

These ideas were first presented to [The Developing Group](#), 9 Nov 2019

## **An introduction to Life-directing Patterns**

Penny Tompkins & James Lawley

It's easy to see that we are made up of hundreds of patterns. There is usually a pattern to the way we get up in the morning, how we clean our teeth, the way we get dressed, the clothes we choose to wear, and so on, and so on.

Some patterns come and go, and some stay with us for long periods of our life. It often takes a major event to get us to notice these patterns. Our long-standing patterns are so familiar to us – and to those around us – that they get called our 'personality', our 'character', or our 'identity'. Without them, we would actually be someone else.

However, our minds, bodies and our surroundings are constantly changing, yet there remains a sense of continuity that travels with us throughout our life. One of the ways we know about this continuity is through the recurring patterns that remain in our life over long periods of time. They manifest physically and they also have what Carl Jung called 'numinosity' – a symbolic significance – that elevates them from the mundane to the sacred.

David Grove made use of an interesting analogy when he asked himself: We know a lot about the mechanism by which our cells continually reproduce to maintain our body, but what do we know about the mechanism by which our metaphors reproduce to maintain our mind?

These 'replicating mechanisms' are the process by which patterns maintain themselves over time. And a *life* pattern must have *such* a robust replicating mechanism that it manages to reproduce the characteristics that are 'us' over decades.

For 30 years we have been modelling how come people live the lives they live, are the people they are, and how do they learn to develop and change? In other words, we've been investigating these replicating mechanisms and how they change and evolve.

We've discovered that some of these patterns not only have the effect of reproducing themselves, they also set a direction to our lives.

Rarely do we know it at the time, but looking back we can see that a directionality has emerged. This directionality is not a feature of any one decision, it is an emergent property of any number of decisions taken over many years.

Sometimes it seems we are fated to meet the same life challenges over and over. At other times, as hard as we try, we just can't change an aspect of ourselves we don't like. We noticed that clients who wanted to get rid of one of these significant patterns would often visit many therapists and attend all sorts of workshops to try to do this. Mostly they found that at best they had only tinkered with the margins, and the pattern continued to manifest in their lives, despite their best efforts to change it.

So we asked ourselves, if with all of their effort and intention they were not able to change this pattern, maybe this was because the pattern played an intrinsic part in who they were, and the pattern wasn't the problem. The problem was the person's *relationship* with the pattern – their relationship with themselves. Their attempts to get rid of, cut out, or suppress this aspect of themselves, was often doing more harm than good,

This thought combined with a number of other ideas. One of these came from NLP'er David Gordon, who asked "What is it that you cannot, not do?" Another was from James Hillman's book, *The Soul's Code* which introduced us to the idea of a 'calling'. A 'calling' is not destiny, because the outcome is not specified. Rather a calling manifests in what the Greek's called a *daemon*, which at crucial moments will whisper in our ear, nudge us in the back, or call us to take certain decisions resulting in a directionality to our life.

When we don't respond to a calling we can be nagged by what Robert Johnson refers to as an 'un-lived' life.

When we ran the ideas of David Grove, David Gordon and James Hillman through the lens of self-organising systems, it all came together. We noticed that once these patterns are formed, at certain moments they exert an influence which means we tend to take decisions, or have reactions to life events which result in our life unfolding in a certain direction.

Life-directing patterns are not the same as 'life purpose'. They are not 'vision'. They do not define the path nor its end because the path is created step by step, decision by decision. Whether the pathway is created by lots of little decisions or by a few major life-changing decisions, life-directing patterns are a direction-influencer.

While there is a tendency to focus on changing the patterns that produce outcomes that we don't like, these very same processes can produce our best, often undervalued features. For example, some people have a stubborn motivation and willingness to keep going in the face of all obstacles. Others are adventurers who keep finding new things to explore whether these are new lands or new technologies.

As Ursula Le Guin so poetically put it in her book, *The Wizard of Earthsea*:

"And the truth is that as a man's real power grows and his knowledge widens, ever the way he can follow grows narrower: until at last he chooses no more, but does only and wholly what he must do."

As a result of these insights, we began to put more and more attention on supporting people to figure out how these patterns work. We wondered:

- What is their function?
- How do people recognise the signals generated by these patterns?
- What kind of relationship would they *like* with their pattern?
- And if necessary, what subtle shifts would support them to be aligned with the directionality of their pattern rather than trying to fight a losing battle?

Sometimes the metaphors for these patterns are as overt as “someone up there is looking after me”. More often than not the sacred is disguised in the mundane:

One client had a metaphor for a pattern of throwing away a bothersome apple. No matter how often or how far he threw the apple, sooner or later it would reappear in his hand and he felt this slowed him down. He had spent years trying to get rid of this apple. An exploration of this pattern revealed that he threw the apple away as soon as he had a clear sense of the direction his life should take — only to have it reappear in his hand whenever he felt lost or confused. It was a special moment when he finally realised that rather than trying to get rid of the apple, he could accept it as getting him to stop so he could consider his decisions and the next direction of his life. (*Metaphors in Mind*, p. 244)

Here’s an example of one of James’ life-directing patterns.

I remember a session I had with David Grove where I mapped out where my life was going. I represented that by a line in front of me with six bullet points on it symbolising the major things I had committed to accomplish.

What I wanted was to take a different path – which veered off to the left.

In exploring how that was going to happen I realised that even though I had a desire to start in the new direction, I still had to fulfil my commitments to the bullet points – which would mean I had to continue to move along my existing path.

The big insight came when I physically moved up my metaphorical path a couple of steps.

I still had my desire to curve to the left, but I was shocked when I looked ahead – I still had six bullet points in front of me! And I knew every one of them would be an interesting thing to do.

And then it dawned on me, this was going to keep happening and that I may never get to travel along that left-hand path. What I had to do was to make sure the next bullet point I added was on the left-hand path, even though there would be lots of good reasons to add another bullet point to the exiting pathway.

Then, by adding bullet points one-by-one to the left-hand path and not to the straight-ahead path, eventually all of my bullet points on the straight-ahead path would have been completed and the bullet points on the left path would then become the new straight ahead path!

I discovered two things.

First, at the moment of choosing to add another bullet point, if I paid attention to my physical body, and noticed it’s desire to turn to the left I could consciously choose to do things aligned with my left-hand path.

And secondly, this decision was one that would come up over and over again in my life. It wasn’t a problem to be solved, it was something to be embraced. The challenge of *continually* making the decision in-the-moment was the key aspect of this life-directing pattern.

It took me 18 months to learn how to transfer all my bullet points to my new pathway, and each time I did it was easier to resist offers that were still coming in from the old direction.

Where do the symbols and metaphors for these patterns come from? We don't know. What we do know is identifying, accepting, speaking truth to self, and consciously aligning with them, changes our relationship with our self and our life, often in a profound way.

### **A few quotes with a similar message**

"We are but whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate. A pattern is a message, and may be transmitted as a message."

Norbert Wiener

*The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (1950)

- - - 0 - - -

"Nature uses only the longest threads to weave her patterns, so that each small piece of her fabric reveals the organization of the entire tapestry."

Richard Feynman

'The Character of Physical Law' a course presented at Cornell University (1964)

- - - 0 - - -  
-

"The patterns of life, however, are not designed, and their "purposes" arise from the recursive nature of their organization in relation to other patterns and to the non-living universe, rather than from the relatively simple goals and aims of a designer."

Michael Yocum

'In Lieu of a Reply to the Powerses' in *Continuing the Conversation*, 9 (1987)

- - - 0 - - -