

Learning about Oneself

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Learning occurs in every imaginable area of our lives—school, practical projects, career, feelings, people, groups, money, sex, politics, science, literature, philosophy, the arts, and spirituality.

Learning also occurs in self-knowledge. In our everyday personal experiences, in informal conversation, and in studying, we learn not only about things outside ourselves but also about ourselves.

This may seem obvious, but many intelligent people lack the habit, perhaps the courage, to learn about themselves. Below is an account of five things mature adults need to learn about themselves: habitual reactions, self-image, dysfunctional emotions, self-centeredness, and ignorance about understanding.

1. *Reacting vs. Responding*

Consider our experience of fear: about public speaking, being handed huge projects, competing against a stronger opponent, facing criticism, and the hard work of raising children, staying in love, and study. Or our experience of frustration: being unable to lose weight, unable to start a relationship, losing a game, being overlooked for promotion, losing money on an investment, realizing that we'll never reach a lifelong goal.

In all these, the problem we face is not simply in the object we fear or the obstacle to our desire. It is also in ourselves. The essence of the problem is our *emotional* reaction to our own *imagination* about the threat or barrier. The task of resolving these problems will be to replace any distorted emotions and images with those more true to the situation.

To replace distorted emotions and images, we first need to gain control of them. To explain how to do this, notice a difference between a *reaction* and a *response*.

A *reaction* is automatic.

You start moving toward, against, around, or away from some perceived object without even thinking. This is important for our survival—quick reactions are necessary both to dodge danger and to exploit opportunities.

Reactions are habits. They are our ever-ready emotions and images that govern how we act. We inherit most of them from our parents. We developed some of them all by ourselves. Many of our habits are good; a *virtue*, after all, is a habit. But not all habits are good;

some are self-defeating; some are malicious. Who doesn't have habits they regret?

A *response* relies on our thinking, our imagination, and our responsibility.

By our **thinking** we identify what the perceived threat or obstacle really is. This is obviously important. We want to avoid emotional reactions to things that simply do not exist. For example, Judy may feel angry at Bill, her boss, because she is continually passed over for promotion. So she acts coldly toward him. But when she thinks about this honestly, she may realize that she lacks the skills needed for her job. The actual threat, then, is not Bill but her lack of skill. So now, rather than shunning Bill, she approaches him to ask for training in areas needed for the position she wants.

Also by our thinking we identify what our emotional reaction actually is. This is less obviously important, but actually more important because, believe it or not, we can be wrong about what we're feeling. Suppose Ben teaches 8th grade and simply cannot get much response from Tonya, a student in his class. So Ben expresses some anger at her, telling her pay more attention. But when he thinks about his anger honestly, he may realize that his *real* emotion is frustration; something is blocking what he desires. Then Ben may say to himself, "Look at me; I'm acting like I'm angry, when really I'm frustrated." By naming his emotional reaction as frustration, instead of trying to break down a wall he imagines that Tonya has built, he decides to express direct interest in her—her hobbies, family, and special events in her life.

By our **imagination** we can first change how we envision ourselves and our perceived threats according to what our thinking tells us is really so. Judy comes to see herself not as passed over but in need of training. Ben comes to see himself not as being shut out by a student but as ready, willing, and able to make more interpersonal contact with Tonya.

We can also imagine creative responses to threats and obstacles. For example, we can picture the *resources* we have: Are there *walls* to protect me from the threat? Are there other *paths* around the obstacle? Can I *sidestep* the attack I feel coming? Can I *jump over* the obstacle? Are there *people* who can help me? Is there a *technological* resource I can use? How much *time* do I have to deal with this obstacle? Should I use my *sense of humor* instead of my sense of fear or frustration?

By our **responsibility** we take charge of our response to the threat. Others may hold us responsible for our response, but to

actually be responsible involves accepting that we actually have the ability. We are capable of discovering what the perceived threat really is, and of taking action to meet it. We have response-ability.

An important part of taking responsibility for our responses is taking responsibility for our emotions. This means recognizing which emotions are just habitual and not responses to this or that specific situation: Is my fear justified or just an old habit? Should I first allow my feeling of panic to subside before getting obsessed with the imagine object of my panic?

It also means recognizing which emotions are really mine and which I borrowed. Consider fear: Is my fear really mine, or am I borrowing from a friend's strong emotional expressions? Consider desire: Is my desire for something really mine, or do I desire it *because* someone else does? This dysfunction has serious ramifications. In school, when Jack desires high grades *because Jill does*, then Jack and Jill will compete and mutually hoard information that would be mutually beneficial. Worse, if I pursue a career *because* someone else prizes it, it may take me years before I realize what I've done to myself. I have been emotionally irresponsible.

Note that these questions assume that we can take charge of emotions. It is healthy habit to repress emotions that will move us into troubled waters and to allow those that move us in a right direction. This is the difference between reacting and responding. When we respond, we draw upon emotions of our choosing, rather than let spontaneous emotions have their way. This is not easy—or to be accurate, this is not spontaneous. We need to learn from our experience that certain feelings cloud our better judgment (usually agitated feelings) while certain other feelings give light to our judgment (usually deep and settled feelings). When we listen to passionate people, we might ask ourselves, "Have they taken charge of their feelings or have their feelings taken charge of them?"

Let me add that a *response* sometimes requires saying nothing at all. Often enough we need to **think** about the obstacle, so that we might **imagine** different solutions, and determine what our **responsibility** may be. When others say something to provoke a reaction from us and we are just silent, we may appear unresponsive to them, but silence is a response. No matter how they interpret our silence, they cannot avoid the possibility that we have been taken aback and need to process our feelings and thoughts. Or we can simply say, "I need some time to respond to that."

Keep in mind that the goal is *not* to always-respond and never-react. Not all reactions are bad. After all, we can't stop at every turn in order to reflect on what action we ought to take. Rather, the goal is to develop habits of healthy *reactions* by *responding* repeatedly to unfamiliar situations. Then, with familiar situations, our reactions are rooted in our habits of thinking, imagining, and taking responsibility, while with unfamiliar situations, we are careful not to react impulsively but to respond thoughtfully, imaginatively, and responsibly.

To take charge of our reactions it may help to visualize the effort like this: Our reactions are *gut* reactions. They come from the belly. But our considered responses come from our heads and hearts. Picture your mind (head) and your love (heart) taking charge of and educating your gut reactions (belly).

2. Self-Image



It is a difficult and enduring task to imagine ourselves as we really are. Some people imagine themselves mainly in their role—as firefighter, minister, or mother. Some students imagine themselves as absolutely needing to gain a 4.0 GPA, while others imagine themselves as the poor, misunderstood, and resentful victims destined to slump in the back row of life. Some adults imagine themselves as perfectionists, or helpers, or stars, or artists, or philosophers, or guardians, or travelers, or bullies, or peacemakers.¹

None of these images comes close to our true identity as persons. We are each unique. Our true identity is hidden from us because every life event changes us in ways we seldom notice at the time. There's no use trying to "find myself" because I, the finder, keep changing. All we can do is detach ourselves from role-based self-images, and focus simply on being as open a person as we can.

After all, think of a man you admire. Isn't he more concerned about being open than about how he comes across to others? Think of a woman you deeply respect. Doesn't she take more care to learn more, do better, and love widely than to work on her "self-esteem"?

If a self-image is needed, then rather than imagining ourselves in a role, it would be more accurate to imagine ourselves in a process. Specifically,

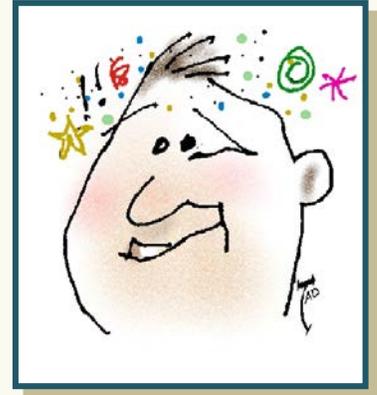
¹ For how these neurotic nine self-images affect teenagers, see <http://users.wowway.com/~tdunne5273/BeTeen.pdf>.

we might imagine ourselves as being persons open to learning more, to doing better, and to expanding our love.

3. *Dysfunctional Emotions*

A friend of mine once said about his father, "He has many emotions. But they all come out as anger."

Do you recognize this phenomenon? Your emotions have a full spectrum of hues and shades, but isn't it true that your overall emotional state is, say, rosy, or blue, or gray? Might you have unknowingly accepted a stupid rule about your emotions? For example:



I must never get angry.

I must always make cheerful remarks.

I must never hurt another's feelings.

I must never appear hesitant.

I must always feel urgency.

I say "unknowingly" because none of these statements may have occurred to us, yet our behavior is evidence that such a statement does represent a subconscious habit.

And might you have a *favorite* emotion that you are attached to? Cheerful? Solemn? Excited? Stern? Hurt? Eager? Melancholic? Stressed? (Yes, we can be attached to feeling stress!) But if we consider only our behavior and not what we think, we may realized that we are strongly affected by some such stupid rule. This is a vital step in learning about our emotions.

Emotions may be negative or positive, but they are neither good nor bad. St. Augustine said, "The hairs on your head are far easier to count than your feelings and the movements of your heart."² The reason we have so many different emotions is that life has so many different situations for us to feel about. So to be attached to a "favorite" emotion is to suppress genuine, honest responses to real life situations. It prevents us from really engaging life on all fronts. If our emotions are entirely predictable,

² Confessions 4:15. Also, the reason art, music, poetry and dance can cast such a spell on us is that they tap countless emotions in us that have no names.

then we send others the message, "Please don't engage me; please let me keep on pretending I'm really here."

The lesson here is not that we should be detached from our emotions altogether. To understand them, it is far better to face them. Nor is the lesson here that we should *suppress* our "favorite" emotion. There are times when our favorite is quite appropriate. Rather, the lesson is to *detach* ourselves from favoring it, in order to allow whatever emotions arise that a particular situation stirs in us.

4. Self-Centeredness

One final thing to learn about ourselves is whether we are addicted to Frank Sinatra's philosophy: "I did it my way."

Since learning is asking and answering questions, we optimize learning the best way of doing things by being open to all relevant questions. And when problems first arise, it surely is rare that anyone immediately knows all the relevant questions. People attached to doing things their own way seldom know the best way. To the degree that they are unaware of certain relevant questions they will likely create or exacerbate more problems than they solve.

And how does one become aware of overlooked questions? Quite simply: Ask people. Those who are detached from doing things their way and attached to finding the best way will spontaneously tell others what puzzles them, what they are curious about, what stirs their wonderment. Typically, the people with whom one shares some puzzlement enjoy helping others untangle things. They eagerly share not only what answers they have found but also questions from their own perspectives about what bothers the person who is open to being helped.

This attitude toward learning helps us find the best ways to meet the challenges of life no matter where—at home, at work, in school, even in our private moments of imagining ourselves in the drama of life. But it is particularly important in schools, where the atmosphere of being graded can set up an irrational competition among students—a game that effectively prohibits them from mutual learning. This is evident in classroom learning where teachers frown on students talking to each



other.

Fortunately, distance learning technology now enables anyone talk to anybody about anything at any time. Here is how it facilitates becoming detached from *my way* and learning the *best available way*: Most online courses offer a forum for free discussion—called "water cooler" or "study circle" or "student lounge." Use this forum to share your questions with other students. Ask about course content you haven't fully understood. Ask about study-guide items that confuse you. Ask about upcoming tests. Ask about paper assignments. Share any answers you found to elicit confirmation or correction from others.

If your energetic pursuit of mutual leaning frightens your online teacher, the he or she becomes an obstacle to your learning—an obstacle to be dealt with in any of the several ways we have mentioned here.

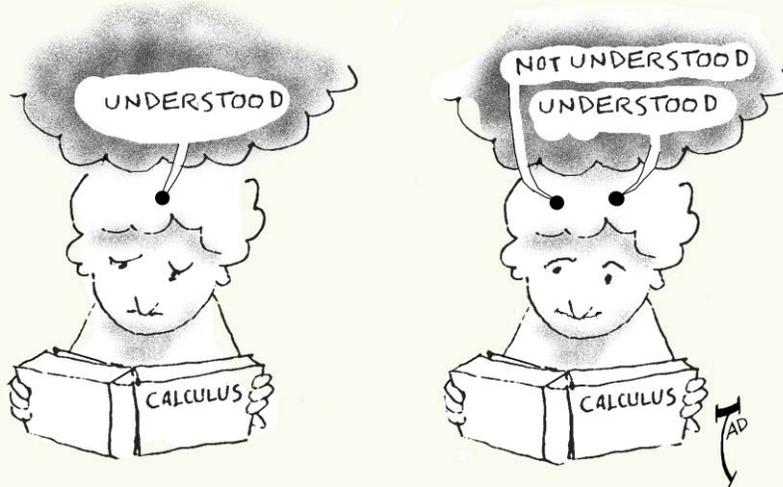
This kind of detachment from our spontaneous way of doing things does not mean indifference to outcomes. On the contrary, it passionately pursues the better and resists the worse. So even when it comes to everyday obstacles such as our fears of public speaking, of being handed huge projects, of competition against a stronger opponent, of running into obstacles that block our promotion, and of facing criticism, an authentic detachment from doing things *my way* will be also passionate and liberating openness and *attachment* to learning the *best available way*.

5. Ignorance of Not Understanding

The previous four obstacles regard dysfunctions in our psyches—the realm of our imagination and emotions. But there can be another dysfunction in our minds. It has to do with our comprehension. Many issues are truly beyond our comprehension. The third-grader Judy cannot understand calculus. But in the 12th grade she can. However, in the 12th grade and maybe even for the rest of her life Judy could still be generally ignorant of exactly what she does *not* understand. She may feel puzzled at certain points, but not notice exactly what puzzles her. In a vague and meandering way she hopes that reading more might relieve her puzzlement. But had she noticed, "Here, right here. I don't get this," she has moved from vague puzzlement to a relevant question. It is by noticing exactly where she has *not* understood that she can intelligently move forward toward full understanding.

Understanding refreshes the mind like clear, refreshing wine. Not understanding upsets the mind like sediment-filled, bad-aftertaste wine. If Judy cultivates a habit of noticing what she does *not* understand, she has learned the difference between the mental "taste" of understanding

and the mental "taste" of not understanding. She is far less likely to misunderstand an assignment, an essay test question, or a study guide item. And she is far more likely to make steady progress in reaching a full understanding of "course materials."



In short, then,

*Learning to understand is like wine tasting.
You need to learn what a Bordeaux tastes like.
But you also need to learn the taste of what isn't a Bordeaux.*