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Taking a Leap: The risk of development, on a human level

Wednesday, 17 July 2019, 9:21 am

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As a child, I frequently remember many lazy summer days spent lugging my purple Huffy bike up the cement dunes of my suburban neighborhood. Following the parade of my two older brothers and my neighbor, I would often times find myself summiting hills that turned my palms sweaty. Looking meekly at my brother then at the steep incline, thinking to myself "Well, there is only one way down" I would proclaim stubbornly "You go first." He would glance at the daunting hill, then look over at Dylan, our neighbor, and suggest "You go, then I'll go."

Dylan always went.

This almost always ended in a loud cheer and a thumbs up signal.

Then my brother went. Then I went, my prior qualms quickly replaced with "Hey, wait UP!!"

Years later in a behavioral science course, I discovered an explanation for this. Humans are naturally risk-averse, it takes X amount of people engaging in a certain activity for us to engage in said activity. For the Dylan's of the world this number is 0. For some people it is insanely high, requiring a lot of people to do something before partaking i.e they are very risk averse. For some people they may just be risk neutral, sitting somewhere at the median.

This underlying principle drives nearly every aspect of human behavior and interaction, from my scabby-knee escapades to social upheaval. In economics and finance, the application is clear-cut. In the 2010 uprisings of the Arab Spring, it first took Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation to spark protests in Tunisia thus leading to uprisings all across the Middle East - as more people revolted others became more inclined to join.

In the Al Haouz province of Morocco, the community waits patiently to witness the outcome of a farmer's decision to switch from raising livestock to the more lucrative (and sustainable) cultivation of hectares of organic carob, almond, and pomegranate trees. If he reaps the fruit, literally, then the rest of the community will follow suit, disregarding the livestock practices that have been commonplace for generations preceding them.

For Amina Al Hajjami, a women's empowerment trainer and the project manager of the High Atlas Foundation, her life's course was changed by her father's decision to send her to school. She was the first girl in her community to attend school. Some called her father crazy, yet Amina made the 4-kilometer trek to school every day, never once missing. Now her younger sisters, and majority of the girls in her community attend school. Amina now facilitates women's empowerment workshops and has trained over 600 women on empowerment. None of this would have been possible had her father not made the choice to break the age-old traditional values of her community.

In underdeveloped communities, it's hard to see why it is not obviously correct to send your daughter to school or to switch to organic certified. But years and years of customs and cultural norms forge a rigid school of thought, long enforced by generation after generation's conformity. It is hard for one removed from the place to

fathom this, and it is certainly much easier to write this away as a consequence of 'impoverishment' or the 'rural'. But to do so, would be inherently inaccurate.

The best way to realize the positive benefits of an action is to actualize them. The best way to truly listen is to hear it from one of your own. It is one thing to preach about the great benefit from planting organic fruit trees, but it is another thing to see a fellow community member go through the process and benefit. By means of this snowball effect, deep long-lasting changes can be made, new traditions can be forged, and development at the local level can be realized.

We tend to often write off cyclical, endogenous developmental issues as stemming from religion or culture, but there is an unavoidable inaccuracy when we generalize people to the larger systems in place. Forgetting that a culture is made of millions of people, just like you and me, filled with fears, hopes, and worries. To be human is to be averse to change, to be scared. We are drawn to the familiar, the tried and trusted, it is often not a question of ignorance or oppression.

After all, sometimes we just need the thumbs up from Dylan before making a leap of faith.

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