

The unexplored power of intelligence

Giancarlo Livraghi – December 2013

For all my life, since I was a child, I have been worrying about the power of stupidity. For seventeen years I have been writing about it. And learning that there can be no end to this task, because the subject is inexhaustible. Every day there are new examples, new ways of understanding the problem.

But I wonder why only now, after such a long time, I am beginning to realize that it's worth trying to understand the situation from a different perspective. Which is not the opposite – it's just looking the other way round. Strange as this may seem, we are underestimating the power of intelligence.

I don't know where this path may be going to lead me. I wonder if and how I shall be able to see things – from the origin of humanity to everyday events – from a different angle. I expect this to be another endless pursuit. Encouraging, sometimes. But also distressing, when we see so much good thinking (and doing) being painfully wasted.

In the meantime, here are a few observations on what I have been learning so far. I am encouraged by some recent, surprisingly pleasant, experiences. And by rediscovering some that I had somehow forgotten – or, at the time, I had not appreciated as much as they deserved.

While living with the never-ending perception of the hideous power of stupidity (including, of course, my own) it's intriguing and stimulating to discover how intelligence can surface in so many unpredicted and unexpected ways. Not only as remote, though enlightening, "lights in the dark". Also in maybe small, but brightly relevant, episodes in the apparently sterile environment of everyday boredom.

Several such signals are not hidden, nor invisible. But they aren't loud. Rarely, and briefly, in the limelight. More often they are almost imperceptible, submerged in the deafening noise of repetitive and boring superficiality.

The main reason why we don't find them is that we are not looking for any encouraging symptoms. We are accustomed to the depressing perception that everything is going from bad to worse and that it's useless to seek any improvement. This is dangerous nonsense. We aren't unavoidably heading for doomsday. When things happen, leading in this direction, it's our fault.

We haven't trained our minds to perceive the value of what "doesn't seem to be important". We are rarely able to understand how humble experiences in solving "small" problems can teach us ways of facing "big" difficulties with more realistic approaches and fewer confusing complications.

I am not trying to say that "large scale" studies and initiatives are to be abandoned. I am not totally blinded by my basic distrust of power. Nor by the distressing inefficiency, clumsiness and slowness of governments worldwide, as well as all sorts of international authorities, in facing the serious problems infecting the whole planet. Such as the late, scarce and inadequate attempts to reduce the devastating effects of the disastrous global epidemic, financial psychopathy, that has been warping the world's economy for thirty years.

Unpleasant as this can be, we need to recognize that power hierarchies have an irreplaceable role. Standing blindly in their way is unreasonable. Complaint, disappointment, indignation are justified. But it's very unlikely that problems can be solved by everyone believing that it must be done by someone else. Or by hopeless frustration that isn't only useless, but often the cause of additional distortion, mischief, violence and destructive stupidity.

I don't believe that reasoning on the undervalued power of intelligence can offer any miraculous solutions. But it's clearly demonstrated by all the history of evolution that fundamental progress has been achieved by the intuitive talent of bright pragmatic thinkers whose names and identities we shall probably never discover. And that real progress is generated much more often by simplifying complexity than by making simple things complicated.

As far as I can see so far, I am not ready to offer any examples. A few would be too specific. Many would be too much. Each case has a distinct identity, that can't be simply reproduced in a different context. But it helps to understand that there are enormously more that we can tell.

Learning about some can be very useful. It can prompt us to realize their fascinating diversity and lead us onto the path of discovering ways of thinking that are better than the most obvious, and often misleading, appearances.

Understanding a few episodes of unpredicted or unexpected success can only occasionally lead us to find immediately an idea that can suddenly help us to solve a problem in a different environment. But this isn't necessary.

Curiosity about everything builds, over time, a way of being and thinking. It's a cognitive resource that, with practice, becomes an instinct – discovering solutions that, after they are found, turn out to be obvious. But they were invisible as long as we were conditioned by habit, prejudice or fatalism.

This isn't just chance or luck. It's the precise result of the ability to understand the multiplicity of perspectives that always exists, but can't be perceived by a mind untrained to look beyond the barrier of appearances.

And so reduce the power of stupidity, while unleashing the resources of open minded, flexible, determined intelligence.