

Pathways in the brain get larger and more efficient every time you think of the same thing or make a connection between two things. What starts as a thin wobbly bald line through a grassy meadow, over time, becomes more established, with first people then cattle, then horses and carriages, then cars and lorries until you have a motorway three lanes wide, made of concrete and topped in tarmac with crash barriers, lay-bys and service stations. By the time you are in your teens these pathways are so deeply etched into your brain that they are almost impossible to move.

For example, let's take a fleece that I recall from my late teens. I had a suit that I really liked, I picked it up at a vintage shop in Oxford, it was a grey suit from the '50s, double breasted with turn ups, a bit Guys and Dolls, you might say, but it was fashionable at the time. Unfortunately, I got this fleece, straight from the mouth of God that if I wore this suit, I would have a car crash. So, I would avoid wearing it, just in case. Every time I opened my wardrobe doors and saw the suit, I knew I could not wear it, neurological pathway would grow stronger and stronger because this belief was left unchallenged.

I started to see these fleeces as not the voice of a god but unwanted brain activity. I understood that I had to reroute some of these paths although I did not see it with such clarity as I do now.

To do this went to a psychotherapist. We met in a room in Colchester. Unfortunately, I could tell within minutes that they were not for me. I told them about the fleeces and deals, they seemed unfazed, nodded and looked concerned. They sat there and said 'what does that mean to you' 'how did that make you feel'...easy job! I felt, nice work if you can get it. I saw them a few times but then gave up. But it was not a complete waste of time; they told me I was not a schizophrenic, that was a relief, I did have a feeling that if all this stuff was known I'd be sedated and sectioned on the spot...so that was nice to know.

I then made my biggest breakthrough and that was meeting a hypnotherapist called Michael Worthington. He had a strap line on his website which was 'hypo-no-fear', the message being he could eliminate fear of anything from spiders, the dark, buttons and so why not the fear of God!

When I first explained the fleeces and deals, he was initially confused, he had never heard anything like it, he did not know what to say or do, I thought. But he seemed to decide quickly on an approach. Some people are scared of buttons, I was scared of God which gave me lots of weird rituals. Michael realised that he needed to reroute me thoughts.

There are two ways of looking at the thought. Either thought is construction of our own imagination, or it is an instinct that is placed in our brain from outside like God is telling us to do things, or part of the factory setting of our brain, like the bird's instinct to make nests. Michael made me understand that any thoughts I was struggling with was of my

own making. For example, my belief that if I draw someone they will die within four years, is a belief that has been nurtured in my brain. This thought is like some exotic plant that has been tended and cared for, planted by someone many years ago but through my unconscious action, it has grown into a substantial tree. The thoughts that are genuinely instincts are universal thoughts common to everyone in the species. For example, being kind to people, and the reproductive instinct could all be seen as factory settings. But what made my thoughts so definitely self-generated is their uniqueness.

On the side of the road, one sometimes sees these large mysterious steel boxes, I have no idea what they are for, I assume they are something to do with Wi-Fi. Inside they are full of thousands of thin coloured wires like multicoloured spaghetti connected to a circuit board. Occasionally you see a man in high vis opening these boxes and tinkering around with the wires inside. You can imagine if he connects the right wire to the right connection the houses down the road will have their Wi-Fi restored. That was Michael's job.

I came back the next week and he had a deck of cards. He asked me to write down the various items on my fleece and deal list. They were: - my sister's brain tumour returning, my children dying, and my artist talent being demonic. Michael then shuffled the pack and said 'Pick a suit red or black', I chose red. He held the deck face down in front of me. 'Right', he said 'if the next card is black then your sister's brain tumour will return and it will be your fault for playing this game. I, of course did not want to play the game, but he was insistent, so I had to guess and I had no choice. He turned the card over, it was a heart, my sister won't die, phew! Asked which suit I would like to choose to stop my children from dying, I picked black, he slowly turned over the card...it was red again. 'Oh fuck!' I had genuine fear, I felt my children would die because of this stupid game I was playing, my heart was pounding. 'Can we do the best of three' I vainly asked. Michael was happy to do this, I lost this too, best of five? Best of seven? Best of nine? Where does this stop, I kept losing, this was beginning to feel desperate. It was brutal.

I left that evening feeling terrible. My sister's brain tumour would return, my children would die and my artistic talent was thoroughly cursed. I was a mess and I deeply regretted ever agreeing to attend the appointments and playing the game, why did I let this happen? It was my appointment, I paid for it, why didn't I refuse?

I came back the next week, angry that I had been put through this. Michael asked, 'So, how are you doing?' 'Not great' I replied with some anger.

I explained that for the first half of the week I had been in a state of extreme fear and depression caused by his silly game. 'So, you're better now' he enquired. 'Better, but I still regret playing the game' I said.

'So, it only took you a few days to get over killing your children, giving your sister a brain tumour and having your artistic talent cursed?'

He explained that I was well on my way to recovering. If I could get over these major issues in a few days, my beliefs were obviously not as strong as I'd imagined.

He then said I needed to play this same card game against myself daily. Which I did every day for weeks. This reinforced the belief that at the cards were just coming up in a random order and God or the Devil was no part of it.

The fleeces and deals still continued at the same rate for a while, but instead of trying to stop the deal by saying 'No fleeces, no deals' I moved on to saying 'Lose both ways. Here I was saying, that I am assuming the deal is going forward and I'm 100% responsible, but my wager is that I will lose completely whatever the outcome. If the coin is heads or tails, I voluntarily lose completely each time. This was often unpleasant but it was the only way I could end the chatter in my head.

Gradually the fleeces and deals lessened. I was free from the intense anxiety, I then decided I would never again be religious.