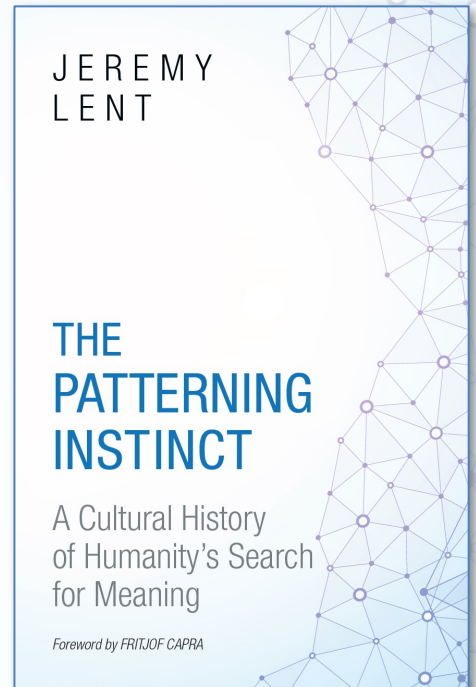


# Discussion Guide: *The Patterning Instinct*

## General Discussion

- Lent describes the book as an “archeology of the mind” (pp. 29–30). What insights did you have about the underlying ways in which you have formed your own worldview?
- Do you think we can change our cognitive patterns? Individually? As a culture? As humanity?
- What guides your own search for meaning? How is it different after reading this book?
- The central theme of the book is that culture shapes values, and those values shape history. Which values are shaping our world today?
- The patterning instinct has given us all the benefits of civilization but has also driven us to the precipice of possible catastrophe. Is this trajectory inevitable or is it something that is culturally conditioned and could possibly be redirected?



## Part I: Everything Is Connected

- Is it our nature to be competitive or cooperative? How do you see ideas about competition and cooperation affecting our societies? (Chapter 1)
- What can we learn from hunter-gatherer societies and apply to our world today? (Chapter 4)
- What did you think of the story of the hunter-gatherer tribe who insulted the anthropologist who gave them a fat ox for Christmas (pp. 83, 93)? Would it be a good idea to reinstitute that practice in our current times?
- The way climate change occurred was the same way hunter-gatherers caused mass extinctions and the Mesopotamians turned the Fertile Crescent into desert: their patterning instinct gave them powers that led to an imbalance with the natural world, while they remained unaware of it. How does becoming aware of your patterning instinct empower you to affect the future?

## Part 2: Hierarchy of The Gods

- Property, land ownership, and agriculture radically changed the human experience. How are our current cultural practices reflective of this shift from hunter-gatherer to settler, and how do they affect the natural world? (Chapter 5)
- We often think of existential anxiety, hierarchy, wealth, land ownership, and patriarchy as being a normal part of the human condition; yet the book shows they only emerged in the past ten thousand years. Did that realization change your own ideas about them? (Chapter 5)
- How did learning about the ways different cultures patterned meaning into the cosmos cause you to reflect on your own cultural heritage?
- In the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, why do you think Enkidu lamented on his death bed, “I was once in the wilderness with all the treasure I wished”? (p. 103). What does the story of Enkidu mean to you? Do you ever feel his lament?

## Part 3: The Patterns Diverge

*Western Pattern: Split Cosmos, Split Human*

*Eastern Pattern: Harmonic Web of Life*

- The book tells how Greek philosophy gave us dualism, with a Split Cosmos and Split Human (perfect abstraction versus polluted matter). Where do you see the ramifications of this dualism in our society today? (Chapter 7)
- Monotheistic religion has a large influence on our world today. How does the cognitive history of monotheism help us understand some of the origins of our current difficulties and how we might address them? (Chapters 11, 12, & 13)
- What does the traditional Chinese worldview reveal to us about the blind spots of Western cognition? (And why doesn't it seem to apply to modern Chinese society?) (Chapters 9 & 14)
- The debate about whether language affects the patterns of thought of its native speakers is far from over. Do you think language influences how you think? Or not? How would you know? (Chapter 10)
- Did you take the test on p. 212 "Which Two Go Together?" Which two did you pick? Do you have typical WEIRD cognition? What insights did it bring about the different ways of seeing?

## Part 4: Conquest of Nature

- What benefits has Francis Bacon's vision of "the conquest of nature" brought to humanity? What have been the costs? (Chapter 15)
- What do you make of the paradox of Christianity serving as an incubator for science, while in modern times Christianity and science are so often pitted against each other? (Chapter 18)
- The book describes how systems thinking offers a different way of understanding life than mainstream reductionist science. Why do you think most science has remained stuck in old patterns of thinking? And how could the new systems way of thinking be most helpful in responding to our current crises? (Chapter 19)
- Imagine being in the shoes of Zheng He encountering the same land and people as Columbus. What do you think he would have done? How would that have changed history? (Chapter 16)

## Part 5: The Web of Meaning?

- The book describes three possible trajectories for humanity: collapse, Techno Split, and future flourishing. Which do you think is most likely? Do you see another possible trajectory? (Chapter 21)
- What do you see as the most important patterns of meaning of our time? What future do you think they might lead us to? (Chapters 20 & 21)
- How might a greater understanding of our cognitive patterns help us construct a more integrated worldview that could put humanity on a sustainable path?
- What do you think are the most important values that will contribute to a future of wellbeing and flourishing for all?
- How could you contribute to the trajectory you would most like to see?
- In this archaeological journey, which cognitive patterns surprised you the most? If you could create a film of the future you would like to create, say 2100, what can you imagine?