

NOT SO GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The more I facilitate seminars, the more I realize how subtle the power of thinking is, and how readily I make seemingly simple, straightforward statements about it without exploring the significance of both its subtlety and its strength.

For example, “If it’s not on your mind, it’s not your experience.” I’ve probably said those words five-hundred times in five-hundred settings, along with the corollary, “Whatever is on your mind *is* your experience.” And people generally nod, “Yes, yes, of course, that makes sense.” But recently as I’ve made these statements, I have begun to appreciate and reflect more on their enormous implications for the quality of everyday life.

Imagine these situations:

- As a young girl enters a social gathering, she is thinking that people seem happy talking to each other and no one will want to talk with her. She hangs around the edges of lively groups, but doesn’t speak. When she gets home from the party, will she tell her mother, *“I made it hard for myself to have a good time because I couldn’t stop thinking that no one would want to talk with me. I never got that off my mind, so I didn’t join any conversations.”* Or will she tell her mother, “No one wanted to talk with me. It wasn’t any fun.”
- As an eighth grader begins a math class, he recalls his older brother having trouble with that class and he has the thought that his brother generally does better than he does in school. He settles on the idea that he’ll be lucky to get a D. When he gets the D, will he tell his parents, *“I made up my mind in advance that the class would be too hard for me and kept thinking that a D would be the best I could do, so I didn’t really calm down and open my mind to new learning.”* Or will he tell his parents, “Math is hard for me and I’m lucky I got a D.”
- As a patient waits for his doctor to get results from a battery of tests, his head fills up with overwhelming fear that he is really sick and will face a lot of pain. When the doctor talks with him, the patient has trouble focusing on the doctor’s words because his mind is churning with his own fears and worries. After he goes home to his family, will he tell them, *“I don’t actually know what the doctor said because I couldn’t quiet my own thinking about how frightened I am of being sick so that I could really listen to the doctor.”* Or will he tell them, “I’m not sure I understood everything the doctor said, but I’m sure I’m really sick and I’ve got to face a lot of pain.”
- As a family contemplates moving to a new house, the children, who grew up in the old house, think and talk incessantly about their childhood memories and how sad it will be to leave the house they know so well. They dismiss any thoughts of anticipation or curiosity about the new house. On moving day, they beg their

- parents not to go through with the move. Will they tell their parents, “*We never gave any thought at all to the new house and we thought all the time about this house, so we made it impossible for ourselves to consider any positive ideas about this move and we’ve made ourselves miserable.*” Or will they tell their parents, “We’re miserable because you’re cruel taking us away from our home.”
- As a person sits in a seminar in which ideas about taking advantage of new technology are presented that are foreign to her training and foreign to her own current work, she continually thinks, “This doesn’t fit with what I already know at all. I can’t see how this would work. Nothing can be this simple.” She entertains scornful thoughts about every new idea. Will she return to her co-workers and say, “*I was so consumed with my own thinking about what I already believe and know that I couldn’t learn anything new in that seminar and I never gave the subject a chance.*” Or will she return to her co-workers and say, “It was simplistic and it didn’t make sense to me. I don’t think this will be of any use to us.”
 - As a man encounters a person he hasn’t seen for years, he remembers that their last meeting was negative and led to an unpleasant parting. While he talks to the man, he keeps recalling more details of their last encounter and anticipating the same kinds of responses. They have an awkward conversation. Will he later tell his colleagues, “*I ran into this guy I haven’t seen for years today, and I couldn’t clear my head of all my memories of the last time we were together. It really spoiled our meeting that I was so stuck on my old impressions of him that I didn’t relax and just talk to him.*” Or will he tell his colleagues, “I ran into this guy I haven’t seen for years today. He hasn’t changed a bit – still difficult.”

In each of these scenarios, someone entered a moment in time with not-so-great expectations. Any time we expect things of life, rather than simply participating in life fresh with no expectations, we are generating a preconceived experience, rather than stepping into an unknown experience to see how it is. Nothing new can happen to someone whose mind is occupied with old ideas because our experience of life is generated by what is coming to mind – and we don’t know it.

Living from expectations is like living in a house full of rooms-to-go. When you buy rooms-to-go, you get a pre-designed and pre-organized set of furniture arranged a certain way with accessories to match. You take what you get, even if you don’t like all the parts, because it all comes packaged according to a plan. You walk into your home and enter a predictable experience. Living from freedom of thought, the capacity to be present in life without expectations, is like going to the furniture mart not knowing what you’ll find. As you discover things, they are put together in a house being created from random insights, surprises and serendipity. You walk into your home and enter a dynamic experience that is ever-changing.

That’s a superficial analogy about the outcome of expectations. But the points I want to consider in this essay are subtlety and strength, which precede outcomes. Without some

recognition of the subtlety and strength of thinking, it is impossible for people to see that their experience of life events originates within them, and will change as their thinking changes, without any change in circumstances. Without that recognition, it always looks as though the events we go through cause our experience of them and we don't have a choice about it. We cannot know that we are the authors of our own lives unless we recognize that we are holding the pen and the page is blank until we write on it.

The subtlety of thinking is that it continually runs through our minds, like current through an electrical system, whether we know it or not. The subtlety of thinking is that it appears to be so real to us at every moment that it makes perfect sense to assume our ideas are true. The subtlety of thinking is that we don't notice it *changing* because we are always living in the effects of the change, the "reality" that looks real to us right now. In the life scenarios above, would each person live in a more hopeful and malleable world, more likely to work out positively, if the italicized explanations of events came to mind for them? Doesn't everybody long to be in the driver's seat of their own life? If my own thinking keeps me from having increasingly better experiences, not the things that are happening to me, wouldn't it be a relief to know that? If I could understand that my own thinking is dynamic and always changing, wouldn't it give me hope that I would never be "stuck" in any experience of any life circumstances?

And yet, because thinking is so strong, if I never understand its subtlety and its strength, my own habitual thinking will continue to deliver blame, disappointment, failed expectations, and righteousness. If I can't tell that my expectations are governing my experience, all I can see is what I've created – not *that* I've created it.

So, how can I tell when my mind is "stuck" in a repetitive set of thoughts and I am unresponsive to life? It feels different. The feelings that accompany expectations are not exhilarating or inspiring, but dull, predictable, possibly discouraging, dispirited, even painful. The feelings that accompany presence, being alive to the light of the moment without a cloud layer of extra thinking in the way, are lighter, sweeter, possibly hopeful, spirited, even joyful.

Thinking is so subtle and so strong that it generates not only vivid perceptions of life experience, but undeniable feelings as well. Thinking is so dynamic that it is not a linear event, but a whirl of images and feelings continually affecting each other as we move through the dance of life. We can feel the rhythm and sense the grace of our steps when we're dancing with life. When we stumble and lose the beat, we can feel that, too. Understanding the dynamic of thinking and feeling gives us the knowledge that we can slow down, reconnect, pick up the beat, and rejoin the dance.

We always know how we feel. The shifts from discomfort to comfort, from anxiety to peace of mind, from agitation to ease, from self-consciousness to unselfconsciousness, from being out of step to being in step, are visceral; we know them deep within our very

being. We can deceive ourselves with our own thinking, but we can't fool ourselves about how we feel.

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