

Formerly Called “Retirement”



When the Pupil is Ready

“When the pupil is ready to learn, the teacher will appear”

Zen Proverb

Charlie owns and operates one of the most restless minds I’ve ever witnessed. After MIT where he dealt with things he could measure and calculate, he slid into the slippery world of human thinking and behavior. Over several decades of nurturing his congenital dissatisfaction with the way things are, he developed a sophisticated understanding of how people working in groups unwittingly conspire to destroy their own collective productivity and satisfaction. The field he helped create is called “organizational learning”, and he founded a consulting company to help corporations learn how to learn from their experience and focus their energy where it counted. I was a partner in that company for a time, reveling in the new realms of understanding they had developed. Many of his clients over the years found their productivity and satisfaction soaring after coming to understand both their patterns of chronic self-sabotage and the corrective pathways to realize their highest aspirations.

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Alas, Charlie sold his organization to Arthur D. Little, Inc., the very large consulting company that proceeded, several years later, to commit suicide—the same company and same lethal event that took down a significant portion of my nest-egg. Charlie’s loss was dramatically more devastating, as he had become the largest individual shareholder in the now-worthless company.

So Charlie found himself involuntarily “retired”. Fortunately his previous years of prosperity had enabled him to invest and protect enough money to sustain most of his lifestyle despite the devastation of his holdings from the sale. He sold the twin-engined plane and the beach house in Florida, but beyond that there was little evidence that he was doing anything other than scanning the horizon for the next target—the next failure of human performance to repair.

With lots of time on his hands and boundless intellectual energy, Charlie began to experiment with new models of thinking, and models of consulting that would improve the quality of clients’ thinking. Over the course of four or five years, he dreamed up one concoction after another, experimenting on family and friends. Every few months, I’d get an e-mail from him inviting me to a workshop where he wanted to try out some new mental exercise or another. My calendar was always filled with what seemed like better things to do.

Then one day recently I got an e-mail from Julia, another former partner in Charlie’s original firm and a good buddy. “I did Charlie’s new workshop last week—the one on how to increase your capacity to generate insight—and it’s terrific! I found it really helpful. You’ve *got to go!*”

Julia is nobody’s fool. Super-smart and willing to be witheringly critical when the occasion calls for it, her compliments don’t come cheaply. Besides, the last course she recommended to me on the basis of her own experience did wonders for my golf game, such as it is. Like Charlie’s course, it was all about what goes on in your head, not how you swing a club. Spent three days there. Dropped about six or eight strokes off



my score.

If Julia says “Go!” I go.

Charlie and his partners in this new venture had scheduled another workshop for early December, and fortunately they had room for both Patti and me to participate.

Trying to help people fiddle with their thinking is classic Charlie. God would have been well advised to consult with Charlie before finalizing the wiring of our brains. Could have saved humankind a lot of woe.

And for his latest patch on our defective thinking, Charlie had targeted “insight”. What *is* insight? How does it happen? Why is it so rare and so random? How could we make it happen more often, on demand, when we most need it?

As with most of Charlie’s quests, this one conjured up images of Don Quixote at full gallop, flogging Rocinante down some forlorn byway in search of higher truth or purer love. Geez, Charlie, why don’t you just chill out. I’m afraid you’re just setting yourself up for some serious disappointment. Don’t hurt yourself. Just spend more time at your piano.

Take another trip to Provence—you loved it there. Get to New York for the theater more often.

Geez, Eliot, why don’t *you* just drop this forlorn quest to do more writing?

Okay, I get it. Charlie is a born innovator. He has no choice in this matter. And, as it turned out, I’m glad he didn’t.

Prior to the actual workshop, Patti and I got some forms to fill out and bit of pre-work. We were asked to list a few instances from our lives where we felt lacking in insight. Could be anything where we were dissatisfied with the clarity of our understanding. Issues in a relationship. Challenges at work. The purpose of our lives. Big stuff, small stuff, anything in between.

It wasn’t hard. One came instantly leaping to the fore for me: “If I really love writing as much as I say I do and think I do, how come I spend so little time doing it?”

Another, safer question followed. “How come anesthetists don’t use our brain monitor more than they do?”

On a frigid December Wednesday, we drove up a long, curving, snow-covered drive that brought us to an elegant old stone mansion atop a wooded hill, a private castle now become a small conference center. The massive wooden door, so heavy on its enormous iron hinges, took two hands to push open. Once inside, we found ourselves gazing about a soaring entry hall the size of a small ballroom. A fire crackled in the huge fireplace flanked by cozy seats in an alcove across from twin spiral staircases looking like something from a Busby Berkeley movie set. But Christmas decorations everywhere softened the formal elegance of the interior, making even so expansive a mansion feel homey and welcoming.

Soon we met and chatted with the other sixteen participants. An eclectic bunch. Patti and I were the oldest. The others were all still working. An about-to-retire executive from DuPont. A couple of psychotherapists. A real-estate developer. A hedge-fund

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manager. A physical therapist. An insurance guy.

We began our first session in late afternoon. Charlie and his partners presented a summary of the beliefs and theories about insight that they had come up with. Much of what they had begun to understand had to do with clearing the space for new thought to emerge—the necessity to clear the space, and the ways to actually do it. As they noted, we humans are creatures of habit and repetition. Given our druthers, we routinely return to familiar surroundings, whether in our homes or in our brains. Thoughts and answers that have served us well in the past become irresistible magnets for our minds when a new problem emerges. I guess you could call it path of least resistance or, probably more accurately, mental laziness. We immediately head for these used answers and stick with them even when it becomes apparent that they don't fit the new question. They have long-since proved that they don't merit any more consideration, but we have a perverse instinct to squeeze them just one more time in hopes that *this* time they'll yield something they are demonstrably incapable of yielding.

So we practiced thought-euthanasia. Charlie and his gang had devised some exercises in which our principal task was to kill off used thoughts when they flashed into our minds, the better to leave space for something new—for insight, in fact.

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Wait a minute, I thought, finding space for something new might really be a problem. I began to sense that my brain is already well-rehearsed on most things, fully loaded with fondly familiar opinions about all subjects poised to spill forth at the push of a button, and far more sealed up than I might have guessed. Sealed up? Settled? I began to reflect on our snug home, which we dearly love, and the homes of our best friends. All of us are in our seventies now, and have been in our homes for a long, long time. The structures need no further remodeling. The furniture doesn't change much. The art on the walls has been there for decades, and there's no space for any more.

In fact, most of us own dozens of other framed pieces of artwork that formerly graced our walls, now stacked in dusty sloping clusters in attics, basements, garages. In our earlier years, we bought new ones every few years and swapped out older ones as we toyed with various trends in art and home décor and self-discovery. Then we sort of settled into a comfortable groove. Now these discards are doomed, with no hope of ever seeing the light of day, awaiting only whatever disposition our heirs will make of them decades from now.

This seemed a fit metaphor for the problem of insight: if all the visible space is already filled with well-seasoned and fondly regarded stuff, it's tough for anything new to make itself seen or heard.

After the workshop leaders concluded their presentation of the conceptual framework, they closed the afternoon presentation with the promise that tomorrow we'd go to work on the issues and questions we had prepared before our arrival.

Thursday morning, we broke ourselves into groups of three for the first of several rounds of insight-generating. The design of our exercise was fiendishly simple. One of us would have exactly one minute to present a question or issue that bedeviled us, for which we sought greater insight. After that minute-long presentation, the other two people would engage in a seven-minute conversation with each other about the problem that had just been presented. *But* they would totally ignore the presenter, as though he or she were not even there. When they were done, the original presenter



would have two minutes in which to talk about what he or she had experienced during the seven-minute conversation between the other two.

Restricting the presenter to one minute was a stroke of genius (or, more likely, painful trial and error as Charlie and his partners perfected this workshop over several years of effort). I had gone first in my group, and I began with my safe question: how come more anesthetists don't use our brain monitor? Now, as it happens, I am pretty much a world-class authority on why they don't. Understanding their behavior had been the focus of my work for my tenure at the Company and has continued to be the focus of my continuing consultation with them. I could easily have spent two or three hours—or more—explaining the dozen or more reasons I already knew of.

And if I had done that, I'd have so inundated the minds of my two discussion partners with my own "used thoughts" that it would have brainwashed them, wrecking any chances for them to think freely about the subject. They'd have spent all their time dabbling around in the myriad reasons I had cluttered their minds with, trying to sort out the ones that made sense to them and reject the ones that didn't. Despite, of course, the fact that if *any* of them were the magic answer, I wouldn't have been raising the issue in the first place.

Plus, it would have reloaded my own brain with a full inventory of used thoughts leaving no space for insight to emerge through the clutter of familiar failures.

So I presented the issue very succinctly. After a brief description of the brain monitor itself—what it is, what it does—I said that despite it's being available in the vast majority of operating rooms, it is used on only about 17% of general anesthetics, whereas it ought to be used on about 90%.

Then my job was to be quiet. To be quiet in more ways than one. First, to keep my mouth shut and pretend I wasn't even there. And second, to quiet my mind. To kill off stray thoughts not germane to the subject, to kill off used thoughts that leapt up to rebut anything they might say, to kill off the urge to take credit for already having thought of something they were saying long before they said it just now.

Harder than one might think.

It was not their job to solve my problem or answer my question. Their job was just to muse out loud about whatever I had said. Perhaps they would say something that was fresh and unexpected, an idea I could take and run with. That wouldn't necessarily be *my* insight, but rather new thinking by others that had the power of insight for me. That would be fine, albeit a short-lived solution to the challenge of gaining insight. After all, they wouldn't always be around to consult.

Better, in the course of listening or half-listening to them my own mind would begin to spin off somewhere unexpected, somewhere previously unexplored, somewhere an "Aha!" was waiting for me. I was reminded of the phenomenon of night vision, where the clarity of one's sight is enhanced by looking slightly away from the specific object you want to see. Staring directly at it actually diminishes your ability to make it out.

And so for seven minutes I let myself slide into a state of suspended animation beside them, floating in quiet eddies of half-thought, listening a little and wondering a little.

When they finished, I remembered only two vivid lines of inquiry they had pursued. The first had to do with the marketing challenge.

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“Eliot says the clinicians ought to be using it 90% of the time,” one began. “Says who? Of course that’s what Eliot would think, because his company would be five times as successful if they did. But maybe 17% is actually exactly the right number. Maybe the clinicians have figured that out for themselves.”

I knew for certain that this was a new thought—or at least an unthinkable one for any of us on the executive team at the Company. That thought would *never* have been expressed there, but it was damnably worthy of consideration.

His partner added on to the line of thought: “Or, maybe, 90% is the right number, but it’s going to take another ten years to get there no matter what the company does. We all know how slow doctors are to adopt new things.” The sober voice of experience speaking, from a man who had labored long in the healthcare field.

I was grateful for their perspective, even if it failed to present—or to stimulate in my own mind—an immediately applicable solution to the problem as I had presented it. These were undeniably fresh thoughts, however aggravating and indigestible they might be.

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But I was totally unprepared for the other unforgettable avenue they pursued. From my contemplative, receptive pose with my head hanging comfortably over my folded hands, I jolted visibly and sprang upright when I heard: “Why is Eliot messing around with this question, anyhow? Doesn’t he have better things to do with his time? They’ve got hundreds of people back at the company who can worry about this. He’s retired. He doesn’t need this. What’s going on here?”

It was like a slap upside the head. Hey, wait a minute, I wanted to shout. *That’s* not what I asked you to talk about! I’m trying to...you know...don’t you understand...this is a big problem that we’re...it’s, really, it’s... Oh, how I wanted to argue my case!

But mute in my role and committed to the process, I couldn’t force the stark question to go away. So I parked my debating instinct and became contemplative again. I calmed down. I refolded my hands, closed my eyes, and got very quiet inside. For the rest of the seven minutes, I simply absorbed that question, letting it take root deep within me: what *is* going on here, anyhow?

During my two-minute feedback to them, I thanked them for knocking me off stride in my accustomed thoughts on the subject and promised that I’d be working on what they had stirred up in me by their comments. In due course, each of my two companions in the triad had his turn, and the process seemed to be equally fruitful for them, too.

Then we had a break between rounds, and I seized the moment to better prepare myself for the next one. Paradoxically, I had been gradually generating an insight about how to generate valuable insights. Namely, it was becoming very clear to me that everything depends on the quality of the question—rooting it in the most fundamental issue possible, as best one can identify it. That’s the critical element in getting to an insight that can truly satisfy. And I realized I might be able to improve my line of inquiry by framing a new, better question. So I sat myself down on a seat in the alcove by the big fireplace in the entry hall and pondered a while, until I felt it come clearer, and clearer.

Then I added a new one to my list: “What is my primary identity at this point in my life?”



I returned to the upstairs conference room to find that the players had been shuffled, and I settled myself into a new triad, partnered with a fifty-something physical therapist and a thirty-something financier. For this round, I decided to trot out my new and improved question: what is my identity now?

When it was my turn, I posed the question just that simply. And they began considering my brief, blunt query. Of their seven minutes of dialogue together, I heard only one thing—ten seconds' worth. The young financier drew his right index finger across the left side of his chest as he quietly observed, "It sounds as if Eliot hasn't decided what he wants on his name tag."

Everything in the universe became clear in that moment. If I am a writer—not an unemployed jack of all trades who also “does some writing” or “is working on a book”, but a writer—then I just need to start acting like a writer, living like a writer, being a writer.

My God! Oh, my God! An insight flared in my head like a sunburst, fierce and hot, searing itself into my mind: I have to *decide!* This isn't something that just *happens* to me. I have to *decide!*

I never thought of that before. I've been waiting, but nothing was happening. I was going nuts, and on the verge of getting depressed, but still nothing changed. It never, ever dawned on me that it was just as simple as deciding on my identity. This is not a matter of fate—this is a free choice: Who do I choose to be?

Well, who *do* I choose to be?

A writer.

The answer was instantaneous, unequivocal, certain. A writer. The answer leapt up from forever in my life. A writer. That is who I am, and that is who I choose to be. That is my *identity*, from this instant onward and ever.

Oh, my God! Everything in the universe became clear in that moment. If I am a writer—not an unemployed jack of all trades who also “does some writing” or “is working on a book”, but a writer—then I just need to start acting like a writer, living like a writer, *being* a writer.

It was all *so* clear. The difference between what I do, and who I *am*. If I am a writer, then that will determine what I do, not the other way around. If I am a writer, then I organize my life, shape my priorities, spend my time, protect my space the way a writer would.

Now a robust agenda of transformational actions bloomed in my mind. Being that I am a writer, I need to create a proper space for writing. That means purging what had become my “office” of everything that dilutes or contaminates its new role as my “studio”. No more a dumping ground for whatever matters might claim my attention. No more a cluttered tumble of distracting and distressing diversions from what matters in my life. No more anything but a serene environment dedicated to delivering whatever was within me. I'd find new space in the house to transform into a “home office” and cart over there everything not related to my writing. From now on, I would never use my studio for anything but writing. *Fait accompli*. Sure, I hadn't yet stirred from the conference room to actually take any of these actions, but they were as good as done. And I knew it.

What else? Scheduling time on my calendar for writing, of course. Been there, done that—unsuccessfully. But now it was all different. Yes, I had done that before, but not with the matter-of-fact resolve I now felt. Before, blocking that time was hopeful,



almost wishful, and was vulnerable to being overridden by whatever other activity might hove into my peripheral vision or be placed in view by someone else. But now blocking time for writing—and seizing it—was just simply what a writer does. This is my work. This is my life. This is me. *Not* to block that time, protect it, and use it for writing would be unthinkable, would be tantamount to abandoning my identity. And that had suddenly become impossible. In the instant of that insight, I had claimed it forever.

I wanted to go home. I was not interested in the rest of the workshop. I was itching to drive home as a writer headed for his studio to write, and write, and write. And write.

Curiously, the workshop actually did end ahead of schedule the next afternoon. It wasn't just because of the blizzard that was headed our way. Everyone else in the group also felt fully satisfied with what they had gained by way of personal insights and seemed ready to head to their homes as changed people.

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Patti and I stayed overnight with Charlie and his wife, enjoying dinner by their fire while the blizzard howled outside, and then headed back home to Princeton on Saturday after the roads were cleared.

The half-life of clarity can be woefully short, and monumentally exasperating. I had experienced it all too often. But this time it was different. Unlike my futile efforts to capture people's suggestions for the theme of my needs-to-be-rewritten book, the insight deep inside me—the true-forever choice that I had affirmed—did not consist of a slippery conceptual proposition or a sequential structure to be snatched at with desperation and frantically brought to life on paper, quick, before it withered and disappeared yet again.

No, what I had seen and felt was something already real. It had been real for most of my life. It had been a part of me for most of my life. I just had never known that I needed to name it, reach out for it, grasp it, claim it, be it. So it arrived home with me intact, full strength. Solid, quiescent, permanent.

I slept well Saturday night.

Epiphany

At five AM, I was gently awakened by a stirring in my mind. I lay there in the dark and let it move around, quietly, softly, casually. Gradually the ghostlike drifting of ideas began to settle into waltzing patterns that dimly emerged. Years before, on October, 9, 1991, I had arisen about three AM in Santa Monica and had driven an hour north up the freeway into the Tehachapi Mountains near the tiny ranching town of Gorman. Over the previous weeks Christo had planted 1,760 bright yellow patio umbrellas in graceful array over grassy meadows and knolls and barrancas there. Workers had opened them during the night before, and I wanted to be there to see them bloom in first light of day.

When I arrived, all was still in deep darkness and nothing was visible from the hilltop where I sat myself down. Then, with infinite precision of pace, the darkness seemed gradually to be absorbed by the hills, as though drawn softly into earth like a falling mist. In time, broad shapes began to emerge with a steady but imperceptible inevitability. The smooth crown of a rounded hill. The dark cloud of an oak tree. A flat triangle of darkness here, now there...ah, over there, too. More and more of them. First one by one, then arrayed in widespread clusters and streaks, the deep gray umbrella shapes were revealed as the darkness was increasingly drawn into the earth.



Soon a lacework of the small pyramids came clear, but still frozen in monochrome tones of night and pre-dawn gray. The scene became a silvertone Ansel Adams: “Dawnrise over Gorman, California”.

Then the sun.

The first rays sparked above the horizon and struck a sole umbrella atop the highest hill. In seconds, the golden fabric flamed brilliant yellow, shimmering, like the one candle lit in the darkness that carries the hope of all to come. Then another caught the rays and fired up. And another. And another. Soon whole courses of umbrellas were snatching sunbeams and clamoring to be seen one right after the other, as though a switch had been thrown to trigger a cascade of solar brilliance along their entire row.

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From that early darkness had emerged first the gray shapes, and then one by one the torch-like umbrellas as each arose to claim its place in the sunlight and, once fully illuminated, reveal the artist’s vision for the entire work.

And now that was happening in my head.

I knew what was going on. I had experienced the same phenomenon when I was writing scripts for “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” more than thirty-five years before. I knew this movement in me. I knew it was the Muse at work. I knew she was inviting me to arise and deliver something new.

I slipped out of bed. It was dark, but I kept my eyes closed. I did not want to break whatever spell was upon me. I eased into the bathroom, lifted my robe from the hook and slipped it on, and headed out to my studio, opening my eyes just enough to navigate the pathway. As soon as I arrived, I settled into my chair, closed my eyes again, and delivered.

For an hour, I wrote. When I was done, the entire outline for this book was in front of me on the computer screen.

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Eliot Daley's work spans a wide range of for-profit, not-for-profit, and pro bono enterprises, the common thread among them being his passion for working with others to envision, reach for, and achieve beneficial results for society. He is now a full-time writer harvesting the lessons he has learned and expressing the insights and outrages experienced in the observation of our common life. www.eliotdaley.com

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