

Learning Is A Voluntary Endeavor



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Learning is a voluntary endeavor. This statement is profoundly simple, but also can feel complicated, difficult, and painful because it requires the fortitude to abandon those habits, thought patterns, and beliefs that are no longer “right.” I sought out learning on insight not because I was prepared to revolutionize my own thinking but because I was worried about myself. I knew enough to suspect that what had always served me well: my relentless pursuit and achievement of goals was taking a toll on my well-being. I had a swirl of thoughts running through my head that constantly obstructed my ability to connect with people, including my own children. I could hear the content of the speech but not the meaning behind the words. I jumped to conclusions, rushed to judgment, flew to the next interesting idea and I was convinced that this is what made me great.

What I first learned through this experience is that there is a voice inside of me that is bigger than the thoughts that constantly run through my head. I am looked after by something larger than my own fears, ambition, and dreams; I am the voice that sees the swirl of thoughts. The more wound up I get, the more frenetic my thinking becomes, the more distant the voice gets, but it has always been there waiting for me to listen.

That is the second realization I had during this experience: really listening can be disorienting. Superficially listening to text, music, or people leaves one relatively unchanged, but deep listening often results in more profound shifts in thought. This has affected the friends that I have grown closer to and those who I have stepped back from; the stories I read for pleasure and the authors I read in my professional work, the music that I find pleasurable and that I find unbearable.

The third realization instantly reframed my thinking but has taken months to actually process. In a quiet conversation, I was advised to “listen for a feeling” as a gauge of health. And that statement rocked my world. After much reflection, I have arrived (for now) at the position that truly listening for a feeling requires trusting oneself that the answer lies within, the validation lies within, the accomplishment lies within. The swirl of thoughts that preoccupied my life for thirty-five years not only was a drain on my physical health but also my spiritual well-being. Prior to my learning about insight, I had begun to monitor my energy levels, my enthusiasm for life the way I monitor the battery on my laptop when I’m using it on an airplane. Anxious on whether I will have enough to make it through, worried about rushing to complete tasks so I can plow through to the next one, and fearful that I might not finish before the laptop and I are depleted. Since then I have recalibrated my work life and my home life to make sure that external ambitions do not fuel my thinking or my actions. Now I see myself from the outside and catch myself when I start doing things that resemble bad habits or old and less useful patterns of thinking. When I start thrashing around, like rushing to get to the gym so that I can get to a video conference so that I can get to the bank so that I can get home to pack so that I can get to North Carolina for work and back, some voice inside of me says ‘What are you doing right now?’, a voice that lets me make adjustments in real time before my thinking further derails me.

The arc of my learning experience has been steep, disorienting, and of dizzying proportions. I have gone and continue to go through phases where I am unrecognizable to myself. Words flow out of me when I speak to an audience that I never conceived of until the moment they appeared; the energy of a space and the people within it become perceptible the instant I set foot in a place; and I feel the emotions of others more



deeply but am less tied up in the drama of their stories. But most importantly I look forward to the moments when the world (my mind) goes still and for a brief but glorious flash, I hear my inner sanity. Even as I craft this reflection, I watch the cynical thoughts dance through my head about how a concrete-sequential, overachiever from New Jersey wound up espousing intangible, conceptual crap. Then the thoughts are interrupted by this physical feeling, akin to butterflies into one's stomach that waves out through the limbs of the body –a feeling that is sensational and calming, fleeting but familiar that serves to remind me that I am have always been more than I have ever imagined possible.

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I have always been a collector of quotations that become signposts and familiar friends along the path of any learning experience, so I thought it befitting to place a marker here to conclude this piece. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities have crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.” Learning is a voluntary endeavor that frees the individual from the self-created failures, parameters, and habits so that the present moment can exist unfettered in its infinite possibilities.

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