

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

At a recent reunion, I was talking to an old friend's son, a high school student, who told me he had wanted to apply to an Ivy League school, but changed his mind. His uncle, a Yale graduate, said he probably wouldn't be a strong enough applicant because he hadn't been the president of any organizations in high school. "There's no point filling out all that paperwork if I won't be considered," he said, dejectedly. "So I guess I'll just apply to the schools that are likely to take someone like me."

A number of years ago, when I was arranging benefits for people who worked in the offices of medical groups, I was told by an insurance company representative that people who worked in doctors' offices were very hard to place for health insurance because they were costly to the system. "They always think they have every disease in the book," he said. "All day long, they hear about symptoms, and the next thing you know, they're at the doctor thinking they have something serious and demanding a lot of tests."

When I was in the 8th grade, taking algebra for the first time, the teacher stood before us on the first day of class and said, "This is the math class that separates the boys from the girls. The boys do well in algebra, but algebra is hard for girls." I had never had difficulty with any subject until then, but I struggled with algebra all year.

A friend told me recently about her daughter's experience at an exclusive prep school. At the orientation assembly for entering students and their families, the headmistress announced, "Twenty percent of you won't be here for graduation. We have very high academic standards. You won't all meet them." After the assembly, she said, her daughter and some friends were in tears, trying to figure out who among them was destined to fail, and already feeling devastated by the prospect of failure.

Years ago, I went to a friend's baby shower. She was a nurse. Several people from the hospital where she worked were there. An obstetrician gave her a "gag" gift of goofy items to cheer her up when she suffered from postpartum depression. "I never had that problem with my first baby," my friend said. "I bounced right back, and I'm really looking forward to this second baby." "Just you wait ..." the well-meaning obstetrician

said. “Pretty much everyone gets depressed after the second child. You’ll be in to see me for valium and a psychiatric referral before you know it.”

At first glance, when you look at each of those anecdotes, it seems like an outside expert has provided good information. Every one of us is bombarded with “informed” opinions every day by people who think they’re helping us by describing the way things are. They offer their own or others’ experience, statistical data, or material from respected published reports to substantiate what they consider to be helpful input to our lives. At first glance, it might appear that we are set up simply to take in a lot of valid external information and act on it.

How about at second glance?

How do we explain the informed opinions we all get every day that we dismiss or ignore entirely? How do we sort what we don’t take seriously from what we do take seriously? What makes information valid or invalid in our minds? What is at work behind the scenes when we act on ideas we initially heard from others? What is at work when we don’t act on them?

Many answers are possible. Perhaps it depends on the regard in which we hold the person who expressed the opinion. Perhaps some things make sense to us when we hear them, and other things don’t. Perhaps we already had similar ideas to those we’re hearing, so we feel affirmed. Perhaps we’re sorting out answers according to what we secretly hope is true. Perhaps we’re following some sort of internal logic of our own – if five people say the same thing, then we should believe it, or if we hear it from an authority figure, we should take it to heart – we all have our own “rules” in mind.

The common thread in all those answers, though, is this: No matter what “reason” we make up for acting or not acting on any information, the reason and the decision to act are ours and ours alone. We are always acting on our own ideas, even if they look like others’ ideas. Others cannot influence us unless we *think* they have power we lack. It is not the strength or weakness of their ideas that causes us to act or react to their information. It is *our own thoughts* about who they are or what they represent to us.

In the first anecdote, the young boy had tremendous reverence for his uncle. In fact, he had been inspired to consider an Ivy League school by the fact that his uncle had attended Yale. He had grown up trying to emulate his uncle. Thus, when his uncle said he “probably” would not be a strong enough candidate, he was devastated. He heard it as a condemnation of his whole life and he heard his uncle relegating him to mediocrity. He just withered and gave up his dream in the face of his uncle’s supposed judgment.

Consider, though, what he might have thought if a teacher he did not respect had said the same thing. He might have thought, “I’ll show her!” and redoubled his efforts to write a

winning application to his dream school. Consider what he might have thought if a competitive classmate had said it. He might have dismissed it entirely, writing it off to jealousy. Consider what he might have done if no one had expressed any opinion at all and he had just gone ahead pursuing his goal without any extraneous information?

In the second example, consider how that insurance company statistic might be different if people who worked in medical offices knew in advance that it is an “occupational hazard” to see symptoms everywhere and quite natural for people to wonder if they, too, have some illness that is being described to them by others. Would they have a different perspective and think twice before they concluded they must be sick?

In the third example, what if I had noticed on the first day of class that the algebra teacher who made that remark was a woman and wondered to myself how she had succeeded if math was so difficult for girls? What if I had been out of class when she said it, and one of the boys had told me later?

In the fourth anecdote, what if my friend’s daughter had been feeling exceptionally self-confident, instead of quite nervous, at that assembly? She might have wondered in passing if that failure rate were true, and decided either way it had nothing to do with her. Or she might have written it off as a typical headmistress tactic to scare new students into studying hard.

In the last anecdote, my friend actually did laugh off that doctor’s remarks. “She always sees the bleak side,” she confided later. “She’d have the whole world on valium if it was up to her.” My friend sailed through her second baby, and the next two, without any depression and continues to this day to enjoy life with her children and grandchildren.

What turns opinions and ideas into self-fulfilling prophecies is not the quality of the opinions and ideas, their rational strength, or the evidence for them. Opinions and ideas take shape in our lives and become true for only one reason: We *think* they are true and we continue to think they are true because our very thoughts create the experience of their truth. If we change our thinking, what looks true changes and our experience changes accordingly.

The more we see that our thinking is infused with the feeling of reality by an internally generated impetus, the more we find freedom to use our power of thought wisely. To come to appreciate the gift of thought, we need not worry about *what* we have been thinking. Whatever it is, it has been our life thus far to the degree we have taken it to heart and seen it through. We need to see *that* we think everything that becomes true for us. Our life beyond this moment is as yet unformed, about to be generated from the infinitude of energy from which we form all our ideas and opinions.

Life truly is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The prophet is within

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