

FROM SIMPLICITY ...

When seeking wisdom, one is very apt to find that in simplicity lies complexity. Those who don't realize the profound nature of such simplicity are very apt to expound on their findings, losing the essence.

Sydney Banks
The Missing Link

Not long ago, I incorporated that quote in some materials that I sent to several people to review. Every response came back, "Don't you have the quote backwards? Doesn't he mean, "In complexity lies simplicity...?"

Given the point of Mr. Bank's statement, there's an inescapable irony in those responses. We are predisposed to think that the most complex or involved explanations of things are the most complete. We believe that if we peer into them and analyze them long enough, we'll figure out what they mean in simple terms. We are educated to converse in complexities, sometimes confounding each other and the subject, but assuming that is a positive indicator of high intellect. And assuming that complexity is more significant and meaningful than simplicity.

I remember one time in Boston years ago listening to people at a dinner party discuss a prominent speaker they had just heard on the Harvard Campus. She was considered one of the leading thinkers in her field. This is how I recall the conversation:

- A: *"I didn't understand a word she said, did you?"*
B: *"No, but she's really brilliant, isn't she?"*
A: *"I guess... but what did she say to us? I couldn't grasp it."*
B: *"I couldn't either. I tried to read one of her books before the talk, too, but it was way over my head. Really amazing stuff, though."*
A: *"Tell me, how would you know it was amazing if you don't understand it."*
B: *"That's the whole point. She's way beyond us mere mortals. She can write this stuff and talk about it and our job is to struggle with it and try to get something out of it. We just have to keep trying to figure it out."*
A: *"But how do you figure out something when you have no idea whatsoever where to start or what it means?"*
B: *"I don't know. I guess we have to figure that one out, too."*

- A: *“Yeah, but what if we’re being hoodwinked? What if she writes and says all this complicated stuff and it doesn’t mean that much to her, either. It seems to me that a person ought to be able to say what they mean so other people can understand it. Otherwise, what’s the point of paying attention to it at all? We would never get away with this, if we turned in papers that no one could read or understand and then defended them with such convoluted ideas that no one could follow them.”*
- B: “C’mon! We’re just graduate students. She’s famous, for goodness sake. She travels all over the world lecturing about this stuff. Somebody must understand it!”

At the time, I was pretty convinced by “B”. I was accustomed to being surrounded by “brilliant” people I could barely understand, and thinking it must be because I was too uneducated, or not bright enough, to get it. I spent a lot of time puzzling over difficult books and papers and often fell back on creating complex outlines and diagrams and memorizing them in order to persuade myself that I had gleaned some meaning from them. I was floundering through the academic process, until I came across Noam Chomsky, and an idea that set my mind on an uncharted path.

I was studying Linguistics, a field packed with more theoretical density than a tin of Spam. I’m not sure why I ever thought that the study of complex grammatical structure was the route to discovering the meaning of meaning. See, even that sentence dangles over the precipice of Byzantine. But we were taught to hang there, by the thin threads of syntax. This was the question: Is grammar the key to understanding life? Somehow, I thought so.

In the course of my studies, I stumbled into a slim volume, published in the 1960’s by Noam Chomsky, describing his initial theory of “transformational generative grammar”. It was a complete reversal of all the theory I was studying. It flipped my academic mind. It offered the notion of “deep structure”, the notion that every complex utterance begins with a purely simple thought. The moment of the formation of that thought is the point, the inchoate intention of the creator, the “essence” of everything that follows. That thought is the originating point of all expressed complexity. And Chomsky demonstrated, in grammatical terms, that increasing complexity always includes repetition of that original, simple utterance. That is, the core utterance is re-expressed with every nuance added to it.

To return to the point: In simplicity lies complexity. All complex utterances or manifestations flow from, or originate from, their simple deep structure.

The extraordinarily interactive, redundant and complex system that is a functional human body begins with the merger of one sperm and one egg that form one cell of an embryo. Observation of all the complexities of human functioning will not lead back to that one

cell. Understanding the “heart” of that cell, the beautiful double helix and the simple proteins that started the chain of complexity, provides a logical pathway into the whole system.

Matter and energy transpose; all life is the same vitality in different forms. Observation of all the manifestations of energy and matter will not lead back to the moment in time that one transforms to the other.

The hundreds and hundreds of colors we can make are combinations of four primary colors which themselves break out of white light. All color originates from pure light. Studying every possible color that can be seen or imagined will not reveal pure light.

To a student of the history of discovery, it becomes increasingly evident that reduction from the complex to the simple is an arduous process that often leads to dead ends, or to further complexity. The simple answers that stop the process usually “occur” to the discoverer, or come from out in left field somehow. It appears that there is a relationship between the struggle and the insight. But one could not prove that the struggle necessarily led to the insight. The history of the creators in every age of mankind is filled with stories of unexpected ideas that took them aback and gave them an immediate and profound understanding from within their own minds.

Still, institutions expend most of their educational energy to train the intellect and pay very little attention to the understanding and nurturance of the capacity for insight. It isn’t recognized that insight and the intellect are partners, each as significant to the development of our knowledge as the other. We do not sufficiently respect the infinity of insight or sufficiently recognize the boundaries of the intellect.

Is it worth a moment of reflection? Are we inhibited by our intellect, bound to work out the solutions to life’s problems only by sorting through the details? Or are we set free by the energy of our minds, to continually gain sight from within, *insight* that feeds our intellect and energizes its service to us?

The solution to outwardly complex problems created by misguided thoughts will not arise from complicated analytical theory, but will emerge as an insight, wrapped in a blanket of simplicity.

Sydney Banks
The Missing Link

© Judith A. Sedgeman, EdD