

# Conscious You:

## Become the Hero of Your Own Journey

A book excerpt by Mobius Senior Consultant Nadjeschda Taranczewski



**We are delighted to announce that Nadja joins us as faculty for this year's Next Practice Institute. As part of our special Wednesday Intensive she will join a panel discussion on New Work & Evolving Organizational Forms.**

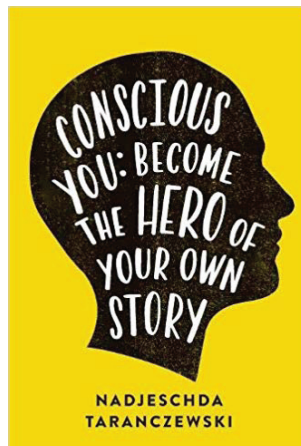
Psychologist and Mobius Coach Nadjeschda Taranczewski released her book *Conscious You: Become The Hero of Your Own Story* in September last year. *Conscious You* is a brilliantly comprehensive and yet easily accessible introduction to personal growth (suitable to clients and practitioners alike) which captures so many of the models and practices that deeply influence our work – including the ladder of learning, voice dialogue, archetypes, polarity work, transformational maps, and brain science.

### The Transformation Map (excerpts from Chapter Four)

*Whenever life feels stuck, somehow not in flow, it can be helpful to understand the location and nature of the blockage before rushing to change random aspects of our life that may or may not be the cause of our unhappiness.*

Human experience unfolds in the constant dance between the individual and the collective. As individuals, we are part of a nearly infinite number of more or less permanent collectives.

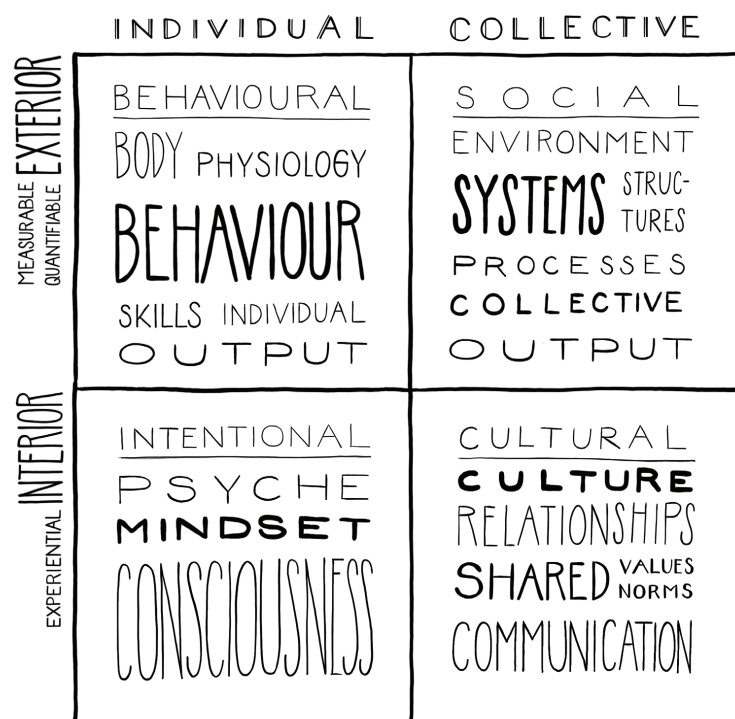
There are aspects about each perspective – the individual and the collective – which are observable, measurable, and/or quantifiable. Because we can observe them, let's call them *exterior*. At the same time,



the individual and collective perspectives each have aspects that are experiential (they are experienced internally) and mostly intangible. These aspects are much harder to observe, and we will call them *interior*. When we combine the individual/collective and exterior/interior perspectives we get a four-quadrant matrix that can serve as our map for transformation (see overleaf).

Enquiring into the four quadrants within the specific context of one collective allows you to gain a different perspective on your life. You may feel stuck at work because you are lacking a skill that you need (upper-left, behavioral), or because you feel isolated in your team and at a loss how to create more meaningful connections with your co-workers (bottom-left,

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intentional). Or, possibly, you feel upset that your team doesn't have the right systems and processes in place to work effectively (upper-right, social) or because the culture of your team, the way you communicate, is lacking mutual appreciation and respect (bottom-right, cultural).

### What lies beneath

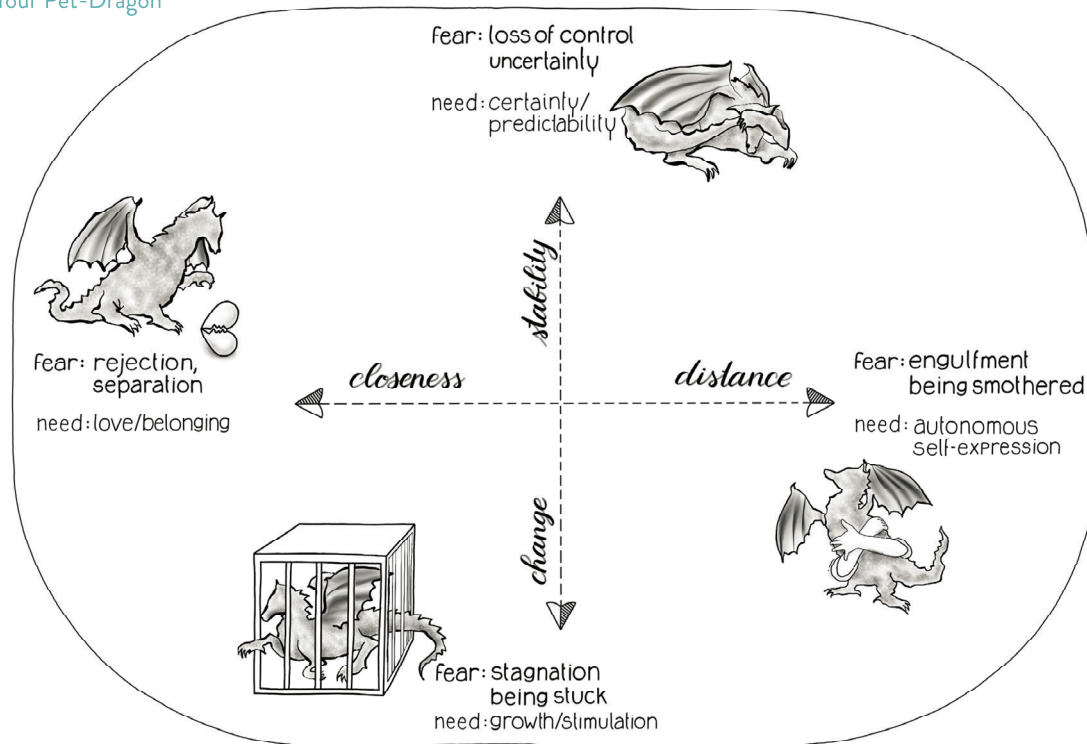
When I am called into organizations which are undergoing change processes, I often observe how the lower sections of this map have been forgotten entirely. There seems to be a belief, stemming from the industrial age, that all it takes to make a company more successful or productive is to optimize its systems or structures (e.g. introduce better software or re-arrange who is reporting to whom), and to train people in new skills so they can be more effective at their job. Organizations that are narrowly focused on improving the two exterior quadrants (everything above the iceberg's waterline) eventually produce employees with severe change fatigue. Employees are tired of being rushed through one new system after the other and often develop resistance to new structures and procedures – even if they are sensible. I

have heard countless complaints from employees who feel that new is not better but worse, because it does nothing for them but add to their confusion and sense of being overwhelmed.

Obviously, it makes sense to influence and optimize the upper quadrants, but as the management consultant Peter Drucker famously pointed out, 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'. Unless we consider what lies below the waterline (the interior quadrants), sustainable structural change in individuals and collectives is unlikely. Change is more peaceful and takes less of a toll when driven by individuals operating from a higher level of personal awareness or consciousness.

As much as I believe it to be necessary to affect social change, to invest ourselves in creating social justice, gender equality, and affirmative action, I believe that these endeavors are more successful if we are able to acknowledge our part in having co-created the very system we seek to change. Social change leaders such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Luxemburg, or Rosa Parks are all examples of the power of consciousness in action. The bottom quadrants of our four-quadrant iceberg (our individual mindsets

## Your Pet-Dragon



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and our shared mindset expressed through culture and communication) are at the heart of individual and collective transformation. They deserve a lot more attention than we typically grant them.

### The ripple effect

Each of us holds the power to exercise true choice for one person and one person alone: ourselves. Beyond this chapter, I will therefore concentrate my attention on the individual and interior experience, the lower-left quadrant.

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### Dance with Dragons

#### (Excerpts from Chapter Six)

Although it often doesn't seem like it, at the root of conflict with others lies fear: fear that we will not get what we want or need. Although fear is just an emotion like any other, it is one of the less popular ones, because it is connected with vulnerability and loss of control. Most of us, both unconsciously and consciously, devote a lot of time and energy to avoiding feeling fear. But being unaware of or denying fear has consequences.

Unacknowledged fears erect an invisible wall between ourselves and others. When we are unaware of how fear drives our actions, it becomes impossible to resolve conflict because we are busy fighting proxy wars instead of speaking about what we are really afraid to lose.

### Needs and fears

Growing up, we not only learn which ways of meeting our needs are approved of and rewarded, we also learn which are discouraged or punished by our parents, our peer group, and by society at large. The energies of our core needs are polar opposites in nature, and fulfilling them simultaneously can seem impossible. (See map of our basic fears and needs.)

On the one hand, it is essential we learn to trust life, the world, and other people, and to let others be close to us and allow for intimacy (love/belonging). On the other hand, we need to become mature and autonomous individuals, accept and embrace our independence, and differentiate ourselves from others (autonomous self-expression).

To meet our need for stability and security, we

learn to be consistent, make plans, and follow them reliably (security/predictability). Yet, if we want to grow and enjoy life, we need to remain spontaneous and creative, be willing to embrace the unknown, and let go of the familiar in order to be open to change (growth/stimulation).

Our inner selves assign different importance to these needs, depending on the interaction of our biology, our upbringing, and our current stage in life. Quite often, we invest a huge amount of energy on fulfilling a need that appears crucial under our current life conditions, while neglecting the rest. The longer we (or one of our selves) serve this one need, the more readily we dismiss the other needs – and sometimes we even begin to react against people who place more importance on a different need. In order to feel balanced, we have to find some way to express and fulfil all of our needs, not just one or two.

While still young, we naturally depend on other people to fulfil our physical and emotional needs. However, it is a costly error to continue this dependency into adulthood. To accept our inherent responsibility to take care of our own needs also means to reclaim our innate capability for fulfilling them better than anyone else ever could.

If your life has been dominated by the need to belong and be loved, you will most likely fear rejection or separation. If your strongest need is for autonomous self-expression, you will want to run screaming when others encroach on your autonomy, smother, or engulf you. If you need a high degree of order and certainty to feel safe, loss of control and chaos are your worst nightmare. If your main objective is a life of growth and stimulation, the possibility of stagnation or being stuck makes you gasp for air.

Whatever need we put at the center of our attention, most of us react to the associated fear as if it was a life-threatening dragon we need to run from or defeat and slay.

The ‘fear dragon’ unconsciously driving us can trigger rather rigid or even bizarre behaviors, of which we ourselves are often blissfully unaware. Whenever driven by our dragon-fearing thoughts, we slide into a shadow response, a behavior that quickly becomes a liability for ourselves and others. Sometimes we may even be aware that a particular response is unhelpful or

**"The fact that our eyes appear to function like a camera lens and our brain like the hard drive of a camera recording actual events in real time, makes us want to reject the idea that reality is self-deception. But the brain is not a camera, it is a projector."**

irrational, but somehow we can't help doing it anyway. The less conscious we are of the connection between our fears and our automatic shadow behaviors, the less likely we are to stop them, and the higher the risk of alienating others. Ironically, it is often precisely that shadow behavior aimed at avoiding the fearsome dragon which creates more of what we are trying to avoid.

*For example:* If I try to eliminate uncertainty or potential loss of control by micromanaging my environment, I lock myself in a cage of structure and rules, and disempower others with my fixation on details and process. As a result, I experience a constant sense of being overwhelmed.

These counterproductive behaviors are triggered by the assumption that behaving this way will get us what we need. In reality, our shadow behavior very rarely gets us what we need, and quite often, it gets us precisely what we want the least.

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### **Hidden Gifts**

*The coach's story:* I was hyper-adaptable – and completely spineless. In addition to expunging my need for self-expression, I tried very hard to reintroduce a sense of structure and predictability,

which my life had lacked after my parents' separation. Instead of acting out, I developed an overly strong sense of discipline and reliability that helped me establish control over my environment as well as securing the admiration of others. In some respects, this survival tactic of overadaptability and merciless self-discipline served me well: it had a big part in getting me where I am today. At the same time, I paid a high price. In order to be accepted by the right people, I learned to be disingenuous, saying and doing the things I felt would buy me their attention. My need to control my environment manifested itself in rigidity and a tendency towards self-righteousness, which sometimes drove others away. For years, I was blind to the potential of the other two poles of the playing field (growth/stimulation and autonomous self-expression) because I could not see how to align them with my personal survival strategy.

My old patterns worked well enough until I became a self-employed coach. Suddenly it was obvious that being the nice and studious girl was not a viable strategy for professional success. To be an effective coach and give straight feedback to clients, I needed to let go of wanting to be liked and instead develop the courage to be honest and learn to articulate my opinion. And in order to run a business and offer my services, I had to stop playing small in the hope that someone would accidentally discover my greatness. I had to stand tall and promote myself. To cooperate effectively with colleagues on bigger projects, I had to be more flexible and allow for people to do things differently than I would have done them.

Whatever pattern you may detect in yourself – view it with kindness. Your survival strategy has helped you manage your fear and has got you to this level in your

life. But it will probably not get you to the next. Every one of your shadow behaviors points you towards a blind spot, an area where you have been operating – consciously or unconsciously – from fearful thinking. If you learn to develop more ease in playing in all four corners of the playing field, you will unleash your full potential and become more of yourself.

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### The master dragon

According to the philosopher Ernest Becker (1971), there is one ultimate fear, deeper and older than all the fears we have explored so far: the fear of non-existence – or, in other words, the fear of the death of ego. Because of its existential nature, we could call it the 'master dragon'.

As far as we know, humans are the only species with the consciousness of being alive as well as having the consciousness that we could (and someday will) not exist. The notion *I could not exist* is distinct from the knowledge of *I will die*. Theoretically we know that all living things will die. Non-existence confronts us with the question of the ultimate relevance of our life. What if there is not a higher purpose to our existence? What if, in the grand scheme of things, in the vastness of the universe, it doesn't matter if we are or if we ever were?

For some people, the notion of a fear of non-existence immediately rings true while others will claim never to have felt afraid of not existing. Whether you have ever been aware of this fear or not, you might be surprised to know how it probably impacts you unconsciously. Based on the ideas of Becker, a group of social psychologists developed what they coined the *terror management theory* (Rosenblatt et al., 1989). On the hypothesis that everyone is subconsciously

**"The wars we fight with others often have little or no connection to the original source of our fear: our imagined vulnerability."**





affected by the fear of the void, they came up with some rather entertaining experiments to test how people would change their beliefs and actions when they were reminded of their own mortality (which is how they operationalized the fear of non existence for experimental purposes). What they found was that prompting people to subconsciously think about their mortality does in fact have the power to change their worldview and behavior, an effect that could be replicated across different cultures and religions. They also found that people who deny being afraid of not being or of dying (in other words: who suppress the inevitability of their own demise) think and act very differently from people who consciously reflect about their own mortality and the fears this brings up.

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In one study, random people passing by on a street were interviewed either while facing a department store or while facing a funeral home. The interviewer inquired about their views regarding topics such as equality of same-sex marriages, diversity, integration, and immigration. When interviewed in front of the funeral home, people became more conservative in their political views, more nationalistic, less accepting of different life-styles. At the same time, triggering their mortality made people more likely to accept violence as an acceptable measure to enforce their cultural or religious rules and norms on others.

In the terror management studies, the topic of their own death never consciously registered for any

of the participants, but they still adapted their beliefs and behaviors based on this inkling of non-existence. Terror management studies have proven how even a subtle reminder of the fragility of our existence is enough to have people barricade themselves behind cultural and religious symbols, because these bestow our lives with meaning and purpose and give us a sense of belonging.

To my great relief, the researchers also discovered a very simple cure for our unconscious reaction to this master dragon: look at it, talk to it, be kind to it. It seems we change for the better when we face the big questions about life, death, and meaning head on instead of hiding from them. The terror management data showed that people who deliberately engage in deep conversations about death, and the meaning of life and the universe, become measurably more open minded, more accepting of diversity, more empathic towards the disenfranchised, more willing to help others in need, and less ready to see violence as a solution for cultural or religious conflict. So, here as well the same principle applies: dance with your dragon, drag it into the sunlight, tickle its belly, and show it to others. It might just become your favorite pet.

### **Soul need**

We have already discovered that behind every fear there is a deeper yearning. The yearning behind the fear of non-existence is connected to the need of our soul: to know our life has meaning and that we matter.

In the life of many of my clients, this fear shows up as the nagging feeling that they are not yet doing their thing, that they are somehow not delivering on their purpose. As a result, their lives feel flat, devoid of a deeper meaning. To listen to our need for meaning and significance can be a powerful and positive driver for creativity and change.

At the same time, being blind to the need for meaning, and therefore blind to the fear of non-existence, can create unpleasant results. On a personal level, the drive to qualify the relevance of our existence can inhibit our ability to enjoy the moment. We work towards ever increasing levels of influence, power, and wealth, hoping for peace of mind as a reward. Compelled to leave a mark in the fabric of history, we are much like teenagers carving 'I was here' into the trunk of a tree. Even worse outcomes can entail, if whole groups of people are blind to this fear in their hearts. Terror management theory is based on the assumption that in order to avoid facing the dragon of non-existence, humans have created cultural and religious reference points against which we can measure the meaning of our life. By these standards, *the right life* is one that obeys the rules and furthers the established way of life. The more I live by the book (whatever the book may happen to be), the more meaning I am promised in return.

The bearers of this kind of institutionalized meaning see anyone who does not defer to the written (and unwritten rules) of the book as a potential threat. They will ridicule, persecute, and sometimes even kill people who think outside of the box of their cultural or religious boundaries. Because if there are no absolute truths, then how can I measure the significance of my own accomplishments? How do I know that I matter? In this light, the recent surge of young European men and women joining the cause of the Islamic State and the rise of populism in the West can be seen as a desperate outcry for significance and meaning by people who otherwise feel disempowered, marginalized, and irrelevant.

If we allow the fear of non-existence to drive us subconsciously, we turn life into a struggle for power and personal relevance without ever really getting

away from our fear. Paradoxically, terror management research has demonstrated that nothing makes us feel more alive and more connected to others than when we relax into the inevitability of our non-existence (at least to the inevitability of our non-existence in this physical form – who knows what happens next?). The more we accept that we, in this body, are but a very temporary expression of life's energy, the more contentment we find in being alive in the here and now and being connected with the world around us.

To think that our existence is both utterly insignificant and utterly meaningful at the same time seems contradictory at first glance. On the one hand, it is highly unlikely that any individual existence will affect the course of the universe. On the other hand, each of us matters. Because we are alive. Because there are people around us whose lives we affect every single day. Because we affect the fate of humanity and the fate of all life on this planet. Because we are an expression of life itself and need to believe we matter in order to protect it. And although I don't believe that I have a predetermined purpose, I believe that choosing my purpose based on the talents and gifts I have is a worthwhile quest. The question therefore is not 'what is my purpose?' but rather 'what do I choose my purpose to be?'

Putting all the parts together, our needs, fears, the associated shadows and gifts/strengths, we end up with a 'self-realization compass'. On it, our biggest growth opportunity may lie directly opposite to us. We can choose to leave our comfort zone and our familiar dragon behind. If we embrace the gifts of our opposite pole and discover strengths in us that maybe most unlike us, our options in life will increase.

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