So, when we begin with this understanding that we are living systems, the next question becomes, well, what are living systems actually doing? And one of the simplest answers is this. They are responding to conditions all the time. 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whether we're consciously aware of it or not, our biology is receiving information from inside us and around us and responding to what it perceives.

And I think that's really important because when we look at ourselves primarily through a psychological lens, we can easily begin to think that everything we're experiencing is something we're somehow consciously choosing. Why am I doing this? Why can't I stop doing that? Why do I keep reacting this way when I know better? But a living system isn't sitting around waiting for our conscious mind to tell it what to do. It is continuously adapting.

And underneath that adaptation are two enormous biological imperatives. The first is survival, stay alive. And the second is growth, develop, learn, explore, mature, connect, create, reproduce, become more of what this particular living system has the potential to become.

Both matter, survival and growth, but biologically they do not have equal priority. Survival gets first claim on the resources of the living system, growth gets what's available after that. Survival gets first claim, growth gets what's available after that.

And I want to be a little careful here because I'm not suggesting that our biology is literally sitting there with a little accountant's visor on, in a pencil in its pocket, deciding where it's going to spend today's resources. Although with my background as an accountant, I confess I rather like the image. But what I'm saying is that living systems have finite resources and those resources are continually being allocated according to what the system perceives is needed.

And sometimes I think nature makes this much easier to understand than humans do. So I have a dogwood tree, well bush, in my backyard. And this summer I had some extensive landscaping done and my lovely dogwood had been growing in the same place for years quite happily.

And during the landscaping, the contractor dug it up, and that's being a little generous, he ripped it out of the ground and he just left it lying underneath another tree in my backyard. Well, as you can imagine, the dogwood was not impressed. Its leaves began to wilt, they turned brown, and it looked really terrible.

Now here's what's interesting. I didn't stand over the dogwood and say, what is wrong with you? Look at these other trees, they're doing perfectly well. Why aren't you blooming? Have you considered working on your mindset? Like I didn't sign it up for a course on becoming a more resilient dogwood.

Because when we look at a tree, another piece of nature, somehow we understand something that we've often forgotten when we're looking at ourselves. Oh dear, this makes

me cry. The dogwood's response makes sense in the context of the conditions it was experiencing.

The dogwood's response made sense in the context of the conditions it was experiencing. It had been uprooted, of course it was struggling, of course its resources were being directed towards survival, rather than producing beautiful green leaves for my enjoyment. There was nothing morally wrong with my dogwood.

It wasn't failing at being a tree, it was doing what living systems do, it was responding to its conditions. Now, eventually, we replanted it. And then my job wasn't to stand beside it and say, okay, you're back in the ground now, bloom.

My job was to become interested in the conditions. Does it have enough water? What about the soil? Does it have the right amount of light? What conditions might support this living system in doing what it naturally knows how to do? We don't make the dogwood bloom. We participate in creating the conditions and life does the blooming.

We don't make the dogwood bloom. We participate in creating the conditions and life does the blooming. And the more I've come to understand human beings as living systems, the more that question has entered my work with people and in my relationship with myself.

What if instead of beginning with what's the matter with me, we begin with what conditions might this living system be responding to? That's a very different question. Because suddenly, anxiety isn't simply anxiety. Procrastination isn't simply procrastination.

Perfectionism isn't simply perfectionism. Pleasing isn't simply pleasing. They're occurring within a living system that has been responding and adapting to conditions all of its days.

And here's where it becomes even more interesting. Because human beings don't respond only to the conditions that are present around us today, we're also responding according to what our living system learned from the conditions it experienced before. And this is something we've become increasingly interested in in Conscious CFT.

I call it our historical blueprint. Our biology learns. If particular ways of being helped us remain safe, connected, acceptable, included, loved, or simply helped us get through what was happening, those patterns become extraordinarily well practiced.

Perhaps I learned that I needed to anticipate what everybody else needed. Perhaps I learned that making a mistake carried a significant cost. Perhaps I learned that keeping other people happy helped maintain connection.

Perhaps vigilance was useful. Perhaps disappearing was useful. Perhaps being excellent was useful.

Perhaps not needing very much was useful. And again, from a living system's perspective, my first question doesn't have to be, how do I get rid of this? It can become the less pathological, more compassionate question, how did this make sense at the time? What

conditions was my living system responding to when this way of organizing itself developed? And that's not the same as saying, well, it happened in the past, therefore I'm stuck with it forever. Quite the opposite.

Because something interesting becomes possible when we can appreciate that an adaptation belonged. We can begin to ask another question. Yes, it belonged then.

It made sense then. Does it belong now? Does it belong now? That's a question I find myself asking more and more of myself as a human being and of my clients as human beings. Not, was this response good or bad? Not even necessarily, is this response healthy or unhealthy? But, did this belong to the conditions in which it developed? And are those the conditions I'm actually living in now? Because sometimes the answer is yes.

There really is something difficult happening today. There really is danger, loss, uncertainty, illness, conflict, financial pressure, inadequate, unequal, or some other demand that the living system needs to respond to. And sometimes the answer is not in the same way.

The conditions have changed, but the system is still beautifully practiced at responding to an earlier world. And I think that's where compassion becomes so important. Because if I see only the behavior today, I may judge it.

If I see only the symptom today, I may try to eliminate it. But if I can see the adaptation and the conditions to which it belongs, something else becomes possible. What looked like dysfunction through one lens may begin to look like adaptation through another.

And that doesn't mean we romanticize suffering. It doesn't mean we say, oh well this makes sense, so nothing needs to change. It means we have more information, more reality has entered the picture.

And so perhaps now we can become curious about what conditions would support something different today. So I think this is one of the places where healing can become much gentler. Instead of asking a living system to stop doing something that has made sense to it historically, we can become interested in helping it perceive and experience the conditions that are actually available now.

Not forcing it to bloom, not standing over ourselves demanding green leaves, but becoming curious about what supports life today. And I think there's one more piece of this that is absolutely essential. Because responding to conditions isn't free.

Every adaptation uses something. Every biological demand requires resources. So if my system is devoting resources to vigilance, anticipation, protection, suppression, bracing, pleasing, controlling, or simply getting through an extraordinarily demanding period of life, those resources are being used.

Which means they aren't simultaneously available for anything else. So depending on the conditions a living system is experiencing and adapting to, it will have more or less capacity

available for growth. And that brings us to a word that we use constantly in everyday life, but that I think we can understand quite differently now.

Capacity. Because capacity isn't about how strong I am. It's not about how committed I am.

It's not about how much I want something. And it sure isn't a measure of my worth. Capacity is about what biological resources are actually available to this living system under these conditions right now.

And that's where I want to go next.