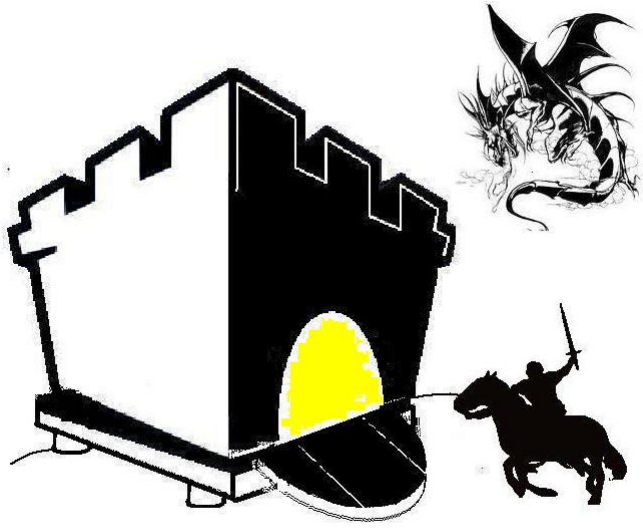
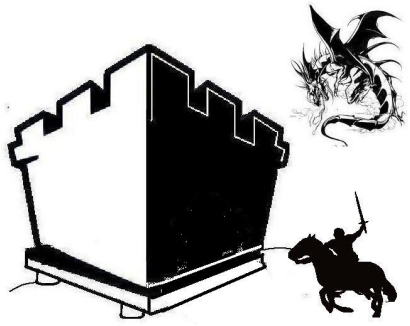
Fortress Living



Three Solutions for Your Greatest Problems in Life

Fortress Living: Three Solutions for your Greatest Problems in Life

Lesson Four *Where do Situational Solutions Come From?*



Once upon a time, in a land far away, a knight rode happily across a meadow. He was thinking about the lovely day and how glad he was to be returning home to his family in the castle. But he didn't allow himself to be too distracted. He remembered a time years before when, as a young squire, he had been surprised by robbers in the forest, who stole his money and his horse, beat him up and left him for dead.

Meanwhile, above the clouds, a huge, dragon circled high over head. The dragon was hungry and cross and looking for his dinner. Through a break in the clouds, the dragon spotted the lone rider below and instinctively reacted, swooping down with gathering speed until he broke through the cloud cover and, with a mighty roar, attempted to startle and overcome the knight with a burst of fire from his nostrils.

But the knight was not caught off guard. Memories of past indiscretions kept him alert and when the fiery blast descended he was able to react instantly. He lifted his sword, shouted a battle charge, and dashed with all his might to the castle gate where he found safety and a warm dinner waiting for him inside.

Such stories can always go one of two ways: toward a happy or sad ending. And, for the most part, a sad ending is one that ends in suffering and pain while a happy ending is one that ends in peace and pleasure. Though we don't fight actual fire-breathing dragons as we go through life, there are "dragons," nonetheless. And as we look for solutions to the greatest problems in life, we could think of the painful situations that come along as dragons. Ultimately, our goal is to rid the land of fire breathing dragons so they will no longer torment its citizens. In other words, our hope is peace and the pleasure and comfort that affords.

In earlier lessons I explained there are three great problems in everyone's life revealing three great needs:

- The Problem of Failure – we need success
- The Problem of Pain – we need pleasure
- The Problem of Danger – we need protection

Before we examine solutions to these great problems and needs, we're trying to understand the framework within which any effective solution is constructed. As we've seen, a solution is like building a castle. It starts with a solid foundation, moves on to a well-constructed structure; and is completed with a dependable access.

Dragons and the Situations of Life

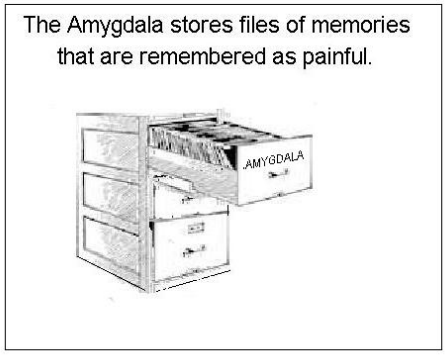
"Situations" describe the events and circumstances that make up our lives. Each second, minute, hour and day of our lives consists of these situations. I pictured one above: the knight being attacked by a dragon. Most of our situations are fairly harmless and benign—whether we have pizza or hamburgers for lunch is a situation of life but makes little difference. So, we're going to focus on those situations that do make a difference—especially those like sickness, disappointment, criticism and other kinds of pain.

I want to begin by distinguishing between the situation itself and the way we think and feel about it. The technical term is "perception." The fire breathing dragon flying over the knight's head was the situation itself. His thoughts and feelings about it when he felt the blast resulted from his perception. There is little we can do about the actual situations of our lives. But there is everything in the world to be done with the way we perceive them. And how we respond to those perceptions is the key to slaying the three "dragons" chasing us all:

Dragons from the Past – Memories

When you think about a eating bowl of ice cream—or a stalk of asparagus—it may surprise you to realize that it isn't the ice cream or asparagus itself that makes you feel pleasure or pain, it's the memory of past experiences. This is where our understanding of the situations of life begins: with the mystery of human memory.

Memory is a very complex topic and to discuss it in detail here would go well beyond our purpose. It will be enough for you to understand that the experiences of our lives—everything from favorite flavors of ice cream (and unfavorite experiences with asparagus!) get filed away in tiny filing cabinets in the brain. One of those file cabinets is called the "amygdala." It is especially active in the processing of painful or unpleasant memories. We don't remember every one of them. Some just fade away, but some are so strong they are like file folders as the very front of the drawer. Even when we don't remember a particular event—like the first time we ate asparagus—the emotions that attended that experience continues to hold influence in our lives.



This is true with pleasant memories but also with painful ones. This is what I mean by "dragons from the past." These are memories—sometimes hidden from conscious awareness—of painful and upsetting events from the past that continue to live in our memory warehouses, almost as if the events themselves are still happening.

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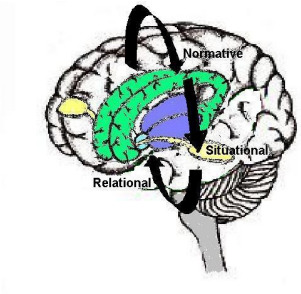
Dragons in the Present – Feelings

When a strong memory is stored in the filing cabinets of the brain, it is most often stored with tiny substances called "neurotransmitters." There are three of special interest in the way we process our emotions:

Epinephrine – *The "What's Happening" Chemical*
Dopamine – *The "I Want It" Chemical*
Serotonin – *The "I'm Ok" Chemical*

This too is a complex topic, but it's these neurotransmitters that account for what we know as "feelings." That's what I mean by the Dragons of the Present. Feelings aren't always like fire breathing dragons in our lives! But whether we experience pain or pleasure depends on them. And the feelings that create the greatest problems in our lives are definitely like dragons.



The release and absorption of neurotransmitters occurs in the Hypothalamus. The Hypothalamus is like a thermostat, activating various organs that secrete neurotransmitters and then triggering other actions to absorb them—almost like the thermostatic control of the furnace or air conditioner in your house. It's been designed to maintain a certain chemical balance in the brain and body. And for most of us it does so. We don't think too much about it. Only when chemical balance is lost do we feel helpless and out of control.

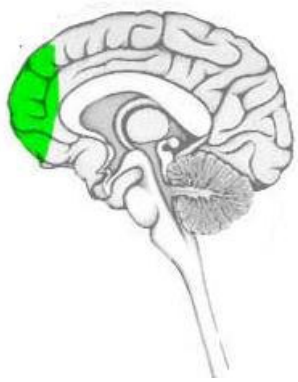
Dragons of the Future – Expectations

Hidden deep in the middle of the brain is a tiny organ called the "Hippocampus." It's where the Dragons of the Future are fought. Some call the Hippocampus the Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) of the brain because it creates our perception of where we have just come from, where we are now and what is likely to happen next. Without a good-functioning Hippocampus we would be unable to function in the world. There are medical examples of patients with damage to this region of the brain who cannot even remember family members they've lived with all their lives or how to return home from the mailbox.

Maybe you can see how important the Hippocampus is in the way we perceive the situations of life. It functions by making predictions, based on past experience, of what is likely to happen next. This is what I mean when I call the Dragons of the Future our "expectations." Many of those who are suffering in the situations of life expect things to continue getting worse. This is where feelings of despair and hopelessness come from.

Situational Solutions and *Aposteriori* Knowledge

You may have never given much thought to the neurological activity in your brain when you're facing a difficult situation—one of the dragons of life. But you've definitely "felt" what's going on. Perhaps now you can understand that your feelings in that moment are this part of the brain's attempt at constructing solutions to what it considers the greatest problems in life.



How do organs like the Amygdala, Hypothalamus or Hippocampus determine solutions? It is very different from the regions of the brain involved in higher reasoning skills. Earlier we talked about logical deductions based on apriori knowledge. The part of the brain most active during deductive analysis is directly behind your forehead. It's called the Pre-Frontal Cortex. It is so advanced that it is able to weigh various alternative scenarios, evaluate them, and decide between them—or even to take a little from each. It does all this by that process called deduction.

But situational solutions are derived very differently, that's because this part of the brain uses a different kind of reasoning: it's called aposteriori knowledge. This knowledge is in direct contrast to apriori. Apriori is knowledge "prior" to experience. Aposteriori is knowledge "post"—after—experience. In other words, situational solutions are *reactions* to evidence. And even when we're trying to be "logical" and "think straight," when it comes to activity in the Amygdala, Hypothalamus and Hippocampus, this kind of logic has very little to do with it.

Situational Solutions and Inductive Logic

It would be inaccurate to say that *aposteriori* knowledge is illogical. It's just a different form of logic. Rather than begin with a norm or premise, and then derive a conclusion from it (deductive logic), aposteriori knowledge gathers as much individual data as possible then tries to arrange and organize it into some meaningful explanation. Logicians call this "inductive logic." Deductive logic goes from the "whole" to the individual "parts." Inductive logic works from the individual parts to the whole. Inductive logic is what scientists try to use in their research. Note I say "try" because it is impossible to rely totally on inductive analysis. Even the most skeptical scientist makes deductive, apriori assumptions on a regular basis.

So, when does this region of the brain know when it has enough data? How does it decide to arrange and assemble the data is has? Unlike deductive logic, there is no apriori pattern or conclusion behind it. The outcome is "totally" unexpected. This leads to the final dynamic in understanding where situational solutions come from.

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Situational Solutions and System Balance

Remember the story of Goldilocks? When Goldilocks tried the three bowls of porridge the first was too hot, the second too cold and the third "just right." When addressing the great problem of pain in our lives situational solutions are very similar. These parts of the brain want to feel good (self-gratification) but not "too good." They are willing to endure feeling bad but not "too bad." This balancing act is accomplished by the release and absorption of those neurotransmitters I talked about earlier.

The technical term for this balancing act is "homeostasis." And when the brain achieves it, the exact combination of neurochemicals gets filed away in the memory warehouses under the heading called "normal." Notice that there is nothing here about right and wrong or good and evil. This part of the brain doesn't function that way. It only knows what feels "normal." And what feels normal is what is interpreted as being good.

This has enormous implications in our lives. For one thing, it means that when a person lives by the rule, "if it feels good I'll do it" there is no predicting where it will take him. The other thing to understand is that if the mid-brain has such a flexible and relative definition of "normal" the actual experience of normalcy is going to change all the time. And that's exactly what happens.

This can sound confusing but here's a simple example. If you put a frog in a kettle of boiling water it will immediately leap out for self-protection. However, if you put it in warm kettle and bring the water slowly to a boil, the frog will not even realize what's happening until it's too late.

We must be careful not to assume that the pleasure pursuit and the desire for normalcy and gratification are bad in themselves. Such views periodically creep into human thinking and almost always result in error. It's not that pleasure and gratification are bad. The problem is these parts of the brain cannot be given control of our lives. They are not capable of the higher functioning necessary to make good decisions.

Once again, the reason is that situational solutions arise from natural perceptions. And because of inductive logic, they can never give certain knowledge. They will always be inclined to overlook important information that, if processed, would change the outcome completely.

An example is the kind of extreme emotional activity that leads someone to attempt suicide. Why would a person try to kill himself? Is this a solution to a conflict or troubling situation in life? For the mid-brain that depends on the data and on how it is organized. This part of the brain doesn't rely on norms and rules like the higher brain regions.

So, what would be going on in the memory, perception and expectations of someone pondering self-destruction? Probably they have many painful memories filed away in the various warehouses of the brain—some of them so terrifying they can hardly consider them. It is also likely they are suffering from extreme chemical imbalances. These can be brought on by illness but also by self-abusive behaviors like drugs, alcohol or even sleep deprivation. Finally, their Hippocampus is not correctly mapping the various experiences of life. It's like a computer printer spitting out meaningless gibberish.

When you combine all these things their feeling is there is little reason left to live. And, particularly when the suicidal person has weak relationships with others, ending his life seems the most "logical" thing to do.

Natural Situational Solutions are Disordered

Though the example of a person contemplating suicide may seem rare, actually it is just an example of a universal problem with the situational solutions of life: as our brain tries to create them it is inclined to various errors and misunderstandings. I call them "affective disorders." "Affective disorder" is a broad term and can cover many afflictions—from suicide or psychotic paranoia; to more common conditions like exaggeration or an angry temper.

All of these are failed attempts at creating situational solutions in the face of dragons in our lives. They are attempts the brain makes to inductively arrange the various data of experience into some meaningful picture. While these are obviously destructive there are a host of other erroneous conclusions that are not as obvious. What about the desire to overeat chocolate when you're bored? What about spending too much money when you're upset? What about neglecting important responsibilities because you don't "feel like it—especially when it harms your relationships with others?" If you're thinking that everything we do could be a result of affective disorder, you're right!

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Christianity has not typically discussed problems and failures using terms like "affective disorder." However, there is a term in the Bible that means the same thing: "inordinate affections" (Colossians 3:5). The Bible warns that inordinate affections not only destroy our relationships with others but ultimately with God.

Another word that describes this is "lust." Though we often assume that "lust" describes perverse sexual desire, the word can be used to describe any strong, intense desire. Lusts, inordinate affections, affective disorders—whatever we call them—describe the same condition: a misguided effort to solve the great problem of pain in our lives, to arrange and create meaning, by pursuing some source of pleasure we hope will replace it; to achieve self-gratification and the warm, familiar comfort of peace, even though it is often at the expense of rejecting the norms, rules and truths that might stand in the way.

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Quiz 4 Questions

1. In order to evaluate our situational solutions it's important to distinguish between the situations of life themselves and

   a. who was involved in them
   b. our perceptions of them
   c. what age we were when they happened

2. One of the memory warehouses of the brain is called:

   a. the Clavicle
   b. the Amelia
   c. the Amygdala

3. An example of a neurotransmitter that activates emotion is:

   a. Dopamine
   b. Dozanine
   c. Doxydine

4. Which form of reasoning is used in determining situational solutions?

   a. Deductive, apriori
   b. Inductive, aposteriori
   c. Abductive, intraori

5. Because emotions are motivated by maintaining a balance of pleasure and pain…

   a. They rarely drive a person into extreme behaviors.
   b. They are reliable guides for right and wrong.
   c. They are always redefining what behaviors and experiences feel "normal."