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Mind Alteration: Or How We Consider
the World Differently

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Turning strategy into momentum.

A few months ago, at a conference in Tangier, I heard the story of peace activist Aziz Abu Sarah. It began on a harsh note: when Aziz was 9 years old, he lost his older brother, who had been detained for allegedly throwing stones and was now released from prison with internal injuries.

This start to Aziz's story could have led to a lifelong quest for retribution. Instead, it became a journey of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Violently losing a sibling evokes a profound sense of injustice. The most immediate emotional responses are hate or powerlessness, and this was the path Aziz initially followed. Eventually, however, he was in the midst of turning himself into the second casualty of the tragedy. It dawned on him that he could rise above his initial impulses—that no force of causality bound him to the role of a somber, self-pitying victim. Aziz broke away from the narrative of revenge common sense often nudges us toward.

Aziz now runs an activist travel agency that facilitates encounters between people with opposing worldviews, fostering dialogue and promoting constructive communication in deeply entrenched

cultural or political conflicts. He changed the narrative. Not only for himself, but for those who use his travel agency's services.

Narratives are the soil on which our actions grow.

Our actions are shaped by the assumptions we hold, which manifest as narratives. If you prefer mechanical metaphors, think of narratives as the cerebral kernel system on which the rest of our social software runs. The essential point is that narratives are not set in stone but constructed.

If this was just another clichéd motivational talk, I would simply offer three foolproof steps to roll up your sleeves and reprogram your core system—or adjust the composition of the soil you're working with. But clearly, there are forces far greater than a few lines of text: our upbringing in family and culture, our biological disposition, and the cumulative impact of life experiences, to name just a few.

That said, there is an important catch. While very few of us have immediate access to rewrite our

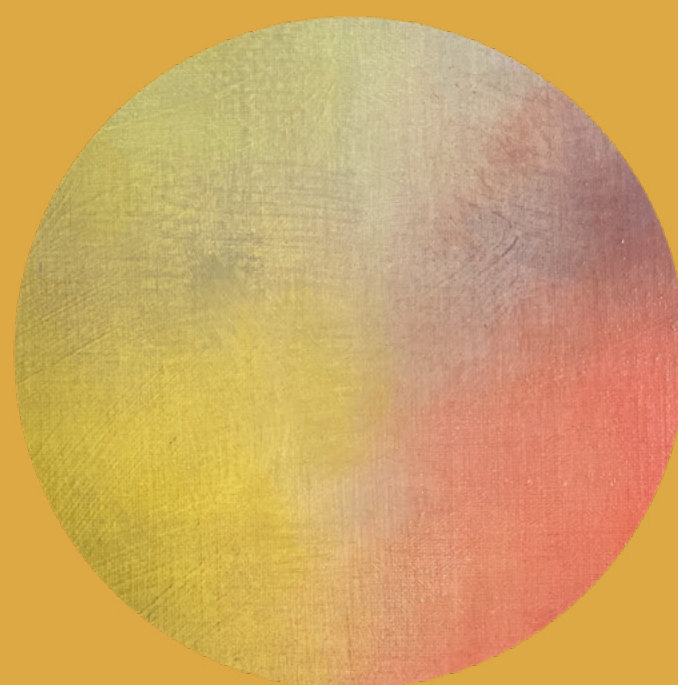
foundational narratives, we do have the power to alter the way we experience the world and change our future narratives. I align with neuroscientist Ian McGilchrist's suggestion that "attention is a moral act". The way we perceive the world shapes the kind of world we discover. It determines, for example whether we encounter an environment that inevitably calls for revenge after harm (tit for tat), or one where the door to forgiveness stands slightly ajar, waiting to be opened by those who dare.

Shifting our attention is a form of mind alteration. When it comes to altering the mind, someone once explained that we have three types of substances at our disposal, each with distinct effects.



First, there are anesthetics, then there are performance-enhancing substances, and finally, reality-augmenting substances.

Narratives can act exactly like those substances. When coping with the disappointment of rejection, we might rely on anaesthetic narrative structures such as, “It was not meant to be,” or, “It would not have been good anyway,” to help us manage the pain and soothe our minds. The resulting peace may be well-deserved, but the line between a remedy and the poison of complacency is a fine one.



On the other hand, truly believing in a performance-enhancing narrative like the American Dream might activate our productive drive, pushing us to work harder and strive for more—regardless of whether the dream ever becomes a reality. It works much like a carrot on a stick. If, eventually, all our cravings culminate in the desire to taste the flavor of carrot, there is a good chance we have overdosed on this type of narrative.



The most intriguing category, however, is augmentation. This seems to reflect Aziz's journey: discovering a hidden path that leads away from the draining grip of tragedy. Not that his experience can be 'overcome', but rather that it can give rise to something profoundly transformative. From here, new action becomes possible. For Aziz, it opened the path to advocating for peace through his own example.

As with the other two types, this third one certainly has its pitfalls. If we become overly absorbed in exploring new perspectives without grounding them in action, we risk losing ourselves, adrift like a bunch of colorful balloons. Yet, before weighing the risks of augmentation, ask yourself: how desirable is Aziz's shift toward peace? And are there more people—or fewer—who achieve this kind of mind alteration?



I hope the lines above serve as an invitation to examine the ingredients and effects of the narrative cocktails we consume daily, and to begin doing so based on the belief that our sense of possibility extends beyond the reality we have framed as our own. Mind alteration starts by shifting our attention, one narrative at a time.^[RS]



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This text is part of the zyhw-series, published by
NAMENAME Creative Partners. It is an invitation to explore ways
of thinking and creating — beyond business specialisations
and job roles. We share perspectives on questions and phenomena
we observe: all around the belief systems, narratives, and
thinking patterns in business.

Let's allow ourselves to turn things on their head and
reconsider the thought qualities and creative approaches
these present times call for.

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