

Thoughtable Quotes

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A job well done

June 3, 2007

Posted by jisommer in : Craftmanship,Uncategorized

My own collected thought

Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;

From this live encounter came the work

What is your secret to success and a job well done? Ask this question of several people and I am sure you would get a variety of answers. The poem below is a simple yet profound explanation from a woodcarver when asked by those who just saw his latest work. It must be the work of spirits they say.

From the poem I found several points from the woodcarver worthy of further reflection to help me to be more successful.

- Focus on what is important
- Clear the mind, don't be distracted
- Start with the basics, look to what can be not just what is
- Find, develop and convert hidden potential

King, the master carver, made a bell stand
Of precious wood. When it was finished,
All who saw it were astounded. They said it must be
The work of spirits.
The Prince of Lu said to the master carver:
"What is your secret?" King replied: "I am only a workman:
I have no secret. There is only this:
When I began to think about the work you commanded
I guarded my spirit, did not expend it
On trifles, that were not to the point.
I fasted in order to set
My heart at rest.
After three days fasting,
I had forgotten gain and success.
After five days
I had forgotten gain and success.
After seven days
I had forgotten my body
with all its limbs.

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"By this time all thought of your Highness
And of the court had faded away.
All that might distract me from the work
Had vanished.
I was collected in the single thought
Of the bell stand.

"Then I went to the forest
To see the trees in their own natural state.
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt
All I had to do was to put forth my hand.
And begin.

"If I had not met this particular tree,
There would have been No bell stand at all.

"What happened?
My own collected thought
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;
From this live encounter came the work
Which you ascribe to the spirits."

The Moment

Posted by jisommer in : Craftmanship,Uncategorized

We need to observe ourselves as we work, not just to look at what is happening, where the work is taking us, because if we cannot observe and really notice what taking place is, how will we ever see the connection between what we are doing and where it is leading us?

James Krenov

As an undergraduate in college I selected mathematics as my major. While I did ok in the subject in high school, no one would have considered me to be a mathematical genius. I enjoyed the subject because I liked problem solving, seemingly impractical topics turned out to be extremely useful and last but not least everyone else thought it was too hard or complex.

The first year of Calculus is much like most high school mathematics in that it is very process oriented. Learn the process steps and which problems can be solved with a particular process and you will do fine. As I entered into my second year the mathematics became harder and yet more interesting. Instead of learning a set of steps you started building a tool chest of tools and acquired the knowledge of how and when to use them but more importantly how to build new tools. I remember distinctly a professor I had for Differential Equations. This mathematics course can be very process oriented if taken as part of an engineering curriculum. With this particular professor it was definitely a mathematics course. He stressed theory, understanding why, finding creative methods to solve problems and building blocks of mathematics.

Besides learning a great deal of mathematics, the professor brought forth an epiphany for me. The dictionary states an epiphany is "A sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something such a moment of revelation and insight." After the course I understood real mathematics and the approach and insight needed to succeed.

I found this reference to Wordsworth which better describes the moment. Wordsworth, in Prelude Book VIII, describes the "moment" when he for the first time passed in a stagecoach over the "threshold" of London and the "trivial forms/ Of houses, pavement, streets" suddenly manifested a profound power and significance:

'twas a moment's pause,—

All that took place within me came and went

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As in a moment; yet with Time it dwells,
Aned grateful memory, as a thing divine.

The moment has stayed with me – understanding of the difference between doing and being. Whether it is mathematician, a cabinetmaker, or other profession to be successful and truly enjoy the work it needs to become you.

I started out with woodworking as a hobby. First projects were crude. I finally created a coffee table my wife accepted for our living room. I felt like I passed my first major test. The next project was better, they increased in complexity and my woodworking knowledge increased. At this point I was a good woodworker. Next step was how do I gain the skills and experience to be able to call myself a cabinetmaker, a craftsman.

How do you get to that next level? Does it mean buying better tools? Good tools are important but it does not distinguishes the craftsman from a hobbyist. What does it mean when your passion or work becomes you? Just as I found the correct insight with my study of mathematics I found someone to provide me with the epiphany to become a cabinetmaker. That person is James Krenov. What follows are excerpts from several of his books which I found most inspiring and to me summarize his philosophy and approach.

James Krenov



The author of four books for any serious woodworker, Krenov teaches a philosophy that has become a prerequisite for advanced cabinetry throughout the world. A recognized furniture maker in Sweden, he moved to Northern California in 1981, where he created and led the College of the Redwoods' Fine Woodworking School. In his twenty years with the school he taught hundreds of eager students from around the world while continuing to build his own fine furniture. He retired from the college in 2002, but is still actively creating cabinets in his home woodshop.

James Krenov is represented with works at museums in Sweden, Norway, Japan and the U.S.

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Identification:

The definition for this word comes from David Allen, a productivity and organizational guru who give very sound and practical advice. While interviewing for positions I heard several times the prospective employer desired the person to exhibit a passion for his work. David Allen offers a better word Identification. He states: Rather than passion I would suggest the word identification. When you really identify with something, whether it is some intended outcome or some internal standard about your reality, it creates a true motivational energy to make it happen.

Identification will create incredibly focused energy when that energy is required. But most often it will manifest as calm and deliberate thinking with action continually refocusing on desired outcomes is the master key to success try peaceful purposefulness.

Krenov: The Impractical Cabinetmaker

We have to feel good about what we are embarking on; even if it's the start of a long, difficult job of various definite processes we still have to feel good inside, there has to be something central about the whole thing that adds up for us.

So your way of going about doing things will be an interpretation of something basically sound. It won't be against the laws of wood or of clean work or the simple truth of good and bad joints, but it will be a series of personal adaptations. It will be yours, with flexibility and a final clarity of your own. Even your mistakes will be personal. And I think personal mistakes are less painful and more enriching than mistakes made through other people's methods or measures.

You cannot divorce the shapes with their details from the process of work itself. All the things we are must be in our work. The difference in our work will be the difference between us as craftsman.

There will be certain stiffness about the work of those who rely mostly on techniques and want predetermined results.

Try to live the way you are, be the person in your work that you are in the rest of your life.
Easy to say!

With repairing mistakes there is a crude way and a fine way of going about it. By allowing ourselves to be crude in moments like this little moment of crisis we might develop habits that will spread the crudeness into other parts of our work.

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We need to observe ourselves as we work, not just to look at what is happening, where the work is taking us, because if we cannot observe and really notice what is taking place, how will we ever see the connection between what we are doing and where it is leading us?

One of the designs could be executed by 5 or 6 cabinetmakers and even in broad daylight most of us could not tell who made which. There were no cabinetmaker fingerprints on the work.

Different people, different ways. D. H. Lawrence

Things men have made with awakened hands and put soft life into
Are awake through year with transferred touch and go on glowing
For long years

And for this reason, some old things are lovely
Warm still with the life of forgotten men who made them
- D. H. Lawrence

We are blessed to work with wood
A medium with color, figure, and character
That can only come from sun, rain, soil, and time.

Investing heart, mind, and muscle,
We shape wood into works of lasting beauty and utility
Furniture that will long outlive us.

http://www.garyweeks.com/wood_forests.htm

Krenov and His Students

In his quick, self-effacing and sometimes impish way, he delivers his critiques in the form of questions and oblique suggestions, which convey his point without becoming too didactic [Intended to instruct. Morally instructive. Inclined to teach or moralize excessively].

- Ellis Walentine on James Krenov

Krenov's teaching seeps into you even if you don't know it, it comes back to you. He's given me insight into details of the craft that may have been forgotten. It's more of a way of working and being with the wood. Frank Barrera

What shapes our lives are the questions we ask, refuse to ask; or never think to ask. Sam Keen

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Wood is a living material quite unforgiving and sometimes very elusive. It takes for granted that we are sensitive in hand and eye and our whole being – our intuition, our sense of proportion, line and detail is finely tuned yet always modest.

Workmanship Sum total of the skills and sensitivities of the craftsman.

It is not drive by ego but rather by a sincere and lasting desire to do one's best and to be proud of what one has done. There is integrity in this.

A favorite excerpt of mine from his books: I have a little hideout in one far corner of the building. There is a sign on the door that says "Please knock". There's a great deal of knocking, which I enjoy. There I am tucked in the corner, an old guy, and I'm still needed.

Krenov: Cabinetmaker's Notebook

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I stand at my workbench. Shavings curl from the plane in my hands, swish-and-slide, as I rock to the motion of the work. The smell of fresh-cut wood, a slick, silvery yellow surface gleaming under the tireless plane and a feeling of contentment. Nothing is wrong. Here am I, here is my work and someone is waiting for the fruits of these fleeting hours. My contentment is bounded by the whitewashed walls of my little cellar shop, by the stacks of long-sought woods with their mild colors and elusive smells, by the planked ceiling through which I hear the quick footsteps of a child and yet it is boundless, my joy. The cabinet is taking shape. Someone is waiting for it. With a bit of luck, it will be liked, given continuity in a life of its own.

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Working alone I do not have help even when I need it. I do all the work myself. Partly this is because I don't like the idea of having someone do the dirty work for me, and then come along, the artist guy, to do the finishing touches and put my John Henry on the piece.

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Don't be pressured by originality. Don't lose time thinking your work has to be wild and wooly or slick. A nice four-legged table with pleasing and subtle, well proportioned legs spaced right, the top in a pleasing form, is a beautiful thing; and rare.

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Good cabinetmaking is usually a complex task. It is a lot of concentrated thinking and exact moving. Think wrong and you've probably ruined something, maybe a week or month's of work. Move wrong and you can lose a finger or hand. Especially if you get impatient.

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I don't love working, it is working well that I love.

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David Pye The Nature and Art of Workmanship

I'm going to do something; it should be personal and contain all of myself. I think this consistency; the fact that these little objects perhaps have what Professor Pye called diversity, things to be discovered as you get close to them is of crucial importance. A handle becomes and adventure and a challenge; so to a little latch on a door and the joints in a drawer.

Krenov on Grain: The Story of a Cabinet

From Fine Woodworking #133

<http://www.taunton.com/finewoodworking/pages/w00082.asp>

When it comes to reading grain, Krenov wrote the book I started with only a vague idea of what I was going to make. I knew it was going to be a small cabinet and that it would be made of a wood not too light — and not very dark. Medium, like this teak. I did a little sketch, more of a doodle than a drawing. The sketch just gives me a line on a map — I can follow it, but I still have to take a look at what's on either side of the road.

From there, I went to the wood room and picked and poked my way to a sense of confusion, irritation. I looked through the wood I had in my bench room, but I didn't find what I wanted. I had some teak that was very dark brown and extremely straight lined. Teak like that seemed too good to be true — it didn't excite me. Then, back in the wood room, I noticed a small, crooked, sawn-up log of teak lying partly hidden on the floor. We'd had it for several years, and nobody seemed to want it. It was no more than 5 ft. long and had been sawn into 8/4 planks. I scratched it a little bit and discovered it was rather a lively teak. It had nice color and a lot of motion in it. Once I found that log, I was off and running — it really gives me energy when the wood helps me with what I hope to do. But I have to take care. If I turn to one plank instead of another to start a cabinet, it can be the difference between night and day. Or maybe just night. ...

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It's a matter of getting acquainted with all of the properties of each wood you choose to work — a wood's colors; its hardness or lack of hardness; whether its grain is ornery or not. It's a very personal thing, and not everyone pays such close attention. But if you do, you are more in harmony with the wood and the work. And the results seem to flow from this harmony, even though it is connected with periods of stress and doubt. In the long run, knowing about these things will help a person.

When I was working on the sides of the cabinet, it became apparent that something different from what I had anticipated was going on. I was making a perfectly rectilinear cabinet, but here the grain was bending forward at the bottom: The crook in the log of teak was now visible as a pleasing but definite curve in the grain of the veneer.

When I saw that the side of the cabinet created a forward curve, I decided to change the stand to one with front legs that swept forward. Making this change is an example of observing what's happening with the wood as you work. But while you sometimes let the wood guide you, you shouldn't let it dictate. You have to refer to the wood without abandoning your intentions. There has to be a cooperation, a partnership between the two. The idea is to follow, but be careful.

Father's Day 2006 – Stages of Fatherhood

June 15, 2006

Posted by jisommer in : Relationships,Uncategorized

A dad is someone who wants to keep you from making mistakes but instead lets you find your own way, even though his heart breaks in silence when you get hurt. – Susan Ceylise

Father's Day is approaching and I would like to share my thoughts on this day (from the perspective of a father of two boys). This year I have reached a new stage in being a father (more on the stages later in the essay), a very different time which is filled with pride and a sense of accomplishment.

A bit of history about the origin of Father's Day: (from <http://festivals.iloveindia.com/fathers-day/fathers-day-origin.html>)

The history of Father's Day: in 1909, Spokane, Washington, Sonora Smart Dodd was listening to a Mother's Day sermon. The lecture inspired her to have a special day dedicated to her father, William Jackson Smart, who had brought her up and her siblings single-handedly after their mother died. She could realize the greatness of her father and wanted to let him know how deeply she was touched by his sacrifices, courage, selflessness and love. She held the first Father's Day celebration on 19th of June 1910, on the birthday of her father.

The idea soon caught on and in 1924, President Calvin Coolidge supported the idea of a national Father's Day on the petition sent to him by Dodd on the acceptance of fatherhood. In 1926, a National Father's Day Committee was formed in New York City.

However, it was thirty years later that a Joint Resolution of Congress gave recognition to Father's Day. Another 16 years passed before President Richard Nixon established the third Sunday of June as a permanent national observance day of Father's Day in 1972 in the honor of all good fathers that contribute as much to the family as a mother, in their own ways.

Even before Dodd came into the picture, Dr. Robert Webb of West Virginia is believed to have conducted the first Father's Day service in 1908 at the Central Church of Fairmont. However, it was the colossal efforts of Dodd, the devoted daughter of the Civil War veteran who refused to remarry for the sake of his six children and took upon him all the duties, love and care of a mother, which eventually led it to a national observance.

As you can see Father's Day is a fairly new officially recognized day Mother's day has been official recognized since 1914. Nonetheless, today both are celebrated on par with the

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recognition each parent contribute significantly to the family.

As I mentioned at the beginning, I feel I am entering a new stage, last of 5 stages, of fatherhood.

Stages of Fatherhood:

1. Rizzo and the White Tiger
2. Socrates
3. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
4. 1776
5. Krenov

Rizzo and the White Tiger Stage

This is the early stage of fatherhood when the child is first born through about 4 years old (until they start formal schooling). I would also call this the bonding stage. It is called the Rizzo and the White Tiger stage because these are my sons' favorite stuffed animals. Not too special, not fancy, nor expensive. My oldest son's was a raccoon named Rizzo which was made from a front and back print of a raccoon sewn together with an interior of soft cotton. My youngest son had a small white tiger with fuzzy hair which match the fuzzy stand up hair he had when he was born.

The early years of fatherhood are as important as any with it a time of close and intimate contact, gaining the trust from the child, becoming the center of their world (and vice versa) and comforting them in their times of need.

I have fond memories of either reading or telling bedtime stories each night before bedtime (with many repeats). Our youngest son was very active and at a very young age kept crawling out of his crib. We were concerned he would get hurt and was not quite sure what to do. I decided to make him what he called a big boy bed; a standard twin bed. He thought it was great and when he went to bed he stayed in even though the bed did not have any means to keep him in – guess he wanted some individual control. Our oldest son was fond of super heroes and he liked to play a game where I would place individual super hero cards (about 5 by 7 in size) around the house and he would then go to find each one. We created many variations and spent a lot of time crawling on the floor; great times.

Just as a child never forgets their favorite stuffed animal, they never forget the attention and love a father gives to them during this time.

Socrates Stage

This is a very rewarding stage for the parents as we see great growth and change (physically

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and mentally) in our children. The father's role expands from being a source of comfort, protection and trust to also include being a teacher and role model.

I found a poem which will help to explain more about this stage which covers the time from around 5 years old to the start of the teenage years.

What Is A Dad?

A dad is someone who
wants to catch you before you fall
but instead picks you up,
brushes you off,
and lets you try again.

A dad is someone who
wants to keep you from making mistakes
but instead lets you find your own way,
even though his heart breaks in silence
when you get hurt.

A dad is someone who
holds you when you cry,
scolds you when you break the rules,
shines with pride when you succeed,
and has faith in you even when you fail...

Dad, you're everything a dad should be and some.

By Susan Ceylise

Socrates was a teacher who helped others learn to learn utilizing probing questions. A quote from Ellis Walentine on James Krenov (Cabinetmaker and renowned teacher) explains this role well: In his quick, self-effacing and sometimes impish way, he delivers his critiques in the form of questions and oblique suggestions, which convey his point without becoming too didactic. It is a fine line of helping your children and yet giving them the latitude to learn for themselves, make mistakes and be able to make good choices. We teach our children not only skills and knowledge but also morality, right vs. wrong and respect for others. This stage builds a critical foundation of the child as they and the parents move to the next stage where we see the application of what they have learned in a more complex and riskier environment. Another key for a father at this stage (actually all stages) is time spent with your children. Not just when you can but when it is important to them. I recall Mark Twain's quote: "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than the

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ones you did do. Being there for their sport and school activities, showing interest and helping with homework, exposing them to a variety of activities and knowledge and letting them explore and create their own adventure are some of the simple but important time giving activities for a father. This excerpt is from a letter my oldest son wrote for me on Father's Day when he was just starting his teenage years. My dad has always been there for me and my family and I think that this trait is his best and most outstanding. It is the one that allows me to be able to write this about him. If he was never around and always doing this or that or too busy to do anything with his family then this would be about someone else.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde Stage

His friends were those of his own blood or those whom he had known the longest; his affections, like ivy, were the growth of time, they implied no aptness in the object – from Robert Louis Stevenson's book.

This stage is the teen years. A tough time for parents and children as the children are in the transition stage of child and adult and their world expands even more beyond the family. They need their parents and they also want their space. A quote by Mark Twain helps to highlight some of the reason for difficulties. When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But, when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.

Friends and peer pressure sometimes seem to have more influence than the parents. At this point we hope our efforts in the previous stages now reap the benefits as they help our children make the correct choices in actions and friend so they may enjoy their teen years. Children see many problems during this stage but as C. K. Chesterton points out "It isn't that they can't see the solution, it is that they can't see the problem". As parents if we can help them to see the real problem, the solution becomes trivial.

This is a time for the parents to manage boundaries, accountability, and the children's perspective to see more than their own world. We teach our children that they earn their role as an adult by actions, words, and thoughts. And, we as parents reward our children as they earn their way by treating them more as adults and allowing them more freedom and choices. This is a tough time for parents as they balance control vs. letting go to allow our children to grow. Too strict and we can lose them completely; too loose and they have no direction (analogous to a landmark which you can use to find your way when you start to get lost). Parents and children both strive to make progress toward what each see as their goal (of course not always the same goal and that is part of the development). Alfred North Whitehead

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illustrates the dilemma we have during this tough stage when he says; The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order.

The book Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences discusses advances in technology and how unforeseen effects can occur. In the beginning of the book there are references to Mary Shelly's book Frankenstein. I don't want to give the impression teenagers are monsters, but one quote from this section of the book is appropriate for this stage. "Frankenstein's fateful error was to consider everything but the sum of the parts he had assembled." This quote is used in the book to lead into a discussion of systems, especially complex ones, and the interaction of parts within the system to create more than each part on its own could accomplish.

Every part is disposed to unite with the whole that it may thereby escape from its own incompleteness. Leonardo da Vinci, Michael Gelb's book How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci: Seven Steps to Genius Every Day.

At this stage in our child's development we begin to see their systems coming online. Everything they have learned, the environment, friends, experiences now interact with each other in a complex and very human manner. Their systems continue to develop as they observe, orient themselves, make decisions and act with feedback loops from decide and act to the observe step. [This is a form of the OODA Loop which was developed by Air Force pilot John Boyd]. Ignoring or misinterpreting feedback will cause a system to become stagnant and ineffective.

Another quote from the book Why Things Bite Back: A machine can't appear to have a will of its own unless it is a system not just a device. Our children need to build good systems in order to utilize each of their modules (knowledge, values, family, etc.) in an effective, integrated and satisfying way. The child needs to understand themselves and how to develop themselves so they can think for themselves. They learn how to evaluate new experiences and knowledge to continue to develop into their own unique person. You and I are a self organizing system. We do this by paying attention to our own thoughts about what is going on around us and developing our responses from an evolving awareness unique to our own experiences. Peter Kline, Why American Children Can't Think.

1776 The development of independence

This starts the independence stage which covers the 4 to 5 years after high school graduation. While most of the stages we saw a gradual change in our boys (and ourselves) as they move into the next stage, the transition to this stage seemed to be better defined.

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Both of them went away to college and we could see the changes almost immediately. When one starts college you notice several things right away. You are not under Mom and Dad's daily watch where they see all of your coming and goings. Also you learn quickly the only one paying really close attention to your daily study and classroom performance is you, the professors leave it entirely up to you to perform, or not.

They are experiencing, and for the first time for some children, freedom. This can be frightening, invigorating and challenging. Many students handle it very well and many overdose on it and forget that responsibilities and accountability come with freedom. For most students the first semester is the adjustment time and then they figure it out and are either on their way to growing or are spinning into trouble.

I have included two quotes in this stage from the time period in US history where our nation was struggling for independence. Both are about John and Abigail Adams from David McCullough's book John Adams at a time in their life where they foresaw great opportunities lay before them and it was their time to take advantage of the circumstances and utilize their skills and experience to overcome obstacles to achieve their goals and succeed in way they may have not thought was possible.

I never shall shine, until some animating occasion calls forth all my powers. –John Adams.

We live, my dear, in an age of trial. What will be the consequences I do not know. –John Adams to Abigail

Whether through the trials of academics or the management of relationships in a new world of friends and acquaintances the young adults are indeed provided with an opportunity to grow.

We saw both of our boys do better than they had done in high school and extend themselves and experience things they (and in some cases we) may not have thought they would.

The relationship we had with them also changed. They did a lot of changing and growing on their own and began to view us as valuable resources where we noticed they would specifically ask us for advice [as opposed to parents giving mostly unsolicited advice]. And we transitioned from being the ones in control to being advisors and sounding boards for them as they assumed more and more of the control. "The greatest gifts you can give your children are the roots of responsibility and the wings of independence." Denis Waitley

Krenov Stage

I have named this stage after an excellent cabinetmaker and teacher.

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I have a little hideout in one far corner of the building. There is a sign on the door that says Please knock. There's a great deal of knocking, which I enjoy. There I am tucked in the corner, an old guy, and I'm still needed.

I am at the start of this stage as our youngest has just graduated from college. As with each stage it is not a dramatic and specific end of one stage and beginning of the next. We see the development of our children as they and ourselves, change slowly taking on more and more characteristics of the next stage.

Some may call this stage the Empty Nester's stage, indicating that the biggest impact on the parents is they now have the home to themselves. For me the biggest impact is seeing our children doing more and taking more responsibilities for their decisions. They want to do it themselves, in part to prove to them they can and in part to show Mom and Dad what they have learned. While there is a definite sense of pride and accomplishment for the parents, there is also the question of whether or not your children still need you. The old saying, be careful what you wish for, comes to mind as we now see them being independent and adults.

But as we watch what they do and the decisions they make, we start to see they actually have been listening. On several occasions I have had the great pleasure to hear one of my boys repeat something I have said or advice I had given them several years ago. I don't always remember the specific circumstance, but they do. Other times they will ask specifically for advice on something or go over their decision making process to see what you think.

I remember the first time our oldest son paid the bill for a dinner at a nice restaurant. A small but significant sign that he is does not need to depend upon Mom and Dad for everything and is becoming more independent and in control of his life. Our youngest son recently graduated and started his first full time job in his new career. He called us to tell us he purchased a new car on his own. It was something he wanted to do for himself and also in part to show us he has developed to the point where he can apply what he has learned to make important decisions. I will never forget, for similar reasons, the call I received from my oldest son when he decided to propose marriage. It was another proud moment as a father and an unforgettable conversation.

This stage is one of joy for us as parents as we see our children continue to grow and build their lives. It is a tugging of emotions as we are proud of them becoming independent and also recognize that this means they need our help less "A ship in harbor is safe but that is not what ships are built for." William Shedd.

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Mr. Krenov's quote states he feels joy from the knocking at his door and the opportunity to be needed. As parents we also get great joy from reflecting and recognizing we have been needed and gain satisfaction from seeing we really did help.

Self Reflecting

February 15, 2006

Posted by jsommer in : Uncategorized, Values

We are each like a character in a book who is reading his or her own story, or like a picture of a mirror reflecting its own landscape.

<http://www.mathacademy.com/pr/minitext/escher/index.asp>

As I enter the second half of my fifties, I reflect back on what I have accomplished, relationships formed, decisions made, current level of happiness and where do I go from here. I compare the process to the flashback scenes from a movie where the director builds the character by showing how previous experience has contributed his



current situation and behavior. I am reminded of this quote from Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard; "Life can only be understood backwards; but can only be lived forwards." The reflections (flashbacks) are used to better understand ourselves so we may improve and better our life. "Life is growth. If we stop growing, technically and spiritually, we are as good as dead." Morihei Ueshiba, 20th century philosopher-martial artist. So, how do we follow Socrates' advice and "know thyself"? We need to be able to objectively observe, analyze and critique ourselves. Let's start with an illustration from an artist of self-reference in order to gain a better understanding.

The lithographs are by M.C. Escher.

From: <http://www.mathacademy.com/pr/minitext/escher/index.asp>

A central concept which Escher captured is that of self-reference, which many believe lies near the heart of the enigma of consciousness and the brain's ability to process information in a way that no computer has yet mimicked successfully.

The lithographs Drawing Hands and Hand with Reflecting each captures this idea. In the former the self-reference is direct and conceptual; the hands draw themselves much the way that consciousness considers and constructs itself, mysteriously, with both self and self-reference inseparable and coequal.

On a deeper level, self-reference is found in the way our worlds of perception reflect and intersect one another. We are each like a character in a book who is reading his or her own story, or like a picture of a mirror reflecting its own landscape.

And so we end where we began, with a self portrait: the work a reflection of the artist, the artist reflected in his work.

Knowledge and understanding of anything can vary by one's perspective. "Many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our point of view." Obi-Wan Kenobi.

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Do you know and understand yourself; from what perspective, with what bias? How do other people perceive you, how do you perceive yourself; who is the real you, are you who you want to be? Have not you tried so hard to please others that now you no longer behave as you nor have your goals. Is the real you trapped inside?

From the poem *The Man in the Mirror*:

For it isn't your mother, your father or wife

Whose judgment upon you must pass.

But the man, whose verdict counts most in your life

Is the one staring back from the glass.

He's the fellow to please,

Never mind all the rest. Anonymous

The movie *Groundhog Day*: [Breakthrough to the True Self](#),

<http://www.transparencynow.com/groundhog.htm>,

is a great illustration of one man's struggle with these questions.

An example of an exceptional work of moral fiction is the apparently minor comedy, *Groundhog Day*, which shows us a character who has to be exiled from normal life so he can discover that he is in exile from himself. What is so powerful about *Groundhog Day* is the way it lets us experience what it would be like to make a breakthrough like this in our own lives.

The movie shows us a character who is like the worst in ourselves. He is arrogant and sarcastic, absorbed in his own discomforts, without hope, and cut off from other people.

Like us, he finds himself in an inexplicable situation, seemingly a plaything of fate. But, unlike us, he gets the luxury of being stuck in the same day until he gets it right. Whereas most of us go semi-automatically through most of our (very similar) days, he is forced to stop and treat each day like a world onto itself, and decide how to use it. In the end, he undergoes a breakthrough to a more authentic self in which intimacy, creativity and compassion come naturally – a self that was trapped inside him and that could only be freed by trapping him. Like many of the heroes of fiction, he can only escape his exile from himself by being exiled in a situation not of his choosing.

Margaret Young has some very good advice: "Often people attempt to live their lives backwards; they try to have more things, or more money, in order to do more of what they want, so they will be happier. The way it actually works is the reverse. You must first be who you really are, then do what you need to do, in order to have what you want."

Thoughtable Quotes

As one reflects on their life they may ask; have I savored the moments of my life? From American Heritage "Savor means to appreciate fully; enjoy or relish." These moments are a big part of you and a key to long lasting happiness.

Man is fond of counting his troubles, but he does not count his joys. If he counted them up as he ought to, he would see that every lot has enough happiness provided for it. – Fyodor Dostoevsky

From <http://www.ndnation.com/> The Rock: I haven't learned all that much yet, but I have learned that life is made up of moments. We need to mark those moments because they make us feel greater than we are and inspire us to hopefully do something beyond the ordinary... Many of us are so focused on the next thing or on a seeming "big goal" that we completely miss the moments that mean so much, letting them pass right in front of our cool cynical or overly ambitious eyes.

We learn from an old Irish blessing "May you never forget what is worth remembering; Or remember what is best forgotten." We must distinguish properly and not cling to memories which drive us to be negative and away from whom we really want to be. If we dwell on the negative we put ourselves in a state of mind which becomes self-fulfilling. "No man is happy who does not think himself so." – Publilius Syrus. The self prophecy is illustrated well from this excerpt from a 1932 book by David Reichinstein about Albert Einstein: 'A depressive condition was developing in Einstein which made him more sensitive to insults and also made him remember disagreeable incidents of the past with greater vividness.'

Michele Laub describes the notion of self observation as a form of stalking: Toltec stalking (not to be confused with contemporary stalking as in the dark obsessive behavior of criminals in Hollywood movies) is a technique for watching ourselves being ourselves where we become the actor and the observer simultaneously. It is in this way that we heighten our awareness. It is important not to judge as we observe ourselves being our selves, but rather to become the objective observer, witnessing our behavior, thought patterns, emotional responses, beliefs, and agreements. It is a trans-formative process, as we cannot change anything about ourselves without having awareness.

We need to ask ourselves a variety of questions such as: Why did I behave that way (good or bad), is it consistent with what I really believe, what could I have done differently, what decisions did I make and why, am I in control or are others controlling my actions, etc. What are some practical methods of observing ourselves? Here are some things I have tried.

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A few years ago, after 21 years at the same company, I decided it was time to look for a new job. In order to interview well, you need to be able to convey to others about yourself. As I read typical interview questions, I found I came up with more questions of myself than answers. What am I like, what do I believe and how can I articulate myself to others, what are my strengths and weaknesses? How can I learn more about me? I have always found a great way to learn something is to teach it to someone. How can I best teach myself about me?

To start, I listed several areas of interest to me and of importance to my professional career such as management, problem solving, quality, creativity, change management (also personal interaction), organization. I collected articles related to each area which either supported by views or gave me new insight. I based my initial selection on reaction, not full analysis. I did this on purpose in order to be as objective as possible. Each item collected was placed in the appropriate section of a three ring binder. Periodically I would review the collection, rearrange them, change or add areas of interest, highlight certain sections, identify unexpected connections between them or in some case remove them. The approach turned out to be very effective. I was able to refine and more clearly articulate to myself what I believe and why.

Next method was to examine my reading habits. Over the last 10 years or so I have really increased the amount of pleasure reading. Pleasure reading is making a time commitment to read what you enjoy, filling a personal need. I started keeping track of what I read. After a time I made some objective observations of the type of books, variety, patterns, my favorites and which ones I did not like or even care to finish. Some initial observations: I read a variety of topics but the overall theme could be categorized as historical, mostly non-fiction (those which were fiction were fictional representations of real events), same topic from different book's perspectives, a lean toward math/science, history, warfare, and biography (of people or businesses).

I tried a similar exercise with one of my project teams. As part of the initial "get to know each other" activities, I asked each person to think of three of their favorite movies and share them with the group and explain why they were their favorites. The activity actually worked out very well and created some very good discussion amongst the team.

A few years ago I started a notebook in which I recorded my favorite quotes. They start to form a set of concise statements about my philosophy. Going through my book of quotes, I would see many with very similar themes. I decided to start to write essays focused on a favorite quote and intertwined other similar quotes to develop my thoughts. The product of this activity is the Thoughtable Quotes section of my web site.

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Aristotle's "good life" is defined as knowing your "signature strengths" and using "these strengths every day in the main realms of your life to bring abundant gratification and authentic happiness. We need to understand our weakness and leverage our strengths. Robert Sternberg calls Successful Intelligence the ability for a person to know their strengths and weaknesses in order to create a life around their strengths and spend enough time on their weaknesses so they are not liabilities. I do not know of any way to manage your strengths and weaknesses without fully understanding yourself. I recommend these books for inspiration and practical ways to improve, manage setbacks, leverage your strengths and manage your weak areas. [Simple Steps to Impossible Dreams: The 15 Power Secrets of the World's Most Successful People](#) by Steven K. Scott and [Miller's Bolt: A Modern Business Parable](#) by Thomas Stirr.

While reviewing material for this essay, I ran across something I had not heard of but is related to the process of knowing yourself. It is called Ethical Will - <http://www.ethicalwill.com/> . Ethical wills are a way to share your values, blessings, life's lessons, hopes and dreams for the future, love, and forgiveness with your family, friends, and community. The word "will" implies this is a document made toward the end of one's life. While the intent of an ethical will is to leave your personal thoughts behind for others, I believe the methods and topics are just as important to help to know yourself. When you write an ethical will, you learn a lot about yourself.

- It is a way to affirm the past and be positive about the future
- If you don't write your stories, no one else will, and these stories will be lost forever
- It allows for putting your personal signature on what universal values mean to you (e.g., love, truth)
- It opens the door to forgiving others and being forgiven, which heals relationships
- It helps coming to terms with our mortality and the desire to make each day count
- It can be a spiritual experience that provides a sense of completion in our lives

http://www.cancerlynx.com/ethical_wills.html

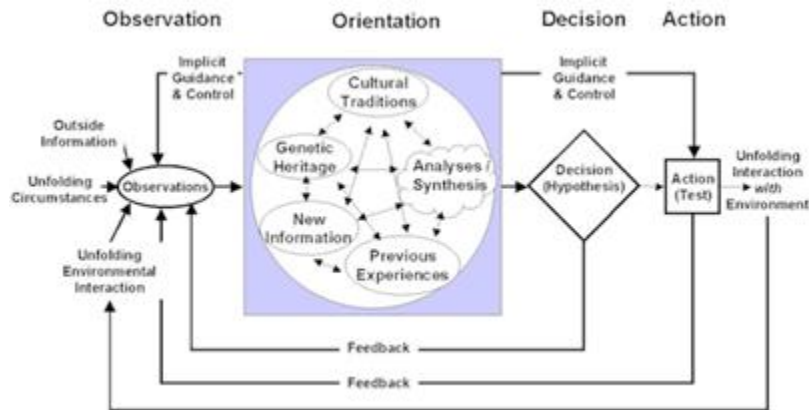
- Its key components are Observe, Orient, Decide and Act. His strategy for growth and vitality are based on the following principles. Since a major part of his OODA loop is observation and orientation, it is easy to see the connection to the process of self-observation:
- Physically, we interact by opening up and maintaining many channels of communication with the outside world, hence with others out there, that we depend on for sustenance, nourishment, or support.
- Mentally, we interact by selecting information from a variety of sources or channels in order to generate mental images or impressions that match-up with the world of events or happenings that we are trying to understand and cope with.

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- Morally, we interact with others by avoiding mismatches between what we say we are, what we are, and the world we have to deal with, as well as by abiding by those other cultural codes or standards that we are expected to uphold.

Let's return to Toltec stalking – day to day observation of you. All of the previously described methods are useful means to teach you about you. But, daily one needs to practice self-observation. Review what you did, how you felt, why you reacted in that manner. Am I being who I am, who I want to be, making progress toward my goals, etc.?

John Boyd was a fighter pilot and one of the top military strategists. He developed an approach to warfare which is highly applicable in many other areas. I have found his ideas very helpful to me. His ideas are diagrammatically explained in his OODA Loop diagram.



I will close with some decision and action thoughts, the last blocks in the OODA loop.

From the movie Batman Begins: “It is not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me. You can want to be a lot of things but you have to act to fulfill the wants.

Think Arete. <http://www.thinkarete.com/> The classic Greek philosophers had a word for the process of self-actualizing and striving to reach your highest potential. They called it ‘Arete.’ (pronounced ar-uh-tay). Our challenge is to discover [decide] our own truth and, as we gain more clarity as to what is right for us, to have the courage and the discipline to live [act] according to that truth.

Define who you are today, who do you want to be and become that person. Becoming that person means actions. You want to be as proud as Popeye when he says: “I yam what I yam, an’ tha’s all that I yam.”

I have learned a deep respect for one of Goethe’s couplets: “Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now!” Or more simply

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(from a tee shirt I saw on the internet): Find out who you are and do it on purpose – Dolly Parton

May I Ask a Question?

August 25, 2005

Posted by jsommer in : Improvement, Knowledge, Uncategorized

What shapes our lives are the questions we ask, refuse to ask, or never think to ask. – Sam Keen

I recently finished reading two books, [A Pirate of Exquisite Mind](#) and [Socrates Cafe](#). The first was about pirate William Dampier and the second about a professor reviving Socrates methods in an informal cafe setting. A pirate is defined as “A ruthless speculator or adventurer”. What could a pirate and a great philosopher possibly have in common? I would suggest Nichtwissen.

I came across this word in an article by Harrison Owen named “Opening Space for Nichtwissen. He states: the German word Nichtwissen dictionary supplied translation is Ignorance. So what English word might communicate the essence of Nichtwissen (which literally means no knowledge, state of not knowing)? Something positive and useful; the condition precedent to knowledge? I think the word might be question.

For most people, the word question and Socrates have a strong correlation. From [Socrates Cafe](#), Socrates method is described as: “Socrates did not teach in the regular way. He held no classes and gave no lectures and wrote no books. He simply asked questions. When he got his answer he asked more. Socrates asked his questions in order to make people think.” The more questions you have, the firmer the footing you are on. The more you know yourself. The more you can map out and set a meaningful path for your future.

If you asked people to think of words to describe a pirate, most likely the word question would be low on the list – if at all. And yet, the more I read about pirates the more I learn the typical stereotype is not completely correct. Pirates, within their group, created and practiced one of the first forms of democracy. On board ship a set of articles (rules of conduct) governed the ship. The rules included: creation of a council to delegate duties of the crew, workman’s compensation program for injuries sustained during the voyage, voting by the crew determined the level of punishment for offenses, voting on major decisions regarding attacks and course, and strict rules on association with women. Most likely they created this democracy because many faced injustice from society (over one third of the pirates were former slaves and many others experienced the rule of cruel monarchy). How could we set up a better system they probably asked?

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Pirates were also a very literate group with over 70% level of literacy (a literate person at this time was also one who could sign their name). Diana & Michael Preston in [A Pirate of Exquisite Mind](#) surmised the relatively high level among sailors is reflected partly due to the intelligence of those sufficiently curious to want to see the world and partly the requirement to read charts.

William Dampier is considered to have been an explorer, naturalist, author and buccaneer. He became a model for writing travel books. Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe used Dampier's writings as a source for their books. His detailed account of his journeys and astute observations of the environment, geography, maps, weather and animal life became the bible for many current and future explorers. Dampier can claim more than 1000 entries in the Oxford English Dictionary. Inscription on his memorial: Thrice he circumnavigated the globe. An exact observer of all things in Earth, Sea and Air he recorded the knowledge won by years of dangers and hardships in [Books of Voyages and a Discourse of Winds, Tides and Currents](#)

Dampier's last trip was made while he was in his 50s. The journeys were filled with hardship and many dangers. What drove him? In part it was the chance of a fortune from a well laden ship. His initial objective was to pursue the bounty of other ships but his curiosity, atypical pirate interests and powers of observation provided him with real satisfaction. He asked why, how, related in what ways, what deductions could be made? He was then able to understand the weather, nature, navigation, etc. better than anyone at this time.

The book [Socrates Cafe](#) shares the author's experience in coffee houses, book stores and other small gatherings to share ideas and experience. In the book about Dampier, the author describes the atmosphere of a coffee house in the Seventeenth-century. It was an era of intellectual and political ferment where ideas could transcend status. London's lively coffeehouses, where Dampier probably pursued his contacts, exemplified this. England's first coffee house had been opened by a Jewish immigrant in Oxford in 1650. The first in London had followed two years later and proved so popular that by 1700 there were more than 2,000 in the city. They were convivial, democratic establishments where men of all pursuits and backgrounds rubbed shoulders. Entrance cost a mere penny, and a man could spend much of the day drinking a dish of coffee costing about one and a half pence and debating the state of the world with other drinkers.

I tutor mathematics to high school and college students. Many times my students will look at a problem and remark they have no idea how to solve it, nor where to start. I start by asking them a few questions; no answers from me just questions. Almost all of the time, after a few directed questions, they have figured out how to solve the problem. James Krenov is a wonderful cabinetmaker and teacher. Ellis Valentine made this comment about his teaching

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style (a modern version of the Socratic method): In his quick, self-effacing and sometimes impish way, he delivers his critiques in the form of questions and oblique suggestions, which convey his point without becoming too didactic. My experience in working with students has taught me one of the most important skills a student needs to learn is what questions to ask. George Polya's problem solving process in his famous book, [How to Solve It](#), can be summarized as these steps and typical a questions: Understand (what do I know, what do I need to solve, how can it be restated?, related to another problem?), Plan (organize, write/draw what I know, create an approach/path), Carry Out the Plan (give it a try, adjust), Look Back (will this be useful later, how else can it be applied?).

Stephan Shapiro [24/7 Innovation](#) made the following observation. When a good detective sets out to analyze a crime scene or investigate a case, he never starts by asking what evidence can I gather? He's much smarter than that. His first question is: What are the questions I need to answer in order to allow me to solve cases?

When I was teaching at a boarding school I had a class ask if they could do their homework in the classroom – they felt their work was more productive in that room. They had not yet realized the key to their learning was the series of questions which lead them to understanding. No one questions, no one wonders, no one examines like children. It is not simply that children love questions but they live question. [Socrates Cafe](#). Too bad many lose this skill and have to work so hard to re-develop. From [Conceptual Block Busting](#) by James Adams: The first reason we lose our questioning attitude is we are discouraged from inquiry. After a child reaches a certain age, parents and others are often no as patient with questions (especially if they are busy or do not know the answer). The second reason the child's inquisitive nature is socialized out of us (or at least diminished) has to do with the great knowledge game. We learn as we grow older that it is good to be smart. Smart is often associated with the amount of knowledge we possess. A question is an admission that we do not know or understand something [Nichtwissen]. We therefore leave ourselves open to suspicion we are not omniscient.

A teacher is tempted to emphasize the facts and push students to obtain the answers (teaching to pass a particular test). Martin Heidegger put it well as he described teaching: Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than learning. His conduct, therefore, often produces the impression that we properly learn nothing from him, if by learning we now suddenly understand merely the procurement of useful information.

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Learning what and how to ask questions is a key to fully understanding and learning the material. We need to form links to what we already know. Retention rate and comprehension is increased dramatically if this is done. From [Learning to Use What You Already Know](#), Until one connects the experience and finds the patterns among them, or places the experiences into context additional to those in which the experience occurred, learning is not likely to take place. I talked to a high school student taking a statistics and was amazed at the pace and quantity of material the teacher required. The teacher moved from current topic to the next topic with great speed and made great use of a powerful calculator to solve most of the problems. At the end of the course the student received a grade of B+. While happy about his grade he felt he had very little understanding of the material. He learned to follow a process, without any knowledge of why or how each part was related to the others. He commented, he will take it again in college and hopes this time to learn the material. In one week I received several calls to tutor some students in Calculus, all from the same school and teacher. They are good students but in a panic. The school has moved to block scheduling (a little longer class in which they cover a year long course in one semester). They are moving so fast in the course one student said all she can do in the class is writing as fast as she can with no time to think or ask questions. A very poor learning environment.

Teaching someone how to learn opens up a world of adventure and knowledge and provides one the tools for one to continue for themselves. From the web site From Now On (www.fno.org): "Questions allow us to control our lives and allow us to make sense of a confusing world, they are tools that lead to insight and understanding. If all you have is the technology, you are not an information producer, you are just a consumer."

Remember: Asking questions is a very good way to find out about something. – Kermit the Frog.

Hidden Potential

May 4, 2005

Posted by jisommer in : Craftmanship, Uncategorized ,

My own collected thought

Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;

From this live encounter came the work

From THE WAY OF CHUANG TZU by Thomas Merton

What is your secret to success and a job well done? Ask this question of several people and I am sure you would get a variety of answers. This poem is a simple yet profound explanation from a woodcarver when asked by those who just saw his latest work. "It must be the work of spirits" they say. From the poem I found several points from the woodcarver worthy of further reflection.

- Focus on what is important
- Clear the mind, don't be distracted
- Start with the basics, look to what can be not just what is
- Find, develop and convert hidden potential

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand

Of precious wood. When it was finished,

All who saw it were astounded. They said it must be

The work of spirits.

The Prince of Lu said to the master carver:

"What is your secret?"

Khing replied: "I am only a workman:

I have no secret. There is only this:

When I began to think about the work you commanded

I guarded my spirit, did not expend it

On trifles, that were not to the point.

I fasted in order to set

My heart at rest.

After three days fasting,

I had forgotten gain and success.

After five days

I had forgotten gain and success.

After seven days

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I had forgotten my body
with all its limbs.

"By this time all thought of your Highness
And of the court had faded away.
All that might distract me from the work
Had vanished.
I was collected in the single thought
Of the bell stand.

"Then I went to the forest
To see the trees in their own natural state.
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt
All I had to do was to put forth my hand.
And begin.

"If I had not met this particular tree,
There would have been No bell stand at all.

"What happened?
My own collected thought
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;
From this live encounter came the work
Which you ascribe to the spirits."

The Disease of Hate

December 3, 2004

Posted by jisommer in : Relationships, Uncategorized

Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity. Hate destroys a man's sense of values and his objectivity. It causes him to describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful, and to confuse the true with the false and the false with the true. – Martin Luther King Jr. US black civil rights leader & clergyman (1929 – 1968)

Over the last several months I have read several history books covering historical times of Genghis Khan to the Vietnam War. During this same time period I have also paid close attention to the 2004 presidential election. Something struck me as a common thread. It was not leadership, nor sacrifices needed for victory, nor the fight for freedom. It was hate.

As I read about the events in history I am overcome by the hate and actions of hate that seem to exist in every generation. Countless people are mistreated or killed as if they were just bugs hitting a windshield. Human life held in no higher regard than the lowest of any creature on earth. Hate is not formed by the tools of war, the standard of living or religious faith. Hate is very personal and self serving. History leads me to believe it may well be an inborn trait where everyone must consciously work to overcome or become consumed.

Hate does not require violence to be active and destructive. While there was no bloodshed in the hate of the recent presidential election, hate was present in many forms. We may characterize this event as an example of civilized hate. No physical wounds but there were many intellectually wounded. Martin Luther King's quote at the beginning of this essay is insightful and particularly relevant to what I witnessed during this past election. I have watched and participated in many presidential elections but have never felt the emotion of hate consuming so many people, clouding their judgment, steering their actions and altering their values. This essay is not about whether or not George Bush or John Kerry is the better presidential candidate. Hate is my concern and how intelligent and peaceful people can become so consumed to the point they actually contradict themselves and their beliefs while trying to defend and justify their words or those they support.

From Martin Luther King's quote we see hate affects our values and clouds our objectivity. And we describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful. We see what we want to see and rationalize any differences as unimportant. Failures are pointed about any event our opponent celebrates. Success is determined by how much it helps my immediate cause, not how much does it help the greater whole or end objective. Mr. King sees personality being changed by hate; more self interest, more boisterous, less understanding of another view, irrational

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behavior. You will also find people moving away from their core values in the name of their cause, which they believe is for the greater good but in reality is driven by the control of hate.

Mr. King states that a nation, group or even a person's vital unity is damaged. In the election both parties professed to have the same high level goals of a strong America internally and internationally and differed on the means to attain the goal. If this is true, why is there such a deep hatred? Why not work together? Is it a quest for power? The importance of unity and cooperation is well described by Stella Terrill Mann: Whatever God's dream about man may be, it seems certain it cannot come true unless man cooperates. Hate does create a form of unity and cooperation; what I would call closed unity. If you do not believe the way we do, you are wrong, you are the enemy and must be destroyed (removed from political power). In business one learns the value and teamwork. Teams don't always agree and do have energetic discussions. The objective however is to come to a resolution which is then supported by the team; even by those supporting an alternative idea. The objective of hate is to create factions and conflict and then state you are the only one who can bring everyone to work together and solve our problems. Those consumed by hate are focused on self serving objectives. And in many cases the focus is not on even building their dream in a constructive manner but instead work to ensure their opponent does not. A philosophy based on what is bad for my opponent is good for me.

Mr. King talked about loss of objectivity and hate causing us to confuse the true with the false and the false with the true. The loss objectivity, coupled with the drive to undermine one's opponent leads to misrepresentation of the truth. During the election I marveled at how many believed if something is said enough times to enough people it becomes the truth. It seemed as if the definition of the word "fact" was slowly morphing into one based solely on frequency of statement and the size of the audience. Many political candidates, reporters, columnists and the general public found this to be a convenient way to support their philosophies and views. The strategy appears to criticize first, get only the facts that support your view (alter as necessary). All would have been better served to have listened to John Adams: Facts are stubborn things and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.

Is power the root of all evil? Is power the fuel of hate? The desire for power and the rationalization of actions against others has been demonstrated by many in every century. David Limbaugh had this to say about today's political environment: Their angst proceeds from an arrogant feeling of superiority and entitlement. Actions are rationalized to gain power under the premise the "I" know best and "I" am the only one to fix the problems. But what

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must we think of someone whose actions demonstrate they will do whatever it takes to promote and institute their agenda? Weak commitment to their values, easily swayed by popular opinion, inconsistency in thoughts and decisions, arrogant, aloof, shallow, judgment clouded by hate? You cannot have a proud and chivalrous spirit if your conduct is mean and paltry; for whatever a man's actions are, such must be his spirit. Demosthenes a Greek politician around 350BC. This is great advice from an ancient politician. A current politician Evan Bayh makes a similar observation: We need to be a party that stands for more than the sum of our resentments. - Abraham Lincoln recognized You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time. People do eventually figure who is driven by hate and who is driven by the goal and has takes the interest of all into account.

So how does one act if you are one of the hated? How do you respond? Dale Carnegie offers a plan: When we hate our enemies, we are giving them power over us; power over our sleep, our appetites, our blood pressure, our health, and our happiness. Our enemies would dance with joy if only they knew how they were worrying us, lacerating us, and getting even with us! Our hate is not hurting them at all, but our hate is turning our own days and nights into a hellish turmoil. A strategy of control, focus and dedication to our dreams and not to defeating or hating our enemy is required. Adapting to change and being open to other ideas and assistance. Similar advice comes from one whom many would consider an unlikely source, Richard M. Nixon. Remember, always give your best. Never get discouraged. Never be petty. Always remember, others may hate you. But those who hate you don't win unless you hate them. And then you destroy yourself.

Is hate ever an acceptable emotion? An essay by Meir Y. Soloveichik titled "The Virtue of Hate" addresses this question. "He who hates must be wary, lest we become like those we are taught to despise. But hatred can be a vital function if it is controlled. Hate allows us to keep our guard up, to protect us. When we are facing those who seek nothing but our destruction, our hate reminds us with whom we are dealing. In order to manage hate one must be in control of oneself; otherwise we become consumed and become the opponent we seek not to become.

I posed a question in the beginning. Is hate in born or does it manifest itself from other vices such as greed or jealousy? I am still not sure but most likely it is a bit of both. The better we understand hate the easier we can recognize when it may be taking control of us. We cannot completely control our lives or other's actions which affect us. We can control how we handle the tasks life sends our way. I close with a quote used by George W. Bush in his acceptance

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speech as the winner of the 2004 election. There's an old saying, Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Be aware, be ready, be true to yourself, be true to others, and be in control.

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Lessons from BOODA

July 23, 2004

Posted by jisommer in : Attitude,Uncategorized

What is the aim or purpose of strategy? To improve our ability to shape and adapt to unfolding circumstances, so we (as individuals or as groups or as a culture or as a nation state) can survive on our own terms. – John Boyd

I grabbed Robert Coram's book Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War from the library expecting to read a book about a top notch modern era fighter pilot. A few years ago I read Chuck Yeager's biography and found it very interesting and entertaining. He had unbelievable skills and was a great example of how to take advantage of what life gives to you. While John Boyd is definitely a top fighter pilot (nicknamed 40 second Boyd because he would beat anyone in a dog fight within 40 seconds), the book was really about much more. From Publishers Weekly: He was a crackerjack jet fighter pilot, a visionary scholar and an innovative military strategist. From the book jacket: But what made Boyd a man for the ages was what happened after he left the cockpit Boyd transformed the way military aircraft-in particular the F-15 and F-16-were designed with his revolutionary "Energy-Maneuverability Theory," fighting the Air Force's entrenched ideas every step of the way. He then dedicated lonely years to a radical theory of conflict that at the time was mostly ignored, but now is acclaimed as the most influential thinking about conflict since Sun Tzu.

The quote at the beginning really describes Boyd's strategy for his life. He had a goal and purpose of mind with an attitude that anything could be overcome. I would like to share lessons I learned from Boyd on the "Strategy of Getting it Done".

Lessons from BOODA (will explain the name later):

Dream Conviction

As Yogi Berra once said: If you don't know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else. Everyone needs to have a dream, a sense of purpose. The unfolding circumstance to which Boyd referred in his quote happen everyday. Some are great and provide us just the boost we need and others are obstacles. To take advantage or overcome the obstacles generally requires decisions to be made followed by actions. But how do we decide, how do we act. The dream is the answer. Each is evaluated as to whether or not it will get us closer to our dream.

Sometimes our actions and decisions affect people. Should the effect on other people be a prime factor in our actions? Boyd had fighter pilot's personality. He was aggressive, arrogant and rank and protocol of not a great concern to him. He seemed to get extra joy and satisfaction by hosing a general whenever he could. Boyd was not the type of person to use

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the win friends and influence people approach. He was focused on success, achieving his dreams. I think he would have agreed with Herbert Bayard Swope who said: I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you the formula for failure; which is to try to please everybody. The lesson to be learned is to make the correct choices for your dream and goals, not just to be politically correct or well liked.

Foreknowledge

A key to Boyd's military strategy was to know your enemy and in a more general case, your obstacles. He was a great admirer of Sun Tzu and this quote expresses their views: If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. To do this you must be well educated.

Much of Boyd's education was compiled on his own. His formal college education provided him with a strong base from which to launch his learning. History was a key component for him. He studied the greats of the past, compared them, found agreement and disagreement then formed his own thoughts and ideas. He used what I like to call associative or linked learning approach. As Boyd developed his military strategy and fighter plane theories he found he needed to branch into other areas deeper than he ever considered. His fighter plane adventures moved him deeply into mathematics and physics.

Beside gaining significant knowledge to develop his theories it also supplied him with the tools to combat those who criticized, made fun or in some case tried to destroy his reputation. Knowing your enemy/obstacles means being prepared. Anticipating what they may ask, what is wrong with my logic, what am I missing, what will I do if they do this. For Boyd this was an ongoing never ending process. He was always revising and improving. He reminded me of Harry Truman's quote about being an expert: An expert is a fella who was afraid to learn anything new because then he would not be an expert anymore. Said another way, The more you know, the less you know.

And will end this section with another quote from Sun Tzu: Now the reason the enlightened prince and the wise general conquer the enemy whenever they move and their achievements surpass those of ordinary men is foreknowledge.

Feedback

Boyd was a fanatic, some may say perfectionist, with everything he presented. His mode of communicating his ideas was through formal presentations. Since many were out to discredit his ideas, he had no room for error. He relied heavily on feedback from his team, which were called Acolytes. Any hour, day or night, he may call upon them to discuss his latest thoughts. They were his sounding posts as well as supplements to his talents. He surrounded himself with quality people and look to those to reinforce his weak areas. He was a very good mentor and did not mind sharing the spotlight and credit for their work. This fostered a very cohesive

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and loyal team.

Feedback can come from one of three methods. Internal (listening to oneself); Innercircle (listening to associates, friends, teachers, etc.); and Open Forum (all others). He paid close attention to anything related to his projects. What others thought, critique of related theories and the personalities involved – especially his greatest critics. One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears — by listening to them. – Dean Rusk

One of his contributions and means to explain strategy and learning was the OODA Loop (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act). Now you can see why I call this lessons from BOODA (Boyd's OODA loop). Key elements of this loop is constant feedback and speed with which one can process the feedback and turn it into action.

Leisure

The word leisure comes from the middle English word *leisour*, which means freedom or opportunity. The Oxford dictionary clarifies this meaning to be freedom to do not from something specified or implied. I first ran across this interpretation of leisure in the book [A Man Who Knew Infinity](#). The author used it to explain Ramanujan, a great mathematician; leisure was him creating the opportunity to work on his mathematics.

This is also applicable to Boyd. He made a special effort either outside of his normal work or within his normal work activity to create time to develop his theories. How many people are always saying they never have the time to do the things they like, or read a book, or study art, etc. I have found time and time again, as I read the biographies of successful people they were able to create leisure time for themselves. This time became their most productive time in their lives. This also reminds me of a story in Richard Feynman's book [Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!](#) . The story recalls a famous pianist is met by an admirer at a party and remarks that she would give anything to be able to play like him. He has most likely hear this many times and finally decided his response this time would be his true feelings. He stated back to her that she would not give anything to play like he does. He then went on to explain the hard work, training, dedication and time required. Lastly remarking that regardless of talent, she did not have the other attributes required.

Don't waste, create the leisure time. . . . work even when I'm satisfied with it is never my child I love nor my servant I've brought to heel. It's always busy work I do with my left hand, and part of me watches grudging the wastes of a lifetime.

Ruth Benedict

In Conclusion

John Boyd's story was truly very interesting and inspiring. I do not know how he was able to persevere with his dream in the face of many enemies. Still today he is not given the credit

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due, even while others use his theories everyday. Beside the book by R. Coram I also suggest you look at the web sites http://www.defense-and-society.org/second_level/boyd_military.htm and <http://www.belisarius.com/> . You will find more information about and by Boyd as well as application of his theories to current day issues. Chet Richard, one of the Acolytes, has written articles and a book showing how the theories can be applied to business.

Genius – An overused word?

June 10, 2004

Posted by jisommer in : Knowledge,Uncategorized

The kind of intelligence a genius has is different sort of intelligence. The thinking of a genius does not proceed logically. It leaps with great ellipses. It pulls knowledge from God know where. – Dorothy Thompson

This past spring my wife and I went to the gulf side of Florida to spend a relaxing week by the Gulf of Mexico. A daily activity was to spend a couple of hours sitting by the water enjoying a good book. This year I read a wonderful book, The Man Who Knew Infinity, about a great mathematician from India, Srinivasa Ramanujan. He is considered not only as one of India's greatest mathematical Geniuses, but also in all of mathematics (mostly unknown outside mathematics). The book does a great job by giving the reader an understanding and appreciation of what it was like for him to grow up in India pursuing his study of mathematics isolated from other western mathematicians. With the aid of a mathematical reference book of formulas and theorems he rediscovered hundreds of year's worth of mathematics' knowledge and added his own. He sent some of his notes to one of the top mathematicians in the world, G. H. Hardy. While his notes included much well known mathematics, the notes included over 100 theorems unknown to western mathematicians. Recognizing his genius Hardy decides to be Ramanujan's mentor and invites him to come to England to study. Also see [\[url=http://www.geocities.com/thesciencefiles/rama/page.html\]](http://www.geocities.com/thesciencefiles/rama/page.html)www.geocities.com/thesciencefiles/rama/page.html[/url] for a summary of Ramanujan's life.

I enjoy reading historical books about those who have made significant achievements in their life. Many of the people are ordinary using their talents to the fullest and taking advantage of or creating opportunities. Some are in the extraordinary class which goes far beyond any normal ability. With the application of dedication, concentrated effort, tremendous focus and a spirit of creativity they use their God given talent to make unbelievable contributions. To them science fiction is history. This special class of individuals is normally called Genius. In this essay I would like to focus on the scope of Genius. Is the word overused?

The dictionary defines Genius as: Extraordinary intellectual and creative power. Originally Genius was a term from Roman Mythology synonymous with Juno. Genius/Juno were ancestors who guarded over their descendants. Over time it evolved to personal guardian spirits who granted intellectual power and prowess. Does this imply we should regard Genius as a higher spirit?

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Some people associate the term Genius with a person they perceive as significantly more intelligent than themselves. Relative to me they are a Genius. Martin Gardner made the remark in his book [Excellence: Can we be equal and excellent too?](#): Genius used to be rare. Today, thanks to popular interpretation of test scores, every elementary or secondary school has its quote. As I was browsing a bookstore recently I saw a title of a book called [Cocktail Genius](#), definitely an overuse of the word Genius.

This brings to mind a conversation in [Alice in Wonderland](#) where Alice asks Humpty Dumpty: The question is whether you can make words mean different things. To which he responds, When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.

I think we need to define and use the word Genius as a more restrictive class. The more re-definition of a word, I believe, the more diluted its original meaning becomes. A word such as Genius is an honor to bestow upon a person. Redefining it reduces the rank of all receiving the distinction. One may think of it as being analogous to using God's name in vain. Improper usage exhibits a lack of respect and honor.

Let's start with a part of Ms. Thompson's quote I used at the beginning: It leaps with great ellipses. It pulls knowledge from God know where. We are looking for people who make huge original leaps in their field of work, rather than merely extending work in that field. William Crashaw makes a very simple definition of Genius: Genius is an African who dreams up snow. This is definitely a great leap pulling the idea of snow from who knows where, since the African had never previously heard of snow. Ms. Thompson links Genius with God, which I believe is very appropriate. As I have read about the lives and accomplishments of a true Genius, the only explanation of their great gift is through a divine inspiration.

How do we describe a real Genius? What are the characteristics of a Genius? Michael Michalko wrote a book [Thinking Like a Genius](#). In his book he gives eight strategies used by Geniuses from Aristotle and Leonardo to Einstein and Edison. The premise of his book is that even if we are not a Genius, we can benefit from understanding their strategies. It is a very good book where one indeed can learn from the Genius.

I would like to offer my own characteristics of a Genius and use Srinivasa Ramanujan as my guide. First I see a Genius as being primarily self-taught. While they do learn and use the knowledge from others (as noted in Isaac Newton's quote "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.") they distinguish themselves by creating their own unique learning experience to create knowledge instead of merely expanding what is known. By creating their own unique methods, analogies and perspectives they are able to see things

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or solve problems no one else would even dream of. Ramanujan used a book by G. S. Carr as his reference for mathematics. It was primarily a listing of important formulas and theorems of mathematics (no detailed proofs). From this he built his mathematical knowledge. It also probably was an influence on the amount of details he documented on his discoveries, concise with very few proofs.

The second characteristic is creativity. One of the best short definitions I have seen for creativity is: ability to make unexpected connections. Not only does a Genius come up with creative ideas and solutions, but they also have the ability to look at something that appears to be insignificant or garbage to most people and turn it into a great scientific discovery. Last year I read the book [Mauve How One Man Invented a Color that Changed the World](#). From Amazon: In 1856, while trying to synthesize artificial quinine, 18-year-old chemistry student William Perkin instead produced a murky residue. Fifty years later, he described the event: he "was about to throw a certain residue away when I thought it might be interesting. The solution of it resulted in a strangely beautiful color." Perkin had stumbled across the world's first aniline dye, a color that became known as mauve. His discovery revolutionized business of dyes and fashion industry.

A third characteristic comes from Michalko's book. He states that a Genius thinks productively, not reproductively. Reproductive thinking uses the problem solving methodology of past experience and similar problems to find a solution. A Genius extends the process to ask, how many different ways they can look at the problem. How can I extend what I just solved to more general case or other dissimilar problems? In the book and movie [A Beautiful Mind](#), John Nash's Genius was the method he used to solve problems. He solved problems in the most unusual manner with unexpected results. In the book about Ramanujan, the author compared him to a magician. When one looks at the results of an intelligent person, you are impressed. You review how they arrived at the result and determine if you had spent the time, had more knowledge you too probably could have come to the same conclusion. With a magician, even after seeing the process and results, you still have no idea how it was done. Ramanujan came up with results and methods that astounded the top mathematicians of his time (and also those who came later).

A fourth characteristic is focus and productivity. Some Genius are focused on one subject field, others are polymath (such as Leonardo DaVinci) where they contribute to many different fields. All have in common the drive, motivation, intensity and focus to spend many productive hours. The quantity of work they produce generally surpassed the combination of many other greats in their field. Ramanujan's first correspondence with G. H. Hardy at Cambridge included 120

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theorems completely unknown to western mathematicians. In his short lifetime (33 years, died in 1920) he produced over 4000 theorems and formulas of significant relevance.

A fifth characteristic is longevity. I am not referring to longevity of human life, but longevity of their influence in their field(s). In Ramanujan's case he did not supply a lot of proofs for his work. Others have made the further development and explanation of his ideas their careers. Many of his theorems and ideas have become valuable new tools in mathematics and physics. Some of his strange ideas have not only been found to be theoretically useful but also have found practical applications. Today there is still an undeveloped source of his ideas mathematicians are still trying to analyze.

The last characteristic is intuition (There is a very good article from Fast Company about intuition of ordinary people, see <http://www.fastcompany.com/online/38/klein.html>). A Genius makes many conjectures without details of the logic to prove the conjecture. While they are not always correct, their batting average is very good and when they hit a home run it is out of the universe. As you may know there are several great unsolved problems of mathematics. Mathematicians have tried for many years to prove or disprove them. Success has come in some cases, such as Fermat's theorem. Every so often you see something in the media about one of Einstein's theories has finally been able to be proved because we now have the technology to conduct the experiment. Ramanujan's vast number of formulas and theorems (without proof); provide evidence of his unbelievable mathematical intuition. Another component of the intuition of a Genius is I believe the ability to visualize. They can see patterns, normally incompatible ideas, and unusual associations with the ability to pull the thoughts together. Their thought process is not linear but a set of seemingly disconnected ideas in the vision of their mind to which they form associations and connections.

Earlier I made the statement that for a Genius science fiction is a look at history. They have such a vision and intuition which defies logic and goes well beyond current knowledge. My oldest son got me interested in a TV show called Alias. It is about a young lady who is a CIA agent. Very much like a James Bond type of movie, but I believe actually better. In the show the main nemesis is pursuing the ideas and inventions of a Genius from the past Milo Giacomo Rambaldi (1444 – 1496). Rambaldi demonstrates the characteristics I have described and has invented devices that have only today been able to be manufactured and some devices yet to be understood. See <http://www.alias-tv.com/rambaldi.html> for more information about this imaginary Genius.

In preparation for this essay I looked to see who others have designated as Genius. Harold Bloom has a book giving his top 100 Genius of literature. I found several sources on the

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internet where people listed the top 10, 100, etc., Genius for all fields, mathematics, science etc. Many of them consistently showed up on each list. Here is one such list: <http://www.free-definition.com/Genius.html> I suggest you pick one and read a book about their life. You will find amazement, appreciation, and wonderment. And hopefully inspiration. In closing, be respectful of the Genius. The world and the quality of life would be completely different without them. I have to wonder that many of them are heaven sent.

Defining Myself

April 12, 2004

Posted by jsommer in : Improvement, Uncategorized

Definition: A statement expressing the essential nature of something

The previous comes from one of the dictionary definitions of the word definition. While we normally think of defining words, my recent experience interviewing for a new job has prompted me to consider defining oneself. During the interview process the prospective employer gathers visual and verbal information about you, assesses the data and draws conclusions to define who you are, what you know, how you will interact with people, what motivates you, your personality type, and how you will perform. In some cases they determine this out in an hour – a pretty good feat.

It is important to understand yourself. The only way to improve is to assess where you are, identify your weak points and design a plan to create a better you. So in this essay I will take the dictionary approach and try to define myself. As with most words, they have multiple definitions and sometimes several meanings. So will I. In this essay I will identify the words to define myself – definientia (my new word for the day) and elaborate on each.

I have come up with five definientia used to define me. They are Equanimity, Personal Mastery, Polymath, Identification, and Teacher. Here is my definition of me:

MySelf, noun: An aspiring polymath who enjoys sharing his knowledge with others in a Socratic manner. One who strives to improve his personal mastery with identification and to maintain control and handle adversity with equanimity.

Equanimity:

What determines how well one performs in difficult situations is how well one understands their strengths and weaknesses and uses this knowledge to be effective. When I came across the word equanimity, I thought it fit well to describe my approach to stressful and difficult situations. I found a definition from a dictionary dating back to 1828: Evenness of mind; calm temper or firmness of mind which is not easily elated or depressed, which sustains prosperity without excessive joy and adversity without violent agitation of the passions or depression of spirits. For example; the great man bears misfortune with equanimity. I have found maintaining control of a situation and being able to clearly think and process information will lead to a more successful and longer lasting resolution. As a leader, people gain comfort and offer more productive input when they feel the situation can be managed and they can be part of the solution.

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Personal Mastery:

Even though this is a phrase instead of one word, it is important part of my definition. This definition comes not from a dictionary but from Peter Senge's book Fifth Discipline. He defines it as:

Approaching one's life as a creative work, a living life form. A person striving for personal mastery has the following characteristics:

- Vision is a calling rather than simply a good idea.
 - Current reality is an ally not an enemy. Learn from Ebenezer Scrooge's dream in the Christmas Carol as he saw past, current and future reality and learned from it to change his life. Experience is a great teacher (it opens the door for you) if you learn to use it (choose to walk through the door).
 - Develop and learn to use intuition - instinctive knowing by quick and ready insight through the use of clues and patterns. A novice examines and compares different approaches to solving problems while an expert comes up with a plan, makes a rapid assessment and then moves fast (by asking what's going on, not what do I do and uses categorization from prior experience). (From a 9/2000 article in Fast Company on intuition by G. Klein, Cognitive Psychologist)
- Learn to perceive and work with forces of change rather than resist those forces.
 - Proactive. True proactiveness is where we see how we contribute to our own problems.
 - Strive to be a craftsman who practices their craft with great skill and high quality.
 - And last but not most important is to live in a continual learning mode.

Polymath:

Since my college degree was in mathematics my first assumption for the definition of this word was a strong connection to the discipline of mathematics. While mathematics is a part of the definition, it is not the main point. I found a very good explanation of the word on a web site for the Polymath Society (www.angelfire.com/fl/polymathsociety/whatis.html). A person is considered a polymath if they excel in multiple fields; particularly arts and science using a universality of approach. The person has a passion for getting their hands dirty, for tinkering and for inventing through trial and error. It is a mind in control of emotions but also genuine integration of feelings and sensibilities with thought (note linkage to equanimity). The brain requires constant exercise and the polymath seeks to develop a highly tuned mental processing unit. Another word used for a polymath is Renaissance man. Today people seemed to be more interested in specialist and de-emphasize the contribution of the polymath. When you need creative, innovative solutions to problems or improvements a polymath can leverage their wealth of knowledge and experiences to make the unexpected connections necessary to create breakthrough ideas. While I am nowhere near great polymaths of history (DaVinci,

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Galileo, etc.) I feel a desire and energy to be well rounded. My mathematics background, computer science experience, knowledge of business and interest in history give me a strong analytical background. My arts background is the hardest for me to develop but I have tried to improve it through writing, reading, study of creativity and the pursuit of goal of a craftsman cabinetmaker.

Identification:

The definition for this word comes from David Allen, a productivity and organizational guru who give very sound and practical advice. While interviewing for positions I have heard several times from prospective employers they desired the person to exhibit a passion for his work. David Allen offers a better word: Identification. He states: Rather than passion I would suggest the word identification. When you really identify with something, whether it is some intended outcome or some internal standard about your reality, it creates a true motivational energy to make it happen.

Identification will create incredibly focused energy when that energy is required. But most often it will manifest as calm and deliberate thinking with action continually refocusing on desired outcomes is the master key to success try peaceful purposefulness. (Notice the strong link in this last attribute of Identification to Equanimity – calm and deliberate thinking.)

Teacher:

One definition for teacher is any professional who teaches the principles of their profession. At one point in my career I worked for a Vice President who liked to give nicknames to his staff members based on their characteristics. For me, he chose the nickname professor (teacher). Some say a person is born to teach, maybe he felt I projected and displayed the teacher characteristics. Even though I do not believe he knew, I started my career as a teacher and have done some sort of teaching or tutoring ever since. My role as a teacher has surfaced in direct situations such as tutoring in mathematics or indirectly by aiding an employee in their development or teaching my customers new tools. Therefore, I believe professor or teacher is an important definiens in my definition. My philosophy of teaching mirrors the approach I use for myself in the effort to continually learn. First – we know more than we think we know. It's a matter of asking the correct questions then searching and developing the answers. I like the approach of Socrates' questioning methodology to teach principles and concepts in a manner so the person feels they played a key role in their learning, which of course they did. Ellis Wallentine describes James Krenov's mentoring method (cabinetmaker and teacher) as: In his quick, self-effacing and sometimes impish way, he delivers his critiques in the form of questions and oblique suggestions, which convey his point without becoming too didactic.

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An anonymous quote states this well: Tell me and I forget, Show me and I remember, Involve me and I learn. I also strongly believe in teaching principles not formulas (as advocated by famous physicist Richard Feynman). When I tutor I work to help my students to understand that education (learning) is a participative sport. The development of real knowledge requires intentional activity – David Allen Beside the satisfaction of seeing a person develop and grow, I also agree with Joseph Joubert when he says: To teach is to learn twice; the person will ask questions I never considered and answering them expands my knowledge. And lastly, I firmly believe the goal of education is to teach us how to learn and I support B. F Skinner when he says: Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.

The Nature of Me:

Thus I have defined the essential nature of me.

I will close with a part of a poem from a NY poet and friend of mine, Steve Dalachinsky.

i feel empty

À a lonely planet

when i miss what i seek

and seek what does not

excite me.

Know what you want, know yourself, make a plan and go for it.

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Super Powers

February 4, 2004

Posted by jsommer in : Leadership,Uncategorized

I never shall shine, æ~til some animating occasion calls forth all my powers.

–John Adams.

These quotes are from the book

JOHN ADAMS By David McCullough see a sample of the book at:

<http://www.teenreads.com/reviews/0743223136-excerpt.asp>

When I was reading the book both of these quotation struck me as being very interesting. At first one may think that John Adams is waiting for something to come along to allow him to use his abilities. The second quote by Abigail puts it in better context. He knew great challenges lay ahead which he must accept and will require utilization of all his skills and resources.

Have you ever accomplished something and later looked back and thought, I did that, how did I ever do it. I did not think I could. Circumstances and animating occasion many time bring out the best in us, if we are prepared. What does being prepared mean?

I must admit when I read John Adams' quote I also thought of the superheroes in the comics and movies. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

A superhero is a fictional comic book hero, usually with abilities far beyond those of normal human beings. The abilities are usually superhuman — like invulnerability, but may be perfected versions of normal abilities — like great agility. Many superheroes, e.g. Batman and the Green Hornet, are ordinary men possessing no super-powers. Their status as a superhero derives from an extraordinary willpower, intellect, physical perfection, exotic outfits and equipment, and a drive to fight for what is right—or, at least, what they consider right.

I want to emphasize the human traits mentioned: willpower (persistence),intellect(experience, equipment), drive (attitude) and fight (action).

First of all is the proper attitude, willingness to accept the challenges and make the best of imperfect situations. Charles Kettering said It's amazing what ordinary people can do if they set out without preconceived notions. Have an open mind, think you can, visualize success. I started running a few years ago at the age of 48. Never thought I would ever run long distances, hated running more that a quarter mile. Running in the early morning hours, in the dark and cold weather is not always easy. You really must be self motivated. A wonderful book for runners (especially for the average runner) is John Bingham's book. His motto is: The

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miracle isn't that we finish, the miracle is that we had the courage to start. Recognize and seize the opportunities presented to you with the proper attitude.

Second part of preparedness is Experience. Life is an experience. But why are some people deemed to be very experienced. It's not because of longevity. Aldous Huxley helps to explain: Experience is not what happens to you, it is what you do with what happens to you. And Albert Camus clarifies further by saying: You cannot create experience, you undergo it. One must learn from their experiences, make the unexpected connections of various experiences (creative thinking) and apply your experience to new challenges. Each problem that I solved became a rule which served afterward to solve other problems. Rene Descartes. Increase your preparedness by learning, using what you have learned and growing. Seek opportunities to fill in the voids in your knowledge. I like Oprah Winfrey's thoughts on using preparedness: My philosophy is that not only are you responsible for your life, but doing the best at this moment puts you in the best place for the next moment. And, To live is to have problems and to solve problems is to grow intellectually. – JP Guilford

Third is persistence. Here is Newt Gingrich's definition of persistence: Persistence is the hard work that you do after you are tired of doing the hard work you already did. A challenge is called a challenge because everything is not expected to go perfectly. Obstacles will occur and persistence is a requirement to work through the obstacle. All truth passes through 3 stages. 1st is ridiculed, 2nd is violently opposed, 3rd is is accepted as being self-evident – Arthur Schopenhauer. People may object, especially if you are being innovative or requiring them to change. My son gave me a poster several years ago with a great quote from Einstein: Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds. Not everyone likes change or appreciates innovative solutions to problems. Overcoming people resistance is many time harder than actually solving the problem. “Nothing will ever be attempted if all possible objections must first be overcome – Samuel Johnson.

And last a bias for Action. All worthwhile men have good thoughts, good ideas and good intentions. But precious few of them ever translate those into action – John Hancock Field.

Avoid analysis paralysis. Deciding not to decide is a decision and most of the time the incorrect one. Edward deBono's six thinking hats

<http://www.edwdebono.com/> is a great model to follow:

Information, Intuition, Creativity, Judgment, Optimism, Management of the process.

I recently started to read Dream of Reason by Anthony Gottlieb. The philosopher Heraclitus seemed to sum up a lot of what I have presented in the previous paragraphs. He saw flux, change and strife wherever he looked. And believed strife and unity can be drawn together

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into one harmonious whole. This quote from Heraclitus writings says it very well: Most people sleep walk through life, not understanding what is going on about them. Yet experience of words and deeds can enlighten those who are receptive to their meaning.

Be perceptive, be prepared and act and everyone can summon their powers to greatness. Don't be filled with regret by missing your chance. Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream Discover – Mark Twain.

Why, because: The use of your powers along the lines of excellence is the definition of happiness – John F. Kennedy.

Advancing a Dream

January 7, 2004

Posted by jsommer in : Improvement, Uncategorized

I have learned this at least by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the directions of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

From Henry David Thoreau (from the conclusion to Walden

<http://eserver.org/thoreau/walden18.html> (for the full text)

My youngest son received a card from his girl friends parents to congratulate him on achieving a 4.0 grade point average (his first) for the fall semester (he is a sophomore in college). They could not have selected a better quote to give him. Here is the remaining text of the paragraph:

He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

My son has always needed to work hard to get his grades and was an average student in high school. I am sure his older brother's academic achievement also affected him. Good grades always came much easier to his brother. There were many struggles in elementary and middle school to learn and get good grades in school. Tests always seemed to be a big problem for him and he was not much of a reader. And while his mathematics grades were up and down, I could tell he was learning and understanding the concepts. As he progressed through high school you could see his student habits improving and so did his grades.

Everything started to come together in college. First, he started out with a great can-do attitude. Was able right away to notice college required a different approach, dedication and maturity than did high school. It seems as if you have more free time in college, but in reality it is more time you have to learn to manage yourself. He even started to read more than ever before (many times more) and more importantly was enjoying what he read.

As Thoreau states, he developed confidence in his dream of doing well in college and changed his way of life (balancing study, social, sports, etc.) to attain his dream. His new laws

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developed and he was able to actually simplify his life while accomplishing more. As he prepared for finals this year he mentioned it was easier this year. Proper study, notes, understanding throughout the year made the preparation for a comprehensive test much less complex and definitely less stressful.

All of this enabled him to build a foundation for his castles in the air. (See <http://www.psymon.com/walden/quotes.html> for more Thoreau quotes)

Learning Mathematics

October 24, 2003

Posted by jisommer in : Knowledge,Uncategorized

achieving purpose without ever achieving understanding

Euclid's Window by Leonard Mlodinow

The Dawn

I would be ignorant as the dawn

That has looked down

On that old queen measuring a town

With the pin of a brooch,

Or on the withered men that saw

From their pedantic Babylon

The careless planets in their courses,

The stars fade out where the moon comes.

And took their tablets and did sums;

I would be ignorant as the dawn

That merely stood, rocking the glittering coach

Above the cloudy shoulders of the horses;

I would be — for no knowledge is worth a straw —

Ignorant and wanton as the dawn.

William Butler Yeats

June 13, 1865 – January 28th, 1939

In the book Euclid's Window by Leonard Mlodinow references Yeats poem in his assessment of the Babylonian approach to learning and using mathematics.

Yeats refers to Babylonian indifference to knowledge in this poem. This was a trait, which in mathematics, held them back from greatness. Pre-Greek humanity noticed many clever formulae, tricks of calculation and engineering, but like our political leaders, they sometimes accomplished amazing feats with astonishingly little comprehension of what they were doing. Nor did they care. They were builders, working in the dark, groping, feeling their way, erecting a structure here, laying down stepping stones there, achieving purpose without ever achieving understanding.

I tutor high school student in mathematics and more and more I am forming the opinion the current method of teaching mathematics has adopted the Babylonian approach. Let me give some examples to support my claim. First of all I see students being given a multitude of

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problems on the same process. Requiring them to calculate, solve, etc. the same type of problems over and over again. A certain amount of repetition is needed and one does need to give them the opportunity to work variations, but I see too much overkill. The real disappointment is I rarely see the more abstract, applied or thought provoking problems given to them. These are problems that will really determine their level of understanding versus being able to just follow a defined process, which is easily forgotten when not associated with understanding. I also tutor for SAT preparation. Everyone has his or her opinion about the value of SAT test. One thing the mathematics portion of the test does attempt to test is the understanding of certain mathematics principles. The level of mathematics on the test is not high, but it does require understanding and a problem solving process to get a score above 600.

I will illustrate further with some comments my students have made. We finished factoring today with the completion of our test. The teacher told us not to worry about factoring again until the end of grade testing. A student was working a process to determine the best fit of a line. She had the process down and was able to do it perfectly. I asked her if she knew why they were doing this, where it could be used, etc. She said they had not been told. After explaining the benefit, usefulness and power she thought it was very interesting and wanted to know more. While tutoring another student on matrix multiplication I asked if they had done any proofs on this topic. She said, Oh no, our teacher promised no more proofs after we finished geometry.

I know every student will not be a mathematician and many students have some poor skills in mathematics. Neither is a valid reason to not give them the opportunity to enjoy mathematics. No wonder most dislike it and cannot wait until they are done. The students I see having a high degree of math anxiety are just worried about doing a process, not interested in understanding. They feel they cannot and just want to pass the test. Once I can get them past this feeling and approach, they actually surprise themselves and say this is fun.

A problem based approach to teaching and learning mathematics can be a more effective method. See this diagram of key elements of learning mathematics. I am currently developing a better explanation and some lesson plans to illustrate. One analogy is to think of it as a project. This is another pet peeve of mine about the teaching of mathematics. How many times are students required to do a project/paper in a mathematics class? Very few I would venture to guess. A project offers the advantage of developing a clear objective, research, building up an understanding of supporting information, going deeper as necessary, connecting what you have learned to other topics or subjects, and finally being able to explain

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your project to someone else. Nothing like having to explain to someone else to see if you really know what you have learned.

A passage from Henry Wadsworth's 1865 book Kavanagh: A Tale highlights his thoughts on method of teaching mathematics.

How dull and prosaic the study of mathematics is mad in our schoolbooks; as if the drand science of numbers has been discovered and perfected merely to further the purpose of trade. There is something divine in the science of numbers... It holds the sea in the hollow of its hand. It measures the earth; its weighs the stars; it illuminates the universe; it is law, it is order, it is beauty. And yet we imagine — that is, most of us — that its highest end and culminating point is bookkeeping by double entry. It is our way of teaching it which makes it so prosaic.

The state of North Carolina has published their student goals for mathematics. I think the goals are very good. My experience lends me to believe they are not being attained. Appear that the main goal is to pass a test covering process execution. Here are the goals:

- Strong mathematics problem solving and reasoning ability.
- Firm grounding in essential mathematical concepts and skills including computation and estimation.
- Connections within mathematics and other disciplines.
- Ability to use appropriate tools including technology to solve mathematics problems.
- Ability to communicate understanding of mathematics effectively.
- Positive attitude and beliefs about mathematics

Let's not make our student's Ignorant and wanton as the dawn. The Greek's flourished because of their interest and approach to learning. Give our students the same benefit.

A Memory of the Future

September 15, 2003

Posted by jsommer in : Attitude,Uncategorized

dream is inquiry

a memory of the future

notes taken at an as yet unscheduled event

...

because all elements make up a dream

we are its proof

- Steve Dalachinsky "Duets"

This is from a poem Duets by Steve Dalachinsky from his album Incomplete Directions. His reference in the poem is to our nighttime dreams, but I believe are just as relevant to our dreams of who or what we want to be.

Dreams are the key to a happy and successful life. Without them we have no direction. With a well-defined dream, decisions become easier because we can evaluate which choice brings us closer to our dream. Enjoyment in our family, work and hobbies is heightened. We have a passion in what we do and what we are that gives us fulfillment and we become a person other people enjoy and admire.

One of the best books I have ever read about developing and achieving your dreams is "Simple Steps to Impossible Dreams: The Fifteen Power Secrets of the World's Most Successful People" by Steve Scott. The book does not really describe any magical formula. The magic is that it can be done and the author gives you some simple steps. The steps are simple to state but require actions to be completed. He does a great job pointing out how people stop themselves from achieving their dreams.

John Bingham, in reference to running for fitness, has as his slogan: "The miracle isn't that we finish, the miracle is that we had the courage to start". In addition he states; " We all need to live out our dreams,. We need to spend less time planning and organizing and more time doing. We need to spend less time worrying about doing things and more time rejoicing we are doing them at all".

We are what we dream, dreams can be accomplished by doing. Follow Yoda's advice: "Do or do not. There is no try" and the same thought by Goethe (Faust); "Knowing is not enough, we must apply. Willing is not enough, we must do".

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At first I was not sure what category was best for this. It could fall into several of them, Improvement, Creativity, Values, etc. I decided on in the category of attitude. How we handle what life presents to us is determined by our attitude. Having well defined dreams can be a foundation for our attitude, something for us to hang onto and help to formulate and direct our response to life's many challenges in a productive and optimistic manner.

On last thought to keep in mind. The dream is not a final destination. As John Bingham has said; " I learned that if you love what you are doing, if you can keep the passion alive, the journey to greatness is more important than the destination". You will find "It's kind of fun to do the impossible"; Walt Disney. And "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams"; Eleanor Roosevelt.

Be the proof of your dreams.

Thoughtable Quotes

Self Growth

July 16, 2003

Posted by jisommer in : Improvement,Uncategorized

You and I are self-organizing systems. We do this by paying attention to our own thoughts about what is going on around us and developing our responses from an evolving awareness unique to our own experience.

Peter Kline, [Critical Thinking Why Children Can't Think](#)

To live is to evolve and to evolve is to change. Gloria Steinem put it well when she said: The art of life is not controlling what happens to us, but using what happens to us.

There are those who avoid change at all costs. They defer decision; wait to let it work out for itself. Of course making no decision is making a decision; generally not the best decision for you. This quote points out we are self-organizing (self-evolving) people. To grow intellectually, emotionally and socially we must be able to change and evolve. How do we ensure we do?

First is to recognize and understand the need for change. Neither a wise man nor a brave man lies down on the tracks of history to wait for the train of the future to run him over – Dwight D. Eisenhower. Beneficial growth will not happen when left purely to chance. Change is not merely necessary to life; IT IS LIFE.

Second, we need to know ourselves; pay attention to our own thoughts. We must develop a dream or vision for ourselves; otherwise we can wander aimlessly. As Yogi Berra says: You got to be careful if you don't know where you are going, because you might not get there. A personal inventory of what we like, what we do well, our weaknesses, etc. is vital to growth. You cannot consistently perform in a manner which is inconsistent with the way you see yourself – Zig Ziglar. I am what I am and I am going to take advantage of myself and succeed.

Thirdly, we need to increase our awareness and improve our observational powers. Many events occur in our life. Some are great for us, while some cause problems. How we handle them is so critical. I like what Breffni Baggot said: An idea (opportunity) can turn to dust or magic, depending on the talent that rubs against it.

Fourth, an action plan needs to be developed. We need to have a bias for action as opposed to never ending analysis. Consider the thoughts of John Bingham (alias the Penguin from Runners World): We need to live out our dreams. We need to spend less time planning and organizing and more time doing. We need to spend less time worrying about doing things well and more time rejoicing we are doing them at all. This is not to say we do not need to plan,

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but planning should not be an excuse for not starting. Our dream or vision will be our yardstick to measure whether or not our actions are moving us closer to the dream.

Fifth, we need to recognize we are unique. While we may have many of the same components of another person, the sum of our experiences, talents and dreams are different. As we learn and grow, we associate previous knowledge and experience to new events in our lives. New knowledge can be supportive of existing or cause us to abandon our previous ideas. This formation of our internal web continues to adapt and evolve. We are most definitely a system where the sum of the parts is most important. Don't make the same mistake as Frankenstein: Frankenstein's fateful error was to consider everything but the sum of the parts he assembled. He had failed to understand the body as a system. From Why Things Bite Back, E. Tenner. Remember a bit of advice from the Little Zen Companion: Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old; seek what they sought.

Lastly, we must view growth as a continuous journey with a feedback loop to our selves monitoring our progress and enabling corrections. Must also follow the advice of Ursula K. LeGuin; "It is good to have an end to the journey; it is the journey that matters in the end." "It's the time of your life, so live it well" – movie Bugs Life. Enjoy the process, this is the secret to being happy.

Thoughtable Quotes

Connection via the Moon

June 23, 2003

Posted by jisommer in : Relationships, Uncategorized

The moon sees you, the moon sees me

The moon sees who I want to see

I'll see you soon

Down in the light of the melon moon

- Flatlanders song Down in the light of the melon moon from their CD [Now Again](#)

Ever looked up at the sky at night, gaze at the moon and think about others are seeing the same moon as you. People separated by great distances and different perspectives can be connected. And for a time the world does not seem to be so large.

My son is getting married this summer (of 2003) and he and his fiancée carried on their courtship while each attended different law schools separated by 450 miles.

I thought of them each time I heard this Flatlander's song about two people distances apart making a connection through the moon. Those who know the story of how they met would truly say their destiny was written in the stars. Which makes it even more appropriate to have their love for each other transcend the distances via the moon.

They will soon be together as husband and wife and sit together on a clear night of a full moon and can see their dreams in the light of the melon moon.

Thoughtable Quotes

Stability

June 10, 2003

Posted by jisommer in : Improvement,Uncategorized

True stability results when presumed order and presumed disorder are balanced. A truly stable system expects the unexpected, is prepared to be disrupted, and waits to be transformed.

- Tom Robbins

This is one of my favorite definitions of stability even though at first read it is very different from the standard dictionary definition. Some standard definitions include:

1. the quality, state, or degree of being stable
 - o the strength to stand or endure : FIRMNESS
 - o the property of a body that causes it when disturbed from a condition of equilibrium or steady motion to develop forces or moments that restore the original condition
 - o resistance to chemical change or to physical disintegration
2. residence for life in one monastery
3. in mathematics, condition in which a slight disturbance in a system does not produce too disrupting an effect on that system.
4. The state or quality of being stable, especially
 - o Resistance to change, deterioration, or displacement.
 - o Constancy of character or purpose; steadfastness.
 - o Reliability; dependability.
5. The ability of an object, such as a ship or aircraft, to maintain equilibrium or resume its original, upright position after displacement, as by the sea or strong winds.

The standard definitions imply a resistance to change and a determination to return to the original state. Let's think about stability in the context of a business. If you state you want to work for a stable company, what do you really mean? Is your image a company that does not change, stays the course, and reacts to a disturbance by fostering its forces to return itself to the original condition?

In today's business world I don't believe that would be my definition of a stable company. I prefer the definition given by Mr. Robbins. Change is inevitable and the true test is how the disruption of change is handled. It is important to understand what the change or disruption is telling us. Is it an anomaly that is a one-time occurrence or is it a warning of more to come? Being stable means a system is in place to understand the importance, the impact, and the risks. Then be able to analyze, design and implement a plan to handle the change. An assessment of the effectiveness of the plan and what we can learn for future events is a step that cannot be skipped.

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To me stability is being resilient and adaptable while still keeping your focused direction consistent with your effort to realize your vision and dreams. If the focus is lost or compromised you will wander.

We can never forget what Yogi Berra said: " You got to be careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there." as well as "If you don't know where you are going, you will wind up somewhere else."

Why is a company successful? It may be because they know where they are going have processes in place to keep on course in a changing environment.

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Narrative of a Craftsman

May 21, 2003

Posted by jisommer in : Craftmanship,Uncategorized

"Try to live the way you are, be the person in your work that you are in the rest of your life."

The Impractical Cabinetmaker by James Krenov

I make furniture as a hobby and this book was an inspiration to take my woodworking to a new level. Very thought provoking not only for a woodworker but for anyone that wants to consider the work they do to be that of a craftsman (could also substitute the word professional for craftsman). Here are some of his philosophy and advice.

We have to feel good about what we are embarking on; even if it's the start of a long, difficult job of various definite processes we still have to feel good inside, there has to be something central about the whole thing that adds up for us.

So your way of going about doing things will be an interpretation of something basically sound. It won't be against the laws of wood or of clean work or the simple truth of good and bad points, but it will be a series of personal adaptations. It will be yours, with flexibility and a final clarity of your own. Even your mistakes will be personal. And I think personal mistakes are less painful and more enriching than mistakes made through other people's methods or measures.

You cannot divorce the shapes with their details from the process of work itself. All the things we are must be in our work. The difference in our work will be the difference between a craftsman and us. There will be a certain stiffness about the work of those who rely mostly on techniques and want predetermined results.

Try to live the way you are, be the person in your work that you are in the rest of your life.

With repairing mistakes there is a crude way and a fine way of going about it. By allowing ourselves to be crude in moments like this (little moments of crisis) we might develop habits that will spread the crudeness into other parts of our work.

We need to observe ourselves as we work, not just to look at what is happening, where the work is taking us, because if we cannot observe and really notice what is taking place, how will we ever see the connection between what we are doing and where it is leading us?

One of the designs could be executed by five or six cabinetmakers and even in broad daylight most of us could not tell who made which. There were no cabinetmaker's fingerprints on the work.

Root Cause Analysis

May 13, 2003

Posted by jisommer in : Problem Solving,Uncategorized

"Do not look where you fell, but where you slipped."

- African proverb

When I first read this quote I had an image from several years ago when I was visiting with one of my brothers. He was returning from the kitchen talking to me as he walked. All of a sudden he stumbled and almost fell. Once he gained his balance, he turned his head to try to determine why he tripped. Quickly he determined the cause. Lying on the floor with a mischievous grin was his dog, a Doberman. The dog was just a puppy but of course large paws indicating his potential size. Feeling ignored and in the mood to be playful the dog stretched out his large paw just as my brother walked by. The desired effect was achieved; the dog was now the center of attention.

When an error has been made, an issue raises its ugly head or an unforeseen event disrupts the norm how do you react? Some people completely ignore the problem and view it as a random event not likely to occur again. In some cases this may be the best approach. Others quickly determine what they view as the cause, make an adjustment and move on. Some times call the band-aid approach. Probably the vast minority takes a more disciplined approach to determine the real cause. This is more properly called root cause analysis. There is a well-defined process to aid the pursuit of determining the root cause of the problem. 5 Whys and Cause and Effect diagrams are popular methods utilized. It is also important to determine whether or not it is the result of common cause (Chronic and inherent in the process) or special cause (which is sporadic and originates outside the process).

Why go through all this trouble to find the root cause? One of the best ways to learn or make a quantum improvement is by trying new things and taking risks. Not everything works but we can learn a great deal from the mistakes. Looking where you fell will help you to move farther. I can recall many times I gained the best understanding of a concept or system when I was faced with a new situation filled with problems. The other reason for going through the process of why is to ensure that it will not happen again. In many cases one can also apply what has been learned to prevent an occurrence of a similar undesirable event. This is especially important when it effects others, such as your customer.

Thoughtable Quotes

Song of Chess

May 1, 2003

Posted by jisommer in : Creativity,Uncategorized

For a war of thoughts their war is.

This is a copy of an old poem on chess by a Spanish Jewish rabbi in the 12th century. English translation is by Nina Davis (now Mrs. Salomon)

The Song of Chess

I will sing a song of battle
Planned in days long passed and over
Men of skill and science set it
On a plain of eight divisions,
And designed in squares all chequered.
Two camps face each one the other,
And the Kings stand by for battle,
And twixt these two is the fighting.

Bent on war the face of each is,
Ever moving or encamping,
Yet no swords are drawn in warfare,
For a war of thoughts their war is.
They are known by signs and tokens
Sealed and written on their bodies;
And a man who sees them,
Thinketh Edomites and Ethiopians
Are these two that fight together.

And the Ethiopian forces
Overspread the field of battle,
And the Edomites pursue them.

First in battle the foot soldier
Comes to fight upon the highway,
Ever marching straight before him,
But to capture moving sideways,
Straying not from off his pathway,

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Neither do his steps go backwards;
He may leap at the beginning
Anywhere within three chequers.

Should he take his steps in battle
Far away unto the eighth row,
Then a Queen to all appearance
He becomes and fights as she does.
And the Queen directs her moving
As she will to any quarter.

Backs the elephant or advances,
Stands aside as twere an ambush;
As the Queen's way, so if his way,
But o'er him she hath advantage,
He stands only in the third rank.

Swift the horse is in the battle,
Moving on a crooked pathway;
Ways of his are never crooked;
Mid the squares, three form his limit.

Straight the wind moves o'er the warpath
In the field across or lengthwise;
Ways of crookedness he seeks not,
But straight paths without perseverance.
Turning every way the King goes,
Giving aid unto his subjects;
In his actions he is cautious,
Whether fighting or encamping.

If his foe come to dismay him,
From his place he flees in terror,
Of the wind can give him refuge.
Sometimes he must flee before him;
Multitudes at times support him;
And all slaughter each the other,
Wasting with great wrath each other.

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Mighty men of both sovereigns
Slaughtered fall, with yet no bloodshed.
Ethiopia sometimes triumphs,
Edom flees away before her;
Now victorious is Edom:
Ethiopia and her sovereign
Are defeated in the battle.

Should a King in the destruction
Fall within the foeman's power,
He is never granted mercy,
Neither refuge nor deliverance,
Nor a fight to refuge city.

Judged by foes and lacking rescue,
Though not slain he is checkmated
Hosts about him all are slaughtered,
Giving life for his deliverance.

Quenched and banished is their glory,
For they see their lord is smitten;
Yet the fight again this battle,
For in death is resurrection.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (commentator, poet, philosopher, astronomer, Rabbi)
Spain, 1093-1167

It is characteristic of this poem that the pawn moves two spaces at the first move, as at present, but not as in the Arabic game. The queening of a pawn is also mentioned. The queen may move in all directions, but only one space, like the king at present. The bishop "fil" or (elephant) moves diagonally, but only three spaces. Castling is unknown. The "wind" is the rook.

<http://www.goddesschess.com/chessays/bidev1.html> Origins of chess

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=437&letter=C&search=Abraham%20Ibn%20Ezra%20chess>]Reference in Jewish Encyclopedia