



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

## Not so fast. Think slow.

Clay Nelson © 5th July 2020

We are in the midst of living the ancient curse: “May you live in interesting times”. Unless we are over a hundred years old, no one alive has been through a pandemic quite like what we are experiencing now. We are still learning about the virus and its spread. What will treat it? How do we prevent it? Will a vaccine be discovered? It is most assuredly impacting economies, but it is also changing how we relate to each other, perform our work if we still have a job, our politics, the social contract and, of special interest to me, the church. What does the future hold for Unitarianism in Aotearoa? Will its values still be voiced for future generations? If so, what will the vessel of those values look like? Will the present assumptions about being a church hold or will we come to see and experience church in totally new ways? Let me be clear, I have no idea what the answers are to these questions. I hope I’ll live long enough to find out. Call it spiritual and intellectual curiosity. The best I can do is offer a suggestion as to how to discern different paths we might take in a time of uncertainty, where the ground beneath us is shifting minute to minute.

Last week I promised you more about the work of Nobel prize winner [Daniel Kahneman](#) whose work focused on how we think about and decide on a course for action when it is not intuitively obvious to the casual observer. He argues that such times call for thinking slow. In the introduction to his book, [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#), he explains the rationale for his life work:

*“This book is about biases of intuition. However, the focus on error does not denigrate human intelligence, any more than the attention to diseases in medical texts denies good health. Most of us are healthy most of the time, and most of our judgments and actions are appropriate most of the time. As we navigate our lives, we normally allow ourselves to be guided by impressions and feelings, and the confidence we have in our intuitive beliefs and preferences is usually justified. But not always. We are often confident even when we are wrong, and an objective observer is more likely to detect our errors than we are.*

*“So this is my aim... improve the ability to identify and understand errors of judgment and choice, in others and eventually in ourselves.”*

Psychologists identify two ways of thinking that Kahneman labels System 1 and System 2. The first operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control. System 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration.

Examples of System 1 or “fast thinking” are: Detecting that one object is more distant than another. Orienting to the source of a sudden sound. Completing the phrase “bread and...” Making a “disgust face” when shown a horrible picture. Detecting hostility in a voice. Knowing what  $2 + 2$  equals. Reading words on large billboards. Driving a car on an empty road.

Examples of System 2 or “slow thinking” have one feature in common: they require attention and are disrupted when attention is drawn away. Here are some: Brace for the starter gun in a race. Focus on the voice of a particular person in a crowded and noisy room. Look for a woman with white hair. Search memory to identify a surprising sound. Maintain a faster walking speed than is natural for you. Monitor the appropriateness of your behaviour in a social situation. Tell someone your phone number. Park in a narrow space. Compare two washing machines for overall value. Fill out a tax form. Check the validity of a complex logical argument.

In all these cases, you are asked to do something that does not come naturally, and you will find that the consistent maintenance of a set requires continuous exertion of at least some effort. The often-used phrase “pay attention” is apt: you dispose of a limited budget of attention that you can allocate to activities, and if you try to go beyond your budget, you will fail. It is the mark of effortful activities that they interfere with each other, which is why it is difficult or impossible to conduct several at once. You could not compute the product of  $17 \times 24$  while making a right turn into dense traffic, and you certainly should not try. You can do several things at once, but only if they are easy and undemanding.

This does not mean that the two systems work independently. They do interact. Sometimes well. Sometimes not.

Everyone has some awareness of the limited capacity of attention, and our social behaviour makes allowances for these limitations. When the driver of a car is overtaking a truck on a narrow road, for example, adult passengers quite sensibly stop talking.

Intense focusing on a task can make people effectively blind, even to stimuli that normally attract attention. The most dramatic demonstration was offered by [Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons](#) who constructed a short film of two teams passing basketballs, one team wearing white shirts, the other wearing black. The viewers of the film are instructed to

count the number of passes made by the white team, ignoring the black players. This task is difficult and completely absorbing. Halfway through the video, a woman wearing a gorilla suit appears, crosses the court, thumps her chest, and moves on. The gorilla is in view for nine seconds. Many thousands of people have seen the video, and about half of them do not notice anything unusual. It is the counting task — and especially the instruction to ignore one of the teams — that causes the blindness. No one who watches the video without that task would miss the gorilla. The authors note that people find its results very surprising. Indeed, the viewers who fail to see the gorilla are initially sure that it was not there—they cannot imagine missing such a striking event. The gorilla study illustrates two important facts about our minds: we can be blind to the obvious, and we are also blind to our blindness.

To find our way in this new reality we need both systems but to rely only on System 1, shaped by both our past experiences and emotions, will only take us so far into the unknown. We need to do the hard work of thinking slow.

To aid us I am forming a small informal think tank to assist us to think slow as we as a faith community seek to answer some of the questions I began with. I have asked John DiLeo, Derek Handley and Nina Khouri to be our slow thinkers. I appreciate their willingness to take on this task as they all have demanding lives raising young children and building their careers. Those demands keep them from being as deeply involved in our community life at present as those of us who have completed those tasks, but they are all three worship associates committed to our values. Individually, they each bring useful gifts to such an undertaking.

I have been asked why I have not included those of us who have been giving heart, soul and resources to our community for years. I'm not discounting how important such dedication and commitment are, nor do I think that you don't have something to contribute to slow thinking. But the fact is, I and the congregation get the benefit of your thoughts in many ways. The people we don't hear much from are the generations who will inherit what we leave behind when we have done our dash. This will not be a quick process. It will involve wide consultation with those who are here, those who have left, our youth, and those who have never crossed our threshold. The small group will also mine the best thinkers on progressive religious thought around the world. They will feed that back to us to fuel our creativity.

In very broad strokes, I hope this path will cure our blindness to the obvious and our blindness to our blindness.