

Chapter 5

Cracking The Enigma

I could tell that Frank and Sandy had been “bad” the moment they entered my office. Perhaps it was their subdued attitude as if they were bearing a heavy secret. It didn’t take long for them to confess even though having sex isn’t exactly a mortal sin for a married couple.

“Um....We broke the rules. We’re sorry. We didn’t follow the plan.” Frank looked at me guiltily and waited for my response. After a slight hesitation, I jumped out of my seat and frowned at them in the sternest countenance I could muster. Then I shook my finger in their faces.

“You naughty, naughty children!” I shouted.

It was enough. Frank and Sandy collapsed in convulsive laughter that brought them close to tears. My intuition had been correct. They knew me well enough to know that I was feigning my over-the-top rage. They enjoyed it immensely but my hysterical act was serving an important purpose. I had **played** with them while discussing their failed assignment. That fact had implications for the future: I wouldn’t be investing my ego in their compliance and wouldn’t be using shame to corral their behavior. My act had reinforced the safety of our future relationship and I could see that the tension had left their shoulders. But this small benefit wasn’t my original objective. I was after bigger game.

Frank and Sandy’s “failure” didn’t surprise me. They had come for sex therapy because of Frank’s sexual impotence during the previous year. Sandy had a robust sexual appetite and Frank had tried hard to please. But over time Frank’s humiliating failures had resulted in the typical avoidance. Their assignment may sound a bit absurd but they were to abstain from intercourse and practice parallel masturbation for two months.

Parallel masturbation training is a strategy that I’ve used to help many couples who have come to me with sexual difficulties. It addresses a problem in sexual relations when over-focusing on a sexual outcome is often self-defeating. Goal-driven behavior inhibits sexual reflexes. “Easy does it” should be the motto. Frank and Sandy apparently benefited from the latter when they verbally agreed to forego intercourse. Their contract had released Frank from the burdensome responsibility of guaranteeing Sandy’s pleasure. Perhaps it was also the case that he no longer feared causing her frustration. His release from responsibility allowed him to become receptive and aroused. That’s how it works.

In the months following their initial “naughtiness”, Frank and Sandy pushed through their inhibitions to carry out their unusual assignment. It required their increased trust to expose that utterly hedonic part of their psyche. They each became proficient at assisting each other to have a self-stimulated orgasm. More important, they trained each other’s unconscious to provide more of a sense of safety. Neither one would ever again be trapped by the perception that the other expected guaranteed intercourse. There was now a viable alternative if either Frank or Sandy couldn’t reach arousal. That fact had another powerful implication. If intercourse was no longer a responsibility, then Frank and Sandy didn’t have to

worry about starting sexual play. No one would be trapped into performance if he or she didn't get turned on. The other would take the responsibility to give his self or herself an orgasm and thereby avoid frustration. So, their exploration increased and with it their robust intercourse. Frank and Sandy later expressed how sex had become so much more "laid back" and relaxed. The secret had been in the sauce. They had reached success by retraining their implicit expectations and their unconscious model of the world.

On the surface it's a glaring paradox. Practicing non-intercourse can lead to greater intercourse. It's like the Chinese finger-trap puzzle. Moving the fingers towards each other loosens the trap. This is the nature of paradox. On the surface a phenomenon seems self-contradicting. Less becomes more. Not trying leads to the desired outcome. The human condition is full of similar paradoxes. Here are just a few:

We can never "be enough" by trying to do enough.

We may keep behaving in ways that we detest, each time swearing that we've finally learned our lesson.

We may sometimes find ourselves attracted by, and a short time later repulsed by the same person without knowing why.

By trying to be strong in a situation we may weaken ourselves by making ourselves less adaptive.

We may cry when we're deeply happy.

We may feel deeply ashamed if we're given praise.

We may feel anxious when given a present by someone who truly cares.

We may find ourselves acting just like someone we swore we would never be like.

We may be very assertive and self-assured when single but then become unassertive and passive when paired up with a partner we love.

Over-focusing on pride can make our self-esteem more brittle.

Healthy use of anger can help maintain attraction in a relationship.

All paradoxes involve the common element of using an erroneous or incomplete frame of reference to understand the phenomenon. For example, suppose you lived in the 1300's and you saw an expedition sail East but then arrive back from the West a few years later. It would seem paradoxical based on your assumption that the world is flat. The paradox disappears with the more accurate frame of understanding that the Earth is spherical. For someone in the 1800's, it would seem paradoxical that a highly accurate clock placed into orbit around the Earth would gradually lose synchronicity with identical clocks on earth. It would take a rudimentary understanding of Einstein's explanation of space/time

physics to unravel the paradox. So it is with all of our human paradoxes. Most of us perceive them because of our inaccurate assumptions about human nature.

During World War II, the Western Allies successfully read secret Axis communications by cracking the code for the Axis Enigma encrypting machines. The Enigma was an electro-mechanical rotor cipher that required a secret “key” of specific calculations to decipher the scrambled information. At the start of the war, it was composed of three rotor gears but was later changed to four rotors when Germany was encrypting messages to its submarines. I liken human behavior to the Enigma system. When working with a patient I use a sort of key in the back of my mind when constructing a model of the other person’s mind. I’ve found it extremely useful, not only for understanding others but also for understanding myself. It deciphers many of our human paradoxes.

The key is a model that has two main components like two rotor gears in the Enigma machine. The first component of the key is that we have different divisions of our personality operating at different times. We can call these “self-states.” In order to really comprehend this model, you will need to jettison the commonly held view that our personality is a unified single “thing.” The truth is that it’s more of a confederation of cooperating parts. If the personality parts aren’t cooperating well, then you might choose to seek out a therapist such as myself. However, all of us have some division between self-states. It’s normal that we may feel and operate differently at work than we do when at home with our families. We may feel and behave yet other ways when on vacation. Most of the time we have memory transfer between self-states. However, you may have blocked memory transfer if you’ve had severe early trauma that gave you a multiple personality (Dissociative Identity Disorder). In Chapter 2, we’ve already discussed how self-states can change in a quantum fashion based on our unconscious modeling of the world. Different self-states involve different constellations of a person’s neuronal matrix. A good way to think of a self-state is that the brain makes a mostly unconscious model of the world and one’s self that often changes from one situation to the next.

The human cipher becomes more complicated when we have to consider a second component of the key. Within each self-state we have what can be called “meta-motivational states”. Try to visualize meta-motivational states as being like a bank of switches that exist within each self-state. Each switch can be set to either the left or the right. This resembles a DIP switch for those of us who are geeky enough to be familiar with electronics. Also imagine that each of the switches on the bank are frequently flip-flopping from left to right or from right to left. One particular switch will tend to be set on the left or on the right but won’t spend very long in the middle or in transit. This visual simile is very accurate because our motivations involve neuropeptide reflexes in the brain that compete against each other. One side of the struggle will dominate the other at any given point in time. While neuroscience has only just started to map neuropeptides to motivation, Reversal Theory research has studied meta-motivational states since the 1980’s. It’s uncovered some interesting findings.

People reverse between a focusing attention on their present experience (Para-telic state) or focusing attention on reaching a future goal (Telic state). They may quickly switch back and forth but they will tend to be in one state or the other. They won’t be in both states at the same time. Research has shown that people frequently change their color preferences throughout their day corresponding to their reversing telic and paratelic states. Arousal may be pleasant or unpleasant depending on whether they are in a paratelic or a telic state.

People reverse between wanting to control some outcome (Mastery state) versus wanting to connect or join (Sympathy state). In Reversal Theory, the term “sympathy state” has a much broader meaning than merely feeling compassion for someone. It’s the motivation involved in attachment. Think Mars and Venus differences between men and women even though both men and women reverse between these states.

People reverse between sometimes wanting to conform to others’ expectations (Conforming state) versus wanting to oppose or resist expectations (Negativistic state).

People reverse between wanting to serve self interest (Autic state) versus wanting to serve the interests of others (Alloic state)

I’m not going to describe all of Reversal Theory or even the meta-motivational dimensions that I believe that should be added. What’s important is that we have a working model that helps us to understand human paradox. Here’s a simple illustration that might help.

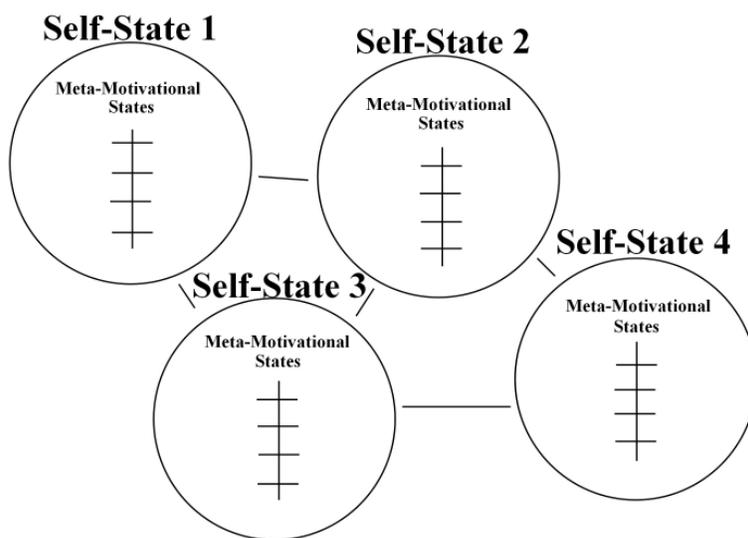


Figure 5. Meta-motivational states within self-states.

States within states! It’s like one rotor scrambling the effects of another in the Enigma machine. And when we consider that there are a number of dimensions of meta-motivational states that reverse back and forth at different times within each self-state it’s all incredibly complex. No wonder it’s so confusing when we try to decipher human nature.

The unfortunate truth is that even this model of human nature is still a gross oversimplification. If we leave the model as I’ve just described, we’ll miss out on some very important implications for plotting emotional and spiritual growth. Our model should also reflect that self-states share information to a greater or lesser degree. There are varying degrees of both connection and disconnection. At extreme disconnection, a person “loses time” and can’t remember what he or she did while in another state. This can happen with severe dissociative disorders. We can refer to a state being dissociated when it doesn’t

receive information from the most common adult states. If you rage at your spouse and later regret it then you raged in a dissociated state that couldn't get adult information about consequences over time. It's also the case that more than one self-state can be active at one time. When that happens there's usually (but not always) one dominant self-state occupying consciousness at a given point in time. Subordinate self-states may contribute to emotions and reflexes but consciousness acts like an amplifier for the dominant self-state. This is particularly true as it affects learning. Subordinate self-states in the unconscious are poor at learning new information until they're in the dominant conscious position. If we upgrade our model to include all of these aspects, it might look something like Figure 6. As you look at the model, try to imagine self-states shifting position and the meta-motivational dimensions toggling back and forth. It's all very dynamic.

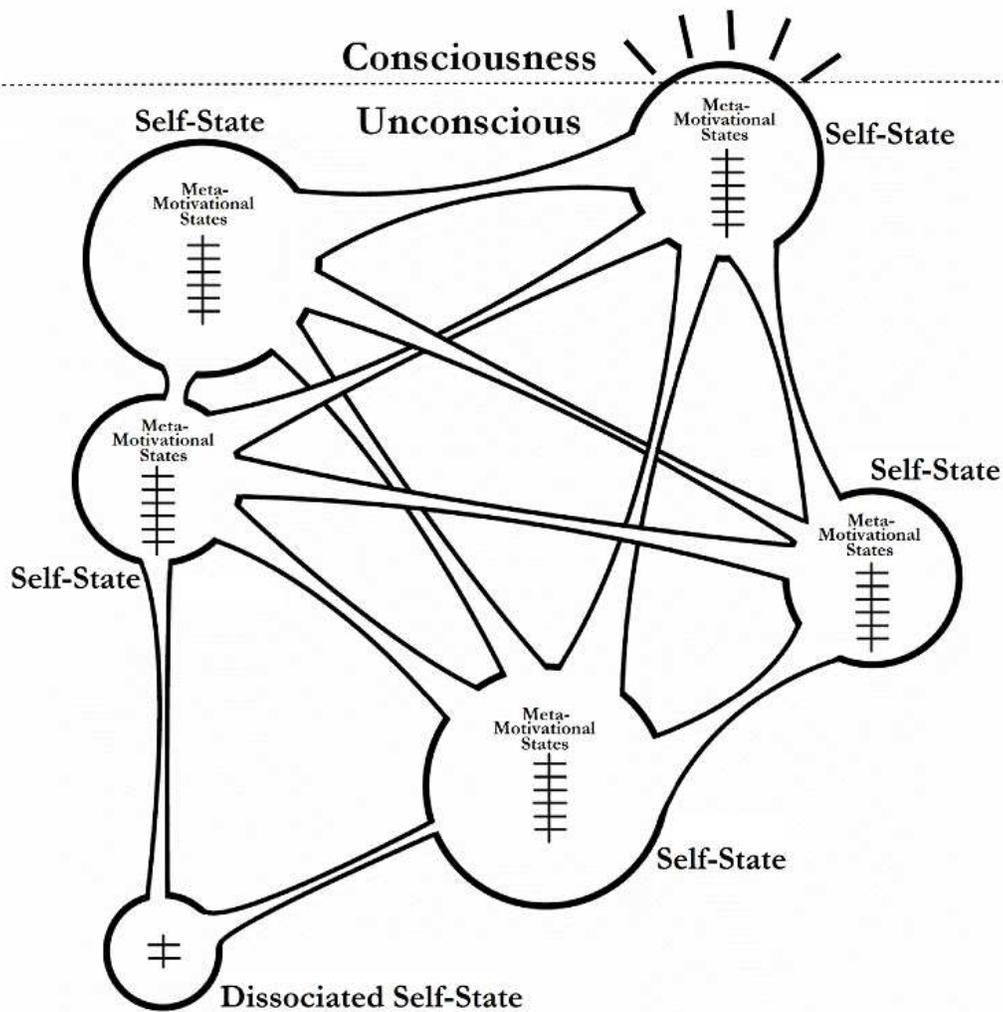


Figure 6 Self-states communicating to varying degrees.

I once had the opportunity to experience one of my youngest self-states in a very dramatic way. It happened over thirty years ago when I attended a workshop with other therapists. At the time I had just lost the second of two intimate relationships and I was “a hurtin’ puppy.” I’m sure that my grief at the

time played a part in what happened. At the workshop we were being trained on how to use body postures and body movements to bring infantile self-states to dominance. We spent about 20 minutes contorting our bodies in unusual ways until we finally lay on our backs, flailing our arms and legs. This may seem “silly” but that’s just saying that we were leaving our adult personas. What happened next was astounding. I was suddenly able to see myself from a different perspective. It wasn’t pretty. In fact it was disgusting! I saw that my Dr. Kaye persona of independence and competence was really layered over a very needy child-like part. My hidden self was more desperate for connection than I had ever let on. It felt like my adult persona was the epitome of hypocrisy. That sense of hypocrisy was so strong that it felt like foul carrion in my throat that I wanted to disgorge. Grrrrrooooooough! I grimaced and shook my head as I tried to get the rotten lump out of my throat. Then I cried. My suppressed grief was finally coming out. The trainer was close by and he came over, placing his hand on the center of my chest. The pressure over the hollow feeling in my chest felt reassuring. Through all of this I was quite conscious and self-aware as the trainer and I discussed what I was experiencing. But what I’ve described so far wasn’t the astounding part. What was truly amazing was that my infantile reflexes came back into more dominance. My voice wasn’t my own! My register had dropped at least two octaves in a way that I can’t voluntarily reproduce. My lips also became highly sensitized with a kind of prickly sensation while my thumbs and index fingers tensed and grasped together. It was obvious that my suckling reflexes were also emerging. At this point you might think that this author is rather loosely wrapped but consider the fact that three other therapists in that workshop had the same experience with emerging suckling sensations. Also consider that I’ve had the occasion to similarly regress a few patients when doing infantile self-state work. This isn’t about neurosis or psychosis. It’s about human nature. We all have these different self-states sometimes dormant, sometimes activated and sometimes emerging into consciousness. This hidden complexity is why I use the metaphor that sometimes psychotherapy feels like repairing a ship in a bottle that’s painted black!

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It’s important to understand states because spirituality is best cultivated when we’re motivated to connect (sympathy state) and not so much when we’re motivated to control (mastery state). A sympathy state usually involves the neuropeptides oxytocin and dopamine and activates more diffuse associations in the advanced upper brain. A mastery state prepares us for action with fewer helpful associations. It may sound banal but the force that grows our spirituality is love and not pride. Whatever inhibits our sympathy state is going to limit our spiritual development. When we know how to evoke a sympathy state within ourselves then we can use it to face tough situations. A good example of this occurred for me during the tragedy of 9/11.

I could see the people clearly falling to their deaths. The big screens surrounding us in the TV studio displayed the horror in vivid detail. There were about 30 of us therapists who had been called down to the most popular TV station in Raleigh NC to answer the phone lines. People were calling in for advice. “What should we tell the kids?” “Should we let them watch?” “How do I help my husband who is bipolar and is freaking out?” The questions varied but most had to do with protecting the children. We did the best we could despite not having specific training for this kind of catastrophe. It seemed surreal. But then something happened that ratcheted up my stress a whole lot more. One of the anchors came over and told me that the station wanted me to go on the air for about 10 minutes before the evening news.

They wanted me to share whatever would be helpful on how to respond to the disaster. She then gave me a microphone so I would be ready.

It's not my usual fare to tell several hundred thousand people how to react to a national crisis. I don't do that every day. I thought who the hell am I to do this? But then who else is more qualified? Nobody routinely gives advice for this kind of disaster. I figured I would have to prepare. So I took my phone off its cradle so I wouldn't be disturbed while I pondered what I had to say. What would the reporter most likely be asking? She had talked to me earlier and I had explained to her about all the people asking about their kids. That's it! She'd be asking me about the kids and what would I have to say? I started to think up important points that I **SHOULD** say. And as the ideas piled up I became more anxious about whether I would remember them all. And would I be able to explain them all clearly? I became more and more tense. An old familiar dread was in the back of my mind. Maybe I'd look foolish and be remembered by my colleagues as being incompetent in the clutch. This isn't going too well I thought.

Then it came to me. I was going about this all wrong! I was trying to get my content under control when I needed to free myself up instead. I needed to start **DEPENDING** on my other self-parts so I could flow in the moment. It wouldn't happen as long as I was worrying about my pride and appearance. My ego would get in the way. This would require another attitude.

I focused my attention on my body. It was tense so I unfolded my hands and rested them on the table with my palms open and facing each other. That was better. My body posture now suggested that I was in a more receptive mood. I closed my eyes and focused awhile on my breath, how it was able to reach further into my belly when I focused on its regular rhythm. Then I started to contemplate. Some kids were getting traumatized in front of those TV sets, especially if they noticed their parents' fear. Was it really so important if I made a fool of myself? I could see my narcissistic ego like the squirming child that it is. I also reminded myself that there were more important things than me going on that day. Could I let go of my self-consciousness and get into the moment? After all, whatever they asked would be interesting. Could I let go enough so that my curiosity could flame on?

"Will you help me to let go and be in the moment?" I repeated to myself several times while feeling the openness of my palms. Was I praying to God? No. I was respectfully asking my other self-states to give me support. I repeated the requests and opened my awareness to whatever was happening in the present. Expectations and self-evaluations were leaving. A calm feeling started to flow. Whatever would be would be but I was open to **NOW**.

The reporter was suddenly in front of me speaking into her microphone. "So Dr. Kaye, what should folks be telling their kids about this?" I answered without hesitation but I remember turning away from her and looking into the camera instead. It was the mind of the audience I wanted to engage, not hers. As I talked, it was as if there were two channels. One channel sourced up a continuous flow of information that was already organized from down below. My intuitive processes had opened up. As I discussed how different ages of children needed different approaches I was aware of a second channel. I simultaneously observed how I was talking. In fact, I was able to modify my inflections and phrases to emphasize certain points. My mind was in a transcendent state and my own ego no longer dragged on my thoughts. It seemed as if I had horsepower to spare. For each question the reporter asked, my answers seemed to float up spontaneously.

Then the reporter asked “What should people be doing with all of their anger?” It was familiar ground. “Behind anger you will always find either fear or pain..... And today it’s fear. But you don’t fight fear with anger. You fight it with faith.” Then I launched into a discussion about how faith isn’t confined to religious doctrine but plays a very important role in making our lives meaningful every day we have the courage to strive for a meaningful life. I gave a few examples to illustrate my point. When I paused, the reporter very slightly shook her head and gave me what I thought was a skeptical countenance. She then spoke to me in a stern voice. “Dr. Kaye. It’s very hard to feel faith on a day like today!” I felt a surge of panic. Shame suddenly coursed through me. It felt as if an ice-cold poker stabbed through my core. With it came thoughts of self-doubt and derision. I had shared my fluffy headed thoughts about meaning and philosophy which was inappropriate for a serious situation like this. The humiliation was powerful. But then something bounced back inside. I grinned and turned my head to one side. Without premeditation my words seemed to shoot out automatically “Yes it is!” I looked her straight in the eye and smiled. “That’s why we need each other!” The interview was over.

I think back to that interview not only for inspiration but also for the lessons learned. It taught me how to evoke a sympathy state that in turn allowed me to use other resources below consciousness. It was a form of self-hypnosis that would later prove useful to many of my clients.

At this point, it might seem that I’m idealizing sympathy states and vilifying mastery states. After all, isn’t spirituality about connection and belonging? Well, yes but let’s allow for paradox. Consider that the world isn’t always benevolent and you have to protect what you love. If you don’t protect yourself with healthy boundaries then you’ll get damaged by accumulating inhibition. How many people have you met who say they don’t know what they want or who they are anymore? Or that they’re suffocating or drowning in their relationship? That’s what happens when someone completely avoids using mastery and negativism (opposition) states. If the person can’t say “No” in his or her relationship then the person will often develop what I call “relationship depersonalization.” If it’s strong enough, it feels as though the person is disappearing.

Jake was a client of mine who claimed he couldn’t say “No” and couldn’t maintain a relationship. It wasn’t rocket science to figure out why. He had been raised by an alcoholic veteran father who enjoyed playing a twisted sadistic “game” with the boy. Every morning he would stalk the young lad while the youngster fled in terror from room to room. He would finally pounce on the youngster and hold his nose and mouth in a suffocating grasp until the boy stopped struggling. My client had learned that he would have to go limp and play dead if there was any chance for the father to let go. He could only hope that the release would come before he would pass out or die. Each morning death was only a breath away!

When Jake first came to me he couldn’t even fantasize resisting his father’s deadly grip. I tried and tried to walk him through images of grasping the father’s fingers and tearing them off. No dice! It wouldn’t happen. I then decided to try something radical. After getting his permission for some limited touch, I taught him what it felt like to twist off fingers. We went over different techniques he could use and he practiced tearing my hands from his nose and mouth. With these kinesthetic images in memory, he was finally able to fantasize tearing the father’s hands away from his face. This was great progress but we were still working in his adult self-state and not the deeper child state that carried most of the damage. We needed a way to free up that child part.

I won't describe all of the phases of treatment but here are some of the milestones. We eventually used a form of conditioning that disinhibited Jake's negativistic mastery state. We would start with him taking a minute to imagine that his father was suffocating him like days of old. He would take a light plastic bat and flail away on a couch pillow while he made growling expressions to help reduce inhibition. When he indicated he was ready, I would grab his mouth and nose and he would tear off my grip. Jake would then turn toward an empty chair in which he would imagine his father sitting. He put his anger into words and sentences with as much emotional inflection as he could integrate. As the sessions progressed, his angry expression became more articulate and elaborate. When Jake felt confident he could proceed with homework, I cut him loose to practice at home. He no longer needed the physical sensation of my grip or my presence to give him support. He practiced at least four times a week over the next several months.

During one of our later sessions, I remember when Jake reported getting some feedback from his friends. They had noticed that that he was spontaneously setting limits and occasionally refusing. I still remember the day when I experienced it firsthand. Jake was in a therapy group I was conducting. There was something that I did that angered him although I can't recall what it was. He confronted me pointedly but still in good form. While he dressed me down I thought "This is great!" He had come so far.

We all know that relationships can be torn apart by rage but most people aren't aware that just as many relationships suffocate to death. In fact, the two dynamics often merge. Suck in, suck in, suck in, suck in.....blow! It's a pattern often seen when mastery and negativism aren't applied to protect balance in the relationship. That's right! I said protection. In a high consciousness self-state, anger helps protect what we love. In a primitive dissociated state, anger turns to rage. However, many people carry such a total inhibition of negativism that they can't even rage. They just depersonalize, get depressed, die or have affairs.

We need all of our states but we need them working together. They need to be integrated into a higher consciousness state so we can switch in whichever ones are adaptive. Balance is the key but there's another powerful force that can get in the way. It's hidden deep where no one looks. You usually don't see it in the light of day but rather by its footprint and shadow. That's our next topic.