have unintended consequences.***

It is of course in the 'story world' where we try to predict consequences and try to avoid problems. This is the creative world where we can actually bring new things into existence like the iPhone to replace land line infrastructure, or email to replace snail mail.

But the 'story world' also created the idea of exporting rabbits to Australia where there were no predators. They would be great for meat, the story said, as we watched them proliferate to such a degree that they defoliated vast tracks of territory and wrecked the ecosphere.

In this 'story world' we can try to anticipate all the consequences and predict outcomes but we make a huge mistake if we think ***that we can control all outcomes and consequences.*** That would be to think that our 'story world' is the same as the natural world. It is not.

But often the result of this kind of attempt to control the uncontrollable makes us blind to new possibilities and unanticipated challenges.

One of the major problems of the ‘story world’ is **false narratives**. They often create negative unintended consequences. For example if the narrative is essentially false such as “there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the United States must invade to preserve the peace and protect Israel,” and then after invasion we discover no such weapons, the consequences of loss of blood and treasure have taken place for no good reason. Then we are forced to try to justify the action and deal with all the unintended consequences, like an insurgency that follows. To do this the US created a retro narrative like “we are nation building and creating democracy in the Middle East.” How do we avoid doing this sort of thing in the first place or is this simply unavoidable?

I think that we need to start by being aware of and questioning our narratives and what they do to us. In Jesus time he constantly asked the scribes and Pharisees to examine their false narratives. One of their false narratives that Jesus called out was “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” That was not working but ended up in revenge cycles and blood-letting. And let’s know this: this narrative is still held in Israel today by both sides! What is part of the failure here? It creates sandbox wars. The challenge here is for human being to grow up, to become mature, to be adult.

We live not in a static world but an evolving one! We were not the first creatures here. Nor may we be the last.

We are an evolving species, with debts to the rest of the environment. We are relative latecomers on this planet and there will be species that come after us most likely to whom we will contribute. What does that tell us? ***Reality is emergent. It is still evolving and that is why there will be unintended consequences regularly occurring, some good, some not so good.***

So how do we handle this phenomenon spiritually so as to help us to live our daily lives? How do we stay open to good unintended consequences and protect against the bad ones?

First of all this world is a place for making our souls.

Uncertainties and insecurities seem to be necessary for us to exist here at all on earth. This uncertainty is in the warp and woof of the world as the climate change tornadoes remind us. We can create stories to help us explore unknown consequences, and stay open to as yet unconceived alternatives; **or we can write inflexible closed stories.** Trump was recently asked what his answer was to climate change. He said, “Drill baby drill.” That sort of attitude is intended to block new ideas. But then the unintended consequences come, until the truth hits us so hard on the head, that we either have to give in or die.

I love the teaching that we should only place in motion those events that that can bring the greatest peace, contentment, where cause and effect are benign. I love Amelia Earhart's insight that "no kind act ever stops with itself...a single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees."

So not only are there horrific consequences when we go to war based on a false narrative as Putin has done, **kindness narratives also have incredibly positive consequences.**

This is where the hope lies- after the evil things have left Pandora's Box, Hope remains hanging about just asking to be let out!

Let's make this practical! Let's say you want to retire, get a new job, get a new relationship etc. How do you do this taking into account the law of unintended consequences?

Here is a process we might follow that is a paraphrase of the teacher Deepak Chopra:

- 1) Set your **intention-** i.e. to retire, get a job and or a partner.
- 2) Focus all your **attention** on it. Details, places what you will do with your time etc. things you will do, strategies you will follow etc.
- 3) Then stay in the wisdom of uncertainty and insecurity. Don't force things. Go with the flow, stay open
- 4) Let go of the outcome and any rigidly fixed ideas. Let go of your inflexible closed stories.
- 5) That places you in the field of all possibilities and opens up the possibility of positive unintended consequences, to flow into the mix. Since you have all possibilities to choose from, you can then let your heart, which is connected to the cosmic computer inform your choices. The heart taught us in Scripture is far more than a pump. Our hearts know things that reason cannot know.

Regarding false narratives and what to do when they combine with unintended consequences, here is my take:

If unintended consequences come only because we create a 'story world' **then we need to be aware of what our stories are doing to us.** What we sow in the story world, we tend to reap, so Jesus tells us.

So be careful of your story narratives! They can save you or kill you!

Glen Smiley was a Methodist minister from Texas and he told a story about how our narratives affect reality and can increase the possibility of **positive unintended consequences.**

He had a friend George who was always arguing with his wife Dorothy as to whether non-violence worked in the real world. She was an advocate for non-violent methods. George always said to her that they did not work. That was his story and he was sticking to it.

One night George and his wife Dorothy took their daughter to a show in New York City. They went out to dinner afterwards. It was a cold night with two or three inches of snow on the streets so George suggested that they remain in the restaurant while he collected the car.

It was late and there was little traffic. Turning a corner he saw three men, standing in the middle of the sidewalk between him and his car. Not till he got closer did George expect trouble. The men spread themselves across the sidewalk to deny him passage.

George thought I'm going to be mugged! His narrative kicked in and he began to look for a way of escape but he was too close to them. He thought to himself I wonder if there is any truth to the story Dorothy has been telling me about non-violence? What would Jesus do? Besides what do I have to lose by trying a different approach?

When he came within a few feet of the larger man in the center George spread out his arms, smiled and greeted the man as a long lost friend, giving him a tight embrace and slapping him on the back. In the embrace the man whispered to him " You stupid SOB. Don't you know this is a stick up? Those other two dudes are apt to kill you. Give me all the money you have."

" I don't have any money," George whispered truthfully. " I just ate at a restaurant with my wife and child and paid by credit card. I have 85 cents, but I live in Nyack and need fifty cents to get across the Washington Bridge.

"Dammit!" the man said " Then give me the thirty five cents."

George did so and the three men let him pass without incident.

Non-violent kindness = **great unintended consequences!**

We will never eliminate unintended consequences but if we are living a loving, kind life, the goodness we create will get us through! And the blithe spirit that Pandora let out of the box will come to us and give us HOPE so that we enjoy our life!

Kindness should not be left buried in the field. Instead buy the field! Open the treasure box of unconditional love! The kingdom of heaven is powerful!!

As St Augustine once said about ethics "Love, and then do what you like!

When you try love and kindness, the consequences regular and unintended, will positively surprise you to the depths of your soul; **for Love is where the natural world and the story world interface- where the two worlds come together in liberating truth!**

It is where Mercy and truth meet together; where righteousness and peace kiss each other," (Psalms 85:10).

And this treasure of love is worth buying the whole field for! Amen.